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Helen M. Gunter\textsuperscript{a} & Gillian Forrester\textsuperscript{b}
\textsuperscript{a} School of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
\textsuperscript{b} Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure at Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

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New Labour and the logic of practice in educational reform

Helen M. Gunter\textsuperscript{a*} and Gillian Forrester\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; \textsuperscript{b}Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure at Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

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The paper draws on data and theorising from the Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership (KPEL) Project where we have investigated New Labour’s education policy and investment in headteachers as school leaders in England. New Labour took up office in May 1997 with a modernisation agenda and the leadership of schools is central to this strategy. There have been a number of changes to the status and work of headteachers and a national training programme run by a new National College for School Leadership has been established. The KPEL project gathered data by interviewing policymakers and headteachers and this paper reports on the policy process. Specifically, the project used Bourdieu’s thinking tools to identify a logic of practice and how ministers, civil servants, advisors (including some headteachers) and private consultants developed policy. Through this we intend to show how Bourdieu’s thinking tools can be used to describe, understand and explain headteacher leadership as a social practice at a time of centralised interventions and reforms.

Keywords: headteachers; logic of practice; New Labour education policy

Introduction

Our research into the New Labour government’s education policy in England demonstrates that there is a leadership of schools logic of practice. By this we mean that the strategic and operational goals of schools and the necessary practice to deliver them has been centrally defined and controlled. While there has been debate and assessment about the first decade of New Labour modernisation in education (Chapman & Gunter, 2009; Coffield et al., 2007; Walford, 2008), the complexity evident in much policy assessment is not the case in regard to school leadership (Gunter & Forrester, 2008a). The policy on the leadership of schools is remarkably clear, as illustrated by a minister who explained to us: ‘we always knew we couldn’t do what we wanted in education unless we turned round leadership’.

The Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership (KPEL) Project ran from January 2006 to December 2007 and was funded by the ESRC (RES-000-23-1192). This is the only non-government commissioned and funded project about school leadership in England (see Forrester & Gunter, 2009; Gunter & Forrester, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010, in press). While much has been written in the past decade about school leadership, it has been either commissioned research (e.g. DfES & PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006) or written by those contracted to...
and/or associated with delivering government policy (e.g. Southworth, 2003; Stubbs, 2003). The KPEL Project has robust data sets created from over 200 government documents and 116 interviews with: people in national and local government (ministers, civil servants); advisors (people from schools, business, local government, universities, who were brought into national government or non-departmental public bodies such as the National College for School Leadership) to frame and deliver the reforms; and consultants (people from business and universities) who were contracted to undertake research and/or deliver reforms. In addition to this, people were interviewed from schools and universities who were not involved with the Department or its agencies but who were directly involved in reforms as practitioners and/or as researchers.

Using documentary and interview data we have utilised Bourdieu’s thinking tools to describe, understand and explain knowledge production in the policymaking process. In particular the Project focused on the relationship between the state, public policy and knowledge, by asking and examining which knowledge had been used by to frame policy, why and who are regarded as legitimate knowers about leaders, leading and leadership. Hence, following Bourdieu’s approach we intend to contribute to understandings about ‘our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 1) through focusing on the practice of policymaking as a ‘practical logic’ (p. 86) where theory is not separate from practice as something that, as a model, can be applied, but is about revealing the regularities and complexities within what is done:

In other words, symbolic systems owe their practical coherence – that is, on the one hand, their unity and their regularities, on the other their ‘fuzziness’ and their irregularities and even incoherences, which are both equally necessary, being inscribed in the logic of their genesis and functioning – to the fact that they are the product of practices that can fulfil their practical functions only in so far as they implement, in the practical state, principles that are not only coherent and compatible with the objective conditions – but also practical, in the sense of convenient, that is, easy to master and use, because they obey a ‘poor’ and economical logic’. (p. 86)

Examining this logic has enabled us to identify a regime of social practice where politicians, advisors, consultants, researchers and practitioners have demonstrated a New Labour disposition for centralised reforms based on the neoliberal ‘financialization of everything’ (Harvey, 2007, p. 33). Bourdieu’s thinking tools have enabled us to show how this regime has constructed and communicated a ‘doxa’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11) of good leadership practice by headteachers and used state apparatus to fund and legitimise such preferred and required practice. Specifically, New Labour entered a reform of ‘headteacher as leaders’ game already in play and we examine the logic of practice within this game and how New Labour plays it. We identify the New Labour development of the doxa and how this has been communicated through policy processes and we then go on to show the symbolic exchange between policymakers and headteachers. Central to this paper is ‘revealing the system of social conditions which have made a particular way of being or doing possible’ within the policy process (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 15).

The game in play

Bourdieu (1990) uses field as an arena, and ‘you can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys certain regularities’ (64, italics in original). So ‘you must have a feel for the game, that is, a feel for the necessity and logic of the game’, not least because ‘in the game you can’t do just anything and get away with
it’ (64). The game is defined by, and entry controlled through, the doxa or self-evident truths located in values and discourses (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11). The policy game in play when New Labour came to power in 1997 was twofold; the inherited attack on public sector professionalism, combined with the promotion of a neoliberal version of professionalism (see DfEE, 1998). The first is illustrated by the ongoing ‘creative destruction’ of structures, cultures and power relationships (Harvey, 2007, p. 3) begun by the New Right through the Thatcherite administrations from 1979 onwards. Notably what we call a professional doxa based on public service together with notions of care, commitment and inherent understandings of quality has been ridiculed as provider capture constructed to protect self-serving bureaucratic systems and interests (Gewirtz, 2002). The necessary intellectual work to establish such claims had been undertaken by New Labour (e.g. Barber, 2007; Mandelson & Liddle, 1996) with the acceptance and promotion of the private sector in delivering public services (Ball, 2007). Following Thomson (2005) we would argue that the field of education had been breached by the political and economic fields, where established professional hierarchies were attacked and neoliberal contractual relations were established as the new means by which policy would be produced and enacted. Hence the second aspect of the policy game is the resurgence and legitimisation of the private sector in educational provision, where professionalism is based on customer responsiveness combined with entrepreneurial risk-taking and accountability for the delivery of targets (Clarke, Gewirtz, & McLaughlin, 2000).

Enabled through the 1988 Education Act, the private sector in 1997 was still in the process of securing the school as a unit of workforce production where the outputs are regarded as human capital in a rapidly changing globalized economy. Site-based management from 1988 had restructured the school as a small business, where income, and hence staffing, was directly related to choice of the curriculum as a product within a quasi market. The educational product had already been standardised through the national curriculum, quality audited through inspections and open to the exercise of parental preference through league tables and choice. New Labour entered a game where: first, private provision had been strengthened; second, private firms were contracted to deliver educational and professional provision – from school dinners to consultancy; third, private consultants came into public sector organisations to deliver public services; fourth, public sector professionals joined or set up private sector consultancies; fifth, those who worked outside but entered public sector institutions, variously as consultants, researchers, trainers, were regarded as neutral in their commitment to the standards and effective processes; and, sixth, the type of work and cultures that enabled and shaped that work within the public sector was based on private sector values (efficiency, effectiveness, economy, excellence) (Gunter, 2009).

New Labour played the same game as the previous Thatcherite governments, but with a twist. While, as Fairclough (2000) notes, the rhetoric was of ‘new’ and ‘modern’, with the language of reform full of upbeat ‘pathfinder’, ‘remodelling’ and ‘testbed’ projects, the reality was the ongoing tension between centralisation to control the product and decentralisation of the local provision of that product. The shift from eighteen years of Conservative administrations to New Labour showed continuities but also amplification of particular aspects of the game: the emphasis was less on the Thatcherite quasi-market where local provision was in competition within a national framework (curriculum and inspection) and more on a Blairite regulated market. Here the national branded New Labour curriculum product was strengthened (with the national literacy and numeracy strategies) and local delivery relied less on the market and more on a combination of central direction (national standards, workforce reform and training) with local accountability (performance-related pay, targeted investment).
This twist of the screw of national regulation began prior to 1997 whereby a national system of headteacher training had begun under the Conservatives led by the Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shephard. Government intervention in ‘failing’ schools had also begun through the establishment of the North East London Education Association (known as the ‘hit squad’, see Barber, 2007, p. 25) being sent into Hackney Downs School in 1995. Barber, as an architect of New Labour education policy, developed a ‘feel for the game’ of ‘failing’ schools as a member of this team (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 9). Once in power New Labour directly took on ‘failing’ schools and developed a more systematic, directive and accelerated approach to the ‘twist’ and this was born out of a number of complex motives. Education was and remains (along with welfare and health) a core issue that runs deep within the DNA of Labour identity and purposes. Hence Blair’s iconic statement of ‘education, education, education’ has to be located within this non-negotiable commitment to social justice. However, Labour had been in opposition for nearly a generation and their narratives were framed around neoliberal claims about how investment in education had to be directly connected to accountability (Barber, 2007). They could not be seen to be playing a game that could be read as protecting the public sector and its employees and felt that the way to enter and be successful in the game was to play it as national standards locally implemented by headteachers whom New Labour regarded as agents of reform. While the Conservative administrations had developed national standards through the curriculum, testing, inspections and league tables, they had left the delivery to the workings of the school and the headteacher within the market at local level. New Labour’s twist was to regulate the local in order to deliver reforms through what Barber (2007) identified as a ‘delivery chain’ from minister to child (85). The aim was to devolve responsibility for reforms, benchmark performance in the delivery of those reforms and secure public accountability for that delivery. The logic of the New Labour practice within the game was to develop and promote a delivery disposition where a doxa of a leadership of schools could create a position of dominance within the field of policy.

**Delivery disposition**

Bourdieu uses his thinking tool of ‘habitus’ to explain entry and playing within the game:

> The habitus, as the system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour, and thus for the regularity of modes of practice, and if practices can be predicted (here, the punishment that follows a certain crime), this is because the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 77)

This is not a replaying of the determinism argument, not least because ‘the habitus goes hand in glove with vagueness and indeterminacy’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 77, italics in original). Rather the disposition to play through the staking of capital for recognition together with the symbolic rites and myths of taking up a position are embodied. Within practice there are ‘structured structures’, where a person develops dispositions, and there are ‘structuring structures’, where dispositions are generative, and consequently ‘objectively “regulated” and “regular” without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 53). While the doxa defines the game and field boundaries, disposition to enter and play means that the doxa speaks to the person, where there is an ‘illusio’ or ‘a fundamental belief it the interest of the game and the value of the stakes which is inherent in that membership’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11).
The New Labour delivery disposition as revealed through our analysis of written and oral texts has a number of features to it. Codification of delivery as a social practice is evident in the consistency of the message, the use of particular language together with either ignoring critics or directly attacking them (see Hyman, 2005; Miliband, 2004). While at the time the wider field engaged in debates about purposes (e.g. Bush, Bell, Bolam, Glatter, & Ribbins, 1999) New Labour sought, in Bourdieu’s (1992, p. 17) terms, to ‘fix’ the meaning of words and hence to exclude ideas or even the possibility that there might be another meaning. While our research has shown that some advisors and contractual partners did not always agree with the emphasis on the heroic head as transformational leader, the illusion of the leader-centric nature of the strategy meant that they continued to deliver it to the profession (Gunter & Forrester, 2008a). Notably, the research evidence shows that there is a clear direction for policy combined with statements of intent to ensure that what is said should happen, actually does happen. Social practice is within the immediacy of action. For example, in Excellence in schools (DfEE, 1997) the aim was to have a ‘twin track’ approach to improving the status of education with a requirement that performance improves. They presented six principles:

- Education will be at the heart of government.
- Policies will be designed to benefit the many, not just the few.
- The focus will be on standards, not structures.
- Intervention will be in inverse proportion to success.
- There will be zero tolerance of underperformance.
- Government will work in partnership with all those committed to raising standards. (p. 5)

What is particularly interesting here is how the language of the quality movement, ‘intervention’ and ‘zero tolerance’, is used to show the directness of what must be done, combined with partnership with those who agree with the agenda. It is framed in such a way as to make any alternative agendas look to be unnecessary and, if pursued, seditious. Teacher incompetence was placed in the spotlight and presented under-performing schools and inadequately skilled school-leavers as the failings of an insufficiently skilled and poorly led and managed teaching profession. While the publicly stated objective of the Conservative’s 1988 Education Reform Act had been to ‘raise standards’ in schools, expectations appeared to have fallen somewhat short. The document draws attention to ‘good teachers’ and ‘excellent teaching’, while the meaning of these terms are assumed rather than defined. Their very use, however, is controversial simply because they represent government’s ideas on what constitutes the ‘most effective methods’ and that ‘good’ teachers should ‘know how to use them’ (DfEE, 1997, p. 10).

A standards agenda is laid out for each sector e.g. class sizes of 30 for Key Stage 1; the literacy and numeracy strategies; inspection and how failing schools are to be handled. A key feature was performance based on targets:

- School performance tables will be more useful, showing the rate of progress pupils have made as well as their absolute levels of achievement. (DfEE, 1997, 6)

- Each school will have its own challenging targets to raise standards, and will be held responsible for achieving them. (6)

Hence vertical (between units of delivery from classrooms to the Prime Minister’s office in Downing Street) and horizontal (within units of delivery such as a family, a classroom, a school, a local authority area) controls are secured by developing the inherited performance
system and making it more pervasive where management by targets is central to everyday thinking and doing. The introduction of performance-related pay for classroom teachers formed an integral part of New Labour’s modernisation of schools despite the inherent problems of its application in the public and private sectors (Forrester, 2001) and research that casts doubt on its effectiveness (for example see Marsden & Richardson, 1994).

Such strategies are underpinned by evidence claims but without referencing to sources. For example, in *Teachers: Meeting the challenge of change* (DfEE, 1998) the government outlined the need for a new professionalism, headteachers to be organisational leaders, headteachers and teachers to be better trained and for performance-related pay to replace peer appraisal. Fictions are used to both break with the past and enable the adoption of a prescribed future. Illustrative of the first, is how teacher appraisal is written off:

> The present statutory scheme of teacher appraisal has become largely discredited because in most schools it has been seen as a pointless additional burden rather than integral part of the school’s performance management arrangements. The Government has already made clear that it wants to introduce a new, properly focused system of teacher appraisal which has clear objectives and outcomes. (pp. 34–35)

There is a lot of evidence that teacher peer appraisal was working well but it was not liked by OfSTED and its developmental purpose was undermined in schools by the inspection system (Gunter, 2002). Once the past is swiftly discounted, taking on the future is through the narrated vision used to seductively inspire the reader to engage with and sign up to the reforms:

> At the heart of this vision is the school which takes responsibility for improving itself and which challenges and works with every pupil to reach ever higher standards. The school of the future, working in partnership with parents and the community, will often be a centre of lifelong learning. It will offer pupils excellent teaching in the basics and a wide range of learning opportunities, some provided at the school site and others elsewhere. It will be outward looking, constantly seeking to learn from other good schools, drawing on libraries and other sources of learning and examining the evidence of what works. It will be well-led and managed, reward good performance and it will offer pay, conditions and training for all its staff that reflect the central importance of education to society. Above all it will seek continuous improvement, expect change and promote innovation. (DfEE, 1998, p. 12)

The school is conceptualised as an efficient and effective unit that can deliver for pupils and parents. Those who do the delivery are not given recognition except through the construction of the school as a real or tangible unitary organisation conceptualised as an ‘it’. Later on, headteachers are singled out as the most important role in the school:

> All the evidence shows that heads are the key to a school’s success. All schools need a leader who creates a sense of purpose and direction, sets high expectations of staff and pupils, focuses on improving teaching and learning, monitors performance and motivates the staff to give of their best. The best heads are as good at leadership as the best leaders in any other sector, including business. The challenge is to create the rewards, training and support to attract, retain and develop many more heads of this calibre. (p. 22)

There are no references to the sources of evidence on which this statement is made, which is interesting as the most up-to-date research at that time showed that while visionary heads was a popular idea, it was the case that ‘beyond this assertion surprisingly little else is known’ and ‘although the centrality of the head is widely acknowledged, it has not been examined in very much depth’ (Hall & Southworth, 1997, pp. 164–165). Government
texts do not engage with such debates and that the field has pluralistic knowledge claims regarding theorising headship (Gunter & Forrester, in press).

**Leadership of schools doxa**

New Labour codified the leadership of schools through additional centralisation of the curriculum, standards and testing and through extending the training and accreditation of headteachers as local reform deliverers (Gunter & Forrester, in press). The quality of headteachers as school leaders in making schools effective is a self-evident truth to New Labour and this made the neoliberal game, which they overtly joined in 1997, congenial. Ministers, civil servants and advisors made it very clear during their interviews that leadership was central to delivery. In Bourdieu’s (1992, p. 53) terms it is a ‘structured structure’ where the predisposition towards the normality of role incumbents as leaders is revealed within policy formation. As one Secretary of State said: ‘I don’t think we made a decision that we’d concentrate on leadership, there was not a point when that decision was made . . . it was obvious’. This was backed up by a senior civil servant who said: ‘Well it’s not rocket science to know that if you go into a school, the Prime Minister was often saying this, still says it, if you go into a school, go into a classroom actually, you can tell pretty quickly whether or not that school is successful, effective, whether there is a level of the energy, and that very often depends upon the person who’s in charge, the leader of the school, the headteacher . . .’.

New Labour reforms developed within a leader centric government machine, based on the normality of the headteacher as a local leader of national reforms, and did not consider that educational standards could be generated from within pedagogic relationships between teachers and students outside of an assumed causal link with the head. This was partly because of the professional habitus of some of those working in the New Labour government, where two former Secretaries of State for Education (David Blunkett and Estelle Morris) and the Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit in the Department (Michael Barber) had all formerly been classroom teachers. They sought to rework professionalism around neoliberal notions of delivery based on positivistic evidence on outcomes and, as such, they showed a predisposition to engage positively with school improvement and effectiveness research as a ‘structuring structure’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 53). Our data reveal that headteachers as local leaders of their reforms was ‘the only thing to do’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 11) as ‘that regulated disposition to generate regulated and regular behaviour outside any reference to rules’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 65). There is a predisposition to headteachers as leaders, but the discourse is often about organisational delivery because it builds on the post-1988 headteacher as chief executive rather than the post-war leading professional (often known as educational or pedagogic) leadership (Grace, 1995).

This leadership of schools doxa is evident in major policy texts and speeches. For example, in *Excellence in schools* (DfEE 1997):

> The vision for learning set out in this white paper will demand the highest qualities of leadership and management from headteachers. The quality of the head often makes the difference between the success or failure of a school. Good heads can transform a school; poor heads can block progress and achievement. It is essential that we have measures in place to strengthen the skills of all new and serving heads. (p. 46)

After nearly a decade in power the assumption of the centrality of a leader for effectiveness remains a stable feature: ‘good leadership is at the heart of every good school. A strong headteacher, backed by an able leadership team and governing body, is vital for
success’ (DfES 2005, p. 99). This self-evident truth underpinned the investment in a national training programme for aspiring and serving headteachers located within a National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (DfES, 2004). New Labour wanted to structure the delivery disposition within the profession through offering the opportunity for training that would draw on neoliberal evidence from home and abroad and, for a few, there was to be the opportunity to be drawn into policy making within the Standards and Effectiveness Unit and the Innovations Unit.

The New Labour brand of training would be a form of symbolic capital investment into excellent leadership through a benchmarked world-class professionalism. The leadership of schools sutured together in the form of a ‘make over’ (Gunter & Thomson, 2009) the requirements of reform with the necessary skills, behaviour and knowledge to deliver. Central to this is fabricated history, as one Secretary of State said: ‘Well, I don’t think there had been any systematic approach to school leadership, there had been no systematic approach to a qualification for leadership before’; and a senior civil servant said: ‘... actually our feeling was that we had a lot of headteachers who were effective but almost effective by chance. They hadn’t actually received any development or training in the skills of leadership, and that was therefore a gap in the kit bag and so we were quite keen to do something about that ...’. There is little evidence in New Labour texts, either published or in our interview data, of detailed knowledge of what had gone before. Consequently the diversity of provision from one-day courses run by the local authority through to long-term postgraduate degrees offered by the universities was destroyed through the establishment of a state monopoly. Research into the previous experiments (e.g. National Development Centre, see Bolam, 1986) and longstanding debates about a national college (e.g. Wood, 1983) does not seem to have been taken into consideration. Instead the models used were of Sandhurst, Ashridge and the Royal Colleges, with an emphasis on the symbolism of a parity of status with professions who had these institutions. The ownership of the College by headteachers was considered but dismissed, not least because it was argued that heads had to be trained and produced as alumni before they could be trusted to control their own professional formation (Gunter & Forrester, 2009).

Regime of social practice

In return for their investment in the game New Labour needed others to join through a symbolic exchange of goods (Bourdieu, 2000). The illusio or ‘interest in the game’ (p. 207) is through a predisposition to share the reworking of the headteacher as the leader of national reforms locally within a school as a unitary organisation. New Labour developed a strategy that spoke ‘to agents characterized by possession of a certain capital’ (p. 220) and the symbolic goods offered by New Labour was the opportunity to be involved in the formation and delivery of policy at national and local level and what potential agents could offer was the legitimacy of revealing the doxa (or at least not displaying the professional doxa) and the assumed credibility to deliver to headteachers. The New Labour ‘tent’ or ‘sofa’ (Hyman, 2005) was big enough and included an emerging regime of social practice, illustrated by two main groups: first, those appointed to salaried posts in the Department, such as the Standards and Effectiveness Unit and the Innovation Unit and in the National College for School Leadership, where practitioner credibility was regarded as essential in leading policy and communicating reforms to the profession; and, second, those contracted to deliver on particular projects, as sole traders who delivered (e.g. a training session or assessment) through to major international consultancies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers (e.g. DfES & PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007) who delivered
research evidence and leadership models. New Labour wanted private sector and international experience and went to companies and particular academics to enable this.

What we have identified in the regime knowledge production processes is the importance of professional ‘genealogies’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 15). These relationships are based on a form of contractual kinship where people reveal the New Labour delivery disposition and are central to its generative potential through how they engage in practice (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 13). In return for access to new markets in the public sector (e.g. research projects, training programmes, consultancy), private sector entrepreneurs tender for contracts to deliver reforms and produce new products from which to secure new business and in return for the status of private sector involvement in public sector services, the government secures the symbolic capital of the private sector approach to modernisation and innovative reforms. In return for access to commissioned research projects on preferred leadership models or the production of evidence to support government priorities, researchers from the fields of school improvement and effectiveness have provided cultural capital in the form of ‘professor’, ‘university’, ‘expert’ and international networks. In return for access to decision-makers at national and local level, headteachers have provided the cultural capital of consultation with the profession. Misrecognition is evident in the ascribed motivations of this contractual kith and kin, not least through the importance of ritualising the delivery disposition, and is often revealed through narratives about identified failure and the need to do something to improve education because children only go through the system once. Children are objectified as the assumed beneficiaries of the policies, but they are rarely allowed to play the adult game (Thomson & Gunter, 2006).

We have accounts of rituals in regard to meetings and agreements, together with associations between people that demonstrate the importance of shared dispositions and mutuality. While they never speak openly of the symbolic exchange of goods, it is clear that prestige and distinction through the interplay between government and the private sector is central to the conditions in which social practice is produced. Overtly the market has replaced politics as private firms and individuals engaged in ‘can do, can deliver’ contractual relationships with the previous Thatcherite governments as well as New Labour. Ideas are combined and recombined, presented as opportunities arise and, even if a person or firm have concerns about a policy direction, they are able to wait and see and impact on policy as the mood and attitudes change (Gunter & Forrester, 2008a). Frustration with government policies and the machinery of state has been expressed to us but it has not hindered ‘policy entrepreneurship’ (Kingdon, 2003) and the status that distinction and consecration by association with Whitehall brings, even if only for a short time. Hence the emergence of distributed leadership as the antidote to the heroic transformational leadership model is a product of this type of positioning. Importantly, this new product is only rhetorically different and so did not challenge the hierarchical and leader-centric model of the single person at the top of a pyramid. There are great rewards in the form of contractual abundance and honours (Knights and Dames). However, this form of kinship is not unconditional. This is because there is ‘the good player, who is so to speak the game incarnate, does at every moment what the game requires’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63) but, as already acknowledged, ‘anything goes’ is not allowed and, indeed, is punished. While people vouch for each other and there are plenty of people waiting for an invitation to join, there is a very ruthless exclusion process when deal making has been publicly revealed (e.g. see Beckett’s [2007] account of what happened to former headteacher Des Smith and the honours scandal regarding the funding of Academies).
Headteachers as deliverers

The New Labour leadership of schools doxa has travelled to headteachers in order to structure a delivery disposition and, indeed, to strategically forget a professional doxa developed at another time. They have been invited to play the game and engage in the strategic exchange of capitals in a range of ways: first, to implement national curriculum and teaching policies locally; second, to improve national standards through outputs such as tests; third, to yield to the superior knowing of outsiders such as school improvement partners; fourth, to operate the performance management regime (tests, value added data, performance-related pay); and fifth, to access the benefits of major investment through localised tactical improvements and gains. Underpinning all of this is a structuring process of the symbolic capital of the Prime Minister speaking at conferences, attendance at local roadshows that deliver the news and requirements of national strategies and invitations to dine and discuss education with policymakers and to lead on national reforms in the Department or at the NCSL. Headteachers have been the focus of national investment and they are expected to be enthusiastic compliers with the dominant doxa, not least now that we have data from New Labour policymakers showing that they have particularly enjoyed seeing how certain headteachers have learned very quickly what the reforms have been about and how a group of headteachers have raced ahead and have been actively leading the changes.

While there are some cases of localised policymaking in schools (Hollins et al., 2006), such research is either non-existent or just not happening. Much continues to be written about headship but again little of it is independently funded or designed. A few examples exist where Thomson (2009) and Bottery (2007a, 2007b) show how complex and risky headship is. We have interviewed 25 headteachers about their approach to leadership, where they have learned about leadership and their views of being in the job at a time of rapid modernisation (Forrester & Gunter, 2009; Gunter & Forrester, in press). Our data show that there are veteran heads (7 out of 25) who have played many games and have an embodied understanding of the job and so can put New Labour rules and rituals into context, while there are those who are newer to the job (9 out of 25), who have experienced neoliberal structuring as teachers but are playing as heads for the first time. In handling the positioning by reform and seeking to protect or take up a position in relation to the reforms, the issue is one of how they speak about and ‘acknowledge what is at stake (this is illusio in the sense of investment in the game and the outcome, interest in the game, commitment to the presuppositions – doxa – of the game)’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 66). What is interesting in our data is how they handle the doxa and seek to understand it and, for some, help to develop it.

We have identified three main positions. First, reform agenda deliverers (a quarter of the headteacher sample) who have invested in the neoliberal game and are committed to the New Labour doxa. They have accepted that the reforms are about necessary and important changes to the way teaching and learning are conceptualised and operate. While they are troubled by some things and may bristle at being told what to do from people at a distance in London (or the NCSL) they like being consulted, they like the transformational model of the powerful leader with staff as followers and they want to make sure that the changes are co-ordinated and well led in their schools:

I was invited four years ago to a meeting in London by the DfES . . . there were about 200 of us there nationally. And that was because we had been identified as being transformational leaders. And it had come through a whole variety of Ofsted reports, knowledge from the DfES of you, LEA recommendations and so on . . . I find this hard actually because I suppose
I am a charismatic leader . . . I think they have been incredibly creative as a government . . . I think that some of the stuff which is coming out I absolutely disagree with . . . the things around academies concern me . . . I’m supportive of more resources in this school, of course I am, but I don’t wish to be called an academy because we are not a failing school and academies now are predicated now on the term failing school . . . I really dislike some of the language being used . . . I have also been invited twice to Downing Street to discuss government policy and changes in educational practice. So I think they do listen and I know a number of people who I speak to about education . . . I have been able to have telephone conversations with them to say, ‘look I approve of this, but do you realise the implications of the other?’ . . . I think they have made themselves available and they have not hidden in ivory towers, and I think that is very laudable. (Linda)

Second, educational agenda setters (a quarter of the sample) have retained an investment in the professional doxa that New Labour (and the previous Thatcherite administrations) have worked hard to eliminate. These self-evident truths are located in the importance of the local and working with teachers, children and families and also issues of social justice. They are warm to the claims from New Labour to want to eradicate the negative impact of poverty on children’s learning and have welcomed targeted investment to enable that, but they have not bought into the managerialism of delivery, data and audits. While they do not sabotage policies they do work around them and within the schools they are trying to keep alive cultures and social practices that are about social democracy:

So in terms of what draws me forward in my career was a sense that actually you can make a difference through the curriculum but then what’s the important thing of all is a sense of an engaging curriculum that actually people find worthwhile . . . . . It’s also about finding ways in which you can intervene to move people forward . . . that thing about, you know, one, making sure that every child actually can thrive in terms of our social democracy, two, making sure that you create a sense in which you open up what it counts to be successful in terms of a learner rather than just five A to Cs and, three, that you have an absolute remit to work in a sense of social justice and community and to build up fairness and a model community. (Barry)

Third, ambivalent implementers (half the sample) are accepting of the doxa and so put emphasis on taking responsibility for the best way to implement externally determined change and they are prepared to take risks to protect the school if they think that the one-size-fits-all approach of national policies does not work there. They are very conscious of the operation of the performance regime, particularly OfSTED, that can declare the school as failing and hence they would lose their jobs:

The other thing that we have and we have fully embraced is the ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’. So I know that’s a little bit in the past now, but we were in a very difficult position in that Ofsted came in [year] and basically said that the school was under-achieving. So we worked very hard so that by [2 years on] we had got ourselves out of that situation and Ofsted said ‘yes, you are ready to now to move on’. And at that time ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ came out which was all linked in to the children having a much more creative curriculum, so we have obviously embraced that . . . I think that all these things, as long as I actually introduce them into the school in a way which is seen to be supportive, and which is seen to be moving us forward, then staff have embraced them which is what, what I am always hoping for really. (Elizabeth)

What is interesting from this data and our analysis is that all of the headteachers are involved in the New Labour game, whether fully or partly, but the way symbolic exchange works in practice is varied. Not all heads are officially good players and have resisted
domination. All have been shown the game, all have been invited in, the rules have been made congenial through how much of the language is seemingly compatible with the professional doxa and, while a few, as illustrated, play enthusiastically, not all the heads are convinced. In the confidentiality of the interview space (with people who are not visiting the school to make them publicly accountable for outcomes) they are prepared to speak about the technical difficulties of having to implement policies that are often incoherent and incompatible, but there are those who talk about how their educational values and the role of children in educational change are more important than reforms:

... what I say to the pupils, what I say to the staff is what I say to myself is ‘do your best’. And if at the end of the day, every decision you make is based around, is it based on the best interest of the pupils, not to please central government or the LEA or three or four members of staff, but if it’s for the benefits of the pupils and you make those decisions. I can live with that and I can sleep easily at night. (Richard)

It seems to us that that game remains in play because the logic of practice has not fully engaged all players.

None of the headteachers interviewed would challenge the importance of headteacher leadership, but what remains at stake and not yet settled on the terrain of school reform is the purpose of such leadership. This could well be the reason why the role of the headteacher is currently being reworked in ways to finally eradicate the persistence of the professional doxa: first, the requirement to have qualified teacher status to be a head has been removed; second, the restructuring of education with groups of schools joining together as federations means that the top job need not be undertaken by a headteacher but could be by someone with generic leadership skills from another public service or the private or voluntary sectors; and, third, inter-agency working with the development of the public service campus that includes schools, police, welfare, health and public libraries on one site means that, again, someone other than a teacher can ‘head’ up such provision. At the time of writing the Secretary of State, Ed Balls, has announced that £2billion will be saved in education through the axing of 3000 heads and other senior leaders, based on the argument that federations do not need a headteacher for each school (Oliver, 2009). The game already in play in 1997 has been developed by New Labour to further extend the neoliberal ideas of good leadership as a chief executive who delivers reforms at the local level and such a game continues to marginalise professional values and purposes.

Conclusion

The modernisation of education has not been a smooth path because, as Ball (2007) has shown, there remains an ongoing tension between capitalist accumulation and the regulative state. Consequently education is ‘now in almost permanent crisis’ (p. 5) and the logic of practice is implicated within this. The extension of markets combined with centralised targets and performance management requires game playing where contradictions and incoherence can be handled through non-negotiable values (leader-centric hierarchy) and discourses (choice and investment), where the doxa of professional expertise and care has to be eradicated. New Labour has constructed a policy that we have identified as the leadership of schools and they have done this through a regime of social practice positioned through the staking of capital around failing schools and teachers. The disposition is one of delivery through a doxa of preferred leadership practice, where people from a range of employment locations (national and local government, private companies, universities, schools) have
engaged in symbolic exchange of capitals. Notably we have focused on headteachers who have been in receipt of the doxa, trained in the delivery disposition and have been invited to exchange capitals and we have shown that, while some heads have embraced this, there is evidence of ambivalence as well as those who retain a professional doxa. The generative processes in the logic of practice continue to work on this through the ongoing domination of heads combined with their marginalisation and even replacement by chief executives.

In doing this we have worked with Bourdieu’s thinking tools so that we can ‘simply bring to light the theory of practice that theoretical knowledge implicitly applies and so to make possible a truly scientific knowledge of practice and of the practical mode of knowledge’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 27). In doing so we have gone beyond descriptive network mapping towards developing a conceptualisation of power that Goodwin (2009) shows ‘resource dependency and distribution of capacities’ (p. 686). That government uses and relies upon those outside of government and the public sector is neither new or remarkable, but what is crucial is how the logic of practice works through the symbolic exchange of capitals (resources, such as name, status, sector, products; and capacities, such as knowledge, networks, time) in ways that illuminate who are dominant and who are the dominated. Importantly we think that central to the logic as explored through the reading our data is the way that misrecognition works, not least that the doxa of good and preferred leadership by headteachers, while codified and seemingly accepted as normal, is a construction that is about playing the game.

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Notes on contributors

Helen Gunter is Professor of Educational Policy, Leadership and Management in the School of Education, University of Manchester. She has produced over seventy publications, including books and papers on leadership theory and practice, and she co-edits the Journal of Educational Administration and History. Her work has focused on education policy and the growth of school leadership where she has used Bourdieu’s thinking tools to explain the configuration and development of the field. She is particularly interested in the history of the field, particularly developments in knowledge production. Recently she completed the Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership Project, funded by the ESRC, where she studied the relationship between the state, public policy and knowledge, and she has just begun a project on Distributed Leadership funded by the ESRC with her colleagues Dave Hall and Joanna Bragg.

Gillian Forrester is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies in the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. Her main research interests are in education policy and modernization, teachers’ work, performance management in schools and school leadership.

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