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# Curriculum reform as contested: An analysis of curriculum policy enactment in Queensland, Australia



Ian Hardy

*School of Education, University of Queensland, Australia*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how teachers and school-based administrators at a large, low socio-economic primary school responded to policy support for a highly detailed version of the new national curriculum in Queensland, Australia. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' of field, habitus and capital, and recent theorising of policy enactment, the paper indicates how competing relations between different policy actors influenced how they responded to the policy enactment process. The research outlines what is described as the 'field of policy enactment' as a contested site with those educators with more capital more actively responding to policy prerogatives, at the same time as those with less capital were often simply managing to cope.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses school-based administrators, senior specialist teachers and classroom teachers' responses to the recent implementation (or what is more accurately described as 'enactment') of policy supporting a new national curriculum (the 'Australian Curriculum') in a school serving a complex community in Queensland, Australia. I endeavour to mobilise Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'field', 'habitus' and 'capital' alongside [Ball, Maguire, and Braun's \(2012\)](#) theorising of policy enactment, to indicate how teachers and administrators responded to prescriptive policy support, particularly at the regional level, for this national curriculum. The research is in keeping with policy research flagging the importance of local practices and processes in response to policy ([Honig, 2006](#)). I also recognise that interpretations about practice are always constructs that need to remain open to further interrogation in light of practice ([Bourdieu, 1990](#)).

I draw upon school-based staff experiences of strong policy support for the Australian Curriculum in Queensland in a large, diverse, low socio-economic school. The research arose in response to a decision by the Queensland government to develop a set of detailed unit plans in 2011, including individual lesson plans, resources, and assessment tasks for the new curriculum – known in Queensland as the 'Curriculum into the Classroom' or 'C-2-C' – and mixed policy messages about how teachers should engage with these materials as part of the roll-out of the curriculum in 2012. I show how regional interpretation of policy support for the Queensland iteration of the Australian Curriculum, influenced how teachers came to see and engage with policy support for a national curriculum in a complex school setting.

*E-mail address:* [i.hardy@uq.edu.au](mailto:i.hardy@uq.edu.au) (I. Hardy).

## 2. Bringing Bourdieu to educational policy enactment

Pierre Bourdieu never wrote about policy enactment *per se*. However, in an effort to ‘evoke’ and perhaps ‘provoke’ the use of Bourdieu in educational research (Gale & Lingard, 2015), I draw upon his concepts in conjunction with recent theorising of policy enactment to better understand how curriculum reform policy was practised at a specific school site. This involves drawing upon his ‘thinking tools’ (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989) of ‘field’, ‘habitus’ and ‘capital’ to better understand how policy is ‘implemented’ (‘evoking’ Bourdieu). However, such an approach is enhanced by simultaneously drawing upon the theorising of policy enactment in education as a means of interpreting educators’ responses to reform through processes of ‘interpreting’ and ‘translating’ policy (Ball et al., 2012) (‘provoking’ Bourdieu).

For Bourdieu (1998a), practices only make sense ‘in relation’ to one another, and differences in social practices are a product of differential power relations between individuals and groups within specific social spaces, or ‘fields’; in the research presented, this relates to teachers, school-based administrators and regional/systemic policy-makers and how they were positioned in relation to one another. These relations point to a particular ‘principle of differentiation’ at play, and different kinds of resources, or ‘capital’, available in different places and times (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 32). The most dominant forms of capital come to characterize fields, and exist in various forms, including in embodied, social, cultural and/or economic states (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital may also be ‘symbolic’, and therefore subject to alteration and transformation into other forms of capital, depending upon the particular situation and the proclivities and capacities – ‘habitus’ – of its possessors. Bourdieu (1986) describes symbolic capital as capital that is ‘unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence’ (p. 49); such capital possesses particular qualities that ascribe value to it, but in ways that may not be readily recognised as capital of one particular type (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 47). In the case of the state, such symbolic capital is exercised in ways that invoke claims to universality—that the state-endorsed perspective applies in all contexts (Bourdieu 1998a). This is in contrast with teachers in schools who are more contextually bound, and contingent upon specific circumstances (Hardy and Lingard, 2008).

Inscribed with particular forms of capital, the ‘habitus’ constitutes a particular ‘disposition’ through exposure to specific practices within any given field. This is a mutually recursive relationship; not only is the habitus ‘produced’ by the field within which it is located, but the field is itself constituted by the dispositions of those who comprise it, and who influence and are influenced by the forms of capital within the field. Furthermore, fields may also be subject to change through a process of ‘socio-analysis’, as some actors develop a sense of *reconnaissance* (‘recognition’) of the cultural, economic, linguistic arbitrary that characterises fields. At the same time, and more typically, processes of *méconnaissance* (‘misrecognition’) exist amongst other participants, where there is a lack of recognition of this arbitrary; this in turn constrains challenges to more embedded social processes (Grenfell et al., 1998).

At times, change may be abrupt, such that it is difficult to ascertain subsequent effects upon the habitus. In these circumstances, the effects upon the positioning of the individual within the field, is yet to be determined. Such abrupt changes – *hysteresis* – lead to varied responses on the part of individuals within the field, with those occupying more dominant positions able to position themselves to take advantage of these abrupt changes, whilst those who are dominated tend to respond in ways that further consolidate their more marginalised position (Bourdieu, 1990).

As well as being characterized by internal competition, fields are also influenced by external forces, including the broader ‘field of power’. The field of power is an overarching field characterized by contestation over the dominant forms of capital which come to exist within any given field, and between fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 76). As a result of these internal and external influences, the distribution of power within any given field may undergo significant change (Bourdieu, 1998a).

## 3. Theorising policy enactment

While Bourdieu’s work has been taken up extensively in educational policy research, his conceptual resources and methodological approach have not been deployed in relation to the enactment of curriculum reform policies as expansively as might be anticipated. Some very recent work by a team of Australian researchers<sup>1</sup> has begun to theorise Australian Curriculum reform policies, with nascent research involving teachers in schools. From this work, Gerrard and Farrell (2013) refer to how bureaucratic policy production can be understood by drawing upon Bourdieu’s field theory and Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnography in relation to the Australian Curriculum but at a more general level in relation to the variety of texts associated with the curriculum. The more localized inquiry reported in this research complements and adds to this nascent research by shedding light upon how teachers and school-based administrators are influenced by this curriculum

<sup>1</sup> Freebody, P. Sullivan, L. Farrell, J. Albright, D. Clark, D. Clark. (2010–2012). ‘Peopling educational policy: Realising the new Australian English and Mathematics curricula’. This work is funded by the Australian Research Council. Work by Gerrard et al. (2013) maps out a research trajectory for inquiry into classrooms using Bourdieu and Smith, but without reference to empirical data. The empirical work undertaken so far as part of this team’s project focuses upon survey results of English teachers’ practices vis-à-vis the Australian Curriculum but not from a Bourdieusian perspective (Albright, Knezevic, & Farrell, 2013). In more recent work, Gerrard and Farrell (2014) have employed Bourdieu’s field theory and Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnography to analyse how policy-makers and policy documents construct teachers’ professional authority in relation to the Australian Curriculum.

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