

# Abstract

**Steven John Courtney**

**PhD University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities, September 2015**

**Investigating school leadership at a time of system diversity, competition and flux**

This dissertation reports on a qualitative study of school leadership with nine secondary-school headteachers (of maintained schools) or principals (of academy-type schools) in England. The project maps schooling provision and offers an empirical account of leaders' identities and practices in neoliberal and neoconservative times. Informed by a critical policy-scholarship methodology, documentary data from primary and secondary sources supplement narrative and semi-structured interviews conducted over 18 months. The findings are reported in five journal articles and one book chapter.

The first output maps school types through different lenses: legal status; curriculum; selection; types of academy; and school groupings. The mapping highlights the intersections between the reform agenda and historical diversity. I conceptualise the landscape holistically through locus of legitimacy and branding, arguing that diversification policies facilitate corporatised and religious interests.

Second, I show how UTCs and studio schools construct children's abilities as fixed and differentiable in terms of predicted economic value. They select, but the responsibility for this, following Bourdieu, is transferred discursively from the school through branding and habitus to the "consumers" where it is to be misrecognised as exercising 'school choice'.

Third, I typologise three effects on heads' and principals' agency and identities of a few elite multi-academy trust principals, or *courtiers*, who have won regional empires through expanding their academy chains to occupy the spaces opened up by the dismantling of LAs. Public-sector and school-leader identities and histories permit the promotion of their activities as "school led" and downplay their close relationship with central-state policy-makers and private-sector networks.

Fourth, I argue that corporatised leadership in schools in England is being promoted through new actors and new types of school. Corporatised leadership is characterised *inter alia* by the promotion of business interests and the adoption of business-derived leadership practices and identities. I use Bourdieu's concept of field to explain the impact of business on educational leadership and the dissonance between leaders and led.

Fifth, I argue with Gunter that school leaders are removing those who embody or vocalise alternative conceptualisations of educator by eradicating 'inadequate' teaching, and implementing the leader's 'vision'. We deploy Arendtian thinking to show how current models of school leadership enable totalitarian practices to become ordinary.

Sixth, I develop Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis through narratives from two heads to argue that rather than simply being an effect of change, hysteresis may be an actively sought outcome whereby the state intervenes to deprivilege welfarist headteachers and privilege corporatised principals through structurally facilitating their habitus and mandating its dispositions for the field.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate how the diversification of provision in England and the demands of a performative, marketised regime have ontological and professional stakes for school leaders and for the led. Symbolic and economic capital is accruing to the capitalised, facilitated by corporate practices and corporate structural solutions through acquisitions and alliances. Resistance is possible, but a dissident habitus limits standing in the field. This hierarchisation is reflected in the relationship between school types and in how children are meant to self-select into that provision. This is a landscape constituted of positions, where pupils are expected to know their place and the purpose of education is to facilitate social segregation for economic efficiency.