

## *Theorising principals' support for teacher PD in Ontario*

### **Leading learning:**

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##### *Abstract*

This paper describes and theorises principals' support for teacher professional development ('PD') during a time of strong provincial pressure for an increased focus upon literacy, numeracy, and improvements in standardised test scores in elementary schools in Ontario, Canada. The paper draws upon semi-structured interviews with twelve principals in one school district to reveal tensions between principals' support for professional development associated with these provincial emphases, and advocacy for professional development relevant to the specific needs of their school sites. To explore these competing priorities, the paper draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the social world as comprising identifiable and contested social 'fields', each containing individuals and groups with particular and competing socially-inscribed dispositions, or 'habitus'. At the same time, the paper uses principals' responses to validate and extend normative understandings of 'leadership habitus'. While provincial pressures are revealed as having a significant impact upon principals' habitus, an argument is made that the capacity to take local context into account needs to be foregrounded more strongly in current normative conceptions of leadership habitus.

*Keywords:* professional development, social field, leadership habitus, Bourdieu

##### **Introduction**

This paper seeks to contribute to current understandings of the theory and practice of principal leadership in the context of increased pressures upon principals for educational reform in Ontario, Canada. In particular, the paper describes and theorises principals' support for teacher professional development ('PD') during a time of strong provincial pressure for an increased emphasis upon numeracy and literacy, and improvements in students' standardised test scores. These pressures are part of a broader raft of neoliberal reforms, including the standardisation of education more generally, which constitute part of government struggles to respond to economic readings of globalisation. Such pressures are typically in tension with more

profession-driven conceptions of what constitutes the most beneficial teacher learning for student learning (Day and Sachs 2004).

To make sense of these competing priorities, the paper draws upon the theorising of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1998), who conceptualises practice as socially inscribed, and the social world as comprising separate, identifiable and contested social spaces, or 'fields', which influence and are influenced by the individuals and groups who constitute them. The paper focuses particularly upon the nature of the teacher PD principals supported within the 'educational field', influenced as it was by considerable pressure for significant educational reform.

### **Principals' leadership practices in times of reform**

Several scholars have theorised principal leadership practices during the current moment of educational reform and uncertainty. In this context of chaos, complexity, standardisation, accountability and performativity, Hargreaves (2005) calls for what he describes as 'sustainable leadership'. Such leadership: matters; endures over time; spreads beyond the formal leader; is socially just; develops rather than consumes human and material resources; promotes diversity and builds capacity; is activist and assertive in its outlook; is vigilant about monitoring the local learning environment; respects the past; and is patient (Hargreaves 2005). Many of these elements complement Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie's (2003) notion of 'leading learning', with its empirically grounded support for leadership practices to be saturated in pedagogies oriented towards student academic and social learning.

However, such conceptions seem to contrast strongly with many of the discourses and research into the nature of actual principal leadership practices. Principals' work is constituted as part of a neoliberal discourse within what Gunter (2001) refers to in the English context as 'performing schools'. Within such schools, principals' work involves managing so as to maximise outputs on standardised measures of performance, such as externally prescribed curricula and tests. The introduction of New Public Management approaches to the public sector has resulted in a narrowing of systemic goals within public education systems, and increased pressure to ensure these goals are met (Lingard and Christie 2003).

In the Australian context, Thomson (2001) points out how principals' work is constructed as technicist in orientation, involving managing people, infrastructure, and multiple, frequently conflicting, agendas. Such approaches limit the extent to which principals are able to take local context into account (Thomson 2002).

Thomson (2004) also reports how principles of entrepreneurial governance associated with this new public management have had a significant impact upon principal identities. More managerial emphases have resulted in a redefinition of the role of the headship, with a shift in focus away from educational to management-oriented issues:

There is widespread agreement in the scholarly and professional communities that principals' work has become more removed from educational matters, and much more concerned with accounting, 'human relations' and planning and accountability (Thomson 2004: 50).

Such practices have resulted in a regulation of principals' work at the same time as there is rhetorical advocacy for deregulation and decentralisation. The result is a level of frustration and dejection on the part of some principals as they struggle to make sense of the conflicting and contradictory discourses within which their daily work is enacted.

Within this context, there is relatively little literature which reveals principals' leadership practices in relation to teacher professional development. An edited volume (Moon, Butcher and Bird 2000) entitled *Leading Professional Development in Education*, appears to hold out hope of a synthesis of issues of teacher professional development and principal leadership. However, an explicit and extended theorisation of principals' practices in relation to teacher professional development remains elusive. This compendium refers to leadership within subject departments (Busher and Harris 2000), and teachers supporting one another through peer coaching (Swafford 2000), as well as the role of school managers in evaluating the work of the school (Russell 2000), but an extended, dedicated explication and theorisation of principals' responses to the teacher professional development which arise during times of demanding educational reforms warrants further attention within the research literature.

### **Theorising practice: Bourdieu's theory of practice**

To understand the conflicted nature of principals' decision-making as the product of the social circumstances in which this decision-making is undertaken, this paper draws upon Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 50) of 'field',

'habitus' and 'capital'. For Bourdieu, the social world comprises different social spaces or 'fields', each of which is a site of accumulation and contestation over the symbolic and material products, or 'capitals', of most worth. This contestation occurs between individuals and groups, whose dispositions, or 'habitus', make them more or less likely, or able, to engage in the stakes of particular fields.

For Bourdieu, 'a field is simultaneously a *space of conflict* and competition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17, emphasis original). The contestation between the positions occupied by individuals and groups within any given field results in the valuing of particular practices, which possess their own characteristics, or 'logics'. A field may be studied by identifying the practices associated with it, determining which agents are dominant and which are dominated, and delineating the specific capitals possessed by different groups and individuals seeking to exert influence within the field (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104-5). At the same time, fields are overlain by a broader field of power, which acts as a 'meta-field', characterised by contestation between those who hold dominant positions within their respective fields, and who come together to contest the balance of forces between their respective positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

These dominant practices within fields exert a structuring influence upon the individuals and groups who constitute them, and, at the same time, these practices are influenced by these agents. That is, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and collective dispositions, or 'habitus', of agents within fields, and the logics of practice of the field itself (Bourdieu 1990). This means that

the social practices socially and historically produced within fields have an element of durability about them.

However, practices are not static within fields, and the habitus not deterministic.

Rather, the habitus may be awakened through what Bourdieu (1990: 116) describes as a process of 'awakening of consciousness' or 'socio-analysis'. It is this capacity to become aware of one's circumstances which enables people to strategise in ways which do not simply reproduce dominant practices. This concept of habitus, and its potential for change, together with the concepts of field and capitals, inform the empirical explanations and theorising presented in this paper.

### **Applying and extending Bourdieu in educational leadership studies**

A nascent body of work exists which draws upon Bourdieu's concepts in the context of educational leadership. Gunter (2003; 2004), for example, has drawn extensively upon Bourdieu's concepts to understand the practices of those working within the field of educational leadership, which she characterises as both a field of research and a field of practice. In her Bourdieuan analysis of the change in labelling from 'educational administration' to 'educational management' and most recently 'educational leadership', Gunter (2004) points out both continuity and change in terms of the construction of educational leaders' practices within the field of educational leadership in higher education.

Similarly, a special edition of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* published in 2003 was devoted to conceptualising educational leadership as a field of

practice, as well as a field of scholarship and research. In this special edition, one paper, by Lingard and Christie (2003), focused specifically upon and theorised the role of the principalship. Lingard and Christie (2003) explicated the nature of educational leadership as a field of practice, gesturing towards the implications for practice of what the authors described, drawing upon concurrent work, as the 'leadership habitus'; this concept was developed from empirical work in Queensland, Australia, into the nature of principal and teacher leadership practices (Lingard et al. 2003). Lingard and Christie (2003) argued that the educational leadership habitus, as it related to principals, was positioned at a particular point between the policy production apparatus of the state, and schooling practices. This required principals to be able to work with and across multiple logics of practice, including those associated with centralised bureaucracies, themselves influenced by managerial and marketised practices from the broader field of power and the economy. This is in contrast with the logics of practice which characterise curricula, pedagogical and assessment practices associated with the daily work of teachers and students within schools.

Under these circumstances, Lingard and Christie (2003) referred to three elements of a normative conception of leadership habitus. Such a habitus involved principals engaging in a process of reflexivity. This enabled constant interrogation of principals' practices through an active process of self-monitoring. Secondly, such a habitus was informed by a desire to keep the educational, social justice and democratic purposes of education at the fore of decision-making. Drawing upon Said (1994), such an approach involved efforts to 'do the most good and cause the right change' (p. 75, original). Finally, productive leadership habitus involved conceptualising education as the interplay between multiple, contested fields,

including the educational field writ large, and the field of schools. The capacity to work with and across tensions from pressures created by central bureaucracies, teachers, parents etc. were considered essential for making good educational decisions.

This paper seeks to draw upon these concepts and add to this literature, particularly the concept of leadership habitus, by reporting detailed, descriptive, empirically-based accounts of principals' advocacy of professional development practices during a period of substantial educational reform in Ontario, Canada.

### **The Ontario political and policy context**

During the past decade, there has been increased pressure upon educators and educational administrators in Ontario to ensure that educational resources are utilised efficiently and effectively. This is in keeping with broader pressures, within what Power (1999) describes as the 'audit society', to account for the expenditure of public resources. As part of this process, the state has held those engaged in elementary schooling to greater account for the educational outcomes of students. The establishment of the 'Education Quality and Accountability Office' (EQAO) in Ontario in 1998 to administer annual standardised literacy and numeracy tests, and to collate the results of these tests in a central registry, is emblematic of this increased focus upon accountability across the province. These results are reported publicly in newspapers, on a school-by-school basis.



Since the election of the present government in 2003, there has been renewed policy and political interest in the areas of literacy and numeracy. As part of wide-reaching reforms to the education sector, the government established a new administrative entity within the Ministry of Education, the 'Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat', to focus expressly on literacy and numeracy issues. Since 2005, approximately \$34 million has been expended on initiatives at the district/board and school levels to improve the literacy and numeracy capabilities of students throughout the province (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, n.d.) The current government has also put in place a target of 75% of all students across the province achieving 'level 3' on a 4 point scale in province-wide literacy and numeracy tests by the conclusion of elementary school, by the end of 2008 (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, n.d.). The school board from which principals were drawn in this study typically had above average EQAO results, and subsequently set itself a target of 80%, rather than 75%.

Finally, there has also been provincial advocacy for improved school climate/culture within schools in recognition of the importance of cultivating positive learning environments to promote student learning. These reforms have influenced schooling practices in Ontario, including those related to leadership and professional development practices.

## **Method**

To examine how principals conceptualised professional development practices in Ontario within this broader reform agenda, semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals located within a large and relatively prosperous school board in southern Ontario. This board was considered of interest because it represented a

community of educators most likely to be able to engage with the reform agenda. The reflections of educators in this context would provide telling insights into the effects of educational reforms occurring within Ontario, as these related to professional development practices. These insights form part of a broader study into the nature of senior educators' teacher professional development priorities in southern Ontario (see Hardy, forthcoming).

Twelve principals were interviewed from schools which were broadly representative of the diversity of schools and local communities within the board – particularly in relation to socio-economic status, geographic location (including urban/rural) and whether communities were new or established. While the board was relatively prosperous as a whole, significant pockets of poverty also existed within the communities the board served. Further research involving teachers within this board, and teachers and administrators from other boards, would serve as a natural complement to the findings presented in this paper.

Interviews were open-ended, and focused upon the nature of the professional development principals supported within this context of significant educational reform. Questions related to the nature of the reform agenda in Ontario, the professional development practices supported within this context, how principals responded to centralised bureaucratic support for reform-oriented PD, and the nature of any tensions between provincial foci and more context-specific approaches to PD. The interview data were analysed by the author using an emergent thematic analysis approach which involved searching for patterns or themes within the data (Shank, 2002). The analysis involved identifying individual themes via an intensive, manual

coding process. Principals' responses were further classified in line with Bourdieu's (1998) notion of social practices as 'relational' – as characterized by difference from, and contestation with, other possible practices.

### **Elementary principals' responses to reform-oriented PD in Ontario**

The way in which principals responded to provincial pressures for particular types of professional development within their schools concentrated around two broad influences/themes. These related to the provincial push for an increased focus upon literacy and numeracy, and the increased focus upon using standardised data to inform teacher and student learning. Within each of these broad themes, there was evidence of a compliant habitus in relation to provincial foci, but at the same time, there was also evidence that this was a habitus simultaneously influenced by more localised and context-specific concerns.

#### **The provincial push for literacy and numeracy**

The data reveal principals' support for teacher professional development within the province was heavily influenced by the provincial push for an increased focus upon literacy and numeracy. At the same time, there was also evidence of principals seeking to accommodate the reform agenda in light of what they believed most important in their specific school settings. At times, this took the form of resistance to the provincial foci because they were felt not to take schools' local circumstances sufficiently into account.

***A compliant habitus: Principals dominated by provincial foci***

For several principals, the provincial foci, particularly, literacy and numeracy, exerted a significant influence upon the teacher PD which principals endorsed in their schools:

Certainly, the [Literacy and Numeracy] Secretariat has been, I think, part of the biggest driver...so in every school, and in all directions - you would be getting it from the board office – it would be around literacy and numeracy initiatives in your school. (Richard)

... from the system ... [our] School Effectiveness Plan has to be in the area of literacy, numeracy, climate/culture. (Tricia)

A compliant habitus was evident in how such a push was construed as overtly beneficial by the principals, even as it was recognised as exerting a great deal of influence:

we're quite focused on, very specific growth, you know, in specific areas for our kids. So that pushes back in terms of [teachers'] development, ... I don't hear any more arguing that this is not valuable, or what's good for kids, but certainly that it is driven with a very specific agenda of, you know, of improvement in specific areas of our kids' performance. So I think there're definitely big drivers. (Lawrence)

...you don't always hear me complimenting the Ministry, but I have to say, the expert panel documents that they put forth, really gave us the momentum, to bring the initiatives to life. They were really outstanding in putting forth documents for early reading, middle grade readings and for the intermediate levels, ... then they had the same for numeracy. (Michelle)

In some schools, a compliant habitus amongst principals was evident in how teachers were construed as having choice about the areas in which they would be involved, but within the specified domains of literacy and numeracy and school culture/climate. This was the case in one new school where there was an expectation that every teacher would be formally involved in one of the key elements of the reform agenda:

For me in this setting and in my last setting, it's a requirement that every teacher be a part of one of those [literacy, numeracy, school climate] teams. So they can self-select what's their personal interest out of the choice of three, but everyone must be part of something. And that was way back in June when we met. I had staff signing up in June for what team they wanted to be part of, and without my direction, they met over the summer to start talking about what their focus was going to be ... (Kandice)

The provincial foci exerted considerable influence by determining those areas deemed most important, and by establishing the circumstances for the adoption of these foci at the school level.

*A context-responsive habitus: Localising educational practice*

At the same time, principals' support for PD related to the reform agenda was tempered by the need to ensure teachers actually knew their students well enough to be able to make sensible decisions about their own learning in relation to these specific state-endorsed foci:

I actually had to slow them down because I thought they were getting ahead of the game in terms of setting a goal without really understanding our student population, and starting to plan grand scale initiatives when our focus really needed to be on – let's get in our building, because we were two months late getting into our building. We didn't move in 'til November. So let's get to know our students. Let's get to know each other. Let's get into our building ... and then let's start talking about where we want to go with literacy and numeracy. (Kandice)

In another new school, while the focus upon literacy and numeracy significantly influenced PD, a more context-responsive habitus was similarly evident in the way the principal considered it important to also provide opportunities for teachers to listen and learn from one another's experiences more generally as an integral part of the professional learning which occurred:

Our board made a decision a few years ago ... to do early dismissal days. ... So at that time our board said that every school, as part of their 'School Effectiveness Plan' would have a focus on literacy and on numeracy and

school culture. ... We had four of them each year, and the kids would be dismissed early, ... and then you would have an afternoon session with your staff that you could facilitate. That was absolutely critical to me in a brand new school where you didn't have time with huge growth to sit and talk about just the day to day things to say, 'How are things going? What experiences have you had?' Because I had staff who didn't know each other, having met together, let alone for the things that my board was asking me to do. So we did a balance of both. We felt it was really important to record and experience and listen to the thoughts and special opportunities that staff had and do that kind of a sharing. (James)

Finally, a context-responsive habitus was also evident in how some principals reacted against the strong push for literacy and numeracy by arguing for teacher PD which related to a broader range of curriculum areas:

... we talk about, right now, the arts, in Ontario, and what's happening to the arts, because we're so focused on literacy and numeracy. And there's a danger in having that focus. So I think there's other things that schools have to continue to value, ... other, you know, critical and creative problem solving. How are those important skills and thinking processes part of all curriculum, not just literacy and numeracy, and how do we ensure that the dollars and the resources are still spent on other ways that kids learn, so the arts is a big part of that? And our board to date, ... the Ministry, too, has valued the arts, but we're starting to see a decline in that, in terms of the dollars that are, that are allocated to that. So it will be interesting to see what happens .... So I can

keep it going here, because this is a school – it has some dollars. We can raise money – ‘non-board funds’ we call it. I have been in schools that have not been so resource rich. (Rita)

While this principal was supportive of the focus upon literacy and numeracy, she worked to ensure that this should not occur to the neglect of other curriculum areas. Concerns about the capacity of individual schools to raise funds for such ‘extras’ also reflected a principal habitus cognisant of local context.

### **The drive to data**

The focus upon EQAO scores also provided evidence of both compliance with broader provincial foci, as well as concerns that such foci needed to take local context into account.

### ***A compliant habitus: Principals dominated by provincial foci***

A compliant habitus was evident in the way in which principals accepted teacher PD driven by the provincial push to improve students’ outcomes on standardised literacy and numeracy tests, and to ensure that 75% of students in the province, (80% of students in this board) were achieving at what was deemed centrally as an ‘acceptable’ level:

...we know that it was driven by the provincial assessments and that whole accountability issue, that the public, or at least the politicians are saying is so



important in Ontario, in other places obviously, so, that's how it started, that's how it played out. And certainly in our board, our goal is 80%, whereas the Ministry goal is 75% students achieving 'level three'. So, I think what that meant was boards of education started to focus their dollars, in terms of resources, and support for supply days and professional learning, around those initiatives. (Cynthia)

This compliant habitus was also evident in the way principals construed the use of this data as politically controversial, but also educationally beneficial:

There was a lot of controversy, has always been a lot of controversy, around EQAO and standardised tests and that kind of thing, and I think that, I think the work that the Secretariat is doing, is making the validity of the testing – it's improving the validity of the, not of the testing *per se*, more of the reason for testing, and the use of the data, and how to use the data in an appropriate manner. So I think data's made a huge difference. The documents that they're producing are very helpful. ... .. (Reggie)

The provincial push for improved EQAO results was made explicit by one principal, who also construed the use of such data as valuable for promoting teacher PD practices informed by an ethical obligation to assist those students most at risk of failure in schools:

... people are responding to that, very clearly stated level of 75% because they know that that's coming down loud and clear from the Ministry and people

feel some pressure from that, which I know is the Ministry's intent ... it certainly was, it's seen as, ... looking for, maybe a judgement on teachers initially, with a lot of resentment towards that. But I think we're kind of past [that], but like any data, it's still kind of - people are still wary - because if you're using data as a weapon ... But if you're using it as a tool to inform our instruction, great. So I think that push has been valuable. I might also touch a bit upon our focus, the focus on students at risk ... We would write kids off for all kinds of reasons, aptitude, home situations, all kinds of things and now we're saying, morally that's not right. (Lawrence)

Consequently, there was considerable evidence of support for the use of quantitative data to determine the nature of the learning which occurred in schools within the board, and of a principalling habitus supportive of such foci.

*A context-responsive habitus: Localising educational practice*

However, there were also concerns about such data being used to compare schools, or year levels, which were quite disparate. A more context-responsive habitus was evident amongst principals who could see the benefits of using EQAO data, but who also cautioned against misuse of such data in specific school settings:

...and if you're looking at it to compare this school with that school, or this year with last year, that all has to be taken with a grain of salt because every group is different and there's all those kinds of things, ... It is stressful, because, a school like mine, I have a very transient population and my kids

have done reasonably well given the, my school ... this is the school that has the, how can I express it, ... it has the most - searching for words here - the most factors that negatively impact EQAO results... (Reggie)

Concerns about how to talk about the low socio-economic status of students in this particular school, and the attendant negative impact upon engagement with schooling, including EQAO test results, was also a telling reflection of a habitus which had embodied the need to take local context into account, and was cognitive of the situation of schools serving struggling communities.

A more context-responsive habitus was also apparent in how principals struggled with how best to use the data, and their awareness that data for the sake of data was not particularly useful but that a focus upon specific teaching practices for student learning needed to be foregrounded:

The goal is for our school effectiveness plans to be based on data. So they should be data-driven decisions. Which is not something that I think we, principals and teachers, are used to or comfortable doing, even though it's been talked about in our board for, I'd say, five years, four or five years. It's still, you know, fairly new in terms of people feeling comfortable with data ... Am I doing it well? No. Speak for myself... we get hung up on the baseline data ... So it seemed like we were spinning our wheels, trying to just get the baseline data when we really should be focusing on what kind of teaching practice are we going to focus on to implement student learning... (Kandice)

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There was also a sense that teacher and student learning needed to be informed by other evidence of student learning, even as principals struggled with how to make best use of EQAO data:

Now I don't think EQAO should be the only data that we ever look at, and, I think schools need to look at their own data ... Teachers need to come up with assessments that they use, in ... across each grade, and report card data is wonderful data ...and we haven't used [EQAO data] well in the past, and I don't profess to say we're using it well yet, but at least we're using it, at least we're looking at the numbers ... (Elsa)

A more context-responsive habitus was also evident in how improvements in the nature of EQAO data collected were seen as useful for stimulating professional conversations about teachers' specific practices:

They have been giving us better data over the years and where and how to look at our kids and what our kids are doing and not doing and we use that data to pinpoint something that our children are weak at and then we're changing our practices or discussing what practices we're going to put into place .... (Lily)

Such responses reveal applications of data for very specific educative purposes, with a focus upon specific students' needs.

A more context-responsive habitus was also evident in the way principals endorsed a variety of PD initiatives seen as valuable in their schools, and beyond those associated with standardised testing. In one school, this included researching specific language building programmes ('First Steps'), long-term book studies, collaborative grading, and other cross-grade teacher interactions:

... we use 'First Steps' to do a lot of the instruction and the research and instructional practices that we've been doing. We have a book study that we've been doing for 2 years. ... The consensus marking that I was talking about – we did that as a whole school .... And to a tee, they've all said it was one of the most valuable PD experiences they've had 'cos they had to be able to negotiate with a partner as to why they were giving the scores they were on the Rubric. It was great; it was very good. (Lily)

Also, while the drive to collect and use standardised data within the province was influencing teaching and learning, there was a sense that those in schools were interrogating the testing regime and striving to ensure that teaching went beyond 'teaching to the test'. For one principal, who acknowledged testing was influencing the teacher and student learning which occurred in her school, testing was also construed as being of value only insofar as it contributed to enabling teachers to develop richer learning experiences for students, promote independent learning and more fully accommodate students' learning needs:

I personally have not been driven by EQAO scores ... What we don't want to do is start focusing just on the kinds of the questions that we're going to see

and the kind of assessment, because it's paper pencil, so, you know – now we lose the 'multiple intelligences', the ability to perform in different ways of learning. So that's the danger... And teachers are doing some really nice things. This is a whole pile of pieces of writing that teachers are bringing me. I know that it's test oriented – it's responses to reading – but they're trying to help them develop their ideas and do it more independently, ... help our kids a lot, and nurture, and accommodate... (Cynthia)

While pressure for improvements in EQAO scores clearly influenced the nature of the teacher learning endorsed in her school, this principal's response to such PD also revealed a context-responsive habitus supportive of teacher learning associated with a richer, more situated conception of student learning.

### **Discussion and analysis: Exploring principals' leadership habitus**

The data reveal considerable evidence of the influence of the Ontario reform agenda upon the PD supported by principals in schools in the province. Principals' responses revealed a compliant habitus supportive of PD associated with the Ministry of Education's emphasis upon literacy and numeracy, as well as the push for improved EQAO scores. Such support indicates the congruence between principal's habitus and the strong central push for reform in Ontario. However, and in keeping with Bourdieu's (1990, 1998) understanding of contested habitus and capitals – in this case, in the field of education – at the same time, there is also evidence of concerns amongst principals about the negative effects of a strong emphasis upon generic conceptions of literacy and numeracy and student assessment, and advocacy for PD

beyond those associated with a narrow emphasis upon such foci. While the logics of practice which dominated revealed the significant influence of provincial pressure for increased focus upon literacy and numeracy, and improvements in students' test scores, these existed alongside more context-responsive approaches and foci. The complexity of principals' relations to these central prerogatives was also reflected in the qualified support they gave for the work of such bodies as the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and the EQAO.

The provincial push for a focus upon literacy and numeracy, and for educators to ensure that 75% of students attained specified benchmarks was evidence of how the educational field is dominated by centralised bureaucratic pressure to ensure improvements in standardised test scores (Gunter 2001, Lingard and Christie 2003). Recognition that politics at the provincial level was a significant determinant of this emphasis was a manifestation of the influence of what Bourdieu describes as the broader 'field of power' (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) upon principals' leadership practices. Such emphases were also apparent in principals' compliant habitus, evident in the way some described the benefits of PD endorsed at the provincial level.

However, the way in which some principals focused on the importance of contextualising teacher professional development in relation to specific teachers and students in their schools also reveals a more context-responsive habitus. While the principal habitus reflected central pressure to respond to generic conceptions of educational improvement, it was also simultaneously locally-responsive in its efforts to ensure specific teachers' and students' learning were at the centre of decisions

about the PD undertaken in schools. Principals did indeed seem interested in building capacity around learning (Lingard et al. 2003), of engaging in 'sustainable leadership' (Hargreaves 2005), and sometimes construed this role as involving resisting those more managerial pressures associated with the reform agenda. In this way, the educational field was one of contest between competing principalling practices, as these related to PD.

Given their location at the intersection between the demands of the bureaucracy and those of their immediate school communities, these tensions are not surprising.

Working in the interstices between these demands, the principals acted as 'boundary riders' (akin to the front-line district central-office administrators Honig (2006) described as 'boundary spanners') between the logics of practice of the field of schools with their situatedness and embeddedness in local context (Thomson 2001, 2002) and the broader, often managerial education field in which they were situated, and with which they had to deal simultaneously. Consequently, principals' habitus is revealed as somewhat conflicted, as both acquiescent to more managerial pressures for more restricted, standardised conceptions of learning, but also strongly focused upon the needs of specific students and specific schools.

Principals' efforts to sustain a focus upon leading learning in local settings, even as more managerial logics associated with the reform agenda exerted influence, resonate with Lingard and Christie's (2003) notion of productive leadership habitus. There were numerous instances when the principals exhibited reflexivity in relation to their roles. The simultaneous support for and questioning of the value and validity of the emphasis upon literacy and numeracy, and the way in which EQAO scores were used,



or could be used, were indicative of how principals critiqued the broader policy emphases in the context of their daily practices, and those of the teachers in their schools. This 'awakening of consciousness', or 'socioanalysis' (Bourdieu 1990: 116) within the principalling habitus was evident in the way some principals moderated the focus upon literacy and numeracy because of the specificities of their own contexts. For one principal, this involved ensuring that the work teachers were undertaking around literacy and numeracy actually related to the needs of the students in her school. While heavily dominated by the state-sanctioned push for a focus upon centrally-prescribed conceptions of worthwhile literacy and numeracy emphases, a reflexive habitus was evident in the way this principal sought to ensure that the nature of the professional development in which teachers were engaged was in keeping with the specific needs of students in the school. Such a response is also indicative of principals' proximity to everyday pedagogical work within schools which simultaneously serves to temper purely managerial logics of practice.

Principals' responses to the PD considered of most value within the Ontario reform agenda also reflected the second element of the normative conception of leadership habitus of maintaining the educational, social justice and democratic purposes of schooling (Lingard & Christie 2003). Some principals were very aware that even though their's was considered a reasonably prosperous board, there were still pockets of poverty within the area for which standardised approaches to teachers' learning needs would not suffice. Again, more bureaucratic accountability logics at the level of the state were recognised and challenged as blunt instruments by a context-responsive habitus cognisant of the significance of the 'thisness' of individual schools (Thomson 2002). The habitus at play here is one informed by a responsive,

passionate stance which recognises the damage which can accrue to schools and communities which are least able to compete on an uneven socio-economic/political playing field. Principals' comments about the need to be cognisant of pockets of poverty within the school board, and the effects of poverty within school settings, was evidence of a logic of practice informed by Said's (1994) notion of doing the most good and causing beneficial change.

There was also evidence of principals' ability to work across the field of the school and the field of the educational system more generally – the third element of Lingard and Christie's (2003) normative conception of leadership habitus. This included efforts made on the part of some principals to try to avoid being unduly influenced by the push for improvements in EQAO scores. This was apparent in the way one principal supported teachers in her school to promote teacher and student learning which accommodated for individual difference, which went beyond 'pencil and paper tests' and which involved teachers ensuring that they sustained a focus upon varied pedagogical approaches, such as those associated with 'multiple intelligences'. This was not some idealised response by an heroic figure operating against an uncaring monolithic centre, but a more calculated and strategic intervention on the part of a principal who was endeavouring to foreground teacher learning for student learning within a broader socio-political, material and discursive context focused strongly upon increasing students' exposure to literacy and numeracy activities, and improving standardised test scores – a proxy for a responsive state in difficult and uncertain socio-political and economic times. Advocacy for professional development associated with science, the arts and music reflected a more educational rather than managerial habitus. The use of early dismissal days by another principal to generate a

dialogue about teachers' experiences in a new school, as well as addressing provincial concerns pertaining to literacy and numeracy, also reflected this capacity to work across competing logics and fields of practice. In these ways, principals' responses revealed how they were simultaneously influenced by and resisted the bureaucratic core with its focus upon more managerial, technicist concerns (Gunter 2001, Thomson 2001, 2002).

Principals' interrogation of the validity of EQAO data, and perceptions that such data were being provided in an increasingly educationally beneficial format was also indicative of a habitus not simply dominated by pressures to produce numbers for accountability or quality control reasons alone. Rather, the capitals which were valued were more complex, and reflected a desire to cultivate educational capacity at the local level, wherever such opportunities presented themselves. In these ways, there was evidence of a habitus influenced by provincial pressures but also affected by those approaches to teacher learning focused upon a more specific and localised array of social and academic student learning outcomes. As a consequence, principals were engaged in 'leading learning' (Lingard et al. 2003) rather than just managing centralised prerogatives.

### **Conclusion: Extending leadership habitus**

The data presented reveal considerable evidence of tensions between more generic and more localised logics of practice, as these relate to principals' approaches to teacher PD. At the same time, this data also suggest that the recursive relationship between habitus and field is worthy of further attention, particularly as this relates to

current empirical and normative conceptions of educational leadership. In particular, the evidence of principals' capacity to take local context into account in the face of pressure to engage in reductive notions of literacy, numeracy and test scores, may warrant further elaboration of Lingard et al.'s (2003) conception of a normative leadership habitus. A more explicit emphasis on the particularity, or 'thisness' of each school site (Thomson 2002), could serve as a useful signifier of the need for (and capacity of) principals' to respond to broader policy and political pressures in ways which take the specificity of their circumstances into account. Principals' actions to temper their responses in relation to the specific circumstances of getting to know teachers and students in new schools, to take the circumstances of students into account from the low socio-economic neighbourhoods some of them served, to build upon other PD initiatives already under way in their schools, and to keep the educational needs of their teachers and students in their specific school sites at the forefront of decision-making around PD, provided evidence of a focus upon the local and the particular. Explicitly flagging the significance of taking the local into account within normative conceptions of leadership habitus foregrounds the importance of localised action-taking within the educational field. That such a refinement has a foundation in empirical accounts of practice remains true to Bourdieu's (1998) exhortations to avoid theoretical theory, and other forms of 'scholastic fallacy', and to theorise from practice.

Consequently, this paper has sought to draw upon Bourdieu's theory of practice, and to test normative conceptions of principal leadership habitus to understand how principals responded to professional development associated with literacy, numeracy, and improvements in EQAO scores in Ontario. The paper further validates

Bourdieu's concepts for understanding the socially-inscribed nature of principals' practices, and other researchers' applications and developments of Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus in relation to educational (and particularly principal) leadership. The paper also shows how Bourdieu's theoretical resources of field, capital, and especially habitus, are useful for exploring the possibilities and tensions which exist under specific schooling circumstances. The habitus of those situated within the educational field certainly bears traces of the influence of provincial pressures to focus upon narrow and specific emphases. Yet, at the same time, there is also evidence of principals seeking to go beyond such influences, with an emphasis upon local context, or after Thomson (2002), 'thisness', of their particular situations. That is, educators often seemed able to at least partially negotiate across the contested logics within the educational field in a way which seems to give additional credence to their capacity to take local context into account. It is argued that such capacity warrants more explicit elaboration within current conceptions of a normative leadership habitus, as it applies to principals; this is not to imply that the local is ignored within Lingard and Christie's (2003) conception of leadership habitus, but that there would seem to be some value in making this more explicit. The result of theorising in light of practice is an even clearer understanding of the educational field as a space in which agents' activities are enabled, even as they are simultaneously limited; such empirical work also validates the importance of continuously interrogating the theoretical tools at our disposal in light of actual practices.

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