

## Theorizing change in the educational ‘field’: re-readings of ‘student participation’ projects

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There is a burgeoning literature on educational change – how to make it and how to understand its failures in order that the causes can be remedied next time. Much of this literature implies that when free and autonomous policy agents know what they are doing, they can shift institutional structures and habituated ways of doing and being. In this article we mobilize Bourdieu, who rejected this binary of structure and agency, in favour of the notion of ‘field’, ‘habitus’ and ‘capitals’, to theorize one case of change. We describe the shifting policy-scape in Australia in the latter part of the twentieth century which created some opportunities for students to act as educational leaders and participate in making decisions about their learning and schooling. We then develop a specific and situated theorization of change in a contested and hierarchical educational ‘field’. We argue that the continued press from the political field and the wider field of power to increase levels of mass schooling produced a ‘principal opposition’ in the schooling field between democratization and hierarchization. This opposition, we propose, is now *in* policies, institutional changes and the varying actions of educators, making the field not only contested but also unstable: this produces further spaces and opportunities for both hierarchic and democratic changes.

### Introduction

Governments across the world are concerned anew with educational reform, since it is widely held to be part of the policy repertoire required for success in a globalized and networked ‘knowledge economy’ (Taylor *et al.* 1997, Levin 2001). Not surprisingly, a growing body of scholarship is now concerned with this educational reform, its assumptions and its effects.

There is now a growing ‘change’ literature – not only books and articles, but also two refereed journals, a book series and an International Handbook

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– which considers how systems and schools can be reformed. Much of this scholarship asks and answers the question about how reforms are produced, succeed and fail, constructing specific case studies of change which are then analysed to produce sets of key factors and issues. Much of this scholarship relies ultimately on the notion of unitary agents able to act freely within their institutional and socio-political milieu to bring about change.

This article draws on Bourdieu, whose work redressed the orthodoxies of structuralist anthropology and sociology by developing an understanding of social behaviour that neither abolished subjectivity by overemphasizing the effect of structures, nor idealized the notion of autonomous choice and action. Through the theorization of field, which we amplify later in this article, we consider a specific case of educational change in an attempt to move beyond a simple story of reform failure and disappointed change agents which over-determines the repressive effects of neoliberal policy.

This article had its genesis as a jointly authored 2002 American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference paper (Holdsworth and Thomson 2002) which contributed, to a symposium on student voice, a description of changes in Australian student participation in the 1970s–1980s, and the 1990s onwards. We argued at the time that neoliberal education policy had not killed off student participation, but had confined it to curriculum projects and elite forms of student leadership. We did not offer any robust theorization of this change. This article is a re-reading by one of the authors (Thomson) who has kept her conference paper co-author (Holdsworth) informed of continued work on this project. She has decided to write in the plural throughout the paper, but indicates where the joint conference paper text has been drawn on.

Throughout the conference paper and this one, we mobilize the notion of ‘democracy’ – a highly contested term. We are informed in our use of this ‘open sign’ by the work of educational practitioners and theorists (some of whom are cited in this text), and by the work of critical and feminist scholars such as Mouffe (1993), Yeatman (1994), Fraser (1997), Kymlicka (2001) and Benhabib (2002).<sup>1</sup> In order to make our argument, we have not elaborated a theorization of reciprocal dialogue and decision making across differences in postmodern times, nation states and public spaces, but have confined ourselves to a more limited discussion through the notion of participation. We begin by briefly explicating our stance.

## **Participation**

Notions of educational leadership now extend beyond school administrators to include teachers (Anderson *et al.* 1994, Hargreaves and Evans 1997, Gunter 2001) and sometimes parents (Vincent 1996, Crozier 2000). The idea that students can be leaders and active agents in school reform and community development has a small presence in policy, educational practice and research (Rudduck and Flutter 2000, Shulz and Cook-Sather 2001, Wilson and Corbett 2001). In Australia, interest in having students work alongside teachers, parents and designated school and system leaders has been a minor but ongoing aspect of educational activity since the mid 1970s.

In Australia this involvement is usually described as 'student participation'.

The term 'participation' is frequently used in educational policy texts. While participation generally refers to processes and procedures, it has no fixed meaning and has been used for quite different purposes at different times in the Australian context (Holdsworth 1986). When collocated with the word 'student' it may summon up images of happy, engaged and active children, but its meanings may extend to groups of young people taking action in their local communities.

There are five major ways in which the term 'student participation' has been used in Australian policy:

1. *Participation meaning being physically present at school, measured through attendance and retention data.* Policy measures focus on truancy or interventions against early school leaving as responses to perceived deficits in school presence. When this kind of participation is disaggregated by population groups such as gender and race, it is used by equity advocates as a representation of 'access' to schooling. Increasing participation in this sense is both a means and a measure of the 'democratization' of education through/as increasing mass levels of schooling.
2. *Participation meaning being involved in school and taking part in school activities and in lessons.* Here the term works like the notion of engagement and as the opposite of alienation. This use of participation is frequently co-located with concerns for inclusion or equity, and various 'tools' of inquiry are used to gauge the 'levels' of student involvement. It is often argued that student engagement produces better attendance and thus policy emphases on curriculum and school reform can do double work by both encouraging students to not only come to and stay at school but also learn and achieve. This has strong connections to work on more inclusive and equitable education (e.g. Meier 1995).
3. *Participation meaning involvement in formal school decision-making:* this can range from being consulted occasionally by staff, to formalized student councils and forums, to representative places on school committees. In recent times, the notion of 'student voice' has stood for these activities and has covered a large spread of school practices. Some policy rhetoric suggests that increasing attendance and engagement requires participation by some students in decision-making. In general this use of the notion of participation relates to what Young (2000: 19) refers to as 'aggregative democracy' – practices which allow for decision amongst preferences via formal systems of election, representation and legislation. It is here that more elitist forms of student leadership find a place.
4. *Participation meaning initiating, deciding and acting in the school and beyond the school boundaries.* Here there is no elected representation but a majority of a group of students involved in making decisions about school reform, curriculum purposes, curriculum directions, community projects and neighbourhood capacity building. In schools, such activities are often spoken about as 'active citizenship' through which students engage with the school and/or classroom as a polity, and with community

organizations and local government. This has strongest links with 'deliberative democracy' (see Fielding 2001) where student leadership is seen as diffuse and extending to many.

5. *Participation meaning community or social activism and 'organizing'*. This participation does not often feature in official policy texts, but does sometimes find a place in schools as projects concerned with human rights, the environment, social justice and local, state or national issues. It also extends to political action and resistance, as in the engagement of school students in school-sanctioned and unsanctioned protests against the recent invasion of Iraq. This kind of participation does not feature significantly in this article.

### **A story of student participation**

We now employ a wide lens policy narrative combined with closer up snapshots of contemporary policy in action to discuss changes in student participation. It is this AERA conference text which we later re-read.

#### *Student participation – social democratic version*

The 1971 election of the Whitlam government to national government in Australia marked a political shift from a conservative nation-building to a social democratic regime. The new federal government attacked economic and social inequalities on several fronts: one was simply to increase access to education. For the first time, federal funds flowed to schools to support innovations designed to improve the attendance and engagement of the poor, students with disabilities, recent immigrants, Indigenous children, rural and isolated students and girls. These 'access and inclusion' projects involved parents, teachers and students in making decisions about and undertaking a range of small and large school-based reform projects. A significant number of school communities discussed, debated and experimented with student participation (as well as teachers and parents) in both representative and deliberative forms as/in institutional practice (Connell *et al.* 1991).

Change was also afoot in Australian states.<sup>2</sup> Victoria and South Australia, both also with social democratic state governments, made moves to decentralize the governance of schooling. By the mid-1970s, site-based School Councils, with formally elected student, parent and teacher representatives, were legislated in both states. The prescribed, syllabus-driven curriculum gave way to school-based curriculum development and there was active experimentation with school structures and forms of alternative and community schooling (Connell *et al.* 1990, Thomson 1999a). Democratic processes were no longer the tactics of resistance but legitimate responses to the production of more inclusive schooling. For the first time, student experiences and opinions were recognized and their right to contribute to school change was legitimated.

As more and more young people stayed at school, the elite public examination system, gate-keeper of university entrance, came under

pressure. It clearly failed to meet the needs and interests of the new, much more diverse student cohort. School-based curriculum development for senior secondary students produced a range of new structures, including school assessed subjects and certificates in South Australia and Victoria. The Victorian alternative certificate was a fully negotiated whole-course study structure at year 12, and possessed of a high degree of student participation in course design, management, implementation and non-competitive (descriptive) assessment (Holdsworth 2002). Some Victorian universities even allowed this certificate to stand as equivalent to public examinations. It seemed at the time that elite forms of schooling were losing potency, that various forms of more inclusive schooling were ascendant and that students were now legitimate partners in the production of knowledge.

The increase in mass levels of schooling was thus, in part, effected by means of more inclusive and democratic forms of education. The more school administrators, teachers, parents and students worked together on how to make schooling more meaningful, and the more schools changed their curriculum, pedagogies and practices, the more students stayed on. Representative and deliberative democratic participation helped to produce greater attendance, retention and engagement.

### **Contestation and participation**

By the mid-1980s, however, the economic and public policy climate in Australia had radically altered. The nation began to experience the economic woes associated with the phenomenon called globalization. Governments, state and federal, conservative and social democratic, were increasingly convinced that education and training systems were key to recovery (see Kelly 1994). Universal school retention had not been achieved, and policy-makers turned their attention to youth unemployment rising due to the collapse of the youth labour market, a minority who still left school early, and young people variously 'at risk'. Access *and* the formation of human capital via curriculum were the policy problem. The schooling game had to be changed in order to allow all students to attend and be engaged in a curriculum more connected to work.

This was the time coincident with the most rapid increases in school enrolment. Marks and Fleming (1999) explain this rise in school retention as *partly* due to the policy initiatives taken by education authorities. (For young people, the lack of jobs and tightening up of youth allowances also worked as potent 'sticks' to stay at school.) But in reality, there was no single policy direction. This was a period of intense contestation over schooling policy directions and strategies. Social democratic advocates and ideas still had considerable purchase. In education, it was argued that in order to reduce alienation and promote engagement students must be much more involved in curriculum decision-making in both their classes and in the school (Boomer 1982, Boomer *et al.* 1992). Greater equity and *more* student leadership was required.

The federal government funded a new short-term initiative, the Participation and Equity Programme, or PEP as it was known, which

encapsulated some of these tensions, contradictions and hopes. In PEP, older commitments to equity and strategies of participation and leadership – meaning teachers, students and parents involved in meaningful decision-making (Rivzi and Kemmis 1987) – came together as an urgent push for school reform (Thomson 2001). In South Australia and Victoria, PEP saw state advocacy of and considerable local school take up of representative school-based reform committees (PEP Victoria 1985, Thomson and Turner 1989). These broadened the scope of decision-making for parents, teachers and students and, in many instances, new waves of structural and cultural school change resulted (McRae 1988). Schools experimented with middle schooling, alternative groupings of students, more flexible timetabling, negotiated curriculum, teacher action-research and student governance forums (e.g. Warrender *et al.* 1988). But PEP had just a five-year life, targeted only poorer schools, and its impact was patchy.

And these democratizing strategies also helped to produce the change to come.

There were arguments abroad for a common national curriculum, an entitlement for all young people (see Thomson 1999b). Alternative certificates and courses did not challenge elite forms of schooling, the alternative modes did not have ‘parity of esteem’ with the public examinations, and a new national ‘democratic curriculum’ was required to cover all students (Ashenden *et al.* 1984). Several states, including South Australia and Victoria made major changes to their senior secondary certificates with hopes of consolidating a less hierarchized credential for the majority of students.

In Victoria, the effect of the combined push against elite university entrance examinations that dominated senior secondary education, and the apparent universalization of the innovative senior secondary certificate (which had grown from involving 6 to 130 schools) was both confusing and devastating to those involved. While ‘aspects’ of it were to be incorporated within a newly introduced state-wide common certification, concerns for a ‘common approach for all’ saw the demise of widespread school-based curriculum decision-making, student participation and cooperative approaches in senior secondary curriculum. The voices of the disciplines were heard more loudly and more often and students were decentred as legitimate partners in change.

Then came a re-inscription of hierarchy. The common senior secondary certificates in states were associated in increasingly noisy neoliberal polemic with ‘lowered standards’. Advocates of vocational training argued that it was discriminatory to subject working class students to bookish courses when they could be out getting a start in the world via training. University authorities regained control of gate-keeping through the credentialing authority boards. Students increasingly selected either work, training or university courses of study: they had little say in any of these ‘pathways’, which became de-facto tracking systems. National and state bodies were privileged in both school and curriculum reform (Knight and Lingard 1996), leaving little scope for major input by local school communities. The move away from more robust forms of student participation in system and school decision making was integral to the reassertion of the old order.

In 1996, the conservative Howard government won national office. Conservative governments were already in power in Victoria and South Australia. The pantechnicon of conservative policy moved rapidly. In Australia, the internationally popular strategies of governing at a distance (Osborne and Gaebler 1993) have been taken up with enthusiasm. The familiar neoliberal policy panoply of parent choice, privatization and marketization, testing and devolution gained momentum. Not only students but also teachers were to be managed – and silenced.

### **Student participation: conservative version**

The late 1990s saw the production of privilege, which many progressive political and educational activists thought had suffered major structural damage during the 1980s, reinvigorated and realigned. The mass of Australian children were to engage in state mandated curricula, punctuated with national testing. There was a focus on 'the basics', vocational 'pathways' to form economically-needed human capital (as noted earlier), and parent choice between schools. Some children could attend high status public and publicly funded private schools and enjoy gifted and talented classes and an 'academic' curriculum. Others could have 'training' in poorly funded state schools whose teachers worked increasingly hard (Thomson 2002). This was a very dramatic swing from the previous period of innovation and one in which students were positioned firmly as passive learners, rather than active knowers, speakers and decision-makers.

State versions of outcomes-based curriculum framework explicitly directed schools to implement policies determined elsewhere – they could make decisions about the pedagogical processes employed to 'deliver' the required learning. The situation was not too dissimilar to that in the UK (Gewirtz 1997, Ball 1998), the USA (Apple 2001) and Canada (Portelli and Solomon 2001). Student participation now only meant engagement in mandated learning. They had no place in curriculum frameworks or credential decision making. Ironically, a new federal push for civics and citizenship education accompanied the erosion of students' rights as citizens in their schools and the wider education system.

But there were little spaces for student participation, meaning representation and deliberation. This was legitimated by a continued national policy nod to inclusion and equity via the words 'Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of *all* students' (MCEETYA 1999). Some curriculum areas such as the humanities actually specified the use of student participation to achieve this end. In addition, particular policy 'problems and solutions'<sup>3</sup> urged *more* participation by students in decision-making. When the policy problem was defined as one of lack of participation (meaning attendance and engagement in schooling) student participation more broadly became a legitimate strategy. Middle school reformers, for example, envisaged more learning and discipline for the mass of young adolescents through a range of student decision-making activities. The linkage of alienation with participation as engagement meant that at least some students were entitled to some say in their schooling.

Student participation took on three major forms: (1) curriculum projects; (2) student leadership activities; and (3) accountability measures. We briefly exemplify these using examples from our two states.

*(1) Curriculum projects*

Starting in 1999, Student Action Teams (SATs) were set up in several Victorian primary and secondary schools. The initiative came from the Victorian Department of Justice, which funded the state education system to develop teams of students to research and take action on issues of

**Altona Secondary College**

The SAT at Altona researched truancy within the school – why students truant, what they did and so on.<sup>4</sup> The focus came to be on providing activities for students (so they wouldn't truant) and on developing a school Student Discipline and Welfare Policy so that students had some definitive guidelines which would be understood by all in the school community. At least a couple of the students had already exhibited a significant rate of absenteeism, but all were seen as having leadership qualities – for better or worse in some cases. Teachers were open about these reasons with the students and approached this group with a proposal that they make up the team. Team membership was portrayed positively and was seen to provide them with importance and direction.

**Karingal Park Secondary College**

In its first year, the work of the SAT focused around a specific track near the school, where there had been some well publicized major incidents, including the murder of a young woman; since then, students had not felt safe using it. The team improved the safety of the pathway as an access route to the school. The team then moved on, in the second year, to build awareness of the dangers of behaviour and alternatives to what students perceive as the appropriate or expected behaviour during 'muckup' time. Both these issues were chosen as part of the considerations of the community safety group that is part of the College's Student Leadership Council (SLC).

**Weeroona College**

The Weeroona College SAT focused on driver education for young people. In its first year, the team developed a video to advertise a course for skilling young people for driving in adverse country conditions. This involved liaison with police, Bendigo City Council, SES and Prime TV. They participated in a community-based Road Safety campaign called Operation DEFY (Driver Education for Youth) which aimed to help reduce the high road toll of young people. This enabled students to actively participate in planning and decision-making processes within the local community.

**Figure 1. Three school SATs.**



community safety. Safety was a contemporary 'moral panic', and the impetus for the development of student teams was the disciplinary imperatives of government, but the approach adopted provided students with chances to make a difference in areas that were/are important to them. SATs undertook diverse activities (see Fig. 1).

The evaluation report of the SAT programme (Holdsworth *et al.* 2001) suggested hopefully that the value of the curriculum approach demonstrated was that it could be adaptable or 'portable' elsewhere, around any topic and in relation to any students or classes. However, it remains an approach which is confined mostly to citizenship and environmental action projects, as well as programmes for students designated as at risk.

## *(2) Elite governance*

Neoliberal federal and state governments promoted particular forms of student leadership and participation in decision-making. Young people's forums were initiated across Australia by the three tiers of government and public sector agencies to represent the 'voice' of young people in public policy-making. In South Australia in 1996–97, the conservative state government supported two state-wide student conferences to inform educational policy making. These were initiated by senior public sector officers who adopted the moderate rhetoric of leadership and citizenship. From the second of these events, a Student Environment Council was formed to advise the relevant Minister. While this involved only a small number of selected young people who had neither consultative mechanisms nor accountability to an electorate and were limited in their capacity to effect change, its progressive influence should not be entirely discounted – it was applauded publicly by the Minister for proposing and arguing convincingly for a coastal marine park to serve as a whale sanctuary.

Elite governance (Holdsworth 2000a) leadership forums were micro-models of mainstream politics, in which decisions are made on behalf of the majority by a small elected group. Despite the deliberate recruitment of some students from high poverty neighbourhoods and of diverse racial and cultural affiliations, the majority of students involved were from middle class schools. Selection of only the 'best' students to positions of responsibility, to 'represent the school', to take part in valued and valuing initiatives, did nothing to alter existing or past inequities. Even while elite student groups were able to initiate progressive projects, at the same time they were literally embodying wider contemporary political organizations which demonstrably (re)produce inequitable economic and social relations.

## *(3) Student 'voice' tools*

Both South Australia and Victoria developed measurement tools for students' social learning.<sup>5</sup> Social learning in both texts encompassed students' feelings about school, the ways they relate to each other and teachers, the ways they work together and how they are engaged in the life of the school (see Fig. 2).

The Victorian Education system provided a survey of students and teachers, intended for voluntary use by schools to amplify the required review of school performance. The major categories of the survey were (1) a sense of connectedness to school, teachers and peers; (2) motivation to learn; (3) safety and self esteem. Students were to rank on a scale of 1–5 their responses to 28 items.<sup>6</sup> The primary school version included statements such as: I have much to be proud of; I enjoy the work I do at school; Doing well at school is very important to me; I have not been hit or kicked by another student recently; I like my teacher this year.

The word ‘participation’ was not used in the document. For the most part, the text focuses on students taking part in lessons and in school. Having ‘voice’ was largely being listened to and being able to actively engage with lessons.<sup>7</sup> Students were also described taking part in the transition from primary school to high school through quasi- promotional activities in which some talked about their high school and acted as buddies for potential primary students. Here ‘voice’ meant speaking out to support the school in its market context.

There were two references to student participation in democratic processes. One suggested that staff concern about students’ lack of self-esteem might be resolved via class meetings. The second mention was about student discussion of the results of the student voice instrument. The text asserted, ‘It is empowering for students to feel that they are actively involved in the process and to have the opportunity to discuss issues that have a direct impact on them. One way of making the results available to students is through an open discussion in class’. (p. 12)

Students were to discuss with their teacher their ‘impressions’ of survey results and offer possible solutions. They were not engaged in analysis to produce the results. They did not have a formal place in decision-making forums. Their capacity to influence actions arising from the survey must be mediated via their teacher. This was a recommendation for a highly regulated and tightly contained form of voice. Participation in this document was predominantly about attendance, engagement and being consulted.

**Figure 2. Text Analysis of Victorian Student Voice tool.**

These three contemporary forms of participation illustrate the dimensions of change. The heady early days produced hopes that a more equitable schooling would be available for all; that students, together with their parents and teachers, would have a real say in what was to count as school knowledge, how it would be taught, assessed, and how schools would be organized and managed. But the neoliberal 1990s were not unrelentingly grim. Students and teachers still had places where they could make decisions and work in their schools and communities to some effect(s). However, students were no longer seen as central actors in school decision

making, but rather performing outcomes, whose levels of achievement might be raised through the techniques of participation.

But why was this the case? Is the dramatic swing we described simply attributable to the nasty effects of bad neoliberal policy? Was the continuation of some forms of student participation simply attributable to the actions of good teachers and policy activists?

We now leave the AERA conference paper and turn to Bourdieu. We take a step back to reconsider these snapshots and the narrative of policy changes that we constructed. We re-read this text. We look to Bourdieu to begin to ask and answer the questions – why is this so? What has gone on here? How can we theorize this? What does this tell us about education change?

### Theorizing change

Bourdieu drew attention to the ways in which educational institutions in France functioned inequitably, working to (re)produce a raced, gendered and classed society (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Bourdieu 1988). He argued that schools are geared to sort and sift students using processes and narratives of abilities, gifts and development: the rationale – or *doxa* – of schooling is meritocracy, but what actually occurs is the reverse. It is particular children who succeed while others flounder.

Bourdieu suggested that schools both use and produce a hierarchy of educational knowledges and credentials. Those middle and ruling class children and young people whose family and neighbourhood circumstances were rich in the kinds of knowledges, language, ways of being, speaking and behaving required in schools, had the social and cultural know-how necessary to succeed in education. Comfortable and at ease in classrooms, playgrounds and schools, they are further advantaged by the curriculum, pedagogies and assessment practices used. In this, the 'main game' (Zipin 1999) of schooling, those children and young people who already possess the 'goods' required to succeed, perform better than others and rise through the school system to get to university, while others are siphoned off to work and training. Because it is middle- and upper-class families, where parents already had significant levels of formal education, whose resources are what the school both uses and constructs, the French school system works system-atically to advantage those children already privileged. Bourdieu thus claimed that education both produces and reproduces particular kinds of knowledge, ways of being, social position and future economic and social well-being.

Bourdieu's analysis of schooling had both admirers and critics when it was translated into English. It was adopted in Australia, along with work by Bowles and Gintis (1975), to demonstrate the classed nature of schooling and to argue for a 'working class curriculum' to replace the 'ruling class' curriculum on offer (Thomson 1999a). It was also criticized for being determinist, for suggesting that schools simply reproduced broader social and economic relations found elsewhere (see Connell *et al.* 1982). At the time important local debates around this dichotomy fuelled a raft of innovative educational equity policy and school practice (Thomson, 2001).

However, as more of Bourdieu's work was not only produced but also available, it has become apparent that this take-up and its opposition were partial readings that served local purposes.

We now consider Bourdieu's articulation of field.

### **The education field**

Bourdieu argued that social space can be thought of as one large 'field'. This is a 'field of power', because it is a terrain of class struggle, skewed in favour of and by powerful elites embedded in corporate offices, gated communities and significant political and bureaucratic positions. By virtue of their embodied social, economic, cultural and political power, knowledges, networks and know-how, collectives, groups and classes act to conserve and advance their own collective interests, producing and reproducing themselves, social institutions and unequal social relations. In the field of power, culture, economics and politics are equally important.

This field of power, says Bourdieu, consists of a series of interconnected and imbricated smaller spaces, or 'fields'. These smaller fields have some degree of autonomy, yet are also able to influence each other at specific times and in relation to specific issues. Each field is also a terrain of class struggle (1991: 169) and there is a general patterning of activities and relations across fields which together work to (re) produce the larger field of power (the sum of all fields). It is the internal contestation and the continued (re) production of privilege, status or distinction within each field that leads to fields being homologous – that is they work in the same kind of way – even if they are incommensurate.

The field, Bourdieu said, is an 'arbitrary social construct . . . with explicit and specific rules, strictly delimited in extra-ordinary time and space' (Bourdieu 1990: 67). Each field is a kind of little universe, obeying its own laws of functioning and transformation (Bourdieu 1992: 214). Each field has distinctive temporal and geographic characteristics and a hierarchy of particular forms of privileged resources (knowledge, lifestyle, behaviours and so on) that are specific to the field. The practices specific to the field distribute the capitals which are specific to – and at stake – in the field. This occurs via the strategic actions of agents who literally embody 'structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1977: 72). There is a shift away from a structure/agency binary in Bourdieu's fields, toward an idea of social relations which constitute collectives, groups and classes, whose actions are delimited and appear natural and as if a matter of choice.

Following Bourdieu's metaphor, we can see education as a distinct field within the broader field of power. The education field is stratified vertically in levels of formal schooling and training, each of which has greater kudos and cachet by virtue of the capitals involved. The education field begins at home and/or in child-care and preschool, and culminates in the university professoriate. The resources at stake in education are knowledge and credentials. These can be 'cashed in' in other fields in exchange for positions. They are also used to (re) produce the education field itself, and this makes the education field not only unique in its self-reproduction but also

remarkably resistant to change. This is because many agents – principals, teachers and bureaucrats – literally embody the amount and kind of knowledges and credentials that constitute the education field.

However, Bourdieu suggests that fields are permanent sites of struggle, in which agents seek to maintain or alter the distribution of field specific resources. He asserted that students, teachers and parents

... are not particles subject to mechanical forces, and acting under the constraint of causes: nor are they conscious and knowing subjects acting with full knowledge of the facts, as champions of rational action theory believe ... (they are) active and knowing agents endowed with a practical sense that is an acquired system of preferences, of principles, of vision and ... schemes of action (Bourdieu 1998: 25)

Struggles in the field can be thought of as a 'game', in which agent-players are disposed to act, because they have a feel for how it is played. They know the rules and how to move within the particular social space of the field (Bourdieu 1991: 14). Thus, in education, it is teachers who know how to play the schooling game to advantage, and it is their job to impart that specific knowledge and particular ways of behaving to students, some of whom are already ahead of the game.

Furthermore, Bourdieu says, the struggles in a field tend to constantly produce and reproduce the game and its stakes. But, to alter the distribution and weight of forms of resources at stake is tantamount to altering the structure of the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17). Because fields are euphemized forms of struggles between classes, what appears to be simply a struggle over credentials and knowledges is also a struggle over the ways in which class positions are produced and reproduced. This is often mis-recognized by agents because those who have an incorporated history and apprenticeship in the field find that the objectified history of the field seems sensible in itself (Bourdieu 1990: 68). This is the *illusio* of the game, brought about by the investment of all those who play in it (Bourdieu 1992: 228). So those engaged in education are likely to see their actions only in terms of schooling and education policy, rather than seeing how what they do is (re)producing the field of power and/or the connections between other fields.

We now take Bourdieu's theorization of change and bring it into conversation with our story of student participation.

### **The case of student participation**

One way of using Bourdieu to re-read our story of student participation might be to bring to it a theorization of the connections between the political field and the field of education. Indeed this was the tenor of our AERA story which described the shift from a social democratic national government to a neo-liberal one which accompanied the changes in student participation from institutional reform to projects, governance and accountability.

But we think that this is only part of the story. It is not the re-reading we want to develop here. Rather, we want to focus on what our story of student participation has helped us to learn about the educational field itself.

Bourdieu's theorization of fields had us look not only at what is going on outside the field, but also within. We paused after writing our conference paper to reconsider whether the 'game' of education is simply one of the (re)production of privilege via institutional sorting and sifting. We asked ourselves:

- Is change in the field always for or against the (re) production of elites and elite knowledge and credentials?
- Could part of the game also be about the production of more democratic forms of schooling?

We found one answer in the material circumstances of the massification of schooling which we connected with the shifts in practices and meanings of student participation.

### **Mass schooling**

Over the 20th century, the level of school education attained by the majority of the population moved inexorably upwards, from the end of primary school through secondary schooling. There have been varying imperatives for schools to continue to raise the mass level of education of the population (Miller [Australia] 1986, Carr and Hartnett [UK] 1996, Levin and Young [Canada] 1998) and these have usually been combinations of extrinsic social and economic factors melded with rhetoric espousing the intrinsic benefits of more schooling. In Australia this massification is now measured as apparent retention – the percentage of the commencing secondary school student cohort who complete Year 12.

In the last two decades, apparent retention rates increased dramatically from around a third of the population in the late 1970s to around two-thirds of the population in the early 1990s. In some states there was not a straightforward pattern. There was growth followed by an apparent decline. In South Australia, one of the states we focus on in this article, the apparent retention rate was 34.7% in 1979 and it peaked at 92.2% in 1992. It seemed as if the goal of every child completing secondary school was within grasp. Then the rate plummeted. By 1999 it was down to 67% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999).

But young people were not leaving education, just full time schooling: in the 1990s, diverse patterns of full and part-time schooling, work and training were developed (Marks *et al.* 2000). The rising and falling retention figures thus indicate a significant jump in mass levels of schooling, followed by intensive diversification into 'pathways' to university, training, or the labour market. These designated 'pathways' constitute a hierarchy of educational and training courses and subjects that operate across the senior secondary years of schooling, as well as throughout tertiary education (cf. Ladwig 1996).

The push for massification was coincident with significant changes in the student population. Waves of post war migration, first from the UK and Europe, and then Southeast Asia, produced new demands for more

equitable and inclusive teaching. Within the political field, arguments for a shift away from assimilationist and colonialist policies were translated into schooling as support for multicultural education and specifically targeted resources and programs for Indigenous students and 'identity' groups (girls, students with disabilities, second language learners, and so on). There was, in short, pressure for more democratic forms of school reform, signalled here through the case of student participation. As we have argued, student participation (as one of a range of changes in the field) was *necessary* for schooling to change to include these large numbers of additional, different young people. The period of re-stratification was congruent with the achievement and consolidation of new rates of school completion. The old hierarchy was reinstated once more students were graduating from school. Student participation was emasculated and connected most coherently with the production of elite leaders and engaging the alienated.

This led us to think that the schooling field might be organized in a way not dissimilar to other fields.

We conclude by outlining our current thinking about the educational field.

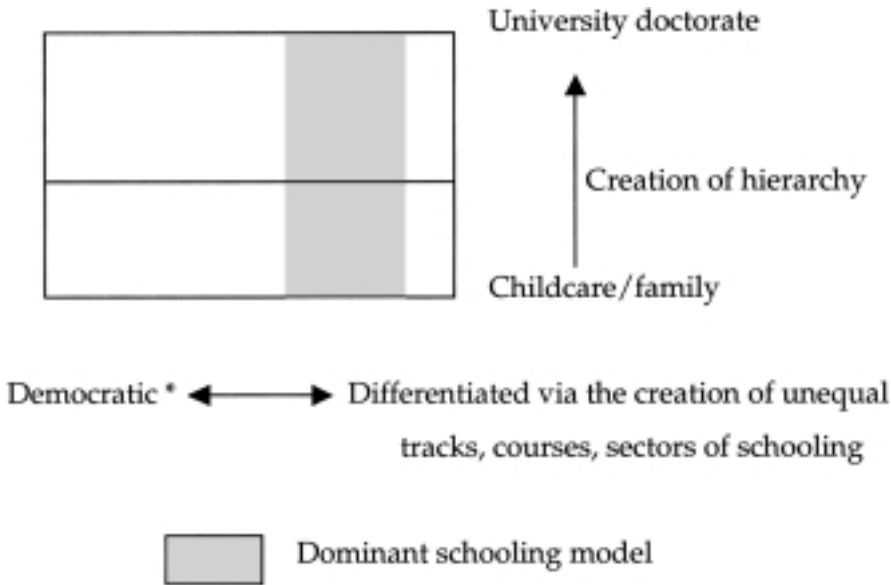
### **Principal oppositions in the field**

Available evidence suggests that the outcomes of schooling in Australia are highly stratified and inequitable (see Teese 2000, 2003). But this is not a static position. To say that schooling is cemented in this place is to over-determine the struggles in the field. Fields *are* organized vertically to sort and sift: their practice is the production of elites and elite capitals. But they also have other inbuilt practices besides that are conducted on the horizontal.

Bourdieu proposed of art (1992) and television (1996) that each was also constructed by a horizontal struggle between elite and populist forms – in art between the avant-garde and commercial, in television between tabloid and high culture forms. This can be thought of as a stratification or differentiation across the field (see also Bourdieu 1984).

We suggest that there is a horizontal as well as vertical organization in education. The possibilities of populist, more equitable and democratic education sit on one side of the horizontal axis and highly sorted, selective education with pronounced elite forms on the other. Thus, at each vertical level of schooling there are a variety of positions available on a horizontal continuum. Think for example of what is offered to young adolescents – from high fee private and public junior high schools that are heavily tracked to a small number of democratic middle schools in which students negotiate their learning and take part in making decisions about how the school is run. While it is the case that many positions of the continuum materially equate to some schools and classrooms that do actually exist (see Apple and Beane 1995), the dominant model is one that leans much more to sorting and selecting. We have represented this, following Bourdieu, in a heuristic (see Fig. 3).

We think that the struggles that exist within the education field often occur around *both* the vertical and horizontal axes, rather than over one or



\*At this edge of the field, democratic forms blur into informal education settings and take in a range of popular pedagogies.

**Figure 3. The education field.**

the other. We have begun to think that both axes together constitute the kind of 'principal opposition' (Bourdieu 1992: 121) that Bourdieu identified in other fields, such as art and television. In this formulation, a 'permanent struggle' (p. 127) is conducted over and around coordinates on the horizontal and vertical axes.

In education, this principal opposition exists in work for and against a more just education. Thus there are struggles not only about the *levels* of mass schooling accessible to the population, but also over the *kinds* of curriculum and schools in which children are educated. There are struggles over who will speak and decide on school cultures and structures, knowledge and credentials. Thinking of education in this way, as a site of permanent tension and movement toward and away from mass or elite benefit at the same time as there is struggle over the levels and kind of schooling, forces questions about the nature of this struggle in any given place and time, and how it is articulated and delimited (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 110).

In our case of student participation, the drive from both within and without education to massify at a time when social democratic ideas were dominant in the political field, legitimated more participatory schooling. Those disposed to democratic educational action moved to become part of the official game. In fact, they and their know how and commitment were essential players, since they could produce the new forms of curriculum, student grouping, assessment and pedagogy that would allow more and more diverse students to attend and complete their schooling. At this time, student participation, meaning attendance and engagement, was equated



with participation, meaning more democratic forms of schooling. The dominant mode of schooling shifted sideways along the horizontal axis at the same time as the level of schooling was increasing on the vertical.

When the game to increase retention was well in play, and the political field adjusted to take account of overall changes in the (social, cultural and economic) field of power, then the educational field became a site of extreme policy contest between agents at all levels. Those who formerly had the upper years of schooling to themselves now found themselves part of a mass cohort. This was a direct threat to the production of their privilege. A range of agents (including university spokespersons) played hard to restore the production of privilege through mechanisms that differentiated between courses, pedagogies and schools.

The intense period of struggle was short lived, and the field was re-stratified horizontally with a new regime of common certification and training programs. Democratic activists found themselves out-manoeuvred and their practices incorporated as part of a new official structure and system. Student participation became a matter of attendance, engagement and representation of an elite of student leaders, save in those areas in which participation in decision making provided an 'answer' to concerns about moral and social order (notably where it was necessary to encourage recalcitrants to stay in school and consolidate vertical movement in the field).

But those committed to democracy and to the notion of students as citizens with rights worked in those spaces that were available – indeed they also helped to make the spaces available.

Importantly, during the changes in student participation we have described there was more than a massification and re-stratification of the field. In different ways and places students and teachers experienced that the game can be more equitable (and this is not to be lightly dismissed, as Herr and Anderson point out in this issue). They acquired the lived sense that things might be different, and as a result of their experiences they have repertoires and resources that are democratically (re) produced. We might go so far as to suggest that the principal opposition in the field (re) produces 'participatory' players. As evidence for this we point to the inclusion of 'student voice' as part of the panoply of accountability, produced by agents in the education field whose game is now to do with regulation.

The good news for those of us concerned with student participation is that, given the inherent instability occasioned by the principal opposition in the field that we have suggested, there will certainly continue to be places in which more equitable and democratic schooling can be produced, and in which students can have some say over at least some aspects of their education.

Our Bourdieuan re-reading of student participation and of the changes that took place in two policy instances moved beyond the structure/agency binary usually found in change literatures. Our re-theorization – of a principal opposition in the education field arising from the contradictions between the push to massify schooling, and the push to produce elite knowledges and credentials – suggests that different players in education will play the game differently. It also suggests that the possibilities and opportunities for change are ongoing.

For those of us interested in theorizing educational change, the task remains to put the theorization of principal opposition to the test, using other cases and other locations.

## Notes

1. Feminist and critical normative theorizations of deliberative democracy and justice (e.g. Mansbridge 1980, Mouffe 1993, Phillips 1993, Benhabib 1996) propose a democratic ideal in which, as Iris Marion Young (2002) puts it, 'all potentially affected persons are included in discussions, all are able to speak freely and criticize, under circumstances where no one is in a position to threaten or coerce others into accepting their proposals'. Just outcomes are produced within 'institutions that enable the self development of everyone and where no-one is subject to domination by others' (p. 34). Such normative epistemes are impossible to fulfill (Bauman 1993, Frazer and Lacey 1993) but they do allow consideration of the gap between the ideal and particular educational contexts. It is this use of the slippery notions of democracy that underpins our discussions of student leadership, participation and voice.
2. Australian is a federation. Schools are the responsibility of state governments, but there is now considerable Commonwealth steerage via funding and through national policymaking bodies.
3. We work with the notion that policy not only provides 'problems' but also 'solutions' (Bacchi 1999). Policy texts are inherently 'heteroglossic' (Bakhtin 1981), that is, they contain meanings which cannot be pinned down, and even though we attempt here to give some dominant interpretations of policy texts, these are not the only possible meanings. We also adopt the view that, in order to gain legitimacy and satisfy competing agendas, policy texts often mobilize rhetoric from previous documents to provide a sense of continuity. Such inter-textuality allows contradictory readings, opens up space for particular readings in various sites and provides the warrant for multiple interpretive acts of implementation. We show some of the contradictory workings of policy in practice, but also suggest that there is a logic in the way readings and actions are made.
4. We note here our mixed feelings about truants who research truancy and decide that they must start attending school in order to be good models for others. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the young people involved were likely to increase their life options by staying at school and engaging in the curriculum. On the other, this activity by itself did not change the mandated curriculum, although it may well have had substantive effects on school practices which alienated other young people. This is participation as simultaneously community activism and discipline (cf. Anderson 1998).
5. South Australia has the *Student Voice Indicator Tool* (2001), Victoria *Connecting students to school* (2000). Both documents claimed as their basis a study conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) into students' social learning (Ainley *et al.* 1997). This study identified six dimensions of social learning: (1) relating to others; (2) commitment to community well-being; (3) interest in learning; (4) conformity to rules and conventions; (5) self confidence; and (6) optimism for the future. The second of these, commitment to community well-being, listed critical and socially just engagement and active participation, exercising personal and social power and social and global responsibility. Little of this found its way into the two documents.
6. It was assumed that schools had the necessary expertise to undertake quantitative analysis.
7. Because class meetings almost inevitably do more than just contribute to self esteem, there are opportunities here for classroom teachers who already are committed to extending democratic practices in the classroom (see Pearl and Knight 1999), but this was not the message given.

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