Epistemic communities and school leadership in England.

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Introduction
School leadership as a contemporary field of research activity in higher education has its roots in a number of epistemic groups that have grown from the 1960s onwards in England. Our research about field knowledge claims is located in work by Gunter (e.g. 1999, 2001, 2005b, 2006) and more recently we have worked together in the Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership Project (ESRC 000-23-1192) (Gunter and Forrester 2008a). This body of work has examined the production of knowledge, and has focused on claims about knowing and who present themselves and are regarded as knowers. In this paper we intend to examine the knowledge claims surrounding the main epistemic communities that underpin school leadership: school improvement, school effectiveness, educational leadership and management, and policy studies.

An epistemic community is a political network that has grown out of a particular issue and/or through the activity of a number of people who have clustered together to pursue particular interests. Such epistemic groups can be located institutionally with people working at the same organization (University or Private Company) or often in a bespoke Centre. Very often such networking is enabled through a national/international society (e.g. BELMAS; ICSEI), Special Interest Groups (e.g. within AERA; BERA), and journals (e.g. Educational Management Administration and Leadership, School Effectiveness and School Improvement). Some work has taken place on examining the growth of epistemic groups by examining developments and debates: first, school improvement and school effectiveness have been examined through an examination of boundaries, not least with government (e.g. Townsend 2001, Thrupp 2005); second, educational leadership and management has been studied through an ESRC seminar series in the late 1990s (e.g. Bush et al. 1999, EMA 1993); third, policy studies has been examined through ongoing debates about purposes and theories (e.g. Ball 1995, Hatcher and

1 This paper is based on the ESRC project report, and a full version of the project findings will be published: Gunter, H.M. and Forrester, G. (2010) School Leadership and Policymaking in England. Policy Studies 31 (1).
Troya 1994, Shain and Ozga, 2001). However, we have moved from reading field outputs to talking with knowledge producers located within all these communities and discussed with them the origins of the networks, their role within them, and what they see as their purposes. Notably there is important evidence about boundaries and how field members position themselves within a network and what they think of other positions in the field of school leadership.

We begin with an examination of epistemic communities, and we suggest that the best way of understanding intellectual work is to conceptualise it as a social practice. Therefore we use Bourdieu’s (2000) theory of practice to examine field positions and the formation of epistemic groups, and in particular we will use his thinking tools of capital and habitus to explain field location and activity. Notably the working of symbolic exchange has been helpful to us in explaining epistemic group activity and cross border movements.

This paper’s particular contribution to educational research is by examining the contemporary growth and development of a significant area of professional practice by field members, and in particular how associations and networks operate to produce knowledge in particular ways.

**Epistemic Groups**

There are a number of ways in which groups of researchers might be identified and understood:

Paradigms: this focuses on the knowledge claims that are shared, their speciality, their journals and professional societies. A paradigm shift takes place when the epistemic community accepts a new way of thinking, seeing and defining the world (e.g. Kuhn 1975, but see Becher 1989 because he focuses on the link between sharing a paradigm as a ‘tribe’ the way power operates in universities through ‘territories’).
Characteristics: this focuses on the identification of patterns within the group e.g. a shared set of purposes, a rationale based on espoused beliefs and narratives that show consensus about the knowledge base (e.g. Haas 1992).

Practices: this focuses on what knowledge workers do to produce and disseminate knowledge e.g. the establishment of a field with clear boundaries and entry based on dispositions to stake and exchange capital (e.g. Bourdieu 1988, 2000).

Our work in the KPEL project shows that: first, paradigms are somewhat elitist in their explanation of knowledge production because it gives attention to intellectual elites who control what is known and is to be known; second, that characteristics enable the abstraction of what the linkages are between people who associate with particular institutional locations or journals or professional societies but it is not clear how groups form and develop over time, not least in relation to the policy process; third, Bourdieu’s theory of practice is an approach to knowledge production that enables not only the description of the formation and development of groups but also explains practice by linking activity to the bigger picture of economic and political power.

Deploying Bourdieu’s thinking tools has enabled us to explain major policy changes and policy processes in the first decade of New Labour’s major policy changes. Notably what we have identified is an emerging, often contradictory, but still clear approach that we have called the leadership of schools (Gunter and Forrester 2008a, 2010). What has emerged is the centralised regulation of structures, cultures and practices in order to control the local implementation of reform. This is different to professional school leadership pre 1988 where the control of the curriculum was localised, and post 1988 where entrepreneurial school leadership was configured as organisational effectiveness within a quasi market (Grace 1995). New Labour built on Thatcherite performance regulation based on arguments that the market could not deliver reform with the required compliance and speed. Responsibility and accountability for the delivery and impact of reform through the leadership of schools has important features: first, centralised
design and accreditation; second, the single person as transformational leader; third, formal
degregation known as 'distributed' leadership; fourth, primacy given to private sector language,
processes and legitimacy; fifth, redesign of professionalism as technical capability (e.g. data
handling) combined with personal attributes (e.g. charisma), underpinned by an overt
commitment to New Labour strategies and processes; sixth, use of School Effectiveness and
School Improvement research and researchers; seventh, contract compliance secured through,
e.g. NDPBs such as the NCSL to codify and transmit New Labour strategies; and, eighth,
networks of advisors and consultants from the private and public sectors have been contracted to
deliver and strategise on product design and tactics (Gunter and Forrester 2008b).

What is evident in this strategy is how the centralization of policy has been enabled through
inviting into government people from universities, companies and schools to work on and deliver
policy change. We call this institutionalized governance (see Gunter and Forrester 2009) where
networks of preferred advisors and consultants enable public sector education to be opened up to
the market through talking up contracts to complete research or evaluations, joining government
bodies to frame strategy and bring about change, and by giving advice through problem solving
modes of action. Consequently the public institution remains a strong feature of government (not
least the Treasury and No 10) because of the means by which legitimate change takes place,
particularly through parliamentary majorities. However, as Béland (2005:3) argues an institutional
focus on its own is limited because of the need to take into account what he calls “ideational
forces” (13) where the power processes which build “trust networks” (Tilly 2005) around ideas is
significant. Policy needs the legitimation of evidence, language and a change imperative, and
then it needs translation, training, monitoring and measuring, and becomes regulated by those
who work within it.

A second and connected feature is that like the Thatcherite governments, New Labour excluded
“welfare bureaucrats and professionals” as “inefficient, self-interested and guilty of fostering
welfare dependency…” (Gewirtz 2002: 2-3). The data show the problem of ‘risky’ bureau-
professional groups with unmodern professional attitudes. A marketised network of private sector
consultants have replaced them as attractive outsiders (Collarbone 2005), together with co-opted bureau-professionals who reposition themselves as attractive risk-free insiders in the “big tent” (Hyman 2005). In Kingdon’s (2003) terms this coalition of ministers, civil servants, advisors and consultants as “policy entrepreneurs” who recombine ideas and so provide evidence, language and distinction to legitimise the reform imperative. They have a “willingness to invest their resources – time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money – in the hope of a future return” (122), and as “policy groupies” they “enjoy advocacy, they enjoy being at or near the seat of power, they enjoy being part of the action” (123), where they engage with the preference for the private sector to deliver change, and they feed that preference by doing it. The “return” on the investment is that private interests are enhanced through policy impact and business success.

A final aspect is the use of forms of knowledge and knowledge production to generate a specific change narrative. While the data confirm pluralistic knowledge claims (Gunter 2005a,b) with a range of epistemic groups, New Labour has tended to advocate Mode 1 knowledge from the SESI epistemic groups symbolised by investment in EIPP; and, Mode 2 knowledge where experiential forms of knowing are in play particularly in advocacy statements about the direct relationship between identity, work and leadership (Gibbons et al. 2007). In Young’s (2008) terms “theoretical debates” about disciplines and “political debates” about policy preferences have been blurred. This potential contradictory situation is handled through an underlying preference for the political, where unclear “sticky” (Ozga and Jones 2006) knowledge can be selected, codified into bullet points and transferred in ways that suit functional aims. So narratives use selected evidence and beliefs to justify interventions to provide a solution to a particular need. There has been a privileging of measurement evaluations (e.g. Leithwood and Levin 2005) and both HEI (Ball 2007, Raffo and Gunter 2008) and Think Tank (O’Shaughnessy 2007) research have critiqued the technology and values base of research. It seems that knowledge produced through theoretical debates which “can offer cognitive gains to policymakers over and above the latter’s knowledge and experience” (Young 2008: 105) lacks recognition.
Regimes of practice

A new conceptual framework used to explain the way that institutionalized governance operates. Regime theory (Harding 2000:55) focuses on the interconnections between people as a “governing coalition”, who require entry into public institutions (as ministers, civil servants, contracted providers) in order to retain competitive advantage (win elections, contract renewal); second, Bourdieu’s (1990, 2000) thinking tools of field, habitus, capital, codification, and misrecognition, were used to develop understandings of how such regimes as coalitions work as practices. Regimes of practice are networked positions within a field, and as such the staking of capital through entering and positioning provides a dynamic explanatory construct through which the location and practice of power can be understood. Following Bourdieu (2005) Diagram 1 presents the map where positions are taken in relation to proximity to and distance from the state as power and economy. Respondents have been located according to indicators of capital in their biography, professional practice, and dispositions.

Diagram 1: Mapping Regimes of Practice.

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<tr>
<th>Power-</th>
<th>Economy +</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space is occupied by those who do not have direct access to public ‘government’ institutions, but who are using leadership as a means to make public sector services work more efficiently and effectively as a business.</td>
<td>Space is occupied by those who have direct access to public ‘government’ institutions, and are using leadership as a means of extending private sector practices and cultures into public sector services.</td>
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<th>Power +</th>
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<tr>
<td>Space is occupied by those who have direct access to public ‘government’ institutions and who want to engage with leadership to develop public sector services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Space is occupied by those outside of public ‘government’ institutions, who undertake critical policy analysis of leadership, and its place in policy-making. The aim is to develop alternative approaches to leadership within the public sector.</td>
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The project findings demonstrate how ideas matter but it is the interplay between the agency of people and the structures that enable or limit ideas that is a key feature of institutionalised governance and how it has produced a particular configuration of the leadership of schools. Diagram 2 shows how the interplay between networks of agents has been mapped as *regimes of practice*. 

![Diagram 2: Regimes of Practice](image)
Regime 1 or “school leadership policy network” (Gunter and Forrester 2008b) is positioned primarily towards the dominance of the economic and political power. Those in formal roles (Ministers, Civil Servants, Advisors) have done two main things: first, continue the close relationship with the private sector, with those (a) close to the PM; (b) actively involved in the Department; (c) actively involved in NDPBs (a few move between). Second, new institutional structures have been created (e.g. SEU, NCSL) and those positioned here tend to have links to schools (former heads) and to SESI. Private sector consultants and those in formal advisory roles directly advise (both formally and off the record) and are controlled through contract renewal. Policy positions headteachers here but the data show that, in Lather’s (1991) words, a large group work “within/against” this regime.

Those who locate within this regime are most likely to:

- Be leader centric. PM Blair is a replicable role model in a ‘we are in new times’ narrative.
- Locate their employment in or be contracted by a public institution to deliver services. Are less likely to be from a local authority or university, and if they are then they tend to be: first, from or supportive of SESI; second, on short-term contract/secondment; third, accepting of private sector knowledge; fourth, politically neutral in self presentation.
- Recognise centralised policy strategy as the starting point for meeting standards and improving performance at local level. Headteachers who model the local transformational leadership role are both included and favoured. Other potential sites for change narratives, such as local authorities, unions, and universities, are framed as problematic.
- Relate their role and identity to achieving national policy and making it work as a means of securing contracts. Criticism is usually about technical implementation.
- Accept neo-liberal thinking about the school as a firm to which ideas from the private sector can be transferred. SESI research is attractive because it is consistent with functional private sector models.
- Be concerned to work with practitioners to help them be contractually enthusiastic. If there are problems raised by practitioners in ways that cannot be ameliorated then this is
passed up the delivery chain and used as leverage to develop new business in ways that enhance policy.

- Frame their identity about what they want to do, achieve, believe in and value, than with an epistemic community and/or a discipline. There is evidence of rival power bases developing, and this is seen as either a positive ‘diversity’ development or is a problem to be resolved through contracts.

**Regime 2** is a form of critical governance, positioned at a distance from the domination of economic and political power. Those who locate here are mainly in HEIs and articulate their work as policy studies, notably policy sociology. Some headteachers have direct association with HEIs through research and postgraduate programmes; they tend to critique New Labour from either the right (they benefited from Thatcherism) or from the left (they want to see more socially just policies from New Labour).

Those who locate within this regime are most likely to:

- Problematise the historical legacy of leader centric structures and cultures, and develop change narratives around a more socially just and participatory democracy.

- Locate employment in HEIs and frame their work as research. Those who have been practitioners are indistinguishable in intellectual positioning and research disposition from those whose biography is mainly research. As critical knowledge producers they give due attention to the crossing of boundaries between theoretical and political debates (Young 2008).

- Emphasise how neo-liberal agendas dominate at the expense of narratives about democratic development and social justice. They are not prepared to make something work that is undemocratic and unfair. By problematising what is taking place, particularly through a critique of SESI, the aim is to focus on the realities of practice and so create spaces to reveal alternatives. Arguments are made about the need to shift the focus to pedagogy and curriculum.
Use social theories to frame investigations, and to provide descriptions, meanings and explanations of what is happening. Are more likely to problematise the context and to look at the interplay between the strategic bigger picture and the realities of local practice.

Be sociologists, and/or to be located in the wider area of public policy. They are less likely to talk about leadership as the prime focus of their work, and indeed they are more likely to talk about the relationship as being tenuous.

Use reflexive approaches to knowledge production, and debate the relationship between power, the economy, and professional practice. This position recognises contradictions and what it means to pursue a critical agenda at a time of neo-liberal modernisation. Those who position themselves here cannot stand outside of the globalised economy and funding contracts.

Emergent Regime 3: a third regime could emerge from the fringes of Regimes 1 and 2. On the edge of Regime 1 there are two ‘communities’ first, a pool of SESI, some are new entrants with great expectations, others are those who have been inside and find themselves outside. Second, headteachers are positioned in Regime 1 as reform deliverers but two-thirds of interviewed heads find themselves variously distanced from it. Some are ‘strategisers’ who want to develop local educational provision, and some are ‘tacticians’ who face difficulties in implementing reform. Engaging with policy is more dialogic (within/against) than totalising self surveillance (Ball 2007), where their stories show (a) teaching and learning dominates as headteacher; (b) motivation is based on making a difference; (c) reforms are too speedy and the realities of local implementation are not thought through; and, (d) views are communicated through local networks and/or union. Headteachers are assumed within policy to be inside policy but they may not be an insider headteacher, and there is a sizeable group who feel distanced from the NCSL.

On the edges of Regime 2 are those who identify with practitioners and who have a track record of project delivery. Previous research shows that this was a vibrant space for practitioners who had relocated into higher education as ELM knowledge workers (Gunter 1999). The data show
that postgraduate masters programmes in ELM remain where SESI and NCSL programmes are located. Repositioning is based on availability as contract and consultancy researchers. There is evidence of criticality in regard to the objectives and outcomes of Regime 1 but it is not sufficient to put potential access to contracts in danger.

Regime 3 could emerge with a focus around practitioner interests. Currently there is more interest in positioning in relation to Regimes 1 and 2 than in creating another regime. For a third regime to emerge there would need to be a direct linkage between those in HEIs and in schools who want to generate alternative strategies to that which currently dominate through Regime 1 practices.

**Regime practices:** following Thomson (2005: 251) agents from the economic and political fields “breach(ed) the borders” of education and used institutional methods (new structures, cultures, jobs, rules) to secure change. This privileged particular types of knowledge, knowing and knowers. Knowledge production in Regime 1 is highly functional, based on an underlying belief in what is to be done overlain with positivist evidence. This enabled the leadership of schools “game” (Bourdieu 1990) to focus on eradicating failing schools and teachers as a means of keeping middle class parents as consumers of public provision. New Labour has entered into symbolic capital exchange with the private sector who have their own “game” of market expansion in play. All share a “doxic acceptance of the world” regarding effective leadership as an “objective structure” where the conceptualisation of the local chief executive is the product of structured and structuring practices revealed through what is normal and necessary to secure domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 168). The exchange is based on shared dispositions to deliver, where the government gives private capital access to new markets and private capital gives government access to a modernising “kulturkampf” (Marquand 2004). Consequently school leaders with QTS are being replaced by effective leaders. The logic of practice that produces such policy strategies is based on unspoken rules of the game where there is “knowledge and recognition” (Bourdieu 2000: 198) of both domination and dominated. Misrecognition can be detected in the failure to speak about the interplay between the “subjective truths” of the
leadership of schools by chief executives as the only thing to do, with the “objective realities” of how this has been constructed through the game in play (Bourdieu 2000: 95).

Illusio or “interest in the game” (Bourdieu 2000: 207) is generated by the symbolic effects of this capital exchange where the position is based on the experience of playing it before or seeing it played, and having a “habitus predisposed to anticipate it” (Bourdieu 2000:12). Regime 1 players are provoked and predisposed to the game, and it “speaks” to them as “agents characterized by possession of a certain capital and a certain habitus” (Bourdieu 2000: 220). The leadership of schools game will only work if those who are at a distance from classrooms stake the claim of knowing more and better, and this is enabled through the misrecognition of those who take up a position in government. The “esteem, recognition, belief credit, confidence of others” in headteachers, consultants and professors as deliverers is “perpetuated... (because) ...it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence” (Bourdieu 2000: 166). While there is evidence of attempts to create power bases within the regime, with ‘new’ leadership products and internal conflicts, there comes a time when the staking of capital that threatens the regime is dealt with though contract termination. This acts as a disciplinary process for those at the centre or the edges, and those who are on the fringes of Regime 1 sustain this existence by their loyalty to the doxa in their teaching, research and writing, and so are ever ready to stake their claim for recognition.

Those who are objects of the leadership of schools game are: first, codified beneficiaries such as teachers, parents, and students, who are dominated through the “representations of power” such as titles, role, and pay (Bourdieu 2000: 171). Nevertheless they can themselves dominate: for teachers it can be through reform implementation; for parents it can be at elections; and for students it can be through absenteeism. Second, there are those who are deemed irrelevant to the game and do not find the illusio of the Regime 1 game to be congenial. Hence in Regime 2 another educational policy game is in play: (a) to open up the Regime 1 game to scrutiny and reflexive theorising, particularly through “historical critique” (Bourdieu 2000: 182); and (b) to
develop an illusio located in issues of power processes. The doxa is one of knowledge production in an unjust world. Those in Regime 2 who are close to practitioners have a "game" enabling alternative narratives about practice to be opened up. Symbolic exchange may not normally happen between Regimes 1 and 2, but within Regime 2 those who hold major grants from funding councils and esteemed chairs in Russell Group Universities do hold symbolic capital of titles, posts and institution that enables them to speak differently to the New Labour project, and as such there is a capital exchange with others in higher education, local authorities, unions, schools, parents and communities. While the New Labour leadership of schools model may not directly speak to these interests, Regime 2 may speak to matters of social justice and radical change, and hence they provide symbolic effects of countering the charges of irrelevance from Regime 1.

What is currently not in a play is a Regime 3 with a doxa located in researchers, headteachers, teachers and children in a pedagogic relationship. Currently those who might create the necessary narratives to invite investment are too few in number and/or who position themselves as actual or potential players in Regimes 1 or 2. This is mainly due to the lack of symbolic capital around teachers and students as active subjects in educational change, and how the market operates in ways to render their capital as only valuable if they are the objects of reform. For Regime 3 to emerge strongly there would need to be a symbolic capital exchange between HEIs and schools through research and postgraduate study combined with forms of activism (Apple 2006a). The data show that this tends to be happening either under the radar and/or it is not a widespread feature, not least because HEIs have been marginalised. However, the data show that some practitioners are pro NCSL, some are anti, while most are ambivalent, and hence the opportunity exists to revitalise HEIs as places where practitioners can seek support for their professional practice. The intellectual resources exist to enable this to be a legitimate area of interest: first, Young's (2008) conceptualising of change narratives as theoretical and political debates with a boundary that needs to be understood is helpful in enabling the staking of capital to be opened up to scrutiny and strategising; second, Whitty's (2002) analysis that crossing such
boundaries by policy sociologists as being appropriate but not an imperative means that policy as analysis and activity are not automatically oppositional but are distinct contributions to educational change.

Summary

Symbolic exchange of being close to political power and extending economic power is the logic of practice within New Labour policy made visible through this research. Ontologically Regime 1 illustrates that what matters is an ongoing visible performance of change through a functional delivery of national policy strategies. Epistemologically this world is understood through the realities of change processes that may require technical adjustments but will demand outcome measurements that demonstrate effectiveness. The principles underpinning this are based on disconnecting what is done from structures, and so those from both public and private can work to ensure that the headteacher as the obvious local change agent can do what is necessary. The methodological implications are to adopt logical change processes that people can be enthusiastic about and collect measurement data to prove the validity of change. By contrast Regime 2 is ontologically focused on description and understanding of policy changes and outcomes through both critique and giving recognition to other forms of legitimate practice. Consequently, the epistemology of Regime 2 is linked to disciplinary knowledge in ways that reveal the exercise of power, mainly sociology but also history and political science, and challenges to established ways of knowing through e.g. feminist theories. The principles upon which this is based is to understand the interplay of the agency of the practitioner with the structures in which they are located, and to develop activism in regard to challenging those structures, particularly in regard to issues of social justice. Methodologically this Regime is about drawing on social theories in order to describe and explain how change is taking place and how it might be done differently. Both Regimes see practitioners in schools as key to their analysis, but Regime 1 sees their purposes as being directly involved in telling and selling what to do, how to do it and the reasons why it is necessary, whereas Regime 2 is more concerned with enabling practitioners to understand the system they are in and how they may not be fully responsible for
the problems they are required to solve. So Regime 1 is about securing policy conformity and interplaying with this is a need to prevent too much damage locally, while Regime 2 is about securing policy critique in order to enable practitioners to be actively involved as policymakers.

A potential Regime 3 has ontological possibilities around professional practice where the underlying epistemology could be in the interplay between theory and practice. Principles can be based on the inter-relationship between the embeddedness of practice with travelling policy requirements (Ozga and Jones 2006). However, the emergence of such a regime is directly related to the capital exchange within Regimes 1 and 2, and while these Regimes may seem stable they are vulnerable to fracture (Ball 2007, Gewirtz 2002). Contradictions are emerging as New Labour is arguing for more bottom-up voice and choice (PMSU 2006), but as Coffield (2007) argues “the current version is focused on faithfully carrying out whatever reforms the government stipulates” (65). If a participatory model is to be developed then the capital from knowledge workers from Regime 2 (and the emergent Regime 3) gains in value. This is a new game and while the resources exist to develop position and positioning, it is likely to remain a minority game unless Apple’s (2006b) strategy of interruption is deployed and Arendt’s optimism for change is recognised (Gunter 2005c). Whitty (2002) identified a dual strategy of both recognising problems and working for socially just change. While he recognises that it is complex and potentially utopian, the project shows that those working in both regimes can speak rationally and handle contestation.

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