RESISTING EDUCATION: A CAPITAL IDEA

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Abstract

Within Australia, Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) are commonly perceived as programs for behaviourally challenged students. This study focuses on students attending one such AEP in Queensland, Australia and reveals that the dominant capitals valued in mainstream schooling, may be similarly privileged within such AEPs. This suggests that such programs may contribute to the existing inequities of mainstream schooling.

Analysis indicates that this AEP is layered with multiple social fields in which attempts are made to legitimise particular forms of capital, with student acts of educational resistance interpreted as reactions to the privileging of one form of capital over another. Whilst the literature suggests the flow of capital is required for transformation, the teacher’s reliance on legitimised capitals and the students’ disposition towards un-legitimised capitals creates a struggle that blocks the flow of capital within the AEP.

Introduction

There is an extensive body of literature that examines the support provided to marginalised or ‘at-risk’ youth through the provision of alternative education programs (Aron, 2006; Aron and Zweig, 2003; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Mills & McGregor, 2010). A consistent theme within the literature is that marginalised or ‘at-risk’ youth, have educational and social needs alternate to mainstream youth, and therefore require a pathway that offers a genuine alternative to mainstream schools. In 2014 Thomson & Pennachia explored the effectiveness of Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) in a large scale research project, encompassing 17 AEPs across four countries. A key finding of their research was that despite differences in many aspects, these programs share an underlying purpose, to change student behaviour so they could fit back into mainstream education. The work by Thomson & Pennachia (2014) aligns with research conducted in Australia (Graham, Van Bergen & Sweller, 2016) that suggests the underlying model for most AEPs is a ‘remove, rehabilitate, return’ model (Granite & Graham, 2012). This poses questions as to the type of support provided to marginalised students. For example, is changing the student in order to succeed in the mainstream educational arena really offering an alternative pathway for improved educational outcomes?
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The research that informs this paper aims to answer such questions, picking up the argument by Mills and Gale (2007) that research underpinned by the conceptual and methodological perspective of Bourdieu offers the framework to critically examine the educational support offered to marginalised students. For Bourdieu, schools play a central role in the reproduction of inequality and Bourdieu applied his concepts of capital, habitus, and field in his explanation of the reproduction of such inequalities (Field, 2003; Portes, 1998). This research project draws together the works of Pierre Bourdieu, with Paul Willis’ resistance theory and proposes a useful relationship between the two in critically examining the educational and social fields inherent within AEPs.

Bourdieu's thinking tools

Reading through Bourdieu’s extensive body of work one can gain insight into how individuals and institutions work together to produce and reproduce inequalities. Bourdieu provides the theoretical and conceptual framework that can be applied to examining this phenomenon and in the case of this research, examining the co-construction of educational resistance. The relational concepts of capital, field and habitus, provide the tools to examine the individual’s and the field’s role in the perpetuation of resistant pathways and the manifestation of resistant acts. The development of acts of resistance can be explained by Bourdieu, “[(capital*habitus) +field] =practice” (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 95) with the term practice, in this context, referring to ‘acts of resistance’

Habitus is described by Bourdieu as a,

system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified task, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems

(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82 – 83 emphasis in the original)

More simply, habitus is the expression of an individual’s historical cultural trajectory, which acts as a (mostly) unconscious guide through future trajectories. In this way resistance can be conceptualised as an aspect of the habitus, with the exact form resistance takes influenced by the social struggle to recognise the forms of capital available within the field.

Bourdieu’s sociological concept of field has been utilised by researchers to examine the educational and social contexts in which students are positioned as empowered or disempowered. Bourdieu’s field is a “structured space of relations” (Lane, 2000, p.73) specific to the physical and relational contexts of such things as a family, organisation, team or a classroom and is where the struggle for valued capital takes place (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).
Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of capital, “accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form)” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241) has impacted significantly on educational research with a consistent central theme of educational success being linked to the degree of compatibility between the cultural capital of the school and home (Mirza and Reay, 2005; van de Werfhorst, 2010. Whilst considerable research demonstrates the influence of cultural capital on the educational outcomes of students, some research suggests analysis of the habitus, seen as the embodiment of one’s capital, as more productive in understanding the educational success (or lack thereof) experienced by some students. For instance, Bodovski (2014) operationalising the habitus as the disposition towards formal educational, as measured by educational aspirations, demonstrates the influence of the habitus on the student’s educational trajectory. The theoretical framework underpinning this research, suggests that habitus guides practice, and certain types of practice, once legitimised, can be designated as capital (Duckworth, 2014). This is significant as while both Willis and Bourdieu indicate the potential for social transformation through education, this requires a modification of the habitus which in turn requires the accumulation of further capitals.

Additional capital can be accumulated either through creation, conversion or transfer with Bourdieu’s concept of social capital conceptualised as a platform through which this transfer, or flow of capital, can occur. I draw on the concept of social capital, including youth social capital to explore the mechanisms behind the flow of capital within the AEP. While youth social capital is usually conceptualised as a parental or family resource that youth can access (Billett, 2012a, 2012b; Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007; Leonard, 2005; Morrow, 1999), Raffo and Reeves (2000) offer a theoretical framework that suggests youth “are conditioned to a large extent by the evolutionary and adaptive characteristics of their individualized systems of social capital, rather than prescribed social characteristics” (p.148). Drawing on a qualitative study aimed at understanding youth transition to work or further study involving 31 young people in the UK, Raffo and Reeves (2000) extend Bourdieu’s concept of social capital. Viewing youth as possessing ‘individualized systems of social capital’ (Raffo & Reeves, 2000) allows an examination of the contrast and struggle between the social capital operationalised by both teachers and students.

**Resistance Theory**

Resistance theory is valuable in “understanding the complex ways in which subordinate groups experience educational failure” (Giroux, 1983, p. 107) with Paul Willis’ 1977 ethnographic study of youth subcultures in education “widely assumed to be the origin of resistance theory in education” (McGrew, 2011, p. 239). In exploring resistance theory post –Willis, Tuck and Yang (2011, 2014) explore the evolution of resistance theory from Willis (1977) to the present and suggest that despite the evolution of the theory in both conceptualisation and application, “resistance continues to be a
widely used lens through which to see and understand the social contexts of communities and schools, and youth experiences in schooling, and in education beyond schooling” (2011, p.523).

This study draws on the resistance theory of Paul Willis and conceptual analysis offered by Pierre Bourdieu’s work to critically examine the educational and social support offered within an AEP. Both Willis and Bourdieu align in their suggestion that the schooling system produces and reproduces inequality, diverging on the importance of student agency in the (re)production cycle.

Resistant theory emerged as an attempt to better understand the unpredictability of reproduction, suggesting that the inappropriate school behaviours of marginalised or ‘at-risk’ students can be interpreted as socio-political protests towards formal education. This re-interpretation is important as Te Riele (2006) suggests, “policy interpretations of youth ‘at risk’ tend to construct ‘risk’ either as an individual attribute or as a condition of particular groups” (p.136) and therefore the use of the term ‘at-risk’ can be viewed as locating the blame with the student and/or family (Araujo, 2005). Reframing these students as ‘educationally resistant’ rather than ‘at-risk’ reframes the action required to best support these students. In other words, redefining the students as educationally resistant moves the focus from a ‘fixing the students’ to fit the system, to critically examining the relationship between the students and the system and constructing ways to improve the relationship.

For instance, an ethnographic study conducted in a Canadian high school (Hand, 2010) determined one significant factor in the manifestation of educationally resistant acts was the social networks of the student, indicating the importance of examining the student’s relationships. Christ (2008) utilised Bourdieuan methodology in her analysis of the teaching and learning of appropriate classroom practices and demonstrated that practices, appropriate and inappropriate, were co-constructed within the social relationships of the field. Furthermore Christ (2008) demonstrated the analytical power of Bourdieuan methodology, arguing that “Bourdieu’s thinking tools provide a useful means of exploring the co-construction of practices” (2008, p.205). The theoretical model underpinning this research posits that the relationship students have with formal education is played out within the overlapping field found within alternative education programs, and Bourdieu’s concepts of capital, habitus and field provide the tools to conduct the micro-level critical examination of the co-construction of resistance within this relationship.

Context

The data that informs this paper was generated through a qualitative case study undertaken in an alternative education program (AEP) in Queensland, Australia offering intervention and support for students between the ages of 10 and 15 with long histories of exhibiting behaviours inconsistent with school success. Document analysis reveals student histories of non-compliance, physical and verbal abuse, and truancy. The AEP operates five days a week, with two programs each day, a morning
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program (9.00am – 12.30pm) and an afternoon program (1.00 – 3.00pm). The AEP operates within the same grounds as a mainstream primary school. At the time of data collection, 13 students were participating in this program (of which seven students and their parents) provided signed consent to participate in the study.

Method

Data collection methods that form this case study include focus groups, individual interviews, observation and document analysis. Focus groups were conducted with the students and teachers to shed light on the interactions within and between these two groups. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student, teacher and at least one of the students’ family members, over a four-week period in order to contextualise the participant’s experiences (Seidman, 2006). Interview recordings were transcribed and annotated. A field journal was kept during the 4 week period of participant observation, enabling documentation of observations, physical layout, movements, and interactions. Document analysis involved AEP operational guidelines as well as student referral forms, achievement records, and case files. Once the data was transcribed and formatted, data analysis was undertaken following a thematic approach.

Findings

This study found that within the AEP, the lines between social strategies and educational strategies blur and what is seen as an alternative educational pathway is simply a perpetuation of the social struggle for power and recognition existent in mainstream educational pathways. From this perspective the AEP fails to offer an educational pathway alternate to that of a mainstream setting. Power and recognition are attained through the accumulation of recognised capitals, however within the AEP there are two separate and competing accumulation pathways. This causes conflict that, for these students, mirrors previous experiences and contributes to the perpetuation of educationally resistant identities.

The field of this study is the relationship students have with formal education, which overlaps the fields of mainstream education, alternative education, and family (Figure 1). While capitals are available within each of these fields, it is the findings related to the capitals valued within the overlapping field that hold significance for this study. Resistant identities are generated over time, through cultural trajectories that traverse multiple social fields and physical sites. It is within the boundaries of this AEP however that specific acts of resistance are co-constructed within the students’ relationship with formal education. As such, acts of resistance are directed towards the recognised capitals inherent to formal education.
The terms ‘recognised’ and ‘unrecognised’ are used for those symbolic, social, and embodied capitals that hold field-value (recognised) and those lacking field-value (unrecognised). A significant finding of this study is the existence of two separate forms of social capital, both competing for recognition within the AEP. Social capital in this context specifically refers to the strategies generated within the field to acquire recognised capital and/or leverage recognition for as-yet unrecognised capitals (including the recognition of the youth’s own social capital).

**Table 1: Forms of social capital within the AEP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy – the recognised social capital</th>
<th>Justice capital – the unrecognised social capital</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A set of formalised, structured and consistent strategies</td>
<td>• Loose, unstructured and fluid set of strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prescribed relationships – top down</td>
<td>• Dynamic relationships – adaptive to who is present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influence restricted to the here and now participants</td>
<td>• Can be influenced by relationships, not just presence</td>
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The follow extract is taken from a student’s (Ewan) account of mainstream school experience, a typical interaction of the type that led to his referral to the AEP.

Ewan: You’re not allowed to wear hats like this (touches his cap), not allowed to wear any hats like this, you have to wear bucket hats or (expletive) wide round brimmed whatever they are called. So mum gets one but it’s too big. This (expletive) teacher, I walk out on the oval with my thing on like this (pulls hoodie up over head and then puts hat on) and she’s like, "Take that hoodie off." So I took it off and I walked away, and put it back on underneath my hat because my hat was too big. She’s like, "Right, get off the oval!". And I’m like, "(expletive) you get off the oval!".
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Analysing this extract through the lens of habitus, Ewan is predisposed to find a practical solution to solve the issue of the ill-fitting hat using the tools at his disposal (his hoodie). In other words Ewan’s mode of thinking is practical, and privileges function. However, the teacher’s behaviour suggests that the hoodie is not just used to stay warm or ensure the hat stays on, but is symbolic, representative of a mode of thinking that embodies recognised capital. Using the hoodie in a recognised manner symbolises a recognised habitus and in the described interaction above, Ewan’s habitus is the embodiment of unrecognised capital.

Recognised social capital

Within the formal education field, a recognised habitus privileges participation in the officially sanctioned tasks and routines of the relationship as the recognised accumulation process or social capital platform. To facilitate the production of work, in an effort to assist students accumulate recognised capital, the teachers choose work for students to complete and arrange the physical environment to best encourage completion of the tasks (and compliance with behaviour expectations). They form small groups of students, pairs of students, or work one on one with students. These choices fall under the umbrella of pedagogical devices utilised by the teachers and are made with the goal of increased production of capital. In this way the pedagogy, a formalised set of strategies used to facilitate the students’ accumulation of educational capital can be seen as the recognised social capital. Below, two of the staff, Richard and Oliver, express the difficulty the students have in recognising the ‘how’ of a lesson.

Richard: They (the students) can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. William can’t see that, that he just has to do A, and he’ll get B.
Oliver: They don’t seem to be able to see how the pieces will fit together

Lessons are structured a specific way, following pedagogical principles. The teacher’s habitus positions them to see this structure as normal and achieving school success as simple; follow the lesson plan, do the work and achievement follows. ‘Do A, and he’ll get B’. Teachers who possess a recognised habitus, aligned with the field, simply view the dominant mode of thinking as normal practice (Marsh, 2006). The following example demonstrates that students do not share a collective habitus with the staff, questioning the ‘normalness’ of the pedagogy and as such, positioning themselves in opposition to the recognised social capital platform.

Michael: Why do they (teachers) ask questions they already know the answer to?
Int: What kinds of questions?
Michael:  Oh, (puts on a funny voice) there are 2 paddle pops and you get 5 paddle pops and then how many you got? (in his normal voice) Like the teacher is that dumb they don’t know.

Here Michael is effectively questioning the recognised social capital; teachers pose questions for students to answer in order to gauge how well the students understand the mathematical process involved in finding the right answer. Without a shared habitus that recognises the process, Michael does not answer the question to the best of his ability, instead questioning its legitimacy. Tina, a staff member, demonstrated an orientation towards ensuring the students ‘do’ the work while simultaneously accepting the legitimacy of the work will be questioned.

Tina:   They (the students) will find the easiest path. That's typical. It could be that I was ... I'll always ask him to do more knowing that they will probably say no.

Int:   So you will ask them to do more work?

Tina:   Yeah. We put out work knowing that the majority of the kids aren't going to complete all of it. I would assume in that instance, me asking him, I was not surprised that he said no. I would have been probably asking him just to see if he would carry on and do it on his own would be my assumption. But we shouldn't have to have that arrangement with Mum where if he doesn’t do work, he's staying until he does. He’s smart enough to finally do the work so he can go home.

Phrases such as, ‘if he doesn’t work’ and ‘complete all of it’ show Tinas’ habitus is orientated towards getting Michael to engage in the act of doing work with the goal of completing a set amount of work. Michael’s lack of compliance and Tina’s focus on completion offer further evidence that Michael and Tina do not share a belief in the legitimacy of the recognised social capital. Analysis indicates the teacher’s mode of thinking recognises an acquisition process as correct. Therefore, despite the rhetoric of an alternative pathway, alternative modes of thinking are devalued through a series of strategic pedagogical choices. Crucially, possessing an unrecognised habitus can restrict the accumulation of recognised capitals.

Unrecognised social capital

Drawing on the theoretical perspective taken by Raffo and Reeves (2000), youth social capital can be seen as generated by a fluid ‘constellation’ of social networks (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). Observations within the AEP reveal that the students’ social networks are characterised by an array of shifting alliances and interactions, which they navigate on a daily basis as they attempt to accumulate power and strive to achieve recognition. Document analysis reveals that from the beginning of their schooling these students have have continually been defined by a lack of recognised capital. Neil (13 years of age), William (11 years) and Ewan (11 years) had all been referred to multiple alternate
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programs since entering the formal education system with Ewan receiving behaviour support from the age of six.

The students attempt to resist this field positioning through the acquisition of further capitals, and in doing so involve themselves in the act of creating their own form of youth social capital. Data analysis draws on the theoretical perspective taken by Raffo and Reeves (2000) which suggests that youth social capital is less generated by a fixed ‘class’ consciousness than a rather fluid ‘constellation’ of social networks (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). Analysing the students acquisition pathway from this perspective it is possible to identify informal, unstructured and ever changing strategies employed by students in an attempt to gain further capital(s). Such strategies include forging alliances through wearing similar clothes, or even swapping clothes. On a number of occasions two boys would swap one shoe with each other, walking around together in a matching yet unique set of shoes, signalling their exclusive connection. On one occasion this connection was observed being utilised as a resource: when one student was being reprimanded for not completing work the other student, who had been engaged in his work, stopped working and began to join in the behaviour, effectively giving the act of resistance recognition.

The boys often teased each other as well as banding together to tease other students, even staff. One interesting strategy, one which appeared to be an attempt to establish the level of shared beliefs between themselves and the teachers, was the act of asking teachers questions the students labelled as ‘real’ questions. Questions such as, ‘Do you ever get drunk? High? Have you ever stolen anything? Do you swear? The teachers regarded this line of questioning as just the students being silly or trying to avoid work and therefore responded by redirected students to the task at hand without answering yes or no, yet this question can be interpreted as the students’ attempt to recognise the teacher’s capital.

The fluidity of alliances was revealed during the focus group as two of the older students attempted to gain recognition. During the focus group students were involved in a discussion regarding school consequences for inappropriate student behaviour. The older students were making negative comments about the consequences and attempting to increase their recognised ‘value’ within the group by encouraging the younger students to align their thinking and also criticise the consequences. When a younger student showed allegiance, but used strong offensive language to criticise the consequences, this drew negative attention from the teacher and the older boys distanced themselves from him through comments such as, “That’s just wrong, hey Sir?”

I use the term ‘justice capital’ to denote this fluid set of individualised strategies employed by the students to acquire further capitals and reposition themselves within the field. These strategies
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form the unrecognised social capital of the field and currently stand in contrast to the teacher’s pedagogy, the recognised social capital. The two separate forms of social capital (see Table 1), pedagogy and justice capital form two separate accumulation pathways.

Justice capital enables the flow of capital between the students and therefore is a form of social capital for students, potentially forming bonds with others that could be used to transfer other capitals. In the following example, students standing up against the (perceived injustice) of teachers is seen as justice capital.

Int: What can you tell me about your friends at school?
Victor: They're awesome, they always step up for me. And they always have my back when something happens.
Int: Like what sort of things happen?
Victor: Like if I get punched, and I say, "That kid did it," and the teachers don't believe me, my friends say, "No, that was true".

If the teacher fails to believe what a student says, this signals the lack of recognition that student possesses within the field. Drawing on the resources available through the friendship allows that student the opportunity to be recognised and believed. If this doesn’t happen, it is a signal the friendship lacks value within the field. The data gathered from the student’s interviews suggests this lack of recognition is often a catalyst for the manifestation of acts of resistance. Justice capital and the students’ desire for it to be recognised, contributes to the manifestation and perpetuation of acts of resistance.

Summary

Bourdieu states that the existence (and acceptance) of symbolic power requires a belief in its legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). Symbolic power exists only through a shared belief in its legitimacy and is both wielded and conferred by virtue of this shared belief. The data gathered within an AEP in Australia indicates that within this field there are two competing forms of capital and that across the students and teachers, there is a lack of shared belief in the legitimacy of these capitals. Furthermore, the continued enactment of resistance after entry into the AEP is evidence that the capitals valued in mainstream education field are the same capitals privileged within the field of alternate education and the disconnect the student experienced in mainstream schooling extends into the AEP.

An expression of their historical disempowerment, the student’s habitus orientates them towards resistance, while the form in which that resistance is manifested is co-constructed within their relationship with formal education. The relationship students have with formal education is conceptualised as a Bourdieuan field, overlapping with the fields of formal education, alternative
education and the students’ family. Within this overlapping field, the habitus seeks to accrue capital and therefore the capitals available within the field hold considerable significance. For these resistant students it is the field-value placed on their social capital that plays a significant role in their trajectory, potentially moving them towards transformative resistance or the continuation of self-defeating resistance. While the struggle to achieve recognition of justice capital signifies that students have the aspiration to involve themselves in accumulation of capital, the continued privileging of one capital over another blocks the potential flow of capital. Therefore it is the struggle for the recognition of capital, rather than the accumulation of capital, that consumes the field.

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