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The school as an arena  
of political contestation:  
education policy from a post-Marxist  
perspective

Marxism was and still seems to be a dominant theoretical perspective within critical education policy analysis. Author describes distinctive „images” of the school present in marxist theory and criticised for their economic determinism and class reductionism. Drawing on the works of Ernesto Laclau, author proposes alternative theoretical frameworks, which can be used in critical research of education policy production and implementation. From this perspective, school and education policy are interpreted as spaces of political contestation and struggle for hegemony.

**Keywords:** critical education policy analysis, hegemony, Marxism, public policy production and implementation, post-Marxism

## Introduction

The object of this paper is to confer the benefits of adopting a post-Marxist approach to the study of education policy, in contrast to more traditional Marxist approaches. The critical study of education has been dominated by the use of Marxism as a theoretical base, upon which theorists have constructed different images of the school. I use the term “image”, in contrast to “model”, the term used widely in social science as oversimplified pictures of reality to frame a problem. An image is not merely an oversimplified, abstract representation, but is drawn within the immanent nature of critical theoretical work, as I explain below.

I aim to show initially how such Marxist images of the school are locked into a problematic dualism in Marxist theory between the necessity of economic determinism and the political contingency of class struggle. I argue that the development of Marxist educational theory since the 1970s reveals the inescapable tendency for theorists to fall back on essentialism and determinism at the expense of analysis of the political-contingent nature of educational space. In response, I argue for moving the analysis of education into a post-Marxist terrain, where concepts in Marxism such as ideology, political struggle and hegemony are rearticulated in an anti-essentialist ontology. This involves recapturing the importance of relations of power and domination from within the context of political struggles over education that are visible as moments of articulation and disarticulation, or discourse. Therefore education is no longer perceived as an already existing structure of the state that is filled with ideology. The discursive formation of education marks the very constitution of educational structures through the process of hegemonic articulation - the attempts of political actors (political parties, interest groups, unions etc.) to determine the meaning and form of “education” through particular political discourses. The paper ends on some important implications for methodology, showing how a post-Marxist perspective can be utilised both in the analysis of education policy at different levels, namely in its production as a policy in government, and in its implementation within educational spaces.

## Marxism and Education

In the critical study of education, Marxism is genesis. Marxism has been an established critical perspective in the sociology of education since the 1960s. Before Marxism, educational theories focused mainly on con-

sensus, looking at how education objectively met the needs of society. Functionalism was the most prominent consensus theory and had a dominant influence on how academics, as well as politicians and policymakers, viewed the school. Marxist theory gave a starkly alternative view of education, one in which there was conflict and contradiction, where the school was the product, not of impartial functions and stratifications in society, but of power relations, whereby inequality and injustice was manufactured and legitimised. However, lacking any strong theorisation of education in the original texts of Marx, Marxist education theorists were forced into making value judgements as to the particularities of the linkages between the specific case of education into a broad social theory. As a result, rather than a single coherent image of the school being constructed directly out of Marx's texts, Marxism has provided a number of different images of the school.

Marxism is founded on a dynamic and immanent epistemology, dialectical materialism, which sees critique as a process of uncovering the underlying social relations that determine existing knowledge, as social relations may otherwise remain hidden by the prevailing ideological trends in mainstream social science. Therefore, when it comes to understanding social fields such as education, Marxism must engage with the reality of social processes underpinning education, processes which are regularly concealed by the objective front of the school. This involves the construction of a Marxist "image" of the school. Images not only account for the theoretical gazing at the school as a concept, but the way the theorist interacts with the nature of the school in reality. Put another way, an image is the way the theorist gives meaning to the institution of the school and the practices which go on in its sphere of influence. Not only does this provide critical explanation by revealing the nature of things, it also provides political insight into how relations of inequality and domination can be challenged and overthrown.

Since its arrival as a major sociological perspective on education, Marxism has been used to develop three distinct images of the school. The first prominent image was fronted by Bowles and Gintis (1976) in their 'correspondence principle'. According to Bowles and Gintis, there is 'correspondence' between the relations of production and the structure and content of education systems in Western capitalist states. The correspondence principle follows the base/superstructure model of determination. It constructs an image of the school as a site of *economic reproduction*, that is, the role of education is subordinate to the needs of the economy and the school therefore acts as an institution for the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist relations of production. This

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reproduction is carried out mainly through the “hidden curriculum”, the general rules and practices of schooling that foster obedient and individualistic subjects to go on to become subservient workers.

There are a significant number of problems with the image of the school as a site of economic reproduction. It has been rightfully argued that Bowles and Gintis (1976) hold a structural-functionalist view of society (Sarup 1978). The school, along with all other institutions of the superstructure, including the political state, provide the functions necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist relations of production. In other words, education is solely functional to the needs of capital.

The primacy of structural determinism in the functionalist model of economic reproduction leads directly to the mechanistic, opaque and pessimistic nature of the image of the school as a site of economic reproduction. These problems all relate to a lack of space for human agency leaving a deterministic, over-socialised conception of agents (Sarup 1978: 176). Consequently, agents are not given any autonomy to hold a subjectivity constituted outside of the economic domain, nor do agents hold the capacity to adopt positions of resistance to their overall subordination to capitalist relations of production. The limitations of structural determinism are also clear in the ability to analyse education policy, for agents of government will also have no autonomy, meaning that politicians only change policy in order to maintain capitalism. Other motivations for policy change, such as ideology, practicality, personal drive, or simply popularity are overlooked from this perspective. The build-up of criticism aimed toward Bowles and Gintis (1976) and the ‘correspondence principle’ spurred some of the Marxist camp into revising the Marxist image of the school, based on an obvious deficiency in the image of the school as a site of economic reproduction, but also in the limitations it set on the possibility of radical political change. They believed that the drawbacks were caused by an osmosis of structural-functionalist ideas into a Marxist ontology, resulting in an unnecessary and injurious commitment to an incorrigible causal relationship between the economic relations of production and the education system. Consequently, the move by leading Marxist educational theorists was not to abandon Marxism, but to instead become more deeply sensitised to existing Marxist literature, especially the works of Gramsci and Althusser, both of which were popular at the time. The result was a rearticulation of the Marxist image of the school as an *ideological state apparatus*.

Following Althusser (1971) and Poulantzas (1969) theorists began to equate the education system with the “capitalist state”. This approach

tried to supplement the logic of economic necessity with the emerging theories of 'relative autonomy', viewing the state as a partially independent political sphere that acts as a proxy for ruling class interests. As well as holding a traditional repressive role to maintain order, the capitalist state utilises its ideological apparatus to legitimise capitalist relations. The school becomes a critical institution in this process of ideological control, acting as the main source by which the State can control knowledge. Apple (1979) reveals how the State's powerful investment in education can disrupt the dissemination of knowledge in society, not only by projecting a particular ideological position, but also by excluding particular demands, interests and knowledge-forms, preventing them from crystallising as sources of contradiction and dissent.

A further concept of some importance in this power/knowledge relationship is Gramsci's (1971) concept of 'hegemony'. For Apple (1979), hegemony is the saturation of the social with a particular ideological knowledge form, the knowledge form of the ruling class, which sets stringent limits on knowledge production in order to restrain forms of cultural and political response that could undermine their powerful position in society.

The image of the school as an ideological state apparatus is clearly developed to respond to the criticism of the economic reproduction image. There is a clear attempt, for instance, to engage with the political and ideological levels more closely, rather than relying upon a economic reductionist account. What is clear in the work of theorists like Apple (1979) and Giroux (1981) is that while functioning ultimately as an apparatus of control, this control is contingent to a greater or lesser extent upon the consent of the actors engaged in education and how other political actors mediate the politics of the state. The image therefore allows for a degree of uncertainty in the way the class struggle affects the maintenance of hegemony, playing up the role of resistance and contestation. The problem, however, with this approach is that it gets itself stuck in a reproduction-resistance dialectic that pulls the theory in two opposing directions. On the one hand there is a clear insistence on the school's reproductive capacity, although there is continual analytical indecision over what is actually being reproduced – ruling class interests, ideological hegemony, capitalist 'conditions of existence', or perhaps all of the above. On the other hand, there is an intentional move to identify and remark upon certain contradictions, mediations and forms of resistance that relate to the dynamic of class struggle. What is more, the theorists in question, when faced with the pluralism and openness of political resistance, tend to fall back in favour of economic

reproduction. The very concept of relative autonomy is employed with the proviso that the economy is the ultimate determining force ‘in the last instance’, to take Engels’ phrase.

The problem here corresponds directly with what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have called the contradictory logics of ‘necessity’ and ‘contingency’ in Marxism. The image of the school as an ideological state apparatus is a perfect example of the way these logics interact. Whilst it is clear that Marxism is interested with the ‘contingency’ of the class struggle, including moments of resistance and contestation within and around institutions such as the school, this dimension is always subordinate to the ‘necessity’ of determining elements in the economy. In fact, there are countless examples where economic necessity is presented as if it were a compulsive habit, almost as though something bad were to happen if it were not mentioned<sup>1</sup>. That “something bad” to the Marxist is most likely the belief that their theory is disintegrating into relativism, or a form of liberal pluralism. Apple, Giroux are held back by this dualism, unable to fully appreciate the nature of the political and of the resistance and contradiction at work within the school.

A third option for Marxist educational theory emerged in the 1970s in the wake of the ‘cultural turn’ in sociology<sup>2</sup>. Despite its theoretical heterogeneity, with influences ranging from Marxism and critical theory to linguistics and symbolic interactionism, what linked the work of cultural theorists was a shared interest in the effects of socialisation into particular social classes, with a strong focus on the relationship between class culture and educational attainment. This shared interest led to a further similarity in that the research was concerned with the agency level and researchers tended to employ ethnographic methods to analyse the behaviour of individuals and sub-cultural groups at this level. A specifically Marxist cultural theory was developed most notably by Willis (1977) in his study of working class pupils at a Birmingham secondary school. The central thesis involves the subcultural identity of working class ‘lads’ and their resistance to the official ideology of the school by adopting a ‘counter-school culture’. Willis observed that working-class ‘lads’ were able to penetrate certain ideological myths used to justify

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1 One of the more clear examples of this is in Apple (1979, 1982). Apple often tells the reader that the political and cultural levels are ‘not reducible’ to the economic, but almost always will supplant this with the idea that they are still ‘strongly related’ to production relations and the problems of ‘legitimation and accumulation’ (1982: 29). Other good examples are Liston (1988) and Dale (1989).

2 See, for instance, the works of Becker (1971), Bernstein (1973), and Bourdieu (1971, 1974).

capitalism, such as the myth that society is meritocratic. However, these 'penetrations' were limited by certain cultural divisions within the working-class, particularly racial and sexual forms of discrimination. Consequently, the class conflict within schools has the 'unintentional' effect of reproducing the labour force necessary for capitalism, because the 'lads' were not able to use their cultural position to build a unifying political stance against capitalism.

Willis' image of the school is one of an *arena of class conflict*; it is centred on a conflict between classes within the school itself, spreading over the cultural and political levels. Perhaps the integral point to relay about this image is its movement away from the necessity of economic reproduction to what Willis has called the 'unintentional' reproduction of capitalism by the 'self-damnation' of the working class. Class struggle is seemingly detached from any underlying clause of economic determination in the last instance. The class struggle is instead reproduced at the cultural level, where it acts as a buffer between structural effects and political demands. This is a considerable development in the study of the political, which opens up the possibility for exploring cultural effects at the agency level. What is problematic about this move, however, is its continual reliance on Marxist concepts which are not flexible enough to fully capture the effects of political struggle and resistance. These Marxist concepts are left unaltered from previous theories of reproduction and therefore pull the analysis back into an essentialist terrain, leaving the relationship between social reproduction, culture and political struggle theoretically underdetermined. This underdetermination stems from the underdevelopment of concepts that reveal the indeterminacy and contingency of social reproduction. Willis, for instance, developed the idea of 'circles of contradiction and unintention' – which I take to be forms of logic or feedback loop which question the necessity of economic and class reproduction - without fully enlightening the reader as to what they are, how they come about and perhaps most importantly how they develop and change. Refusing to expand on this dimension to his theory means that Willis, like his supporters, fell back on typical Marxist regularities in the utilisation of the concept of class and class struggle. It is through this return to a unified theory of class that "resistance" by members of the working class is viewed self-evidently as a sign of political consciousness and a catalyst for wider political struggle.

The Marxist approach appears to overlook the possibility that acts of resistance are not systemic to class relations and are formed perhaps by antagonisms outside of the realm of class. What is also overlooked,





position cannot be considered a supplement to the tradition, or indeed reducible to some hybrid strain of postmodern Marxism. My position is *post-Marxist*, the emphasis being placed on “post”, rather than the “Marxist”. It is best characterised by the idea of complete disintegration of the original theory into a set of loose concepts that are no longer held together by any ontological commitment to laws of necessity. The rearticulation of concepts like ideology, power and hegemony is essential to the post-Marxist perspective. Over the course of this section I will also introduce two additional concepts from further afield: the concept of *discourse*, taken from the poststructuralist tradition; and the concept of *fantasy*, borrowed from the psychoanalytic tradition. But I shall begin with the rearticulation of the concept of hegemony.

Hegemony is a central part of Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001 [1985]) development of a post-Marxist theory of discourse. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* they reject the view of hegemony as a practice performed exclusively by fundamental social classes, arguing that the concept holds a political logic which points in a radically different direction to the essentialist Marxism. Building on an ontology which assumes the radical contingency of *all* identities and the subsequent openness of these identities to change, Laclau and Mouffe argue that hegemony relates to the attempts of political projects to partially fix and close meaning in a discursive space that is always contingent and open to contestation. This is done through the practice of *articulation* whereby contingent discursive elements are partially fixed and stabilised around a nodal point. Drawing on the work of poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida, the term *discourse* is used by Laclau and Mouffe to identify this partial fixing of a system of relational significations through which objects and practices are constituted. As Foucault (1974: 49) has suggested, discourses ‘do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention.’ Thus the level of discourse is the decidable level, where meaning can be partially and temporarily stabilised by concealment of its discursive construction. In close relation to this, hegemony is the articulation of such a discourse with the intent of dominating the discursive field in order to achieve intellectual, moral and political leadership. But simultaneously, hegemony is the political practice of concealing the radical contingency of the social through the articulation of discourse (Torfing 1999: 102-3).

This reworking of hegemony as an articulatory practice holds considerable potential for critical explanation. The post-Marxist can evaluate the claims of education policy discourse by testing both the inner-consistency of that discourse for contradictory claims and by examining

the impact of this discourse on subjectivity and practice within education through a normative critique based on issues of power, domination and exploitation. Take New Labour's education policy, for example.<sup>3</sup> New Labour is often described solely in terms of their relation to Thatcherism<sup>4</sup>, and their project is seen purely as a continuation of neoliberalism<sup>5</sup>. However, their education policy showed that their project was a contradictory and unstable combination of neoliberal ideas, rearticulated around the goal of 'modernisation', and a dimension of strong communitarianism that attempted to build democratic citizenship and social cohesion. Thus while their education policy continued to favour market forces, privatisation and forms of new public management in the running of schools, New Labour also focused on teaching citizenship and democratic values as well as tackling child poverty and social exclusion.

The ability to examine the effect of discourse on subjectivity and identity is something that stands out as a merit of post-Marxism against the vulgar agency-level analysis capable in Marxism. But post-Marxism can equally hold sway on issues of material effects, for instance in explaining how the articulation of a neoliberal market discourse in education can have the performative effect (through parents as consumers and schools as producers etc.) of creating massive disparities in educational quality between schools in working class neighbourhoods and those in middle class neighbourhoods (see Ball 2006, 2010).

There is also a further dimension of post-Marxist analysis, which concerns the concept of 'fantasy'. Fantasy concerns how discourses can 'grip' subjects, allowing actors to believe in the signifying structure of a discourse without acknowledging its contingency (Žižek 1999: 48-9). Fantasies often involve the creation of an 'Other', an external opposition which is blamed for the incompleteness of the identity in question (Laclau&Mouffe, 2001: 125).

An example of an ideological fantasy in education is that of parental empowerment. The fantasy of parental empowerment relates to how the introduction of parental choice – the ability to make a preference of what school to send your child to - by the Conservatives in 1988 was accompanied by an ideological discourse of empowerment, aimed at

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3 The term 'New Labour' refers to the UK Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair and his successor, Gordon Brown. New Labour was in power between 1997 and 2010.

4 Thatcherism refers to the political project of the UK Conservative Party, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and, to a lesser extent, John Major.

5 See for instance the work of Stuart Hall (1998) or recent writings by Dave Hill (2004).

encouraging parents to take up a consumerist subject position and, consequently, exert consumer power over schools and teachers. The fantasy of empowerment provided the ideological 'grip' to subjectify parents into a neoliberal discourse and in doing so identified schools, teachers and local government officials as the 'Other' that was attempting to block their right to provide their child with the best possible education. Fantasies of empowerment and disempowerment are essential to neoliberal discourses, particularly those within and behind education policy, including the policies of New Labour, but in particular the current coalition government in the UK (see Wright&Leśniak 2011, Wright 2012).

### Post-Marxism and Education: the school as a site of political contestation

In developing a new post-Marxist perspective of the school, I have begun with Laclau and Mouffe's model of hegemony as a political articulation. The concept of hegemony as an articulatory practice provides a useful foundation for building a conceptual framework capable of identifying and critically analysing the objects and practices which appear within the educational sphere, whilst helping to flesh out the political and ideological phenomena that can account for their emergence. This particular post-Marxist model of hegemony will function as the ontological framework of a new image of the school; an image which, I believe, trumps those developed by Marxist scholars in its ability to problematize and critically examine the complex political setting within which educational practices are constituted.

When reflecting the post-Marxist reworking of hegemony back on the study of education, the image which is created penetrates through the institutional structure of the school right down to the discursive space upon which every educational idea, institution and practice is constituted. From this perspective, education is not driven by laws of necessity or by its own endogenous logic; education is constituted, like all social spheres, in the hegemonic struggles of various political actors aiming to consolidate power through the stabilisation of their political discourse. The post-Marxist image of the school is therefore distinct from Marxist images not in its decisive content but in the lack of it. Marxist images of the school were conceived as abstract generalisations or 'ideal types', in reference to a structural institution: "the school". The Marxist image of the school as a site of economic reproduction, for

instance, was referring to an institutional structure that reproduced and legitimised capitalist relations, as were the various Althusserian and Gramscian images. The image of the school as an arena of class conflict shifted the focus onto cultural norms and practices, but it still referred to the school as an institution, it being the facilitator of the conflicts between class-cultures due to its position within existing social structures and hierarchies.

In terms of a post-Marxist image of the school, I am using the term “school” loosely here, not in reference to any institution or concrete entity, but as a convenient shorthand for the ontical field the social researcher is to consider for educational research. It is clear that from a post-Marxist perspective, any image created cannot relate to a concrete institution, for such an institution would itself be a radically contingent product of political struggle and articulation. By engaging with the ontology of radical contingency, no assumptions can be made as to the meaningful practices which make up our view of education, for the meanings of those practices and their discursive relationships between one another can never be fully unified and will always remain open to change.

Thus, although it may be true to say that the school can be (and often is) overdetermined by economic or class practices, one must not forget that these processes occupy no essential position in the meaningful structure of education, nor can any other practice for that matter. The fact that certain practices appear *as if* they are essential is down to the ability of hegemonic articulations to partially fix the meaning of discursive spaces such as education in order for political agents to control the flow of ideas and practices that the public interact with. It is in this sense that one should continue, as Marxists have done, to view hegemony in relation to power and control. Hegemony concerns the general process by which political agents construct relations of subordination and gain legitimacy for their own privileged position. The difference in the post-Marxist interpretation is that this construction of relations takes place in the general field of political contestation and is not reducible to a determining class contradiction between the capitalist and the worker. Moreover, the economic cannot play a privileged role in determining political struggles, because the economy itself is the result of political struggle. Glyn Daly explains this point clearly when he writes:

[T]he economy, like all other spheres, is the terrain of a political struggle, and is governed not by a single logic but by a proliferation of discourses/language

games. In other words, it cannot exist prior to, or outside of, its articulation with a set of other social/political discourses in concrete historical conjunctures (Daly 1991: 100).

Like Laclau and Mouffe, Daly views the economy as a site of political contestation that is given shape only from the hegemonic articulations of political agents; it is therefore no different to education in this respect. Of course the political construction of economic discourse is a wholly complex affair, and so too is its relationship with education and other spheres. The important point to grasp here is that the relationship between education and economy can no longer be seen in terms of necessity. Instead, one may view it as a complex and radically contingent process of overdetermination, whereby ideas and practices in both spheres can have a multiplicity of effects on one another at any given moment, but they are in no way permanent or essential to the constitution of either sphere.

To view the shape and contours of education in terms of the process of hegemonic articulation directs educational research towards an analysis of the political struggles that emerge within this space. Education is seen as a key space in the struggle for hegemony, because it is widely perceived to be a primary conduit through which discourses are disseminated directly to the (young) population. The struggle between various political actors is not merely over the meaning of education, but also for the control of educational practices, which are seen as important mechanisms of socialisation. Political actors are keen on controlling the discourses which permeate the school environment as a means of building consent for their own political project and furthering their own political interests.

It is not surprising, then, that education has been utilised as a mode of political and ideological control by various agents, but in particular by government. Whether it be the institution of a racist, militaristic curriculum to further the ideology of national socialism in Nazi Germany, or the spread of liberal democratic values in the comprehensive and progressive education of Britain during the Keynesian social-democratic consensus of the 1960s and 1970s, governments have been motivated by the belief that through control of the education policy agenda, they can seek changes in the values and subjectivity of the population, which can in turn stabilise and legitimise the ideas and goals of a wider hegemonic political project. This aim, fuelled by the wisdom of much of the academic work in the sociology of education, has crystallised in the minds of policymakers of democratic and authoritarian regimes

alike, who, often with good intentions, have attempted to use education as a stepping-stone in creating a new political order.

In the majority of cases, the state is going to be the hegemonic actor in most educational spaces. There is no essentialist reasoning behind this presumption. The very fact that there exists in most countries with developed state educational structures a plethora of non-state actors, all active in political struggles against the education policy discourse of governments, points to the possibility of alternative hegemonic arrangements. Indeed, it is not impossible (and perhaps even appealing) to conceive of a state-funded education where policy discourses are articulated locally, through direct democratic mechanisms. Historically the state in Britain, although being a political actor involved in education, was up until the last hundred and fifty years or so overshadowed by the hegemonic role of the Church. But the modern state continues, for now at least, to be the main hegemonic actor in education, for it controls the vast majority of education policy, and it is through its legitimate position in the policymaking process that the state can have a privileged influence over the discourses which pervade educational spaces.

However, the scope of the state's policy discourses, and its subsequent ability to hegemonise educational space, will depend on the complexity and dynamism of the political contestation between the state and other political actors, such as pressure groups, teaching unions, parental organisations, religious denominations, local communities and private business, all of which may at one point or another come into conflict with the State over education policy. The ability for these other groups to achieve a counter-hegemonic project will be made more difficult by the legitimacy of the state's authority as chief policymaker. Aforementioned external actors hold contrasting discourses on education, but do not have the legal legislative authority over the sphere and may find it difficult to make an impact. But this isn't to say that they do not have an impact. These actors play a major part in the micropolitics of the school, which affects the dissemination of policy discourses by government. Micropolitics can be seen as an analytical tool for understanding the intricacies of policy implementation as it meets with localised forms of political struggle. In this way, the concept serves as a link between a broader analysis of a fully-structured policy discourse articulated by the state, which enters the educational sphere and the more complex and particular analysis of the way the discourse is picked up and disseminated.<sup>6</sup> The point I am mak-

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6 I borrow the term 'micropolitics' from the work of Ball (1987), although conceptually my understanding of the term shares much with the discussion of

ing here is that having legitimacy and authority over a process may increase the chance of using one's articulatory power, but it can never foreclose the possibility of other actors employing their own articulatory power, whether it be in a localised capacity, or in a more widespread political struggle.<sup>7</sup>

I have shown how hegemony is closely related to the space of education, not only in the politics of struggle over the meaning of educational practices, but in the grander schemes of actors who aim to construct a wider hegemonic order over society by utilising educational practices for the dissemination of discourses reflecting their own beliefs and agendas. If one were to suggest a name for the image of the school being constructed here, the school as a *space for political contestation* would appear to capture the central argument made above, as would the school as a *space for hegemonic struggle*. From the explanation I have given of the concept of hegemony, it is evident that the idea of political contestation is not independent of hegemonic struggle; hegemonic struggle is merely an exemplary form of political contestation. This would mean that while an image of *hegemonic struggle* would refer to an exemplary form of contestation and articulation occurring within educational space, one integral to the maintenance (and challenge) of social formations, the term *political contestation* would seemingly refer to the general political struggle over meaning which may or may not involve

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the micropolitical in Deleuze and discussion of micro-fascism in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004). For Ball, the micropolitical is very much interrelated with the wider political context of policy discourses. In certain cases, he has suggested that '[t]he micropolitics of the [school] represents and replays a larger-scale scenario of educational politics' (Ball 1994: 96). What Deleuze and Guattari (2004) show is how large hegemonic projects are wrongly attributed to the molar level of analysis when they are often made up of molecular political elements resonating together. These ideas are influential when thinking about the complex and often-contradictory way policy is implemented in schools.

7 By way of an example, consider the publication of the 'Black Papers' on education in the 1960s and 1970s. These papers were written by academics and well-known persons in education, and posed a major challenge to the social-democratic model of education followed by the Labour government. This challenge had a major impact on policy during the 1970s and into the Thatcher government of the 1980s. It was an alternative discourse that had effects on policy without being part of the legitimate policy process. This example is interesting because it affected change at a national level, but one would expect the vast majority of external challenges to policy occur in localised contexts by actors with particular forms of popularity and legitimacy within their own communities, such as parents groups, religious organisations, charities, businesses, sports teams, as well as local authorities with their own political cultures.

hegemonic articulation. Viewing the school as a space for political contestation allows us to take into account the fact that it is a space of hegemonic struggle, without losing the importance of the “micropolitical” which occurs in the form of localised and institutionalised political logics which may or may not link up with hegemonic struggles. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to analyse how various political logics can have a complex and often contradictory effect on hegemonic practices.

### Policy Production and Policy Implementation

Accounting for the political contestation in the post-Marxist image of the school requires a distinction to be made between two levels in the process by which education policy discourses are articulated. On the one hand, there is the initial level of *policy production*, where policy discourse is being articulated in its purest possible form by the political actor or actors responsible for policymaking. On the other hand is the level of *policy implementation*, which I associate with the more convoluted process that sees policy discourse filter down through various levels of bureaucracy, eventually to be interpreted and acted out by agents within the educational sphere. In practice, these two levels are not always easily distinguishable as they are interconnected in various ways through various feedback loops and spill-over from political struggles (for instance, the civil service often has an influence on the political decision-making, as it did in the 1944 Education Act and often takes the lead in the articulation of policy as text, whilst also having a say in how the policy is disseminated and implemented).<sup>8</sup> However, the conceptual distinction between the two levels of articulation helps to reveal important changes to policy discourse, from the time it appears as text and speech in the government policy agenda, to when it finally reaches staff and students in the school, after a long percolation through government departments, quangos<sup>9</sup>, local government and the like. It is worth, there-

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8 An inverse example would be the influence that educational practitioners may have in the production of policy through consultation and research. Their input into policy production could change the way they think about and practice teaching.

9 The term ‘quango’ is an abbreviation of quasi-autonomous, non-governmental organisation, or what is officially called a ‘non-departmental public body’. It is now used widely in the UK to describe organisations with devolved government responsibilities.



fore, taking some time to examine in detail what these levels mean for educational research.

### Level of Policy Production

Let me begin by examining the level of policy production, for this entails the initial stage in any articulation of policy discourse. When governments construct policy agendas, they engage in the practice of articulation. Whether or not politicians and policymakers are consciously aware of it (most likely they are in some degree), by selecting policies they are in turn producing policy discourse within and behind those policies. Due to the fact that discourse cannot be analysed prior to its articulation, discourse analysis is a process which begins at the visible level of policy in text and speech. It requires a deconstructive approach, one which uncovers the articulatory patterns which give meaning and substance to the policy agenda, that is, the way discursive elements are chained together in relation to each other to inform the policy agenda and construct a policy discourse. It isn't enough to simply list all the moments that occur within a policy discourse. The researcher must understand how all of these moments fit together, otherwise one learns very little about the structure and dimensions of the discourse.

The level of production requires the researcher to account for both the political emergence and their subsequent progression of discourses. All articulation occurs within a particular historical context with specific political and social phenomena embedded within it. It is therefore not sufficient to simply break discourses down into their linguistic components, for this presumes we can understand the reasoning behind such articulation independent of the context of the political struggles, demands and relations from which it originated. What is needed, then, is a contextualisation of discourse to accompany any deconstructive reading. This can be achieved through a genealogical analysis. In describing the genealogical approach to studying education discourse, Olssen, Codd and O'Neill (2004: 47) state that '[g]enealogical analysis aims to explain the existence and transformation of elements of theoretical knowledge (*savoir*) by situating them within power structures and by tracing their descent and emergence in the context of history'. This can take a number of forms, but generally will involve some form of contextual mapping of discourse, which aims to provide a historical narrative to account for changes in articulatory patterns. Stephen Ball provides an example of how this can be achieved. Ball (2008) uses a form of policy

modelling where he maps out genealogies of specific education policies such as parental choice, or New Labour's partnership agenda, to see how the policies evolve discursively as a result of wider contextual changes.

The result of genealogical policy mapping like that found in Ball (2008) is that the researcher is able to see the continuity and change in discourses both between and *within* different governments. For instance, when New Labour entered office in 1997, they produced an education policy discourse that reflected both a commitment to extending politics of social inclusion and the strong community, and a continuation and expansion of a neoliberal market agenda of previous governments. The discursive makeup of this policy discourse, in addition to being partly rooted in previously sedimented ideas, also had an evolutionary dimension whereby New Labour reacted to the interplay of various political forces and developed and changed significant parts of the policy agenda by the time they left government. It is this latter phenomenon that is referred to by the continuity and change *within* governments and it is the result of changing political and social contexts both internal and external to government. The impact of opposition parties, interest groups, lobbyists, party donors, the media, public opinion, not to mention the political contestation within the government itself, will all over-determine the production of policy and policy discourse, as will various other discourses of institutional constraint that function within the democratic process, including the logics of accountability, bureaucracy and Parliamentary convention. The critical analysis of policy production, then, involves a considerably contextualised process; contexts must be taken into account and understood when mapping out policy discourses.

### Level of Policy Implementation

Implementation refers here to the mechanics through which policy discourse is disseminated and practiced in the educational sphere. At this level, the researcher is critically engaged with the way agents interact with policy discourses that enter the educational sphere. Typically this involves the educational workforce and the way they 'act out' policy discourse in the practices they are involved in. But this process of implementation also includes levels of bureaucracy above the realm of the direct provision of education. Government policy must work its way through state bureaucracy, quangos and local education authorities before it reaches the direct providers of education, and in each case, policy discourses flow through agents that have the capacity to interpret

the policy of government and rearticulate it in various ways, finally sending it out to other levels of bureaucratic and educational spheres.

A significant amount of education policy research has had a tendency to analyse the effects of policy discourse solely through the examination of the level policy production, without taking into account the effects further down the line, as policy *as text* becomes policy *in practice*. One of the major flaws of this approach is to misread the impact of policy discourse on the ground by focusing attention on the policy discourse in its most pure form, before it has percolated through a vast number of different agents, all with the potential to distort and reshape the nature of the government's original articulatory practices. The implementation level, instead, focuses on operationalization of the ideas and practices of policy discourse. This is by no means a simple process. The researcher can no longer sit at a desk and read documents; they must now conduct research in the field to get a feel for how policy is interpreted and implemented by actors, whether they are local government officials, school administrators, governors, teachers, inspectors, businesses or other agents involved in policy implementation.

It is impossible to consider the implementation of policy discourse without engaging with the fact that all employees in the education sector, but most notably teachers, have a considerable degree of autonomy over the way in which policy becomes implemented. The micro-political nature of contestation within the educational sphere means that policy discourse comes into contact with assorted political discourses present at different levels in the chain of implementation. Rather than being a simple case of policy as text turning uncritically into practice, the very nature of discourse maintains that every actor engaged in implementation has the potential to employ the discursive power available within each space to resist, challenge and deform the original policy discourse.

The level of implementation is awash with contestation, misunderstanding, meandering, cynicism and all other kinds of logics that make the dissemination of policy discourse complex and incomplete. One might wonder how the state is able to gain any hegemonic grip on education at all. However, it's worth noting that government does still have some advantage because of its legitimate control of the policymaking process. Policy discourse becomes ingrained into the conduct of educational work practice, and to a great extent determines how people may act in an education setting. This may or may not be the intention of the teaching profession or local officials. The implementation of policy by the educational workforce is not necessarily carried out by indoctrinated

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supporters of government policy discourse – it is easy to see that is not the case. It is not therefore a question of, to quote Marx (cit. in Žižek 1989: 28), ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’. But policy is still implemented, and with it the discourse within and behind it is disseminated. One may therefore consider the situation more attune to Sloterdijk’s (cit. in Žižek 1989: 29) cynical reworking of Marx’s phrase: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’. What keeps them ‘doing it’, however, is likely to be a combination of various logics at work within and behind discourses. In particular, this often will involve ‘restorative political logics’, which, as Glynos *et al* (2012) have noted, help to prevent the contestation of norms and practices.

It is clear then, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the education workforce has a crucial role in implementing the policy discourse of government. But the process by which hegemony is achieved is clearly more convoluted than most studies make out. Hegemony is rolled-out micropolitically; the practices and effects occurring differently in different contexts. But so, too, are the resistance and counter-hegemonic tendencies within education. Implementation occurs in vastly different ways as it meets with localised discourse and politics. Consider the implementation of policy in different school settings. One would expect the teachers of a high-achieving school to interpret and implement policy discourse in a different way to the teachers struggling in a failing school, or the teachers in the faith school to those in the local comprehensive. In fact the more complex the education system becomes, the more variables there are to localise and fragment discourse and political struggle in the educational sphere.

## Conclusion

The aim of the paper has been to lay the groundwork for a new post-Marxist perspective on education. I have by no means exhausted the task, but what is given is a starting point towards a more robust understanding of what post-Marxism can offer to educational theorists and researchers in the field. There are a number of reasons why a post-Marxist approach is favourable to educational analysis. What perhaps stands out most in a post-Marxist approach is the ease of which it can supply multi-level research in order to track discourse from its articulatory moment through its dispersal into the social, right down to its interpellation and the individual effects on subjectivity and identity. Marxism struggles with such a multi-level approach because it holds on to a strict distinc-

tion between structure and agency, favouring the former. If one is looking, therefore, for a perspective that fosters critical explanation, post-Marxism has significant advantages over Marxism. Marxism continues to prevail in educational theory because of a lack of theoretical groundwork by educational theorists in building a new image of the school that best characterises the problems education faces in a political environment dominated by neoliberal discourse. All modes of critical explanation must stand against the sharp distinction between fact and value and the objective status of knowledge held by positivist social science. There is no denying the range of critical explanatory perspectives on offer, including Marxism in all of its variations. What I believe post-Marxism holds above other perspectives, however, is a key insight into the political and antagonistic nature of educational spaces. Not only does post-Marxism hold the potential to explain how the social meaning of education is constituted, but it helps to open up methods by which the researcher can critically engage with this process in active educational research.

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**Abstrakt:** Marksizm był i wciąż zdaje się być dominującą perspektywą teoretyczną w obrębie krytycznej analizy polityki edukacyjnej. Autor opisuje zróżnicowaną „obrazę” szkoły obecne w teorii marksistowskiej, a krytykowane za determinizm ekonomiczny i redukcjonizm klasowy. Odwołując się do prac Ernesto Laclaua, prezentuje alternatywne dla marksizmu ramy teoretyczne, które można wykorzystać w krytycznych badaniach produkcji i implementacji polityki edukacyjnej. Z tej perspektywy, szkoła oraz polityka edukacyjna postrzegane są jako przestrzenie politycznej kontestacji i walki o hegemonię.

**Słowa kluczowe:** krytyczna analiza polityki edukacyjnej, hegemonia, marksizm, produkcja i implementacja polityk publicznych, post-marksizm