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# The positions of primary and secondary schools in the English school field: A case of durable inequality.

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## **The positions of primary and secondary schools in the English school field: A case of durable inequality.**

### **Abstract**

In interviews as part of a research study of structural reform in England some tension between primary headteachers and their secondary peers was evident. This was symptomatic of a long standing difference in status between the two phases. At a time when relations between stakeholders in local systems are subject to change, we seek to understand anew why that might be the case and how the tension we found was evidence of a current difference of power within interactions between representatives of the phases. We analyse differences of size, resources, workforce, pedagogy and history and how they have resulted in different, and differently valued, practices and professional identities. We explore how attributes of the two phases have been counterposed and how, in complex interaction with wider discourses of politics, gender and age, this process has invested the differences with meanings and values that tend to relegate attributes associated with primary school. By focusing on the activation of cumulative inequality in interactions we contribute a complementary perspective to studies of perceived relative status and highlight the implications for understanding school positioning in local arenas as the role of local authorities is reduced.

### **Introduction**

The policy landscape in England is changing. The Conservative led Coalition Government came to power in 2010 and it has energetically pursued a programme to create a school system of 'independent publicly-funded schools' (DfE 2010; Woods and Simkins 2014). The intention is for the majority of schools to be academies which operate under direct funding agreements with central government freeing them from local authority (LA) control. The attempt to create a 'self-improving school system' (Hargreaves 2010, 2011) is leading to new forms of collaborative partnerships such as chains, federations and teaching school alliances (Sandals & Bryant 2014).

As part of a project about the impact at local level of these processes we interviewed headteachers who, in various ways, occupied top positions in their local hierarchy. These were leaders of both primary and secondary schools, or federations of schools. They were personally and professionally respected and were taking leading roles locally and nationally. Their schools performed well, were graded Good or Outstanding following inspection by the

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and were popular with parents. While all of them acknowledged to us that their prestige depended on maintaining their school's performance and that this was potentially precarious, they exhibited the confidence of proven and experienced leaders.

But, we also found evidence of some discomfort<sup>i</sup> on the part of the primary headteachers we interviewed in relation to their secondary colleagues, a sense that, as a primary headteacher, there was a danger of being positioned subordinate to their secondary peers with implications for their accrual of symbolic and material rewards. We found coincidentally, that high prestige secondary headteachers were gaining positions of considerable influence in the three LAs in our study more often than their high prestige primary peers (Coldron et al 2014).

A passage from one interview with a primary school headteacher illustrates aspects of the relationship that we intend to explore. At the end of the interview, during which she had been articulate and confident talking about current policy and its implications for her and her school, she spoke explicitly about the relationship with neighbouring secondary schools as they collaborated in the planning for a new Teaching School Alliance<sup>ii</sup> and her words exhibited a quite different tone.

I So is there anything else you wanted to add about, generally about what's going on, or have I given you an opportunity to talk through the main parts?

R I just think that in the (pause) the way it's been thrown out, the teaching school thing, (pause) *it could have been quite detrimental to relationships. And I think we've, we've, you know, we've probably*

I Between schools?

R *Yeah, 'cos I think that, you know, that, that there's, there's (pause) elitism and it's not the old beacon school thing, this is about collaborative working. And, you know, a little bit of uncertainty means a little bit of land grab, and it - actually full proper head teachers who have (pause) been teachers who have grown into the role, that's, that's unfamiliar territory, because we're not that type of people. And er and I think that the businessy type people (pause) have, have probably taken more of a leap (pause) first, because they, they are more confident perhaps, and more used to that (pause) erm (pause) that world. And (pause) I just feel now I'm feeling more confident to be able to get out there, because we have got a good story to tell and we've got a lot going on. But there is still - and probably (pause) secondary, primary, you know, I just feel that primaries (pause) - I'm finding it hard (pause).*

*Secondary school mentality is a little bit different. And (pause) the primaries within (pause).*

The two primaries that I'm closest to I don't feel that, but I just think that primaries should have a voice, and should work very closely with secondaries and it's not always an open door, and it's always (pause) the big boy, and, and there's no baggage there. I just feel that, you know, we're equal players around a table. (Primary headteacher C8)

We are interested in this paper in trying to understand how and why this and other primary headteachers might experience the relationship in this way. What are, for example, the implications of the significant differences between primary and secondary schools in England such that they may be described as different worlds, staffed by different types of people, with different mentalities or ways of thinking? And how might these differences come to constitute unequal relations?

While differences are noted in the considerable but largely separate literatures on the culture of secondary and primary schools relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship itself. There has been considerable research concerned with the low status of the teaching profession as a whole (Bell, 1989; Cunningham, 1992; Judge, 1995) and within this work it has been noted that primary school teachers are perceived as having lower status than their secondary peers (Hoyle 2001; Hutchings, M. 2002; Everton 2007). We however are approaching the issue from a different angle. Our focus is not on perceived status but on what resources are available to representatives of the different phases when they negotiate for material and symbolic rewards - what cards do each have to play with?

In an earlier provisional analysis (Coldron et al 2014) we drew on Bourdieu's relational concepts of symbolic and material capital (Bourdieu 1976 and 1990). Similarly van Zanten and Maroy (van Zanten 2009; Maroy and van Zanten 2009) offer a useful relational analysis of the different capitals possessed by schools in local competitive arenas. We seek here to extend and deepen that mode of analysis by identifying a wider range of relevant capitals and ways in which they may be accrued.

But, a description of possessed capitals, and the relative positions in a social field that such possession constitutes, is too static an analysis. It does not do justice to the way, illustrated in the words of the headteacher quoted above, in which positioning is experienced as intractably factual and at the same time amenable to being otherwise, or actively sought and achieved. In a figured world (Holland et al 1998) people and institutions are invested with capital and

brought into relation with others, through the categories, identities and meanings made available in and by that world. Individuals must work with the way in which their worlds are cognitively and affectively organised and, in social situations and interactions, improvise their responses to optimum effect (Holland et al 1998; Schatzki 2002; Tilly 1999). They may also seek to alter the way things are. To help conceptualise the dynamic nature of the mutually constituting factors of the relationship between primary and secondary we draw on Bourdieu's concepts of capitals and habitus, but also on Schatzki's complementary analysis of practices as sayings, doings, understandings, relating and purposes nested in patterned physical arrangements (Schatzki 1996, 1997 and 2002; Kemmis et al 2012)..

The paper is organised as follows. We first analyse certain salient differences such as the typical size of the schools, the composition of the workforce, and the organisation for learning, to describe how they simultaneously constitute and are constituted by distinct professional identities and dispositions of teachers. We consider the implications of the discourse of 'the basics' and then how other understandings and practices associated with gender and age, found not just in education but in many social fields, intersect with secondary and primary schooling. Through this analysis we identify how these material and symbolic differences flow from and sustain schematic categorisations and meanings that currently value secondary school practices more highly than those of primary and that they constitute the positioning of primary school representatives relative to their secondary peers and therefore constrain the former's power in interactions. Finally we discuss some of the implications of this accumulated inequality for local school landscapes in the current policy context.

### **Differences of institutional size, organisation, remuneration and funding**

One of the most salient differences between primary and secondary schools is size. The average size of a secondary school is around 1000 compared with the average size of a primary school which is around 200 pupils. In 2011 the average number of teachers in a secondary school was 40 with an average total of 70 staff. In primary schools the averages were 11 teachers and a total of 40 staff<sup>iii</sup>.

Size matters because it significantly influences the practice and the habitus of members of the school community including teachers and how far they can accrue various forms of capital. For example the management of the larger number of individuals in secondary schools is

helped by clear formalisation of rules and regulations, explicitly and publicly stated, with formal procedures for implementation (Brady 2008). Leadership and management in the secondary school has typically been through delegation of responsibility by the headteacher to deputy heads, and other senior staff, who exercise designated responsibilities (Lee 2000; Lee et al 2000) through personal contact, but also the chairing of committees and task groups and the line management of teams - for example the administrative and office staff by the school's business manager. In addition to person to person contact, communication often involves business-like media such as memos, notices posted on staffroom boards, group emails, minutes, and written reports.

Competence in these formal or general practices of communication and contributory smaller or dispersed practices (Schatzki 1996) are valued in helping things to go well. For example, reading the notices on the board; meeting deadlines; chairs preparing for meetings; administrators managing papers, distributing minutes, and maintaining up to date circulation lists; attendees being punctual and reading agendas and minutes for meetings; being clear when issuing instructions, and energetic in pursuing responsibilities. These practices exemplify aspects of what is taken to be good professional practice in any (but particularly in large) organisations. Working successfully, being professional, is partly a matter of acquiring these practices as habits and dispositions.

The same pressures of size that shape the communication practices between staff also shape those between teachers and pupils. The effective communication with and management of large numbers of children and their parents requires mastery of similarly formal and general communication practices, including data management. For example a secondary teacher will have to manage assessment data for hundreds (and their school leaders for a thousand or more) of children at different stages of progress and be ready to communicate this to parents, pupils, governors, inspectors and others as necessary.

The practice of the primary school is typically more personal and less formal partly because they are smaller. Acker (1999) described it as 'domestic'. The working of the staff group can rely much more on direct contact when everyone necessarily rubs up daily with all colleagues. It is not as easy to maintain distance from one another as it is in a larger group and the quality of the experience of work is more dependent on the quality of these close relations. We do not wish to draw this contrast with secondary schools too starkly or simplistically. Some of the general practices valued in the larger secondary school will also

be valued in the primary school. And there are smaller teams (e.g. Year groups or subject groups) in the secondary school where similar dynamics are likely to occur. But in primary schools these factors are not further framed by a larger context with which they interact.

The management of children in the primary school differs too. Formal communication of rules and regulations is less necessary because how to behave is exemplified in routines and practices and expressed in the material organisation of the classroom where teacher and children spend the great majority of their time together. This integrated approach to pupil discipline is easier to achieve within, it may be more accurate to say it is made necessary by, the class-teacher system. Typically, thirty or so children are allocated to one teacher for all their education throughout a school year. Inevitably teachers forge close and intensive relations with 'their' children. Caring, norm setting and learning are equally foregrounded in daily classroom life. Communication with children is direct and the dual and related tasks of teaching and maintaining social order in the classroom are a matter less of charismatic performances at regular but dispersed occasions to changing audiences as in the secondary school and more a result of mutual trust sustained by the fairness, consistency and warmth of continuous interaction<sup>iv</sup>. Further, the data to be managed by a class teacher relates to only thirty or so children with whom the teacher has daily extensive and often intensive interaction. The quality as well as the quantity of primary teachers' and headteachers' knowledge of their pupils differs from that of their secondary colleagues.

The arrangements and practices that are associated with, or that follow from, being a large school affect the professional identity of the people who work in the school. Take the example of a secondary headteacher. In addition to acquiring an associated habitus they will also have followed a typical trajectory. Almost without exception they will have started as a teacher, moving through successively more senior posts, to deputy and then headteacher, each step reducing the time spent in the classroom. As a headteacher they will be on a much reduced timetable or no longer teaching at all. They may still have significant interaction with pupils but more often individuals or small groups for example for disciplinary reasons. The current policy to reduce the role of the LA and encourage federations of various kinds is extending this trajectory and changing the role of some of our interviewees. As one secondary headteacher put it:



*I'm stopping being a headteacher. It's more like a chief exec and then that is about managing the work across a group of schools and it's going to get larger. (Secondary headteacher).*

Significantly, while emphasising that the role was different because larger, he expressed no sense of professional dissonance and was quite positive about the change.

With primary headteachers the trajectory is different and to some extent the role too. Primary headteachers still often teach and lead assemblies especially in small schools (Alexander 2010). Even in larger primary schools the headteacher will be involved on a daily basis with their pupils albeit, like secondary heads, often singly and it is easier for them to know all their pupils by name. In addition, because in the staff hierarchy there are fewer posts of responsibility between the class teacher and the headteacher, children more regularly reach the headteacher for admonition or reward. In this way size plays a part in leading primary headteachers to be involved often and intimately with pupils. There is also cultural pressure for primary headteachers to be, and to demonstrate being, close to the children and still a good teacher, a 'full proper head teacher' in the words of the primary interviewee quoted earlier. Another primary interviewee, because of her success in her own school, had been asked to be executive head of three other schools like the secondary headteacher above. But unlike him she expressed conflicted feelings about shifting away from this primary identity.

*I have very reluctantly accepted in the autumn term that I could be Executive Headteacher of two schools. Being the headteacher of old..., in front doing assemblies, in classes, meeting and greeting... I mean I try and do all of those things, but there are some things that I just... You know, I don't teach and I went into teaching to teach and, you know, that saddens me. I could do that in two schools, I could go down and do a story session, but I can't do it in four... (Primary Headteacher)*

Another effect of size is on the remuneration and career opportunities for teachers. In larger schools there are more opportunities for career advancement because there are more senior posts of responsibility with associated higher pay. The titles available (together with the signal of greater worth that greater remuneration sends) are forms of symbolic capital not so readily available to primary colleagues. The headteacher's salary has historically been fixed directly in proportion to the number of pupils. Primary headteachers are consequently paid less than secondary headteachers and the same as a secondary deputy<sup>v</sup>.

Independent of the effect of size, primary schools have been less generously resourced per pupil than secondary schools throughout their history<sup>vi</sup> and their resourcing continues to be less generous. In 2010 most primary schools received between £3,000 and £6,000 (with an average of £4,080) per pupil, while most secondary schools received between £4,000 and £7,000 (with an average of £5,320) (Chowdry and Sibieta 2011). The reason often given for the difference is the higher cost associated with the more advanced subject curriculum of secondary schooling. This difference in funding has not gone unchallenged in the past (Plowden 1967) and Chowdry and Sibieta point out (2011 p24) that a government could change the balance if, for example, it prioritised early intervention on the grounds that investing resources earlier in the educational process is likely to bring greater gains in terms of outcomes later on, or if it felt it necessary to compensate smaller schools because of diseconomies of scale. As it stands, the more favourable funding of secondary schools is a signal of the relative importance placed on the phases. This extra economic capital translates into better staffing levels in secondary and better equipment and facilities<sup>vii</sup>.

The greater size and extra funding means that secondary teachers and headteachers have more opportunity than their primary colleagues to accrue social and cultural capital outside the school. The presence of a relatively large senior management team means that a secondary headteacher can delegate responsibility more easily. This gives capacity to engage in fruitful networking beyond the school gates and thereby access to information, both helpful in times of considerable change. Greater knowledge about what is going on and the support of other key players are assets that may be deployed to advantage in encounters with primary headteachers and other stakeholders.

### **Subject expertise, generalist teaching and the basics**

Differences of pedagogy and professional identity are also entrenched partly as a result of the historical distinction between elementary and secondary education. The term ‘elementary’ was not equivalent to its sometimes current use in England and other countries to distinguish the first few years of a child’s schooling usually from 5, 6 or 7 to about 11. The historical elementary schools in England were distinguished not by the age of their pupils (the elementary schools took children aged from 5 to 14) but by their social class (Simon 1969 and 1999; Lawson and Silver 1973). They were a separate and parallel system of education explicitly instituted for the working classes who, it was thought, needed only a basic education while the middle and upper classes (and a minority of elementary school pupils who earned a scholarship) progressed to a superior stage of fee charging secondary education.

When social categories are created community building and boundary maintenance occurs (Tilly 1999 and 2004). The categorical, material, practical and symbolic distinction of elementary and secondary education created communities of shared interest and solidarity. It led for example to different organisations representing the relative conditions and pay of the teaching workforce in the different sectors. It was also fertile ground for the development and adoption of distinct professional identities, educational ideals and practices<sup>viii</sup>.

In the early part of the twentieth century the theories and educational philosophies of thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Tolstoy, Montessori, Dewey and Freud inspired the development of new ideas, ideals and practices that sought to provide education variously based on learning by doing and democratic principles of the self-government of pupils and that attended to the creative and affective as much as the cognitive development of the child. There was also an emphasis on the particular educational needs of very young children. The predominant pedagogic principle of secondary education remained subject teaching while in the elementary schools and the primary schools that succeeded them, the predominant practice became that of the class-teacher.

The 1944 Education Act brought an end to the elementary system. It replaced them with age defined stages – Infant (5-7), Junior (7-11), and Secondary (11-15) as part of establishing universal free secondary education in a nationally uniform system of mass education. As a result the new primary schools lost the segregating function of the elementary system which was now fulfilled by de facto segregated Secondary Modern, Technical and Grammar schools. By the 1980s the tripartite secondary schools were largely replaced by a predominantly comprehensive system. After a brief period of experimentation with middle schools this is the nature of the English system today.

As a consequence of history and institutional organisation a secondary school teacher's professional identity within the place of work and with professional networks outside is strongly tied to being a subject teacher (Brady 2008). They draw on and participate in debates about the nature of their subject and how best to teach it and take responsibility to defend its role within the curriculum and its place within the school (Siskin 1991; Hargreaves 1994; Brady 2008). Their relation to the pastoral role, taking care of and accepting responsibility for the wider well being of the pupils, is emphatically not absent but is organisationally

equivocal in, for example, the common formal division of responsibility for subject teaching (Subject Leader, subject teacher) and pastoral care (Year Leader, form teacher).

In contrast, as we have already noted, the predominant practice in primary schools is class-teaching where a teacher is responsible for all aspects of the education of a group of about thirty children over a school year. The primary colleagues represented by the primary headteachers we interviewed have a much weaker identity as a subject expert. They will have undertaken graduate study of a relevant subject as a requirement of initial teacher education or have developed an expertise that is recognised. These guide the allocation of explicit responsibility for overseeing a curriculum subject area across the school. But, it is given in addition to their responsibilities as a class-teacher usually with no further remuneration. In a small school even relatively inexperienced staff may be given a subject responsibility.

The predominant identity as a class teacher, in a subtle interaction with gender and the philosophies of education and theories of child development noted earlier, tends to emphasise a pastoral dimension to educational practice, meeting the holistic needs of children in their early years and an integrated approach to learning. Consonant with this identity a counter claim may be made not to subject-knowledge but to expertise in child development, captured in what Alexander et al call the 'old slogan' of primary teachers that they teach 'children not subjects' (Alexander et al .2010 p 409). If such a claim is accepted then process and general skills may be considered just as important as subject content, and call for recognition of professional skill in laying sound foundations for future learning.

The historic legacy of the expert/generalist and subject-teacher/class-teacher schemas have played, and continue to play, a part in the relative prestige of secondary and primary practitioners and in interactions between the phases including the negotiations around teaching schools that the headteacher quoted above refers to. In such negotiations secondary teachers have legitimate grounds for claiming greater authority in matters concerning subjects. Further, conceiving the National Curriculum and national testing in terms of subjects, and statements of policy that emphasise the importance of a teacher's subject-knowledge (DCSF 2009; DfE 2013; Gove 2013) are not neutral in their effect on the relations between secondary and primary teachers. As things stand, they tend to confer greater symbolic capital on the former at the expense of the latter.

More than that, emphasising the importance of subjects constitutes grounds for questioning the competence of primary teachers but not that of their secondary colleagues. The Plowden report (Plowden 1967) had articulated the then widely held view amongst educational professionals and thinkers that learning was a matter not of segmented learning within bounded subjects but of facilitating the integration of understanding through well planned experiences within a learning environment managed by a teacher. The report presented an idealised<sup>ix</sup> image of primary teaching as best educational practice and thereby sought to raise the status of primary professionals in relation to their secondary colleagues (Simon 1999). But the integrated approach and the class teacher system has been derided (Cox and Dyson 1969a, 1969b, 1970; Cox and Boysen 1975 and 1977) continues to be carefully critiqued (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead 1992; Alexander et al 2010) and is officially rejected (Gove 2013). Without a successful counterargument the subject approach dominates. Together with the assumption that the more expertise a teacher has in a subject the more successful will be their pupils' learning, the conclusion follows that a primary class teacher cannot have sufficient expertise in all of the subjects needed. The accepted terms of the debate necessarily construct the class teacher system as organisationally problematic and primary teachers as serially deficient.

Primary teachers might defend themselves against a charge of incompetence in most of the subjects of the national curriculum by claiming expertise in what are widely considered the most important, namely literacy and numeracy. In a related response to early criticism that there was not enough time in the primary school year to meet the requirements of each of the subjects of the national curriculum, there was a tightening of the focus on the 'core subjects' of English (reading, writing, and speaking) and Mathematics. Today attainment is tested only in these subjects at the end of primary school (Key Stage 2)<sup>x</sup>. The other subjects were in practice relegated in importance and time spent on them drastically squeezed. This moved primary practice even further away from that idealised in Plowden and nearer to the notion of the primary school's mission as to deliver attainment in the core curriculum subjects in preparation for the secondary phase.

But primary teachers' competence in teaching even these subjects has been severely questioned (Alexander 2010). So much so that the New Labour government elected in 1997 introduced the Literacy and Numeracy strategies which prescribed in great detail what and how all primary teachers should teach. And, more recently, the present government imposed

synthetic phonics as the ‘preferred’ method of teaching reading (Davis 2012). In the context of primary secondary relations these interventions were highly significant. They unequivocally signalled that primary teachers cannot be trusted to teach the most important subjects. Significantly, no such prescription or mistrust has been visited universally on secondary teachers.

The discourse of ‘the basics’ is itself problematic for the status of primary teachers. The term invites multiple interpretations which in any instance may be separately or jointly invoked. For example it may, with positive connotations, denote crucial cognitive, affective and moral foundations. Or, with a historical echo of the elementary school, it can be taken, more negatively to imply a contrast between the simple content and general unsophisticated skills taught in the primary school and the advanced and more complex ideas and precise subject specific concepts which are the business of the secondary school. Finally, it can be taken to imply that the purpose of the primary stage is to prepare pupils for the secondary stage.

As such the discourse of the basics is replete with resources for subordination and optimal positioning. For example, emphasising, like Plowden, the foundational importance of the primary phase helps position effective primary teachers favourably. Alternatively, emphasising a contrast between simple and complex content supports the assumption that teaching the basics is easier and that primary school teachers require less expertise or less advanced educational qualifications<sup>xi</sup> Emphasising the need for preparing pupils for secondary casts secondary teachers as clients, thereby raising the importance of their views as to what that preparation should entail and positions primary schools as fulfillers of secondary schools’ needs.

### **Gender and age**

Prominent features of teaching in general are that women make up the greater part of the teaching workforce and that the younger the children the more female the workforce becomes. In 2011<sup>xii</sup> 71% of teachers in all government maintained schools were women and 29% were men. In nursery and primary schools taken together<sup>xiii</sup> 86% were women and 14% men whereas in secondary schools 62% are women and 38% men. Regarding leadership, although in all schools those fewer men who teach are more likely than their female colleagues to become headteachers, most nursery and primary headteachers are women (71%) whereas most secondary headteachers are men (62%). When other workers in schools

are included the female nature of primary schools is even starker with only 6% of these roles filled by men in nursery and primary schools but 21% in secondary. Nursery and primary schools are largely female workplaces, predominantly staffed and led by women.

Much has been written about the problematic notion of care as a natural sphere for women and its relation to teaching<sup>xiv</sup>. We cannot engage with this debate here but simply note that the workforce figures given above reflect and reinforce the still pervasive view (Mistry and Sood 2013)<sup>xv</sup> that teaching is more women's than men's work and that it is more women's and less men's work the younger the children (Hutchings 2002). Caring is often associated with low-paid or unpaid work performed by academically less successful working-class women (Skeggs, 1997) and as Vogt puts it,

Caring within teaching also evokes connotations of (female) service, of vocation and being a 'natural teacher' rather than (male) professionalism, expertise and authority. (2002 p253)

Forrester argues that this might be changing under the pressure on primary schools to improve results and the introduction of managerial procedures such as performance management (Forrester 2005 p 284). It is difficult to know how far such a significant change is taking place. But, what is evident in Forrester's paper and in our interviews with primary headteachers is resistance to, or at least a sense of dissonance associated with, such a change which itself attests to the continuing importance for primary teachers of the discourse of caring. A concern for the emotional and physical wellbeing of the child, as well as their cognitive development, continues to be an integral part of what they see as good primary practice and a primary teacher's professional identity.

Sexist discourses, practices and arrangements beyond the school invest the 'feminine' features typical of the primary school with less symbolic capital than the more 'masculine', and managerial features typical of the larger secondary school. These subtly interact with the changing identity of children as they grow older. The passage from childhood to adulthood is in all societies invested with huge significance and is maintained with deeply entrenched symbolism and practice constituting its stages and associated identities. The transition from primary to secondary school is inevitably part of the way English society conceives of and manages this passage including the age related identities of infant, child and adolescent. That secondary schools work with pupils who are older interacts with these conceptions circulating beyond and through the school about how people at different ages should be identified and

treated. In all of this there is the nebulous sense that dealing with near adults is somehow both tougher and more prestigious and reinforces the significance of the fact that the younger the children the more their education is conducted by women<sup>xvi</sup>.

### **Historic and discursive counterpositioning**

In addition to the counterposing of the two phases intrinsic in the development of different professional identities and through the wider operation of schema of gender and age the distinction between primary and secondary schooling has, since its creation in 1870, been involved in larger arguments and struggles concerning democracy and the distribution of power, wealth and respect. Both primary and secondary have at different times been branded positively or negatively in relation to the other. Robert Lowe, just prior to the 1870 Education Act, and those who later supported the 1902 Education Act saw what he called primary education, in the form of the separate elementary system, as a basic provision that would equip those in the working class with appropriate skills for manual work and instil suitable deference to their betters (Simon 1969; Lawson, J. and Silver, H. 1973). Elementary education was explicitly counterposed to a superior secondary education. Later the ‘progressive’ thinkers and practitioners of the first half of the twentieth century, including the official Hadow reports, valorised an educational philosophy and pedagogy at odds with that associated with the then secondary system. The 1944 Education Act effectively curtailed the developing progressive practice in the elementary system as the new primary schools took as their mission the preparation of pupils for examination to select those to be admitted to the grammar schools. Partly in response the Plowden report (Plowden 1967) advocated the extension of primary practice into the territory of the secondary school as a corollary of the then consensus for comprehensivisation. In response the Black Papers<sup>xvii</sup> counterposed and demonised progressive primary practice and called for a celebration and reinstallation of practice based on subject-teaching and didactic pedagogy. Policy since 1988 to the present has reinforced a ‘secondary’ approach to education through a subject based conception of the curriculum, support for streaming (DfEE 1997) and taking measurable outcomes as the main criteria of a school’s and education system’s mission and success.

Schatzki would describe primary and secondary schooling as integrated practices meaning that they are doings, sayings, understandings and physical arrangements ordered in relation to an identified purpose which in turn gives intelligibility to the actions and identities of the



members of that project. But, the integrated practice of schooling is related to practices and discourses beyond the school<sup>xviii</sup>. These are myriad but in the analysis above we have concentrated only on those most relevant to the relative positioning of secondary and primary, particularly those of gender and age.

The schema that constitute and emerge from these wider discourses are used to label aspects of the world as differentially valued, positioned as superior or subordinate. Simplistic binary examples of the most general of these are masculine/feminine; adult/infant. These work through to a web of more specific and subtly counterposed schema established through sometimes extremely complex chains of reference. For example such terms as we have seen are more applicable<sup>xix</sup> to primary schools – small, domestic, informal, feminine, mothering, relationship focused, more *women's work*, personally-mediated, female led – stand in contrast to terms that are more ascribable to secondary - large, business like, formal, masculine, tough-love, task-focused, more *men's work*, *rule*-regulated, male led. Such schema and the counterpositioning they enact, cannot be reduced to simple binaries but together, at this time in England, they purvey a patterned sense of superiority and subordination. In this way they contribute to a cumulative inequality of capital possessed by the two phases and determine the resources available to representatives in interactions.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The analysis in this paper offers a different approach to studies of perceived relative status between secondary and primary schools. In a recent very thorough study Everton et al (2007) report that the perceived status differential between primary and secondary teachers was much less sharp than they had expected and concluded that this reflected 'some closure of the primary/secondary status differential'. While this is an interesting finding our approach sees perception of comparative status as only one of the factors affecting the relative capital representatives of each of the phases bring to negotiations. We should therefore be cautious about Everton et al's optimistic interpretations if they are taken to indicate mitigation of the experience of the accumulated and durable inequality.

Our analysis also helps to understand another of Everton et al's (2007) findings. They report that primary school teachers rank themselves below secondary teachers. This is an intriguing finding. From the perspective of our analysis it may be seen as an intuition of the legitimacy with which their subordination is currently invested and that entangles them with their own

subordination through their plural personal and political as well as their professional identities. Any participant in social exchange experiences the historical weight of inherited meanings, meanings that they have to be aware of and to respond to. They might accept, endorse, oppose, amend, extend, or resist the schema they are subject to (Holland et al 1998).

Although relative status may not be a salient aspect of all professional encounters between primary and secondary colleagues the headteacher whose quotation began this paper reflects on and articulates the experience of such moments in her recent encounters. If we reread the passage in the light of our analysis we can hear in her words the effects of habitus and symbolic and material positioning and an awareness of the complex legacy of meanings, identities, practices and dispositions associated with the primary secondary distinction.

The passage can be interpreted as a moment in the process of constructing an optimal position that she can sustain in the face of prejudice, contradiction, and imposition. We see the creation or identification of cognitive, affective and political resources in the form of arguments, sustainable propositions, self-encouragement, reminder of solidarities, defensible positioning. It is preparation and strategising away from the hurly-burly of interaction and instant decision making so as to better improvise in negotiations. The difficulty she has in articulating reflects the effort needed by anyone who wishes to achieve understanding of the determinants of their social location in overlapping plural fields and the effort to achieve some agency in relation to them.

But relative prestige in the school field is not just determined along the primary/secondary axis. The prestige of any particular school will have other dimensions of capital unrelated to the primary secondary divide (Coldron et al 2014). Some of the most important of these are, for example, Ofsted grades, which are equally available to both secondary and primary schools. Consequently it is possible for a particular secondary school to be unpopular with parents, graded Inadequate by Ofsted, led by a headteacher who has little contact with or respect from fellow headteachers and whose intake to the school is disadvantaged and challenging, while a nearby primary school may be oversubscribed, with a relatively advantaged intake, deemed Outstanding by Ofsted and led by a headteacher who is a National Leader of Education and an Executive of a federation of schools. The superior capital of the headteacher of this particular primary in relation to the headteacher of that secondary would not invalidate our central claim which is that English secondary school

headteachers and staff are in general more able to accrue higher levels of certain kinds of capital than their English primary school peers.

This analysis suggests some further areas of research. There is a growing number of ‘all-through’ schools which take children through both their primary and secondary phases<sup>xx</sup>. It would be of theoretical and practical interest to study how the factors identified here in determining differences of status are modulated in this new context. Further, a comparison of status differentials in the long standing ‘all-through’ systems<sup>xxi</sup> in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries would provide other contexts in which our arguments could be tested and extended.

This paper helps to highlight and to understand an under-acknowledged divide in English schooling which may be important in how local contexts are being reconfigured. The forced withdrawal of the LA as the most powerful local player means that differences of status have become significant aspects of the negotiations within new local elites (Coldron et al 2014). They are more often activated because relations between schools are being foregrounded through fraternities, franchises and federations. Between a secondary school headteacher well positioned in the local competitive arena and the headteacher of a primary school with a poor inspection grade, serving a highly deprived community, unpopular with parents and with limited social and professional networks the difference in status and power will be immense. These material and symbolic differences in capital, position and power in the local field within and without the local elite may be important factors as new local relations between schools emerge.

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<sup>i</sup> We interviewed heads in three LAs, City (A), County (B) and Town (C). The kinds of discomfort reported varied and it was much more evident in City and Town than County. In City for example some tension arose because secondary heads held powerful positions on LA wide forums where a decision was made that was not perceived to be in the interests of primary schools. In Town there was, for local reasons that were not entirely clear to us, a long standing division between secondary and primary. We should emphasise that while in this paper we argue that these and other examples are symptomatic of the underlying tendencies toward subordination that we seek to demonstrate there were many examples of excellent relations between primary and secondary headteachers and their schools. We do not believe this invalidates the arguments we will put forward.

<sup>ii</sup> A new school based approach to teacher education where a group of schools and other partners form an alliance to provide initial teacher education. For more details see:  
<http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/index/support-for-schools/teachingschools.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Figures calculated from DfE statistics at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-workforce-in-england-november-2011>

<sup>iv</sup> We are of course talking here of reasonably successful primary classrooms. But as one reviewer reminded us a primary classroom is not automatically blessed by warm relationships. Equally the 'domestic' nature of relations between staff is not always good either and when classroom and staff relationships fail they can be very unpleasant indeed perhaps partly because they are not mitigated by the 'room' provided in a larger organization or the cooling off time afforded by seeing a class only once or twice a week.



<sup>v</sup> According to a Times Educational Supplement survey published in March 2010 the average primary head was on £52,000; an average secondary head £73,000 and a secondary deputy £52,000.

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6039350>

<sup>vi</sup> See Simon (1999) on Elementary schools. Plowden also documented big differences (Plowden 1967 Para 1104 p 405).

<sup>vii</sup> See Alexander (2010 Fig 3.1 p 28) which shows class sizes of 26.2 pupils in primary and 20.9 in secondary in 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> What follows is very close to the notion of vocational habitus. The concept as applied to education and professional identity is developed in Braun (2012); Vincent & Braun (2010); Colley (2002 and 2006); Colley et al (2003). This work has helped conceptualise how different professional practices and identities emerge and are reproduced. Whilst recognising the value of these analyses we have not adopted the terminology here for three reasons. Firstly, we want to highlight the impact of material factors such as size on the ability to accrue certain kinds of capital. Secondly, our focus is on the valuations (including counterpositioning) of non-material factors such as the different vocational habituses and the effect these have in current interaction. Thirdly we want to minimise the implication in the concept of habitus of non-conscious disposition and habit and to maximise the notion of active achievement of (or struggle for) location and associated identity in a local field. Having said this it would be interesting to transpose our argument into the different key offered by the notion of vocational habitus but that would have been a different paper.

<sup>ix</sup> Actual primary practice in most English primary schools was very far from this ideal vision (Jackson 1964; HMI 1978; Galton et al 1980).

<sup>x</sup> Science is also considered a core subject but is not tested at the end of Key Stage 2.

<sup>xi</sup> Peter Wilby (Guardian 8 April 2014) reports that David Green of the right leaning think tank Civitas wants 'all qualifications for primary school teaching to be abolished'.

<sup>xii</sup> Official figures for 2011 from the Department for Education (DfE 2012)

<sup>xiii</sup> The official figures do not distinguish between Infant and Junior schools.

<sup>xiv</sup> See for example Acker (1994, 1995 and 1999); Boyle, E. (2014); Aspinwall and Drummond (1989); Colley (2002 and 2006); Griffin (1997); Hargreaves and Tucker (1991); Nias (1999); Noddings (1992); Oram (1996); Skeggs (1997); Smeyers (1999); Vogt (2002); Walby (1989); Walkerdine (1990).

<sup>xv</sup> See Boyle (2014) for an interesting historical account of the factors contributing to the feminization of teaching in the US.

<sup>xvi</sup> Hoyles's notion of intermediacy (Hoyle 2001) is of interest in relation to this argument.

<sup>xvii</sup> Cox and Boysen 1975, 1977; Cox and Dyson 1969a, 1969b, 1970

<sup>xviii</sup> The complex result, or rather continuing dynamic of, this process is variously characterised for example as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), or '*a great horizontal web of interweaving practices amid interconnected orders... coextensive with sociohistorical space-time*' (Schatzki 2002 p154-155), or the mutual constitution of contentious practice, figured worlds, intimate identities and history-in-person (Holland et al 1998; Holland and Lave 2009), or chains of reference constituting different world versions (Goodman 1968, 1978). Where the result is a lasting relation of subordination between two categories Tilly calls it a durable inequality (Tilly 1999).

<sup>xix</sup> To be more precise we should use the phrase 'successfully projected' in a nominalist reading of social ontology based on Goodman's (1968, 1978, 1979) and Hacking's (1995) account of attributes and properties and the creation of kinds of people and things.

<sup>xx</sup> These were 89, a tiny minority, at the time of writing (March 2014).

<http://www.edexec.co.uk/news/2669/record-surge-in-the-number-of-%27all-through%27-schools/>

<sup>xxi</sup> The Danish Folkeskole is a comprehensive school covering both primary and lower secondary education for children from 7 to 16/17-years-old.