

# Conceptualizing Research in Educational Leadership

**Helen M. Gunter**

## ABSTRACT

How field members design research and from this develop data collection methods is located in particular knowledge claims. This article presents a typology of knowledge and knowing, and argues that the claims being made within particular research and publications are related to competing conceptualizations of the truth and how this is constructed. The article argues that research in the field needs to embrace and celebrate this pluralism and the dialogue that it generates. This does not undermine positions but legitimizes the dynamism of the field and makes it less vulnerable to hegemony and external interference. Such an approach is consistent with educational leadership, and if field members are to describe, understand and explain this then there is a need to use a multi-level framework that is technical (what is), illuminative (what does it mean), critical (why is it like that), practical (how might it be better) and positional (who says so and why?).

**KEYWORDS** *critical evaluation, educational leadership, knowledge, methodology, practice, theory*

## Introduction

How and why field members seek to conceptualize research within the field of educational leadership is the core focus of this article. In undertaking this task I need to conceptualize the field within which my analysis is located, and so be overt about the process I am simultaneously practising and describing. Conceptualization is activity concerned with abstract ideas but is embedded within field member practice regarding how and why those ideas are generated and used. Field members conceptualize to challenge what is being done or might be done, to affirm stability and/or to deliver change. This process is intellectual and as such it depends on thinking, dialogue and reading: it is active and dynamic. It is necessary work for all those involved in the field from students to taxpayers, from parents to civil servants, from teachers to professors.<sup>1</sup> It is the stuff of everyday action, but it can be disregarded as esoteric or be grasped with enthusiasm as essential to how enduring public matters are tackled.

The challenge is to ask questions about what field members know and need to know, what is worth knowing, how they know and practise that knowing and who does the knowing. This approach to knowledge, knowing and knowers is multi-level: first, *technical* where field members log the actuality of practice regarding what activity and actions are taking place; second, *illuminative* where field members interpret the meaning of practice regarding how and why activity and actions take place; third, *critical* where field members ask questions about power relationships within and external to activity and actions; fourth, *practical* where field members research and devise strategies to secure improvements in activity and actions; and fifth, *positional* where field members align their research with particular knowledge claims about activity and actions, and the networks (epistemic communities, political parties, pressure groups) that sustain them. Conceptualization does not float free of field positions and positioning regarding knowledge claims and so field members must always ask: who is doing the conceptualization, why and to what effect and what impact is it having?

This is a vast area and the contribution I aim to make is necessarily focused and partial. I take both comfort and inspiration from Inglis (2003: 131) who asserts that while 'intellectual method cannot promise genius, it should at least forestall stupidity'. These are wise words given that the field is structurally privileged through the promotion of organizational leadership as the means of securing public sector reform, with heavy investment from the taxpayer (PMSU, 2004).<sup>2</sup> When this is located within wider social, economic and political arrangements, where there is an embedded cultural acceptance of the normality of leaders buttressed by hierarchical remuneration packages, then field members can recognize that there is much that the field takes for granted or might be reluctant to question. This is unsafe territory but it is also a place that field members need to visit if intelligent interpretations of the purpose and scope of field research are to be made. The position I take is that conceptualizing research within the field is unsettled and unsettling, and this is both necessary and desirable.

The inter-relationship between current and potential work within the field, and what label is attached to it, is located in time and space, and field members need a means of mapping this. A field member's job is not to just service change by promoting a preferred model but to actively describe, understand and explain change. This requires critical evaluation and this should not be conflated with opposition. In essence what I am arguing for is for the fullest recognition that this is a field, and as such it does not have a claim to a single disciplinary truth based on a distinctive, rational and agreed methodology, but is located within the social sciences. Field members draw on conceptualizations of research from anthropology, history, philosophy, economics, politics, sociology, psychology and elsewhere, and so have a responsibility to make a reciprocal contribution to the development of these disciplines, not least through dialogue about knowledge boundaries. In this way field members have a part to play not only in enabling action (what do I do at 9 o'clock on a Monday

morning) but also activity (how do I understand and give meaning to that action). Hence the theory–practice divide is eliminated, because as Ranson (1998: 50) argues: ‘practice without understanding of the enduring forms of knowledge is blind, while knowledge detached from the world of practice remains impotent and pointless’. In arguing for this I am asking field members to look beyond the boundaries that shape their work (journal subscriptions, email address lists, citations, conference attendance) towards other positions with different knowledge claims. Knowledge work is about challenging sameness by ‘confronting strangeness’ (Smyth, 2001: 171–2), where practice means a refusal ‘to accept customs, rituals, and the familiar world unquestioningly’. Consequently, educational leadership is exercised through ‘understanding the broader forces shaping . . . work and resisting domestication and not being dominated by outside authorities’.

Such a reflexive approach to knowledge production requires what Bourdieu (2003) describes as ‘scholarship with commitment’ where politics and scientific rigour are productively combined. This is not new for the field, but could be challenging (and possibly distasteful) to particular positions (Gunter, 2001). Nixon et al. (2003: 90) help the field by advocating ‘thoughtful research’ where:

To achieve thoughtfulness, then, educational research must not only broaden its scope, but also extend its reach in terms of the constituencies with which it seeks to engage. This raises issues that are too often marginalized in the current debate on research methodology. Who decides which are the important questions for which we need to produce and collect evidence? Whose questions get asked and answered? Whose problems are investigated? What indeed counts as evidence and whose evidence (or voice) counts? Evidence-based policy and practice offer no inherent guarantee that they will benefit communities or inflect away from thoughtful deliberation by privileging outcomes and ends at the expense of processes and purposes. In so doing, they not only limit the scope for debate, but also render it mindless.

Such an approach necessitates thoughtful reading rooted in ‘thinking otherwise’ (Ball, 1995: 266) so that the field member in higher education can recapture their role as public intellectuals, where we ‘are not ashamed of the idea that sometimes it is worthwhile developing ideas because it is exciting’ (Furedi, 2001: 17).

I intend to take this forward by presenting a framework for conceptualizing the field in relation to knowledge claims before going on to show how this is contested. Finally I propose a conceptualization located in educational leadership and I argue for a reflexive approach to how and why field members position themselves around particular knowledge claims. In doing this I am building on Ribbins and Gunter (2002) by declaring that I find Paechter’s (2003: 116) proposal regarding the usefulness of research to be helpful. She argues that:

. . . we should focus on conducting good research in the field of education and trust to its utility. We are not always able to predict which areas will be most fertile for investigation, nor which studies will have most long-term impact. However, I think that anything that tells us more about the world of education (very broadly conceived) will be useful at some point. As long as we ensure that we carry out our

work as well as it is possible to do so, with due regard to an underpinning moral imperative, rigour, transparency, connection to theory and research ethics, we will be contributing to knowledge in the field of education. This should be our purpose.

## Conceptualizing Purposes

If I begin with the core purpose of enabling and developing learners and learning then how and why resources are and should be controlled generates an imperative to organize. In order to learn students need to have access to a range of resources: first, intellectual in the form of ideas, facts and values; second, developmental in the sense of how the person comes to know their identity as learner and others as learners who learn with and from you; third, professionally in the form of teachers and support staff who are knowledgeable and skilled; fourth, material in the form of place and space with buildings, ICT, books and equipment; fifth, time as arrangements for the formal engagement with learning. This means I need to engage with how learners as individuals and as groups are organized; how staffing and material resources are deployed; and how choices are defended both technically in the form of accounts and democratically in the form of purposes. Where decisions are made on these matters together with the actions that are integral to this (talking, reading, presenting, charring, theorizing, meeting, thinking, breathing, typing, feeling) is regarded as the focus of the field. Hence field members are interested in:

- Learners: who are they, how do they experience learning, how do they progress, and why?
- Staff: who are they, how do they experience their work, how are they developed, and why?
- Organization: what formal structures are there in the division of labour, how do they function, and why?
- Cultures: what informal structures are there, how do they function, and why?
- Communities: what direct (parents, governors) and indirect (businesses, charities) participation is there by local people, how do they participate, and why?
- State: what are the purposes of schools and schooling, and how is the school as a public institution interconnected with citizenship and democratic development?
- Connections: how are local, regional, national and international communities interconnected, what impact does this have on learners and staff, and why?

Baron identifies four positions on taking the work of the field forward. First: 'research for understanding' through which, for example, historical work can explain the past and anthropological work can examine culture; second,

'policy-related research' where evidence can support the formulation and monitoring of policy; third, 'research into administrative structure and process' through which functions and roles can be understood; and fourth, 'evaluative research' where the field member can stand outside of practice and undertake comparative analysis (Baron, 1980: 18–19). Each of these positions focuses on knowledge production with varying, and often overlapping, emphasis on describing to understand, analysing to explain and prescribing to take action. The social sciences can enable the field member to be close to practice through engaging with knowing, as well as providing a reflexive perspective gained by theory from political science, economics and sociology. Furthermore, who does this work and who would find it useful is inclusive because it could involve a teacher, a civil servant, a parent, and/or a professor at home and abroad. From the standpoint of the 1970s when schools were undergoing major restructuring through comprehensivization, and the field was beginning to enter higher education with the launch of professional development/postgraduate programmes, Baron emphasizes the need for more work on structure and process: 'it is in this area that most of the problems which beset those responsible for the conduct of our educational institutions and those with similar responsibilities in other countries lie' (1980: 19–20). As such he is focusing on the immediacy of practice, and how field research should be open to analysis and relatability from those who practise in other settings.

For all these reasons Baron's work is foundational and has continued to influence approaches to how field research has been mapped (Bolam, 1999; Gunter and Ribbins, 2003a, b; Ribbins and Gunter, 2002). Over two decades of research has led to four emergent knowledge claims as illustrated in Figure 1, and this typology is presented with a heuristic purpose 'to illuminate rather than stifle, and to open up rather than create barriers . . . to aid thought rather than replace it' (Gunter and Ribbins, 2003b: 260). It is a newly developed typology that has emerged through four years of collaborative scholarship with Peter Ribbins (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002, 2003a, b; Ribbins and Gunter, 2002), and it is currently being used to map teacher leadership (Gunter, 2005), change (Gunter et al., forthcoming), conduct reviews of research (Ribbins, 2004) and, in this particular instance, to develop the conceptualization of field research.

The intellectual legacy of Baron is located in Figure 1 through giving recognition to how his advice to focus on functions and processes is close to the 'delivering change' quadrant, but his intellectual legacy is evident within the other three quadrants. Baron's concern with enabling practitioners to focus on purposes—deliver their practice as well as to ask challenging questions of that practice—is represented in the horizontal axis. The vertical axis is concerned with doing, and could centre on the immediacy of action while having a wider perspective on activity. Hence meeting, planning and talking don't happen without cognizance of the focus and purposes of organizing, and vice versa.

Delivering change is where evaluative and instrumental approaches are located, and the emphasis is on *securing outcomes*. Here field members ask

Figure 1 Knowledge and knowing

<b>Activity</b>			
<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Understanding meanings</b>	<b>Understanding experiences</b>	<b>Provision</b>
	<p><i>Conceptual:</i> challenging and developing understandings of ontology and epistemology.</p> <p><i>Descriptive:</i> challenging and developing understandings of activity and actions.</p>	<p><i>Humanistic:</i> gathering and using experiences to improve practice.</p> <p><i>Aesthetic:</i> appreciating and using the arts to enhance practice.</p>	
	<b>Working for change</b>	<b>Delivering change</b>	
	<p><i>Critical:</i> to reveal and emancipate practitioners from injustice.</p> <p><i>Axiological:</i> to clarify the values and value conflicts to support what is right.</p>	<p><i>Evaluative:</i> to measure the impact of role incumbents on outcomes.</p> <p><i>Instrumental:</i> to provide strategies and tactics for organizational effectiveness.</p>	
<b>Actions</b>			

questions about: how do we do what we have to do and how do we measure what we have delivered? Working for change *problematizes* action and seeks to understand why we do things in the way we do and how we might do them better in order to achieve a socially just and moral approach. Field members would be asking: how might power structures act as a barrier to work? How do we work for learners and learning as a right and a good in our society?

Understanding action is through a wider perspective on activity, and this can be *philosophical* through focusing on meanings. This is where conceptual and descriptive approaches are located in the concern to understand knowledge and knowing. Doing cognitive and affective work is an activity distant from taking the actions that the knowledge claims may propose. Field members would be asking what does learning mean? How do we know this and might we know it differently? Understanding experiences is similarly about distance but with a view to improving practice, hence the focus is on *accounts* of practice and how the arts can illuminate artfulness.

Figure 1 has the potential to enable the field member to plan and undertake research in the field, and to critically evaluate other research. To illustrate this I will focus on headteachers, where I could design a project in a variety of ways.

### Understanding Meanings

This is based on the argument that, without philosophical engagement, practice is likely to be 'ignorant or confused', and lacking in wisdom (Fielding, 2000: 377). Without it heads are in danger of taking action that is illiberal, and Hodgkinson (1996: 22) reminds us that taking a philosophical approach is about 'practitioner-initiated value-imbued systems of action', and so matters which are about meaning and purposes are integral to how the field member conceptualizes headship (Winkley, 1998). This type of inquiry would involve the following questions:

- Technical: what do headteachers do, what do we see when they are doing it, and how do we know this?
- Illuminative: what is the meaning of being a headteacher, and doing headship?
- Critical: what is power and how might we explore the meaning of headship as a power to and power over structure?
- Practical: what does it mean to improve practice?
- Positional: how can philosophical work (e.g. Hodgkinson) be engaged with and developed?

### Understanding Experiences

This is based on enabling headteachers to both describe their work and their career pathway, and inter-relate this over time within context (organization,

home and policy). This can be through personal accounts (Tomlinson et al., 1999), researcher accounts (Southworth, 1995), interviews (Pascal and Ribbins, 1998; Rayner and Ribbins, 1999; Ribbins, 1997), and can include dialogue (Hustler et al., 1995). Hence headship is conceptualized as a lived and living life that needs to be constructed and reconstructed through the experience of narratives. When field members research the lives of each other (e.g. university professor researching with a headteacher) then issues of what is said is done and what is observed in the doing need to be explored. This type of inquiry would involve the following questions:

- Technical: what is being said in the narratives about the work, life and career of the headteacher?
- Illuminative: what do these accounts mean about practice and how we understand a lived life?
- Critical: how do the narratives show the interplay between the agency of the headteacher and the structures that enable and prevent that agency?
- Practical: how do narratives generate understandings of improvement?
- Positional: how can work on career pathways (e.g. Ribbins) be engaged with and further developed?

### **Working for Change**

This is based on analysis of how the agency of the headteacher to exercise choice interplays with structures that can be social and economic (gender, race, class, sexuality) and political (ideology, policy, traditions, systems). Theories of power can be used to conceptualize the headteacher within complex structures that can determine access to work and how they conduct work (Ball, 1994; Blackmore, 1999; Grace, 1995). This type of inquiry would involve the following questions:

- Technical: what dilemmas and tensions do we see taking place in the everyday work of the headteacher?
- Illuminative: what meaning can be developed about choices, and how agency and structure interplay to shape decisions?
- Critical: how is power exercised by the headteacher and how is this related to identity within headship as a power structure?
- Practical: how might structural barriers to improvement be overcome?
- Positional: how can policy sociology (e.g. Ball, Grace, Ozga) be engaged with and further developed?

### **Delivering Change**

This is based on measuring the impact of the headteacher as role incumbent on school processes and outcomes. The attributes, skills and knowledge of the



head as leader are abstracted with cause and effect relationships being conceptualized and statistically computed (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999). This type of inquiry would involve the following questions:

- Technical: what is effective leadership and what is the best way to measure the impact of headteachers as effective leaders?
- Illuminative: what does it mean to be effective and what are the appropriate skills and behaviours?
- Critical: how do we enable agency to be enhanced for headteachers so that power can be effectively and efficiently used?
- Practical: what improvements can be made to the impact a headteacher as an effective leader has on outcomes?
- Positional: how can work on school effectiveness and improvement (e.g. Leithwood) be engaged with and further developed?

Each of these knowledge claims conceptualizes the headteacher and headship differently based on the extent to which agency or structure are given primacy, and how the inter-relationship between them is or is not explored. For example, field members who begin with working for change would argue that securing change puts too much emphasis on the head as agent for change, while those starting from a different position would critique the former regarding the pessimism of headship being constrained by deterministic forces beyond the head's control.

Underlying these debates are epistemological divergences regarding what constitutes knowledge and knowing, and who are regarded as the knowers. First, understanding meaning is cerebral and can be private and implicit, but also can be accessed through dialogue, observation, diaries and interviews; second, understanding experiences is also related to disclosure but a narrative (written and spoken, alone or with another) can provide an account of events and reveal the dispositions that shape the agent's position within and about those events; third, working for change begins with an explicit position regarding the need to make social, economic and political changes in wider society that can be witnessed within the reality of educational practice through what people do, what they experience, what they say this means to them, and what this means for identity and control; fourth, securing change begins with an explicit position that organizational change can take place by statistical computation on the connection between roles, tasks, cultural norms and behaviours with outcomes.

## Powerful Conceptualization

Particular epistemic communities locate themselves by taking up a position, and while they may use similar methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews) they do so based on particular conceptualizations of practice and how the truth is

produced. Within these positions debates take place about conceptual clarity so that there is shared meaning combined with vibrant intellectual dialogue. Challenge to concepts is endemic because there is open access to new ideas generated from practice, reading and thinking. Hence conceptualization is connected with claims regarding legitimacy, with border skirmishes being the place where these issues usually become visible. For example, in order to deliver change Hopkins (2001: 5) presents ten propositions for securing school leadership where we must 'build capacity' and 'be futures orientated and strategically driven'. By contrast, Ozga (1990: 361), in working for change, argues that approaches that do not connect practice with the role of the state means that 'we will be busy but blind'.

What constitutes relevance can come to the fore with claims about how field members might indulge ourselves with critiquing each other's work but ignore the focus of that work in support of practice (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003). On the other hand, what is promoted as good practice for practitioners raises issues about the interplay between belief and evidence. Hence Harris's (2004: 21) analysis that 'despite a wealth of school improvement literature advocating more collaborative, democratic and distributed forms of leadership, clear links with improved student outcomes have yet to be established' is not esoteric and irrelevant to field members in schools, but is vital to how they are able to engage productively in practice and the research of that practice. Interwoven with this are debates about the purposes of educational research and whether the drive to generate new knowledge and improve practice are inter-related or separated out. Such fundamentals can be irritating and inconvenient to some field members (particularly those in elected office) who want quick answers, and so positions on how research is conceptualized are full of tensions regarding dialogue over ideas combined with the pressures of expediency.

These issues can be explored through examining the labelling of activity and actions as, for example, administration, management, planning, leadership, policy-making, teaching, strategy, performance, etc. Field members have undertaken similar types of work over time but the most popular labels have been: educational administration (Baron and Taylor, 1969), educational management (Hughes et al., 1985) and educational leadership (Gunter, 2005).<sup>3</sup> The key word is *educational* because it firmly focuses attention on the nature and purposes of field member work. Hence administration, management and leadership are about activity and require action, but are hollow unless developed within an educational institution; underpinned by educational values and goals; integrated within teaching and learning; and so practice is itself educational. There are three main patterns of argument regarding this: first, the inclusive nature of schools within a system that 'embraces Parliament at one end of the scale and the activities of any home with children or students at the other' (Baron, 1969: 6); second, the need to enable 'practice to be studied, assessed and ultimately reduced to a form in which it can be taught to those outside the immediate situation' (Baron, 1969: 4); and, third, the need for the

social sciences because 'even the most practical of issues . . . depend upon the interpretation at some point in the sequence of decision-making of basic concepts of equality, freedom and justice' (Baron, 1969: 8).

During the 'policy turn' (Deem et al., 1995: 2) of the Thatcher years, approaches to these matters diverged with, first, the emergence of a radical sociology, known as policy sociology, which focuses on the state within education policy-making and the impact on practice (e.g. Ball, 1990; Grace, 1995; Ozga, 2000), and, second, the rise of a radical entrepreneurialism, known more recently as transformational leadership, which concentrates on the restructuring of educational organizations and practices through private sector strategies (e.g. Leithwood et al., 1999). I have explored this elsewhere (Gunter, 1997, 2001, 2004), and here I intend to focus on the latter trend which has its origins in work that elevates the business practitioner as a superior knower to the educational practitioner and researcher, and presents business models as modern and status-giving to those who use them and who speak the language of efficiency and quality.

Transformational leadership is endemic in the English field, and is based on a separation of leaders from followers, hence leadership is based on what role incumbents have as skills and attributes that enable them to be inspirational, to appeal to individual and groups of followers, to influence their thinking and to build an emotional commitment to the organization. The elevation of the role incumbent as a leader who does leadership from those who do other work has been based on the redefining of management (and indeed teaching) as lower level activity that is technical and about getting the job done. Evidence-informed practice means that research is conceptualized to fit within an electronic database with gateways that give access to precisely the type of evidence a headteacher needs to know regarding how to implement a reform within that type of school (Ribbins and Gunter, 2003). This has been hybridized as 'school leadership' (DfES, 2002; Hopkins, 2001), where field members talk about stakeholders (rather than citizens); standards (rather than learners and learning); and performance (rather than teachers and their work).

What is problematic is the separation of the headteacher as leader from others, except as a linear causal impact on those others. In other words it is 'leadership-centric' research with 'studies assuming and producing leadership through designs with inbuilt "proofs" of leadership, carried out by researchers ideologically and commonsensically committed to the idea' (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003: 379). Hence the field member might wonder whether work that seeks to critically evaluate will be engaged with, and here I have in mind Blackmore's (1999: 222) conclusion that 'perhaps the focus upon leadership is itself the biggest barrier to gender equality'. Such a statement productively disturbs, and asks us to think seriously about how we reflexively question ontological and epistemological positions within the field. My argument here is that educational leadership is sufficiently pluralistic as a field of study and practice that school leadership can be located within it, but it should not be allowed to

become hegemonic and so exclude other forms of knowledge, knowing and knowers.

## **Purposeful Conceptualization**

Once we recognize the pluralistic nature of the field then there are two consequences regarding research: first, a range of methods could be used such as observations, interviews, experiments and questionnaires, and the researcher can base choices on the conceptualization of the investigation; and second, the researcher can focus on what it means to generate and use evidence rather than primarily on how it is organized and accessed. This emphasis on intellectual work requires conceptually informed practice (Gunter, 2001, 2005) where field members come to research as knowledgeable people who need to challenge that knowledge and to seek out new ways of knowing. The realities of practice are such that computers and libraries can provide the information but knowledge comes from how the field member engages with that information. How the field member selects, accepts, fudges, ignores and wants to know more is both scholarly and political regarding how researchers work for rationality within context: scholarly because there is a need to think and to engage with how intellectual practice is understood and felt about, and political because the field member will be located in power structures that are relational through the exercise of power. The dynamics of this are:

- personal: the field member has experiences of familiarity and strangeness, and faces the tension between what might be done and what needs to be done;
- useful: how research is funded and to be used means that the field member faces issues of the purposes and the control of research;
- situational: the field member faces current and forthcoming events that overlay inherited structures and cultures;
- social: what is to be done will have to be received and lived by the field member as self with others;
- theoretical: field members have their own theories and have access to other theories; and,
- dialogic: when data is shared by field members then what is and is not evidence is open to interpretation and negotiation.

The reality and tensions of day-to-day work for field members often means working in complex settings where professional practice is full of contradictions regarding the way forward, and so strategizing can be about agreeing rather than solely leading a way through. Problem solving might be more about problem posing, and in particular the field member might want to ask: is this my problem and who needs to be involved? This is why when a field member wants to know the purposes of conceptualization it does not require a sole focus on objectified

evidence, but instead needs attention to how knowledge is used and produced. Such an approach also does not automatically exaggerate the agency of the knower or construct agents as victims of oppressive structures. Instead it recognizes that educational leadership is a social practice, is about the interplay between agency and structure, and as such it enables respect for the reality of practice and through this reveals the dispositions and challenges that shape that practice. Furthermore, the implementation of innovations and measurement of impact does not only take place by forward tracking, but practice can be put under the spotlight and the field member can use 'more sophisticated methodologies, which work backward from practice' and so 'many of the ways research contributes to practice can be unravelled' (Bates, 2002: 5). Hence, instead of just regarding impact as isolating variables and attempting to measure them, the field member could begin with practice and examine how research is being used in real time, real life activity and actions (Ribbins et al., 2003).

## **Conceptualizing Research Practice**

Conceptualizing research within the field begins with practice and knowledge claims regarding how best field members currently do know, and might know more and better about that practice. Such claims are around the link between activity (such as leadership) and action (such as talking) with purposes through challenging what we know and might know more about, and providing ways forward for improving practice. I have argued that underpinning this are four main positions within the field on knowledge and knowing: two around understanding with a focus on meaning and experiences; and two around change with working for it and in securing it. Research within these knowledge claims is conceptualized through design and implementation, and by how the field member reads and thinks with it. Field historiography is vital to how the knower charts previous, current, and alternative narratives about the choices made and to be made. The field is created and recreated within and through time, and field members seek to fix and unfix this through analysing what is being done and why (e.g. Bolam, 1999). Hence field members do need to see engagement with research through the interplay between use and production: in constructing a conceptual framework the field member is simultaneously drawing on intellectual resources and generating new insights through the questions asked and the data generated. While technical conceptualization enables the field member to enquire what the situation is, on its own it is not enough. Illuminative conceptualization asks about meaning within a situation and so enables movement beyond description to emerging understanding, but this cannot necessarily explain. Critical conceptualization enables an engagement with the interplay between agency and structure, and so practice can be explained through revealing the power dimensions. But this could be pessimistic because it can tell us the situation we are in but may not interconnect with emancipation. Practical conceptualization puts a focus on making interventions to

improve a situation, but this cannot of itself open up the analysis to explanations regarding the epistemic communities that support such prescriptive ways of knowing. Positional conceptualization allows links to be made between research purposes and field territory, and how this inter-relates with a meta-field of power (government, university, private company). This multi-level approach enables the field member to design projects and read reports in ways that can describe, analyse, explain and improve practice, and ensure such inquiry is located within wider state and policy structures.

## Notes

1. This is the most inclusive understanding of field membership and one that is rooted in field historiography (see Baron, 1969). It is out of the scope of this article to provide a detailed conceptualization of field membership or the debates about inclusion and boundaries. However, I would challenge readers to use this understanding as they read through the article, and reflexively engage with how it enables recognition and participation within field membership, and what this means for knowledge production.
2. Glatter (2004: 211) reports that the National College for School Leadership cost £28 million and that the government grant for 2002–3 was £60 million.
3. I have examined the relationship between labels and knowledge claims in the field in Gunter (2004).

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### **Biographical note**

HELEN GUNTER is Professor of Educational Policy, Leadership and Management at the University of Manchester. She has written and researched into issues of theory and practice in educational leadership, and in particular on knowledge production.

### **Correspondence to:**

PROFESSOR HELEN M. GUNTER, School of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK. [email: Helen.gunter@Manchester.ac.uk]