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When Education Meets Environmental Activism: Analysis of the Emergence of the "Outdoor Schools" Movement Within French-speaking Belgium

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For several decades, efforts to transform the grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) have proved to be little fruitful, producing at best marginal transformations (Labaree, 2021; Mehta & Datnow, 2020). Today, however, we can observe in many countries that the omnipresent grammar of schooling is at the core of major debates regarding the future of education (Mehta & Datnow, 2020). Two tendencies can explain the rise of attempts to alter the conventional grammar of schooling. First, in the current context characterized by health, economic, ecological and social crises, concerns about our future and future generations have given rise to new educational imaginaries focused on the common good (Mehta, 2021; Taylor, 2017). They disrupt the taken-for-granted grammar of schooling through their particular philosophy, organization, governance structures, curriculum, pedagogy or type of students. Secondly, this tendency is also the result of new institutional pathways at the crossroads of the school institution and social movements, leading to a re-imagining of learning spaces and purposes (Taylor, 2017). As a result, the boundaries of organizations—i.e., what should or shouldn't be incorporated—are increasingly permeable to issues that go beyond them. Normative references and routines are no longer self-evident, and new partnerships are being created between organizations in order to assume the diversification of their missions (Devos, 2020). One of the most pressing contemporary challenges facing humanity is the preservation of the natural environment and the mitigation of anthropogenic impacts on the planet's ecosystems. Hence, individual actors and organizations are increasingly recognizing the importance of incorporating environmental concerns into their operations and decision-making (Dunlap & Brulle, 2015). As such, a new level of responsibility is required of educators whose job it is to prepare children to meet these profound challenges (Taylor, 2017).

In this paper presentation, we will analyze the emerging reality of "outdoor schools" as an attempt to reconfigure the grammar of schooling. Outdoor schools propose an education "outside the walls" by practicing a nature-based pedagogy that aims to rethink the place of humans within ecosystems (Wagnon & Martel, 2022). However, outdoor schools are emerging and still quite marginal, diverse initiatives. Indeed, environmental issues aren't self-evident within schools, just as there is no consensus on the best way to educate about the environment. Traditionally external to the school institution, these issues are today imported and shaped by social movements that make the ecological transition a driver for changes in society, including institutionalized fields such as the school field.

In order to understand the institutionalization of alternative educational models, and in particular the outdoor schools, we make use of an integrated conceptual framework, combining theories of new institutionalism and the sociology of social movements. This interdisciplinarity is necessary to understand and characterize "interstitial" spaces (Furnari, 2014; Zietsma et al., 2017) where environmental activism meets school institution, and whose cognitions and logics are constructed by a group of central actors (school actors) and a group of very heterogeneous actors who are also embedded in other fields (e.g., companies, associations, science, etc.). Moreover, an approach that more strongly integrates social movements into the dynamics of institutional change is needed to better understand when and how 1) fields are constituted around multiple and competing logics; and 2) multiple logics and contradictions "fuel" field-level change and the creation of new pathways (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016).

Empirically, our study explores both social and cognitive dimensions of a potential field's formation by tracing the evolution of representations and issues marked in discourses and link them to groups of actors competing or collaborating to shape the "interstitial field" (including institutional entrepreneurs, collectives, associations, organizations, etc.). It will be circumscribed to the study of the field in the French-speaking community of Belgium, while taking into account its international scope. We will use multiple sources of online data, using media coverage (articles, press releases, social media, websites, etc.) and interviews with key actors until data saturation.

Regarding the social dimension, a sociocentric and mixed network analysis will allow us to study the structure and history of the interstitial field (Eloire et al., 2011). A mapping of the individual and organizational actors involved will be carried out, with particular attention to the interstitial actors (e.g., ecological education associations, platforms for the professional development of ecological education systems). By means of questionnaires and quantitative techniques (such as web crawler), network analysis will investigate structural properties of networks, such as their composition, strength and density (Saunders, 2007). Qualitative network analysis, using semi-structured interviews with key informants, will allow us to understand how actors characterize the structural aspects of the network and to explain how actors and organizations come to occupy certain positions (Crossley, 2010).

Regarding the cognitive dimension, a topic modelling analysis will allow us to identify the discourses within the field. We will use content analyses of the documents presenting the missions and objectives of the main actors involved, aiming to identify the diagnostic and "prognostic" frameworks linking the climate crisis to education (Hannigan & Casasnovas, 2020). Our analysis will distinguish between two distinct elements in the discursive interactions of an emerging field (Augustine & King, 2017): the shared understanding of the issues that matter in the field (discursive coherence) and the shared opinion about these central issues (discursive agreement).

The combined analyses of the network of actors and topics will allow us to identify 1) the multiple populations within the "interstitial field" and the relationships they establish between them; 2) how the issues are framed, and 3) the interrelationships between the social and cognitive dimensions of the field, i.e., how the diversity of these connected populations and the competing institutional logics potentially influence the definition of problems.

Our preliminary results tend to show the heterogeneity and horizontality of the actors within this interstitial space, challenging the dichotomy of the theoretical categories "insiders" and "challengers" (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017). Indeed, this interstitial space brings together a diversity of actors who can all be considered activists, to varying degrees, interrelated by a common object that is outdoor education. Moreover, our ongoing analysis tends to show that cognitions and networks are interrelated. Indeed, this population diversity within the interstitial field accounts for the multiple forms of rationality; these inform the decision-making of the field's actors and induce struggle and contestation. The framing of what "outdoor schools" are, and the inclusion or exclusion of issues, continually redefine the boundaries of the interstitial field. They are thus influenced by the actors involved and also influence the flow of entry and exit into the field.

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