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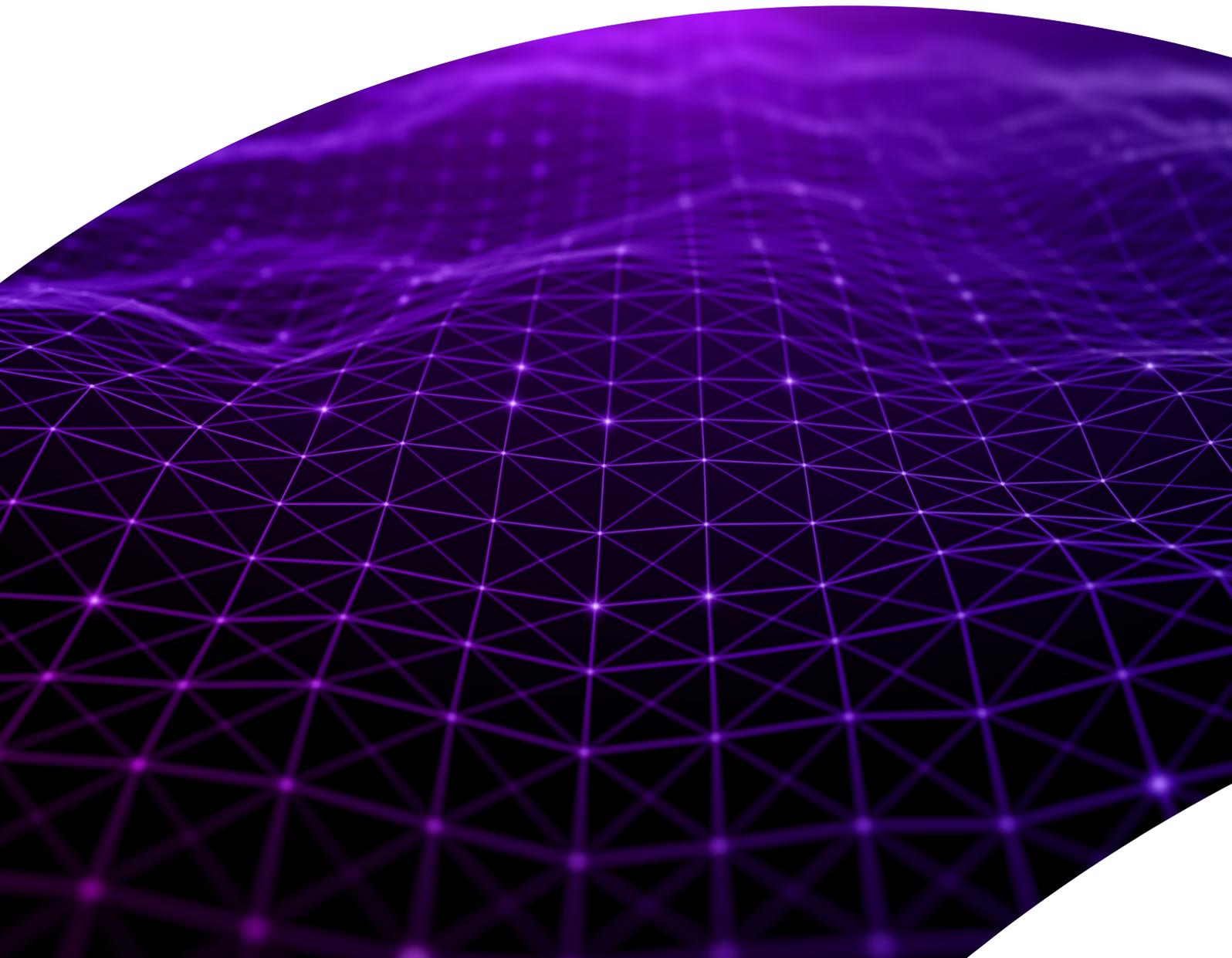of School Trusts

Communities of Improvement: School Trusts as fields of practice

Part of the CST 'A Bridge to the Future' series

About CST –
The voice of School Trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is "the advancement of education for public benefit."

We are governed by a Board of Trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.

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Introduction

CST considers that school Trusts are structures with the potential to build and mobilise knowledge pertaining to school improvement [1]. This paper seeks to extend this analysis by arguing that we need to understand school improvement as a field of practice rather than view it as a series of disconnected activities.

By doing so we are better placed to ask fundamental questions about what 'counts' as legitimate knowledge in the field and on what basis.

This is more than intellectual gymnastics; it is about exposing the theory and practice of school improvement to an analysis that has too often been overlooked.

This paper is not intended to be the last word but it offers a theoretical and practical framing which it is hoped might be extended further. By understanding school improvement as a field of practice we are better equipped to build school improvement knowledge and knowers.

1 Cruddas, L. & Bauckham, I. (2021) Knowledge-building - School improvement at scale. CST.

Into the arena

Bourdieu[2] described social practices, such as education, as being 'fields' – each consisting of a range of actors, rules and forms of capital. The term 'field' is rightly invocative of a sports field upon which there are players, rules and something to be contested. Bourdieu's theorising of fields establishes that within practices there are phenomena that are open to study: the field (what it is, who is/isn't in it, and what is contested) is imbued with meaning and the potential for explanatory power. All of which remains potentially unexamined if we fail to see the field itself as an object of study. To return to the sporting metaphor, this means that rather than view each blade of grass/each player/each pass, as being separately constituted and somehow detached from one another, by viewing the field as a system we can see the 'game' that is being played out before us.

This is significant because it marks a departure from how many within the field – within the game – experience it as it feels in day-to-day professional discourse. For understandable reasons many teachers and leaders do not have the time nor the theoretical framing to understand their practice as existing in this way: they traverse the field without perhaps being fully aware of its existence. Consequently, the forces that shape the field and what takes place within it can remain unhelpfully invisible.

If we can understand fields as being arenas of contestation then perhaps the next logical question to ask is, 'what is being contested?' We might answer 'control', but that leaves open the obvious retort: 'control of **what?** '
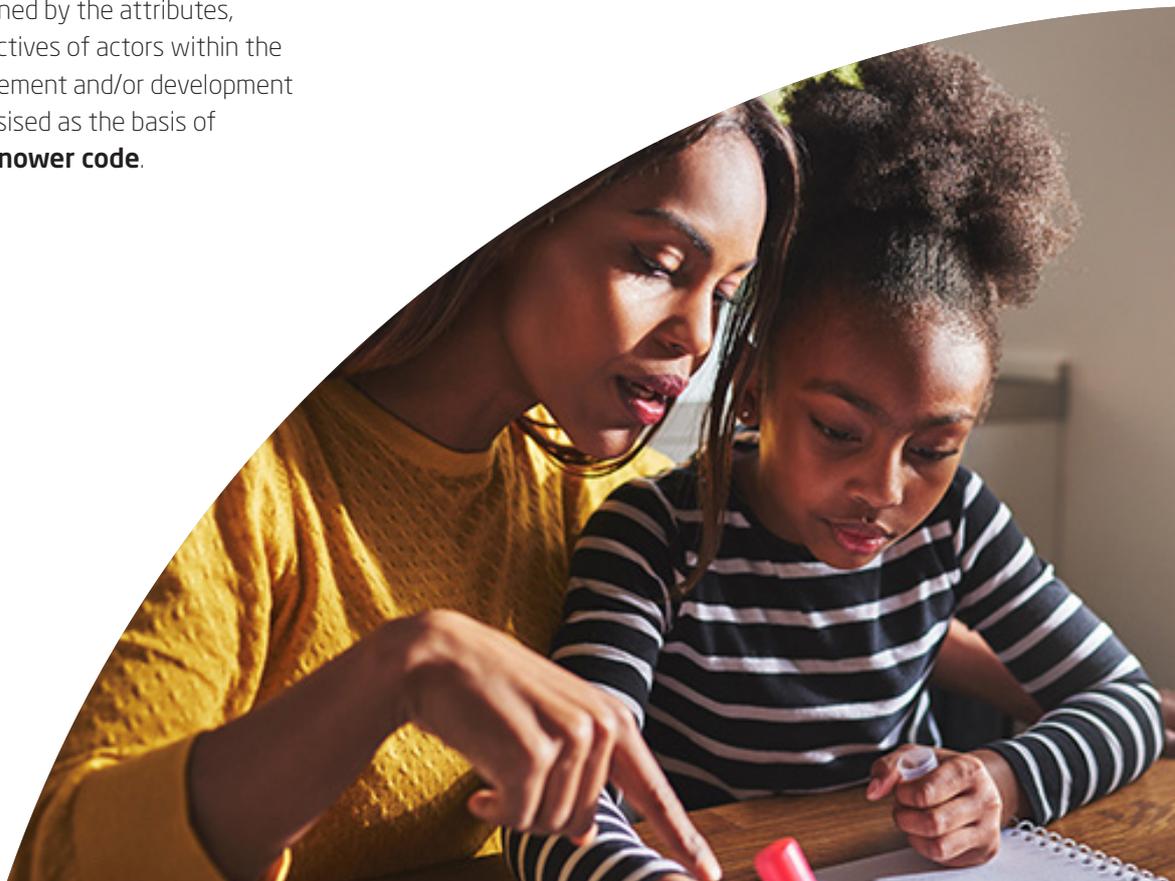

2 Bourdieu, P. (1977) Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

According to Maton[3] fields of practice are essentially concerned with control over what is deemed to be achievement within the field. As a shorthand we can say it is about control over 'what counts', or what is deemed to be legitimate within the field. Controlling this can affect the status of particular actors and practices within the field. This is not intended to imply that such struggles are always intentional, though they can be, but it recognises that 'what counts' in a field is open to contestation and potentially change.

The theoretical underpinnings of Maton's[4] Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) can be dense and complex. For simplicity's sake, here we will make two 'top level' observations drawn from LCT's dimension of specialization:

- Some fields are characterised by 'knowledge building'. 'What counts' is determined by the integration of theories and concepts so that the development and acquisition of specialist knowledge is emphasised as the basis of achievement. This is a **knowledge code**.

- Other fields are characterised by 'knower building'. 'What counts' is determined by the attributes, dispositions and perspectives of actors within the field so that the advancement and/or development of such actors is emphasised as the basis of achievement. This is a **knower code**.

It's important to recognise that these are relational terms rather than absolute. Every field has knowledge and every field has knowers, so it is not about the presence or absence of each – it is about which is more strongly emphasised. Indeed, there are fields where both are strongly emphasised, and also some where neither is emphasised and the basis of achievement is entirely open and, therefore, potentially random. For the limited purposes of this paper, the notion of knowledge building and knower building is what we'll take forward to analyse the field of school improvement.

But is school improvement a field? As Leander[5] notes, "A field can be exceedingly varied in scope and scale. A family, a village, a market, an organization, or a profession may be conceptualized as a field provided it develops its own organizing logic around a stake at stake. Each field is marked by its own taken-for-granted understanding of the world, implicit and explicit rules of behavior, and valuation of what confers power onto someone: that is, what counts as 'capital.'" Accordingly, we can see that 'school improvement', particularly in recent decades, can be seen as a field which is itself a subset of the wider field of education.

3 Maton, K. (2014) Knowledge and Knowers. Abingdon: Routledge.
4 Maton, K. (2014) Knowledge and Knowers. Abingdon: Routledge.
5 Leander, A. (2017). Habitus and Field. International Studies.

The notion of school improvement is manifest in numerous books and publications[678], in school & trust strategies and policies, and in the aims and objectives of governments[9] . It is even evident in job titles such as 'Director of Improvement.' To consider school improvement as a field of practice would seem entirely appropriate and potentially enlightening.

To recap, we can now theorise the field of school improvement in the following ways:

- School improvement, like other fields, is an area of contestation with actors struggling for control over 'what counts' in the field.

- What counts in the field might be determined by an emphasis on specialized knowledge and/or an emphasis on knowers. Accordingly, fields can be seen as being oriented towards **knowledge building** and/or **knower building**.

6 Steward, R. (2020) The Gradual Art of School Improvement: Routledge
7 Hughes, D. W. (2019) Future Proof Your School. St Albans: Critical Publishing.
8 Brighouse, T. & Woods, D. (2013) The A-Z of School Improvement. London: Bloomsbury.
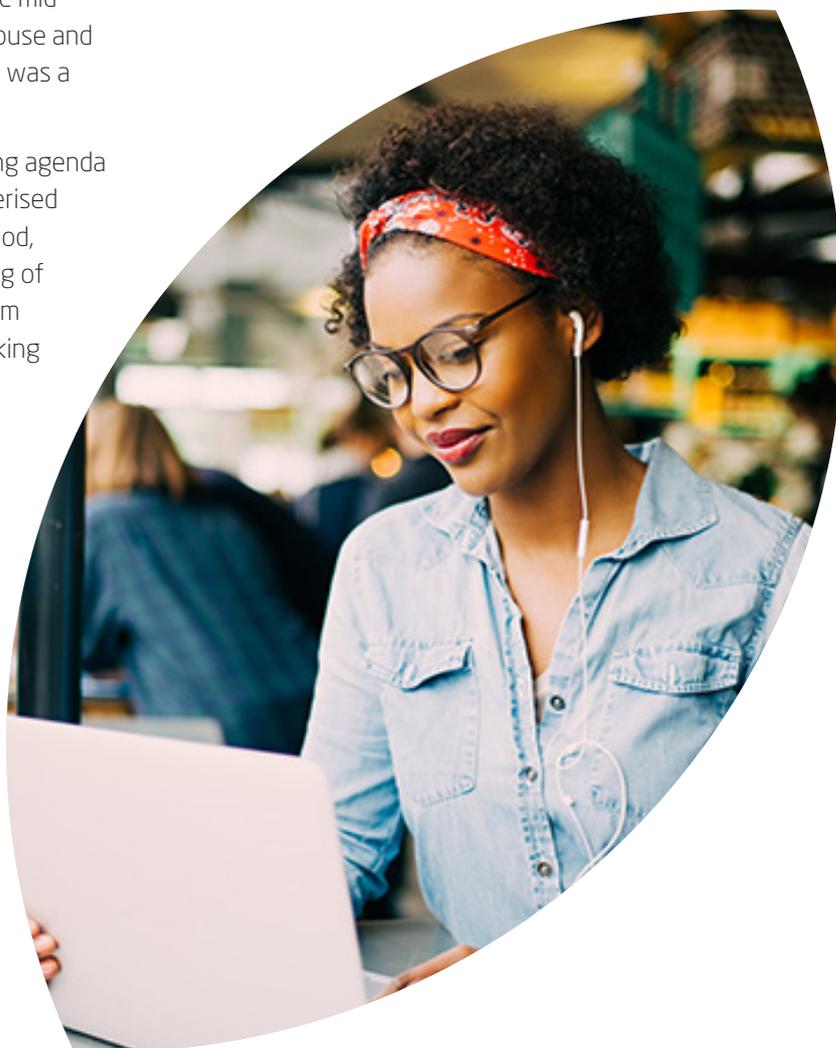**9 DfE (2021) Trust and school improvement offer**. ⎘

School improvement as a field of practice

Understanding school improvement as a contested field of practice is helpful because it allows us to see that what is done in the name of 'school improvement' may not be entirely arbitrary. Instead, there may be particular 'logics'[10] that influence the knowledge about school improvement that is created, used and disseminated. By being aware of these we can begin to understand why, for example, there are particular 'fashions' in school improvement and why these change over time. Take, for example, the language of 'personalisation' that was prevalent in school improvement discourse in the mid 2000s. Some of this trend can be seen in Brighouse and Woods'[11] 2013 recognition that personalisation was a 'buzz word of a few years ago'.

But we can also situate the personalised learning agenda within a broader narrative of education characterised by what Young[12] refers to as Future 2. This period, Young argues, was founded on an understanding of curriculum that prioritised tailoring the curriculum towards individuals' experiences, rather than taking them beyond their own experiences. It could be seen in notions of 'progress' too, which tended to be talked about in the abstract, such as with

National Curriculum levels, or thought of as progression through a set of skills that transcended the particular context or content of the subject curriculum. In this way, progress was often detached from the specifics of the subject matter a pupil was studying at any given time. For example, a Level 7 in History was achieved by being able to fulfil the generic Level 7 criteria for History, rather than being linked to specific historical content. This turn towards the generic manifested in an orientation towards the development of soft skills too.

10 Maton, K. (2014) Knowledge and Knowers. Abingdon: Routledge.
11 Brighouse, T. & Woods, D. (2013) The A-Z of School Improvement. London: Bloomsbury.
12 Young, M., Lambert, D., Roberts, C. Roberts, M. (2014) Knowledge and the Future School. London: Bloomsbury.

All of which meant that school improvement tended to be seen in particular ways:

- Personalising content towards the individual
- Development of generic/transferable skills
- A progression model that was detached from specified content of the curriculum

From an LCT perspective, these can be seen as an emphasis on social rather than epistemic relations as the means of conferring legitimacy – indicative of a knower code. What we've experienced in the past decade has been a strengthening of epistemic relations and a relative weakening of social relations to knowledge: a shift towards a knowledge code.

We can see the field of English education more generally, and the discourse of school improvement within it, has subsequently shifted towards a greater emphasis on specialised knowledge. For example, the new Early Career Framework[13] strongly emphasises the need for novice teachers to acquire specialised knowledge derived from cognitive science. In fact, the growing emphasis on cognitive science, recontextualised for the profession by writers such as Daniel Willingham [14] and Dylan Wiliam[15], seems to be an increasingly important part of what is

considered to be legitimate professional knowledge, with significant institutions such as Ofsted[16] also drawing on insights from cognitive science in its conception of teaching and curriculum quality. We see similar changes in the discourse about school leadership too[17].

These changes are not described here in order to empirically prove the system is oriented towards one code or another (it's more useful to see shifts as relative rather than absolute) rather, the aim is simply to illustrate how 'what counts' within a field can shift. By reading these shifts, actors within the field are better placed to support, challenge and create change in the underlying form and function of the field, and better able to tell when others are doing the same. In short, if we know the rules of the game we are better able to be in it.

13 DfE (2019) The Early Career Framework ☑

14 Willingham, D. (2009). Why Don't Students Like School? San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

15 Wiliam, D. (2018). Creating The Schools Our Children Need. West Palm Beach: Learning Sciences International.

16 Ofsted (2019). Education inspection framework: overview of research ☑

17 Barker, J. & Rees, T. Beyond the generic/domain-specific leadership dichotomy. Ambition Institute ☑

School Trusts as fields of practice

In fact, we might go further still. Just as we can theorise school improvement as being a subset of the broader field of education, we might consider our schools and Trusts, particularly those operating at scale, as being their own fields of practice. If we take the school Trust as a field of school improvement we can begin to pay closer attention to the actors and logics which shape the field. This is especially important if we conceive of school Trusts as being knowledge building structures because such a view brings us, implicitly or explicitly, to consider the school improvement knowledge we are building across the Trust:

- Which knowledge about school improvement should we value?
- Whose knowledge about school improvement should we value?
- On what basis do we decide the 'better' way of improving schools?
- Who are the legitimate actors in the field?
- What are the legitimate school improvement actions?

Let's look at two practical examples:

| Example A	Example B
An assistant headteacher is given responsibility for purchasing a range of books in order to establish a new professional development library in the staffroom. If we view this as merely a disconnected 'activity' this remains a relatively undertheorised, and therefore potentially misunderstood, task for the member of staff. But if we view this as taking place within a field of practice we start to situate this activity in relational terms to other aspects of the field. So, it's no longer just a question of 'which books should I buy? ', it's now 'how does the field inform my decision? ', or to put it another way, "what 'counts' as legitimate knowledge in my field? "	A Trust wishes to bring in an external consultant to contribute to a leadership development course they are running across the trust to support school improvement. What is the basis of this person's credibility for doing this role? Is it that they themselves have led successful school improvement? Is it the specialised knowledge they have of instructional practices? Is it their personal qualities and attributes?

Looking within our field of practice in order to understand the basis of such decisions helps us to see where there might be clashes and to plot a different course. For instance, in example B, if track record is regarded as being key to establishing credibility in the field (the Trust) it might be entirely counterproductive to bring in an external consultant on the basis of their personal qualities alone. Equally, if leaders are attempting to reconfigure the field around a greater emphasis on specialised knowledge (the application of cognitive science, for example), then it might seem coherent to bring in someone who has acquired and can share that knowledge.

Building Knowledge

And we can go yet further again, because by understanding how the field works we can think more carefully about how we actively seek to build **knowledge** and, importantly, how we build **knowers**.

As a rough approximation of the work of Bernstein[18] and Maton[19] we might say that some fields progress through two principle means: knowledge building and knower building. While fields may have aspects of both, most fields tend to be characterised more by one or the other.
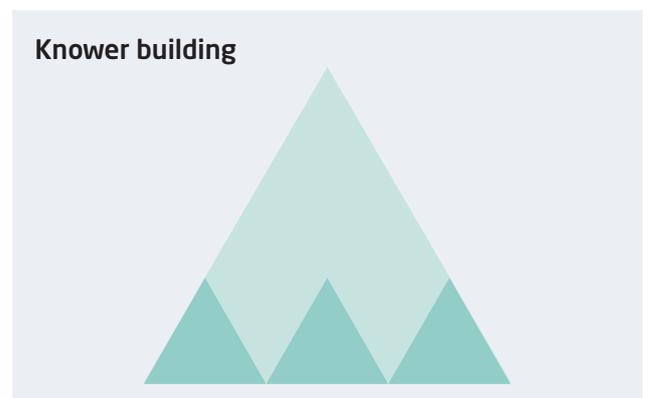
Knowledge building occurs through the deepening and ongoing integration of explanatory concepts. In such fields we build knowledge by finding concepts that explain more about the world. This is reflected in the science disciplines. Bernstein called these fields 'hierarchical' because concepts within them capture and explain a widening range of phenomena as the field progresses. Accordingly, they tend to be represented as triangles.

Knowledge building
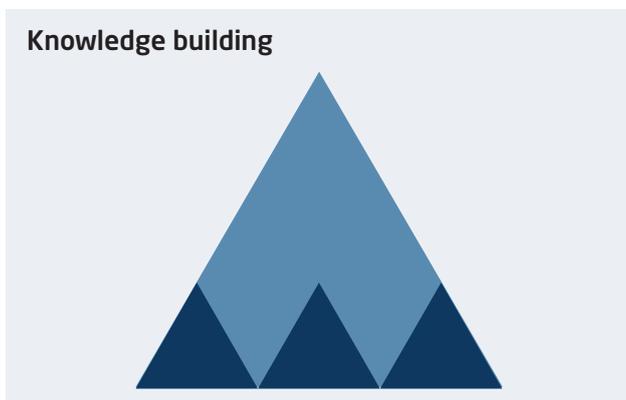
Fields that are not hierarchical were described by Bernstein as being 'horizontally' structured. These fields lack the ongoing integration of concepts and thus knowledge does not tend to build in the same way. We might think of these as being a series of smaller segmented triangles – they tend to sit alongside each other as separate knowledges rather than building on each other.
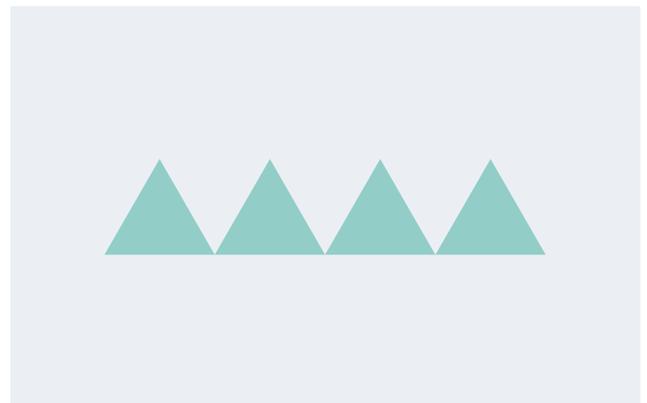
Maton, however, theorises that in these horizontal fields there is a form of hierarchization taking place, it just looks different. He argues that these 'horizontal' fields actually progress through **knower building**. This means that rather than capturing and integrating ever more explanatory concepts, these fields progress by integrating the works and perspectives of knowers within the field.

Knower building

18 Bernstein, B. (1996) Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity. London: Taylor &Francis.
19 Maton, K. (2014) Knowledge and Knowers. Abingdon: Routledge.

There are ways of being, thinking and acting within the field that are valorised, Maton argues. By engaging with the works of significant knowers within the field, Maton theorises, the field builds knowers who, through their resultant perspectives, develop more sophisticated understanding of the objects of the field (school improvement in our case) and who are themselves legitimate knowers. Maton calls this the cultivation of a 'gaze' – a particular way of seeing the field. It tends to be achieved through the establishment of a canon of significant works.

This can be a useful lens for considering school improvement. While there are explanatory concepts, and some aspects of the field may be orientated towards the mastery of specialised knowledge, it would also be true to say that much of the field is of the 'horizontal' nature Bernstein described: it is oriented towards knower building. Accordingly, as well as considering the specialised knowledge of our field we might also consider our canon of school improvement. Who would be in your canon of school improvement? What are the perspectives and dispositions that are valorised in your field? Who (and where) are the significant school improvers we think our school improvers should know about?

All of the above points to a realization with significant implications for education and school improvement: knowledge building is a collaborative and cumulative endeavour. If we're to build better knowledge about school improvement, it is not the work of individuals; it is the ongoing concern of communities. Accordingly, school trusts must elevate their thinking on school improvement so that it reaches beyond improving only individual teachers (as important as this is), towards improving 'teaching' - collectively elevating the practice of the field. It's worth saying too that while this will naturally be about developing specialized knowledge and knowers in relation to classroom pedagogy, it will also bring in a range of other knowledges pertaining to issues such as behaviour, curriculum, culture, leadership and so on. By regarding these as being located within a field of practice we take an important step closer to cumulative knowledge building.

From theory to practice

This paper has made the theoretical case that we should consider school improvement as a field of practice, rather than view it as a set of disconnected and untheorised activities. It also explains how we might view Trusts as a subset of that field: a subset that is engaged in building the knowledge and knowers of the field. But what are the practical implications for school Trusts?

We know that some parts of the field consist of well evidenced and empirically tested specialised knowledge. For example, the literature on how to improve reading is compelling. Ofsted's 2019 research review argued that "studies show that explicit and systematic teaching of the manipulation of phonemes (the smallest unit of sound in a language) and phonemic awareness (the ability to identify phonemes in written words) is crucial and should be continued until children can automatically process this information. Direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies was found to be effective. Children's reading development is also aided by a literature-rich environment and practice in reading authentic literature and familiar materials.[20]"

Given the weight of evidence, a school improvement strategy seeking to improve reading might be seen as running counter to the field if it did not take account of this sort of specialised knowledge.

However, as explained above, what is 'true' in the field is also shaped by more 'knowery' considerations which are less determined by empirical evidence and specialised knowledge. For example, the ethos of the Trust or its approach to managing behaviour may be seen as emerging from things like vision and community. The notion of gaze can be helpful here: what is the legitimate gaze in our field (Trust)? How should our school improver knowers act? What perspectives should they have? For example, is part of our school improvement gaze based on notions of high expectations? How do we cultivate these within staff and students?

The following questions might be helpful in exploring the knowledge and knowers of the school improvement field of practice within your Trust:

Oriented towards building	Questions
Knowledge	- What does research reveal about effective school improvement? - What are the school improvement theories and concepts you want teachers and leaders to know? - On what basis?
Knowers	- What is the school improvement gaze you want your teachers and leaders to cultivate? - What are the perspectives and dispositions that should underpin school improvement? - Who/what is in your school improvement canon? - On what basis?

20 Ofsted (2019). Education inspection framework: overview of research

Next steps

Perhaps the most important point is that by theorising school improvement as a field of practice we create a shared mental model for ongoing professional discourse. Those leading on school improvement within trusts can see their trust as being a dynamic field of practice but also locate that within the wider discourse of the field. Within this they can debate, influence and learn from one another, collectively building knowledge and knowers. By deliberately building specialised knowledge of school improvement, and specialising school improvers as knowers, the field is better equipped to think coherently about school improvement and thus be more effective for children.

CST is building on the theory outlined in this paper by bringing together actors within the school improvement field to discuss, shape and codify its knowledge and knowers. Our Directors of Improvement network is constituted on that basis. It is not merely a 'network' in the sense of simply connecting individuals. Rather, it is, we hope, a community of improvement at the heart of a field of practice. We look forward to working with the Trust sector - with you - on this important work.