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# Positioning school business practitioners in the English school system

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## Abstract

This article explores the increasing professionalisation of school business practitioners in the state school system in England. Often referred to as ‘school business managers’ or ‘school business leaders’, this cohort of the school workforce have been increasingly tasked with leading crucial site-based management functions in schools, such as finance and budgeting, human resources and school operations. As this area of practitioner activity has grown over the last two decades, ‘school business leadership’ has increasingly been positioned by education policy makers and professional bodies as a distinct field of practice within the school system. However, despite increasing recognition of the value of school business leadership within the school system, there is evidence of continued tensions around the inclusion of such practitioners in matters of leadership. Further, there is a paucity of scholarly research exploring school business activity and the increasing professionalisation of its practitioners. Therefore, this article serves to contribute to this gap by exploring the evolution of school business practitioners and their positioning within the wider field of education in England. It argues for further research in England and for knowledge exchange with other education contexts to share insight and explore future potential.

## Keywords

education management, England, reform, school business leaders, school business management, school leadership

## Introduction

The 1988 Education Reform Act brought about new accountabilities and activities for schools to manage and administrate through the introduction of ‘*site-based management*’ (Gunter, 2016: 30). As the school system in England has increasingly diversified over the last two decades, a new cohort of practitioners has emerged and evolved. Often referred to as ‘school business managers’ or ‘school business leaders’, the activity of these practitioners has continued to grow with ‘school business leadership’ increasingly positioned by education policy makers and professional bodies as a distinct field of practice within the system. However, despite the evolution of this practitioner cohort and increasing recognition of their value within the school system, there is a paucity of scholarly research exploring this field of activity and the increasing professionalisation of school business practitioners. To contribute to this gap and stimulate debate on this underexplored cohort of the school workforce, this article begins by drawing on a Bourdieusian lens to consider the position of school business leadership as a distinct field of activity situated within the wider education field. It then draws on the work of Gunter and Ribbins’ (2002) and Ribbins and Gunter’s (2002) to outline the rationale and approach taken in tracing the evolution of this practitioner group. It then moves to trace over two decades of work by policy makers and professional bodies to position school business

practitioners alongside their teaching colleagues. In doing so, it illuminates evidence of continued tensions around the inclusion of such practitioners in matters of school leadership. The article concludes by considering future directions and the need for further research to more deeply understand the positioning of such practitioners in the wider field. Further, it argues for knowledge exchange with other education contexts that share local management characteristics to develop further insights into this field of practitioner activity and its potential for future development.

## Positioning school business leadership in the field of education

The education landscape in England has become increasingly diverse. In this paradoxical self-improving school-led system, a rhetoric of school autonomy grows in the midst of increasing central accountabilities (Simkins et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2020). Indeed, uncertainty and complex expectations continue, a performativity agenda increases, local authority control is declining, and new school

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structures have emerged (Courtney, 2015a; Coldron et al., 2014; Hargreaves, 2012; Rayner, 2018; Woods, 2014, 2017).

As Gunter (2016: 30) highlights, the 1988 Education Reform Act accelerated a shift away from '*autonomous educational professionals*' via the introduction of '*site-based management*'. This brought about 'a system whereby educational professionals managed income generation and the budget, hired and fired staff, and had to market provision within a quasi-competitive system' (Gunter, 2016: 30). As a result, a new type of practitioner has increasingly entered the field of education traditionally populated by teaching practitioners. Southworth (2010: 1) reflected on this as '*a quiet revolution*' stemming from the wake of these rapid reforms as he explored the increasing professionalisation of this evolving practitioner role; the school business manager (SBM). As Woods et al. (2013: 752) suggest

... the case of the SBM can be viewed as part of an international movement of professionalization of the public sector workforce ... Reforms to school business management nationally have been rapid and far-reaching and SBMs are often now key players in schools.

As Armstrong (2018: 1276) observes, school business managers can be understood as 'a cohort of the school workforce who are not directly involved in educational leadership or classroom practice but nevertheless play a crucial role in the ecosystem of the school'. Since 2000, in the context of an on-going policy drive for efficiency, shifting accountabilities have increasingly diversified site-based management functions across the school system (Armstrong, 2018; Creaby, 2018; Wood, 2017). This has continued to influence the evolution of school business management activity resulting in the emergence of a range of role titles over the last decade, such as finance director and business director, with the title of 'school business manager' still widely used (DfE, 2017a, 2019a; ISBL, 2020a). The scope and responsibility level of such roles can vary greatly depending on the context of the school. Many practitioners are now operating at a senior level, either as part of a leadership team in an individual school or as part of an executive team in a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) (Cirin and Bourne, 2019; Creaby, 2018; ESFA, 2019; ISBL, 2020a).

Over a decade ago, Southworth (2010) suggested that it was perhaps time to start thinking of 'school business management' as a profession due the prevalence of SBM roles and the distinct activity undertaken that separated them from the teaching workforce. As the last decade progressed, references to 'the school business profession' and the practice of 'school business leadership' – and to practitioners as 'school business leaders' or 'school business professionals' – have increasingly appeared in practitioner and policy language (e.g. Cirin and Bourne, 2019; ESFA, 2019; ISBL, 2020a). As Gunter (2001: 143) suggests, a profession can be understood as an identifiable group that is '... connected to both the abstracting of behaviours, which is what makes one profession distinctive from or similar to

another, and the power systems that control membership inclusion and exclusion ...' However, as Gunter (2001: 143) further highlights, '[d]ebating the meaning of profession and professional behaviour has a long and contested history in relation to education ...' Instead, what appears helpful for understanding the activity of school business practitioners is how Gunter and Ribbins (2002: 412) – stemming from Gunter (2001) – use the term '*professional*' to mean '*professionalism*'. The meaning of '*professionalism*' is taken by Gunter and Ribbins (2002: 412) to differ from traditional approaches that frame a profession as an 'elite group' or 'as being a professional possessing particular attributes'. Their notion of professionalism instead focuses on what practitioners do, how they do it and why they do it. As this article later traces, within the English context, considerable effort has been undertaken by professional bodies to underpin a level of requirement for those undertaking school business practitioner roles in the changing policy context. Indeed, as Starr (2020) highlights within this special issue, professionalisation has continued at pace through evidence of self-governance and self-regulation, and the development of professional standards, qualifications, career pathways, and practitioner networks. However, 'the process of professionalisation is not a linear and smooth path ...' (Gunter, 2001: 143).

As Armstrong (2018: 1266) highlights, school business practitioners in England appear as a rather 'nascent' group seeking to carve out their own space or territory within a system traditionally managed and led by trained educationists. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice is then a helpful lens through which to view school business practitioner activity as part of the wider education field and consider its positioning. In Bourdieusian terms, *field* relates to a social space where players – social actors – are positioned and legitimatised. As Gunter and Ribbins (2002) articulate, from Bourdieu's theory of practice comes the notion of *habitus* which can be understood as the disposition to act which reveals activity within a defined field, for example how one goes about being a 'teacher' or 'school business leader'. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice also presents the notion of *capital* – material or symbolic – which is valued within a specific field. When forms of capital are mobilised in particular ways, an individual can claim (or is afforded) a certain position of rank or status within the social hierarchy of the field. Bourdieu's forms of capital relate to *economic capital*, such as wealth and financial resources, and *social capital* in relation to access to relationships, networks and groups. *Cultural capital* can involve the *embodied* (such as work experience), the *institutional* (such as academic qualifications), and the *objectified* (such as artefacts, dress, and other material assets). Through a Bourdieusian lens, a field is occupied by dominant members who define and perpetuate the implicit rules of the field (doxa), the legitimate habitus, and what capital is deemed valuable within the field, with the latter tending to reflect the habitus of the most dominant cohort of members. In applying the notions of capital and habitus, Gunter's (2016: 29–30) observations of 'leaders, leading and leadership' is helpful in positioning school business

practitioners as a cohort of members undertaking leadership activity in the wider field of education:

- Educational leadership: leadership is directly linked to educational practices and purpose, developing pedagogy and curriculum, and is focussed on learning
- School leadership: leadership is directly linked to organisational purposes and management functions, with a focus on efficiency, effectiveness and data driven outcomes
- Leadership of schools: leadership is directly linked the tactics of implementing externally driven regulated change, with those who work in schools with a title of 'leader' focussed on these tactics.

As Gunter observes, each of these three activities are seen within schools in England as a '*complex layering*', but with a movement away from a more traditional focus on educational leadership 'towards a hybridized version of school leadership and the leadership of schools' (2016: 30). The activity/habitus of educationalists, such as teachers and headteachers, can be understood as traditionally linked to educational leadership, with a more hybridized form coming into play due to the influence of policy reform. Whereas school business practitioner activity/habitus appears to firmly occupy a space within with this hybridized version of leadership as part of policy reform. Such practitioners undertake forms of leadership directly linked to organisational management functions (e.g. finance, operations and human resources), but also tactically implement externally regulated change (e.g. efficiency policies, health and safety).

As Southworth (2010: 15) observed, despite '*proof of concept*' of the SBM role and the value it can bring to schools, there is an evident history of scepticism by headteachers whereby school business practitioners have been perceived as not involved in educational leadership and therefore not a relevant addition to senior leadership teams. In the decade passing since Southworth's (2010) observations, there is evidence that this perception is changing as this article will trace. However, participation in senior leadership activity in schools is still a continuing challenge for many practitioners based on surveys and reports from professional bodies (e.g. ASCL, 2019a; Creaby, 2018; ISBL, 2020a). Therefore, for school business practitioners as emergent field members, in exhibiting a different habitus and possessing different forms of capital from dominant field members (teachers and educational leaders), legitimacy appears to be an on-going struggle. As Woods et al. (2013: 763) argue '... the complexities of what business management can involve, and what a business manager's role might legitimately include, can be understood very differently by members of the school community'. Indeed, the definition of 'profession' in Gunter's (2001) terms is problematic for school business practitioners to claim within a field where the legitimate profession is 'teaching' and status for inclusion into leadership activity is a teacher habitus and certain forms of capital, e.g.

qualified teacher status (QTS). In addition, paradoxically, as part of the shift away from autonomous educational professionals towards a hybridized school-led system, school business practitioners appear as having been increasingly professionalised within a context of de-professionalisation. This could appear contentious to educationalists experiencing de-professionalisation and could result in their resistance to these new field members who have evolved out of such policy reform. Indeed, as this article will later trace, school business leadership has a legacy of government influence. However, this has receded in the last decade as professional bodies have become more active in the professionalisation of school business practitioners, including those historically focussed on educationalists. Thus, exploring the way in which such evolving roles are perceived by educational leaders, and how the intention of leaders, leading, and leadership is understood in local settings would appear necessary. However, as Woods et al. (2013: 763) observe '... such matters have excited little attention among education scholars, a state of affairs that we believe should be addressed'.

Despite several years passing since Woods et al.'s (2013) observations, exploration of school business practitioners, and the activity of school business leadership, remains largely absent from education management and leadership debate in the English context beyond the academic publications of Woods et al. (2013, 2012), Wood (2017) and Armstrong (2018). As a crucial cohort of the school workforce (Armstrong, 2018), this paucity of exploration compared with their teaching colleagues and senior leadership counterparts is in stark contrast given the journey of professionalisation evident for these practitioners, which further problematises their legitimacy in the field of education. Therefore, to begin to address this apparent gap, the purpose of this article is to illuminate historical (and present) dimensions of the increasing professionalisation of school business practitioners as a '*committed commentator*' (Gunter and Ribbins, 2002: 387). The purpose of doing so is to capture and share this evolution with education management and leadership scholars to stimulate debate, which has been persistently lacking in the English context. This is in addition to furthering global knowledge exchange around the positioning of practitioners in education systems given that similar business management functions and practitioner roles appear established in similar education contexts; for example, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United States of America and Canada (Armstrong, 2018; ASBO, 2020; ASBOI, 2020; Keating and Moorcroft, 2006; Smith and Riley, 2010; Starr, 2015, 2012; Woods, 2014; Woods et al., 2013).

### Tracing a history as a '*committed commentator*'

In tracing the evolution of school business practitioners, and their increasing professionalisation, I follow Gunter and Ribbins (2002) – who draw on Bolam's (1999) work – as a helpful starting point. Hence, this article can be understood in two ways. Firstly, as a '*knowledge for*

*understanding*’ project as I seek to describe, explain and analyse the increasing professionalisation of school business practitioners (Bolam, 1999: 195). Secondly, it can be understood as a ‘*knowledge for action*’ project as I seek to inform others (education scholars and stakeholders) about the nature of this distinct field of activity to stimulate debate (Bolam, 1999: 195). In doing so, I position myself as a knowledge worker and this article in the role of what Gunter and Ribbins (2002: 387) suggest as a ‘*mediator*’. By this, I argue that I am not seeking to provide a solution to a defined problem, and this article does not seek to claim an ‘*absolute truth*’ about school business practitioners. Rather, I seek to stimulate dialogue about what is known and what might not be known about the evolution of school business leadership and the practitioners that undertake its activity. I recognise that this is problematic in the way Gunter and Ribbins (2002: 287) suggest, in that I am not a ‘neutral conduit through which the data flow’ but instead, I am a ‘*committed commentator*’ stressing ‘the importance of recognizing the field [of school business leadership] as a contested space where dialogue is central to the generation of ideas’. As Gunter and Ribbins remind, this is not without bias as such tracing activities offer ‘a selective view of reality and do not show the world as it actually is’ (2002: 390). Furthermore, as Gunter and Ribbins (2002: 388) highlight, it is also important to note that

... knowledge production is a demanding task as it requires description, understanding and explanation of what is done, how it is done, who does it, where it is done and why it is done. Furthermore, it has a historical dimension of what was done, a dimension to the present of what is being done, and a future orientation of what might be done.

Indeed, as Gunter and Fitzgerald (2017: 194) argue, examining the past can help to understand the here and now, and enable ‘historically informed thinking to live in our research conceptualisations and methodologies’ and illuminate various standpoints and interpretations. As Gunter and Ribbins (2002: 391) reflect, much ‘practitioner activity goes unrecorded except within the recalled emplotted life’. So far, there have been few scholarly accounts that recall the ‘emplotted’ life of school business leadership as a distinct arena of evolving practitioner activity. Hence, there is a need to engage in research on school business leadership, and its practitioners, to create ‘... a contested area of dialogue about development’ as this can ‘enable us to capture and analyse activity, but will also reflexively develop agendas for the future we are struggling over’ (Gunter, 2001: 153).

In drawing on Ribbins and Gunter’s (2002: 374–375) knowledge domains, the framing of this article can be understood as informed by a ‘*humanistic*’ knowledge domain as it is concerned with gathering – or rather tracing the history of – the evolution of school business practitioners in England. In doing so, this article therefore has a ‘*substantial concern for historiography*’ and draws on ‘*literary and other non-empirical sources*’ to articulate what is known (2002: 374). As Gunter (2016: 46) reflects, a humanistic approach is therefore focused on ‘capturing

the experience of change and how it might be understood’. Further, I argue that this article is a ‘non-rational’ way of understanding and expressing knowledge, which can be descriptive and normative, framed in the way Greenfield and Ribbins (1993: 254, in Ribbins and Gunter, 2002: 375) suggest as ‘powerful, satisfying and important ...’ drawing on methods ‘... that are essentially cast within an artistic, literary, historical, philosophical even journalistic mode. A mode that is descriptive, with-holding judgement, though moving towards it, moving to insight’.

In framing this article predominantly through Ribbins and Gunter’s (2002: 377–379) humanistic knowledge domain, it’s rationale can therefore be further understood through their seven groupings of work. Firstly, its purpose is to describe and analyse ‘what is’ to offer a contribution to knowledge. Secondly, the focus is concerned with leaders, leadership, leading (in this case school business practitioners) and their agency. Thirdly, the context is the inter-relationship of meso-micro. Fourthly, the method is qualitative and is developmental-reflective in that ‘the findings of empirical research carried out by others, are the starting point for critical review and logical argument’ (Bassey, 1995: 5, in Ribbins and Gunter, 2002: 380). As noted, given that research is limited in this area, I defer to other literary and non-empirical sources (as outlined below). Fifth, the targeted audience is professional researchers and researching professionals, however, it may also be useful for school business leadership stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, professional bodies, practitioners). Sixth, communication is undertaken via reporting to the research community (this article) and to policy makers and practitioners via established networks and conference presentation. Seventh, and finally, the impact sought is an observable change in research interest in this area (via an increase in outputs).

As noted, seeking to trace the history of school business leadership in the English context is problematic given the dearth of scholarly empirical research and debate beyond the academic publications of Woods et al. (2013, 2012), Wood (2017) and Armstrong (2018). However, there are key literary and non-empirical sources available. This includes reports stemming from the National College<sup>1</sup> and the Department for Education (DfE), a small number of co-edited practitioner-focused books on school business management (e.g. Keating and Moorcroft, 2006), and non-peer reviewed empirical research and reports by professional bodies (e.g. ASCL, 2019a; Creaby, 2018; ISBL, 2020a). Much of this literature stretches over two decades and contains evidence of activity influencing the professionalisation of school business practitioners and is available on open government licence via The National Archives (TNA, 2020), the Department for Education, and via professional bodies or other forms of open publication.

## Tracing the history of school business practitioners and their evolution

I now move on to trace the evolution of school business practitioners, via two key sections: the emergence of school

business management (1990s/2000s); the evolution of school business leadership (2010–2019).

### *The emergence of school business management (1990s–2000s)*

As Armstrong (2016) outlines, school business management in England can be traced back to a tradition of Bursarship from the independent school sector. Within the state school system, in the wake of 1988 Education Reform Act, the role of school business manager grew as part of a significant drive to develop administrative and managerial capacity in schools (Armstrong, 2018; O’Sullivan et al., 2000; Woods, 2014). This included an initial emergence of bursar roles in schools during the 1990s as site-based management began to grow, with headteachers and senior teachers managing new accountabilities with support from bursarial staff. Attention then turned to the upskilling of ‘bursar’ roles as part of the reforms to the school workforce as local accountabilities continued to shift and concerns around headteacher and teacher workload grew (Parliament, 1998a, 1998b; PwC, 2001; Woods, 2014). In 2002, the National College launched the Bursar Development Programme (BDP). This programme was originally initiated by Estelle Morris (the then Secretary of State for Education of the New Labour Government), signifying an important step in the journey of professionalisation, from ‘bursar’ to ‘school business manager’ in England (Southworth, 2010; Wood et al., 2007). The BDP contained a suite of school business management qualifications specifically designed to train and upskill school bursars and administrative staff to meet the needs of increasing business accountabilities at school level.

The BDP programme gained momentum during the 2000s which included emphasis on the value that the role of the ‘school business manager’ (SBM) could bring to schools (Wood et al., 2007). In 2009, the National Association of School Business Management (NASBM) partnered with The National College to develop a competency framework. This was based around the key functions of school business management to support career development pathways and maximise impact in schools (DfE, 2014; NASBM and National College, 2009). These bespoke qualifications and professional competencies signified a further key step in the professionalisation of practitioners, as these new forms of cultural capital were attached to practitioner requirements. It also illuminates this as further work to position school business practitioners alongside teachers via accountability to standards of practice. International knowledge exchange also developed through the 2000s. This was undertaken by way of formal visits, professional conferences, practitioner exchange programmes, and interaction with established networks. Much of this was led by the National College via work with professional bodies and organisations representing the interests of school business practitioners across various contexts. This included Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and the United States of America (Keating and Moorcroft, 2006; Starr, 2012, 2014, 2015; Woods, 2014; Woods et al., 2013). This illuminated

an increasing international interest in school business practitioner activity and a growth in social capital, with organisations such as the Association for School Business Officials International (ASBOI) achieving representation from several different countries (ASBOI, 2020; Woods, 2014).

However, despite these attempts to increase cultural and social capital, by 2010 school business practitioners in England still appeared as a rather emergent cohort standing in the shadow of a more traditional model of educational leadership in schools. As raised earlier, Southworth (2010) noted concerns on the future sustainability of school business management as a ‘profession’ in relation to an apparent tension around their position within senior leadership teams (SLTs). This appeared to be linked to how the role was understood, accepted and valued by headteachers, in addition to disparity in pay and conditions. Thus, by 2010, the position of school business practitioners within the wider field appeared contentious as dominant field members resisted the attempts by policy makers to position these practitioners alongside established educational leaders. The forms of capital deemed to be valuable by field members further problematised this, with expectations of habitus and cultural capital highly focused on teaching assets (e.g. QTS). This was compounded by academic research on education leadership, management, and administration in the English context remaining heavily focused on teachers and the leadership of educational practices, purpose and pedagogy. Research on school business practitioners that was completely independent from the National College literature was scant during this decade. Indeed, beyond the sole academic text by O’Sullivan et al. (2000), much of the research literature on school business practitioners created during the 2000s focused on evaluation reports of National College programmes or interventions and were written and published, in the main, by the National College (e.g. NCSL, 2007a, 2007b; National College, 2010). Hence, it can be argued that academic legitimacy of school business practitioners in the wider field was lacking and thus potentially a further constraining factor to the value of their capital.

### *The evolution of school business leadership (2010–2019)*

The role of school business leaders has become increasingly complex. It has evolved in a paradoxical turbulent environment in which schools are addressing innovative policy requirements... business leaders have accepted a widening remit and increased their core responsibilities to share the increased workload of the headteacher... linked to an understanding of policy changes and their impact on the learning environment.

Wood (2017: 168)

The turn of the last decade brought the rise of academisation and reduction of local authority control in England (Courtney, 2015b; Rayner, 2018; Woods et al., 2020). Subsequent complexities have since evolved which led to the

traditional school business manager ‘generalist’ role from the 2000s becoming broader during the 2010s as accountabilities have increased (Armstrong, 2018; Creaby, 2018; Wood, 2017, 2014). As highlighted earlier, ‘school business leadership’ is an increasingly common term to describe this field of activity. Furthermore, academisation in England has given rise to ‘specialist’ roles emerging as new players within the field. For example, school business leaders or directors are often found in senior positions, either working across a set of schools, or working at the executive level in multi-academy trusts (MATs) leading a specific function of site-based management (Armstrong, 2016; Cirin and Bourne, 2019; Creaby, 2018; ISBL, 2020a). This has resulted in a growing diversity in the required skillset to lead school business functions (Armstrong, 2018; Creaby, 2018). Despite this, in 2014 after over a decade of leading on the development of practitioners, the National College stated its plan to move away from the design and provision of the school business management programmes in England, with scholarship funding for SBP programmes ending in 2016. As part of its merger with The Teaching Agency (Crown, 2020), this was deemed by the National College (NCTL, 2014: online) to be in line with their purpose to ‘*create a self-improving, school-led system*’ with expectations that programmes would be run by independent training providers and driven by sector needs. Following this move, attention on school business practitioners, and investment in their development, appeared somewhat side-lined in policy debates compared with the activities of the previous decade, including a decline in international knowledge exchange. However, interest in school business practitioners continued at a similar pace to the 2000s in other contexts outside of England. This can be observed via the growth of various network groups such as ASBOI (2020) and growing academic interest in other contexts, for example Australia, the United States of America and New Zealand, as noted by Armstrong (2018), Starr (2012, 2014, 2015), Woods (2014) and Woods et al. (2013).

The decline of government control of professional standards and career development left a space for the emergence of sector-led, practice-informed professional development (Armstrong, 2016; Creaby, 2018; Wood, 2017). Hence, in 2015, the National Association of School Business Management (NASBM) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) undertook consultation with practitioners to co-develop a professional standards framework to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving policy context (NASBM and CIPFA, 2015). This involved practitioner voice and moved beyond the earlier 2009 competency framework codeveloped with the National College with a vision ‘to establish a clear blueprint for effective school and academy business management and celebrate existing best practice’ (ISBL, 2019a: online). These standards outlined key functions of the school business manager role alongside professional values and behaviours drawn from established practice from within the education sector and the public sector. Thus, self-governance and self-regulation was emerging

within the system as the sole professional body focussed on school business practitioners began to lead the drive for professionalisation in the wake of declining government control. This was undertaken via collaboration with other professional bodies and sector stakeholders, which could be understood as a further step to influence the social capital of school business practitioners. For example, in late 2015, NASBM advocated for the creation of a collaborative steering group to develop qualifications, standards and training for ‘school business professionals’. This steering group – entitled the ‘School Business Professional Training and Development Board (SBPT&DB)’ since 2019 – is so far the broadest example of continuing sector-led effort focused on the development of school business practitioners (ISBL, 2019b). The board holds representatives from NASBM, the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Unison, the National Governors Association (NGA), accreditation bodies, training providers, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and practitioners, as well as invited observers from the Department for Education (ISBL, 2019b). Hence, the foundation of a broad social network stretching across the wider education field was established, which remains currently present.

In 2016, NASBM announced its transition to Institute status to have a developmental role within the sector and became the Institute for School Business Leadership in 2017. The 2015 professional standards (NASBM and CIPFA, 2015) were adopted by the ISBL in this transition (ISBL, 2019a). This movement to institute status involved sector-wide consultation, membership endorsement and the approval of the Secretary of State (ISBL, 2020c). This move included the purposeful use of ‘school business leadership’ over ‘school business management’, illuminating a claim to a position of leadership activity in the wider field. This led to the development of the 2019 ISBL Professional Standards (ISBL, 2020a) via input from the SBPT&DB, in addition to a range of stakeholders (including NAHT and ASCL) and external professional bodies, including CIPFA and the National Audit Office, alongside the input of school business practitioners and headteachers (ISBL, 2020a). The standards also accounted for the increasingly diverse range of local accountabilities through embedding a tiered approach to responsibility levels in schools in England. Thus, during the second half of this decade, aspects of self-governance and self-regulation developed at rapid pace alongside a sense of increased social capital as networks and partnerships were influencing and facilitating the development of professional standards and qualifications. However, by 2017, renewed efforts by policy makers were again evident as recognition of the work of practitioners began to feature increasingly in policy statements. For example, the former Minister of State for School Standards – The Rt Hon Nick Gibb (DfE, 2017a: online) – highlighted

... the role of the school business manager has never been more important... School business professionals play a vital role in strategic and financial management, which enables

more teachers and headteachers time to be given over to teaching a high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum.

Following on from Gibb's speech, in 2017/18 the DfE (via the Education and Skills Funding Agency – ESFA) piloted the School Resource Management Advisers (SRMA) scheme in England via collaboration with the ISBL (ESFA, 2018a). The SRMA scheme sought to recruit and accredit sector experts to work with schools to make the best use of their capital and revenue assets. In late 2018, the scheme was subsequently extended to August 2020 after SSMAs had identified opportunities for savings and income generation of £35million over 3 years (ESFA, 2018a, 2018b). Deemed as a success by the DfE in January 2020, SSMAs had achieved savings of £4.95million with a further £10million set to be achieved by August 2020 as 48% of the schools the SSMAs advised took on board their recommendations (ESFA, 2020b). Furthermore, the DfE established network engagement roles to support the development of regional SBP networks to underpin the DfE School's Buying Strategy with school buying hubs supported by the Schools Commercial Team (DfE, 2018a, 2017b). Thus, the policy focus in the English context has increasingly appeared underpinned by the efficiency agenda, with school business practitioners as key assets to position within the field in relation to the achievement of this agenda. Furthermore, various DfE ministerial speeches and press releases across 2018 and 2019 have increasingly praised and highlighted the value of business leadership in schools (e.g. DfE, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d). Policy makers have developed dedicated government resources for school resource management, driven the continuation of the Academies finance and assurance steering group (DfE, 2019b), and circulated DfE published SBP impact case studies via support from professional bodies (DfE, 2018e). The SBP Good Practice Library, originally beginning as a shared initiative between ISBL and the Education Funding and Skills Agency (ESFA), was passed over to the ISBL – as the leading school business leadership professional body – by the DfE to maintain and develop (ISBL, 2020b). Partnership work between the ISBL, NAHT, NGA, and ASCL has continued to increase through conferences, events, briefings, interviews and collaborative guidance, which has also included endorsements and statements by policy makers (e.g. ASCL, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; DfE, 2019a, 2019b; ISBL, 2019a; NAHT, 2018, 2020a; NGA, 2019). In addition, the launch of the National School Awards in 2019, with ministerial endorsement from Baroness Berridge the current Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the School System, includes a dedicated award for 'school business leader of the year' (GovNet, 2020). The event aims to bring together school leaders, governors, policy makers, professional bodies and education partners to celebrate the range of work and talent that sustains and develops the entire school system. This event is the first of its kind to acknowledge school business practitioners alongside educationalists in the presence of a network of stakeholders who hold considerable social and cultural capital within the wider education field.

As the close of the last decade approached and the school sector has continued to evolve and practitioner roles diversify, scholarly research exploring school business leadership within the education field has remained limited. Hence, both the DfE (2019a) and the ISBL (2020a) commissioned separate empirical research projects, each undertaking a national workforce survey to gain deeper insights into the school business workforce. For the ISBL, this went beyond its own membership to explore demographic characteristics and create 'a basis from which to respond to the developmental and structural needs facing both the profession and education sector at large' (ISBL, 2020a: 1). For the DfE, their survey was cited as 'the department's first survey of this kind to understand the evolving role of school business professionals' (Cirin and Bourne, 2019: 11) with a specific focus on exploring financial management. The ISBL (2020a) survey drew on a sample ( $n = 939$ ) of school business practitioners working across a representational range of school settings across England. It presented a predominantly white ageing female practitioner community who mostly occupied senior roles in their settings and were highly qualified and considerably experienced. However, it reported a mixed picture of inclusion in strategic participation within schools with heavy workloads and pay disparity widely reported, which aligned with findings from an ASCL (2017) members workload survey and earlier ISBL membership research (Creaby, 2018). The DfE survey (Cirin and Bourne, 2019) drew on a sample of school business practitioners described as finance leads ( $n = 1574$ ) situated across a representative range of academy and maintained schools. Their findings also presented a highly qualified and experienced sample of practitioners with reports of similar tensions in relation to strategic participation with a third of the respondents having 'little' or 'no' involvement in strategic planning. As both the ISBL and DfE surveys have presented, and in echoing Southworth's (2010) concerns, tensions persist in relation to inclusion to senior leadership activity in schools. Furthermore, tensions in relation to the balance of gender and ethnicity of practitioners were also illuminated via the ISBL survey (2020a) and Creaby's (2018) research, which is outside of the scope of this article to explore, but warrants note in relation to on-going tensions with inclusion in matters of leadership.

Following both surveys, the 2019 and 2020 DfE Academies handbooks (ESFA, 2019, 2020a) contain reference to the value of qualified '*school business leaders*', with links to a range of recognised institutions, including the ISBL, CIPFA and the NGA. Further, the DfE Governance handbook (DfE, 2020b) circulated to all state schools in England highlights the importance of school business roles to governors in relation to the management of financial performance, people and school governance. It advocates for strong relationships between governors and school business practitioners, which has also been promoted by the NGA (2019). However, despite clear evidence of work by policy makers and professional bodies to position school business practitioners as key players in the system and underpin their legitimacy, tensions persist within the wider field.



Furthermore, as scholarly research exploring school business leadership has remained limited during this decade, this further problematises its legitimacy in the field through a lack of empirical research on the habitus and capital of such practitioners, and how they contribute to a rapidly changing field.

## Conclusions

In tracing over two decades of school business practitioner evolution, there is evidence of a shift in status within the education field; senior positions on leadership teams are more common place than ever before and recognition for the value of their activity in schools is increasingly evident. However, this evolution from *bursar* to *school business manager* to *school business leader* is not without its complexities as the position of such practitioners within the system appears contentious as the policy landscape continues to create a complex layering of leadership intent (Gunter, 2016). As leadership legitimacy within the field remains predominantly aligned to the expectation of a teacher habitus, and forms of capital associated with this habitus, claiming a status equivalent to educational leaders remains problematic. Indeed, practitioners continue to report inconsistent inclusion in matters of strategic leadership and the constraint of their voice in key decision-making activity where their input would be valuable, which has, in some cases, influenced practitioner retention (Creaby, 2018).

As this legacy of contention around school business activity appears to remain embedded within the field, efforts are clearly being made by a range of professional bodies to challenge perceptions at the local level and influence the position of practitioners within the wider field. As Gunter (2001: 143) reminds, the path of professionalisation is neither linear nor smooth, and the two-decade journey so far has seen peaks and troughs, with much of this linked to policy reform. Hence, further evolution is expected as the policy context continues to shift, with sustained work by professional bodies likely to continue to influence practitioner status within the field. Indeed, as school business practitioners increasingly take the lead in managing and administering site-based management functions, this arguably positions them as key actors in the operational realities schools face. Given the further complexity that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to school operations, along with the budgetary pressures this creates (DfE, 2020a; NAHT, 2020b), it would appear even more crucial to create diverse school leadership teams that can work together and support each other in navigating all areas of educational leadership, school leadership and the leadership of schools. Further, research that has engaged with school business practitioners (e.g. Armstrong, 2018; Creaby, 2018; Woods, 2014) has illuminated over two decades of evidence of the value and commitment of such practitioners to the purpose of education and to improving outcomes for children. Hence, it is argued here that school business practitioners can offer a valuable voice in school leadership and the leadership of their schools that is of

crucial support to educational leadership and aligns with aspects of the dominant field habitus. Therefore, exploration of field relations would appear necessary to more deeply understand how school business leadership activity is understood and positioned within the English school system, particularly around matters of inclusion in local leadership teams. Indeed, engagement with educational leaders, teachers and school business leaders appears necessary to better understand how capital and habitus are perceived, legitimised and reconceived as reform continues. Hence is the necessity and timeliness of this topic as a special issue in *Management in Education* in generating debate in this area. Furthermore, it is argued that stimulating global knowledge exchange with contexts where similar systems of education exist can be further helpful (e.g. as noted earlier, including Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, The United States of America). Indeed, further work to develop a global academic conversation that shares scholarly research and debate on site-based management functions in compulsory education systems is arguably helpful. Firstly, this could serve to provide an authoritative and rigorous method to aid the exploration and critique of good business leadership in schools and the potential impact that the consistent inclusion of such practitioners can have to education outcomes. Secondly, it could act as a vehicle to facilitate the sharing of innovation and development in school leadership across different contexts where similar roles, functions and devolution of education management and administration exist.

Overall, as a practitioner cohort that has seen considerable evolution during the last two decades, the wide and varied school business practitioner community is understood to have an evidenced positive impact in schools. This is despite longstanding tensions around the inclusion and status of such practitioners alongside teaching colleagues and educational leaders within the wider education field. These issues appear to persist, alongside a lack of scholarly research and knowledge exchange exploring the contribution of this practitioner activity to matters of school leadership. In supporting the sustainability and growth of the school system, it is important to continue to explore, recognise and encourage a wider diversity of voices in decision-making within leadership teams to navigate the contextual realities they face. With more exploration and robust research, there is the potential for greater inclusion of school business practitioner voice into these vital functions of school operations which can in turn support positive educational outcomes.

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## Note

1. The National College refers to the non-departmental public body established in 2000 initially known as the National College of School Leadership (NSCL) which later amalgamated with the Teaching Agency and became an executive agency of the Department for Education (DfE). The National College provided opportunities for professional development for school and children's services leaders and later, under the NCTL remit, was also responsible for teaching standards. It was dissolved in 2018 with the regulation of the teaching profession moving to a new executive agency (Teaching Regulation Agency) and all other functions being moved into the Department for Education. All references to 'the National College' in this article refer to two iterations of its history.

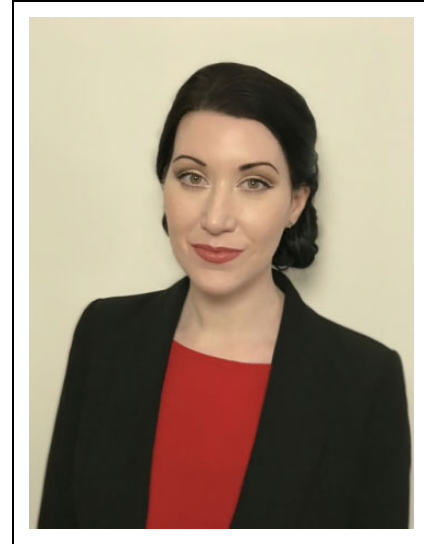
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