



# International Journal of Economics, Management and Social Science

Vol 9 No 1 March 2026

E-ISSN: 2614-3828 | P-ISSN: 2614-3887

Open Access: <https://journal.salewangang.net/ijemss/index>

## Teachers as Social Agents: Professional Identity, Institutional Pressure, and Pedagogical Resistance

Zikri Prismadani<sup>1</sup>, Oman Sukmana\*<sup>2</sup>, Tri Sulistyarningsih<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Mahasiswa Magister Sosiologi, Direktorat Program Pascasarjana, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang

\*Correspondence: [oman@umm.ac.id](mailto:oman@umm.ac.id)

### Article Info :

Received:  
09/02/2026  
Revised:  
13/02/2026  
Accepted:  
05/03/2026

### ABSTRACT

*Teachers occupy a structurally ambiguous position in modern educational systems: simultaneously agents of socialization mandated by the state, professionals claiming pedagogical autonomy, and social subjects embedded in local communities and cultural identities. This conceptual paper examines teachers as social agents through the integrative lens of three theoretical frameworks: Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and the concept of habitus, Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, and Michael Apple's critical pedagogy. The central argument is that professional teacher identity is not a stable, pre-given attribute but a dynamic, contested construction produced at the intersection of institutional pressures including curriculum standardization, administrative surveillance, and performative accountability regimes and individual and collective acts of pedagogical resistance. Drawing on these theoretical resources, the paper identifies three analytical dimensions of teacher agency: identity formation under institutional constraint, the reproduction and transformation of pedagogical practice within the educational field, and the micro-political dynamics of resistance as a form of professional self-assertion. The paper further develops a conceptual framework, the Teacher Agency Matrix, that maps the relationship between institutional pressure intensity and teacher agency orientation across four ideal-typical positions: conformity, strategic compliance, quiet subversion, and active resistance. The argument concludes that understanding teachers as social agents rather than merely as implementers of educational policy is essential for educational sociology, teacher professional development, and the design of more democratically oriented school governance systems.*

*Keywords: teacher agency; professional identity; institutional pressure; pedagogical resistance; Bourdieu; structuration theory; critical pedagogy*



©2022 Authors.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License.  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

## INTRODUCTION

The teacher stands at one of the most consequential intersections in modern social life: between the state and the individual, between institutional reproduction and critical transformation, between professional vocation and bureaucratic compliance. In contemporary educational systems characterized by increasingly centralized curriculum frameworks, high-stakes assessment regimes, and administrative accountability mechanisms the question of what it means to be a teacher has become a deeply sociological one. It is no longer adequate to conceptualize the teacher as a neutral transmitter of knowledge or a technically skilled practitioner of pedagogy. The teacher is a social

agent, embedded in institutional structures, shaped by biographical and cultural habitus, and engaged whether consciously or not in ongoing negotiations between personal professional values and the institutional demands of the educational field (Sachs, 2001; Priestley et al., 2015).

This conceptualization has significant implications for educational sociology and for the practical politics of schooling. If teachers are social agents rather than passive functionaries, then their professional identities are sites of struggle, their pedagogical choices are acts with social consequences, and their responses to institutional pressures whether compliant, adaptive, or resistant are meaningful expressions of agency that shape educational outcomes in ways that policy documents and curriculum frameworks cannot fully determine. The teacher's classroom, in this reading, is not merely the terminal point of an educational delivery system but a social space in which structures are reproduced, contested, and occasionally transformed (Giroux, 1988; Apple, 2004).

Despite the theoretical richness of this perspective, the sociological analysis of teacher agency has frequently been fragmented across disciplinary boundaries. Educational psychologists emphasize individual efficacy beliefs; organizational theorists focus on school culture and leadership; policy researchers examine compliance and implementation fidelity. What is less common is a sustained theoretical integration that situates teacher agency within the broader sociological frameworks that have most productively analyzed the structure–agency relationship in modern social life. This paper addresses that gap by bringing three major theoretical traditions into dialogue: Bourdieu's field theory, Giddens' structuration theory, and Apple's critical pedagogy.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical foundations by reviewing and integrating the three frameworks. The third section examines the construction of professional teacher identity under conditions of institutional pressure, drawing on the concept of field-specific habitus. The fourth section analyzes pedagogical resistance as a form of social agency, distinguishing between its individual and collective manifestations. The fifth section presents a conceptual framework the Teacher Agency Matrix that synthesizes the analytical dimensions developed in the paper. The final section discusses theoretical contributions and implications for educational sociology and teacher professional development.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

### ***Bourdieu's Field Theory and the Educational Habitus***

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical architecture built around the concepts of field, habitus, and capital provides perhaps the most comprehensive sociological framework for analyzing the position and agency of teachers in educational institutions. For Bourdieu (1990, 1993), a field is a structured social space of positions defined by the distribution of specific forms of capital in the educational field, primarily cultural and symbolic capital and governed by implicit rules (doxa) that legitimate certain practices and dispositions while marginalizing others. Teachers occupy a structurally subordinate position in the educational field, holding significant cultural capital in relation to students but considerably less institutional and economic capital than school administrators, policy-makers, and credentialing authorities.

The concept of habitus is central to understanding how teachers internalize and enact their structural position. Habitus refers to the system of durable, transposable dispositions including perceptions, judgments, and practices that are generated through an individual's trajectory within social fields (Bourdieu, 1990). For teachers, habitus is shaped by their own educational biographies (as students navigating the educational field), their professional formation through teacher education institutions, and their ongoing experience within specific school contexts. The result is a set of pedagogical

dispositions that feel natural and appropriate a practical sense of what it means to be a teacher that is simultaneously individual and socially produced.

The field theory framework illuminates the dynamics of institutional pressure by revealing how the educational field is itself structured by struggles between dominant and dominated agents over the legitimate definition of pedagogical practice. When state authorities implement curriculum standardization, high-stakes testing, or administrative surveillance mechanisms, they are exercising symbolic violence the imposition of a particular vision of legitimate pedagogy that naturalizes the interests of dominant groups in the educational field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Teachers who resist such impositions are engaged in a field-level struggle, drawing on their cultural capital and professional habitus as resources in a contest over the definition of legitimate teaching practice.

### ***Giddens' Structuration Theory and Teacher Agency***

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984) offers a complementary framework by theorizing the recursive relationship between social structure and human agency. For Giddens, structures are neither external constraints on human action nor mere products of individual will; they are both the medium and outcome of social practices. Agents draw on structural rules and resources in their actions, and in doing so reproduce or, under specific conditions, transform those structures. This duality of structure means that teachers are simultaneously constrained by the institutional structures of schooling and capable of acting in ways that gradually modify those structures through their cumulative pedagogical choices.

Giddens distinguishes between practical consciousness the tacit, taken-for-granted knowledge that guides everyday action and discursive consciousness the capacity to articulate reasons and justifications for one's actions. This distinction is productive for analyzing teacher agency: much of what teachers do in classrooms operates at the level of practical consciousness, shaped by professional socialization and habituated routines. But pedagogical resistance characteristically involves a shift toward discursive consciousness a reflexive articulation of alternative pedagogical values that contradicts the institutional doxa. The teacher who refuses to teach to the test and who can articulate why is exercising a distinctively reflective form of agency that Giddens associates with transformative social action.

The concept of ontological security the basic trust in the continuity of self-identity and social environment that enables competent social action is also relevant here. Institutional pressures that threaten teachers' professional identity can undermine ontological security, triggering defensive responses ranging from anxious compliance to creative resistance. Conversely, teachers with secure and coherent professional identities may be better positioned to exercise agency under institutional constraint, as their sense of professional self is not contingent on institutional validation alone (Giddens, 1991).

### ***Apple's Critical Pedagogy and Political Dimensions of Teaching***

Michael Apple's critical pedagogy framework (1982, 2004) introduces an explicitly political dimension to the analysis of teacher agency by situating educational institutions within broader structures of power, inequality, and ideological reproduction. For Apple, schools are not politically neutral sites of knowledge transmission but terrain on which hegemonic cultural and economic relations are reproduced through curriculum content, pedagogical practice, and the organization of schooling. Teachers are necessarily implicated in this process not always consciously, and not without contradiction as agents of socialization who either reinforce or challenge dominant cultural narratives.

Apple's concept of the 'new right' educational reform characterized by market mechanisms, standardized testing, deregulation, and the repositioning of education as a commodity provides a critical context for understanding the institutional pressures facing contemporary teachers. Under this regime, teachers are increasingly repositioned as technical deliverers of a pre-specified curriculum, their professional judgment constrained by externally mandated performance metrics. Apple argues that this represents a form of deskilling the systematic reduction of the intellectual content of teacher work that parallels processes of labor rationalization in other sectors (Apple, 1982).

Yet Apple also identifies teachers as potential organic intellectuals (after Gramsci) capable of counter-hegemonic pedagogical practice. Teachers who critically examine the hidden curriculum, integrate students' cultural knowledge into classroom practice, and cultivate critical consciousness are engaging in a form of social agency that exceeds the institutionally mandated role. This transformative potential is not unlimited it is constrained by institutional structures, evaluation systems, and professional risks but it constitutes a genuine dimension of teacher agency that purely structural accounts tend to obscure.

**Table 1. Comparative Summary of Theoretical Frameworks for Analyzing Teacher Agency**

<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>Key Concepts</b>	<b>View of Structure</b>	<b>View of Teacher Agency</b>	<b>Primary Contribution</b>
Bourdieu's Field Theory	Field, habitus, capital, symbolic violence, doxa	Structured space of power relations; internalized through habitus	Disposition-driven; shaped by field position and capital volume	Explains how institutional pressures are naturalized and how resistance mobilizes cultural capital
Giddens' Structuration Theory	Duality of structure, practical/discursive consciousness, ontological security	Medium and outcome of recursive social practices	Reflexive, recursive; capable of structural transformation through cumulative action	Links micro-level classroom decisions to macro-level structural reproduction or transformation
Apple's Critical Pedagogy	Hidden curriculum, deskilling, organic intellectual, counter-hegemony	Site of ideological reproduction and class/cultural struggle	Political; potentially transformative through counter-hegemonic practice	Introduces explicit power-critical and emancipatory dimension to teacher agency

*Source: Compiled by authors based on Bourdieu (1990, 1993); Giddens (1984, 1991); Apple (1982, 2004)*

## **PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY UNDER INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT**

### ***Identity as a Field-Level Construction***

Professional identity the sense of who one is as a teacher, what one values, and what kind of teaching practice one is committed to is not a private psychological attribute but a socially constructed, institutionally mediated, and historically situated formation. Sachs (2001) distinguishes between an

entrepreneurial teacher identity, shaped by performative accountability demands that position the teacher as a technical service provider, and an activist teacher identity, grounded in a commitment to social justice, democratic pedagogy, and professional community. These identity types represent poles on a continuum rather than mutually exclusive positions, and individual teachers typically navigate complex and shifting combinations of both orientations across the course of their careers and within different institutional contexts.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, professional teacher identity is best understood as a form of professional habitus—a set of dispositions toward teaching practice, institutional life, and professional relationships that is internalized through teacher education and career socialization. This habitus is field-specific: it is shaped by the particular demands and rules of the educational field in which the teacher operates. Teachers working in schools characterized by strong audit cultures and high-stakes assessment regimes will develop professional habitus differently from those working in contexts where pedagogical autonomy is valued and protected.

The concept of identity threat is crucial here. When institutional pressures—such as the imposition of scripted curriculum, the reduction of preparation time, or the surveillance of classroom practice through observation schedules—are perceived as incompatible with deeply held professional values, they generate identity threat: a disruption to the coherence and security of the professional self. Research by Day et al. (2006) and Flores and Day (2006) documents how such threats produce responses ranging from passive resignation to active professional disengagement, and how the maintenance of a stable and positive professional identity is closely associated with sustained teacher commitment and effectiveness.

### ***Institutional Pressure Mechanisms in Contemporary Schooling***

Contemporary educational institutions generate institutional pressure through at least four distinct mechanisms, each of which operates on teacher professional identity in specific ways. First, curriculum standardization—the specification of learning objectives, content sequences, and assessment criteria by external authorities—constrains teacher autonomy in lesson planning and content selection, repositioning the teacher as an implementer of a pre-designed educational product. Second, performative accountability systems—including teacher observation rubrics, student test score accountability, and public school ranking systems—create what Ball (2003) terms a performativity culture, in which teachers' sense of professional worth becomes increasingly dependent on measurable, externally validated outputs rather than intrinsic professional values.

Third, administrative surveillance—through lesson plan submission requirements, classroom observation schedules, and digital monitoring of teacher activities—creates conditions of what Foucault (1977) would recognize as panoptic power: teachers internalize the gaze of institutional authority and self-regulate their practice accordingly, often suppressing creative or critical pedagogical impulses in anticipation of evaluative scrutiny. Fourth, professional isolation—the structural conditions of most school environments, in which teachers work largely alone in their classrooms with limited opportunities for collegial collaboration and deliberation—undermines the collective professional capacity that might otherwise sustain resistance to institutional pressures.

## **PEDAGOGICAL RESISTANCE AS SOCIAL AGENCY**

### ***Forms and Functions of Resistance***

Resistance in the educational context has been theorized since at least Willis's (1977) landmark ethnographic study of working-class youth, which demonstrated that apparent failure to comply with school norms could represent a form of cultural agency rather than mere deficit. Applied to teachers,

the concept of pedagogical resistance encompasses a range of practices through which teachers assert professional values and judgments against institutional mandates that they experience as contrary to good teaching practice. Resistance is thus not simply non-compliance or insubordination; it is a form of professional self-assertion grounded in an alternative vision of what education is for.

Pedagogical resistance takes forms that vary in their visibility, collectivity, and transformative ambition. At the most individual and covert level, what Scott (1985) calls 'weapons of the weak' including superficial compliance with administrative requirements while maintaining alternative classroom practices, strategic time allocation that privileges student-centered activities over test preparation, and the creative reinterpretation of curriculum mandates represent forms of quiet subversion that preserve teacher agency under conditions of institutional constraint without directly challenging institutional authority. At the more collective and overt level, teachers who organize professional learning communities around critical reflection, who advocate publicly for alternative educational approaches, or who participate in union-based political action around educational policy represent a more active form of resistance that approaches Apple's concept of the organic intellectual.

The sociological significance of pedagogical resistance lies not only in its protective function preserving teacher professional identity and pedagogical quality under adverse conditions but in its structural implications. Following Giddens' structuration logic, each act of pedagogical resistance, however small and individual, contributes to the cumulative reproduction or transformation of the educational field. Teachers who consistently model critical thinking, engage students in democratic deliberation, and refuse to reduce education to test preparation are, in aggregate, exerting a countervailing structural force against the logic of performative accountability, even when no single act of resistance is sufficient to transform the system.

***Conditions Enabling and Constraining Resistance***

Not all teachers are equally positioned to exercise pedagogical resistance. The capacity for resistance is conditioned by a range of structural and biographical factors. At the structural level, school organizational culture the degree to which school leadership supports or suppresses teacher professional autonomy is among the most significant determinants. Schools characterized by distributed leadership, collegial trust, and explicit protection of teacher professional judgment create conditions in which resistance is not merely tolerated but actively supported as a dimension of professional competence. Schools characterized by hierarchical control and punitive accountability cultures, by contrast, suppress resistance and generate conformity through fear of professional consequences.

At the biographical level, teachers' professional trajectory their educational background, their mentorship relationships, their experience of successful autonomous teaching practice shapes the habitus from which resistance is generated. Teachers who have experienced and internalized an activist professional identity, in Sachs' terms, are more likely to recognize institutional pressures as illegitimate constraints on professional practice and to develop creative responses to them. First-generation teachers entering the profession directly into high-pressure accountability environments may lack the biographical reference point of a professional identity formed in conditions of greater autonomy, making resistance more difficult to conceptualize and enact.

**Table 2. Teacher Agency Matrix: Institutional Pressure and Agency Orientation**

Quadrant	Institutional Pressure	Agency Orientation	Primary Mechanism	Sociological Implication
I	High	Compliant /	Habitus alignment	Structural reproduction;

Quadrant	Institutional Pressure	Agency Orientation	Primary Mechanism	Sociological Implication
Conformity		Adaptive	with institutional doxa; ontological security through compliance	deskilling reinforced; professional identity increasingly entrepreneurial
II Strategic Compliance	High	Tactical / Instrumental	Discursive consciousness; selective compliance preserving core professional values	Partial reproduction with negotiated spaces of autonomy; identity maintenance under constraint
III Quiet Subversion	Low–Moderate	Covert Resistance	Practical consciousness; informal 'weapons of the weak'; creative reinterpretation of mandates	Micro-level structural transformation; professional habitus preserved and transmitted to students
IV Active Resistance	Low–Moderate	Transformative / Political	Collective agency; discursive challenge to institutional doxa; organic intellectual practice	Macro-level field transformation potential; counter-hegemonic pedagogy; activist identity consolidated

*Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on Bourdieu (1990); Giddens (1984); Apple (2004); Sachs (2001); Scott (1985)*

The Teacher Agency Matrix presented in Table 2 maps teacher agency orientation across a two-dimensional conceptual space defined by the intensity of institutional pressure and the character of teacher agency response. Four ideal-typical positions are identified, each associated with distinct mechanisms, sociological implications, and relationships to professional identity. The matrix is not intended as a typology of teachers individual teachers may occupy different quadrants at different career stages, in different institutional contexts, or in relation to different dimensions of their practice but as an analytical tool for identifying the conditions under which different forms of agency emerge and the structural consequences they carry.

Quadrant I (Conformity) represents the condition in which high institutional pressure meets a professional habitus already aligned with institutional doxa, producing compliance that feels natural and unreflective. Quadrant II (Strategic Compliance) describes teachers who experience high institutional pressure but exercise discursive consciousness to identify and protect spaces of professional autonomy within an overall compliant orientation. Quadrant III (Quiet Subversion) characterizes contexts of lower institutional pressure in which teachers exercise covert agency through creative practice, informal curriculum modification, and the cultivation of classroom cultures that exceed institutional mandates. Quadrant IV (Active Resistance) represents the most politically engaged form of teacher agency, in which favorable structural conditions enable explicit challenge to institutional doxa through collective action, public advocacy, and transformative pedagogical practice.

## DISCUSSION

The theoretical integration developed in this paper has several implications for educational sociology and the sociology of professions. First, it challenges the enduring dichotomy between structure and

agency in accounts of teacher behavior. Neither a purely structural account in which teachers are passive carriers of institutional mandates nor a purely agentic account in which teachers are autonomous professionals freely expressing their pedagogical values adequately captures the complexity of teacher practice as social action. The Bourdieu-Giddens-Apple integration proposed here offers a more nuanced account that honors both the real constraints of institutional structures and the genuine if circumscribed capacity of teachers to act otherwise.

Second, the paper's analysis of professional identity as a dynamic, contested, and structurally embedded formation has implications for teacher education and professional development. If professional identity is shaped by field-specific habitus rather than simply by pre-service training, then the contexts into which beginning teachers are inserted the organizational cultures of their schools, the quality of their mentorship relationships, the character of their initial experiences of institutional pressure are among the most powerful determinants of the professional selves they will develop. This places a premium on creating school environments that are genuinely supportive of teacher professional autonomy, not merely rhetorically, but in terms of the structural conditions of time, trust, and institutional protection that enable autonomous professional judgment.

Third, the concept of pedagogical resistance developed here contributes to the sociology of professional work by demonstrating that resistance is not simply a negative response to unwanted constraints but a constitutive dimension of professional agency. The capacity to recognize institutional pressures as potentially illegitimate, to articulate alternative professional values, and to enact those values in practice even under adverse conditions is a mark of advanced professional development rather than mere non-compliance. Educational systems that systematically suppress this capacity, through punitive accountability regimes and administrative surveillance, may be reducing the very professional quality they nominally seek to improve.

The Teacher Agency Matrix offers a practical heuristic for educational researchers, school leaders, and policy-makers seeking to understand how teachers navigate institutional environments. Rather than asking whether teachers comply with institutional mandates a framing that implicitly accepts the legitimacy of those mandates as a baseline the matrix invites inquiry into what forms of agency are being produced by specific institutional conditions, what the structural implications of those forms of agency are, and how institutional environments could be redesigned to support more transformative forms of teacher professionalism.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has argued that teachers are social agents whose professional identities, pedagogical practices, and responses to institutional pressures can only be adequately understood through a sociological framework that takes seriously both the constraining force of educational field structures and the genuine if conditioned capacity of teachers to act as reflexive, value-committed professionals. Drawing on the theoretical resources of Bourdieu's field theory, Giddens' structuration theory, and Apple's critical pedagogy, the paper has developed an integrated conceptual framework for analyzing teacher agency across three dimensions: professional identity formation under institutional constraint, the micro-politics of pedagogical resistance, and the structural implications of different agency orientations.

The Teacher Agency Matrix synthesizes these dimensions into a conceptual tool that maps the relationship between institutional pressure and agency orientation across four ideal-typical positions: conformity, strategic compliance, quiet subversion, and active resistance. The matrix is intended not

as a static typology but as a dynamic analytical framework for tracing how teacher agency is produced, constrained, and transformed across different institutional contexts and career trajectories.

The theoretical contributions of this paper are threefold. First, it advances the integration of classical sociological theory with contemporary educational research by demonstrating how the Bourdieu-Giddens-Apple triad addresses complementary analytical problems in the study of teacher agency. Second, it reconceptualizes pedagogical resistance as a constitutive dimension of professional agency rather than mere non-compliance, with implications for the sociology of professions and for educational policy. Third, it offers a theoretically grounded critique of performative accountability regimes in contemporary schooling by demonstrating how they systematically constrain the forms of teacher agency most associated with educationally and socially transformative outcomes.

Future conceptual and empirical work should extend this framework in several directions: empirical studies of teacher agency in diverse national and institutional contexts are needed to test and refine the conceptual propositions developed here; attention to intersectionality how gender, ethnicity, religion, and career stage mediate teacher agency would enrich the framework's analytical reach; and comparative analysis of policy regimes with different accountability logics would illuminate how macro-level educational governance shapes the institutional conditions within which teacher agency is produced. These extensions would contribute to a more comprehensive and globally sensitive sociology of teaching as a form of social agency.

## REFERENCES

- Apple, M. W. (1982). *Education and Power*. Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and Curriculum* (3rd ed.). RoutledgeFalmer.
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Sage.
- Day, C., Kington, A., Stobart, G., & Sammons, P. (2006). The personal and professional selves of teachers: Stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(4), 601–616.
- Flores, M. A., & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22(2), 219–232.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Polity Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sachs, J. (2001). Teacher professional identity: Competing discourses, competing outcomes. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(2), 149–161.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press.

Willis, P. (1977). Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs. Saxon House.