

RISE COMPLEXITIES IN EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND INEQUALITIES

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More than fifty years ago, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron revealed how educational practices and structures play a central role in reproducing social hierarchies. Their studies showed that while education is often celebrated as a means of emancipation and progress, it also serves as an accomplice in perpetuating inequality. Yet, to effectively challenge these mechanisms, the ways in which education sustains unequal relations must be continually re-examined, locally contextualised, and empirically explored.

Co-organised by the BSA Bourdieu Study Group, the University of Vienna, University of Innsbruck, University of Tübingen, and the Vienna Chamber of Labour, the BSA Bourdieu Study Group Mid-Term International Conference, held from 3–5 September 2025 in Vienna,

Austria, brought together a community of researchers committed to exactly this endeavour. Under the title “Rising Complexities in Education: Opportunities and Inequalities,” the event fostered collective reflections on contemporary mechanisms of reproduction and transformation in and through education. This fourth biennial conference continued the series of previous mid-term meetings (Bristol 2016, Lancaster 2018, Barcelona 2023). Its aim was to explore how Bourdieusian theory – and its contemporary developments – can be mobilised to analyse and ultimately help overcome educational inequalities.

The conference brought together 181 delegates from nearly all continents. Across three days, participants engaged in seven symposia, one roundtable, and 32 paper sessions, covering themes such as class and higher education, migration and family, gender and habitus, reflexivity in teaching, and methodological innovation in Bourdieusian research. A lively book fair-style session showcased recent publications on Bourdieu, education, and inequality, creating a welcoming space for informal exchange between authors and attendees.

A recurring thread throughout the event concerned how Bourdieusian concepts can be rethought in relation to contemporary debates on complex inequalities, political activism, and postcoloniality. This theme was particularly prominent in the keynote speeches and panels.

Opening the conference, Ann-Marie Bathmaker (University of Birmingham) delivered a keynote titled “Making Sense of the Opportunities and Constraints of Vocational Education Pathways: Between Bourdieu and a Better Place.” Her talk revisited the enduring tension between structure and agency in Bourdieusian thought through the lens of vocational education.

Three keynote panels further deepened the conversation on the tensions and developments within Bourdieusian theory:

“Bourdieu Between Theory and Practice – Thinking Activism and Political Change with Bourdieu” brought together Sol Gamsu (Durham University), Carli Rowell (University of Sussex), and Aina Tarabini (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) to discuss how Bourdieu’s ideas can shape activism and social transformation.

“Democracy in Danger? Democratic Participation and the Role of Education” assembled Ilkim Erdost (Vienna Chamber of Labour), Jürgen Czernohorszky (Executive City Councillor, Vienna), Harriet Rowley (University of Manchester), and Tom Kehrbaum (Labour Union Education Sector), who explored how educators, interest groups, and grassroots initiatives collaborate to promote educational equality.

“Bourdieu Beyond the Global North – Bridging Bourdieu and Postcolonial Perspectives” featured Grace Ese-osa Idahosa (University of Cambridge) and

Denisse Sepúlveda (Centre for Economics and Social Policy and Universidad Mayor, Santiago de Chile), who discussed the intersections and tensions between Bourdieusian and postcolonial schools of thought.

The conference concluded with Steven Threadgold’s (University of Newcastle) keynote, “Bourdieu in a Digitalised and Financialised World.” His address connected Bourdieusian theory to pressing contemporary issues, considering how digitalisation and financialisation reshape social life and inequality.

What distinguished this conference was not only its intellectual richness but also its strong sense of community, combining rigorous theoretical engagement with an ethos of care and solidarity. The venue itself – the Vienna Chamber of Labour – served as a powerful symbol, bridging the worlds of academia and policy and reminding participants of the enduring relevance of Bourdieusian sociology for understanding and transforming structures of power and inequality.

The BSA Bourdieu Study Group will continue to host events at the intersection of social theory, inequality, and education. Bringing together such an international, interdisciplinary, and committed group of scholars reaffirmed that critical, reflexive, and socially engaged research is not only possible but necessary. In this sense, “Rising Complexities in Education” was less a conclusion than an invitation.