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Who am I? Really? Why?

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Abstract:

A critical analysis of what secondary headteachers say about the **professional role** they inhabit. In their own words establishing: why they do it, what are the rewards and challenges, what are the dominant demands and how are these addressed? The research explores how the language and concepts shared by the Heads can be reviewed in terms of Gramsci's ideas of **'common' and 'good' sense**. Are moral and personal values, understood as good, losing out to the common drive for: competition, marketization, performative success and accountability? Are schools now businesses operating according to new managerialist principles that have 'colonised the lifeworld' of the headteachers? In critical analysis of the discourse in one-to-one interviews and focus groups, themes emerge around: **new managerialism** (accountability, value, pragmatism), professional identity (purpose, status, description) and professional practice (culture, team, system). The research examines the contested nature of the tensions inherent in the role, where common sense and good sense are not necessarily clear cut, where Heads in their own words are striving to articulate professional identity and where a new approach to Habermas' notion of the **lifeworld** may be helpful; creating a **community of accountability** that ensures the headspace is focused on education and not economics.



Taking up Head Space: discourses of secondary headteachers' professional identity and practice

Aim

To ask what motivated a sample of secondary headteachers to undertake the role, reflecting on: what motivates them, how they describe the role in the current educational climate and how they balance their professional views and priorities against external expectations. To examine whether there is a dominant discourse in their responses and to critically analyse the emerging: patterns, tensions, and examples; seeking to draw conclusions about the way forward for secondary headship into a new decade.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis supported by *Applied Conversation Analysis* – methods to explore the Heads' own words, analogies and explanations and then strive to explore the meanings that emerge from patterns and themes from within this 'discourse'.

Theoretical perspectives

Gramsci's views on common and good sense (*senso comune / buon senso*) as a lense through which to test the demonstration of aims and values associated with headship and to discern contested perspectives. **Habermas'** *Lifeworld* as a lense through which to examine the notions of professional identity and meaning and seek to establish professional community loci around which to challenge elements of new managerialist obsession with measurable performance and the commodification of education and move to effective and purposeful accountability that is value-laden.



Participants

Thirty-two secondary headteachers in four focus groups, with twelve selected for one-to-one structured interviews.



Analysis of data

In 45,300 words from the Heads themselves, there are clear indicators of the dominance that neoliberal policies and new managerialist practice have had in impacting upon the professional identity of secondary headship. Headteachers are striving to make sense of 21st Century secondary schooling and all that is expected of them; balancing on a tightrope of professional practice that is buffeted by performative accountability measures and the drive of market-led standards and competition.

Summary

The essence of what it means to be a headteacher needs to be connected to a reframed *Lifeworld*, with the headteachers able to move beyond the neoliberalism that has colonised their identity and practice and develop new communities of accountability that share and take forward a vision for education that is not about measuring and grading but is one concerned with teaching and inspiring.

"the Headteacher that used to be more of a teacher has become more of a CEO role"

"It's an unrealistic expectation of any one person isn't it?"

"we have to keep the wolves at the door ... that are fighting every day ... and that big rod of accountability, weighs very very heavy I have to say"