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Education work and identity in an English Sixth Form college

David William Stoten

Havant College, Hampshire, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to explore how education workers position themselves with an organisational culture and fashion a workplace identity. The research involved both professionally qualified teachers and support staff in an inclusive approach and drew theoretical concepts from Structuralist approaches such as labour process theory to Foucauldian post-structuralism and Habermasian critical theory on the nature of identity, power and control. This paper also sought to establish whether there was any difference in the positions taken by teaching and support staff.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology used a mixed methods approach. Following on from a pilot questionnaire, a series of research conversations was conducted drawing on Habermas's interpretation of phenomenology and the co-construction of knowledge.

Findings – The findings suggest that there are clear differences in the way teaching and support staff construct their workplace identity. In general, teachers were more critical of Central Government policy, as well as the practices of senior management, than was the case for support staff that tended to be more deferential.

Research limitations/implications – As a case study of a single institution, there are inherent limitations in the generalisability of such research. However, as a snap shot of organisational life, the research provides a useful insight into the complexities of workplace relationships and the identities workers take.

Originality/value – This paper, albeit on a small scale, provides an insight into two areas not often reported on. First, on reporting on a Sixth Form College, the research aims to address the paucity of published research on this particular organisation type in the English educational system. Second, in placing teaching and support staff alongside each other, it provides a deeper insight into organisational life from differing positions.

Keywords Social constructionism, New public management, Teacher professionalism, Identity and the self, Foucault and habermasian critical theory, Critical management studies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper is concerned with a critical exploration of how those who work in a Sixth Form College position themselves in the ordered world of institutional power that exists in English educational institutions. The central task within such an aim is to gain insight into the continuous creation of the self at work and the behaviours of teachers as they seek to manage their public persona, professional identity and inner self while working under the regime of New Public Management. During the research, the scope of the investigation was extended beyond teachers to include support staff. Thompson (1989) highlighted the issue of the inner self at work and it continues to generate empirical research projects and theoretical discourse over two decades later. Central to this discourse is the idea of the "missing subject" – a form of dissonance that exists in within those who work in a hierarchical and disciplined organisation and claim a professional status. Within this debate, ancillary issues are engendered: the nature of professionalism, the role and impact of the State and its bureaucracy, the mechanisms of control within organisations and the process of identity

creation and re-creation. It is also a nexus for competing sociological and ideological perspectives: Marxian labour process theory and critical theory, post-structuralism and for mainstream technical-rationalist approaches.

Reviewing the literature

Organisational theory and the individual – the mainstream orthodoxy

The lexicon of mainstream management education is replete with the work of Classical management science thinkers who offer a particular view of the world and the position of workers within the organisational setting. Working from a positivist stance, writers such as Taylor (1911), Gilbreth and Gilbreth (1916), Gantt (1919) and Fayol (1916/1949) present a view of an inefficient world that can be remedied through the application of managerial forms of social ordering. This "technical-rationalist" management approach is based on two premises:

(1) that workers need to be controlled through scientific management techniques; and

(2) that workers should be subject to scrutiny through an audit culture of accountability.

Although such writing was a product of its age, its fundamental precepts continue to influence subsequent work on organisational theory and the place of workers within organisations. In reaction to the Classical school of management theory, writers such as Barnard (1938), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) and McGregor (1960) chose to focus on the human dimension at work, focussing in particular on the nature of emotional involvement and workers' motivation. This Human Relations school posed a challenge to the Classical school of scientific management but shared a common root – the search for efficiency within organisations. Later theorising often drew from elements within these approaches. The emergence of systems theory (Hershey and Blanchard, 1993) and contingency theory (Woodward, 1965) highlight the inadequacy of earlier mainstream approaches in explaining the complexities of organisational life. All, however, share a common precept: that of the organisational imperative over that of the individual. This position carried implicit values on how the individual was to be viewed, measured and judged.

The emergence of nomothetic psychology, with its emphasis of categorising individuals into convenient typologies of personality traits and the assertion of laws of behaviour, was indicative of the subordination of the individual to the corporate needs of late capitalism and the preponderance of positivist philosophy in academe. Take for example the theoretical model offered by Getzels and Guba (1957) in which social behaviour was defined in terms of a normative/nomothetic dimension that was connected with an employee's role and code of behaviour, and the personal/ideographic dimension that was concerned with the individual, their characteristics and needs. This model was built on by Moser (1957) who described a menu of three leadership styles for managers to choose:

(1) the goals-oriented nomothetic;

(2) the person-centred ideographic; and

(3) the transactional style that sought a synthesis of the other two.

This preponderance of positivist theory and modeling and rules of behaviour lies at the heart of technical-rationalist management literature, and continues to dominate the mind-set of management today.

Marxist labour process theory

It is clear that mainstream management writing is designed to meet the needs of large corporations and contemporary capitalism. The work of Braverman (1974) represents a significant Marxist retort to the mainstream writing on organisations and the individual. In particular, Braverman argued that the professional classes were in danger of being "proletarianised", that is becoming de-skilled as professionals through the imposition of standardised regimes of behaviour at work. For those who see the imposition of New Public Management (NPM) as a new form of State control over the workplace in the public sector, the re-professionalisation of teachers is indicative of this "proletarianisation" (Beck, 1999; Bottery, 1996, 2005; Shain and Gleeson, 1999). Braverman's development of labour process theory applied the scientific logic of classical Marxism to the problem of the individual at work. In so doing, Braverman offers a "structuralist" view of the workplace as an arena in which the individual is subordinated to the needs of the organisation, and individual professionals are viewed as part of a collective entity for the purposes of theorising and analysis. A key feature of the Bravermanian workplace was the ascendancy of the bureaucracy as a mechanism of accountability and control over staff. For Braverman, this subordination of the individual not only undermined their autonomy at work it also created emotional stress within the individual as they sought to create coping strategies.

In their defence of Marxist labour process theory, Hassard *et al.* (2001) argue that much of the potential for radical action within critical management studies has been undermined with the movement away from Braverman towards Foucault and critical theory. Their explanation of the intellectual shift is manifold. In part, this departure from Braverman is as a consequence of the ascendancy of American business schools and relative decline of European Marxian industrial sociology as engines of discourse. In part, they argue that it is a more profound reflection of the defeat of the Left. In part, the movement away from theory has reflected the development of research. In their revision of labour process theory, Littler and Salaman (1982), and later Thompson (1989), called for the development of theory to take account of grounded research whilst retaining the radical imperative. Indeed, Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), while acknowledging the demise of labour process theory, reported the persistence of resistance at work to Managerialism. In doing so, Thompson and Ackroyd highlight the asymmetrical relationship between management and managed within the organisational setting and called for further empirical research that recognises the inherent inequalities that exist within capitalism.

Post-structuralism, social constructionism and the idea of multiple created identities

Although the labour process theory serves as a backdrop to the discourse on organisational theory, Hassard *et al.* (2001) argue that it has been dispensed with in favour of alternative theoretical approaches, and in particular Foucauldian post-structuralism. In *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, Foucault (1977) not only highlighted the asymmetrical relationship that exists between managers and workers through their respective "power/knowledge" positions, he developed his ideas on multiple identities. In doing so, Foucault challenged the uniformity of experience that underpins structuralism and the traditional Left. Instead of the idea of workers being a coherent collective, Foucault offered a view of individuals who modify their behaviours and image for personal benefit and protection. Driven by the ever-present panopticism of management surveillance, workers adopt accommodation strategies that are designed to satisfy the demands of the organisation. In what he termed the "micro-physics of power", Foucault portrayed workers as engaged in a

236

deliberate effort to regulate their identity within the organisational setting. The worker at work had become, for Foucault, a nexus for the re-creation of the self, self-esteem and implicit managerial control.

Thomas (2011, p. 171) argues that Foucault's "manufacturing of subjectivity" thesis is too simplistic in portraying workers as mere subjects and ignores the potential for individual agency. For Thomas, workers are able to adopt different positions in response to circumstance – in short, they do not subject themselves to one subservient position but respond purposefully and tactically in their own fashion. Such a view sees workers as not only conscious of the micro-politics of their workplace but capable of playing a political stratagem. This thesis deserves investigation, and will be explored further below. The study of subjectivity and identity formation is dominated by the post-structuralist agenda set in play by Foucault but one should also recognise the contribution from the psychological studies of Lacan (1979), the idea of dramaturgical performances from Goffman (1990) and from the earlier anthropological work of Mead (1934). The discourse on subjectivity and identity formation is eclectic and draws from a range of intellectual traditions and disciplines.

Central to the discourse on self-identification and self-image is constructivist psychology and its sociological cousin, social constructionism. For Burr (2003, p. 119), "the social constructionist attack on essentialist psychology has left us with an empty person, a human being with no essential psychological characteristics". For social constructionists, identity is created primarily through social interaction rather than the interplay of internal states of mind. The self, it follows is therefore, a creation and accumulation of life experiences and their discourses. Inherent within this constructionist approach is the problem of how to view the role of individual agency and wider society in this creative process. For Berger and Luckman (1996), in their seminal discussion of social constructionism, this relationship between individuals and society operates in two directions in which humans create and respond to constructions of social reality. For Burr (2003, p. 191), the self is both relational and interactionist, and positioned in response to social context. Indeed for a number of writers, the self is little more than an identity created to make sense of experience and to provide a narrative (Gergen and Gergen, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Sutton-Smith, 1986).

Identity work: the regulation of the self at work

As Thomas (2011) acknowledges, the concept of the identity worker is a much used metaphor in organisational theory. It is as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe in social constructionist terms, an iterative process of creation and re-creation of identity, which is undertaken in response to prevailing circumstances in the workplace. Interpretations of accommodation raises further research questions as to the degree of independent choice that is possible for the individual worker and, indeed, their corresponding degree of manoeuvre. The concept of identity work also presupposes that workers are able to "self-categorise" and place themselves into some form of abstract and politicised organisational hierarchy that is somehow distinct from the formal organisational structure. Indeed, such a scenario would infer that workers believe that others within the organisation are also able to participate in this practice.

The outcomes of this process of self-categorisation described by Pratt (2000) as being either one of: positive identification, non-identification, dis-identification or ambivalent identification. In their research into "knowledge-intensive" firms, Alvesson and Karreman (2004) highlight the powerful relationship that can exist between personal identity and being part of the organisation. In their study of four "knowledge-intensive" companies, Alvesson

and Willmott (2001) also reported that employees had chosen to identify closely with the organisation both because of the company, as it was viewed as elitist. In so doing, the workers had used objective signals such as salary or designation as measures of status and then subjectively subscribed to the idea of being part of the elite. For Alvesson (1993) such examples of positioning are the consequence of workers seeking to mediate an understanding of their status and self-image. Within this analysis, Alvesson (1993) points to the relevance of ambiguity within this process of self-categorisation. For Alvesson, such is the inter-subjective ambiguity within organisational life in pseudo-professions that rhetoric is used to provide some form of meaning – "being perceived as an expert is then more crucial than being one" (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1004).

Identity work can therefore be viewed as serving as a mechanism of normative control for managers and also for some individuals to make sense of their subjective position within complex organisations. Implicit within this discourse is relating to the nature of control. Although research by Knights (2001), Knights and Glesson (2008), Alvesson and Willmott (1992, 2001 Alvesson (2004) on the inter-subjective categorisation of the self and its regulation do offer valuable examples from grounded research, there is the potential in such post-structuralist work of dispensing entirely with the wider societal perspective. Although O'Doherty and Willmott (1998) called for the re-positioning of the discourse over subjectivity to a more social realist perspective that took account of social and economic inequality within capitalist society, much of recent research continues to focus on the micro-level of analysis at the expense of grand narrative. In addition to normative forms of cultural control and identity regulation, Karreman and Alvesson (2004) also identified contributions from Ouchi (1979) on clan identity, from Czarniawska-Joerges (1998) on ideology and Barker (1993) on concertive control. Albeit indicative of the experiences of workers in a variety of contexts, post-structuralist accounts do need to acknowledge that changes have taken place not only within wider society but also in the way the State is now conceived and operates, and this impinges on the workplace.

Habermasian critical theory
Although much of Habermas's intellectual grounding was derived from the "Frankfurt School" who sought to explain the failings of modern capitalist society in terms of alienation, reification and spiritual impoverishment, his work represents a revisionist critique of classical Marxian interpretations of capitalist society, and an alternative to Braverman. Habermas is intellectually eclectic, drawing from Hegel's ideas on dominant cultural norms and alienation, Fromm's Marxist interpretation of the state and its capacity for propaganda and, most notably, from Weber's (1957) liberal critique of bureaucracy and its "iron cage". For Habermas, although modernity has restricted the capacity of individuals to express their views, there remains the potential to challenge oppression and encourage open debate that can lead to greater individual autonomy. As such, we can see that Habermas moved critical theory to a more pragmatic position that is aligned with contemporary social democracy.

Habermas's contribution to the discourse on identity is important. First, it provides an interpretation of how late capitalist society is flawed and, second, he offers a view of how its deficiencies can be addressed from an ethical perspective. In *Structural Transformation*, Habermas (1989) argued that modern societies are characterised by two spheres: the "lifeworld" and the "system". The term "lifeworld" is used to encapsulate everyday social life. The term "system" is used to describe the formalised mechanisms of social control that exist such as the state bureaucracy and the executive agencies of the modern capitalist state.

Importantly, for Habermas, although the "lifeworld" may be inherently conservative, in that it is involved in cultural reproduction, it is characterised by relatively high levels of individual freedom and collective co-operation. In contrast, the "system" is typified by control and oppression. Habermas (1989) argues that the modern state has created a dysfunctional system in which individuals are denuded of their individual autonomy, while their ethical framework is re-engineered to meet the needs of late capitalism. Habermas offers then a theory of social action and society within which the ideas of distorted ethics and limited personal autonomy are prominent. According to Habermas, contemporary capitalism creates new types of identity which leads to a distortion of civil morality and personal ethics through the process of "de-moralisation".
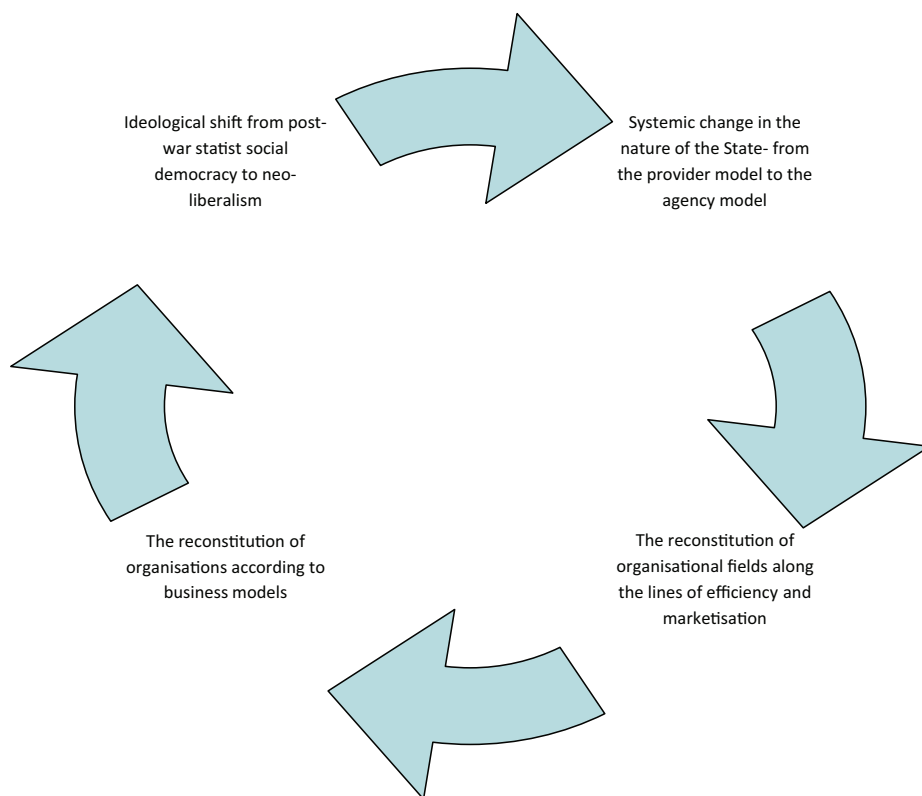
To counter this "de-moralisation" of society and the assertion of amoral organisational management, Habermas argues for a fundamental review of how we arrive at a view of the world and how we interact with others. For Habermas, it is simply not enough to think about why we do what we do at work but how we do it, and what it means to us as professionals when we interact with others. Inherent within Habermas's argument is the idea that we need to understand others' viewpoints and arrive at some form of an inter-subjective consensus which is both moral and ethical. In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1984/1987) developed this critique of the ontological and epistemological singularity of mainstream technical-rational organisation theory and called for true moral and ethical discourse that is designed to establish a social order based on democratic self-expression.

Habermas offers an alternative to the post-structuralist view of an atomised society and the notion of self-positioning. He also offers an historical perspective which post-structuralism studiously avoids. It is an approach which echoes structuralism and the ontological realism of inequality in capitalist society. Although post-structuralist accounts of the workplace can provide insights into the psychology and sociology of an organisation, these researches are open to criticism from essentialists, critical realists and structuralists who view post-structuralism as myopic. For the Left, post-structuralism could degrade into a form of linguistic–psychoanalytical discourse, an arena for pragmatic management studies and potentially symbolise a conservative counter-revolution against the social democratic state. If post-structuralist critical management studies is to proffer a meaningful agenda of change, it must look beyond the company gates and consider the unequal pathways to work, unemployment and privilege that underpins capitalist society.

The changing governmental context to teacher professionalism

Fukayama (1989) famously asserted that the 1970s had witnessed the "end of ideology" and the 1990s was to herald the "end of history". On both counts, Fukayama was presumptuous: not only have we seen the once omnipotent neo-liberalism challenged by its close relative American neo-conservatism but also by neo-conservative Islamic fundamentalism, and the past two decades have seen structural shifts in economic, financial and diplomatic power from the West to the advancing East, symbolised most conspicuously with the post-2008 "economic downturn". Given the limitations inherent within post-structuralism as a vehicle for democratic change, the appeal of grand narrative becomes more apparent. One possible analytical framework that could be followed is described in Figure 1.

Figure 1 describes the re-ordering of British society since the advent of the New Right under Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Although much of this paper has related to research undertaken into business organisations in the private sector, we should also recognise that structural changes have transformed the British state from a social democratic "provider/

Ideological shift from post-war statist social democracy to neo-liberalism

Systemic change in the nature of the State- from the provider model to the agency model

The reconstitution of organisations according to business models

The reconstitution of organisational fields along the lines of efficiency and marketisation

Figure 1.
The transformation of
Western society since
the 1970s

redistributative" model to a neo-liberal "agency" model of a regulatory state. The State has been, and continues to serve as, the key nodal point in capitalist society. Although its role has changed, the State remains a pivotal factor in economics, international trade and employment rights. The State remains a key structure in a structured society.

Although the State has reduced its level of involvement in many areas of British society, it has also engendered new forms of control over those who work in the public services in what Ball describes as "new forms of entrepreneurial control through marketing and competition" (Ball, 2003, p. 219). This new mechanism for control is described by Ball (2003, p. 215) as being encapsulated in three policy technologies: the market, managerialism and performativity. For Bauman (2008, p. 112), power is exercised in contemporary "liquid modernity" through the instillation of "precarization" where middle-class insecurity and fear of unemployment become self-regulating forms of control. In the age of performativity, continual justification is part and parcel of the mind-set of professionals. For Akerstrom (in Kirketerp, 2007), the level of emotional conditioning approximates to a "code of love", where "empowered" employees work to please and self-manage without question. Educational institutions now operate in a marketised environment, in which they are expected to compete with other schools and colleges to provide low-cost, high-quality provision. The education market is, of course, somewhat imperfect, as many students have a limited choice and many institutions

have a limited degree of manoeuvre in how they compete. Although the rhetoric of government policy is often presented in terms of consumer sovereignty and student voice, the real power continues to reside with central government policymakers and the executive agencies of the Central State. For teachers, the most immediate manifestation of the education market is the imposition of NPM and new forms of accountability, such as the analysis of their performance through the annual lesson observation, the analysis of their examination results using "value-added" statistical models, and their target-driven appraisal. The management of educational provision has, in effect, devolved to the individual teacher in new and very personal terms. The issue of how individual teachers respond to the changing nature of their working environment and the new values-system imposed by NPM underpins the discourse on the self-image, identity and professionalism of teachers.

Although the Office of National Statistics categorised teaching as a profession in the census of 2001, it has often been viewed as a pseudo-profession by those on the political Right who have generally defended the interests of the medical and legal professions. At the heart of the critique of teacher professionalism is the belief that teaching is a lower-skilled activity than practising medicine or law, and that it attracts less well-qualified entrants. As Hoyle (2001) describes, this reticence to acknowledge teachers as professionals stems from two sources:

(1) the public's collective memory of school; and

(2) their concern over teaching methods.

Professional status is generally achieved through accepted claims to expertise, independent judgment and self-regulation. Although there has been a wide-spread public acknowledgement of subject expertise and experience of dealing with the classroom, teaching itself has resisted self-regulation, especially when imposed by the State as in the guise of the now defunct General Teaching Council and unpopular the Institute for Learning (IfL). The decision by the teaching unions in the Further education sector to boycott the IfL is indicative of disquiet widely held about the model of regulation introduced by government.

The notion of professional identity has been described by Friedson (2001) as the "third logic" to accompany markets and bureaucracy in contemporary organisations. A separate corpus of research, however, has been undertaken into the professional identity of teachers that is quite distinct from other forms of work identity (Beijaard *et al.*, 2000, 2004). In simple terms, the idea of being a teacher transcends the notion of daily work and being part of the organisation, and it contains within it a distinctive set of values and beliefs about what makes teaching a profession. According to Beijaard *et al.* (2004), research has focussed on three principal areas:

(1) the characteristics of teachers' professional identity;

(2) the nature of its formation; and

(3) main features.

Beijaard *et al.* (2004), professional identity is the product of a number of factors, not least the individual's rationalisation of their context within a community of practice. For Wenger (1998), teachers' professional identity can be viewed in a number of ways: a nexus for professionals and a community, a profession that involves a personal learning trajectory and a work context that has parallels not only locally and nationally but globally. Much of the

research identified by Beijaard *et al.* (2004) reported that teachers' professional identity was created in the inter-subjective environment of the institutional setting.

Professionalism is being redefined by the government, as has been recognised for some years (Bottery, 1996; Beck, 1999; Ball, 2003), and reworked into professionality (Gunter, 2002, p. 146) where teachers are required to adhere to the rules imposed by managers: being professional is increasingly becoming defined in terms of conformity and subordination. This development has important consequences for teachers, not least because it undermines their autonomy but also because it impacts of their own value-system and self-worth. Fundamentally, being a professional is more than doing things well, it is also about being ethical and maintaining a self-identity. Ball (2003, p. 221) develops this analysis of performativity and the re-creation of professional self-identity into a discussion of a "values schizophrenia" within teachers as they attempt to reconcile their own very personal view of professionalism with the need to conform to the prevailing organisational culture. The question of how teachers respond to the demands of site-based management is at the heart of this research and its findings will inform the discourse on new forms of professional identity.

Gleeson and Shain (1999) have contributed to the research on the changing nature of teacher professionalism through their work on compliance within the further education (FE) sector, highlighting the transformation of some college teachers into managers and others into those who are managed. It is within this context that teachers are regarded as being responsible for micro-management and playing "their part" in running the College. It is a form of rhetoric that invites participation and loyalty but is designed to engineer conformity. In their study of middle management in the sector Gleeson and Shain (1999), proffered a typology of compliance in response to change. The three categories of response encapsulate the reactions of FE teachers to a new set of values and notions of professionalism. The identification of "willing compliance" (Gleeson and Shain, 1999, p. 236) among some staff recognises the reality that for some teachers new forms of professionalism represent an opportunity for advancement which may correspond with their own career goals. For others, there is only "unwilling compliance" (Gleeson and Shain, 1999, p. 238) to the new contractual relationship that was imposed as a result of incorporation in 1993. According to Gleeson and Shain (1999, p. 240), the "vast majority" of those surveyed reported "strategic compliance", in that although they implemented change, they rejected the business ethics that lay at its centre. Such research demonstrates that although the government policy has been preoccupied with re-professionalising teachers by redefining their professional identity and responsibilities, this conditioning process has been not entirely successful.

The ascendancy of performativity and its associated notion of professionality have important implications for how we view teachers as professionals and what are expected from them as they are re-ordered into new forms of behaviour. Such a shift is mirrored, for example, in the training organised within colleges by management. In-house training – known as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) – tends now to be focussed on "up-skilling "or "re-skilling" to perform a particular act or engender a mode of behaviour. There is a clear emphasis in such an approach to developing practitioner skills rather than engaging in any philosophical debate about their work and its relation to wider society. Moreover, it is often senior management that determines what constitutes appropriate CPD through financial control and choice of training. In an echo of Braverman's (1974) labour process theory on

de-professionalisation through de-skilling and a lack of autonomy, it is a process which is controlled by management and not the individual professional.

Professionalism cannot be dissociated from the self and the ethical framework within which it is constructed. In recent years, the ethical treatment of workers has come to the fore as managers in the private and public sectors seek to demonstrate their "corporate social responsibility". Take for example, the idea of developing "emotional intelligence" and the promotion of "well-being" health programmes which were identified as areas for management training in some Sixth Form Colleges. Such approaches are not simply indicative of a "caring corporatism" but of the all-encompassing nature of organisational life. Critical theory approaches to ethics at work reject the idea of an abstract corporate responsibility and emphasise the need to establish ethical practice at both individual level and that of wider society (Wray-Bliss, 2011). The centrality of organisational life in constructing the idea of the "self at work" is also apparent in the literature generated by critical theorists, and it echoes Habermas's ideas on the interplay between the system and lifeworld. In contrast to mainstream technical-rationalism and the idea of the uniform worker, critical theory asserts that there are many dimensions to the "self at work". For critical theorists, management control is exercised both in identity formation and cultural reproduction and works to re-engineer human behaviour, professional identity and self-worth (Thomas, 2011). Such a process of indoctrination is inherently complex and may involve individual complicity, as well as some resistance, but it is nevertheless powerful and fundamentally unethical.

The research by Alvesson and Willmott (2001) on "elite" companies and Alvesson and Karreman (2004) into knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs), and referred to above, do offer intriguing comparisons within which to contextualise and discuss educational institutions as organisations with their own cultural frameworks. The 94 Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) are regarded within the English educational system as highly valued academic institutions focussed on university entrance, and staffed by well-qualified teachers. In this respect, SFCs combine some of the features of being both elite and knowledge-intensive organisations. They do, however, differ from such firms in terms of purpose and market environment. SFCs compete with sixth forms in schools and the much larger General Further Education Colleges that cater for a far wider clientele and offer a broader curriculum centred on vocational preparation and some Higher Education courses. Although Alvesson (1993) draws distinctions between traditional professions and KIFs, there are parallels between the educational professions and KIFs in the sense that both manage everyday ambiguity in their work through technical language and assert unique claims to knowledge. Whether any further commonality exists between the use of rhetoric as performance strategies by teachers and support staff, and those reported in elite companies and KIFs would be an important finding given their different contexts.

Research methodology

The nature of the research investigation was limited by the position of the author as a "teacher-researcher" and the restricted opportunity to undertake research outside the researcher's own institution. As a result, a case study approach was chosen that investigated a single Sixth Form College. Among the benefits of such an approach is the potential to gain insight into the phenomenology of the workplace and the life experiences of those who work there. This phenomenological approach was influenced

by Habermas's (1984/1987) thoughts on the co-construction of knowledge and the importance of inter-subjectivity in interviewing. In its early stages, the research focussed on the views of teachers of their professional identity. However, in response to requests from support staff to be included, a wider research sample was surveyed. The decision to include support staff was, in part, determined by the democratic agenda implicit in the research and, in part, by the realisation that an opportunity to compare and contrast different groups of workers within the same organisation was possible. As Rorty (1985) recognised, the pursuit of knowledge "has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one". For Denzin (1997), we live in a new era of ethnography which requires a new set of criteria and one that marks a departure from classical positivist notions of the scientific method, generalisibility and rules of behaviour. For Denzin (1997), we should move towards new and socially aware criteria of standpoint epistemology, self-biographies and powerful political accounts. As an alternative set of criteria to mainstream positivist validity criteria, Smith and Deemer (2003) offer plausibility, credibility and descriptive validity as appropriate criteria in judging emancipatory research and critical studies.

The survey of teachers followed on earlier research that had involved 52 teachers and involved two stages with a co-constructed research interview following on a structured questionnaire that prompted respondents to express a view on a series of issues: conformity, image projection, emotional and behavioural control and personal values. Most statements in the questionnaire were closed with a yes/no option, whereas others elicited an extended response. For example, Statement 1 was "I sometimes feel that my own values are compromised at work", whereas Statement 7 was "I actively aim to present a particular image of me at work, if yes, explain how and why". It was decided that a yes/no response would be preferred to a Likert scale, as it would oblige respondents into a clearer position and that deeper and richer data could be generated during the interview itself. Although most of the questionnaire was common to both teachers and support staff, two additional statements were included for teachers that related to career goals and what they prioritised in their career.

In surveying a broader sample than originally intended, the relevance of professional identity could be teased out with responses from support staff serving as a leit motif for discussion. The range of support staff roles was wide. Those surveyed included a site warden, staff in learning support roles, library and careers staff and those employed in clerical roles. Only one of these respondents was male and one female under 30 years of age. In short, the composition of support staff was middle-aged and female. The preponderance of female respondents in the survey is a reflection of the labour market for support staff in education which tends to be relatively low paid compared to teaching but far more flexible, and attracts those who wish to fit part-time work around other commitments. Given the differing socio-economic context to these two sample groups, the resultant data would not only shed light on the nature of teacher professionalism but also on much under-researched sub-groups within the college community. Instead of portraying a simple binary relationship between teachers and managers, this research involved painting a triptych of these sub-communities: managers, teachers and support staff. In addition to the relatively small sample, a number of other limitations should be acknowledged in such a privileged and confined research exercise. In discussing sensitive workplace issues, the concerns of confidentiality and trust were more pertinent where there was an asynchronous relationship (professional/non-professional) already

in place, and which an implied workplace hierarchy existed. Clearly, the assurance of personal anonymity is central to such research (Table I).

Findings

Support staff data

A majority of respondents disagreed with statements relating to compromised values, being obliged to control emotions and not believing in the work they undertook. It was clear that support staff accepted their lot more readily, and were prepared to conform to the expectations of the workplace (92 per cent). This may well be attributable to their self-image as employees rather than empowered professionals. Furthermore, the data suggested that a clear majority considered that their particular role was important to their self-esteem (84 per cent). Although the support staff largely accepted their role and position within the organisational hierarchy, an overwhelming majority (92 per cent) chose to draw a line between the goals of senior management and their own. A number of responses highlighted the importance of working as part of a team; it appears as if there exists a high degree of mutual support and solidarity at this level within the hierarchy:

I do feel valued and feel very much as part of a team.

and

[I] feel valued by immediate line manager but perhaps not so much by teaching staff who sometimes fail to see/understand the relevance of [my work].

Many of the other responses related to conforming and performing to accepted norms:

[I] maintain a certain degree of formality […][and] portray a professional image to colleagues and customers (students).

[I] control my reactions […]. Alternatives not acceptable.

Smart clothes – more formal […]. To look more professional.

[I] try to be assertive […]. In an attempt to be taken seriously at work.

Progression at work can be helped by adopting different personae, which is what management is looking for […] that is how people get on.

A few questioned the level of understanding shown by senior management:

I know the role is important but sometimes get the impression that senior management don't always understand how demanding/stressful it can be.

I have to put up with behaviour from students which I wouldn't have done with my own children. Many students have a poor work ethic which can make my job difficult […]. I feel this situation will worsen.

	Teaching staff (male)	Teaching staff (female)	Support staff (male)	Support staff (female)	Total surveyed
Table I. A statistical breakdown of respondents by role and gender	37	16	1	15	69

Teachers' data
The data generated by teachers contrasted sharply with the data from support staff. Whereas support staff tended to accept conformity and the decisions of senior management, teachers were far less deferential to management. In comparison to the 82 per cent of support staff who felt obliged to conform, only 17 per cent of teachers concurred. A clear majority of 83 per cent of teachers felt that their values were compromised at work, that they were obliged to control their emotions and that they did not always believe in what they did at work. In addition, all the teachers thought that their role within the organisational hierarchy was important to their self-esteem and that their present role was more important than any longer-term career goal. Moreover, all the teachers drew a distinction between their own values and those of both senior management and government. This set of data echoed earlier research at the same institution that indicated that most teachers were critical of Central Government policy.

It was clear that teachers adopted a pragmatic approach to behaviour:

[My behaviour at work is influenced by] "*who am I dealing with*" (several similar responses).

Whether I truly believe in what I have been asked to do.

Can't always say what you feel about policies […] [I] have to attend meetings you feel are of no value […] you may want to walk out.

[I] moderate my language.

One teacher spoke of being "more flamboyant and outgoing" [at work] because a teacher can't be "quiet and closed in as I prefer at home". In this respect, this comment was possibly the clearest indication of identity work in performance.

Discussion
There was a clear difference in the two sets of data generated, with support staff more likely to defer to senior management and accept their lot. There are a number of possible reasons for the position taken among support staff. In terms of their employment position, many support staff may feel more vulnerable than do teachers who are often members of powerful trades unions and hold different contracts of employment. Despite unionisation, many support staff see themselves as alone doing a limited, and exposed, role unlike teachers who may often undertake several roles within the organisation. Interestingly, a third of support staff held graduate-level qualifications in their own right and yet did not echo the views of teachers with comparable qualifications but those of the support staff. This suggests that workplace views may be, in part, generated by work experience and status rather than qualifications. Importantly, the policy of retrenchment introduced in November 2011 by the Coalition Government and the subsequent cuts in staffing in the Sixth Form College sector could be seen as a reason for moderation and conformity by some.

In part, however, the contrasting nature of teachers' responses could be ascribed to their professional identity. Teachers do claim a particular interest in government education policy, an interest that can be traced back to the neo-corporatist decision-making of the post-war British State in which trades unions were consulted on major policy. Teachers also claim an interest in public policy because of their claim to professional knowledge and status. Although recent political history has witnessed the decline in the influence of many trades unions, teachers still aspire to influence the policy

246

discourse on education. Given their commitment to the idea of education as a form of social betterment, criticism of the current direction of government policy in favour of marketisation and reduced funding is not unexpected.

How do the findings relate to the literature?
The data generated from this small-scale case study echoed much of the literature on accommodation strategies, such as that of Thomas (2011). The data suggested that support staff were far less likely to voice opposition to the practices of NPM than teachers. The findings infer that support staff are more exposed as individuals at work and may, as a consequence, adopt particular accommodation strategies as a result. This study found that employees of all types engage in some form of "identity work" and perform particular identities given differing contexts. The study also suggests that support staff tend to have a more positive identification with the college than teachers who tend to be more questioning of the practices of NPM. Teachers were more likely to make a distinction between their identification as teachers or educationalists, and functionaries within the organisational hierarchy. For teachers, their sense of professionalism came before their adherence to corporate ideals.

Conclusions
This case study has established some grounding for further research into how "education workers" in an SFC engage in "identity work". The results suggest that clear differences exist between support staff and teachers. In many respects, support staff are disadvantaged when it comes to the micro-politics of educational institutions; they are generally paid less than teachers, enjoy less secure tenure and are often viewed as "second-order" staff in supporting others' work. If there is a class system within educational institutions, then support staff corresponds to a subordinate stratum whose interests and views may be viewed both by teachers and managers as of secondary importance. Teachers, in comparison, are more skilled political actors and are able to exert greater collective bargaining through greater institutional and systemic influence. Further research could explore these findings not only among other SFCs but in the schools and Further Education sectors as well. Although we may wish to acknowledge a role for individual agency within this discourse, and much of the data echo post-structuralist thought, we must not lose sight of the wider context within which individuals exist. Although post-structuralism may provide vignettes of social interaction and individual self-awareness, it cannot furnish a holistic understanding of our world and the manifest structural inequalities that lie within. This study suggests that a return to structuralist interpretations of organisational life in the public sector would enlighten our understanding further.

The work of Habermas, together with that from contemporary Critical Management Theorists such as Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, offer alternative ways in which to view the nature of management and its interaction with colleagues at work. It is clear that colleges are changing and have changed in recent years and with this change is a reappraisal of professional work. For critical theorists, the imposition of NPM has re-engineered the work and professional relationships throughout the public sector. In teaching, NPM has meant becoming more concerned with meeting targets, being part of the team and conforming. This research echoes earlier research in Further Education colleges and suggests that many teachers resent this re-professionalisation, and some

view this change as part of a wider de-skilling process that approximates to de-professionalisation. While college teachers may wish to champion their cause, they would do well to recognise the position of support staff and recognise that there are common interests that both groups possess.

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About the author

David William Stoten is an Assistant Curriculum Director and teaches Politics and History at Havant College. He has taught in three Sixth Form Colleges in his 23 years of teaching career. David William Stoten can be contacted at: 1dstoten@gmail.com