

## Cognitive mapping, power and the discursive construction of leader identity.

### Abstract

This paper explores a new approach to researching leadership in organizations by drawing on cognitive maps of individuals within two school settings who articulate what 'leadership' means for them. This study through a critical discourse lens using the method of cognitive mapping and taking a social constructionist approach to leadership presents a different account of leadership practice and reveals how it is co-constructed and functions in powerful ways.

The existence of leadership is subject to a number of factors such as task(s), individuals, culture, relationships, knowledge etc. Leadership is defined in terms of being able to influence the management of meaning through these. In this way, certain meanings are privileged over others and so the meaning is managed (Clifton, 2012). However, to scrutinize the complexity of the process of leadership it is necessary to unpack individuals' language-in-use (Gee, 2005). Cognitive mapping as a method is used as a tool for externalizing the conscious or unconscious micro-practices of individuals. In addition, utilizing a critical discourse analysis, an understanding is gained of the leadership practice individuals are co-creating through their activities on a daily basis. A careful consideration of how leadership is 'brought off' is achieved (Salovarra and Bathurst, 2018).

### Method – cognitive mapping

Analysis of 18 cognitive maps reveals a range of Discourses of contextual factors of leadership such as the Discourse of relations of power (see figure 1) and Discourse of identity-work.

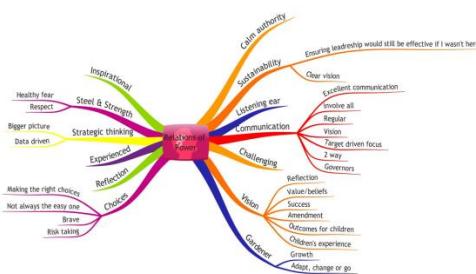


Figure 1 Discourse of relations of power

In her seminal text, Huff (1990:15) believes cognitive maps can be placed on a continuum and identifies a five-fold classification for cognitive mapping dependent on the level of interpretation required by the researcher. It is her fifth category, which contains methods that are designed to 'specify schemas, frames and perceptual codes' (ibid.:16), that forms part of the research design for this study. The objective behind her fifth mapping choice is to explore value and meaning systems. In her view if the mapmaker wants to understand the link between thought and action, understanding this deeper structure is essential' (ibid.:16).

Participants within the cognitive mapping process were left for them to 'free associate' (Mason, 2002:64) through their specific experiences without structured questioning from myself and each spoken thought as they drew their maps, was captured through the recording process. Furthermore, the process of drawing the cognitive maps supported the participants in the fluidity as a 'thinking device' (Gee, 2005).

### **Method - Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

In addition, CDA was suitable as a methodology for this study as it provided a foundation for a critical approach to a discourse analysis. CDA is orientated to question established power relations, it challenges assumptions (Rogers, 2011, Davey & Liefoghe, 2012; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) and develops a specific form of critical thinking and engages more in critique than criticism (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Mackenzi Davey & Liefoghe, 2012). Although critique is an important part of the process, it is not the end goal.

For critical theorists, all reality is socially constructed. For instance, within this study, it became an inescapable social 'fact' that all teachers should incorporate '*effective practices into their practice* (to achieve) *effective teaching* (to become) *outstanding teachers*', irrelevant of the consequences for those individuals. This social construction, that all teachers needed to be '*an outstanding teacher*', remains fully entrenched as an objective social reality within the school. Nor do critical theorists regard reality as arbitrary, unstructured activity; rather, these social constructions of reality are influenced by power relations within that culture – in Fairclough's words, 'power to', in terms of bestowing membership of the leadership team; 'power behind', in terms of supporting an individual in professional development; and 'power over', in terms of who is accepted as 'effective teacher' and who is not. Raelin et al, (2018:278) believe 'power' to be 'tiny drops of emancipatory choice' whilst Salovarra and Bathurst, (2018) ask us to question what are we referring to when we talk about leadership and what is it good for?

Gee's (2005, 2011), framework offers a way to analyze how individuals used language to 'say things and be things'. He recognizes how discourse function plays an important role in reproducing society through its social structures, relationships, and value structures. For him, the form of the Language ('d')iscourse –Grammar) cannot exist separate from the function of the language ('D')iscourse) (Rogers, 2004:7; Gee, 2009; 2005; 2011). When teachers externalize their thoughts about 'practice' within their cognitive maps, it was never just a decision about saying (informing), it was a decision about doing (and being as well) the practice of being a 'good teacher'. The notion of how language was used to say things (informing), do things (action) and be things (identity) played a significant part within this study.

'In a sense all language gets its meaning from a game, though we don't typically use the word "game", we use the more complex word "practice" (Gee, 2011:5). Schools, or any organizations, have a set of rules for how they play 'games'. Activities like taking part in Book scrutinies, staff meetings etc. are not games as in the general sense, but are carried out within certain 'conventions' or 'rules'. The

interest is not in winners or losers in the traditional sense, but rather who has 'acted' normally or 'appropriately', who have shown they are an 'effective practitioner', therefore this can be construed as winning or losing. If you follow the rules and use them to your advantage, you are accepted and considered an 'outstanding teacher', an 'effective leader'. Who is, therefore, an insider within the community or is not? This consideration of wanting to be accepted or considered 'good' is for Gee a 'social good', what is considered in 'society' as a want or value (ibid.).

Therefore, in using language, 'social goods' are always at stake. When speaking or writing, there will always be a risk of being a winner or loser in a given practice. By the act of speaking, writing, being within the community of school, individuals accept others as winners or losers in the practice that they are engaged in, they can give or deny that 'social good'. It is how this meaning is managed that this study is concerned with.

It follows, therefore, that by using language and the distribution (or not) of social goods, then language must be 'political.' How a 'thing' is phrased has implications for social goods like guilt, blame, and ability (or lack of it), who should do what. In other words, what is being communicated and externalized determines what is taken to be 'normal'.

Therefore, responding to Raelin's, (2017:219) call, 'on how leadership emerges and evolves in concrete social contexts', this paper engages in new ways of understanding how leadership practice evolves and how it is 'intrinsically collective' (ibid:217). Thus, following this critical conceptual framework, this study has adopted cognitive mapping, to investigate the micro-practices of everyday life in school.

The study explored how leadership practice was co-created to reflect the socially situated practice in which it resided and examined localized issues where negotiated means resulted in coordinated pre-determined actions. Through a critical discursive lens utilizing the method of cognitive mapping, it was possible to garner the participants' accounts of the leadership activities and the relationships they were experiencing through their taken-for-granted knowledge that revealed the 'inseparability of language, meaning and action' (Fairhurst, 2011:498). Through an examination of the conscious and unconscious practices of individuals, it has been possible to provide an illuminating lens to reveal why experienced teachers were tied in to a power structure and not enabled to work in an emancipatory way and where conflict or resistance did exist in small pockets why was it a card that was hard to find played. Therefore this paper answers the question, how are leader identities talked into being.

**Keywords**

**Cognitive mapping; critical discourse analysis; leader-identity; power**

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