

Chapter 2

Discourse and Policy



The main purpose of this book is to explore the effects of the use of language, or discourse, relating to the school-based policies of wellbeing. In order to contextualise the analyses that appear later in the book, this chapter will introduce and discuss the concept of discourse, relating this to policy formation and its interpretation. What follows is a fairly generic introduction to discourse and policy, but for a reader who is unfamiliar with academic studies in these areas it is an important basis for understanding the arguments later in the book.

Firstly, I will introduce the concept of discourse, examining what it is, and discussing the role of discourse in shaping behaviours. The role of discourse in masking dominant ideologies by naturalising ideas as ‘common sense’ will be discussed. I will explore the ways that powerful groups use discourse in policies that are designed to shape the behaviours of professionals towards particular goals. The discussion will move on to consider how policies are made and enacted, and how international ideological influences coalesce on educational and wellbeing policies. Finally, there is a short consideration of the nature and enactment of discourse analysis.

2.1 What Is Discourse?

Discourse can be seen as the use of language (spoken or written) by social actors in specific settings (Wodak 2008) and is the means by which people represent their view of the world (Fairclough 2003). However, people do not arrive at their world view in a vacuum; individuals are deeply embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts. Discourses are described as being both socially constructed and socially constitutive (Wodak 2009), in other words they emerge from the social action of groups of people, but at the same time they also mould the social world, shaping people’s perceptions and behaviours. Hence the significance of discourse lies in its social function, and in the way in which power and control can be mediated through discourse.

To exemplify how discourse is both socially constructed and socially constitutive in education, I will digress briefly to consider the discourse of ‘fixed ability labelling’ and its twin concept of ‘potential’. This view of learning, based on an assumption that ‘intelligence’ is innate, immutable, and normally distributed, emerged from a human invention, the Intelligence Quotient test, whose widespread use led to the construction of a discourse that remains prevalent today, in spite of searing critique (Gould 1996). It gave rise to the unquestioned categorisation of children using terms such as ‘high ability’ and ‘low ability’ coupled with deterministic assumptions about future achievements. The socially constitutive effects of the fixed ability discourse are evident in the systems and practices of contemporary schooling, such as setting, streaming and some forms of differentiation. These practices, it is argued, serve to lower teachers’ expectations of children and undermine children’s sense of self-worth, which in turn contributes to the reproduction social inequality (Hart 1998; Hart et al. 2004). This provides an example of the far-reaching effects that a dominant educational discourse can have on the lives of children, and in maintaining structural injustices in society.

However, although we can argue that discourse shapes the educational world, only some construals of the world have this constitutive power. Some discourses are privileged over others and the more powerful groups in society have greater access to platforms of public discourse (van Dijk 1997). Moreover, discourses do not only represent the world as it is seen to be in the present, they are also projective, and

can represent possible worlds, thus can be used to bring about change. However, as Fairclough (2010, p. 5) comments, ‘We cannot transform the world in any old way we happen to construe it; the world is such that only some transformations are possible’. The dominant discourses at the time will determine the direction of change. This is particularly important for this book which is exploring how the contemporary discourses of wellbeing in schools have been shaped.

In education, policy is an important public platform for the dissemination of discourse. Policies are produced by governments or other organisations of state, to purposefully influence the behaviour of citizens. According to Foucault, (1984, p. 123) ‘Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses along with the knowledges and powers which they carry’. Thus, Ball (2008) argues that attention should be paid to the discourses of educational policies as these have a strong impact upon the construction of meaning, and consequently the relationships, imperatives and inevitabilities in schools. Arguably the social implications of the discourses associated with the ‘wellbeing agenda’ in schools have potentially far-reaching influences on the behaviour of teachers and, therefore, on the learning and development of children, and it is this that justifies such a close scrutiny of these emerging discourses.

Whilst writers may refer to ‘dominant discourses’, for example, currently we often can identify capitalist discourses as dominating discussions of globalisation, in fact multiple discourses can and do operate simultaneously. Jager and Maier (2009) present a view of discourse as a flow of knowledge that changes over time, which results in any number of competing societal discourses at any one moment in history, referring to a ‘giant milling mass’ of discourses. Not only do multiple discourses exist simultaneously, it is perfectly possible for competing discourses to be evident within the same institution (Rogers 2008) or for a single individual to ascribe to seemingly contradictory discourses (Fairclough 2003). One of the tasks of this book, is to disentangle the complex web of discourses which seem to converge around the concept of wellbeing.

2.2 How Discourse Works: Discourse and Ideology

Discourses are not simply random ways of talking. They are grounded in ideologies. Van Dijk (2006b) defines ideology as a belief system, which is socially shared by a group of people. Ideologies, he argues are a particularly fundamental, or seemingly axiomatic, type of belief, and are socially and politically important because they control and organise other types of beliefs, and the associated choices that people make. Ideological representations contribute to relationships of power and domination. For example, a racist ideology may control beliefs about immigration. Ideologies, therefore, specify the cultural values (for example understandings of freedom, equality and justice) which are relevant to a group. For example, in Chap. 3, I will discuss how neo-liberal and welfare liberal ideologies can be shown to give rise to contrasting understandings of the purposes of education and its role in social justice.

Ideology and discourse are closely related concepts, but not entirely congruent. Fairclough (2010) describes this as a dialectical relationship whereby one could not exist without the other, so ideology is part of discourse and discourse is part of ideology, but none the less they are distinguishable. Ideologies are shaped through the dominant discourses of powerful groups and vice versa. If power is seen as having control over the actions of other people then we can see that language can control people either through direct command, through persuasion, or through subtler use of discourse. Through their privileged access to platforms of public discourse, those in power can shape the intentions, actions and speech of individuals, to align with their own interests (van Dijk 1997). The makers of education policy hold a powerful position in terms of subtly moulding the beliefs and behaviours of teachers towards their own ideology. This has potentially far reaching effects on many aspects of the lives of children.

However, individuals may not be fully aware of the ideologies to which they ascribe and which are represented through their discursive actions. Fairclough (2010) argues that interactions such as conversations depend upon taken for granted assumptions or background knowledge, which serves to naturalise ideological representations so that they appear as 'common sense' rather than ideology. By taking on the mantle of common sense the ideology becomes opaque to the participants. In this vein Wodak and Meyer (2009) describe naturalised discourse as a form of collusion, suggesting that ideologies are transmitted 'behind the back of the subject, while the actors do not understand the game' (p. 17). Those educational policies that are most successful are those whose discourses become naturalised within the 'speech communities' of schools. This book will argue that the concept of wellbeing has been naturalised in schools, to become part of everyday, taken for granted speech, with little scrutiny.

When a particular ideology has become naturalised within the population a situation of hegemony is reached (ibid). According to van Dijk (1997) hegemonic power causes people to act as if their choices were natural, made of free will and in such a situation commands and coercion by the dominant groups are not required. Expressions such as the 'wellbeing agenda' or the 'wellbeing movement' (Layard 2011) suggest that the acceptance of public interventions in personal wellbeing may be becoming hegemonic. Yet, as will be shown, the language of wellbeing can be put to work to support different ideological positions.

2.3 Different Schools of Thought in Studies of Discourse

It should be noted that there are different schools of thought about the relationship between individual actors and their use of discursive practices. There is a divide in the literature between a post-structural view of discourse stemming from European philosophy and cultural thought, and a linguistic view of discourse which is Anglo-American in origin (MacLure 2003). The post-structural approach does not view people as rational self-aware individuals, but instead believes that people's

identities are formed by the discourses to which they are exposed (Foucault 1973). This approach holds that there is no social reality other than discourse. From a Foucauldian perspective, it is not the subject who produces the discourse, but the discourse which produces the subject (Jager and Maier 2009). The post-structural view is not so much concerned with close analysis of texts, but with the use of discursive practices operating at a social level. In this view, truths are always partial and knowledge always 'situated'.

However, other writers pay more attention to the role that individuals play in interpreting discourses in the light of their own experiences. Van Dijk (2006a) argues that if ideology is a belief system, then there must be a role for cognition in an individual's development of belief. He refers to the 'mental maps' or 'context maps' that people create in order to interpret their experiences in the context of their understandings of the social world. This has been supported empirically by numerous research studies which identify the role of individuals in interpreting and enacting policy discourses (e.g. Evans et al. 2013; Maguire et al. 2015; Pickard 2010; Grue 2009).

In this book I take a view that what is said and what it is possible to say are, to some extent, moderated by the cognitive processes and active choices of individuals, albeit deeply influenced by the dominant discourses. Instead of taking a post-structural view this work leans more towards an understanding of discourse as a linguistic practice. However, the main interest is not linguistics per se, but in the social impact of the discourses which are expressed. Therefore, the work will draw from the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is based on an assumption that use of language is closely related to other aspects of social life. Its origins lie in 'critical linguistics' a branch of linguistics which developed in the 1970s (van Leeuwen 2009). It offers an approach to discourse analysis which is interested in the use of language, primarily for its social effects (Fairclough 2003).

Whilst acknowledging the post-structural argument about the conditional nature of 'truth' and the contextual influences on 'knowledge', in this book I take a realist stance. This is a position which believes that social and political structures and forces do exist, although they may be differently understood and not always easy to identify (Fairclough 2010). For example, it may be unclear exactly how social forces work to create the conditions of poverty that disproportionately affect certain groups of people, but it is factually true that this happens. Furthermore, the limitations that poverty places on the lives of individuals are very real, albeit differently experienced.

2.4 Discourse and Policy

Government policy is an important platform for gaining power over discourses. School based policies, such as the wellbeing policies are designed to shape discourses and alter the behaviour of teachers and other professionals in school.

This section will consider the process of policy of formulation and enactment, and consider the role of discourse within this process.

Social policy can be seen as actions and positions taken by the state (which consists of a range of institutions), in order to steer the actions of citizens (Rizvi and Lingard 2010), and is a form of discursive action. According to Ball (2008) a contemporary account of education should also acknowledge the role of the business sector in shaping the direction of policy, thereby identifying a route through which new discourses, and new forms of regulation are migrating into education policy.

However, policy is more than simply documentation, or actions of those in positions of authority. Policy is a process, which includes influence, policy production, textual expressions of policy and implementation. Thus policy has been characterised as ‘text and action, words and deeds’ and ‘what is enacted as well as what is intended’ (Ball 1994, cited in Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Viewed in this way, it is clear that policy is not absolute, (despite the appearance of the documentation), but is subject to negotiation, struggle and compromise in its design and open to interpretation, by social actors, during its implementation (Ozga 2000).

One facet of policy is the documentation produced by government departments in order to express and disseminate their position. According to Lingard and Ozga (2007), the field of education policy includes all texts seeking to influence educational practices, with the exception of curricula. Rather oddly, they state that curriculum and pedagogy are ‘constituted as intellectual fields outside the purview of education policy’ (p. 2). Whilst this may have been true in 1976 when the, then, prime minister Jim Callaghan famously referred to the curriculum as a ‘secret garden’ in his Ruskin College speech, from this point onwards government intervention in all aspects of schooling has become the norm across the UK (Chitty 2009) including the implementation of national curricula. Ball’s (2007) suggestion that policy shapes what it means to be educated and what it means to learn would seem to be a better representation of the contemporary position. Scotland’s ‘Curriculum for Excellence’, (Education Scotland undated) and the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education 2007), to name just two, provide a clear examples of the way twenty-first century governments have drawn curriculum and pedagogy into the work of policy.

It is worth taking a moment to consider the processes by which policy is produced. Contemporary accounts of the policy process dismiss models which view it as a step-wise, linear and logical series of stages flowing from evidence gathering to policy formulation, to documentation then implementation (e.g. John 1998; Hudson and Lowe 2009). Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest this is due to changes in the social sciences, such as the discrediting of the positivist models of research on which this process was predicated, the emergence of new theoretical developments such as post-structuralism, feminism and critical theory, the loss of popularity of Keynesian economic theories on which many policies were based, and most significantly, they suggest, influences of globalised capitalism.

However, whilst all of these factors may be significant, a widely quoted paper debunking the notion of rationalist policy making was published well in advance of these developments. In *The science of “muddling through”* Lindblom (1959)

discussed the complexity of policy making, such as the wide range of goals that may be addressed in a single policy, the plurality of interests that may be attended to, and the limited evidence that may be available to inform the decision making process. He suggested that a 'good' policy was often one which interested parties agreed on, even if none thought it best met their particular goals. He used the phrase 'muddling through' to capture this procedure, suggesting that it could either be portrayed as a sophisticated process of complex decision making or, alternatively, as no process at all. More recently the term 'muddle' is widely adopted to describe policy development (e.g. (John 1998, e.g. Hudson and Lowe 2009), often paying little heed to the original article which portrayed 'muddling through' as a difficult and complex, (if somewhat haphazard) process, rather than simply an incompetent mess.

So, from inception, through design and delivery we can see a messy process of working and reworking, argument, compromise and perhaps 'fudge'. Yet, the outcomes of this process are powerful discourses which impact very directly on the lives of citizens. More recent accounts of policy making echo Lindblom's ideas, suggesting that policies are usually heteroglossic in nature in order to appease a wide range of interests. Education policy may interact with other policies, in fields such as such as economics or health. Policy readership is much wider than the practitioners who may enact it, and therefore policy may seek to suture different, even oppositional ideological positions (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Thus Ball (2007) describes policy making as a process of 'bricolage' whereby bits and pieces are borrowed, copied, and amended from elsewhere, resulting in policies which may appear incoherent. This, of course makes the task of the policy analyst rather complex, since rarely do a cogent set of theoretical or political principles translate unabridged into policy, even where dominant influences may be evident (Ball *ibid*).

Policy is increasingly shaped by international influences. Not only do policy makers borrow and abridge ideas from colleagues world-wide, they are deeply influenced by pressures of globalisation, much of which is economic. Although the term globalisation suggests that governments around the world are facing similar pressures, it is increasingly recognised that they do not necessarily respond in the same way. Each nation must mediate the global influences within its own historical and cultural context (Hudson and Lowe 2009). Ozga and Lingard (2007) refer to the local response to international pressures as the vernacular. In this vein, Winter (2012) describes 'vernacular globalisation' as the constitution of 'hybrid education policies' through the combined effect of the global policy discourses and the historical cultural and political narratives in the national policy arena. In contemporary Scottish policy the neo-liberal discourses of economic ambition are in tension with a long standing national tradition of social democracy national (Paterson 2003) with a government that seeks to build a nation which is both 'wealthier' and 'fairer' (Scottish Government 2011).

An important aspect of policy formation is the choice of language that is used, in order to appeal to the readers and users of the document. Contemporary policies tend to use a limited vocabulary of carefully chosen key terms which repeat throughout the document, with the intention that these will become the naturalised forms

of reference. The erstwhile Secretary of State for Education in England, Gillian Shephard, is quoted by Atkins and Wallace (2012) as saying, 'We [government] must emphasise words that people find attractive.' Hence, one of the strategies of policy making is to lexicalise in ways that appear uncontroversial and appeal to 'common sense'. One of the main arguments of this book is that the concept of 'wellbeing' has been chosen as a policy focus precisely because of its widespread attractiveness, (who could be opposed to childhood wellbeing?) yet close scrutiny of policies reveals that it can be used to serve agendas that may be less 'soft and cuddly' than the vocabulary implies.

Similarly, the implementation stage of policy is not straightforward. As Ozga (2000) noted, policy is rarely delivered to a grateful or quiescent population, but it is interrogated, interpreted, remodelled and delivered in the cultural and personal contexts of the organisations and individuals involved. According to Bernstein (2000) policy is recontextualised as it moves between its production phase and its implementation phase, and the interpretation by practitioners is a point at which new discourses can emerge, and in this 'discursive gap' alternative possibilities exist. As education policies arrive at the implementation phase they are translated by professionals through a process of decoding and recoding, at which point individuals bring their own moral frameworks to bear (Singh et al. 2013). This was clearly demonstrated in a study which showed how health imperatives relating to diet exercise and weight, were 'performed' differently as they were reassembled in the unique cultural and relational context of each school (Evans et al. 2013). In this way, the workers, are not simply the vehicles of delivery, but can be seen as active makers of policy (Maguire et al. 2015). Thus, it is clear that the intentions of policies in the production stage do not necessarily tally with outcomes in the implementation phase. For this reason, research into education policy can be enhanced by examining how it is received by teachers.

2.5 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis has been likened to a puzzle (van Leeuwen 2009) which is addressed by looking at the statements that are dispersed and repeated in different contexts. Discourse analysis is based mainly on texts, which can include written documents, transcripts of spoken language, such as interview transcripts, TV or radio broadcasts etc. However, Wodak (2009) reminds us also, where appropriate to take account of other forms of semiotic communication including images and iconography.

One of the key principles of discourse analysis is the study of recontextualisation (Bernstein 1990). This refers to the way in which discourses change as they move between different groups. For example, when teachers read and interpret written policies there may be a shift in the way in which the topic is understood. By observing how discourses cross refer to each other we can see how they transfer between contexts. By looking for links between the discourses in different contexts

(intertextuality) we can see people draw from other texts either explicitly or implicitly to justify the positions that they hold (Fairclough 2003). We can also see how discourses are changed as they flow between different speech communities.

Jager and Maier (2009) suggest that flows of discourse that centre on a common topic, can be grouped and sub-grouped into smaller topics. This is one of the approaches adopted in this project, as it seeks to identify different themes that coalesce around the notion of wellbeing in the school context. Discursive themes of wellbeing as emotional and social literacy, wellbeing as physical health promotion, wellbeing as care, wellbeing as flourishing and wellbeing as sustainability will be identified and explored. Interestingly, Jager and Maier (*ibid*) discuss how entanglements of discourses can occur where one text addresses several topics, and moreover a single statement can involve an entanglement of discourses (a discursive 'knot'). Again, this project shows how different representations of the concept of wellbeing have become entangled with each other. One of the tasks of this work is to begin to tease out the different discourses.

Discourse analysis is used in research for different purposes. In some cases, the goals of discourse analysis may be simply descriptive, seeking to offer an account of what has been said without offering an explanation, or it may uncritically accept the assumptions in the text. However, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach which deliberately seeks to unmask ideologies and reveal the power relations at play behind the veneer of 'common sense'. CDA distinguishes itself from other types of discourse analysis by the requirement of criticality. This implies a normative element to the analysis, i.e. that the discourses are analysed in reference to a set of values, identifying where those values are, or are not, adhered to (Fairclough 2010). Thus the analysis will examine the ways in which ideologies are justified and propagated, and will demonstrate how linguistic strategies serve to make some positions seem more rational than others, and will identify inconsistencies and contradictions within and between texts.

Social power (as opposed to individual power that may exist in a one-to-one relationship) is an important concept in CDA, as it is through the dominant discourses of powerful groups that ideologies are shaped. CDA plays an active role in exposing the power structures which give rise to inequality. This is a repeating theme in the literature, and to some is seen as an underpinning principle of CDA. For example, van Leeuwen (2009) claims that critical discourse analysts are united by a common goal, 'the critique of dominant discourse and genres that effect inequalities, injustices and oppression in contemporary society' (p. 278). Similarly, van Dijk (1993) states that CDA focuses on the 'role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance' (p. 249). A number of the key writers in this field have devoted their work to the challenge of particular discourses that create inequality, notably Wodak's work on racist discourses and Fairclough's critique of neo-liberal discourse of globalisation. However, Rogers (2008) cautions that over ardent pursuit of a particular discursive stance, without proper analysis can result in work which is political rather than researchery.

In addition to critiquing how well-established discourses exert power and create hegemony, CDA has a role in examining emerging discourses, to explore how

existing discourses can be conflated, or how one discursive strand can outcompete another as new discourses emerge. The ‘wellbeing agenda’ is still a fairly new initiative, at least in formal policy, and there are a number of discourses which coalesce in this area. Jager and Maier (2009) suggest that the role of CDA is to disentangle the ‘milling mass’ of discourses through a critical lens. Rather than focussing on unmasking a single ideology, this book will examine the influences of and interplay between two ideologies which are often in tension in the educational world: that of neo-liberalism and welfare liberalism, to explore how each of these are played out through the discourses of wellbeing as they appear in schools. This is not an attempt to dichotomise the discourses as either neo-liberalism or welfare liberalism, it is a more nuanced exploration of how these different ideologies bump along together in the complex reality of education. The book will show how the concept of wellbeing can be put to different ideological purposes, and how the vagueness of the concept of wellbeing can allow these to be conflated. Moreover, it will show how discourses of wellbeing support different understandings of equity and social justice. This is clearly a policy field which has considerable impact upon the educational and developmental experiences of children, an issue in which power and control are never far away.

2.5.1 The Role of the Researcher in Discourse Analysis

An important point to note in conducting discourse a Critical Discourse Analysis, is that the being a researcher does not place somebody outside of discourse. As human beings the analysts are just as embroiled in discourses as anybody else. For this reason, Jager and Maier (2009) caution the analyst to recognise his /her own position within the ‘milling mass’ and to state that position clearly.

My own position, as a life-long educationalist, lies with a firm belief in education as a serving the personal development of individuals, so that children can lead fulfilling lives in the present and in the future. Like many other educationalists I believe a view of schooling as simply serving economic purposes is an impoverishment of learning. However, I would not ignore the role of schooling in preparing young people for useful employment. Whilst not viewing economic activity as the only way to judge the quality of a life, I would acknowledge that income generation allows wider choices in how a person lives, and conversely poverty can stifle opportunities to be happy. I would also see fulfilling employment as potentially life-enhancing, and that schooling has a role to play in preparing young people for good employment opportunities.

However, I am opposed to practices which deliberately shape young people’s characters or subjectivities solely for the purposes of enhancing their economic potential. In this book, one of the things that will be ‘unmasked’ is the way in which seemingly benign discourses of wellbeing can be put to purposes of human capital creation.

2.6 Summary

The notion of discourse has been introduced as the means by which people represent their view of the world. Discourse is seen as both socially constructed and socially constitutive. Discourses are the means by which powerful groups exert influence in society, and the way in which dominant ideologies are propagated. Yet the speaker may be unaware of the ideologies that they espouse, when they adopt 'common sense' language that has been naturalised in everyday speech. Multiple discourses may operate at the same time (as is the case with wellbeing) and become entangled with each other.

Education policy is discussed as a platform through which those in power can influence the discursive actions, and the behaviours of teachers and other professionals in schools. International influence on educational policies include both neoliberal policies and more welfarist, child centred policies. It is clear that there are powerful and competing influences on policy that can have far reaching effects on the experiences of children. This chapter has provided a platform for the discussions of educational policies of wellbeing that follow.

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