School public discourse and teachers’ personal and practical discourses: three perspectives for examining a school’s charter for improvement

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The paper is based on a Victorian primary school’s continued commitment to implementing a multiage philosophy, and utilises a discourse analysis following Popketwitz (1998) of interviews with teachers and school leaders. The school’s public discourse about multiage teaching progressively honed through staff development and widely endorsed by teachers, is taken as a mentanarrative which provides accepted forms of discourse for discussing multiage teaching and for endorsing consequent actions. However, this mentanarrative is not always reflected in teachers’ personal discourse as they confront the ‘messiness’ of classroom life in a multiage setting. Teachers’ practical discourse shows how they create spaces for action, not always endorsed by the school’s mentanarrative.

The paper explores distinctions and interrelationships between these three forms of discourse. While public discourse serves to create a school identity and a focus for action, its forms of nationality may block out recognition of less tidy elements of school practice confronted by teachers as they strive to implement multiage practice. From a school improvement perspective, a school’s public discourse can hinder discussion of these practicalities of teaching and learning. Suggestions are made about how a school’s public discourse might be modified to recognise and deal constructively with these difficulties.
What do schools value?

“What values and meanings are transmitted by reform programs in schools?” Popkewitz (1982) goes on to say, from his research about Individually Guided Education (IGE) as a reform program in the United States, that many reform programs have had unanticipated consequences and have concealed values that actually work against the ethical and political intentions of the planners (Popkewitz page xi). This is of significant importance to educators who deal with reform programs. Indeed, in his research Popkewitz asks “what happens to ideas and practices aimed at reforming curricula and administrative patterns when these ideas are introduced into the real world of schools?” (page ix). To answer this question, Popkewitz, followed a somewhat unconventional path and focused their attention on the “relationship of IGE as a reform technology to on-going patterns of schooling and the ways in which IGE was incorporated, revised and even transformed in the institutional settings of the school under investigation.” This approach contrasted to the conventional approach of measuring the consequences of a program in terms of anticipated outcomes such as student achievement. Popkewitz found, through questioning the teachers working in schools engaging the IGE program and analysing their responses’, that the reform practices were not merely adopted, but were in fact substantially altered. The study concluded that, “the institutional patterns characteristic of the schools in this study may be generalised to other school settings as well”. Thus, Popkewitz has initiated a fruitful line of inquiry that possibly allows our understanding of the conditions of schooling and the possibilities of reform to be expanded.

This study is of great importance considering contemporary Australian educational trends. Recently, Federal, State and Independent education authorities have placed heavy emphasis on educational reform through the implementation of various programs and strategies. These “programs” have different names but usually have similar components such as, a prescription of best practices, specific training of personnel, and measurable consequences (usually student achievement). In Victoria, the Catholic Education Commission’s Children’s Literacy Success Strategy (ClaSS) is a good example of such programs. The success of these programs is measured in conventional ways. That is, the extent that the programs have been “implemented” is measured, and/or student outcomes are measured and judgements about the success of the program are then drawn.

Reform Practices in the “Real World”

The proposed thesis for this doctorate is to apply a similar approach to that of Popkewitz (1982) to a contemporary reform program, such as the ClaSS. The question of what values and meanings are been transmitted by reform programs in schools is then asked. As is the question of what happens to ideas and practices aimed at reforming curricula and administrative patterns when these ideas are introduced into the real world of schools? The study is therefore not about the ClaSS per se, it is about the complexities of schooling and the possibilities of reform.

In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of, and model the methodology of such an approach the following study was initiated.
The St Monica’s Experience

In the Australian State of Victoria, both Catholic and State Primary Schools have been actively encouraged to move away from centralised models of operating. These schools have been encouraged to base their administrative and educational activities on locally developed Mission and Vision statements. In particular, the Catholic Education Office of the Diocese of Sandhurst assists schools, within the Diocese, develop ‘local’ ways of “knowing and doing” through subscription to the Diocesan School Improvement Framework. The school involved with this study (being part of the Sandhurst Diocese) has developed its own distinctive and innovative set of philosophical assumptions, methods of school organization and unique blend of educational metanarratives. The school has approximately 500 students from Prep to Year 6 and has maintained a Multi Age philosophy for fifteen years with P12, 3/4, and 5/6 structures. Indeed, as parents exercise ‘choice’ when choosing a school the Multiage philosophy is one of the schools defining features. The multiage philosophy is strongly defended by the school as it is promoted as an expression of the school’s core beliefs about teaching and learning. The school maintains that learning occurs best when students are actively engaged and that multi age helps facilitate this.

Postmodern Perspectives

A Postmodern position would maintain that all situations and phenomenon are multi faceted. In this instance the promotion of Multiage at St. Monica’s has been drawn from the public perspective. That is, the information and insights about Multiage originated from documents and statements that are designed specifically for the public arena. Therefore, while being accurate they only provide limited perspectives on the status quo, as there are many perspectives that could be drawn upon to provide insights. As these other perspectives have not been given credence, the perceptions that are drawn are incomplete. A postmodern perspective as put forward by Popkewitz suggest that we “disrupt the way we ‘tell the truth’ about ourselves as teachers and children and thus open a potential space for alternatives.” To disrupt the way ‘we tell the truth’ the postmodern perspective suggests that we search for many truths within the different discourses available and gain insights from analysing these multiple perspectives. The process of giving credence to the multiple facets of the schools commitment to Multiage is the context from which this study is based.

Right and Wrong Questions

Contemporary educational research debates have perhaps led to the “wrong questions” being asked by educational researchers. (Popkewitz) Certainly, this school experiences levels of “discomfort” with the type of research available concerning multi age and relies upon aligning the schools epistemological and pedagogical perspectives with its vision and mission statements to support and defend its position on multiage. Generally, contemporary research on multiage has been concerned with comparing multi age with other organization structures, focusing on ‘student outcomes’; a debate that is outside the postmodern perspective for it is intrinsically ‘modern’ as such comparisons rely on qualitative and /or quantitative methods to establish one “truth”. Rosenau puts forward the view postmodern research methodology “has more confidence in faith, emotion, imagination, and intuition than in any of the standard research techniques generally associated with policy studies”. A postmodern perspective suggests’,
that the right questions to ask, are simply questions that allow various key stakeholders to express their views. Thus, allowing these multiple perspectives to emerge and to be seen with equal value. That is, different levels of discourse should be given equivalent value; all perspectives should carry equivalent authority as no perspective is privileged.

**Engaging a Postmodern Approach**

To engage in research using a postmodern approach requires one to listen to a cross section of key people involved in a given situation and give credence to their statements based on faith, emotions, imagination and intuition. In this instance, reference is made to Popkewitz as he proposes “If we think about simple conversations that occur in school, we recognize language as constructing norms that are different from those of institutions or personal expressions. It is not uncommon, for example, for a teacher to make distinctions about learning. There are distinctions about how children master content (grade level distinctions, and so on) that embody norms about stages of growth and achievement. There are other distinctions that are less obvious but also embody a normalization.” Therefore, engaging in (or constructing) some of these ‘simple’ conversation and listening to the distinctions made, it becomes possible to determine what the teachers hold as ‘truths’. Hence, by guiding a discussion with questioning it is possible for the ‘truths’ of a particular phenomena to be researched from a postmodern perspective.

The author (a member of staff at the school) asked a cross section of teachers at the school to participate in an informal interview structured around a number of common and opened ended questions. Their responses were recorded and analyzed from a postmodern perspective described early. This paper is in essence a postmodern discourse involving nine teachers, including the Principal. The primary aim of the paper is to allow multiple perspectives about the school’s multiage philosophy to been seen clearly and equally through alternative forms of discourse. The analysis of the discourse will then be offered to the school and perhaps used for by the school to determine the relationship between its prescribed practice and the actual practices. In summary, the ‘philosophical consciousness’ of the school will be analysed and discussed in conjunction with exploration of key documents and through analysis of the interviews. For the purpose of this study three levels of discourse were formulated. It must be acknowledge that several levels of discourse are available for this kind of analysis and these three have been chosen in the interest of controlling the study and therefore provides a limited perspective of this situation. After the brief overview, each discourse will be examined thoroughly.

**Instruction and Administrative**

The discourse analysis of the continuing engagement of, and ongoing commitment to, a Multiage philosophy at the school unveiled several important insights into instructional and administrative practices at St. Monica’s. The investigation of the implementation of a metanarrative (such as Multiage in this instance) into the "real world" of classroom practice revealed the ways in which Multiage was incorporated, revised, and even transformed in particular classroom settings.
What’s more, the degree to which this transformation, incorporation and revision occurred varied significantly amongst the classrooms involved in the research. The result of these variations indicated that the ideas and practices, prescribed by Multiage, were not merely adapted. They were substantially altered in congruence with the personal epistemology and pedagogy of the individual teacher. This alteration was substantial enough for the author to question the educational credibility of the school defining itself as Multiage. It was evident that excellent teaching and learning practices exist in school and the teachers approached their tasks very professionally. Following on, the research is definitely not an attempt to dichotomise views and practices concerning Multiage. It is, however, an investigation of what happens when the ideas embodied in and practices prescribed by a Multiage metanarrative are transformed into teachers own narratives as they enter the "real world" of classroom practice.

**Discourse Analysis**

The use of discourse analysis, through its guiding questions, concepts, and methods allowed the views of the teachers involved with processes of turning educational theory into practice to be given credible "voice" in debates concerning the impact of metanarratives on school systems. In short, the research deals with how change takes place in schools. A postmodern approach assumes that change is multi-dimensional and complex. Thus, though unconventional, discourse analysis can be an effective tool in determining what is actually happening in classrooms and schools by probing teachers understanding of education.

**The Success of the Methodology**

The methodology was successful for a number of reasons. Through the application of this postmodern theoretical lens three levels of discourse could be determined. These levels of discourse helped create a continuum of values about teaching and learning that exist within the school that could be viewed simultaneously with the values prescribed by the Multiage philosophy.

**Public Discourse**

The first level of discourse may be called the schools public discourse. This discourse is concerned with the responses that are supportive of the metanarrative and constitute the “public” face of the school in regard to its practice of Multiage. This discourse also contains the rational perspective of that position, its intrinsic logic and provides a focus for the personal and practical empathy of teachers, parents and the wider community for the metanarrative.

**Personal Discourse**

The second level of discourse analysis may be called teachers’ personal discourse. This discourse is concerned with responses that give insights into the personal pedagogy of the interviewees as their classroom practice intersects with the various structures and practices the school has established. Some discourse supports the metanarrative while other discourse highlights tensions between personal pedagogy and school structures. Specifically, this discourse gives insight into how individuals rationalise the metanarrative within there own belief system.

**Personal Discourse**

The third level of discourse may be called teachers’ practical discourse. This discourse is concerned with the highly personal adjustments that are made to
classroom practice by the interviewees as they operate out of their belief system and attempt to be consistent with the metanarrative. The logic of these practical accommodations cannot be understood independently of the public and personal discourse that the teachers are involved in.

**Reconciling Perceptions**

The study attempts to reconcile the teachers perceptions of reality as expressed in their classroom practice with the proposed reality describe by the Multiage philosophy. The teachers’ professional judgement was valued and respected in the study and given authority. Simple questions about classroom practice and personal beliefs revealed insightful responses about educational philosophy and school policy. Through valuing the "voice" of the professionals at the "coalface", the educational complexity of the school was acknowledged, defined and given validity as a necessary element in the construction of the school’s "reality". The success of the study weighed heavily on the author making a distinct effort not to make assumptions about the educational status quo and in not defining any elements of the situation as variables. In contrast, conventional research methodologies do not acknowledge, define and validate such complexities. Conventional approaches to such issues assume that change is one dimensional and hence advocate either determining the extent to which the metanarrative has been adopted or by measuring the consequences of the metanarrative in terms of anticipated outcomes such as student achievement. Conventional research relies upon precisely defining variables and then manipulating a chosen variable.

This study was concerned with giving meaning to and identifying interpretations of Multiage and the tensions inherent in its interpretation and implementation based on the valued perspective’s of the practitioners of Multiage as distinct from those which define the metanarrative.

**Asking the right questions**

In this study variables were not strictly defined and manipulated, assumptions were not made and then tested. This study asked the right questions to the right people and because of this was successful. In order to allow these interpretations and tensions to come to the surface, a postmodern approach requires the researcher to be both sceptical toward prevailing metanarratives and to bring alternative frameworks to bear when analysing discourse. The questions posed by the researcher are intended to assist and allow those being interviewed to step aside from the metanarratives that they have taken on as participants in the school and to give expression to their own narratives. There is no guarantee that the dialogue between the researcher and those interviewed will produce a changed stance with regard to a metanarrative. Several rounds of interviews may be required to reveal lines of tensions or distance. When these become evident the researcher then has to bring his/her own interpretive framework to bring some sense of coherence to these alternative narratives.

**Alternative Narratives**

Some of these alternative narratives, which emerged in the St. Monica’s study, were shaped in part teachers’ concerns to have their students ready for the next stage of schooling. This applied noticeably, but not solely to those teaching in the last years of primary school where teachers saw a high priority being given to developing students content knowledge for entry to secondary school. None of
these alternative narratives constituted a rejection of Multiage by the teachers interviewed. What these alternative narratives allowed teachers to say was that in a Multiage room they have to resolve competing and conflicting priorities. Competition and conflict between priorities was also experienced by teachers in P-1-2 as they referred to the special social needs of the Prep students in contrast to the readiness of the Year 1 and 2 students for intellectual pursuits.

**Important messages and Future Directions**

An important message from this study for a school like St. Monica’s is that staff development in a Multiage setting needs to take note of these conflicting priorities and tensions. The school needs to question whether its strong public and professional commitment to Multiage allows these pressing and sometimes "messy" issues to be articulated by teachers. Finally, where these issues are articulated, school leaders have to be careful not to offer "recepied" solutions drawn from public discourse which either make light of the problem or trivialise the solution. These cautions are very much in line with the postmodern position which says discourse shapes reality. As a research tool discourse analysis aims to allow alternative "realities" to emerge and be owned. Further research will focus on interviewing staff at several schools that define themselves as ClaSS schools. It is hoped that perhaps these interviews will “give voice” to any possible tensions between the reality of the classroom and the rhetoric of the school.