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School Reform – Programs or Packages?

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An exploration of one program for whole school literacy reform.

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Introduction
The values and meanings inherent in reform programs create and perpetuate powerful forms of discourse that characterise the projects themselves, evoke loyalty and commitment and may ultimately serve to stifle other voices. This paper advocates that genuine school improvement requires one to step outside the circle of discourse engendered by such reform programs. Indeed this paper holds that genuine school reform requires schools to break out of the imprisonment of the dominant discourse.

Many whole school programs come with and promote a single-minded discourse about themselves, and what the school is attempting to do. It is not possible within the rhetoric of such programs to pick and choose what elements to adopt. Schools are expected to ‘buy in’ to programs 100%, or not at all. This appears to lead to the creation and perpetuation of an ‘officially’ sanctioned way of thinking about school reform and teaching. Proponents of reform programs may argue that such sanctions are a necessary feature of whole school reform programs and provide a focus for energy and activism, of winning people’s support, and of conveying to parents and the wider community school community, a sense of purposeful action and rational planning. On the other hand, these dominant discourses seem to have a necessary effect in obscuring other perspectives, disallowing critique and even preventing reflective discourse and analysis from taking place or even being expressed.

Bureaucratic Values and Meanings: control and surveillance
There has been significant expansion of bureaucratic control in the development and delivery of educational services in Western educational systems. Such expansion can be attributed to the neo liberal orientations of most Western political systems (Spring 1998; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000; Symth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000). In congruence with this global trend, Australian Federal, State and Independent education authorities have placed heavy emphasis on educational reform through the implementation of various programs and strategies that promote administrative tendencies that are based in neo liberal philosophy. Such programs are characterised by their efforts to define and control time, increase productivity, eliminate waste and the exertion of control and surveillance, Hargreaves (1994). Further, despite such programs having different names and agendas they usually have similar components such as, a prescription of best practices, specific training of personnel, and measurable consequences, which are more often than not exclusively focused on student achievement.

This research examines several primary schools involved with the Children’s Literacy Success Strategy (CLaSS) in the Victorian Catholic system. The research is
a meta-analysis of the dominant discourse created and perpetuated by the CLaSS documentation, Education Officers, Principals, and Classroom Teachers. The study is concerned with characterising the nature of that discourse and exploring its effects on the work of teachers and principals, and on school improvement. The analysis proposed in this thesis is in no way a disparagement of CLaSS itself, nor does it seek to judge its objectives, or even offer a critique of the specific methods used in CLaSS to improve literacy.

Children’s Literacy Success Strategy (CLaSS)

The ‘Children’s Literacy Success Strategy’, (CLaSS), which is the focus of this study is an example of the type of sector endorsed contemporary reform programs described above. The CLaSS program was developed as a joint project between the Catholic Education Office of the Catholic Arch Diocese of Melbourne and the University of Melbourne. The principal authors of the program, Hill and Crévola, two senior academics with extensive and impressive research profiles, are held in high regard within school systems. The discourse emanating out of the program is designed to develop a strong sense of mission and purpose in school communities about the importance and urgency of improving student outcomes in regard to literacy development in the early years of schooling and prescribed teaching and administrative practices. The program presents itself not as just a model for improving literacy outcomes but also as a model of whole school reform. The program is as much about school management as it is about literacy. The premise of the program is that individual teachers, as opposed to schools, can make a difference to student’s learning outcomes. As with other education reform programs originating out of a socio-political environment dominated by neo liberal perspective the way teachers go about their work is the focus of attention and modifying teachers’ behaviour is crucial to the success of the CLaSS program.

Neo-Liberalism and Sector Reform

The theoretical underpinnings of CLaSS are derived from neoliberalism and in order to describe the culture of sector-endorsed programs some exploration of neoliberalism is necessary. Contemporary Australian society lives in the shadow of neoliberal inspired market proposals and neo-liberal neo-conservative inspired regulatory proposals (economic rationalism). Marginson (1997) goes further and says, “The management of education is shaped by economically defined objectives and methods, and “increasingly driven by economic pressures (p. 13). McCarthy and Dimitriades (2000) refer to schools being “entirely umbriacated in the kind of market logic and imperatives so intrinsic to popular culture” (p.35). Educational policy and associated curriculum reform programs are born and given identity from these material and ideological conditions. There is increased and intense interest in knowing whether schools are delivering value for money — how effective schooling is and how it can be improved (Hill, Rowe and Holmes-Smith, 1993; Hill & Crévola, 1997). Hill (1995) notes that, the need for reliable information and measurement has been understood in industry and business, and the message is becoming increasingly clear within education. Within educational circles there is a polarised debate concerning both the definition of “reliable information” and the subsequent methodology used to
obtain the information. Depending on which pole of the debate you are attracted to, Hill’s reference is prophetic or ominous in regard to its alliance to neoliberal market tendencies.

Neoliberalism helps define the origins and nature of the dominant discourse and all associated procedures and promises. Nevertheless, despite its usefulness to this proposed research, neoliberalism does not offer an explanatory framework for what takes place in schools implementing such reform programs. Different theoretical perspectives are needed to explain what happens to and in schools when such reform programs are introduced to the schools. To investigate and explore what happens to and in schools that have been introduced to sector-endorsed reform programs the proposed research will draw on critiques of postmodernism and critical theory.

Postmodern Theory
The postmodern perspective engaged by this research acknowledges reality as constituted in language and that meaning shifts according to context. This research thus places great value on the levels of discourse located in and around the reform program and will identify and interrogate discourse in order to reveal alternative or previously unseen perspectives. The identification of dominant discourse through a postmodern analysis is relatively straightforward. However, interrogation of discourse requires the engagement of a related yet different of theory.

Critical Theory
While Popkewitz and other critical theorists describe their work as Postmodern in its orientation, they operate in ways that are different to the postmodern position that this research engages in order to identify levels of discourse. Critical theory focuses on the creation of social norms, regulations and the normalization and the capacity of discourse to reshape definitions of teacher’s work, teacher’s professionalism and school accountability. The subsequent methodology relies on the documentation of teacher discourse as reflecting hidden norms and exposing tensions in teachers’ own values as they work in complex and often conflicting values. Smyth et al. (2000) explain that critical theory deals with the development of power much more effectively than postmodernism:

It works something like this. Within a piece of research, some core abstract concepts are located which are considered to be central; they are used repeatedly to interrogate situations of concrete lived reality in order to develop a new synthesis. In this sense, theory is not, therefore, simply ‘abstract analysis nor is it something merely tacked on to data at the end of the some process of analysis; rather, what occurs is a theory-building process. (p. 57)

This research relies upon critical theory to develop questions that facilitate discussion that will reveal some of the tensions and conflict that exist among the different levels of discourse.
The application of postmodern and critical theory theoretical frameworks can be seen as problematic, especially when considering positivist notions of knowledge being grounded in the objective and tangible (Travers, 2001, p. 8). This study rejects such notions and engages these theoretical positions to allow for multiple opportunities of investigation into the impact of reform programs in ‘other ways’ and to consider perspectives that have not yet been voiced. Some elements of postmodern theory would claim much of the territory covered by critical theory as its own. However, this research keeps the two positions separate as each serves a different purpose. The theoretical position of this research offers a more critical, open and comprehensive stance towards what is being researched and how to research it.

This thesis takes the view that the above theoretical perspectives are ultimately useful only to the extent that they help explain the nature and appeal of sector endorsed reform programs and elucidate insights into what happens to and in schools where such programs are implemented.

The Study
This study is concerned with designing an instrument that gives teachers a chance to speak or to tell their story about the effects of the introduction of a reform program in relation to their understandings and lived experience of working in CLaSS schools. Neoliberal reform programs generally note the modification of teachers’ behaviour as the key to the success of the program. Yet, teacher’s perspectives and understandings on the reform program and the focus of the program are consistently excluded from the development and implementation of such programs. To explore this situation, a cross section of teachers in participating schools will be included in an informal interview structured around a number of common and opened ended questions. The purpose of the interviews is to provide opportunities for teachers in CLaSS schools to give an account of their lived experience from within the school. Denzin (1989) explains that:

Human beings are complex, and their lives are ever changing; the more methods we use to study them, the better our chances to gain some understanding of how they construct their lives and the stories they tell us about themselves...to learn about people we must treat them as people and they will work with us to help create accounts of their lives.” (p. 268)

Conversation with a Purpose
This study is concerned with developing an instrument that allows the stories of teachers’ to be told and heard. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe an interview as “simply a conversation with a purpose” (p. 268). This research will conduct purposeful conversations with sector administrators, principals and practicing classroom teachers. The purpose of these conversations is to identify the dominant discourse and investigate its effects. In developing formats for these purposeful conversations an interview protocol has been piloted with sector administrators and principals and has revealed promising information. The pilot
interview was concerned with allowing principals to talk about their role within the CLaSS program. Principals were asked to explain, for example, if their role was one of critical friend or assurance controller. Also, were principals were asked about their perceptions of their school’s previous education experiences and expertises. The ability of the interview format to disclose clear instances of dominant discourse has been confirmed through the ‘pilot’. The following extracts from the principals first round interviews identify and define the dominant discourse.

Three Characteristics of Dominant Discourse

Disregard for alternatives
There is an unambiguous tendency to trivialise other approaches to children’s literacy and school accountability. Principal A, for example, said:

“I think there ought to be some accountability to the system for literacy funding. I don’t think this should be a system where we are handing out five, ten twenty, forty thousand dollars to schools, and say ‘tick a box if you are doing a literacy approved program’ and that’s the accountability.”

The CLaSS program has predetermined goals to achieve in an order to be accountable. When asked to comment on the apparent success of a non-CLaSS literacy approach at a neighbouring school Principal B commented that:

“CLaSS has a stronger structure and a little more rigor to it. I believe that the professional learning of teachers is the key, and that commitment to that on a weekly basis and the Melbourne meetings and just the general talk about literacy practice in this school is a lot more thorough. The school is obviously doing some great things up there and good luck to them if some of the elements of CLaSS are there.”

Starting From a Clean Slate.
There is a clear disregard for the past educational experiences of the school and strategies used by the teachers. Principal A contrasts ‘the non-focused teaching of the past’ with is school’s current CLaSS program:

“I think a lot of our teachers were just working in isolation. I guess in the old style, you know, you’ve got individual teachers who do great things with kids and they can work as a team and all that, but whether they can share what they are doing with other people is pretty hit and miss. What CLaSS has helped us to do is to make those links more structured, more concrete.

… (CLaSS) is a framework really and I think, you know, good teachers found that they could use their strategies in the CLaSS model, no problem at all. But, it gave them structure. They could slot what they would like to do in, and they could also discard things that actually were a bit wishy
wash but actually worked for kids. They can leave that behind and say ‘oh but that doesn’t work’.”

According to Principal A, not only do these old practices lack credibility, teachers need to exclude them from their work.

“There is a little bit of hard work for someone to unpack a bit of stuff they used to do and let it go.”

Similarly, Principal B disregarded the past succinctly by saying:

“Our teachers wouldn’t teach any other way now. My teachers would not go back and teach another way. They know that this is the way to go and so hence our movement into numeracy has enabled the same design to take place. They wouldn’t go back to the way it was before.”

Not only are previous ways of operating disregarded, any return to them is foreshadowed by a warning articulated by Principal B, “If we went back to the old way that we taught and delivered with no focused teaching with a general approach to curriculum those kids would be lost.”

Conforming to a Recipe for Change
Conforming to the prescribed practices and ideologies of the program is an important element of the CLaSS program as expressed by Principal A:

“When I walk into a class room and I see someone working in the CLaSS model, and they’re not doing what they are supposed to be doing, I will know they are not doing it and I can have a conversation with them. ‘We agreed that we were going to do it this way’. So we would have a conversation about what people are struggling with (when they might say) ‘I’m finding this thing hard’, (I would say) ‘Do you need some support, what would help you? Can I get someone to come and team teach with you for a little while?’ But I know what’s going on and what to look for even though I don’t teach it.”

Conformity extends beyond what’s happening in one school and is an issue for the sector as Principal B says:

“CLaSS puts definite pressure on teachers, because we do work them pretty hard with high expectations and the professional development component of that actually happened outside the school, enabling our teachers to mix with a bank of schools and discuss practice at a state-wide level.”

Further to this, Principal B associates discussion to do with CLaSS as professional dialogue, while any other discussion is valued only as “chit chat”.
“The talk around the staff table, and socially, is talking about professional practice, and not general chit-chat, so the level of professional conversation has lifted because they’re wishing to share their successes, their challenges.”

From the pilot interview data analysis, a second interview was required with clearer attention to the following given to revealing lines of tension or distance between the perspectives that abound within the school.

In a second round interview, Principal A responded to a question concerning his experience of teachers having difficulty with implementing CLaSS.

“Oh, some have found it very difficult to make because of the level of planning required. The pre-planning needed each day forced people to work pretty hard, and to work at another level and requires a different set of thinking, particularly if you’ve been teaching a long time. It’s often hard to let go of what you think are good ways of doing things, until someone actually shows that there might be another way to do it, it might be actually more effective. I think it’s been hard for a couple of them to commit themselves to professional practice, of every night sitting down and saying, ‘Well tomorrow I’ve got this group of kids, let’s look at my records and see where they’re up to and what do they need for tomorrow.’ That’s hard for some people because a lot of people are used to planning their week on Sunday night and writing their work program when they are teaching for the week and not really analysing on a daily basis what they are doing.”

This statement defines very clearly what the expectations of ‘effective’ teachers are within the CLaSS model. Past models of planning tend to be devalued and portrayed as inadequate and constitute a submissive discourse. The dominant discourse provides guidelines for effective teaching. A dichotomy of effective and ineffective teaching practices can be seen with this response. Teachers who can’t let go are not ‘analysing’ what they are doing and according to the dominant discourse are teaching ineffectively.

Document study
Initial analysis of the sector sponsored, documentation that accompanies CLaSS also helps identify the dominant discourse and highlights the program’s neoliberal orientations. The following references to the official documentation give some indication of what CLaSS validates and presents.

The teaching strategies recommended by CLaSS in Hill and Crévola (2001) are ‘results driven’ and must be implemented at sector level. Programs that recommend teaching strategies that are not ‘results driven’ or are logo centric in their origins cannot be as effective as CLaSS because, as these authors assert, “Dramatic improvements are achievable within the context of a fully implemented, comprehensive program that is results driven and involves both system and school wide commitment and coordination” (p5).
Hill and Crévola (2001) further acknowledges the value of pressure as contributing the effective reform; “It is not unusual to find whole school communities in which there is a culture of low expectation and blaming factors beyond the control of the school for the poor performance of their students” (p. 11). The application of pressure is targeted toward the “small number of factors that best predict whether students make progress at school.” (p. 15). One reading of this text is that the goals of the reform program will be obtained through forceful application of some simple rules concerning a small number of factors.

Hill and Crévola (2001) continue by defining what constitutes effective teaching and highlight the following factors that are associated with effective teaching:

- “Effective teachers know they must focus their teaching on the learning needs of each student” (p. 25).
- “Effective teaching is structured” (p. 26).
- “Well organised schools and classrooms facilitate effective and efficient teaching and student learning. Poor organization acts as a barrier to teaching and learning.” (p. 26).
- “Low expectations and complacency are an unavoidable consequence of lack of pressure” (p. 34).

Hill and Crévola (2001) promote a need for urgency in regard to its adoption and implementation:

- “Time is short and the stakes are too high to ‘reinvent the wheel’ When there is good evidence that a particular way of doing things works effectively, it makes sense to stick with it” (p. 29).
- “School improvement means bringing about change, particularly in how teachers operate within the classroom, but also in how the entire staff operate a team” (p. 28).

This thesis has no interest in debating whether or not any or all these factors do in fact constitute the profile of an effective teacher. It is interested how the dominant discourse defines the behaviour of effective teachers and the impact such definitions have on a school.

**Summary**

The extracts from the first round interviews with principals and the document study clearly identify the dominant discourse permeating out of the CLaSS program. The trivialisation other approaches to children’s literacy and school accountability, the disregard shown for the past educational experiences of the school and strategies used by the teachers define very clearly what the expectations of ‘effective’ teachers are within the CLaSS program. Further, the explicit exertion of pressure promoting the forceful application of some simple rules concerning a small number of factors and the urgency given in regard to the adoption and implementation of CLaSS are clear indicators of the program intention to dominate the school. By conventional measures CLaSS is a very successful literacy and school reform program. The CLaSS program satisfies its
neoliberal determinations admirably. However, this research is committed to the exploration of new lines of research and in particular, examining the effects of the dominant discourse associated with reform programs more critically, openly and comprehensively than convention has previously allowed. Therefore, the next stage of this study will be to have conversation with the people who actually make a difference to the students’ learning; the teachers. It is anticipated that the stories the teachers tell about their lived experience of working in a school with such a dominant discourse will at least identify the tensions between the individual and the community and add much needed educational perspectives to contemporary school reform programs.

Reference List


