

The wolf in sheep's clothing: the continuing accountability discourse in education

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Abstract

The Australian government has, for some time, shone a strong spotlight on education and teacher quality. This has particularly resulted from literacy and numeracy results slipping over the last few years in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment measures of student performance. Such performance and teacher quality become inextricably linked and, almost inevitably, education is the subject of reform. In this paper, the author analyses the competing discourses of a recent government campaign for 'better' schools and improved teacher quality. The campaign examined is the 2012 Commonwealth Government campaign, launched through various media, officially known as the National School Improvement Plan, but promoted as "Better Schools for Australia". Here, the discourse of inclusive opportunity is set against that of economic rationalism. The discussion of the government campaign is firstly grounded in the literature of contesting views of the purposes of education and the ways in which the campaign contains elements of several discourses. The author demonstrates how the economic and accountability discourses dominate and deflate the other discourses of need and inclusion. The paper is concluded with a discussion of what these prevailing discourses mean for teachers and pre-service teachers and how teachers and their teaching are being positioned by the accountability discourse.

Keywords: purposes of education, teacher quality, accountability, discourse analysis

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Introduction

In Australia, as elsewhere around the globe, education is a highly contested arena, discussed within the discourses of accountability and quality. It has been the subject of numerous government reports and funding initiatives designed to address the issue of teacher quality (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Council of Australian Governments, 2009; Department of Education Employment and Work Relations, 2010; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). More recently, extensive, and at times heated, debate has occurred after the publication of the “Great Teaching, Inspired Learning” document in New South Wales (New South Wales Government, 2013) and the promotion of the National Plan for School Improvement, or “Better Schools for Australia”, through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on behalf of the Australian Government (Australian Government, 2013). A large component of the debate arises from competing discourses regarding the purpose of education.

An analysis of the Better Schools for Australia campaign reveals that there are competing discourses: that of economic rationalism against the discourse of inclusive opportunity. In this paper, there is a discussion of how these discourses are subtly nuanced in the text of the television advertisements and they are also juxtaposed against differing views of the purpose of education.

Better Schools for Australia

In 2013 the Australian Government began a campaign to promote a new education initiative, the National Plan for School Improvement. It did this through a range of media including television, print media and public fact sheets. The initiative was to commence in 2014 and, by 26 July 2013 the government had expended \$2,648,171.30 on the production of campaign material and a further \$10,390,091.86 was paid to commercial companies to air the advertisements (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2013). In total, there were eight television commercials (each with a perspective from different characters), four print advertisements and four fact sheets.

In the print advertisements, each provides a selected quotation from one of the television advertisements, but all give details as to why this new initiative was introduced and what it would deliver. The latter is far ranging and reflects a discourse of opportunity. It promises to deliver:

- * “Ongoing teacher training;
- * A national curriculum;
- * Fairer funding for Australian school students” (Australian Government, 2013).

Very few would argue that there is a need for equitable funding for education and also ongoing teacher training to meet the demands of a changing world.

In contrast to the discourse of what is to be delivered, the reasons for the introduction of this initiative reflect competing discourses. The same print advertisement describes the reasons for its introduction as:

- * “Australia’s international results have dropped from 2nd to 7th in reading and 5th to 13th in maths over the last decade;
- * By Year 9, disadvantaged students are over two years behind their peers;
- * The number of high performing students has dropped by 5% in reading literacy over the last decade (Australian Government, 2013).

Here there is a tension between the discourses of performance (with implications that will be discussed later) and disadvantage.

It is noteworthy that all advertisements and fact sheets describe the main purpose of Better Schools for Australia is to improve the education system either with the tag line “to take Australian schools into the top five countries in the world by 2025” or a statement that it will “will help to give Australian kids a world class education” (Australian Government, 2013).

Purposes of Education

In 1897 Dewey wrote that education is “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p.80). His writings on education were to become staples of philosophy of education units in many teacher education programs. However, the purposes of education have been intensely debated with no consensus being reached. Murphy and Gale (2004) argue that there are “parallel discourses of ‘human capital’ and ‘social and cultural capital’” (p. 3). The former relates to terms such as ‘performance’ and ‘competence’ and provides “a view that implies a direct and singular connection between quality teaching learning, student achievement and labour market outcomes (Murphy & Gale, 2004, p.3). In contrast, they argue that “discourses of ‘social and cultural capital’ are characterised by issues of ‘difference’, ‘equity’ and ‘social justice’ (Murphy & Gale, 2004, p. 4). Arising from this argument, for the purposes of this discussion, a framework of three main educational purposes has been adopted.

Firstly, there is what Gillies (2011) discusses as the development of human capital wherein “the more and better education that individuals possess, the better their returns in financial rewards and the better the national economy flourishes” (p. 225). He sounds a warning about this purpose of education because:

there is a risk of education being narrowed to economic goals, of the broader aims and purposes of education being submerged, and of the person being reduced merely to ‘human capital’, not as a life to be lived, but as mere economic potential to be exploited (Gillies, 2011, p. 225)

Biesta (2009) also refers to this function of education as one of ‘qualification’ which is:

connected to economic arguments ... an important rationale [that] can be seen in ongoing discussions ... about the apparent failure of education to provide adequate preparation for work (p.40).

It is this purpose that frequently seems to dominate government discussions of education, at the expense of two other purposes.

Biesta (2009) describes two other important purposes of education. The first of these is 'socialisation', the "ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political 'orders'" (p. 40). Plato would have subscribed to this view of education with his statement that the individual should be subordinate to a just state (Plato, 1955). The other purpose is 'individuation' or 'subjectification' where education provides "processes . . . that allow those being educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting" (p. 40). Kennedy (2014) extends the discussion of the difference between the two in her explanation that socialisation positions those being educated as "'novice" members of society who need to be inculcated into the culture and practices of that particular society" (p. 2) and subjectification as positioning students as "individual members of society whose interests and talents should be fostered and encouraged with the express intention of fostering independence and creativity" (p. 2).

With this framework as an underpinning for analysis of the discourses of the Better Schools for Australia campaign, attention is now turned to five television advertisements as examples.

Discourses of the Better Schools Plan

The eight television advertisements are each scripted to promote the view that many different groups of people understand that there are advantages to the new initiative. Seven of the advertisements are spoken from the point of view of different characters: a mother, a student, a teacher, a grandfather, a youth worker, a builder and an economist. The eighth advertisement was used as the launch and contained brief quotes from several of these characters. All of the advertisements have a similar thrust in terms of the tag lines already mentioned: "to take Australian schools into the top five countries in the world by 2025" or "will help to give Australian kids a world class education" (Australian Government, 2013).

In this section of the paper, the specific scripts of five of the characters, the economist, the builder, the student, the grandfather and the social worker are examined. It is important to note that these are scripts for actors rather than the spontaneous response of real people and, as such, these scripts cast light on the government's underlying views of the purpose of education. Sections of the scripts in italics and different colours are there for the purpose of exposition and are not in the original.

The first script is that attributed to Karl, an economist, who argues that:

to me, nothing is *more important to our country* than education. To *stay economically competitive* we need a well-educated population. We've already got good schools and teachers but we've got to keep pushing to get our literacy, numeracy and science scores back *amongst the world's best* (Australian Government, 2013).

Here, the voice of economic rationalism speaks loudly, perhaps to be expected from an economist's point of view. Education here falls clearly into the rhetoric of the first purpose described in the framework, the development of human capital. There is no reference to education having any individual purpose, but is rather a description of education as providing national good such that the country can be *economically competitive*. Even in the comment about raising literacy and numeracy scores the rhetoric is about competitiveness, being *amongst the world's best*, whilst not referring to the other aspect of human capital development described by Gillies (2011) as providing better educated people with "better ... returns in financial rewards" (p. 225).

Along similar lines is the script for Darren, a builder. Darren is concerned about business getting ahead and having 'job-ready' employees. He explains that:

I'm a builder. This job's not just about banging nails in. I need apprentices who are able to measure, calculate, read plans - people who can think on their feet. Lifting education standards will help *make well-rounded employees* - people who can think on their feet and *that's got to be good for all businesses*, big and small. A strong education system is not just important, it's a *must for my business*.

Darren is discussing the need for educated employees so that not only his own business, but all businesses can grow and prosper. Certainly it is important that employees can meet the requirements of the jobs that they hold, and this links with subjectification loosely as it must be assumed that the employee wishes to improve his or herself, but the underlying discourse is still economic and gaining a necessary qualification.

Turning our attention to the script for a student, Adam, he states that:

my mum reckons, there's nothing more important than an education. What I reckon is, if I get a good education, *I'm more likely to get a good job*, and *do something I really love*. And, if I get a great education, who knows. At this stage, *I don't really know what I want to be, but I really want the chance to be - whatever that is* (Australian Government, 2013).

In this script, two purposes are at play. Adam reveals the development of human capital approach to education: *I'm more likely to get a good job*. At a time of high youth unemployment and uncertainty about the youth job future this is a common comment from many students in schools. While playing into the economic rationalism rhetoric, it is certainly a very real comment. Adam's other comments move out of the human capital paradigm and into that of subjectification. In his statement regarding doing something *I really love* and, while not yet knowing what future he wants, *he really want[s] to be whatever that is*, we can see at work what Kennedy (2014) has described as Adam being "individual members of society whose interests and talents should be fostered and encouraged with the express intention of fostering independence and creativity" (p. 2). While the dominant discourse of the economist is still apparent, it is subservient in this script to a more individual purpose to education.

Peter, who purports to be Adam's grandfather, has the fourth script for discussion. Peter states that:

for me, there's nothing more important than my grandchildren's education. It's more important now than when I went to school. Nowadays, we have got all this global technology. If things happen as fast as they have in the last 50 years, we have to work smarter. The National Plan for School Improvement means *children will have a better opportunity to get a great education for the world they'll live in tomorrow.*

In this script we see the only instance of what might be considered the socialisation purpose of education. Here, Peter is describing how his grandchildren will need to have a good education to fit into *the world they'll live in tomorrow*. This script begins to touch on how students can be assisted to fit into the society of which they are a part through their education.

The fifth script considered here is one that can be argued is more problematic. It is that of Rebecca, a youth worker.

As a community youth worker, I believe nothing is more important than education. I see the *cycle of disadvantage* every day and I believe a great education has the *power to change lives*. From what I know, the National Plan for School Improvement will fund schools based on the *needs of students* so kids who need extra support, get extra support, giving them a better chance to finish school and *get a great job*. If we put opportunity in front of our kids through a stronger education system, we *grow stronger as a country* (Australian Government, 2013).

Here, the discourse of inclusivity and disadvantage is strong at the start. Rebecca argues the *cycle of disadvantage*, the *needs of students* and imbues education with the *power to change lives*. In all of the advertisements, this script most closely argues the subjectification purpose of education. However, Rebecca is then scripted to move from this discourse into the government's dominant discourse of national growth and economic rationalism. While it could be argued that stating the initiative will permit the disadvantaged to *get a great job*, the linking of this statement with the statement that an opportunity for education will allow us to *grow stronger as a country* deflates the former argument.

Each of the scripts considered here has a slightly different approach to what the purpose of education might be. However, when coupled with the tag lines already mentioned and also with the reasons for the initiative, explained in an earlier section, the strong discourse is that of economic rationalism and development of human capital. This has been re-stated in a recent media release (Phillips & Walters, 2014) where, discussing recently released statistics on Australia's poor world position across six measures in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the journalists state is important because "science and innovation boost our standard of living and contribute to

economic growth and jobs”. The economic imperative is still being promoted in the media.

Discussion of Australia’s results in comparison to the rest of the world, one of the reasons publicly stated for the introduction of the Better Schools for Australia initiative, falls squarely into the development of human capital agenda for education. Kennedy (2014) explains how:

the human capital function is evident in the way in which international measures of student achievement are used as proxy measurements for the success of individual nation states’ education systems (and by implication, the success of their teachers) and therefore are seen to be measures of the human capital produced by these countries (p. 2).

While this discourse positions schools and funding arrangements, and by corollary, students in particular ways, it is also a discourse that positions teachers and pre-service teachers in important, and contestable, ways. This positioning is the subject of the next section.

Teacher and Teacher Education in the Accountability Era

For decades, debates and decisions about teacher education have been permeated with discourses of accountability and quality. While few would argue against the need for teachers both to be accountable and to be quality educators, the positioning of teachers within the profession is being subtly refashioned by the development of professional teaching standards that define what it means to be a quality teacher. However, the calls for greater accountability and better quality have emerged as the result of performance on international measures such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Australian Government, 2013; New South Wales Government, 2013). These calls have resulted in professional teaching standards which purport to describe what it means to be a quality teacher (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011) as well as new measures for accreditation of teacher education programs. Conway and Murphy (2013), writing about Ireland while acknowledging the global trend, refer to this coupling of a range of accountability issues with measures of performance as a “rising tide meeting a perfect storm” (p. 11) and they argue that this is part of a global education reform with its “with its new emphasis on standardisation, a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy and a reconfiguration from low/moderate to high-stakes accountability (p. 29).

Kennedy (2014) describes how teachers are positioned in the accountability milieu by drawing on the same framework of the purposes of education as previously described (p. 3). She argues that teachers can be positioned as “‘novice’ members of the profession who need to be inculcated into the existing culture and practices of the profession, and thereafter help to maintain the status quo” (socialisation) or “state functionaries who will enable students to enhance the standing of the country through increased success in international league tables of performance” (development of human capital) or “autonomous educators who can contribute to the common good through the fostering of their own specific interests and talents in creative ways” (p.

3). It can be argued that professional teaching standards promote one view of what it means to be a quality teacher, a view that can be argued as technicist in its approach.

Ryan and Bourke (2012) further argue that “bureaucratic, hierarchical and managerial controls replace cultures of collaboration; there are competencies and licensing rather than trust” (p. 2). In the race to prove that teachers and teacher education are accountable to the public and to the government, there is the possibility that the questions of being accountable to whom, for what and why could be ignored. One of the unfortunate aspects of professional teaching standards is that, given their claim to ensure quality, there will be no critique of what quality might mean. Is it quality to ensure that the devaluation of human capital occurs so that a nation can be seen as ‘better’ than others in measures of particular subject areas? Is it quality to have all teachers subscribing to a ‘one size fits all’ view of what a quality teacher is? Sachs (2003) states that:

while any attempt to develop a ‘one size fits all’ version of standards may be attractive to governments, it may not be in the best interests of teachers teaching in remote areas, in difficult schools, or in multi-age settings where their competence will be judged on the basis of some idealized notion of what competent or excellent teaching might be (p. 185).

It is clear that there needs to be sound critique of the discourses of education, teacher quality and accountability.

Conclusion

It is clear, both from an examination of the rhetoric of the Better Schools for Australia campaign and from the current literature that the dominant discourse for education is one of economic rationalism and the standardisation of what it means to be a teacher. However, there is a long history of opposing views as to what the purposes of education are/should be. The discussion seems to be encapsulated in the framework of three distinct purposes as outlined in this paper. Plato (1955) would espouse the socialisation view of education. Many governments are less philosophical, but would probably agree with Plato providing that the economic rationalist view, the development of human capital, was also dominant. However, many teachers and educational researchers are questioning this view of education, preferring to look to the ways in which the individual can achieve self-actualization.

It seems, in the current climate, that discussions about the purposes of education and what quality education might be is at an impasse. It is suggested here that one possible way forward is global collaborative research into the how the purposes of education can be melded. It is not suggested that there is only one purpose: indeed, there is an constant interplay between competing purposes. However, it is imperative that there not be one dominant discourse, one that looks only to the economic good of the nation.

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