

Working Paper

Building resistance to the 'GERM': Discourse Theory, Discursive Struggle and the 'teacher' subject position

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Introduction

In April 2013 the NZEI (New Zealand Educational Institute), the trade union which provides representation and advocacy to around 50,000 primary and ECE teachers and support staff, mobilized around 8,000 of its members and sympathizers in coordinated protest marches across the country.

Promotion posters for the rally emphasized not the stalled collective agreement negotiations, but concern "about the impact the Government's education policies are having on children and their learning" (NZEI, 2013). The NZEI's 'Stand Up For Kids: Protect Our Schools' campaign site (<http://www.standupforkids.org.nz/g-e-r-m/>) characterizes the government's reform programme as part of the GERM; the Global Education Reform Movement, a term coined by the Finnish education expert Pasi Sahlberg (Sahlberg, 2013). The NZEI's web-page contains an illustration image of the 'GERM' as an actual germ, a ghoulish monster dripping with slime and significantly carrying a briefcase, together with a dichotomized outline of the two sides of the debate from Sahlberg's blog; 'Standardization' versus 'Personalized Learning', 'Competition' versus 'Collaboration' etc.

Utilizing concepts from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990, 2005), this PhD study, as yet in its early stages, will aim to theorize the 'Stand Up For Kids: Protect Our Schools' campaign as a hegemonic, or discursive struggle, which discursively constructs an 'antagonistic frontier' with a 'constitutive outside' in the GERM. 'Empty signifiers' such as 'Teacher', 'School' and 'Kids' become the discursive space where the two articulations compete to attain objectivity; relatively stable 'common-sense' understandings, while at the same time constituting antagonistic identities on both sides of the argument.

Background: Primary Sector Education Reform and the 'Problem' of Maori/Pacific underachievement

Primary sector education reform has consistently remained high on the news agenda since 2008 when the National Party took over the government in New Zealand. Controversial policies such as National Standards, Charter Schools and increases to class sizes have led to widespread debate and criticism within the media, the academy, and professional organizations, which has enabled the NZEI to draw on considerable discursive resources (van Leeuwen, 2009) and allowed their campaign to "construct the ground of its own actions" (Torfing, 2005: 21).

The rationalization for the policies of National Standards, introduced in 2009, and Charter Schools, introduced in 2013, is centred around the discursive constitution of the 'problem' of low Maori and Pasifika achievement, which is seen as detrimental to New Zealand's position in the all-important Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, which recently fell (Jones, 2014).

National Party and government documents (Banks, 2011; The Treasury, 2012; New Zealand Government, 2013; The National Party, 2013), position Maori, Pasifika and learners with special educational needs as “not getting the qualifications and skills they need to succeed in the workforce and in life” (Banks, 2011: 1). The blame for this underachievement, utilizing a logic of “responsibilization” (Butler, 2013: 103), is not contextualized to high levels of inequality and the material and parental support limits this imposes, but landed squarely in the court of individual schools, as in the Treasury’s briefing to the incoming Minister of Finance:

This suggests that all schools could do better at lifting the achievement of their lowest performing students. (The Treasury, 2012: 2)

Because then logically, within schools, teachers have the greatest influence on student achievement, policies which aim to “raise the quality of teaching” (The Treasury, 2012: 2) will have the greatest effect on raising student achievement. Although no evidence is given that proves New Zealand teachers are performing badly in international terms (in fact there is ample evidence to suggest otherwise, see Wylie (2012), the fault of low achievement is discursively positioned as the burden of ‘the teacher’. The logical progression of this argument is now culminating in increased pressure for teacher pay and professional development to be linked more directly to student achievement statistics (Morris & Patterson, 2014).

Criticisms of this logic have been vocal and numerous. The NZEI have commissioned their own in-depth, qualitative and longitudinal study of the impact of National Standards (Thrupp & Easter, 2012; Thrupp, 2013). Together with Wylie (2012), they see National Standards as resulting in a narrowing of education to the functions of reading, writing and maths, producing ‘teaching to the tests’ and creating a ‘one size fits all’ uniform approach to all students, ignoring individual trajectories (Thrupp & Easter, 2012; Wylie, 2012; Thrupp, 2013).

Similarly to the Thrupp University of Waikato study on National Standards, Massey University’s College of Education (Education Policy Response Group, 2012) has released a report on Charter Schools, which affirmed that Charter Schools will have the reverse of their intended effect, by actually increasing ethnic polarization, in selecting only the most academically able minority students and leaving the rest to flounder in comparatively poorly-funded, declining public schools, as has already occurred in the US (Ravitch, 2010).

This support from the academy for their position, has allowed the NZEI to build discursive resistance to the government’s colonization of the signifier ‘Teacher’ and consequently the teacher identity with a ‘discourse of crisis’ (Butler, 2013).

Discourse Theory – brief outline of the relevant concepts and their applicability

Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (Torfing, 2005; Glynos & Howarth, 2007), or Post-Marxist Discourse Theory (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011) derives primarily from Laclau and Mouffe’s seminal text *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), and Laclau’s theoretical elaborations on some of the main concepts in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990).

Their main influences were Gramsci’s concept of Hegemony, Foucault’s notions of discourses as dispersed systems of differences and power/knowledge regimes, Derrida’s Deconstructionism and Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of the disrupting presence of the real in symbolic orders.

Discourse Theory’s position is that there are no permanently fixed or essential meanings, only struggles to stabilize the signifier’s inherent contingency through discourses which can function to institutionalize, or ‘sedimentize’ meanings in a hegemonic articulation (Laclau, 1990), which ‘fixes’ identities and subject positions to the symbolic system that attains dominance. In this aspect discourses have a material, not only a mental,

reality, as both linguistic systems and our ontological categorizations of objects are constituted through the systems of differentiation that discourse provides (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In other words, there can be no ontological separation of discursive from non-discursive practice as in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2009), as both are articulated through discourse (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011).

However due to the nature of the social in Discourse Theory these articulations of meanings and identities can never be "fully sutured" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 111), and are therefore inherently unstable, as they have been constituted via logics of equivalence, which hold the hegemonic identity together in opposition to a "constitutive outside" (Laclau, 1990: 10), simultaneously forming an "antagonistic frontier" (Laclau, 2005: 75). Because the 'inside', the hegemonic articulation, needs the 'outside', the discursive 'other' in order to sustain itself through identifying against it, it is always vulnerable to attack, but especially in times of systemic crisis, "when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast" (Laclau, 2005: 132), and identities experience 'dislocation' from the symbolic system (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

In this case the key signifiers, or "nodal points" of the discourse, start to 'float', and can become 'empty' of signification, and thus are able to be filled by competing discourses, which can begin to build their own hegemonic, or counter-hegemonic articulation, with linked subject-positions and identities. In the case of the NZEI, the meaning of the signifier and subject-position 'teacher' has begun to float after the dislocation of the reform discourse from the government, which has caused a systemic crisis within the profession. New articulations of what it means to be a teacher can be observed on the NZEI's website, quarterly magazine, and in particular their 'Stand Up For Kids' Facebook group page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/standupforkids/>), which aim to forge a counter-hegemony through a populist discourse, connecting diverse strands of social justice movements and parents, outside of their paid-member constituency, through the colonization of the floating signifier 'teacher' and the empty signifier 'kids' (Laclau, 2005).

Methodological Pluralism with Discourse Theory as an Ontological Framework

There is a certain amount of acknowledgement within the field of Discourse Theory, that there is an inherent difficulty in connecting the abstract and complex concepts described by Laclau & Mouffe, with concrete methodologies which can be utilized by the emergent researcher (Howarth, 2005; Torfing, 2005; Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008; Phelan, 2011; Owen, 2012). Howarth (2005) views Discourse Theory as a "research programme or paradigm, and not an empirical theory in the narrow sense of the term" (Howarth, 2005: 317). A way around this, however, is to embrace methodological and conceptual pluralism in a problem-centred approach, with the active "construction of theoretical and empirical objects of investigation" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 12) by the researcher. This concurs with Laclau's own view that theoretical concepts should be adapted for "each specific empiric research question" (Laclau, 1990: 208-209).

The most common methodological and conceptual partner has been Critical Discourse Analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Chouliaraki, 2005; Lams, 2008; Phelan, 2009; Owen, 2012). Although CDA, unlike DT, ontologically separates discursive practice from broader social practice, seeing them as only dialectically linked (Fairclough, 2009), Fairclough's analytical tools, based as they are on Halliday's *Systemic Functional Linguistics*, give a more micro, fine-grained 'toolkit' for the analysis of texts such as newspapers and other media texts, government policy documents, and the NZEI's quarterly magazine, website and Facebook page (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Phelan, 2009).

However Laclau and Mouffe's assertion that the discursive includes social practices that cannot be reduced to texts, and an insistence from Hermeneutics that understanding must first come through "contextualized self-interpretations" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 3), leads me towards pursuing a methodological pluralism which will

include in-depth interviews of key actors (Howarth 2005, Owen 2012), and participant observations of protests and meetings, which have increasingly become forums for 'performativity' (Butler, 2013) of a collective 'resistance identity' (Goodwin, 2011; Castells, 2013; Langman, 2013; Taylor, 2013).

Discourse Theory provides the ontological framework for the analysis of resistance identity formation from a reflective, critical perspective, viewing the use of technology such as social media as enabling increased collective agency, but at the same time dividing and excluding 'others' (Goodwin, 2011).

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