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Disrupting the prevailing discourse: a 'fresh effort of thought'

A think piece

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Troubled by the discourse?

Sometimes you know that what you are hearing doesn't sound right. You feel that the way in which the speaker is talking is implying that certain things are common sense and unchallengeable; but it is subtle, it is almost as if the way that the speaker is talking precludes any challenge. There is a set of assumptions underneath the language, but these assumptions are hidden. Your mind is telling you *"I wouldn't have started from here"*, but the dialogue does not appear to give you or anyone an opportunity to hold an alternative view. It feels as though the dominant narrative is just common sense, and your potential counter-narrative would be dismissed as derisive, irrational or hopelessly idealistic. What you may be experiencing is a lack of affinity with the prevailing discourse.

The purpose of this think piece is to provide some examples of the prevailing discourses and consider possible counter-narratives in order to help leaders of children's services to challenge discourses that trouble them.

What is 'discourse' and how does it link to positional power?

Discourse has multiple definitions in the literature but, in general, it describes ways of talking and thinking which are political in the sense that they seek to define what is thought of as 'true' and 'real' in a way that benefits a particular authoritative position. As Fairclough[1] suggests, *"Discourses structure, construct, and constitute, our perception of reality."*[2] Discourse defines the way in which certain things are spoken about, and ensures that the interests of those who have helped to shape and define the discourse remain paramount. The power behind the discourse is described as hegemonic power[3].

Hegemony refers to a form of 'social domination in which the dominant or hegemonic group (actually a dominant class and those associated with it) gains the consent or at least acquiescence of other groups to the practices and ideologies which constitute its domain'[1]. Fairclough[2] argues that the maintenance

1 Gordon, C. 1991. Governmental rationality: An introduction. In The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality, ed. G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, 1–52. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

2 Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and social change. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

3 Jayman. J. (2014), in Vassilis K. Fouskas, VK., The Politics of International Political Economy, Routledge, 2014, pp. 119-120.

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of the discourse is an effective way for those in power to perpetuate the beliefs that sustain their view of the world and prevent challenge to that view, without them appearing to be enforcing the view directly.

Some theorists, for example Herman et al[4], see discourse as the means by which ruling groups produce or manufacture consent to the things the ruling group wants to do. A very familiar example of this is the current Government's skill in creating a discourse around the economy that assisted it in its aim of reducing the size of the State to balance the nation's books – linking this to the common sense way a household budget is run.

Foucault[5], who is considered to be the first to use the term discourse, believes our sense of self is constructed through our engagement with a multitude of discourses. He believes that if you want to exercise social power, you have to use discourse to do this. As a leader in children's services, the discourses, you and your staff use and engage with, set the tone for the narratives in your organisation and help to define what is assumed to be common sense, what forms of knowledge have currency, what is clearly ludicrous and, also, what may never be spoken about. The prevailing discourse will also invite resistance where the 'truth' will be contested and debated.

One of the conclusions drawn by those who examine and write about discourse is that through engaging with the discourses that circulate through civil society, many people come to accept inequalities of income, power, class, gender and ethnicity as the prevailing orthodoxy and, therefore, impossible to transform radically[6]. This means that in effect, certain forms of discourse are oppressive in that they become a means of social control by expecting conformity to particular norms e.g. that inequality of income and power is inevitable and unchangeable. Given that the task of significantly improving outcomes for children and young people may mean a radical transformation of ideas around power, class, gender and race, senior leaders in children's services may wish to challenge this discourse.

The ideology underpinning much of the current discourse in the Western world is neo-liberalism. This focuses on the positive effects of the free market and private property rights, as against the burden of state regulation and intervention that reduces individual freedom. Campbell Jones et al[7] state that, *"In its simplest version, it reads: markets good, government bad."* The consequences of this ideology such as poverty, unemployment, poor life expectancy, failing schools, declining towns, poor mental health and inequalities are assumed to be the responsibility of individuals. Harvey[8] points out that they are therefore seen to need technical rather than political solutions, as the systemic causes are seen as 'givens' that cannot be addressed.

This think piece examines how the prevailing discourses in education and children's services in England can shape our ability to think about issues. The way in which the discourse is constructed, may actually limit our ability to see ways of making a difference that would seem more possible if alternative ways of thinking were pursued.

Foucault[2] has also argued that groups in power will reinforce their superiority by seeking to identify as 'other' those that are considered to be inferior. A crucial task in listening to the discourse is to establish the extent to which it leads to 'othering' of certain groups who are then held as personally responsible for their circumstances. This leads one to ask, are certain groups being positioned as 'other' to the educated cultured person? If they are, what are the underlying uncomfortable issues that the discourse may be ignoring in referring to them in that way?

This think piece now examines a number of discourses prevalent in children's services and seeks to analyse their impact.

4 Herman, Edward S and Chomsky, Noam. (1988) Manufacturing Consent. New York: Pantheon Books

5 Foucault, M. (2000) "The Subject and Power." Pp. 326-348 in Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3 edited by J. Faubion. New York: The New Press

6 Stoddart (2007) Ideology, hegemony, discourse: a critical review of theories of knowledge and power. Social thought and research Vol 28 pp191-225

7 Campbell Jones, Martin Parker, Rene Ten Bos (2005). For Business Ethics. Routledge. p. 100:

8 Harvey, D. (2005). A brief history of neo-liberalism. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Discourse 1

More freedom for schools and parents improves the education system

Adam Wright[9] writing in 2001, examines the discourse used to support the UK Coalition Government's policy on education, particularly its claim to empower schools and parents by freeing them from government and local government control and bureaucracy. Through 'academisation' and free schools, parents would be seen to have more freedom and more choice, and there would be more diversity to choose between. The underlying message is that power is shifting from the Government to parents and from the Government to schools and anyone with common sense would agree that this a good thing. This was not a new idea and reflected the Freedom for schools and power for parents in the Labour Government White Paper-Higher Standards and Better Schools for All[10].

When the Coalition Government came to power in 2010, it focused its opposition to New Labour around a negative image of bureaucracy, which was stifling education through its target-driven centralised approach and that this was encroaching on individual rights and freedom. Not only was central government doing this, but local government and quangos were also key culprits. Parents as customers of schools would be empowered through having more choice. The Academies Act 2010 allowed for groups of parents to set up and run free schools. At the same time, their powers in relation to other things such as making complaints, challenging detentions, admissions, or exclusions were arguably diminished, through the loss of the local authority responsibility for school improvement. However, the discourse around red tape prevailed. A typical press release from the Department of Education states, *"The Department for Education has told schools and local authorities to ditch 'unnecessary paperwork', and has cut its 150 pages of guidelines to eight."*[11] A typical strategy by those leading the discourse is to use common sense language so any counter-narrative would be considered totally irrational.

The prevailing discourse from the Coalition Government is that the Government is limiting the power of the State, so that the individual can act more freely. It implies that power belonging to the State can be transferred to individuals. Wright[11] refers to these two transfers of power as 'fantasies of empowerment' in that this power transfer is not real. The language suggests that power can be handed over from the State to the individual, but Wright suggests we look more closely at what is really being handed over.

Underpinning this discourse are significant contradictions. In both the Labour Party aspiration for power for parents, and the Coalition Governments' aspiration for a Big Society[12], the coupling of parental involvement with individual choice rather than collective interest is really emphasising more selfish individualistic values.

The apparently common sense elements of this discourse, are that empowerment, freedom and choice are good, and bureaucracy, targets and central control are bad. In signing up to the idea that it is good as a parent to have the freedom to choose your child's school, (or even run a school), you may also be implicitly accepting that if you don't take action and involve yourself in your child's education, and your child subsequently does not succeed, it may be your fault. As Wright[12] says:

"This places great pressures on parents to be self-responsible in the way in which the market desires and will in turn lead parents inevitably to blame themselves for social problems which are impossible for them as individuals to fix and may paradoxically be caused by the very market mechanisms parents are offered as the solution (for instance, the polarisation of school quality or the increase in class based inequality in educational attainment)."

So a discourse which focuses on individual freedom ultimately relieves the State of responsibility for considering the extent to which a market driven system might increase social injustice or inequality.

9 Wright, A. (2011) Fantasies of empowerment: mapping neo-liberal discourse in the coalition government's schools policy. Journal of Education Policy Vol. 27, No. 3, May 2012, 279–294

10 Higher Standards and Better Schools for All (2005) DfES Publications

11 BBC news 2 July 2011, School trip red tape 'to be cut' by Michael Gove

12 Building the Big Society (2010) Cabinet Office Publications

Discourse 2

Special educational needs and disability: normal, different or deficient?

Listening to the discourse with reference to special educational needs and disability in any context provides a hint as to the extent that children with special educational needs or disabilities are being 'othered' (i.e. told 'You are not one of us.') in order to serve the needs of a more powerful group. In practice many children and young people are only accepted by some schools on condition that the schools are given resources to support them. A key issue in SEND is the extent to which the needs are seen as linked to the organic, the biological or the medical and therefore the system can in no way be responsible; or whether the deficit could be located all or partly in the child or young person's social or educational context.

The neo-liberal discourse locates the problem in the child (and sometimes parent) and seeks technical solutions to addressing it – the whole gamut of procedures and processes to identify children with these problems and deliver technical solutions. There are very strong drivers perpetuating the tendency to identify and 'other' children with special educational needs or disabilities. These include clinical practitioners whose profession focuses on diagnosis, intervention and treatment, organisations who employ them, voluntary organisations who support the needs of particular groups, organisations who provide services and provision for children and young people with special educational needs and, most importantly, a national framework of accountability which strongly sanctions headteachers and teachers who do not raise achievement in children.

Interestingly, it has been an Ofsted review of SEN[13] which challenged the prevailing discourse on special educational needs by stating that *"as many as half of all pupils identified for School Action would not be identified as having special educational needs if schools focused on improving teaching and learning for all, with individual goals for improvement."* The report pointed out that a key issue in the identification of children with SEN is that the identification is relative to the context the child or young person is in. If the pedagogy and support is outstanding, the proportion of children identified with special educational needs drops significantly. In this counter-narrative some children are wrongly identified, and the finger of responsibility points at some individual schools as the guilty culprits.

A more systemic counter-narrative by Liasidou[14] highlights that, *"The very term special educational needs is a discursive artefact that represents some students as different and deficient."* Many would argue it is self evident or common sense that we need to distinguish what is normal from what is not so that we can target resources to those who need them to become 'more normal'. However, the way we distinguish between the SEND children who are then 'othered' and the 'normal' children who are not, is completely dependent on the context they are in, the resources available and the prevailing ideology. An outstanding school may identify less than 5% children with SEND. Another may put 50% of its students in this category.

Fulcher[15] states that we should think of special educational needs as being associated with a disability. However, he states, *"For the majority of these high proportions of schoolchildren, no known impairment is present. But the presumption is made that it is. This is a highly political act. An alternative politics would locate deficits in school practices."*

We might go further and say that this alternative position might clearly state that the process for the identification of special needs reflects the prevailing ideology of the governments of the day. In a neo-liberal world the deficits are located in the individual child rather than the system, and a technical solution is proposed. To those who say this isn't a systemic issue, perhaps, as a counter narrative, we should ask why 30% of pupils identified as having SEN in the UK are eligible for free school meals, when overall in the UK, only 14% of all children are eligible for free school meals.[16]. The links between social inequality and special educational needs although, tangible, are not currently part of the prevailing orthodoxy.

13 Ofsted (2010) The special educational needs and disability review

14 Anastasia Liasidou (2008): Critical discourse analysis and inclusive educational policies: the power to exclude, Journal of Education Policy, 23:5, 483-500

15 Fulcher, G. 1999. Disabling policies? A comparative approach to education policy and disability. London: Falmer

16 HM Govt. Special educational needs in England ; National tables 2013

Discourse 3

Youth without jobs: casualties or culprits?

There have been significant changes in the youth labour market and in the school to work trajectories of young people over the last three decades in Britain.[17] Although this change of employment is due to complex economic change the overwhelming discourse would suggest that it is young people's fault because they lack the right skills and attitudes.

In 2013, The Telegraph stated, *"Nick Hurd, the minister for civil society, believes young people are not getting jobs because they lack the confidence, self control and 'grit' needed in the workplace."* (21 Aug 2013) and from the Mail Online in 2013 - *"British teenagers are too lazy to do the 'menial' jobs snapped up by immigrant workers which keep the economy moving, Boris Johnson claimed today."* (1 Oct 2013)

So, young people's unemployment occurs because they are either lazy or incompetent or both. Rosa Vasilaki[18] points out that this discourse assumes *"one of the most potent myths of capitalist ethics, that is 'meritocracy', which asserts that in our (neo)liberal societies everyone gets what they deserve."*

So in this system, the plight of young people is self-inflicted and the answer is to work hard and conform if they want to be successful. Henry Giroux[19], highlights the contemporary plight of young people in England particularly those pushed to the margins of society by virtue of their race and class:

> *"Increasingly denied opportunities for self-definition and political interaction, youth are transfigured by discourses and practices that subordinate and contain the language of individual freedom, social power, and critical agency. Symbols of a declining democracy, youth are located within a range of signifiers that largely deny their representational status as active citizens."*[21]

This is one discourse, but there is also another one which does not position the responsibility with young people for their fate. This is neatly provided by Ainley and Allen[20] who argue:

> *"Rather than 'employer demand for skills', it is the absence of work that has been the reason for young people staying in full-time education for longer and experiencing a more prolonged transition to adulthood – if they are able to make a transition at all. In the absence of work, education has little economic rationality. Instead, it functions as a means of social control over youth to enhance existing divisions amongst young people and replace the social control formerly exercised in the workplace by wages."*

This latter discourse is a good example of a counter-narrative. We need to search for these distinctive discourses, which confront prevailing beliefs.

17 Goujard, A., Petrongolo, B. & Van Reenen, J. (2011), The labour market for young people, in P. Gregg & J. Wadsworth, eds, `The Labour Market in Winter: The State of Working Britain', Oxford University Press.

18 Vasilaki, R. (2012) London Calling: Riots and the politics of deprivation, at link

19 Giroux, H. (1996) Review of Hollywood, Race, and the Demonization of Youth: The "Kids" Are Not "Alright"Kids [Film] by C. Woods; L. Clark. Educational Researcher, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Mar., 1996), pp. 31-35

20 Ainley, P and Allen, M (2012) Running from the riots – up a down escalator in the middle of a class structure gone pear-shaped. Contribution to 'The Riots One Year On, A One Day Conference' 28th September 2012, London South Bank University

Discourse 4

Early help and prevention; systemic change or technical programmes?

Prevention and early intervention have dominated children's services in more recent years following a plethora of reports on evidence-based practice and what works[21]. The discourse has an attractive rationality. It emphasises the identification of risks and evidence based practice that will prevent likely problems. It advocates delivering these solutions to reduce the risks, preferably through commissioning, with the promise that this will lead to better outcomes.

White and Stoneman[22] question this rationality. Firstly, they argue that many of the most challenging problems are highly complex and do not easily lend themselves to empirical study. More importantly, they question the context in which the 'problems 'are identified and construed. They suggest that, *"by restricting our attention to the question of what works... we fall into the trap of believing that all social problems among youth are objective conditions for which a rational solution exists, and it is just a matter of identifying and applying the correct scientific evidence."* In reality, *"the evidence is often fragmented, contradictory, limited and contested"* and that it, *"excludes certain ways of knowing and places limits on what can be thought, said and done."* This links to the approach of Keith Grint[23] who warns against treating 'wicked' problems as though they can have simple solutions.

White and Stoneman[27] suggest that this discourse encompasses *"a victim blaming ideology"* which is:

> *"coupled with a sympathetic / humanitarian / charitable attitude where social scientists and those in the helping professions fail to recognize that they are implicated in the problem, and instead, express their sorrow that the poor / victim / other are afflicted by their own inability to escape the cycle of poverty / victimhood / otherness. This social arrangement sustains the role of the charitable helper and locates the problem within the individual - rather than the social."*

They suggest that in several domains of prevention, the result of this approach often leads to implementation of techniques of social programming, selecting the most marginalised groups for this work. The implications of this are that those selected have deficits or lack something which needs to be improved through state intervention, often those selected are also characterised by being of a different race or class from the dominant groups in society. Sometimes the programmes chosen can do harm by restricting development potential, creating dependency or by removing a child or young person from a mainstream setting.

The prevention focus in most of the interventions identified in the Graham Allen report on early intervention,[24] such as Multi-systemic therapy, Incredible Years or Nurse Family Partnership, is on the individual young person or family, only a few focus on whole system approaches, and these are limited to the level of the school. In this sense the individual unit is identified as the problem, and the prevention techniques are focused at this level. This is despite the fact that data reveals the over-representation of certain groups in these interventions programmes e.g. white males eligible for free school meals, and certain groups of black and minority ethnic children. There is often insufficient analysis of the structural forces of society that place some individuals in marginalised roles and others in mainstream roles. This leads to further 'othering' of these respective groups.

An example of this is the response to the high levels of suicide in young and middle aged males. Our national strategy[25] to prevent suicide focuses on these two 'at risk' groups. The document states:

> *"Suicides are not inevitable. An inclusive society that avoids the marginalisation of individuals and which supports people at times of personal crisis will help to prevent suicides. Government and statutory services have a role to play. We can build individual and community resilience."*

This is a great start to a counter-narrative which places the responsibility for suicides in a social and economic context, but this is one of the only references to systemic issues. Although the

21 Frank Field (2010) The Foundation years. Preventing poor children from becoming poor adults. DfE

22 Jennifer White & Lorinda Stoneman (2012): Thinking and Doing Prevention: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Youth Crime and Suicide Prevention Discourses, Child & Youth Services, 33:2, 104-126

23 Grint, K. (2010) Wicked problems and clumsy solutions: the role of leadership. The new public leadership challenge 11: 169-186.

24 Graham Allen (2011) Early intervention the next steps. HM Government

25 Preventing suicide in England: A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives (2012) HM Govt.

document notes that suicides clearly increase at times of recession, unemployment and economic difficulties, there is no analysis of the impact of these on suicide, or of the lived realities of some men including racism, poverty, and 'othering' by mainstream society. The whole document focuses on the need for services and the community to support individuals. There are no systemic solutions, even in the section that focuses on high-risk groups. The message is that people who commit suicide have mental health difficulties, they lack access to information, and support, or they have too much access to the means to take their own life. When we consider the recent rise of suicides in prisons[26] we can see the lack of any strategic thinking in this approach.

A counter narrative might explore with one of the high-risk groups what sense they made of suicide, eliciting their narratives of the problem, which might not construe the issue as a problem of unhealthy individuals. For example Wexler[27] worked with Inupiat young people in Northern Alaska to reframe the issue of young male Inupiat suicide as a response to colonisation by a dominant group with a different culture and values. The response to youth suicide was not more mental health services but a social and political engagement by the young people with the forces that were shaping their lives.

Beth Swadener[28] argues that the most effective counter narrative in prevention would be to move away from the identification of 'at risk' children suitable for prevention programmes:

> *"I have argued that there is a clear ideology underlying the use - indeed the overuse - of the medical metaphor 'at risk', and suggest that we reconceptualize all children as 'at promise' for success, versus 'at risk' for failure. The problem of locating pathology in young victims of oppression (and their families) is, in my opinion, the most objectionable tenet of the 'at risk' rhetoric."*

This is not just a call for a semantic change. It is a call to concentrate resources and attention on children and young people strengths, whilst addressing the social, political and economic factors that oppress them.

26 Prison and Probation Ombudsman Report 2013-14 (2014)

27 Wexler, L. M. (2006). Inupiat youth suicide and culture loss: Changing community conversations for prevention. Social Science & Medicine, 63, 2938–2948.

28 Beth Blue Swadener (2010) "At Risk" or "At Promise"? From Deficit Constructions of the "Other Childhood" to Possibilities for Authentic Alliances with Children and Families International Critical Childhood Policy Studies, 3(1) 7-29.

Shame as punishment for not conforming to the prevailing orthodoxy

A key consequence of a discourse, which locates problems in the individual, is the impact on those who are at the receiving end of the discourse. Part of the neo-liberal narrative is to promote messages about what sort of behaviour is expected of people as a form of social control. These narratives are so strong that they can lead to individuals experiencing deep shame at not meeting what they have internalised as expectations of themselves in our society. Some examples of this are:

- The value given to emotional self-regulation and self-management particular in males in our society, leading to shame at the inability to regulate behaviour and emotions. (Fullagar, 2003[29])
- The idealised notions of mothers and mothering behaviours which lead to shame and self-blame in mothers who feel they have been inadequate at caring for their children. (Singh 2004[30])
- The notion that an ideal man has to provide for his family in any circumstances irrespective of the economic conditions and the shame of being thought a 'scrounger' if you become unemployed
- The ideal conception of a caring and all-knowing social worker who will always know when to intervene to save a child, but will never 'remove' a child from a good parent, leading to public humiliation for social workers when a high profile death occurs
- The focus on bullying as a problem of getting better social control over problem children rather than by exploring with children the existence and consequences of 'othering' in our society and how we manage social difference. (Walton 2010).[31]

The wonderful thing for dominant groups, about maintaining power through discourse is that society, the media, institutions and individuals do the job of policing their rules for them. They can appear not to be controlling the way people think, because others do it for them.

29 Fullagar, S. (2003). Wasted lives: The social dynamics of shame and youth suicide. Journal of Sociology, 39, 291–307.

30 Singh, I (2011) A disorder of anger and aggression: Children's perspectives on attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder in the UK Social Science & Medicine 73 889-896

31 Walton, G. (2010) The problem trap: implications of Policy Archaeology Methodology for anti bullying policies, Journal of Education Policy, 25:2, 135-150

Being an archaeologist for your own policies

Leaders in children's services may wish to examine their policies from the perspective of which discourses are underpinning them. Walton[36] describes a method called **policy archaeology**, which is a way of examining the discourse in a particular area. He believes the real purpose of policies are to maintain social order. Policy archaeology allows an examination of the way in policies do this by asking particular questions about the policies.

Walton suggests that key questions to ask are:

- Whose voices are included in articulations of the 'problem'?
- Who decides how goals to resolve the stated problem are to be set and met?
- Who gets to state the terms of reference for the problem and how have they been informed of such terms?
- Who is impacted by this policy and at what point has their voice been elicited?

One could add to these:

- To what extent have 'problems' been identified by the predominantly educated white middle class professional group in children's services?
- Has consultation occurred within the narrowed frame of reference of this lens?
- Does the policy locate problems in 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' individuals?
- Are the solutions really various forms of social control to make the individuals conform to what 'good' or 'worthy' individuals should be doing, so that they can get the outcomes that they will then deserve?

Examining the language in your own policies using these questions can be a very instructive workshop for a service team.

Conclusion

Bringing fresh thoughts into policy creation

Gordon[32] has described analysing and disrupting the prevailing discourse as requiring a *"fresh effort of thought."* This task is easier if the process of policy creation is much more inclusive and expansive so that it creates new knowledge. Staff need to explore in more detail how young people and families negotiate their behaviour and how they participate in social worlds, to get a real sense of the complexities they face. An effective way of preventing children's services policies and strategies from colluding with oppression of the populations they serve, is to develop counter-narratives which are based on:

- The voices of children, young people and families and their strengths
- Exploration of the lived experiences of young people and families and how they negotiate their behaviour in response to these
- Exploration with staff of attitudes to difference and when these may become unintentionally oppressive
- The impact of identifying certain groups 'at risk'
- The real impact of the existing policies in schools and services on young people and families in the longer term.

Capacity development work with both staff and those who use our services can help bring people to the table as equal partners. They can then help to analyse and understand the social complexities, controversies, and inequities surrounding the issues, and co-produce counter-narratives and policy options to address these. A great starting point is for the leaders of the organisation to reflect on the discourse they use, what impact this has on their users and find forms of language that empower rather than oppress.

32 Gordon, C. 1991. Governmental rationality: An introduction. In The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality, ed. G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, 1–52. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

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