Discourse analysis and the study of educational leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the current and past work using discourse analysis in the field of educational administration and of discourse analysis as a methodology.
Design/methodology/approach – Authors reviewed research in educational leadership that uses discourse analysis as a methodology.
Findings – While discourse analysis has been used in the field, little work has been done that explores "leadership" as a discourse practice.
Originality/value – Increased use of discourse analysis in the field might unearth the ways principals and superintendents are creators of discourse and mediators of the discourses of others.
Keywords CDA, Discourse, Methods, Educational leadership, Michel Foucault, Critical discourse analysis
Paper type Conceptual paper

Leadership[1] is in its essence a discursive practice (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998). It is as much about managing meaning as it is about managing organizations (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). As far back as the early 1980s, Gronn (1983) argued that school administration was accomplished largely through language. This may seem like an obvious observation, given the importance of communication in organizations, and yet, this important discursive dimension of leadership is largely neglected in mainstream research in the field.

It is not that we do not interview or observe principals and superintendents, but we too often assume a windowpane theory of language (Gusfield, 1976). This is the notion that we can code interviews and observations and access "content" independent of language and the connotative and ideological work that texts (whether interview transcripts or recruitment brochures) perform. There are few studies that focus directly on how leaders manage meaning in their day-to-day work though verbal and written communication, or the ways they interact with the constant flow of documents and texts that they navigate daily. Nor do we tend to seek how these texts reflect what Smith (2005) calls "ruling relations" that exist outside the site under study.

This is partly due to the ways we narrowly classify research methods in the field as quantitative (e.g. surveys, analysis of primary or secondary data, etc.) or qualitative (e.g. case studies, ethnographic interviews, and observations). Vague references to document analysis or discourse analysis is often tacked on, but is seldom the primary method. And yet, discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1999) and ethnographic semantics (Donmoyer, 1985) have developed methods for centering the importance of language and discourse, and institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) has emphasized the importance of documents and texts. For example, Andre-Bechely (2004) in her institutional ethnography of how mother's go about choosing schools for their children

under current choice policies, analyzed the gatekeeping texts these mothers had to navigate, such as application forms and school brochures as major data sources.

Fairclough (2013) expands on the nature and importance of texts:

> Texts are to be understood in an inclusive sense, not only written texts but also conversations and interviews, as well as the "multi-modal" texts (mixing language, visual images and sound) of television and the Internet. Some events consist almost entirely of texts (e.g. a lecture or an interview), in others texts have a relatively small part (e.g. a game of football) (p. 4).

Corson (1996) notes that in an education setting this can include school or district policies, parts of a student or teacher conversation, passages in textbooks or educational articles in a newspaper.

Educational leaders swim in an ocean of language and texts that are represented through policies, conversations, e-mail and the language of the profession. In this chapter, we will argue that, whether oral or written, language, and discourse should be more central to research in educational leadership. We will provide an overview of the methods and approaches available to study them. Our discussion will include the potential that discourse analysis has for future research in educational leadership, as well as how conceptualizing leadership itself as a discourse can help us understand shifts in school leadership over the last 30 years.

In particular, we will discuss how discourse analysis can be used to study intertextual chains that link micro and macro levels of analysis and how school and district leaders mediate these discourses, as well as, the inter-sector transfer of discourses, particularly from the private, business sector into education. We will end with a discussion of how viewing "leadership" as a discursive formation itself can open up a broader analysis and critique of leadership as part of a move from the administration of public bureaucracies to new public management (NPM), which is based on a new market and entrepreneurial-based approach to leadership (Ward, 2011).

Theories of language and discourse

In the field of education, we have tended to approach language and discourse from many different theoretical perspectives. The breadth of this scholarship and the scope of this chapter will not allow us to review all of these. We will focus instead on a distinction that Gee (2004) makes between discourse analysis with a capital "*D*" and discourse analysis with a small case "*d*." Little "d" discourse is "language in use," and many psycho and socio-linguistic approaches fall into this category. On the other hand, Gee (2004) states that:

> Discourse (with a capital "D") […] is a distinctive way to use language integrated with other stuff so as to enact a particular type of socially situated identity […]. What is this "other stuff"? It is a distinctive way of thinking, being, acting, interacting, believing, knowing, feeling, valuing, dressing, and using one's body. It is also a distinctive way of using various symbols, images, objects, artifacts, tools, technologies, times, places, and spaces (p. 46).

Discourse with a small "d" is the day-to-day language of conversation or classroom interaction while Discourse with a capital "D" refers to those instances within the conversation (or texts) that have underlying meaning, feelings, and relations in specific contexts. Typically, we are doing capital D discourse analysis when we are "reading between the lines." Michel Foucault takes this further in viewing discourses as broad historical narratives that are less about language and more about historical shifts that create new "regimes of truth" (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998; Ball, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Maxcy, 1994).

There are many classroom studies that are more focussed on "language in use" than the ideological "work" that language performs in different contexts. The relatively small number of studies that use discourse analysis in educational leadership tend to view leadership as a discursive practice, drawing on David Corson's (1995, 1996, 2000, 2002) path-breaking work in the field. For instance Corson's (2002) study of emancipatory leadership examined how school administrators and community representatives negotiated meaning through the agenda of a meeting and how power was exercised through language. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) in this case, focusses "directly on the macro and micro-power factors that operate in a given discursive context" (p. 95). Corson lamented that research on educational leadership often lacked a consideration of issues such as ideology and power that influence educational processes and outcomes, and he saw discourse analysis as a way of providing empirical evidence of how they operate.

Discourse and educational leadership

In a 1983 study entitled "Talk as the work: the accomplishment of school administration," Peter Gronn demonstrated that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the total working time of principals or superintendents is spent talking. It is likely that much of the remaining time they are dealing with various written texts in some form. Their daily exchanges with colleagues and subordinates, the meetings they attend, their professional development workshops and conferences, the professional journals and books they read, the memos, directives, and e-mails they send and receive, all help construct who they are as a leader and the ways they manage and legitimate a particular social arrangement.

Discourse analysis can help to better understand how the everyday social events that occur in schools are influenced by the subtle ideologies embedded in language, discourses, and texts (Henze and Arriaza, 2006). The importance of educational leaders like principals and superintendents in this process is their location as mediators at different points in the hierarchy. They occupy pivotal discursive spaces through which policies and practices flow (Anderson, 2009; Ryan, 2007).

Language is increasingly used not simply to communicate, but also forms part of a larger arena in which power struggles over meaning take place. For instance, the language of business and economics creeps into education talk and texts without anyone noticing and with little research attention to the cross-sector flow of language and ideology (Mautner, 2010). We now "leverage" change and "scale up" practices without much attention to the unexamined assumptions these verbs bring to our efforts. Equity language, like "No Child Left Behind" and "closing the achievement gap" are used to promote high-stakes testing and market-based policies. The multilayered complexity of everyday discourses requires a form of analysis that can explore the relationships between everyday discursive practices and the larger world of shifting power relations in society.

Even our identities as teachers, principals, superintendents, and human beings are being redesigned through discourses. Frederick Taylor's scientific movement centered on creating a more efficient work environment where managers could use knowledge to make the organization and the workers more productive. Historically, the growth of Taylorism during the last half of the nineteenth century led to the need for the production of new discourses and the inculcation of new identities as work evolved from farmers and craftspeople to wage labor under the new factory system (Gee *et al.*, 1996) resulting in a new identity: the industrial worker. Likewise, we are today living through a historical shift that is often presented as a natural process of "globalization," but is in fact a power struggle over discourses and the shape that social practices – like

teaching and leading – will ultimately take under new forms of market-based governance (Ball and Junemann, 2012). Sociologists of the professions see a deprofessionalized "new professional," emerging from these discursive shifts (see Anderson and Cohen, 2015; Evetts, 2009).

CDA

Much current research on educational leadership that uses discourse analysis draws on the work of Norman Fairclough. Fairclough (2003) has developed an approached called CDA, which views complex modern societies as the networking together of social practices across different domains or fields like education, health, policy, economics, the family, law, etc. Thus, the domain of education is composed of social practices such as teaching, leadership, counseling, etc. These social practices are immersed in and interconnected by discourse in the form of texts, defined broadly as written texts, spoken interaction, and the multi-media texts of television and the internet. According to Fairclough, the transformation of what he calls new capitalism can be seen as transformations in the networking of social practices and discourses.

In explaining discourse, Fairclough conceptualizes it in the following three broad dimensions (Figure 1):

This visual rendition allows us to see the relationships among levels of discourses and how discourse can be analyzed within different dimensions. The inside box pertains to the descriptive element of discourse; the text itself, and is analyzed through close linguistic analysis. While Foucault focusses here on written texts, oral texts can also be analyzed as discursive and social practices. A conversation in the teachers' lounge, an open house meeting between a teacher and a parent, or a school board meeting, can all be viewed as texts that can be analyzed as discursive and social practices. The middle box represents an analysis of the production, distribution, and consumption of the text (Who produced it?, Who funded it?, Who is the intended audience?, etc.) and the outer box requires an explanation of how the text as a social practice is connected to historical and broader structural discursive shifts (Fairclough, 1992).

For instance, if we take a particular genre of text, such as a university web site (formerly produced and disseminated as brochures), we can see how these texts have shifted over the last 30 years as universities have become more entrepreneurial as a
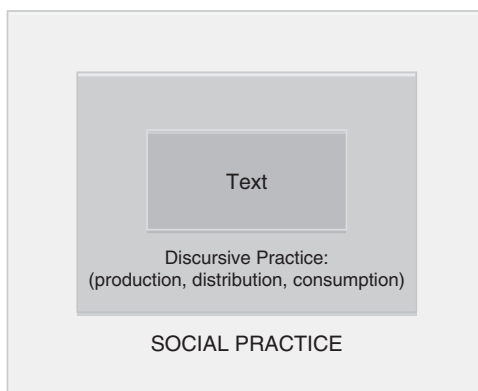

Figure 1.
Fairclough's three dimensions of discourse analysis

Source: Taken from Fairclough (1992, p. 73)

logic of markets has expanded beyond its commercial boundaries. Whereas university web sites used to be informational in style and content, they are now unapologetically advertisements for the university and marketing consultants are hired to create and promote the university's "brand." These broader shifts in social practice can be traced through shifts in discourse and genres of texts.

The networking of texts historically, hierarchically and across fields can be examined through what linguists call Intertextuality which refers to the ways that a text borrows from previous texts – verbal or written. According to Fairclough (1992), "The concept of intertextuality sees texts historically as transforming the past – existing conventions and prior texts – into the present" (p. 85). Mikhail Bakhtin argues that all texts and utterances are shaped by prior texts that they are responding to and by subsequent texts that they anticipate. According to Bakhtin (cited in Fairclough, 1992) "our speech [...] is filled with other words, varying degrees of otherness and varying degrees of 'our-own-ness'" (p. 102). Mautner (2010) provides an example of how intertextual chains are mediated within hierarchies:

> If market discourse is embraced by top management, it will cascade down the system. Chains of command thus become chains of intertextual adaptation, with the less powerful actors adapting to the more powerful ones. Over time, individual acts of adaptation solidify into discursive practice, and a new norm emerges (p. 28).

CDA can be used to track the linguistic traces left by these processes of adaptation across fields and levels of analysis.

Controversies and debates about CDA
As with any research methodology, there is a lively debate about CDA. The primary objection to it is that it is not a methodology, but rather a stance or a critical approach to research. These critics argue that the adjective "critical" is unnecessary since the goals of CDA can be accomplished by traditional linguistic approaches as well (Jones, 2007). Others level a familiar critique that is leveled at all critical research: that it is essentially ideological and biased, and that the analyst already knows the outcome ahead of time (Tyrwhitt-Drake, 1999; Widdowson, 1995).

Similar debates occurred around critical ethnography in the 1980s and 1990s (Anderson, 1989). Roman (1992), for example, argued that traditional ethnography was part of a positivist project that "affirms a social world that is meant to be gazed upon but not challenged or transformed" (p. 573). She argued, for instance, that critical feminist methods were needed to ensure that the researcher did not unwittingly collude in reproducing patriarchal power relations either by not "seeing" gender or through masculinist methods that were positivist, nonrelational, and nonparticipatory.

Others argued that critical ethnography is not a methodology, but rather should appropriate traditional methods, but use a critical (e.g. neo-Marxist, feminist, queer, etc.) orienting theory (Carspecken and Apple, 1992). Van Dijk (2013) makes a similar, but more contemporary argument with regard to CDA. He also argues that CDA is not a methodology and that "being critical, first of all, is a state of mind, an attitude, a way of dissenting, and many other things, but not an explicit method for the description of the structures or strategies of text and talk" (paragraph 1). However, he agrees that the kind of methods used "should be adequate to realize their critical goals, namely to analyze and denounce domination and social inequality" (paragraph 2).

The critical nature of CDA has opened it up to accusations of bias, to which practitioners of CDA respond that these critiques of bias could be leveled at any

research, and that good research is always reflexive and verifiable. Fairclough (1996), responding to Widdowson's accusation that Fairclough confuses science with ideology, responds that:

> CDA would argue that we are all – including Widdowson – writing from within particular discursive practices, entailing particular interests, commitments, inclusions, exclusions, and so forth. (This claim, by the way, means that CDA is theoretically better-placed to recognize its own "parciality" than most theories, *pace* Widdowson) (p. 53).

These debates over CDA and other critical and qualitative research have increasingly taken center stage as the gold standard for educational research has become narrower in the wake of the 2002 National Research Council (NRC) report, *Scientific Research in Education*, which reasserted the dominance of quantitative, positivist research in the field. Lather (2004) called the NRC report "a racialized, masculinist backlash against the proliferation of research approaches that characterize the past 20 years of social inquiry" (p. 15). The narrowing of what counts as rigorous research has important implications for expanding research methods to include CDA, since straying from the use of more "legitimate" methods may affect academics' ability to compete for grants and advance their careers.

CDA and educational leadership
Fairclough's (1992) version of CDA has been a useful tool for some researchers of educational leadership, since it represents a way to analyze through discourse how administrators mediate power and knowledge vertically and horizontally. Ideas and practices travel horizontally across fields or sectors and discourses travel vertically and iteratively from macro to micro levels of analysis and vice versa. Discourse analysis can also demonstrate how race, class, and gender are discursively constructed (see van Dijk, 1993, for analysis of race, and Wodak, 1997, for analysis of gender, and Bernstein, 1971, for analysis of class). Fairclough (2013) more recently connects CDA with critical policy studies. He examines the ways in which CDA can work with economic and political theories such as poststructuralist discourse theory and cultural political economy.

Some examples of studies using discourse analysis in educational leadership are O'Laughlin and Lindle's (2015) vertical discourse analysis of policy texts and principal interviews on Individuals with Disabilities Education Act least restrictive environment policy; Bruner's (2002) analysis of superintendents' discourse; Anderson's (2001) discourse analysis of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and certification exam; Scribner *et al.*'s (2007) critical analysis of the discourse of collaboration in distributed leadership teams; Bogotch and Roy's (1997) analysis of principal discourses; Carpenter and Brewer's (2014) study of how principals construct democratic discourses; Andre-Bechely's (2004) study of an application brochure and the ways parents have to navigate texts as choosers of schools for their children; Blackmore's (2006) deconstruction of recent shifts in discourses of diversity; Gabriel and Paulus's (2014) and Rogers's (2012) studies of the discourse of paid consultants on committees that make educational policy; and Suspitsyna's (2010) study of US Department of Education speeches that explore the rhetorical strategies used to reinforce neoliberal governmentality through a discourse of accountability.

Some of these authors used mixed methods. For instance, a CDA of a text may reveal the ideological "work" the text is performing (Mungal, 2008), but interviews with those involved in producing the text will provide greater contextual understanding of the politics that produced the text. Qualitative researchers are also increasingly finding

that doing a discourse analysis of interview transcripts provides a form of triangulation that complement traditional coding procedures. For instance, a tendency to use agentless, passive voice or masculinist language or vocabulary transferred from other sectors adds a dimension to the analysis of interviews that analytic coding of content misses.

What many of these researchers have in common is the view that language and discourse do more than reflect reality; they also construct reality (Gee, 1999). So the importance of CDA for leaders is that the ways discourses are taken up actually can shape the culture of a school. In the case of analyzing policy texts, professional standards like ISLLC, or transcriptions of a school board meeting, a linguistic analysis provides intertextual chains that reveal influences that even interviewees may be unaware of. In this way language has the tendency to normalize social arrangements, and CDA has the potential to denaturalize them. We owe a great debt to Michel Foucault for many of these insights and we will take him up in the next section.

Foucault and discourse
The concept of discourse is also central to Michel Foucault's (1977) work, but he uses the term broadly to include more than oral and textual linguistic practices (Fairclough, 1992). To Foucault, discursive practices are the link between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980). Social practices, like educational administration or teaching, are viewed by Foucault as forms of knowledge. According to Clegg (1989), "Because they are knowledge constituted, not just in texts, but in definite institutional and organizational practices, they are "discursive practices": knowledge reproduced through practices made possible by the framing assumptions of that knowledge" (p. 54). Because discourses shape practices and practices produce discourses, some authors use the term discourse practice to denote this circular dynamic (Cherryholmes, 1988).

Discourse practices determine what counts as true or important in a particular place and time (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998). For example, administrative interns want to become "effective " school administrators. Becoming an effective school administrator, among other things, means to acquire skills to maintain an orderly and disciplined school, motivate teachers, manage conflict, improve test scores, promote a vision, and engage effectively in public relations with the school community. Effective school administrators seek to master "appropriate" discourse practices of administration. Foucault argues that this process of normalization represents a technology of power that "disciplines" administrators. The acquisition of a particular set of dispositions and skills at any particular time and place is the result of a battle over competing discourses or what Foucault calls a politics of truth resulting in a regime of truth (Foucault, 1980).

Principals and superintendents are not totally "trapped" within discourses and roles. There is always some level of dissonance. Though less common, discursive shifts can also push upward from the grassroots and discourses can be taken up in unpredictable ways. There is a growing body of research that is exploring the ways teachers and administrators are resisting neoliberal and managerial discourses (Anderson and Cohen, 2015; Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Cohen, 2014; Ryan, 1998; Star, 2011).

Leadership as a discourse: leaderism
While we have cited research that studies leadership using discourse analysis, there are also studies that view leadership itself as a discursive practice. Fairhurst's (2007) work provides a critique of psychological approaches to the study of leadership and calls for a more constructivist approach that focusses on how leadership is essentially a discourse

practice with the power to frame issues and manage meaning in organizations. This perspective has a long history in leadership theory and was introduced into educational administration by Greenfield (1973) in the 1970s and further elaborated later (1993).

A more critical approach argues that leadership represents a new master narrative that serves as a carrier of the market-based principles of NPM (Ward, 2011). O'Reilly and Reed (2010) document the emergence of a leadership discourse over the last 30 years that parallels the introduction of NPM and other neoliberal reforms. They use the term leaderism to describe this discourse, which serves as a discourse that facilitates and disguises the implementation of NPM (Hall, 2013).

In spite of leaderism discourses of autonomy, entrepreneurialism, and transformative leadership, this shift toward NPM ultimately constrains the professional judgment of school administrators and is constructing new teacher and administrator identities. NPM is characterized by: an audit or performance culture and work intensification created by an increase in the compliance requirements of high-stakes measurement, testing, and teacher evaluation systems (Strathern, 2000); a narrow, scripted "what works" and "scaled up" conception of teaching that diminishes professional judgment (Biesta, 2007); the commodification of teaching through a new non-profit and for-profit education industry (Burch, 2009); new forms of governance, regulation, and self-regulation (Ball and Junemann, 2012); and finally, a proletarianization of teaching in which conception becomes divorced from execution (Ellis *et al.*, 2014). Some argue that these shifts are also marginalizing multicultural, artistic, and civic education and making it harder to recruit and retain teachers of color (Achinstein *et al.*, 2004).

In the USA the discursive construction of leaders as "entrepreneurial," "change agents" or distributers of leadership within business-like organizations with "bounded autonomy" has provided cover for this broader disenfranchisement of teachers and school administrators through the tenets of NPM. Rather than administrators of democratically accountable public bureaucracies with an ethos of public service, the new "leader" is framed as a CEO of a de-bureaucratized organization that is accountable to the choices of the new consumer-citizen (Gewirtz, 2002). However, while bureaucratic control has not disappeared, it has been supplemented by new modalities of governance that control from a distance through high-stakes accountability and from within through self-regulation (Anderson, 2009).

This understanding of leadership or leaderism as a discursive formation draws on a view of discourse that is less about language and more about master narratives that become carriers of ideology. In this sense, we can still use the methods of CDA to explore the ideological "work" that the language of NPM and leaderism does both through verbal exchanges and texts. We can also draw on Foucault's methods of archeology and geneology to provide a historical understanding of how these discourses have evolved (Scheurich, 1994).

Mainstream research in the field takes for granted that the shift from school administration, with its bureaucratic connotations, to school leadership, with its cultural conotations, is a positive one. But once we understand it as a discursive shift that occurred at a particular historical moment and did not occur purely by chance, then we need to discover the ideological subtext of this shift and the ways it is affecting what we do and how we think about what we do as "leaders."

Conclusion

Taking discourse seriously in the field of educational administration has both methodological and theoretical implications. As a research method, it directs researchers to pay greater

attention to how language is used in oral or written texts and requires the acquisition of some basic linguistic analysis skills. This will require either an expansion of how we think about "qualitative research," and the skills required to engage in it, or the inclusion of coursework and experience with discourse analysis.

If we think about discourses in a Foucauldian sense, then discourse analysis provides a philosophical method for analyzing leadership as a disciplinary practice that is constituted through discourses (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998; Scheurich, 1994). This will also require expanding the philosophical and methodological tools we supply to our future researchers. A Foucauldian approach will call into question everything we take for granted in the field, including the very notion of leadership itself. The field is coming increasingly under the influence of venture philanthropy, Edubusinesses, Foundations (e.g. Wallace), "What works" functionalism, Charter school organizations, alternative pathways to certification (or the elimination of certification), privatization, and fast track, online education. Too much research in the field seems unaware of these shifts, how they are promoted and sustained through discourse, and their meaning for leadership and the future of public schooling. Research approaches in the field that are explicit about the need to study the effects of power and privilege though the study of discourse are needed today more than ever.

Note

1. In general, we will use the term leadership throughout the paper as this term has largely replaced administration and management in the field in the last 30 years. While some see leadership, management, and administration as connoting different dimensions of what we colloquially call "running a school," we would argue that they are all three contested discursive practices with their own historical, social, and ideological agendas.

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