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**It is the paper published as:**

**Author:** T. A. Turunen and J. Rafferty

**Title:** Insights beyond neo-liberal educational practices: The value of discourse analysis

**Journal:** Educational Research for Policy and Practice **ISSN:** 1570-2081 1573-1723

**Year:** 2013

**Volume:** 12

**Issue:** 1

**Pages:** 43-56

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**DOI/URLs:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10671-012-9129-x> [http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=44180&local\\_base=GEN01-CSU01](http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=44180&local_base=GEN01-CSU01)

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**Insights beyond Neo-Liberal Educational Practices: The Value of Discourse Analysis**

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## **Insights beyond Neo-Liberal Educational Practices: The Value of Discourse Analysis**

This paper discusses the nature, power and effects of neo-liberal rationale in educational settings. By introducing discourse analysis of two cases, the influence of neo-liberal ideology on contemporary curricula and school programs were examined. The analysis showed that dominant discourses based on neo-liberal rationale presented themselves as “unquestionable truths” that influenced how educators interacted with others and went about their profession. The dominant discourses relied upon assertions by consensus or common conception and understanding to create an “officially” sanctioned way of thinking about education. Proponents of a particular dominant discourse argued that such sanctions were a necessary feature of an initiative or innovation, and provided a focus for energy and activism, winning teachers’ support, and conveying to the wider community a sense of purpose, action and rational planning; a clear path to salvation. On the other hand, these dominant discourses had a necessary effect in obscuring other perspectives and disallowing critique from taking place. This paper argues that discourse analysis provides a platform to interrogate the dominant discourses to reveal alternative or previously unseen perspectives.

**Keywords:** neo-liberalism, dominant discourses, discourse analysis, salvation stories, curriculum, school reform

### **1. Introduction**

In most countries with advanced economies education is institutionalised and highly politicised. Increasingly, high quality evidence of effectiveness is becoming the primary determinate of school funding allocations in many countries and the focus of election campaigns. In the USA, the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2002 (107th United States Congress, 2002; Turunen & Määttä, 2012) has served to intensify and legitimize links between educational policy and practice, as well as the need to demonstrate quantifiable, statistically comparable results. In the UK, *Higher Standards Better Schools for All. White Paper* (Her Majesty's Government, 2006) highlights increasing reliance on accountability to improve education. Similarly, the Australian Federal Government’s *Smarter Schools – National Partnership* initiative (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations DEEWR, 2008)

places a heavy emphasis on improving school and student performance through greater transparency and accountability.

Olssen (2003, p. 199) has described the change in last 30 years as a “neo-liberal revolution”, and according to Goodson (2010), the 1990s was the world-wide era of neo-liberal restructuring of educational systems. In the neo-liberal era of education there is intense interest in knowing whether educational systems are delivering value for money, how effective education is, and how it can be improved (Fullan, 2009; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; P. W. Hill, Holmes-Smith, & Rowe, 1993; Levin, 2010). The focus on accountability and individualism constitutes a new institutional culture (Ball, 1994; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). Subsequently, curriculum initiatives and reform programs stemming from these policies are characterized by rational planning, economic efficiency, standardization, intellectual capacity within the school, and a clear focus on pedagogy (Hargreaves, 2004; Hayes, Christie, Mills, & Lingard, 2004; Rafferty, 2008). Marginson (1997, p. 353) argues that the language, assumptions and ideology of this new management “dominate the language, conscious action and modes of analysis of those working within the education sector”.

This paper contends that investigating the experiences of teachers is critical in determining what actually happens when ideas and practices aimed at reforming curricula and teaching practices are introduced into the real world of educational settings. Building on recent studies (e.g. Canning, 2003; Goodson, 2010; Taylor, 2004), we used discourse analysis to explore the influences of neo-liberal rationale, expressed through dominant discourses, in educational curricula and practices reform via two cases in Finland and Australia. The cases were chosen from our previous studies (Rafferty, 2008; Turunen, 2008). The first case describes how the pre-school reform in Finland in 2000-2002 was interpreted by kindergarten and primary school teachers. The second case studies the introduction of a reform program in Australian primary schools.

The consequences of neo-liberal changes to education are the subject of ongoing ideological debate (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2008; Olssen, 2004). In joining such debates, this paper asserts that neo-liberal policy initiatives are much more than the articulation of a set of ideological beliefs. The initiatives drive the development of dominant discourses that shape institutional practices; for better and for worse. As researchers we are aware that we are part of the ideological landscape (Edwards, 1997). In this landscape we position ourselves as debaters and aim to add research-based evidence to discussions about neo-liberal influences in educational settings. By doing this we want to interrogate the dominant discourses and stimulate critical discussions (Juhila, 2002).

## 2. Discourse analysis

Gee (2008, p. 115) defines discourses as “stretches of language which “hang together” so as to make sense to some community of people”. Defined this way discourses are understood as social meaning making practices which, according to Wetherell (2001, p. 16), build “objects, worlds, minds and social relations “. In this paper we define discourses as social constructions in the school context and suggest that discourse analysis provides insights beyond the institutional context in which the language is constructed. We explore the patchwork of thoughts and words of teachers as they work within a neo-liberal dominated educational landscape.

Humes (2000) contends that attempts to explain the ideological context within which discourses are developed and come to dominance are an essential part of discourse analysis. The ideological context controls the construction of discourses that presents preferential accounts of what happens in organizations. Discourses privilege particular ways of thinking and make it possible to speak and understand some issues, and at the same time, exclude other perspectives (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1992). That means that “certain narratives become dominant and serve as the received wisdom of educational institutions and systems” (Humes, 2000). Power and knowledge are intertwined in this process (Foucault, 1991, 2008). Discourses produce certain types of knowledge which for its part strengthens the dominant discourses. As Foucault (1980, p. 131) says “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.” Discourse analysis can help to expose the political character of official accounts of policy and challenge the ostensibly ‘neutral’ stance adopted by bureaucrats (Humes, 2000, p. 49). Questions about the origins of dominant discourses, the ways in which discourses have been promoted, the ideological climate which has enabled a particular discourse to gain currency, and the groups that benefit from it are paramount in developing perspectives on what is happening to particular individuals within particular institutions at particular times. As our two cases will demonstrate, dominant discourses are legitimatised as self-evident, natural and unquestionable truths and can become so strong that they marginalize other possible discourses (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Foucault, 1969).

Dominant discourses can be regarded as salvation stories. According to Popkewitz (2008; 2000) and Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000), salvation stories are interpretation of systems of rationality and configurations of beliefs. They inform the cultural practices that are used to produce order and make plausible the engagement of particular behaviors and ways of thinking. They are narratives of the core beliefs and aspirations of specific

ideologies and represent different and competing pathways to “redemption” from a flawed condition. They also present a remedy to protect those who “believe” from lapsing back to their former flawed condition, and provide a basis to critique alternative salvation stories. The notion of a salvation story as a system of rationally based beliefs that inform practice and make plausible the engagement of particular behaviors and ways of thinking, provides a powerful tool for analysing how conflict and disagreement are dealt with within dominant discourses.

### **3. Case 1: Pre-school teachers’ interpretation of Finnish pre-school reform**

Case 1 discusses six primary school teachers and five kindergarten teachers interpretations of pre-school reform introduced in Finland in 2000-2002\*. An important part of the reform was the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000* (Finnish National Board of Education, 2000). It was the first mandatory curriculum for Finnish early years education, and the document was to be followed in all pre-school education. Early years curricula are an international phenomenon and they have changed the focus and practices in early years education (Wood, 2004). They tend to narrow early years education to academic achievement (Stephenson & Parsons, 2006; Turunen & Määttä, 2012), and thus strengthen the neo-liberal practices of effectiveness and accountability.

In my previous study, I (in press) identified two discourses in the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000*: Future Discourse and Individuality Discourse. In Case 1 I investigate teachers’ interpretations on these discourses and their effects on pre-school education. The data were gathered four years after the reform in 2005. Two focus group interviews were carried out with teachers who had worked in pre-school during the reform years. The interviews were conducted separately with the kindergarten teachers and the primary school teachers. In both groups the teachers knew each other beforehand. Following the focus group interview framework the interviews were task-orientated but informal (Puchta & Potter, 2004). During the interviews the teachers interpreted the reform in the present, “here and now”. They used their knowledge, experiences and cultural interpretations to make sense of what had happened (Juhila & Suoninen, 2002). The interpretations constructed during the interview were coherent ways of talking about the reform; they were the ‘building blocks’ of the conversations (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The data were analysed by following the discourse action model and the teachers’ descriptions and attributions of the reform and their use of discursive devices like consensus

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\* The Finnish education system is composed of nine years of basic education, preceded by one year of voluntary pre-primary education, which is referred as pre-school. Children begin basic education in the year of their seventh birthday. In 2007, 99 percent of six-year-olds participated in pre-school education (Eurydice, 2009).

and corroboration were investigated (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Horton-Salway, 2001). Attention was also paid to agency and personal accountability described by the teachers.

### ***3.1 Future Discourse***

Future Discourse in the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000* emphasised the preparatory function of pre-school education. Children were regarded as incomplete and on their path towards maturation, and pre-school was considered useful in that maturation process (Qvortrup, 1994; Turunen & Määttä, 2012). Children needed to be prepared for the future and a teacher was responsible for the preparation.

Both primary school teachers and kindergarten teachers described changes in pre-school education after the reform. Parents and community members had expected more academic oriented and school-like pre-school education with desks, school books, and even homework. The dominance of Future Discourse was seen in teachers' talk about children's readiness to school. In the following extract the primary school teachers describe the transformed expectations:

Pirkko: But I had a feeling [before the reform] that maybe the children are too early in school-like teaching if we start to cover the alphabets and numbers. But now [after the reform] nobody questions that kind of approach

Marjo: Now, more like, it is expected to learn them in pre-school

Pirkko: And the parents expect it too

(Primary school teachers)

In this extract Pirkko describes a dilemma between her previous stake and interest and how the reform had liberated her. After the reform, the school-like teaching was accepted and there were no reason to defend it. This interpretation was accepted among the primary school teachers and consensus was used to confirm it. The primary school teachers interpreted the reform as a justification for their approach to pre-school education. It set a new framework in which the aims and contents of pre-school education were mostly determined by the school. Pre-school was good because it made children ready to school. The primary school teachers estimated the value of pre-school education by talking about how well it prepared children to school, as demonstrated by the following dialogue:

Pirkko: Yes, pre-school is useful. Then you can start straight in the beginning of year one, they [children] just wait to start their school work. It is so play-like at pre-school anyway.

Eeva: Do you remember Leena if there have been children who have started school without pre-school?

Leena: One, I remember one [explains detailed why that happened]. He was very laborious; he had the skills but did not know how to use them. The teacher had to show and teach everything individually to him, he couldn't...he could read. The other kids acted independently and were a group, they followed the instructions what to take with them and what to do. But this one who could read, the teacher had to advise him all the time individually.

(Primary school teachers)

In this extract pre-school education is corroborated with an example of one child, who in Leena's twenty-plus year career in pre-school education in that locality, had started primary school without pre-school and did not adjust to school. This is an interesting narrative to use to strengthen Future Discourse because it is quite obvious that over the years there had been more than one child who had not attended to pre-school.

The kindergarten teachers also described how after the reform pre-school was expected to be like primary school. Parents expected school-like things in practices and environment, and asked for example about backpacks. In their accounts, kindergarten teachers attributed increased planning and target-orientation in pre-school education. They also described the image of pre-school created in the media during the reform:

Jukka: And there was the big thing why the discussion of pre-school became so school-oriented. The media marketed pre-school with pictures of children with backpacks and sitting on the desks. I think that the marketing was misleading

(other teachers agree)

Heli: Because at that stage, when we started [pre-school education] we pondered and looked for our own policy. We asked what is changing and should there be any changes and what are we going to do. And then there were that pressure from the media and all the wonder what is this all about.

(Kindergarten teachers)

During the reform years, the kindergarten teachers' understanding of their own agency was unclear as can be seen in Heli's account in the previous extract. Unlike the primary school teachers, the kindergarten teachers resisted and questioned Future Discourse. The resistance was evident when the teachers talked about the local pre-school curriculum and school books. Just after the reform school books were used more like they are in early primary education but later they role had changed:

Jukka: The critical view about these school books has increased. Now you look at page seven and think that this is so easy and simple that we will not do it with children. Earlier you might have looked at the book and the thing there and just do it. So now one might ask more questions about things we are doing with the kids.

(Kindergarten teachers)

During the interview the dominance of Future Discourse and resistance created tension between the kindergarten teachers:

Kari (To Liisa): Do you use school books?

Liisa (To Kari ): Yes we do. We have that [the name of the book], which is from my opinion ...

[Kari and Liisa talk about the book.]

Jukka: But there are also some issues.

Liisa: Yes, yes

Kari: In that material if I may. I don't know how much the targets... If you go through the material then how much you have covered the year one curriculum?

Liisa: Yes, and why I think the material is very important, first to say the stories in it...

Kari: (simultaneously with Liisa) They are the best thing in it.

Liisa: They are good, they include moral and friendship and caring each other. In that book there are many things from primary school curriculum but if you put a child to a school readiness test, there he/she is expected to know the alphabets and phones at the beginning of the word. And that is the same that we teach when using the material and I have noticed that it has increased children's linguistic awareness.

Jukka: Yes, the importance of language has also increased in pre-school curriculum.

Liisa: (simultaneously) Yes, is it bad? Is it bad?

(Kindergarten teachers)

In this extract Kari questioned Liisa's personal accountability. The extract can be understood as a confrontation between early childhood education traditions and Future Discourse. Liisa corroborated her practices with the expectations of school readiness, and by doing so, she defended the dominant discourse.

In the kindergarten teachers' description the resistance to Future Discourse had strengthened and in some ways, pre-school education in day-care centres had returned to previous early years traditions. However, at the same time they described significant changes in pre-school education; many kindergarten teachers used school books and had six-year-old children in their own groups. The focus of pre-school education was more on teaching and school subjects, not so much on child-centred pedagogy. All these things came from the school tradition and had previously been unfamiliar in early years education in Finland.

### **3.2 Individuality Discourse**

Individuality Discourse was the other discourse evident in the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland 2000* (Turunen, 2008). Embedded in the document was the notion that pre-school education should be planned and implemented on the basis of a child's individual needs and development, and a child was to be an involved and active participant in his/her pre-school education. Individuality and planning based on a child's strengths and needs are important in Finnish early childhood education (*The Act on the status and rights of social welfare clients 812/2000*; The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health, 2004; Turunen, 2012). Thus, Individuality Discourse was based on early childhood education traditions. It can be understood as a counter-discourse to Future Discourse.

Children's individuality was discussed during the interviews, but the two groups interpreted it differently. The primary school teachers did not talk about individuality as an important factor when implementing activities in pre-school. Rather, the attributes related to individuality came from Future Discourse. Individuality was an issue for children with special needs, and talk about this theme took up nearly twenty per cent of the interview. The primary school teachers considered children's special needs as issues that should be "fixed up" before the primary school.

Leena: Yes I have a feeling that this year I have had to explain [to parents] that these tests they are not a mischief but they will help the work with the child next year when you'll know where the problem is. You

can then skip the areas where the child is already doing well and really blast and stimulate the problematic area. The special education teachers and primary school teachers can really concentrate on those things and the other areas can be ignored. And it helps a lot with the work with the child. But then the parents ask if the tests are really needed if their child will repeat the pre-school year.

Eeva: Exactly the same, the teacher can justify the advantage to the child and teacher that you can push the right button when you know how the child is acting.

(Primary school teachers)

The kindergarten teachers' interpretation of Individuality Discourse was different. They talked about individual plans for every child, and the importance of parents and their involvement in planning and assessment processes. These teachers' interpretations resonated with early years education traditions. Children's individual needs were important starting points, and since the reform the importance of individual pre-school education had increased, as shown in the following extract:

Marja: I think that now there is much more discussion about individuality than in the beginning [of the reform]. It is taken into account. In the autumn when you start with a new pre-school group and before you start with any plan you first get to know your group. The groups are different every year and you can't have the same kind of pre-school from year to year. So, taken individuality more into account has increased, I think.

[The discussion continues about the planning time teachers are allocated to]

Jukka: The individual plan is different for every child. It is not only assessment, but the child participates in it as well, and the family. I think that families' engagement has increased. These are all positive influences.

(Kindergarten teachers)

### ***3.3 Conclusions from Case 1***

The teachers' interpretations of Future Discourse, with the emphasis on effectiveness and usefulness of pre-school education, resonated with the neo-liberal rationale. Pre-school was conceptualised as a school-like place where children were prepared for school. The focus was on a child who should be prepared, and other aspects of readiness such as schools' readiness for children and promoting the parents role in education (Dockett & Perry, 2009) were

ignored. For the primary school teachers, Future Discourse worked as a salvation story and was used to legitimize school-like pre-school education. It was so strong that it was also used when talking about individuality. The kindergarten teachers had not fully accepted Future Discourse although it was used to explain the new practices in pre-school education. They questioned and resisted it, which evoked tension in the interview and also discussion about the purpose of pre-school education.

In their evaluation of pre-school education in Finland, Turunen and Määttä (2012) noticed that Future Discourse has become dominant in Finnish pre-school education. This follows international trends where early years education is considered as an important financial investment for the future (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development, 2006). The dominance of Future Discourse has narrowed the pre-school education to academic achievements especially in literacy and numeracy, and coaching for the school. According to Stephenson and Parson (2006) the same phenomenon is also evident in the UK.

#### **4. Case 2: Primary school teachers' response to neo-liberal reform. A study of Children's Literacy Success Strategy**

Case 2 concerns the findings of a recent study (Rafferty, 2008) that examined primary schools involved with the *Children's Literacy Success Strategy* (CLaSS) in the Victorian Catholic Education system<sup>†</sup> in Australia. CLaSS (Hill & Crevola, 2005) is reform program symptomatic of the response of schools and school systems to the pressures produced by neo-liberal inspired education policies. Despite having different names and agendas programs used to respond to neoliberal pressure usually have similar components, such as: a prescription of best practices, specific training of personnel, and measurable outcomes such as student achievement. The CLaSS program was used as an example of a neo-liberal reform program used. In order to participate in CLaSS schools must comply with the nine design principles and formally agree to follow thirteen non-negotiable requirements (Hill & Crevola, 2005). The data were generated in interviews with eight teachers working in four schools that identified themselves as "CLaSS" schools. The study gave the teachers a chance to tell their stories about the effects of the introduction of a neo-liberal inspired reform program. These stories were told from the perspective of the participants' understandings

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<sup>†</sup> In the Australian state of Victoria, both Catholic and State Primary Schools have been governed by educational authorities driven by neo-liberal philosophies. Schools have been actively encouraged to move away from centralised models of operating and at the same time are forced to be increasingly accountable to governing authorities in regard to funding allocations and student outcomes.

and lived experiences. The analysis demonstrated that three distinct discourses permeated the interviews: Public Discourse, Personal Discourse and Practical Discourse.

#### ***4.1 Public Discourse - we believe***

Public Discourse demonstrated that teachers accepted the definitions and limitations that CLaSS placed on practices and structures. For the most part, the teachers were satisfied to interpret the major and minor educational dilemmas that they and their students experienced through the dominant Public Discourse. It demonstrated that the teachers responded to the professional directions and ideology of the program and willingly complied with the beliefs and understandings of it. They attended the weekly meetings, engaged the prescribed teaching strategies and practices, used the correct technical language, and generally supported CLaSS. The teachers' continual demonstrations of allegiance to the imperatives of the program reflected the fundamental characteristics of their new professional identity. Through Public Discourse the teachers illustrated how they accepted and faithfully interpreted those specific patterns of behavior expressed as "non-negotiable". CLaSS was accepted as the only logical way for the school to reform and improve. All "good" teachers will, according to advocates of CLaSS, readily recognize and accept this:

I feel much more confident about what I am doing and how I am doing it. It has been really good at bringing out the best in me. CLaSS has given me a lot of direction with the teaching and I really feel good that I know what I'm doing. (Teacher B)

You can have your room running really well without thinking about it too much. CLaSS has a good structure. Yes. I don't think I would go the other way now having been in the junior school and used CLaSS. (Teacher D)

Public Discourse described the visible activities of the teachers as they engaged in the common actions and agreed upon behaviors. It was consistent with the conditions of engagement identified in the CLaSS documentation. When applying the analytical questions used with the teachers, data lines of tension became evident and alternative narratives outside of Public Discourse started to emerge. These practical and professional concerns formed a distinct

discourse. The teachers discussed conflicts between the CLaSS and their own beliefs about teaching and literacy. These were issues that were outside and beyond the thinking, speaking and acting that were sanctioned.

#### ***4.2 Personal Discourse –we have limited agency***

The teachers' Personal Discourse revealed some of the tensions that occurred through the interplay between the teachers' own system of rationality and Public Discourse of CLaSS. The teachers talked in varying tones of quiet dissent, and pointed to specific aspects of the program rationality which they considered to be problematic or even flawed. Personal Discourse illustrated how the power relations within the school were interpreted and enacted. The teachers had limited agency in expressing ideas and opinions other than those sanctioned by CLaSS. For example, the teachers knew that challenging any aspect of the program involved directly and simultaneously challenging the principal, the CLaSS coordinator and their peers. In effect the teachers knew that to be openly critical was to stand alone against the school community. They demonstrated their understanding of the implications of having one "shared belief". To challenge the beliefs and understandings of CLaSS was to position oneself beyond or below the accepted boundaries of the new professional identity. Discussions held between principals and questioning teachers were not discussions among equals. The hierarchical, vertical relations of the program had redefined collegial relationships. The principals were the expert managers and the authority of the teacher to make professional contributions to broader educational issues had been diminished.

In the following extracts, responses that gave insights into the personal pedagogy of the teachers will be explored. We start to hear about the things that should and should not be said and what can be discussed within the school, but not too loudly. Insights into the tensions involved with using the new framework and making decisions started to emerge. Personal Discourse demonstrated how the personal practices and structures intersected with CLaSS. These intersections revealed new forms of interactions, new values and a new identity. Some of Personal Discourse seemingly supported the program. However tensions between individual decision making and the CLaSS framework started to emerge. Personal Discourse identified varying levels of resistance, slight modifications to agreed practices, overt and covert criticism of the program and even evidence of wavering support:

I joined the staff last year and I picked up very quickly that the school's commitment to the CLaSS program is beyond question. I was told very strongly the reasons why the school had adopted CLaSS and that the

results the school has attained over the last couple of years in regard to literacy development are beyond questioning. I don't think anyone would openly not support it. (Teacher D)

I'd say that I'm just not following that exact CLaSS recipe, which says 'Do two focus groups' I am only doing one...I've got to adapt it. (Teacher C)

These were not conversations that would be sanctioned in a staff meeting. Sometimes, teachers kept these reservations to themselves. Other teachers discussed them with colleagues outside the school. They could not be shared as part of the school's Public Discourse. On the other hand, they did not equate to outright rejection of the CLaSS, but they had moved well beyond the complaints about tiredness and exhaustion and difficulties of adjustments that characterized the earlier components of Personal Discourse.

#### ***4.3 Practical Discourse - we take action***

Practical Discourse demonstrated that the teachers' personal beliefs and values about literacy and teaching were strong enough to enable them to resist and even defy the rationality, practices and structures prescribed by CLaSS. The conflict and collisions the teachers experienced as they navigated between two competing systems provided evidence of how the teachers were willing to take action based on their own system of rationality, beliefs and understandings identified in the teachers' Personal Discourse. The teachers' preparedness to allow their own system of rationality to direct their discussions and actions was evident. Their professional needs and questions were not always satisfied by the response given by the program.

Despite the teacher's best attempts to navigate through and around the dominant Public Discourse, ideological collisions did occur. Personal Discourse revealed the highly personalized adjustments made by the teachers as they struggled to reconcile their own professional beliefs and understandings with those of CLaSS. These adjustments were minor enough to go unnoticed or were sufficiently disguised to maintain an appearance of conformity and compliance. In making such adjustments it can be argued that the teachers were resisting or even rejecting some of the fundamental characteristics of the new professional identity. More importantly, such adjustments and associated patterns indicated that the teachers had a strong sense of professional identity

characterized by their own personal beliefs and understandings, and teaching and life experiences that they were not willing to compromise.

Beyond the various reservations expressed about CLaSS through Personal Discourse, the following comments indicated preparedness to depart from strict adherence to CLaSS, and to act on their professional convictions. These departures formed a part of Practical Discourse where the teachers moved beyond feelings and institute changes that were not sanctioned by the program. These changes were usually covert:

I found it particularly difficult last year, I did try my best. However, midway through the year I looked at where the children were in regard to literacy and was very concerned. I therefore abandoned the CLaSS model and returned to doing things in similar way to how I had done before. I really feel that one of my strengths as a teacher has been my ability to teach reading. I have been teaching children to read for a long time. (Teacher D)

Ah, bits of it I leave out. I change bits around and also the teachers who have come in later, they've sort of been in Early Years and I think that we probably need a bit of that. It's mainly CLaSS. (Teacher A)

The teachers had a professional capacity to make covert decisions about their work and how they wanted their work to be valued. There was no flexibility with the neoliberal agenda. CLaSS brought with it a system that allowed teachers to value what they did only in terms of accountability as prescribed by CLaSS. Therefore, only if teachers reached the predetermined outputs by following the predetermined path could they consider themselves, and be considered by others, to be successful. CLaSS insists that only through total compliance to it can a schools hope to make *lasting* changes to literacy levels (P. Hill & Crévola, 2001). Teachers accept a significant professional risk when manipulating any aspect of CLaSS. Regardless of how successful teachers may claim any local interpretations or manipulation of CLaSS to be, advocates of CLaSS maintain that such actions significantly comprise the school's ability to make *lasting* improvements and should not be tolerated. The full study from which case 2 is drawn also examines data from the Principals of the focus schools (Rafferty, 2008). The data from the Principals is exclusively with the Public Discourse. CLaSS insists that Principals choose and maintain their CLaSS team carefully and monitor them constantly (P. Hill & Crévola, 2001). In turn, Principals readily counsel and/or

reassign teachers to other classrooms if they are found to deviate from the thirteen non-negotiable components and nine design principles (P. Hill & Crévola, 2001; Rafferty, 2008).

#### ***4.4 Conclusion from Case 2***

Public Discourse presented the rational perspective of the neo-liberal philosophy with its own intrinsic logic. Personal Discourse showed how the teachers' practices and structures and their classroom management intersected with CLaSS practice, and created space for them to express and sometimes to qualify their commitment to the school's multi-age philosophy. Practical Discourse highlighted those changes made by the teachers to reconcile their beliefs and understandings of teaching and learning with those beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning prescribed by the dominant discourse of CLaSS. Through analysis of the three levels of discourse, a continuum of the teachers' values and beliefs about teaching and learning emerged. They could then be viewed and contrasted with prescribed values about teaching and learning that the school publicized.

The three discourses demonstrated that the teachers worked out of two systems of rationality. One was prescribed by CLaSS and was evident in Public Discourse. The other system was derived from an eclectic mix of the teachers' own beliefs and experiences and was evident in Personal and Practical Discourses. Personal and Practical Discourses provided insights into the dualism and tensions that the teachers experienced on a daily basis. CLaSS deliberately set out to define and dominate the professional identity of the teachers; to varying degrees the teachers in this study resisted and even rejected characteristics of the new identity. This resistance and rejection was indicative of the teachers' capacity to operate from a system of rationality other than that engineered by CLaSS.

### **5. Discussion**

As demonstrated by Future Discourse in Case 1 and Public Discourse in Case 2, the dominant discourses shape day-to-day practices beyond intention of the policy in schools. It is important to note that discourses are not something that is "done" to staff. Teachers contribute to the development and maintenance of dominant discourses. According to Gee (2005, p. 61), discourses present themselves as "theories (storylines, images, explanatory frameworks) that people hold, often unconsciously, and use to make sense of the world and their experiences of it". As the cases demonstrated, within neo-liberal reform the place of schools and teachers is straightforward. The fundamental characteristics of schooling as a social, moral and political enterprise have been decided and debate, reflection and

questioning are not needed. Within the counter-discourses the tensions and discontents the teachers experience as they go about their daily business are evident. However, they have limited agency and occupy the discursive spaces left by the dominant discourses. While the counter-discourses provide a place for important questions about the purpose of education, the nature of teaching and learning to be shared, they are often marginalized.

The dominant discourses that provide order and effect, constantly develop as educational systems respond to the ideological, economic, political, professional and institutional forces that shape them (Humes, 2000). Any discussion of institutional change takes place within a context of competing narratives about education. As demonstrated by Future Discourse in Case 1 and Public Discourse in Case 2 teachers are provided with knowledge designed to enable them to understand and comply with what is expected of them. This knowledge is predetermined by the experts external to the school; it is not contestable. Popkewitz (1998) argues that, "With knowledge fixed, the soul is the site of the struggle for norms of achievement, competence and salvation" (p. 28). As soon as a reform or a program has won the argument and debate about what should be done and how teachers should behave, the struggle about what is to be believed is limited. Controlling teachers' beliefs and understandings and determining the system of rationality that they are expected to operate from, is central to this struggle.

The use of discourse analysis reveals how the neo-liberal rationale operates within a salvation story. Social relations, meanings, and assumptions of schooling are no longer problematic. The rules used for sense making are prescribed. Therefore the question for schools considering engaging neo-liberal reform is not about choosing curriculum or a particular program; it is about choosing systems of rationality, beliefs and understandings that define and prescribe how schools will go about the process of education.

If educational settings are to become places of agency of change, educators need to identify and interrogate the salvation stories that come within the dominant discourses. Unless they can do this, they are imprisoning themselves within a rationality that does not necessarily represent them. They will have lost the capacity for critical self-examination and are placing themselves in the position of waiting for the next reform to be presented. The expectation for schools and teachers to respond to educational issues through measurement, accountability and performativity is likely to continue. Within the neo-liberal dominated landscape, time for teachers to think and talk about their practices and the purpose of education with professional autonomy is regarded as an intolerable and unproductive extravagance that schools can no longer afford. In order for authentic reform to occur, it is essential that schools retain an awareness of the all outcomes associated with dominant discourses. A particular rationality

may capture some of the truth, but is unlikely to capture all of it. The counter-discourses do have value and should not be marginalized. Discourse analysis opens up the rationalities of dominant discourses and allows the previously unseen perspectives to be considered in the change process. These cases demonstrate that the interrogation of the dominant discourse opens up space for practical action to ameliorate its effects and even subvert it.

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