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Language and reforming schools: A case for a critical approach to language in educational leadership

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This article examines the potential of a critical approach to language as a new dimension of transforming school cultures and making them more coherent with purported equity and social justice goals. The literature review shows that the latest waves of school reform in the USA have done little to change patterns of student achievement based on 'race' and class because they have only tinkered with changing the cultures of schools. We suggest that one reason that school reforms have failed to achieve educational equity for all groups is that a critical approach to language has been absent from this process. This absence is due, among other reasons, to the fact that teachers and school leaders have not been formally educated on the subject of language and discourse as a medium for change. Our analysis of the literature leads us to suggest that a critical approach to language could offer a way for schools (or any human organization) to concretely analyse implicit beliefs and values and, thus, unpack institutionalized epistemologies of race, social class, and gender that might, in the last analysis, be hindering efforts to transform schools into equitable institutions.

Introduction

> In the staff lunchroom of a small elementary school in a working class neighborhood of San Francisco, California, one of the authors, some teachers and Ray[1], a paraprofessional, are chatting about an upcoming IEP (an individual educational plan) meeting to discuss a particular child who has been labeled as emotionally disturbed (ED). Ray listens with interest. After a while, he interjects and asks, 'What do you have to do to get that one'? Someone gives a short response that explains the way children are identified as emotionally disturbed, and the moment passes.[2]

Ray was not familiar with current scholarship that takes a critical approach to language, yet he was in fact practising this approach when he asked his question. The job of critical discourse analysis, according to Luke (1995: 20), is to 'disarticulate and critique texts as a way of disrupting common sense'. By reframing the label *emotionally disturbed* as something that children acquire ('get that one') rather than something they innately are, and by making the label sound like a prize or something desirable ('What do you have to do to get [it]'?), Ray offers a critique, albeit subtle and short-lived, of a powerful, normalizing discourse.

This vignette of a fleeting moment in casual talk among staff is intended to introduce readers to the kind of attention to language critique which we

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argue for here. Ray did not have the institutional and/or moral authority of a principal, superintendent, or teacher leader, and perhaps for that reason his question did not lead to further discussion in the staff lunchroom. The vignette suggests that while anyone, regardless of their place in the institutional hierarchy, may take a critical approach to language, the results might be different if those in positions of power were to apply this approach to support and further equity and justice in the workplace.

Our aim in this article is to argue for the potential of a critical approach to language as a key element in transforming school cultures and making these cultures more coherent with purported equity and social justice goals. A critical approach to language cannot suffice as the only means of school transformation, but in concert with other transforming efforts, it might add the necessary link between language, cultural practices, and institutional change.

The article consists of five main sections. First, we briefly review literature on the recent school reform movement in the USA. Second, we explain why a focus on language might be a necessary part of school reform that seeks to change school culture; third, we provide definitions of key theoretical constructs; fourth, we discuss potential benefits of a critical approach to language, and in the last section, we suggest a process for implementing a critical approach to language in leadership practice and consider potential challenges.

Background on school reform in the USA

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the burgeoning of countless local, state, and federal government reform initiatives in the US educational system, triggered by the report *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980s and the flourishing of innovative ideas stemming from the social transformations of the 1960s. In this section, we first survey the overall thrust of the different reform initiatives during the period mentioned above, and then focus on the nature of the cultural approach in vogue at the end of the 1990s.

Today's school reform efforts encompass various spheres of action. These spheres include: (1) restructuring systems and organizational mechanisms; (2) creating new ways of learning and assessing; (3) changing understandings of subject matter; and (4) critically interrogating school cultures.

Reforming schools through most of the 1980s meant, among other things, a push for change in the systems governing schools. Strategies such as reorganizing the decision-making process, changing scheduling patterns, creating new assessments, implementing and using data systems, and generating common planning time for teachers characterized the dominant approach of that era (Little and Dorph 1998, Peterson, McCarthey and Elmore 1996). Later, full access to knowledge and skills to benefit all students regardless of socioeconomic background, race, or gender appeared as the central goal.

Yet the focus on structures and access did not yield the results expected, particularly in terms of the academic performance of students from low socio-economic background and students of colour. Analysts of this decade

of reform efforts have argued that the structural emphasis of these efforts only tinkered with change, and that reformers failed to recognize that human organizations change only if and when the actual beliefs and behaviours of individuals and groups sustaining the status quo are challenged and transformed (Berman 1995, Fullan 1993, Barth 1990). Moreover, the notion of access assumes that children come to school equipped with the same or similar skills, background knowledge, habits, and family predispositions for them to succeed equally. This level-playing-field assumption ignores the fact that we live in a hierarchically organized society where the 'field' is far from level. As reformers began to recognize and address these shortcomings, the reform movement expanded in the 1990s to include culture and an emphasis solely on equity rather than on access as the guiding principle (Henig, Hula, Orr and Pedescleaux 1999, Darling-Hammond 1997).

Within this new emphasis, school reform began to be seen as cultural change in at least two key interrelated aspects: challenges to traditional content and delivery of subject matter; and transformation of the ways people work. Both of these arenas for change implicated changes in cultural values and practices.

While critical analysis of subject matter in terms of its representation of people of colour has been part of the history of mass education in this country (Banks 1989, Glazer 1997, Tyack 1974), it was during the 1990s that the reinterpretation of their histories and modes of learning became a prominent feature of pedagogical debates. Multicultural educators vigorously promoted an activist, political, and anti-racist education as part of new content across subject matter, particularly in the social sciences, and as a 'zero tolerance' policy to counter institutional racist practices.

Culturally de-centred approaches to teaching and learning, language development, and holistic assessment approaches defined a new and different type of schooling (Tatum 1992, Delpit 1995, Ladson-Billings 1994, Nieto 1999, Simon 2001). Indeed, an emphasis on cooperation and teamwork, heterogeneous grouping, inclusion of other than European people's narratives, and extensive use of computer technology began to appear in school districts across the country. Fresh knowledge gained from neuroscience and new cognitive and developmental psychology theories revolutionized traditional learning conceptions (Gardner 1993, Levine 1990, Lave and Chaiklin 1993). Hands-on approaches to measuring what students know and can do (e.g. project-based learning, portfolios, exhibitions) echoed the new knowledge educators gained.

Cultural change was also conceived as changing the ways people work and relate to one another (Deal and Peterson 1993). Reform-minded educators in the 1990s readily embraced popular notions such as 'learning communities'. Changing schools into learning communities meant that learning was to be embedded in daily teaching, and that instructional decisions would be made on the basis of this on-site knowledge production. It also meant that, in order to create learning communities for students, teachers themselves had to become a community that fostered support for one another in their quest for learning to be a better teacher (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson and Hann, 2002, Goodlad 1990), better parent advocate or whatever. And since learning has a concrete location, and is socially constructed,

teachers needed to connect across local and state boundaries through professional networks (Henderson and Hawthorne 2000).

This proposition represented a dramatic leap for a culture that had relied heavily on external expertise for its own growth and that operated within a rigid vertical decision-making structure. To initiate learning communities in schools, educators had to redesign the industrial model inherited from late nineteenth century mass education, toward more personalized environments, and shift the emphasis from efficiency to a more cooperative and human scale conception of learning. New demands and expectations on the teaching and administrative labour force were created, regardless of and contrary to new restrictive legislation at national (e.g. No Child Left Behind) and state levels (e.g. in California the implementation of a high-stakes standardized high school exit testing system).

Teachers could no longer limit themselves to closed-door traditional teaching, and administrators no longer were expected to simply manage schools (Evans 1996, Little 1990, Kretovics and Nussel 1994). They had to re-conceptualize their roles and functions and acquire new and appropriate skills, habits, attitudes, and knowledge (Darling-Hammond 1997, Sizer 1992, Newmann and Wehlage 1995). With this emphasis on transforming the ways people work in schools, an administrator, for instance, was supposed to become a transformative, moral agent and a manager whose central concern revolved around teaching and learning, and less on paperwork (Fullan 2000, Murphy 2000, Kouzes and Posner 2002, Lambert 1998, Sparks 2002).

The implementation of these changes went hand-in-hand with the creation of support systems, including professional development, for those changes to be sustainable (McLaughlin 1993, Darling-Hammond 1998). Indeed, the transformation of a school into a learning community hinged upon the institutional capacity to transform classroom experience into an on-going collaborative learning endeavour (Henderson and Hawthorne, 2000). Teachers became essential participants not only because they were expected to function simultaneously as executors as well as creators of innovation, but also because, in the final analysis, they are the most stable purveyors of a school's ethos, usually far outlasting principals in terms of their tenure at a particular school. It follows that teaching in the early part of the twenty-first century could no longer be pursued as a private, individualized endeavour, but rather as an open activity, a thinking responsibility that extends beyond the classroom to the school as a whole, including the parental and larger communities. In this 'systems' view of education, change in one part of the system changes other parts, so that the system as a whole is coherent (Senge 1990, Schmoker 1996).

A rationale for a focus on language in educational leadership

As we suggest above, school reformers of the 1990s engaged the notion of school culture mostly in terms of challenging the differential representation of different cultural groups, especially racialized groups in the curriculum,

and changing the ways people work at school. While schools have improved considerably in many respects (MacMullen 1996, Lee and Loeb 2000), the fact that the patterns of achievement signified by the most important indicators of student academic achievement have not changed means that something beyond the current dominant paradigms of school reform is needed. Disaggregated data by race, socioeconomic status, and gender still point to outcomes that are too predictable. Females continue to drop out of mathematics and science; African Americans, Latinos, and low-income Whites and Asians are clustered in the lower quartiles of any given assessment. Data on college-bound students, dropouts, disciplinary actions, and graduation rates reflect the same predictable pattern (Berlak 2001, Flaxman 2003, Johnson 2002, Lipman 1998, Lucey 2004, Ogbu 2003, Anyon 2005).

Changing structures and addressing cultural practices related to both the content and delivery of curriculum and the ways teachers and administrators work have not produced an adequate challenge to institutionalized epistemologies of class, race, and gender. While these changes have modified power relations between teachers and principals and between school districts, the state, and the federal government, something different is called for.

Conceiving, developing, and implementing educational reforms are all phases of a social process materialized and negotiated through language. What individuals and groups talk about and the ways they talk constitute the most fundamental human activity (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982, Goffman 1974, Quinn and Holland 1987). People express their mental models in words, and in the case of social organizations such as schools, language influences all actions. Educators' beliefs and values are encoded in their daily communication (Ellis 2000, Kegan and Lahey 2001).

Habermas (1990) proposed a theory of communicative action based on a process of reasoned argument, featuring 'moral agents trying to put themselves in each others' shoes' (p. viii). In Habermas' idealized model of communication, speakers attempt to convince each other through a 'competition with arguments… Here convictions change internally via a process of rationally motivated attitude change' (p. 160). Habermas proposed a set of guidelines for discourse ethics, including the idea that anyone should be permitted to speak and take part in a discourse, and that anyone should be allowed to question any assertion. The ultimate goal is to seek universally valid claims.

This model of communicative action, while it offers some insights for educational leaders interested in social change, can be critiqued in two ways. First, it presupposes that speakers are all equally positioned to offer mutual criticism. Yet this is not the case in most social organizations, where power differences are inscribed in almost every aspect of the organizational culture. Even if a facilitator or teacher establishes clear ground rules for communication that is equal for all participants, no facilitator, no matter how skilled, can erase the structural and historical baggage people bring with them when they sit down to talk together:

> When educators ask students to bracket these differences as if we were all the same, a privileged center remains untroubled, questions of difference are suspended or suffocated, and the particular

costs of bracketing differences are absorbed by students of color… [T]he bracketing assumption—leave your differences at the door—reproduces privilege, oppression, and opposition in the guise of neutrality or 'color-blindness'. (Fine, 1997, p. 251)

Secondly, communicative action theory assumes that a strong argument changes people's minds. Lakoff (2004) argues that this is not the case. 'We know from cognitive science that people do not think like that. People think in frames… To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off' (p. 17). Returning to our earlier point that educators' beliefs and values are encoded in their daily communication, we suggest that an educational leader who simply reasons with people in order to reach consensus about a desired social change (using the Habermas model of communicative action) will not be as effective as a leader who also uses a critical approach to language in order to frame issues in a way that activates deeply held values and worldviews.

The centrality of teachers and school administrators in setting the tone of a school's culture stems, among other sources, from their function as power brokers. Yet even as they wield the powerful tool of language, teachers and administrators are not generally prepared to analyse language in ways that would help them advance the reform of schools for greater equity. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that university programmes and on-site professional development do not prepare teachers and administrators with the understandings and skills necessary to decipher the social and cultural ramifications of language use.

Ironically, educational leadership programmes are a primary institutionalized means whereby the discourse of educational leadership is codified and passed onto future school leaders (Jäger, 2001). However, this transmission takes place largely through routine processes, resulting in the institutionalization of educational discourse as common sense. As Waite (1995) points out, there is surprising lack of attention to communication in recent efforts to reform schools. What little attention there is appears in the form of mental models (Senge 1990) and the recognition that language has the power 'to serve our purposes or to subvert them' (Sparks 2002: 7, citing Ellis 2000).

We suggest that teachers and school leaders need a more finely-tuned approach to language than what has been offered so far. A critical approach to language can be a powerful tool for interrogating and disrupting this common sense, implicit acceptance of educational discourse as 'normal'; it can thereby increase the capacity of educational leaders to carry forward reforms in which they seek to transform the culture into a more equitable one.

The relationship of language and culture

Language is a fundamental part of culture. If school reform is at least partially a matter of transforming the culture of schools, then we must articulate more precisely how language enters into the process of changing school culture. Kramsch (1998) articulated three ways in which language and culture are connected. First, language expresses culture—that is, people use language to refer to common experiences, facts, ideas, and events which can be communicated to those who speak the same language and share a similar

cultural background. This is possible because they share, to a large degree, the same knowledge of the world and use a similar linguistic system to encode that knowledge. For this reason, the things and activities that people in a cultural group consider important usually have some direct expression in their language. The culture of schooling in the USA is replete with words for the things educators consider important—including everything from labels for different kinds of children to names for different approaches to teaching.

Second, language embodies culture. This means that language is the medium that gives substance to many cultural processes. In fact, many everyday activities cannot exist without language. For example, a casual conversation, a business-like email, a telephone call to an employer, an announcement on a school public address (PA) system—each of these are cultural activities created through the medium of language. The school PA announcement makes sense in the particular culture of schools, and without language it would not exist. In other words, the language of the PA announcement, when used in its appropriate context by the appropriate people, is the PA announcement.

Third, language symbolizes culture. Languages, dialects, and styles of speaking or writing come to stand for or represent social identities. That is why conflicts arise over the use of different languages or dialects, and why when one group prohibits another from using its native language, the speakers view it as a rejection not of their language, but of their social group and their culture. For example, while the use of African-American Vernacular English by White teenagers can be a badge of coolness among peers, it may be quickly denounced by White parents as 'ghetto talk' that makes them sound like a marginalized group.

In addition to the aforementioned relationships between language and culture, a fourth relationship can be extrapolated: Language is a medium to being about culture change. In other words, language does not simply reflect or express what is already there in terms of cultural categories. Speakers and writers also have the capacity, through language, to create new categories, new words, new relationships, new meanings, and new patterns. Under certain conditions of institutional support or grassroots advocacy, such changes in language can eventually become normalized.

Consider, for example, the development in modern English of non-sexist language, such as chairperson (or chair) instead of chairman, and the avoidance of the pronoun 'he' when either gender is intended. Feminists and supporters of less biased English have, over the years, been able to institutionalize to a large degree the reduction of gender bias that was previously encoded in the English language. These changes in language were used to create and help support changes in the social order. Thus, as Luke (1995) and others point out, discourse not only reveals or displays social relations, but also actively constructs and has the capacity to transform those same relations.

The notions of equity and social justice entered formal educational discourse in the early 1990s and occupy central stage today. Equity, for instance, was first introduced in the report *A Nation at Risk* at the beginning of the Reagan administration. It was again invoked in the Bush

administration's No Child Left Behind Act. These notions are fundamentally about how resources and services in schools are distributed to different 'social identities', as well as the roles and agency exerted by social identities within the hierarchical structures of schooling. These social identities include racialized identities such as 'African Americans', 'Whites', 'Latinos', 'Asians', and 'Native Americans' as well as 'immigrants', 'ELL (English language learning) students', 'girls', 'at risk kids', 'resource students', and many others. In schools, as much as in other parts of society, identities are constantly constructed by the language available to talk about them. The fact that terminologies change due to pressures for political correctness or due to group internal pressures to resist and transgress (for example, the use of the term *nigga* in gangsta rap, (McLaren 1997, citing Lott 1994)) suggests that people see language as a tool for social change. All of these shifts in terminology reflect a fundamental awareness that language influences social relations. Any serious effort to reform schools to be more equitable and socially just, therefore, has to consider carefully the role of language in constructing the social identities of those who make up the school community and the power relations among them.

Discourse as practice

Educational leaders, from high-level state and national policymakers to school principals and teacher leaders, are expected to shape the educational culture in positive ways (Deal and Peterson 1999). Because of their institutional authority and their particular placement in the institutional hierarchy, they often play dual roles. For example, school principals are positioned between teachers, parents, and students, on the one hand, and board members, county, state, and national policymakers on the other. Their dominant role in relation to the first group gives them the possibility of using their power and authority in responsible ways to promote policies and practices that foster equity and positive interethnic relations—or not.

On the other hand, their subordinate role in relation to the second group makes them interpreters of dicta coming from those with more institutional authority. They can slip into roles as obedient servants of higher-level administrators, or they can challenge and possibly transform the policies and practices created by those with more authority. Educational leaders, regardless of their particular place in the hierarchy of institutional authority, may act to reproduce the status quo or change it.

All educational leaders express, embody, symbolize, and construct the culture of the educational setting through language. Discourse not only mirrors their practice, it is their practice. They accomplish much of their work through discourse, both spoken and written. For example, they use discourse to negotiate reforms, develop and implement policies, address conflicts, promote a particular school vision, and in each case either to transform or to maintain the status quo. As Luke claims, 'There is no space outside of discourse' (1995: 40).

Some applied linguists who focus on discourse have begun to take an interest in the domain of educational leadership and policy-making. For

example, Goatly (2002) examined the metaphors used in the reform proposals of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and found that 'consciously adopted reformist theories of education' were 'consistently undermined by commonsense and conventionalized metaphors' (p. 266). In another recent study, Briscoe (2003) examined the newsletters of the University Council on Educational Administration (UCEA) to understand how different identities such as students, teachers, board members, and parents are positioned. The study revealed, among other findings, that ethnic or racial social attributions were seldom used, and that where they were used, they described children and students, never leaders, administrators, or teachers. Briscoe also found that 'professors, educators, and respondents were the most likely to be actively positioned, while children, family, and interns were the least likely' (p.2). She concluded that 'the discourse of UCEA re-enacts many of the power relations found in the context of schooling and society' (p. 23).

Studies like Goatly's and Briscoe's are important because they connect micro analyses of educational discourse to a larger social context. Goatly, for example, speaking of the constructivist educational reforms in Hong Kong, wrote, 'The conclusion has to be that the progressive thrust of the reform is often compromised by the metaphors chosen or available' (p. 292). By focusing on educational discourse but also examining it in its larger social and ideological context, we can better understand how educational discourse both constructs and is constructed by the social order. Such analyses lend themselves to addressing some of the big questions in education. For example, why is it so difficult to initiate and sustain reform for equity in schools, and why do schools in the USA continue to reproduce the low academic achievement of Black, Latino and low-socio economic Asians and Whites?

A critical approach to language and discourse

Discourse, in the sense we are using it here, consists of 'recurrent statements and wordings across texts' which 'together mark out identifiable systems of meaning and fields of knowledge and belief' (Luke 1995: 15, citing Foucault 1972 and Kress 1989). Educational discourse uses particular, identifiable wordings and patterns such as 'drop outs', 'achievement', and 'college prep', terms which are generally recognizable by most people in this society regardless of educational background.

However, within this general educational discourse, there are also specialized genres, such as special education discourse and anti-racist education discourse. These genres may contain jargon that, while recognizable by insiders, is less accessible to outsiders. Educational leadership too has its own discourse, with specific words and phrases that mark it. In preparation programmes for school leaders, for instance, much is made of the distinction between management and leadership, with management connoting the more technocratic aspects of running a school, and leadership connoting the more visionary aspects. For insiders, these 'buzzwords' carve out separate ideological spaces, whereas for outsiders, these words might overlap much more in their meaning.

Throughout the remainder of this article we use the term 'critical approach to language' as a way to bring together two essential constructs: critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness. We do this to provide a conceptual tool which encapsulates their meanings simultaneously. For purposes of clarity, however, we need to define the terms critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness. Critical discourse analysis 'looks to establish connections between properties of texts, features of discourse practice (text production, consumption, and distribution), and wider socio-cultural practise' (Fairclough 1995: 87). It is critical in the sense that it sets out to uncover through analysis the connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations which are generally not self-evident to 'people who produce and interpret those texts, and whose effectiveness depends on this opacity' (p. 97).

Critical language awareness, on the other hand, attempts to build the skill 'for language critique, including the capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself' (Fairclough 1995: 221). Fairclough states that the 'focus shifts from critique of existing practices to exploration and even advocacy of possible alternatives' (p. 221). Critical language awareness is, in other words, the application of critical discourse analysis as a force for change in actual domains of practice where unequal power relations are at issue.

Clearly, critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness are complementary aspects of one coherent effort to connect discourse at the micro level with its surrounding social context (macro level) and to use this analysis to argue for and implement changes in institutional practices. Simply put, critical discourse analysis may be described as the research part of this effort, and critical language awareness may be seen as the application of this research to actual domains of practice such as education, health care, the workplace, and politics. However, the line between the two may be more blurred than this simple dichotomy suggests.

The emergence of a critical approach to language as an intellectual and professional habit in education bears a striking resemblance to the way critical participatory pedagogy entered the field, both as a conceptual framework and a teaching approach. Critical participatory pedagogy traces its roots to enlightened constructivist Western philosophy (from Kant to Dewey), and it was for many years (roughly from the 1930s to the 1960s) the province of a few pedagogues (e.g. Freire, Zilphia and Myles Horton, Teixeira, among others). It became popularized among educators during the last two decades of the twentieth century by critical theorists such as Giroux, Macedo, Apple, and Hurst. Rooted in hermeneutics, critical discourse analysis has only recently come to be known in the field of education (see for instance Fairclough 1995, Luke 1995, Corson 1999), but its use is still sporadic and inconsistent, and it is definitely not an integral part of most teachers' and school leaders' preparation programmes. Most attempts to integrate it in education focus on developing critical language awareness in students (e.g. Alim 2005, Davis *et al.* 2005) rather than educational leaders.

A critical approach to language use can provide insights and tools that lead toward understanding how language is implicated in the enactment and sustenance of equity-based school reform. Our assumption here is that when school administrators and teachers incorporate a critical approach to

language into their intellectual habits and professional repertoires, they will be better positioned to make visible assumptions which normally go unexamined; to recognize how language encodes social relations; to identify and challenge prejudice in ordinary, daily discourse practices; to interrogate and redirect the nature of questions asked about schooling; and to raise questions that have not been asked. In other words, they will use language in ways that support rather than undermine equity and social justice goals.

Potential benefits of a critical approach to language in educational leadership

In this section, we offer some illustrations that show how the integration of a critical approach to language in educational leadership could make a difference—specifically, how it could support equity-based reforms.

Making assumptions visible

One area that discourse analysis can bring to light is the nature of assumptions. Our assumptions are often linguistically encoded in the form of presuppositions and entailments. Yule (1996) defined these as follows: 'A presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making the utterance. An entailment is something that logically follows from what is asserted in the utterance' (p. 25). He also notes that speakers have presuppositions, and sentences (or utterances) have entailments. Take the following example from an interview with an elementary school principal:

> 'From the second year I was here, there was a plan, however sketchy it was, to meet the needs of the children'.

In this example, there are at least two presuppositions: One is that the speaker and hearer share an understanding of what children need. This presupposition is signalled by the speaker's use of the definite article 'the' preceding 'needs'. The other presupposition is that the hearer knows which specific group of children the speaker is referring to, also signalled through the use of 'the'.

There are also several entailments in this example. First, one can logically infer that the speaker has been 'here' (at the school) for more than two years. One can also infer that the speaker thought the plan was sketchy.

While these presuppositions and entailments might seem quite obvious, that is exactly what makes them powerful in shaping the way we think. We rarely pause to consider the subtle information that is communicated when we speak or listen to others. 'The needs of the children' is a very common phrase among educators, but it bears further scrutiny. By using the definite article, the speaker lets the audience know that they already have a common understanding; they share with the speaker knowledge of what the needs are. Therefore, the speaker does not have to elaborate about those needs; they are a given.

In some cases, a construction like this might be preceded by a clear definition of those needs. Perhaps the speaker had already identified specific needs, in which case subsequent utterances would refer to them with the

definite article. However, in other cases, including this one, the speaker does not identify the needs. This excerpt occurred close to the beginning of an interview with an outside researcher, and the principal simply assumes the hearer knows what the needs are. This move has the effect of placing greater emphasis on the plan to meet the needs, rather than on considering what the needs are and whether all concerned parties agree that those are the needs. It privileges the solution (a plan) as the important new information in the sentence, and treats the needs as background, old information. Through the use of presuppositions, speakers direct listeners' attention away from the things they consider givens, and toward that which they think is new or more interesting information.

It is important to note that we all do this in our speech. There is nothing nefarious or intentionally misleading in the fact that we create many presuppositions in our discourse. In fact, without these devices, we would have a hard time communicating, because nothing could be assumed and, therefore, everything would have to be explained in a highly redundant manner.

The use of the definite article is not the only signal of presuppositions in English. There are many others. For example, in wh-questions, the information following the wh word (when, where, etc.) is usually treated as if it were given, old information. Thus in the question 'When did he leave'? we assume that he left.

Returning for a moment to the previous example about 'the needs of the children', consider how a principal might apply critical language awareness to this statement. The first step would be to recognize that she is assuming that the needs are commonly known and agreed upon. Having recognized this, the leader might then question whether there really is agreement about the nature of children's needs. She would realize that well-intentioned people coming from different backgrounds and perspectives might define the needs differently, even for the same child. One person might think a child who has been fighting in the playground needs more strict discipline; another might think the same child needs counselling; a third might think the child needs a safer home environment.

Realizing that key stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and the child herself might disagree or at least prioritize the needs differently, the leader might then decide that it is worth meeting to discuss how each defines the child's needs. Such a meeting can be illuminating because, among other things, it can help people understand each others' perspectives better. Since all of these people are critical to the success of any intervention on behalf of the child, it follows that they should develop a shared understanding of the child's needs. Moreover, the intervention will be different depending on how the needs are defined. Defining needs is like asking good questions; one cannot expect to arrive at good answers if one asks the wrong questions, and similarly one cannot 'meet the needs of our children' if the wrong 'needs' are addressed.

Recognizing how discourse encodes social relations

While we all recognize the feeling we get when someone is speaking in a way that degrades us, it is not always easy to put one's finger on what the person

actually said that made us feel that way. This is due to the fact that social relations are encoded in language in complex ways. Briscoe's (2003) analysis of the UCEA newsletter texts, showing how certain role groups such as professors and educators tend to be actively positioned while children, families, and interns tend to occur in passive constructions, is a good example of how discourse analysis can make the power dynamics of an institution more transparent.

Another example is the use of the metaphor 'voice' to mean either emotional expression or representation of certain under-represented groups. In the excerpt below, Janet Tse, a school district leader, talked about how one of the principals in the district had created the space for people to express themselves in a way that validated their concerns, ideas, and emotions. She says:

> It [voice] creates the groundwork for diversity, which gives a place for people to voice their opinions—the school is a place where *voice is encouraged to come up*… what these kids are doing or what these parents are doing is trying to *give voice to their feelings*. And then teaching them *how to give that voice in a way where people might be able to hear them, rather than just squish squashing their voice*.

Part of the principal's vision involved allowing people to express themselves emotionally because she believed that if that were not allowed, those individuals would feel disenfranchised from the school.

A middle school leader, Richard Valencia, expressed a similar idea, but focused more on representation:

> I do not think we've done enough to connect with our parents. In previous years we've done better and for the last couple of years, we just have not reached our parents as strongly as we can. …I think maybe it's because we haven't, maybe the question is we have to find some way to *give them a real voice in the place*… in decisions we make on what kids to kick out, what kids to bring in, somebody always has some investment in some kid or another, or they feel that the process wasn't appropriate… that causes the person to feel that *his voice may or may not have been heard*.

In Tse's and Valencia's instances, the use of 'voice' as a metaphor for emotion or representation is attributed to people in low status positions—for instance, students, parents, people of colour, and girls or women. It is rarely attributed to people in high status positions, like principals, superintendents, and other leaders. Furthermore, it is responsive to the power dynamics of a given situation, such that a principal might easily refer to the importance of teachers having a voice in school decision making, but students would not consider their teacher's input an instance of 'voice' because the teacher is in a more powerful position institutionally. As Hargreaves (1996) pointed out, the notion of the teacher's voice can often be romanticized and over generalized as an ideal 'other.' A similar critique could be made of the way parent and student voices have been represented in the scholarly literature.

This brief analysis of two instances of the term 'voice' is intended to show how certain words encode the social relations of a cultural group. A school leader who is aware of the power of discourse to express and also construct social relations can ask questions such as, 'Who in our school environment is described as needing to have a voice'? 'And why'? 'Are there other people who are never described as needing a voice'? What are the

social relations we are encoding when we use the term 'voice'? 'Do these social relations reflect the way our school is now'? 'Do they reflect the way we want it to be in the future'?

Another example of how language encodes social relations is the use of pronouns to include or exclude people. Wortham (2003) discussed an extended interaction in a high school classroom in which the teacher illustrated the dilemma of choosing one's alignment in a conflict by setting up one of the male students as a person who has to choose whether to tell the teacher that some boys were planning to trip him on the stairs, or to remain silent and let the teacher fall. In the beginning of the interaction, the teacher addresses this young man in the second person as 'you', but as it becomes clear that the student is hesitant to align himself with the teacher, the teacher shifts to the third person, 'he', thus placing the student outside the central players of the narrative. Pronoun shifts, according to Wortham, are important indicators of shifts in speaker perspective, particularly when they shift from an inclusionary (we or you) to an exclusionary pronoun (he, she, or they).

Reframing questions

A critical approach to language among educational leaders could potentially alter the way important questions are asked. In recent years, many reform efforts have emphasized the need for all educators to use a 'cycle of inquiry' in which they frame problems or dilemmas in the form of a question, gather data to try and answer the question, analyse the data, develop new understandings, and then either apply those new understandings to some kind of action or refine the question to obtain better information (Sagor 1998). The focus on questioning, which is embedded in the cycle of inquiry, means that school reform efforts often become encapsulated in one or several questions, and, as a result, the language used to frame questions takes on a more visible role in school reform. In the following excerpt, Maria Garcia, a high school principal, relates an experience in which she worked with a group of math teachers to support them in changing a key question:

> The [teachers] own the curriculum. That's their life; they are teachers. Curriculum is about the classroom. I can be a critical friend, I can be a provocateur, I can give them research, I can say I disagree, but I just had a huge one recently with a math team… They were holding on to a very high standard for graduation in math and they were under attack from a lot of different factions in the schools for having an unrealistically high standard, and they made a powerful argument, and we had a couple of really difficult long, staff meetings and they held their ground and they basically came down to the point that if these young people of colour are going to have access, they have got to do the math at this level. And the community has rallied around it. So the conversation can be a different one—not 'Is the standard too high?' but 'How do we support students to meet the standard?' And that might mean five years, that might mean three days a week after school, it might mean summer math camp, it might mean bringing the parents in and saying, 'What are you doing to help Johnny at home?' That the conversation changed from 'Is the standard too high?' to 'How do we meet the standard?' —You have got to love that as a principal, as a parent, as a teacher. You have got to love that change. So I take a small amount of credit for helping the math team and the student support team to have that conversation and change the nature of questioning.

Earlier in the interview, this principal had talked at length about her vision of equity. It was clear that the less preferred question ('Is the standard too

high'?) did not embody the beliefs she had expressed earlier, that expecting less of some students amounts to 'soft bigotry'. By supporting the teachers in changing the question, she was not only promoting an equity-based approach throughout the school, but also attending to the details of discourse. She was aware, in other words, that key questions driving the school's reform efforts have to express principles of equity. Rejecting a question such as 'Is the standard too high'? and changing it to 'How do we support students to meet the standard'? is an act that recognizes the power of language to shape reality. By supporting this change, the principal and teachers created greater coherence between their desired goals and the language used to talk about those goals.

The foregoing illustrations provide a glimpse of areas where a critical approach to language could be beneficial for educational leaders.

Can a critical approach to language really play a role in school change?

Throughout this article, our key assertion has been that a critical approach to language is a necessary, but not sufficient, part of the process of school change for greater equity and social justice. We have supported this assertion by examining the relationship between language and culture and by providing vignettes illustrating potential areas where critical language awareness would enhance a leader's ability to promote equity. However, there have been few studies that definitively show the impact of language on organizational environments and people. Perhaps the best work on this topic recently is Lakoff's (2004), in which he applies decades of research on metaphors and cognition to the question of why the Republican party has so deftly captured US public discourse with terms like 'tax relief', 'family values', and so on, while the Democrats have been left wondering what happened. Lakoff's research shows that language (in particular the way we frame issues) plays an enormously important role in social and organizational change:

> Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change… Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently. (p. xv)

Lakoff notes that it takes not only language change but also many other changes happening in a coordinated, systemic effort (e.g. structural changes, staffing changes) to create real social change. However, language is key and cannot be left out if we want change to take hold.

A process and some challenges

While there can be many ways to go about integrating a critical approach to language in educational leadership, we suggest one possible process here. This process assumes a site-based professional learning process, in which people

meet together periodically over several weeks or months, with guidance or facilitation by an educational leader who is interested in promoting this approach at his or her site.

1. Try to have people attend the sessions in school teams or other teams that are already functioning, and organize these sessions as part of a cycle of inquiry.
2. Contextualize a critical approach to language in ongoing work on equity issues at the site. A critical approach to language is one facet that should be part of an ongoing effort to address equity issues. It is not supposed to be the content of a 'one-shot' workshop, in which the content and issues raised are never discussed again, or are only discussed sporadically when they arise. The one-shot approach will lead to failure and frustration, as participants may feel short-changed and will not see the relevance of the issues raised in a larger context (Sparks 2002). A critical approach to language should be part of an intentionally planned, ongoing effort on the part of the school, district, or professional preparation programme. Such efforts should all focus on the vision of student learning that the school community seeks. Specific attention to language must be linked clearly to more macro issues such as access to resources, allocation of funding to different schools, teacher preparation and in-service support for teachers, curricular reform, programmes that help students achieve high standards, and so on.
3. During the introductory phase of such efforts, use one or more vignettes (such as the ones provided in the previous sections) or an awareness building activity such as the ones suggested in *Appendix A*, to engage participants' interest and stimulate further learning on the topic of language use and discourse.
4. Provide an overview of a critical approach to language, including goals, methods, and definitions. Pose an open-ended question such as, 'How might a critical approach to language help us achieve our equity goals'?
5. Ask participants to collect some written or oral data of their own at their school or district site. Make sure they understand that they must have informed consent before they tape record any individual or group.
6. At a subsequent session, facilitator and participants analyse the data together; discuss possible interpretations.
7. Facilitator and participants suggest alternatives, changes that could be made in the use of language to be more coherent with espoused equity, social justice goals.
8. Participants try some of the suggested alternatives.
9. Participants and facilitator share results of these efforts, plan for future action as they continue the cycles of inquiry.

Challenges

We see several challenges that will need to be addressed by those integrating a critical approach to language in educational leadership. One challenge is that the practice of a critical approach to language by some people in a school

or district, particularly if they happen to have powerful institutional roles, could easily devolve into a 'language police' situation. Others who feel less confident of their own critical language skills could become silent, resentful, or hostile, not wanting to subject their own language or their group's language to the critique of others. The entire enterprise could result in hyper vigilance regarding language and silencing of some, without any real change.

One way to prevent this from happening is to build ownership of the process from the very beginning. Educational leaders can create consensually agreed-upon norms and exercise them as a means to build a collaborative, supportive environment that fosters trust and respect. They must also recognize that the discourses of education are not particular to any individual, but rather endemic to the culture; thus changing the language is not about critiquing a person, but rather reforming an inequitable culture that is materialized in part through its discourse (Briscoe 2003).

Another challenge is the familiar one of 'too much on my plate'. Educational leaders and teachers are overburdened as it is with mandates from above, and their new roles as cultural change agents have increased the number and type of expectations placed on them. A critical approach to language might sound interesting, but in the final analysis it would easily give way to something more pressing, such as preparing the school for a state mandated test. Innovations in schools are often abandoned when the next urgent issue arises. If a critical approach to language is to gain any kind of footing in school leadership, it will have to become part of the way everything is done, not be simply an add-on. But the introductory phase is key, for before the approach becomes integrated in practice it has to meet with enough positive interest that people are willing to try it, wrestle with its complexities, and continue until it becomes 'the way we do things here'. Thus, this phase must be part of the scheduled professional development work through the school year.

Probably the most serious challenge to overcome will be the cultural inertia and resistance that is endemic to most schools. Wagner (2001) wrote that educators are 'risk adverse' and 'feel powerless and victimized' due to the isolation they experience (p. 283). Overcoming this sense of isolation through the formation of authentic learning communities is paramount. We doubt that a critical approach to language will make sense or be effective in a school that is not already moving toward becoming a learning community.

Conclusion

Educational leaders, especially teachers and principals, are among the most important change agents—close enough to the daily life of the school to have intimate knowledge of its implicit culture and, at the same time, carrying enough institutional authority to facilitate change. We have suggested here that school reform efforts need to include a place for deepening the language awareness capacity of leaders. Thus, the formal preparation of these individuals and groups, whether through site-embedded education or university programmes, ought to include a critical approach to language. Leaders who understand and use this approach in their practice will be better equipped to

promote equity-based reforms because they will be able to develop discourse that supports rather than undermines the enactment of equity and social justice.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article to protect the confidentiality of information shared.
2. All school-based illustrations are drawn from data collected in the Leading for Diversity project (Henze *et al*. 1999, Henze *et al*. 2002)

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Appendix A

An initial awareness building activity focused on terminology: Think of some terms that have been changed, like black → African American; chairman → chairperson or chair; remedial maths → consumer maths. What other terms can you think of that have been changed? Pick one that you find interesting, and discuss the following questions with a partner:

- Who or what group do you think promoted the change?
- What do you think they hoped to accomplish with this change?
- Who resisted the change?
- What else was going on at the same time that helped support this change?
- Do you think the shift in language was effective? Why or why not?
- When people try to purposefully change the terms we use, what assumptions are they making about the relationship between language and people's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions?
- Do you think language change can be a tool for social change in your school? Why or why not?

> *A possible writing prompt to build awareness of metaphors as mental constructs*

According to research on cognition and language (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Santa Ana 2002), metaphors are one of the primary ways through which we conceptualize the world and social relations within it. Once we accept a certain metaphor into our discourse, it sets up a frame through which we conceptualize the idea or issue in question—a frame that is likely to call our attention to certain aspects of the idea or issue and ignore other aspects. For example, schools are often referred to as families. When we think of schools as families, we can relate the principal's role to that of a father or mother, the students' role to the children, and the teachers' role perhaps to aunts and uncles. The school building itself can be related to a house or home, and the 'family' can be warm and loving, or strict and authoritarian. But the 'schools are families' metaphor also ignores certain other important aspects of schooling; for instance, this metaphor makes it difficult to think and talk about achievement outcomes. A different metaphor—'schools are businesses'—is better for that discussion because then one can talk about how all businesses need to have clients (students and parents) who must be satisfied with the product (learning, preparation for the next level, etc.) in order for the business to be profitable.

Metaphors are also used frequently to describe educational leaders. In a written reflection, choose one or more metaphor(s) for educational leaders. The metaphor(s) you choose could be used in public discourse, or you could create a new metaphor for the purpose of this reflection.

- Explain how the metaphor(s) help to clarify certain aspects of educational leadership as well as the aspects of educational leadership that the metaphor(s) obscures or fails to explain.
- How useful do you think this metaphor(s) is as a way to understand educational leaders and leadership? Why?