

Disrupting dominant discourses of private schooling

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Abstract

Educational provision in Australia has been dramatically altered in recent decades, as neoliberal choice policies favouring an increasingly marketised, tiered educational landscape have brought about a decline in public sector schooling and a concomitant burgeoning of private sector schooling. While these shifts have provoked an extensive literature concerned with potential ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the educational marketplace, proponents of the privatization of education argue that consumer demand for private schooling and the perceived moral, social, academic and financial benefits parents are eager to secure on behalf of their children justifies the current constellation of educational providers. Amid the neoliberal rhetorics of excellence and accountability that pervade discourses of private schooling, however, recent high profile incidents in private schools—ranging from sexual assault among students to schools’ neglect of their duty of care—disrupt dominant discourses of private education, and pave the way for interrogating the widespread normative view of private schooling as synonymous with ‘quality’ education. This paper considers how such ‘disruptive’ incidents function to both disrupt and perpetuate the market ideologies that underpin discourses of private education, and argues that the commercial, representational and disciplinary regimes of private schooling merit greater critical attention.

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of a three-year doctoral study (Saltmarsh, 2005) concerned with incidents of sexual violence that took place in an elite private sector boys’ school in Sydney, Australia in 2000. When news broke in September 2000 that four students from one of Sydney’s most prestigious schools were under investigation in relation to a series of sexually violent incidents that had taken place in the school’s boarding house, the story received widespread media coverage and provoked a barrage of public responses. While some—including some of the students involved in the incidents and their parents, former students and former school staff members—argued that the incidents were part of an endemic ‘culture of bullying’, representatives of the school insisted that these were isolated incidents of which the school neither had prior knowledge, nor in any way sanctioned or condoned. Under intense media scrutiny, the school engaged the professional assistance of a high profile media strategies consultant, with a background in television and current affairs, and a growing reputation as a professional ‘spin doctor’. The school adopted a strategy of responding minimally to media requests for more detailed information, arguing that they were under instruction by the joint police and Department of Community Services (DOCS) investigation team to avoid jeopardizing the investigation through public comment. The media scrutiny and public debate in the months that followed raised a number of questions about elite private

school cultures and the quality of educational experience such schools are generally seen as providing (see Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1997; Symes, 1998; Kenway & Bullen, 2001; Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004). My own line of inquiry takes up the notion of institutional complicity (see Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997) in the production of violence, and argues that many of the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin a wide range of discursive practices associated with schooling—as well as many ‘commonsense’ assumptions that pervade social practices such as media reporting, marketing and public relations—bring institutions themselves into the matrix of factors that need to be considered when looking for explanations of violent events in schools.

The study was undertaken with a view to understanding the significance of these events to broader discourses of representation, consumption, and the marketisation of education. In particular, I was interested in understanding how these incidents—which powerfully disrupt current conceptualizations of school violence and of elite education, as well as the dominant neoliberal rhetorics about the excellence and accountability that choice policies are said to deliver—might be understood when mapped onto the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. In particular, I have been concerned with mapping the discourses that precede and pervade such incidents and the ways in which social and discursive practice is altered as a consequence of disruptions to those dominant discourses. In considering these incidents and the public debate that followed as sites of analysis, I have taken inspiration from the work of French theorist Michel de Certeau, who argues that “Every individual experience functions within a system of economic structures...Experience cannot be isolated from the socio-economic whole in which it intervenes” (Certeau, 1997: 64). Thus while my discussion of these assault incidents necessarily incorporates some detail about the incidents and the school, the overall aim of the project is to consider the ways in which intersecting discourses that circulate in both educational and sociopolitical spheres are productive of violence.

It needs to be emphasized that, while I do critique in some detail certain aspects of the school in which these incidents took place, my position is one which advocates reflexivity as a necessary catalyst for change. Unlike the dominant psychosocial approaches to school violence, which locate the source of problems squarely with individuals (and by extension, families and communities), my own approach informed by the field of cultural studies suggests that by better understanding the cultural histories, disciplinary practices, social relations and organizational structures of schools themselves, we are in a better position to understand what it is about schools themselves that might contribute to the violence that occurs within them. Thus, while it is not my intention to imply, for instance, that any individual or school should be seen as deliberately or willfully *causing* violence, it is important to consider how they might be complicit in its production through discursive practices that are part of the day-to-day mundane routines and assumptions that are part of schooling. In particular, I take the view that identifying those features of schooling that are symbolically and/or materially violent provides the necessary tools for attending to aspects of schooling that are *productive* of violence. In the following sections of this paper, I want to elaborate on some of the theoretical and methodological tools that inform this view, with the aim of opening up a critical dialogue about how issues of violence might be reconceptualised.

Discourse and contradictions

The sexually violent incidents at the centre of my study raise numerous questions pertaining to the operations of power within schools, and the ways in which institutional and social discourses can be both produced and powerfully disrupted by such events. Again, I want to emphasise that my aim in taking up the study and disseminating the findings is not to apportion blame to particular individuals or the school, nor is it part of a reductive project aimed at disclosing empirical ‘facts’ or scientific ‘truths’ concerning the details of the incidents under consideration. Rather, it is to demonstrate how “socially produced ideas and objects...were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 6). The poststructuralist approach to analysis taken here places particular emphasis on the constitutive function of discourses which can be understood, according to Michel Foucault, as socially produced truths which “systematically form the object about which they speak” (Foucault, 1972: 49). While an extensive theorization of discourse will not be undertaken here, what I want to raise is the importance of such disruptive events in analyzing discourse (as opposed to analyzing merely the events themselves). I make this point because I have frequently been asked to explain how analyzing a single series of events can tell us about anything beyond the specific individuals involved and the context within which they occurred.

There are two points I want to make in relation to this question, as I think they are crucial to finding new ways of looking at problems that, on the surface, might appear to be limited to a particular set of individuals and circumstances. The first point I want to make is that ‘disruptive events’—and by this I mean those events that fall outside the descriptive parameters of a range of commonly held assumptions, expectations and epistemologies—never occur in isolation. Despite what the individualizing and pathologising discourses of psychology would seem to imply, acts of violence (and even more so, acts of violence that have multiple victims, perpetrators and onlookers) are understood here as socially situated and produced. While sociological analyses of violence have played an important role in shifting this focus away from the pathologies or dysfunctions of individuals toward considering violence as an effect of systemic disadvantage, there is a tendency in sociological models to associate violence with particular demographics through which trends and patterns can be identified. Yet ‘disruptive events’ which occur infrequently (or which are reported infrequently) are difficult to analyse using traditional psychosocial models, and therefore require a different approach if their significance is to be understood.

The second point I want to make follows on from the first, and draws on Foucault’s argument that:

Discourse is the path from one contradiction to another: if it gives rise to those that can be seen, it is because it obeys that which it hides. To analyse discourse is to hide and reveal contradictions; it is to show the play that they set up within it; it is to manifest how it can express them, embody them, or give them a temporary appearance (Foucault, 1972: 151).

In the case of the incidents at the centre of my doctoral study, the discursive contradictions at play open up a dialogue about how issues of violence might be understood in terms other than those which currently predominate in educational discourse. Importantly, I want to suggest that while the path from contradiction to contradiction is nonlinear and nonsequential, when considered together, or mapped onto a broader discursive framework such as the marketised educational context, the contradictions provide surprisingly rich spaces for analysis not only of events, but of the discursive terrain itself. Further, Foucault's insightful observation that discourse 'obeys that which it hides' opens up some particularly productive lines of inquiry. With reference to my own PhD research, the extent to which the assault incidents I've described are talked about in the depoliticized terms of 'bullying' (by both media and the school), while the school's status rhetorics (such as reputation, amenities, pastoral care program, discipline policy and so on) are emphasized, gives an indication (if we are to follow Foucault's line of thought) of how the *violence* of the market—rather than just the *operation* of the market—has become that which is to be discursively protected, hidden from view and obeyed.

A final point I want to raise in this section of the paper pertains specifically to this notion of discursive violence. Certeau argues that "If, by violence, we mean a growing distortion between what a discourse says and what a society does with it, then this very discourse functions as a manifestation of violence. It becomes itself a language of violence" (Certeau, 1997: 30). While all around us we see evidence of violence that is understood as the consequence of, for instance, the uneven distribution of wealth and resources that shapes educational provision, what I think Certeau's argument calls into question is precisely that of the connection between violence and discourse. What I have found particularly productive about such an approach is that the emphasis is removed from individual deficits and disadvantages, extending our research gaze instead to include the terrain of discourse and its productive capacity in the lives of individuals and communities. Such a poststructuralist framework opens up interesting spaces for considering 'disruptive events' in terms of how they enable discourse to hide and reveal contradictions. But perhaps more importantly, it opens up a space for exposing discourse itself to analytic rigour and for (in the case of my particular project) considering the violence of the market, rather than the violence of individuals or groups.

Project overview

As I have already indicated, this study was confronted by a number of anomalies that were specific to the circumstances of the assault incidents. For example, these incidents took place in an elite private school, rather than a disadvantaged public school. The students came from families prepared to invest significant amounts of resources into their children's education, and therefore hardly fit the profile of disinterested, antagonistic parents so commonly referred to in discussions of school violence. Further, while the incidents involved male-to-male sexual violence, there was no indication that they were specifically homophobic attacks (which is the predominant explanation for sexual violence between males). Clearly there was a need to look to paradigms beyond the dominant psychosocial approaches to school violence in order to better understand the significance of these particular events. To that end, a decision was taken to draw on

Norman Fairclough's (1992; 1995; 2003) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis for a methodological framework which would enable "analysis of relationships between three dimensions or facets of that event, which I call *text*, *discourse practice*, and *sociocultural practice*" (Fairclough, 1995: 57, original emphasis). While a detailed discussion of Fairclough's work will not be undertaken here, what I want to mark out is its usefulness in dealing with the complexity of multiple lines of inquiry that may be necessary in a single study. This is particularly the case in a study that deals extensively with textual data and communicative events such as correspondence, media reporting and so on, and Fairclough's concern with the ways in which texts might be analysed not merely according to properties specific to the texts themselves, but also according to the ways in which they shape and are shaped by the discourses and sociocultural practices from which they emerge provides a useful means of examining the ways in which institutional structures and power relations shape texts, events, context, and social practice.

While the initial intention was to draw on textual data (media reporting, public correspondence, etc), the scope of the study was extended to include a limited number of interviews to enable clarification on a number of crucial points. After consultation with the Macquarie University ethics committee, interview research was approved within a specifically defined set of parameters (for further details, see Saltmarsh, 2005). Data for the study included: school history and promotional material, general correspondence between the school and parents, private correspondence between the school and one of the parents whose son was later charged in relation to the incidents (documents that had been provided to and cited by the press and were therefore in the public domain), media headlines and news stories in the print media, interviews with a former student and his parents (none of whom was directly involved in the incidents or their aftermath, as stipulated by the university ethics committee), with a journalist, and with the media management consultant employed by the school during the period of intense media attention.

In the initial stages of the project, the school involved was formally approached with a request for documents that had been circulated in the public domain with respect to the incidents in question. No private documents, or documents that might reveal the identities of anyone directly involved in the incidents were requested, but rather the request was for documents such as open letters to parents that had been posted on the school's website periodically while the matter was being reported in the press. The headmaster declined the request, but provided a copy of the school's prospectus, and later in the project the school provided a copy of the school's history. I took seriously the school's provision of the prospectus, and conducted an extensive semiotic analysis of the prospectus with a view to exploring how the school chooses to represent itself in promotional materials designed to attract clientele. In particular, the issue of institutional identity is explored with particular reference to the ways in which private schools respond to the current marketised educational climate through the production and distribution of school prospectuses and other promotional products (see Symes, 1998; Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004). Of particular interest are the gendered and racialised modes of representation deployed in promoting the school, as well as the ways in which religious symbolism is deployed as a signifier of elitism and entitlement. Images connoting ties to imperialist

traditions, for example, are deployed as markers of the school's status, despite the violence that characterises the entire project of imperialist expansion, while images of women are restricted to those which imply nurturing and 'mothering', thereby reproducing the symbolic violence of traditional gender relations that relegate women to subservient subject positions that are legitimated only by their location with respect to men.

Another aspect of the study concerns the disciplinary practices and operations of power in schooling practices modeled on the English public school tradition. Correspondence, interviews, and the school's published history were analysed drawing on Foucault's (1972; 1977; 2002) conceptualisation of power and Certeau's (1984) conceptualization of consumptive practices, to argue that many of the traditions and disciplinary regimes that are normative features of contemporary private sector education are converted to an exchange value in the education market, thus implicating educational consumption in the complicity of institutions with regard to the production of violence. Rather than students merely reproducing the ethos and traditions of that which is imposed by schools, I argue, following Certeau (1984) that the consumption of education is also a productive act, in which students are able to appropriate and subvert that which they acquire, to produce new structures and relations derived from and in dialogue with, although not necessarily intended by, the institution. Disciplinary practices predicated on hierarchies of age, for example, that invest senior students with the authority of the institution that enables them to impose punishments on junior students, are implicated in a school ethos and tradition in which entitlement to social domination is cultivated. I argue that the institutional 'order of law' (see Derrida, 2002) is a law that is, through the assault incidents in question, inscribed on the bodies (see Certeau, 1984) of the students involved.

I also take up in some detail the question of relations between schools and parents, with particular reference to the location of parents at the intersection of discourses of family, education and market. Approximately two years prior to the news reporting of the sexually violent incidents, the mother of one of the boys who was a boarding student at the school wrote a detailed letter to the headmaster and the boarding housemaster bringing to their attention a number of issues concerning the boarding house. Among the issues she raised were 'bullying' and 'bastardisation'—matters that she feared would, if not rectified, cause her son (then a student in year 8) to become a bully when he became a senior student. A copy of that letter, and the letter the headmaster wrote in response, is analysed drawing on Certeau's (1984) arguments concerning the relations of power between producers and consumers. Certeau's notion of consumptive activity in terms of the tactics used by consumers in order to effect change—as compared to the strategies used by institutions as a means of maintaining power—is used to interrogate the interaction between this particular parent and the school, and to argue that the tactics used by parents are determined "by the *absence of power*" (Certeau, 1984: 38, original emphasis), and are therefore largely ineffective in negotiating institutional strategies which are organized by the postulation of power (Certeau, 1988: 38).

The representational practices of the print media with respect to these incidents are also considered, with emphasis on the ways in which news headlines and stories construct a public version of events which ultimately functions as a vehicle for both reproducing and

normalizing dominant discourses, despite apparent attempts by journalists to interrogate the school's official versions of the events. While an extensive discussion of media reporting is not possible here, an interesting aspect of much of that reporting is the extent to which it is framed by reference to the school's reputation and the markers of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1997) with which it is associated. While studies of media reporting often point to the ways in which moral panics (see Cohen & Young, 1973; Thompson, 1998; Simpson, 1997) are provoked by the press as a way of marginalizing less powerful individuals and/or groups, the moral panic generated in relation to these assault incidents operated somewhat differently. What I suggest, specifically, is that the emphasis placed on the material and positional advantages students are expected to gain through an education at such a school focuses the site of moral panic not on the degrading and injurious nature of the assaults, but rather on the ways in which the students involved had willfully jeopardized the school's market position, hence by extension, their own positional advantage.

Public relations practices commonly referred to as 'spin doctoring' are also examined in the study, with particular reference to the involvement of the media strategies consultant who was employed by the school during the period of intense media scrutiny in relation to the assault incidents. Interview data demonstrates the ways in which the discursive practices of 'spin doctoring' are incorporated into the school's representational and relational practices, and the ways in which the school functions as a corporate entity in relation to individuals and other institutions. The focus of this aspect of the study is, once again, concerned with the productive capacity of language, and the ways in which language use can be a powerful tool for producing normative views about, for instance, masculinity, schooling, and violence. Through strategic citation of the incidents in the depoliticized terms of 'bullying', and repetition of statements concerning the school's reputation and credibility, the discursive construction of the school—and of others like it—as the superior and desirable educational option is maintained and reproduced. There is also an interrogation of how claims and practices associated with the strategic management of these incidents might be understood with relation to what Foucault (2002b) refers to as 'games of truth', and deploying the work of Certeau (1984; 1997b) to interrogate commercial agendas underpinning the representational practices associated with professional media management.

Conclusion

The assault incidents at the centre of my doctoral project provide an important example through which issues of both school violence and educational marketisation can be explored. In particular, these events demonstrate the extent to which institutions are not merely neutral or unproblematic contexts within which violence occurs as a consequence of individual pathology or family and community dysfunction. Rather, I would argue, through representational practices which valorise elitist, racist, heterosexist and imperialist traditions, through disciplinary practices which privilege institutional structures of power over the needs, safety and wellbeing of individuals, and through subscription to market ideologies that commodify virtually every facet of educational experience, a wide range of social institutions—including schools, churches, media and governments—are complicit in the production of violence.

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