

What does post-truth have to do with education policy in Victoria?

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Post-truth has become the defining epistemological condition of our current political moment. Characterised by scepticism towards experts and institutions, rejection of the conventions of truth-making and truth-telling, and increasing relativity, post-truth has had its most egregious impacts in the realms of the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

My PhD research looks at the recently-implemented suite of policy initiatives in Victoria, and considers its discursive composition within the contemporary epistemological conditions characterised by post-truth.

While Castro Samayoa and Nicolazzo (2017) write that “what happens via political discourse is always already implicated in educational spaces” (p. 989), in the case of post-truth, those implications are neither neat, nor precise—in fact, the relationship between education policymaking in Victoria and post-truth is complex and contradictory. In some cases, post-truth seems to be having the opposite effect on Victorian policy discourse—strengthening the emphasis on ‘truths’ and ‘facts’, even if those truths and facts remain contestable. It is the way that the rhetoric, such as ‘evidence-based’ practice and ‘visible learning’ are enforced and asserted, and their prolificacy, that brings contemporary practice closer to the political realm of post-truth. At the same time, the implicit assumptions in new policy initiatives around a lack of trust in teacher experience and knowledge, the ascension of a small group of gurus who share tenuous claims about ‘what works’ in practice (Eacott, 2017), and an infallible and impenetrable rhetoric proffered a ‘truth’ about practice, align harmoniously with post-truth symptoms. Further parallels between the discursive themes of post-truth rhetoric and trends in education policy exist where questioning and challenging the efficacy of ‘evidence-based’ practices becomes akin to research scepticism, despite questions around the accuracy of measures such as effect size (McKnight and Morgan 2019; McKnight and Whitburn 2018; Aestrup Rømer 2018; Simpson 2017).

This paper explores these tensions, entanglements and contradictions, suggesting that while it is crucial to consider post-truth in policy analysis, its reach and its effects are complex and confounding. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis of Victorian policy texts, it suggests that although new policy trends are introduced under the illusion of a more scientific or clinical practice, the belief in the absolute certainty of evidence-based practice precludes teachers’ practice of conventions such as questioning or critical inquiry. Instead, when expressing philosophical uncertainty around initiatives such as learning intentions and pedagogical models, or encouraging the inclusion of qualitative data alongside quantitative forms, teacher knowledge is rendered powerless against new policy rhetoric.