Constructing Dialogic Relationships: School Legislation and the Principal's Gamble

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Abstract

This paper considers the practice of school suspension and exclusion as outlined in *Queensland's Education (General Provisions) Act 1989*. What is concerning is the possible effects the text's discursive strategies promote in both the decision-making processes of principals and the relationships enacted. Fairclough's (1989, 1995) method of Critical Discourse Analysis will be used to discuss the discourses employed in the legislation. Four prominent discourses will be examined: moral/behavioural, scientific/legalistic, developmental/ageist and individualist. This paper underscores the ongoing need for principals to engage in purposeful reflexivity in their dialogic relationships – in this case, those actively constructed between students, school principals and the legislation guiding their contact.

> When writing represents itself as knowledge, so is the writer defined as adequate (rational, discerning, advanced), and the audience as less so. In effect, we inherit and sustain forms of writing that contribute to alienated relationships, the creation of inadequacy, along with an atomistic and hierarchical conception of society. (Gergen, 2001: 3).

Introduction

In our daily lives we regularly come into contact with government-run institutions. By far one of the most commonly experienced would have to be schools. Given this widespread contact it is surprising that people generally pay little attention to the legislation that directs the practices taking place within the boundaries of the school. What is of particular interest to me (and this article) is the means by which the State sanctions practices that exclude students from what is considered a fundamental right in a liberal society, the right to an education. Among the many anomalies of such practice is the disproportionate representation of boys being socially excluded. Recent figures report that of the students suspended or excluded from Queensland State schools in the first semester of 1999, 80% were male (Cole, 2000). To elaborate, my concern in relation to the topic occurs across several different fields. A Psychologist by trade, I am acutely interested in the effects social practices have on people. In this instance, I am talking about the reported effects of school exclusion upon the student which can range from feelings of stress to placement with State welfare agencies (Hayden, 1997). Added to this, I am currently employed by the government department discussed in this paper to perform the role of Psychologist. This position involves ongoing contact with a number of students, predominately male, who have been subjected to exclusion from their school. As well, I am also researching the subject of my practice i.e. the effects of socially exclusive practices on students.

I have made reference to some of the positions I presently occupy as I appreciate an authors attempt at transparency in their writing. One way of attempting to do so is by reflexively acknowledging the multiple positions we occupy in our daily lives. The issue of transparency is also relative to the point Shotter (see any of 1993a, 1999, 2000) has made about coming to knowledge *from within* the practices under scholarly investigation. Shotter contends that it is from within the dialogically structured spaces that exist in our everyday lives that we can begin to understand what usually goes by ignored. He suggests that

> Although we usually remain unaware of always being situated within such a dialogically structured space, although the created sense of a 'depth' usually remains unarticulated in the background to our lives together, it is always from within such a complexly intertwined space – in 'answer' to the 'calls' it exerts upon us – that we responsively perform our actions. The unique nature of such spaces can, thus, only be studied from within the practices in which they are created (2000: 13).

In this article I have selected a text that contributes to the shaping of particular relationships enacted in schools. To put it in Shotter's language, the dialogue I am interested in engages as the Act 'calls' principals and students to 'answer' responsively in the performance of acts of exclusion. Being reflexive and acknowledging these 'calls' and 'answers' through acts of transparency may not be as straightforward as it sounds. To suggest that the text effects the construction of dialogic space surrounding these relationships may initially seem confusing to some. But it is my contention here that such dialogue does occur and that the 'calls' voiced by the Act firstly, go largely unnoticed by those involved and also secondly, that these are in contradiction of the ideals currently in favor across the field of education.

I was surprised by the guise of research in the area to date. Conceptually, in terms of trying to enliven the dialogic space between text (legislation) and subject, I could not locate another article of this kind. I had hoped to find other examples of contextual legislative discourse analysis. What were found were articles that performed historical analyses of discourses surrounding legislation (Manderson, 1999; Bacigalupe, 2000) or Naples (1997) situational analysis of the discursive practices that influenced congressional hearings preceding legislative enactment. Further afield there were several examples conducted on thematic and content descriptive lines engaging policy but not legislation (Garnsey & Rees, 1996; Hasian & Delgado, 1998; DuPuis, 1999; Glenna, 1999). The legislative discourse analyses that have taken place generally look to functional language use in legal contexts (Gunnarsson, 1989; Danet, 1980). Billington's (2000) interest in narratives of difference and British legislative constructions of childhood probably embodies the most comparable thematic and methodological leanings in relation to this paper. Conceptually and methodologically then this article may add to what has to date been generally a pragmatic endeavor. I will now move on to discuss the analytical framework facilitated in this study.

Critical Discourse Analysis

I have chosen Fairclough's (1989, 1995) method of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) to facilitate an understanding of the discourses at play within the *Education (General Provisions) Act 1989* (hereafter EA). The Act was chosen as it contains the section of greatest interest to this article: Part 4 – Good Order and Management of State Educational Institutions. This section stipulates what school principals are responsible for in relation to the creation of their school's

behaviour management plans and also details the grounds for student suspension, exclusion and submissions against either practice, within State educational institutions in Queensland.

According to Fairclough, CDA functions across three areas of analysis. Firstly, as would be expected, CDA performs a descriptive analysis involving scrutiny of the vocabulary, grammar and interactional conventions present in the text. The discourse analysis component then takes place as comparison is made between this descriptive analysis and the discursive practices suggested to be at work in processes of text production, consumption and distribution. Finally, an account of the social practices, which facilitate the discourses highlighted, takes place. The dynamic movement between micro textual analysis and macro social analysis was of particular importance to me if this inquiry was to be capable of showing possibilities and making suggestions involving dialogically structured relationships.

How Fairclough understands discourse is extremely relevant as it positions the entry point from which the analysis can begin. He suggests that 'discourse is use of language seen as a form of social practice' (1995: 6). This position may be expanded threefold in that he considers a) that language is part of society, b) that language is a social process and c) that non-linguistic features of society influence language (and vice-versa). I want to briefly look at each of these statements as each has its own effects on the outcomes of CDA.

The first contention suggests that language should not be considered separable (e.g. as a frame of reference) from the context in which it is used (i.e. in the social world). The argument against this referential use of language has been widespread (see Gergen, 1991; Shotter, 1993a, 1993b; Potter, 1997). What is at issue here is that it is considered hazardous to extricate language use from its social context as such practice promotes the possibility of distancing and obfuscating meaning. Added to this, it is suggested that language use will influence and be influenced by the social sphere in which it takes place. As the social world shifts and changes with the impress of historical and cultural influence so to is language to be considered a living and changing part of that world.

As an inseparable part of society language influences the practices of everyday life. As shall be seen in the following discourse analysis, it is this very aspect of language performance that is incredibly meaningful but often ignored in considering practices of text production, distribution and consumption. In this article I will discuss some of the social effects of language including its influence on how principals go about their jobs in relation to behaviour management in schools and how it helps determine what is considered to be appropriate and inappropriate conduct by students in schools.

Fairclough's third point, that non-linguistic features of the world influence language use, is a point where he and I will differ. I will discuss this point further below but for now it is important to give some grounding to our differences. If I were to position Fairclough's view of human psychology I would suggest that he be comfortably accommodated in the field of constructivism. One dilemma I encounter with this position is the primacy cognition is given in explanations of behaviour. The constructivist focus remains on the individual and from this position then moves to an account of their interaction with the social world. Hence, although Fairclough does speak of the importance of analysing relationships in CDA processes, he fails to give away the theoretical pretensions of cognitivism and individualism. Just as language may be considered to be inseparable from the social world so to, in my opinion, is the person in joint action[1].

Having elaborated my position and discussed the proposed method it is time to consider to my analysis of the Act. In turning to the discourses drawn from the text, I will begin with some of

the moral/behavioural discursive practices that guide school exclusions and then move on to look at scientific/legalistic, developmental/ageist and individualistic discourses in turn.

Moral/Behavioural

As text, legislation displays its own conventions in structure and content. One of the first things to make an impression when reading legislation is its non-emotive and static presentation. It could be suggested that such global structuring of the text has an effect of imposing high levels of routine on social practice. If this is to be considered one of the central functions of legislation, the declaration of rules to guide social practices, the seemingly straightforward appearance of legislative texts can be deceiving. For example, few would disagree with the presupposition that action in the everyday world can be influenced by a myriad of factors. But if I am to take the legislation as it is written, the subject position of student is treated as universal as is her/his behaviour. Hence, behaviours such as 'disobedience' or 'misconduct' that are grounds for exclusion, may be invoked without recourse to any factor/s that could mitigate the student's current situation. Accordingly, the text's only consideration in this regard is that the principal 'must take all reasonable steps to ensure the institution's behaviour management plan is implemented *consistently*, *fairly* and *reasonably*' (EA: 24; my emphasis). As such, behaviour as treated in the text takes no account of context, including such demographic variables as gender, social class or race as it defers to the principal's sensibilities. I question whether principals would be in agreement with the text and as a group on what accounts for disobedience or misconduct. The deception here (and legislation is certainly not the only type of discourse to propagate such nonsense) is that behaviour should and can be treated universally.

In moving on I would like to take a closer look at the main subject positions created within the text, first the principal and then the student, as both are discursively infused with moral qualities that contribute to their ongoing positioning. For a single individual, the principal of a school requires many attributes. One of the primary functions of the legislation is its delegation of power from the Minister down a hegemonic chain to the principal. The principal is conferred a position of authority in relation to, amongst other duties, decisions made in schools concerning behaviour. According to Part 4 of the Act, the first priority regarding the principal's responsibilities in this regard is the establishment of a behaviour management plan. The vocabulary of what is intended to be included in these behaviour management plans reads in a very positive light. For example, schools are intended to be 'a supportive environment' that is 'caring, productive safe', working to include 'all members of the institution's community', allowing 'positive aspirations, relationships and values to develop' as well as being a place that fosters 'mutual respect' (EA: 23). As mentioned earlier, principals are required to deploy their plan 'consistently, fairly and reasonably' (EA: 24). But in looking more closely at the Act one can infer the establishment of a moral order in relation to the actions that takes place at schools. In fact, you don't have to look any further than the title of this section: Part 4 – Good Order and Management of State Educational Institutions. The discourse that follows is presupposed by the contention that behaviour in schools will be of *good* order. Such a statement invokes a moral and valuational judgement that those individuals (students) who do not comply with the order created by the principal must be other than good. I will follow this point below but for now the position of the principal has been strengthened in the text in that they may assume a rightfully delegated position of power and that the plans they create have a valuational quality which is intrinsically good. What can this have to say about the quality of the person that occupies the principals' position? The relational value of the vocabulary affirms and is presumably embodied by the person assuming the role of principal.

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I have already mentioned that grounds for exclusion from a Queensland educational institution include 'disobedience' and 'misconduct'. I can add to these 'other conduct of the student that is prejudicial to the good order and management of the State educational institution' and where 'the student's disobedience, misconduct or other conduct is so serious that suspension of the student is inadequate to deal with the behaviour' (EA: 26). There is a textual invitation to consider the antonym of each as the preferred behavioural ideal. In this case, disobedience becomes obedience as the ideal mode of student behaviour. The antonymic process in turn holds implications for character construction in that any student who acts against the good order of the school (through disobedience) must be of *bad* moral character. From this vantagepoint exclusion is seemingly a straightforward decision for a principal to make given the student's behaviour. Such action is also supported by a liberal discourse involving the rights and responsibilities of the individual. If education is to be the right of the obedient then those constructed as disobedient automatically suspend their rights when the choice is made to act against the good order of the institution. They, the students of bad moral character, must forego their rights when behaving irresponsibly. If that involves the right to education, apparently the legislatively condoned answer is so be it.

Scientific/Legalistic

To regard legislation as legal text is seemingly obvious. I have already mentioned the non-emotive and static presentation in textual structure of the Act which is common with legal (and scientific) documents. It may be of interest here to describe further some of the grammatical features that these texts commonly display. For example, legislation customarily appears in complex sentences supported by subordinate clauses. This may give the reader an impression of cohesiveness within the text as it generates formal connections between declarations. It also implies a logic inherent in the text and to this point further discussion is required.

To suggest there is logic to the discourse of exclusion and the legislation within which it is held one must review the process by which it is applied. One principle supporting the form of logic used in the text suggests that between two contradictories no middle ground is possible. That is, to exclude is to 'prohibit the student from attending a State educational institution or State educational institutions for a stated period or permanently' (EA: 10). The student is either allowed to attend or is prohibited from attending - there is no middle ground to be sought. This kind of either/or logic furnishes those who accept it with a concrete (and I would suggest comforting) view of the world. In effect, legal discourses are driven by a similar logic in that the defendant can only be adjudged guilty or not guilty. For the student to be found 'guilty' by means of similar logic is to condemn not only their actions but (as was suggested in the previous section) the moral content of what is perceived as their character as well. Unfortunately this position obscures and disguises the relationships that are enacted within the contexts of everyday life. Taking the student as an example, there may be relationships with people (student/student, student/principal, student/teacher, student/parent), relationships to place (student/school, student/home) or relationships with concepts (student/self, student/abilities) that influence and effect their actions.

Inferences of causality also contribute to support the scientific/legalistic logic used in the Act. Possessive attributions leave no room for deliberation as in '*the student's* disobedience, misconduct or other conduct is so serious that suspension of the student is inadequate to deal with the behaviour' (EA: 26; my emphasis). The use of prepositions have a similar effect. The previous quote serves as an example where the attribution of events facilitates the adverb 'inadequate' and the complement 'serious' to justify the logic of exclusion. For suspension to be inadequate the principal will have to consider his decision especially given the behaviour was deemed to be *so*

serious. The preposition 'so' directs the decision making in again an either/or formulation. Was it so serious that it necessitates exclusion? Yes or no?

Both scientific and legal discourse value one's ability to reason and act with rational cause. Expressive modalities, interpreted through use of grammar and the relational values asserted in the Act, support these intentional discursive movements. As has been previously mentioned, the principal is endowed with the authority to ascertain the seriousness of student misconduct and decide for or against a recommendation of exclusion. But how does the principal reach such a decision? In the description of the student's behaviour modal adverbs such as 'persistently' and 'adversely' express an inferred history of unwanted behaviour and qualify its suspected effect. The grounds for cancelling the enrolment of a student who is no longer of compulsory age may provide another example here. The Act states that such situations occur when 'the student's persistently disruptive behaviour is adversely affecting the education of other students at the institution' or when 'the student's behaviour amounts to a refusal to participate in the program of instruction provided at the institution' (EA: 30). Add the auxiliary verb 'is' to the modal adverbs previously mentioned and a future orientation is created which suggests that the school might expect a continuance of the behaviour. What choices would the principal have then regarding the future of the student?

Modal adverbs also appear in the text in relation to the principal's supposed cognitive processes. A principal should be 'reasonably satisfied grounds exist to cancel the enrolment' (EA: 30). The adverb 'reasonably' serves as an adjunct to the principal's satisfaction (an attribution) that grounds do exist. Enlisting a physical descriptor such as 'grounds' is declarative and attempts to place the event or events in a world that can be reasonably (or rationally) adjudicated. As it is, for these grounds to 'exist', they must have objective status. The legislation then defers power to the subject position of principal as its representative in the adjudication of truth and objectivity.

Developmental/Ageist

That young people are discriminated against because of their age may seem a strange contention to some. Dominant discourses of human development tell us that with age comes maturity in the sense of responsibility and rationality and in this regard, certain practices have to be put into place to assist children in learning these values. But to refuse the individual the opportunity of choice on the basis of their age removes equity from the relationship. An example and comparable form of developmentalist discourse appears in Part 4 of the Act. In discussing the elements of a school's behaviour management plan, it is suggested that a principal should 'encourage all students attending the institution to take increasing responsibility for their own behaviour and the consequences of their actions' (EA: 24). Perhaps what this means is that, over time of enrolment and with no relevance to age, the student should be encouraged to take increased responsibility. I doubt it. The chance that a principal would allow a Year 12 student (approximately 17 years old and for argument's sake let us say they are new to the school) several months to develop a sense of responsibility seems highly improbable. What I am suggesting is that the increase in responsibility referred to in the legislation implicitly follows a developmental/ageist discourse. That is, it is only with age that an individual develops responsibility and conversely, the younger the individual the less they are able to take on responsibility for their actions. The ramifications of this discourse concern me greatly but perhaps I should recontextualise my argument. My concern in this article has been with the children who are subjected to school exclusion, how they are represented and dealt with in an act of legislation. What I find difficult to understand is how a student is assumed to lack responsibility because of their age and presumed stage of development

but (as is played out in schools each day) still able to bear the responsibility of their actions when the time comes for behavioural discipline to be dispensed. It seems to me that with this legislation dealing retributive discourses trump any discourse of development.

According to the Act there are two definite variances of student according to age. There are students who fall under the category of compulsory attendees (CAs) and the binary, non-compulsory attendees (NCAs). These groups are differentiated on the basis of age: CAs fall between 6 years and 15 years of age and NCAs are students over the age of 15 years. The splitting of the two groups becomes particularly interesting when it comes to describing the act of exclusion in the text. For CAs, the text lays out 'grounds for exclusion' (EA: 26) but in relation to NCAs, it reads as 'grounds for cancelling enrolment of student more than the age of compulsory attendance' (EA: 30). The question should be asked how it is that there is need to differentiate between the two groups in relation to the description of the action? I would suggest an answer might be found in section 39(b). In discussing the grounds for cancellation of enrolment involving NCAs, one such example may be when 'the student's behaviour amounts to refusal to participate in the program of instruction provided at the institution' (EA: 30). The suggestion here is that the student's refusal to participate is a telltale sign of their motivational state. Couple this product of inference with a developmentalist discourse and the student has themselves taken responsibility, through their actions, for the cancellation of their enrolment – something that student's of compulsory attendance age can not seemingly do. For those students, exclusion is a byproduct of irresponsible and presumably unintentioned behaviour. What possible consequences could there be in removing choice from student-teacher/principal relationships? This is a point I will return to below.

Individualism

It makes sense that it is much easier to exclude a person if they are considered individually and not as part of a collective or community. The moral/behavioural discourses referred to earlier in this paper work in relation to discourses of individualism and acts of exclusion. I have discussed how appropriate participation is based on continued obedience and good conduct. These approved behaviours contribute toward establishing the social and cultural boundaries for student membership across State-run educational institutions. I have also mentioned the facilitation of the binary logic in exclusive practices. The individual is to be considered part of the grouping known as students or their identity is to be something other than this. As I have said, it is much simpler to castigate those who are not group members and to justify one's assertions within moralist or pathogenic rhetoric. But the issue is not simply the construction of a certain worldview but also the effects and future possibilities for action, i.e. for people in their everyday lives, in light of individualising discourses.

> Explanations of mental disorders as restricted individual troubles tend to reproduce a certain worldview about the psyche, about society, and about their interrelationships. Such explanations are, needless to say, also immensely consequential for the kinds of therapeutic intervention likely to be utilised, and thus, ultimately, will significantly influence whatever counts as a desirable prognosis (Gottschalk, 2000: 22).

For the person excluded it is certainly easier to give up hope for an education figuring that you are no longer a respected member of the community and blame has surely been apportioned solely to your own actions. Resigning oneself to the will of the powerful is much safer than

fighting for an alternative. I will enlist here an example from the text. In the event that a student does become subject to exclusion, the student has the right to appeal the application. Actually, the wording from the text is 'the person under the cancellation may make a submission against the cancellation' (EA: 31). I purposely used the word 'appeal' to juxtapose what might be considered emotive language with the non-emotive vernacular of the text. Of interest is also the derivation of the word 'submission'. Of course, the word comes from the verb submit meaning 'to place oneself under the control of a person in authority or power; to become subject, surrender oneself, or yield to a person or his [sic] rule' (OED: 2169). There is little doubt as to where the student is being positioned in this process.

Discourse as Social Practice

I would like to move now past the analysis of the Act to some samples of research conducted in the area of school exclusion to consider the sensibility and plausibility of what has been said thus far. In doing so, I am specifically interested in looking to develop, as Shotter put it, the 'unarticulated background' of our everyday lives. It is my contention that if there are dialogically structured relationships occurring it may be possible to bring these to the fore with examples from previous research.

The first example comes from Scotland and was undertaken by Cullen (1997). In this study she looked at an analysis of factors contributing to exclusions in eight Scottish secondary schools. Cullen's method involved interviewing a sample of teachers, excluded pupils, their parents and school support staff. Of equal interest to the research was an analysis of the professional ideologies that arose in the discussions with teachers and support staff. It is a strange coincidence that the language of moral value appears both in an Australian piece of legislation (see above) and interviews with teachers in Scotland. Through her involvement with one of the schools Cullen concluded that student behaviours could be considered from three angles – 'pupils in the school who were considered "naughty" were excluded; those considered "damaged" were referred to "the experts" ' and 'the acceptable pupil was defined as well-behaved, willing to learn and from a supportive home' (1997: 3). As such, the three groups of students being referred to here could also be known as a) the morally bereft non-learner, b) the pathological non-learner and c) the morally accomplished and psychologically healthy learner. It is of interest to note that there is an alternate process for handling students considered as having some form of psychological deficit. The discourse pertaining to this category of student suggests that their inappropriate behaviours are possibly beyond their control and thus do not warrant exclusion as an initial response. It is not surprising however to find that a discourse of diminished responsibility[2] does not appear in the Queensland legislation for, as was highlighted in the previous section, the universal treatment of Queensland State school students precludes such attention to detail.

Cullen also makes an interesting observation in reference to situations were a student is persistently excluded for lengthier periods of time. She says that 'where difficulties with a pupil persisted, a reactive punishment of a longer exclusion was less effective than a reflective willingness to rethink the situation and work out a flexible and appropriate response' (1997: 4). Rather than individualise the issue as a problem belonging to the student, it seems as though a relational orientation to the issue has the possibility of creating outcomes that may be of benefit to all concerned. She also believes there is a connection between the willingness to act reflectively and the school's willingness to monitor trends regarding exclusions. Seemingly, on several levels, deliberation has a more positive effect than declaration.

In his excellent *Education, Exclusion and Citizenship*, Parsons (1999) gives an overview of exclusive practices as they are currently taking place in schools across England. He suggests that the ideology supporting current educational policy in the UK fluctuates between a social-democratic/humanistic approach and a dominant traditional hard-line. Parsons proposes that at any time government policy can be positioned in relation to what he terms the six primary functions of schooling: custodial, civilising, national identity, skilling, credentialling and public knowledge. One point that I believe resonates with the developmental/ageist discourse highlighted in the previous section is the lack of choice Parsons claims that English students have across these activities in schools. He puts it as such

> Arguably, a major disincentive for children at school is the absence of an agenda over which they have some control. The schooling system does not convey a sense of developing agency, empowerment and capacity in learners, or valuing learners as genuinely thinking young people struggling to understand (1999: 15).

A considerable amount of work currently coming from the UK and Europe discusses student's disaffection with mainstream schooling and educational practices (see Blackman, 1995; Duffy, 1995; Room, 1995). Disaffection itself is an umbrella term for a myriad of possible feelings and responses students may exhibit including a general dislike for school, for some teachers, subjects or activities. What is promising is that research is now moving beyond outcomes (i.e. what student responses may be symptomatic of disaffection) and focusing on the lived and embodied practices that engender these complaints. Of course, the use of school suspension and exclusion is commonly evoked as a major factor contributing to the issue.

A common theme emanating from the two studies cited thus far has been the establishment of non-hegemonic relationships with students in schools. Could a similar point be made in the Australian context? A study conducted by Hay (2000)[3] set out to discuss whether high school students, who received suspension from their school, presented with noticeably different self-concept profiles when compared to their age-specific peers. Theoretically, Hay supports the notion that concepts of self should be considered as multi rather than unidimensional as it provides what he suggests are more detailed profiles of the subject under scrutiny. The results suggest that suspended students obtained low scores across the domains of academic, school and parent relationships and that the qualities of these relationships were important considerations in the construction of their multidimensional self-concepts. Hay, referring to Braithwaite (1989), concludes that

> …to prevent antisocial behaviour [sic], adolescents need to be reconnected with social institutions such as families and schools. Without this reconnection (through mentoring, counselling, parenting programmes), antisocial behaviours are likely to continue. This reconnection involves ongoing dialogue, relationship building and communication between all parties, rather than seeing the problem as being within the student suspended from school (2000: 348).

Just how this 'reconnection'[4] could take place without a commensurate movement by legislators is uncertain. The reliance upon some form of legislated or policy provision is a necessary precondition for unilateral action in my opinion. This is not to say that there are not State school staff in the field already doing implicitly what has been suggested. The point is that the redress to sponsoring (re)connection can not be left to chance or goodwill.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this article I contemplated an apparent paradox. In a society which values the liberal ideals of individual rights and equal opportunity there is a place for the sanctioning of exclusionary practices. Of particular concern is that the practices discussed in this paper involve prohibiting children from participating in or belonging to State-run institutions. What I wanted to explore here was the part the *Education (General Provisions) Act 1989* plays in mandating the practices taking place and to discuss how these might effect principals in the delivery of their everyday duties. I focused on one particular section of the Act, Part 4 – Good Order and Management of State Educational Institutions, as it is within these pages that the direction for exclusion is set out. But, as I believe was shown, legislation is not simply about the supply of procedural formula, it enters the culture and practices of our lives effecting us along the way. It can create the boundaries for inclusion or exclusion.

On the subject of boundaries I feel that my own profession should raise its collective hand and assume some responsibility for the practices discussed in this article. My reasoning for such a statement is somewhat confessional. To question the processes by which legislators and then principals construe and act upon an other, the positions from which they engage an other, one must consider how and who informs these practices. My short answer and confession: the mainstream of psychological theory and practice. Theories that have held sway in informing those in authority have time and again focussed on the individual. Whether it was a radical form of behaviourism promising a stimulus/response punishment/obedience continua or high cognitivism pathologising the thought processes of students, psychological theory has reliably led those in authority to the answer. It has dictated the terms in such a way that alternatives to individualising practices seem not only difficult to conceptualise but near impossible to realise.

Wittgenstein once suggested that 'not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loopholes open, and the practice has to speak for itself' (1969: no.144). Examples of relational activity, alternatives to individualising practice, occur each day in ordinary schools. From the teacher inquiring about the health of a student's mother to the community building agenda currently promulgated in certain sectors of public education, examples of relational practice occupy a peripheral position in the core business of the day. But what needs to occur is for examples of such practice to become core government business thus tightening (striving to maybe one day closing?) the loopholes Wittgenstein referred to. School exclusion may be more appropriately thought of as a blackhole but I believe we share a similar sentiment. If relational practices were to become the core business of schools what place would there then be for the exclusion of a community member?

My interest in foregrounding relational issues simultaneously parallels and returns me to Shotter's (see introduction; see also McNamee & Gergen, 1999) concern for creating different ways of listening for sounds or signs of life in our investigative (and daily) practices. If I were to enter into a discussion with a student concerning their relationship with the Act, the student would probably respond with uncertain bewilderment as to the relevance and purpose of our conversation. I am sure that similar responses would occur given a range of possible conversational nominees: parents, teachers, school ancillary staff among many others who participate and influence the relationships taking place within the boundaries of schools each and every day. It does not seem strange to us that each of these people can possibly engage with an other in dialogue so why should a dialogically structured relationship with, in this case a text, present as extraordinary? Probably because it is! It is *extra*ordinary. To question a text is to question a practice. It is a gamble because in the process of doing so what may have seemed like

a sure bet can become a substantial wager - sometimes with the appearance of little or no return. Nobody said the stakes were not high.

Keywords

Discourse; legislation; dialogue; relationships; exclusion.

Acknowledgment

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Endnotes

1. I have borrowed this term from Shotter, 1993a. Joint action is a way of describing the products and processes of persons in relation with each other and a continuously changing and dynamic social space. Although cognitive processes could be discussed it would be preferable to consider thought as inner dialogue that is the product of our many relationships, past, present and future.

2. Although, on a professional level, I have difficulty accepting discourses of deficit, at the very least this example draws some attention to the context of influence surrounding the student and possible effects impinging on their current and presenting behaviours.

3. Of note is that Hay's study was undertaken in Queensland's State capital, Brisbane.

4. Hay's use of the words 'antisocial' and 'reconnection' are not without concern. To suggest that a student's actions are antisocial is to individualise him/her from the student body and, as has been my contention (and seemingly Hay's), such a process contributes to the breakdown

of relationships. Also, to suggest that reconnection is needed suggests that a relationship has been severed. In many cases I do not believe this is so. A student will continue to be positioned in relation to the school or family whether this position is a favoured one or not i.e. being considered oppositional continues a certain form or type of relationship.