Critical Discourse Analysis and Leadership

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This article outlines the need of infusing critical discourse analysis into the preparation and support of prospective school leaders. It argues that in the process of school transformation, the school leader must possess the ability to self-reflect on his/her language and understand the potential power of language as a means that may support or hinder the transformation process. Moreover, the piece contends that language of school transformation needs to be aligned with the actions of school transformation.

In professional preparation programs for school administrators and leaders, a need exists to include discourse analysis as a key strategy to increase capacity to lead reforms that seek to change school culture (Henze, 2001). The assumption here is that when school administrators incorporate critical discourse analysis into their professional repertoire, they will be better positioned to understand, among other things, what happens when they – and school staff --

A great challenge for school leaders may consist of closing the gap between, on one hand, adopting reform language, and believing and acting on it, on the other. Over the last two decades, the school reform movement generated a genre extremely rich in vocabulary, metaphoric expressions, concepts, and even particular ways of talking – implementing equity throughout schools, for instance. School leaders today often find themselves needing to have competence in this genre. But from rhetoric to action there is a distance that, in human organizations, usually results in serious tensions, which in turn may affect relationships and collectively cherished values, such as trust. This is not to say that a direct correlation necessarily exists between" walking the talk", and the lack of trust and the existence of a culture marked by adversarial relationships, but to rather argue that, as Briscoe, Henze and Arriaza (2009) have noted, critical discourse analysis might prove useful for school leaders in their effort to understand, at a micro level, why people relate to each other the ways they do, and to unlock, at a macro level, the ideologies informing school reform and leadership.

One reason that leaders sometimes adopt reform discourses without necessarily practicing or believing in them, might be that using certain discourse might prove useful in attracting badly needed support and resources to their sites. "Reform-speak" may even allow school administrators and leaders to appear cognizant of what is new.

Moreover, the practice of "talking" reform might prevent school administrators from seeing the contradiction between stated purposes of systemic change (as the new jargon offers), and how things are usually done at their sites. Using the word "equity," for instance, does not always translate to creating differentiated approaches to learning, and to the allocation of resources, economic and social, where most needed. In the same way that using the phrase social justice, does not imply the transformation of the institution into a just one.

Nonetheless, language that conveys new perspectives and visions of schooling often embodies a challenge to the status quo. For instance, an administrator who matches equity rhetoric with action would probably deploy resources in ways contrary to the norm, such as assigning the best prepared, most talented and passionate teachers to work primarily with under-performing students; structure the school schedule to ensure that all students enjoy full access to all school course offerings and programs.. In other words, the disruption of normalizing discourses and the efforts to connect the new language to action risks, to say the least, exposing leaders not only to the resistance of those who benefit the most from the status quo, but even the rejection generated by ingrained practices and beliefs of those same people promoting the change. For a school administrator the latter might be an extremely puzzling and uncomprehensible endeavor. But here is where critical discourse analysis would be helpful.

Understanding, for example, the distinction between the instrumental and expressive functions of language and its impact on school culture could help a school leader unpack entrenched opposition to change. Troyna and Hetcher (1997) define the instrumental function of an utterance as the ultimate result it seeks and the expressive function as the actual beliefs that inform and nurture what is being said. Hence, what is being expressed (behavior) might or might not reflect true beliefs. Helping opponents to change the contradictory nature of what they say they believe and what they actually do (Argirys,2002) may be a first step. Working persistently to bring closer those two realms of talk (i.e. closing the distance between believes and actions) may prove hard to do, yet invaluable as contribution to changing a school's culture.

In a school reform that places more emphasis on the transformation of culture and the creation of resilient structures, school leaders will certainly need deeper understanding of critical discourse as awarness of the potential power of language as a force of social change, and the necessary skills to do so.

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