Reading Through the Basics: Towards a Visual Analysis of a Newspaper Advertisement on Education

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This paper describes the contribution the analysis of visual design can make to a critical reading of educational texts. Drawing on recent work on visual design, the paper analyses the composition of a newspaper advertisement seeking responses to an educational report. It illustrates the way elements of composition work to present a particular reading path, constructing a hierarchy of meanings across the text. This hierarchy of meanings reinforced the Queensland Government’s preferred discourse on standards in schools. The paper shows how an analysis of the visual elements adds to the discursive mapping of the advertisement. It argues that the analysis of visual elements should be included in a critical discourse analysis of educational texts in order to gain a deeper understanding of the discourses that construct and produce meanings about educational policies and practices.

Keywords: visual analysis, critical discourse analysis, discourse, media, newspaper, policy

Introduction

This paper examines a newspaper advertisement that sought public responses to a report on the Queensland school curriculum. Using critical discourse analysis, the paper maps the discursive field of the advertisement. It traces the construction of preferred discourses on schooling and identifies the authoritative voice that such discourses establish to speak on curriculum issues in Queensland schools. A key component of the discursive mapping is the analysis of its visual design, in particular, an analysis of the composition of the advertisement. Specifically, the identification of the principles of composition lead to the tracing of a preferred reading path through the advertisement. The paper shows that an inclusion of visual design in critical discourse analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the discourses constructed through the text. It argues that the analysis of visual design can make a significant contribution to the discursive mapping of educational texts. Beginning with a discussion of the place of visual design in critical discourse analysis the paper moves on to a detailed mapping of the advertisement in question.

The Place of the Visual in Critical Discourse Analysis

Underlying the argument presented in this paper is the assumption that semiosis, or the process of ‘meaning-making through language, body language, visual images, or any other way of signifying’ (Fairclough, 2001: 229), is an irreducible part of social life. Further, recent technological developments have led to
transformations in the relationship between language and other forms of semiosis, such as visual images, resulting in a more fluid relationship between words, sounds and image as written texts are structured by visual means (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 1998; Raney, 1998). That is, all texts are multimodal in that they realise meanings through many semiotic modes (Anstey & Bull, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 1998). Thus, reality is textually mediated not just by language but also by social images (Stephens, 1998). Such images become of increasing significance as visual ways of communication proliferate and become critical in domains of public communication (Anstey & Bull, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Raney, 1998; Tomaselli, 1996).

Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to different interpretations of experience and different forms of social interaction (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 1998). As a form of semiosis, visual modes of representation and communication construct meanings that are culturally specific; that is, they are not transparent and universally understood. Similarly, texts, whether they contain linguistic or visual structures, are interactive. That is, they are written with particular readerships in mind and are oriented to (and anticipate) particular sorts of reception and responses (Fairclough, 2001). However, all texts are also polysemic. They are not restricted to a single, authoritative reading, that is to one true interpretation, but are open to a multitude of readings and become an object of work by the reader to produce meaning (Turner, 1990). Readers produce meanings from the linguistic or visual elements in texts by taking up one of three ideal-typical reading positions that are available to the reader (Allan, 1998; Fairclough, 1989; Hall, 1980; Luke, 1995/1996).

The first, the preferred reading position, adopts the reading privileged by the discourse. It is the invited, intended or authoritative reading. The second reading position is the alternative, or negotiated, position, where the reader ‘recognizes as appropriate the legitimacy of the preferred definition, but identifies certain discrepancies or ‘exceptions to the rule’ within a specific situational context’ (Allan, 1998: 115). In the final, or oppositional, reading, the authority of the preferred reading is challenged and resisted as the reader’s own values are ascribed to the textual manifestation of the discourse (Richardson, 1998). However, the range of possible readings of any text is limited and constrained by the nature of the text (Fairclough, 1995b). For as Kress and van Leeuwen (1998: 190) note, ‘information is presented as though it had that status or value [of reality or ‘what is the case’] for the reader, and the readers have to read it within that structure initially, even if they then produce a meaning which rejects it’. Thus, the preferred reading position tells the reader how to read any text, either verbal or visual, presenting a hegemonic, common-sense version of the world (Allan, 1998; Luke, 1995/1996). Both verbal or visual texts encourage ‘complicity in upholding the hegemonic frame’ (Allan, 1998: 126).

Thus, images, as well as words, are ‘the means . . . for the emergence of [the] ideological positions’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 12) that are evident in the multiplicity of possible discourses constructed through texts. For this reason, it is important that an analysis of these discourses includes not only linguistic, but also visual, elements, as well as an exploration of the interrelationships between the two (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998; Stroupe, 2000). Indeed, Walker (2001) notes the need for more analyses of the interaction
between linguistic and visual structures. This paper outlines one such analysis. It links Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996, 1998) work on visual design with a textual analysis that draws on theories of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (cf. Apple, 1996; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1989, 1995a; Luke, 1995/1996, 1998). The paper shows how the interaction between the linguistic and visual structures in the text works to construct particular meanings. In so doing, the paper illustrates how the analysis of visual design can inform, and broaden, methodologies that employ Critical Discourse Analysis.²

Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with how a particular account of events becomes the decisive public version, or definition, of the situation. That is, it focuses on how such a definition generates meaning through particular representations, identities and power relations within discourses. CDA recognises that these meanings are not set but are open to negotiation and contestation within a politics of meaning (Apple, 1996). Participants in contests over meaning attempt to capture or dominate modes of representation in a variety of ways, including invitation, persuasion, co-opting opposing discourses, and silencing opponents by attacking them. A successful attempt at domination results in the formation of a hierarchy of meanings in which one of the many ways of representing the world gains primacy over others (Mehan et al., 1990: 137). It is this hierarchy of meanings and the resultant power relations that are of interest in Critical Discourse Analysis. That is, CDA is concerned with ‘how power, identity and social relations are negotiated, are legitimated, and are contested toward political ends’ (Apple, 1996: 130). It seeks an understanding of how ‘ideology is expressed through discursive forms’ (Patterson, 1997: 427) and hence of how ‘discourse is implicated in relations of power’ (Janks, 1997: 329).

In addition, the critical discourse analyst is concerned with ‘the destabilisation of ‘authoritative’ discourse’ (Apple, 1996: 131). It is the means by which such a discourse is foregrounded, interrupted and reframed (Luke, 1997). That is, CDA is the ‘analytical and political tool for talking back to public discourse . . . and questioning its constructions of power and agency’ (Luke, 1997: 365). In particular, it focuses on the discursive strategies that legitimate control, or otherwise naturalise the social order, and especially on relations of inequality. Such an understanding of CDA necessitates the investigation of ‘how formations of discourse and power are manifest in the everyday, quotidian aspects of texts in use’ (Luke, 1995/1996: 11). Critical Discourse Analysis questions the relationships between the power relations evidenced in social formations and that of local everyday statements. The CDA of everyday statements, such as those found in advertisements and newspaper layouts, is enhanced by an analysis of their visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Of particular interest here are the three principles of composition that ‘marshall meaningful elements into coherent text and do this in ways which themselves follow the requirements of code-specific structures and themselves produce meaning’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 213). These three principles are information value, salience and framing.

Information value refers to the way in which the ‘placement of elements . . . endows them with the specific informational values attached to various ‘zones’ of the image: left and right, top and bottom, centre and margin’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 183). For example, in Western cultural tradition, elements placed
on the left of a horizontal axis are presented as Given, something that the viewer already knows; and elements on the right of the horizontal are presented as New. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) note, the New is a place where social meanings are (re)produced and (re)affirmed, being both naturalised and made problematic at the same time. That is, the New is the site for contestations over meanings. Similarly, information placed at the top and bottom of the horizontal axis of the image is presented as the Ideal and the Real respectively. Information placed in the centre of the image represents the Centre or essence of the text.

The second principle, the salience or visual weight of the elements of the text, creates a 'hierarchy of importance among the elements, selecting some as more important, more worthy of attention than others' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 212). An analysis of salience, which is judged by visual clues (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998), thus reveals the ideological valuing of the discourse. Visual clues indicating salience include capital letters, colour, size and emboldening, all of which are used to draw attention to important pieces of information (Walker, 2001).

Also a matter of degree is the third element – framing – which refers to the way in which 'the elements or groups of elements [in a visual text] are either disconnected, marked off from each other, or connected, joined together' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 214). The strength of the framing devices, which may, or may not, be present, in the text indicates the connectedness of the different elements and reveals the degree of inclusion, or exclusion, of these elements in the preferred discourse.

These three principles structure the layout of a text and present the ideal reader with 'what is the case' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998: 190), with a definition of the situation that is established as common sense. In this way, the visual design of a text becomes a site for the naturalisation of, and contestations over, ideological meanings. Thus, an analysis of the composition of a text reveals how the production of integrated meanings through visual representation presents particular ideological positions to the reader. Composition, especially the principle of information value, was a significant component of the analysis of an advertisement (Department of Education, 1994) which called for public comment on the recommended changes to the Queensland school curriculum.

The Advertisement

The analysis that follows is drawn from a larger study (Thomas, 2000) that investigates the interrelationships between media and policy discourses on education. It examines the newspaper coverage of one particular instance of educational policy making and explores the relationships between this coverage and the policy process. The study mapped the discursive field of the policy process in order to identify how media and policy discourses constructed ideological understandings both of the policy process and of schools and teachers. The particular policy process investigated was a review of the Queensland school curriculum. This review became known as the Wiltshire Review, with the resultant Report, entitled Shaping the Future, known as the Wiltshire Report (Wiltshire et al., 1994).

The Review was conducted from 1992 to 1994. The review process encom-
passed four stages. They were: the establishment of the Review; the initial review processes culminating in an interim report; the release of the report proper in April 1994; and a period of public consultation prior to the submission of the final recommendations to Cabinet. The fourth and final stage of the review process was a significant one as, following the release of this report, six months were allowed for public comment on the Report’s recommendations. In this time of public consultation, many recommendations were changed and realigned with the preferred discourse of the government of the day. The advertisement that is the focus of the analysis of this paper was published in this final stage of the Review. As will become clear, it was significant in the reassertion of the authority of the preferred government discourse.

Published on 23 April 1994, slightly less than a month after *Shaping the Future* was released, the advertisement (Department of Education, 1994) called for public comment on the Report. Headed BACK TO BASICS?, the advertisement constructed a preferred discourse about education, schools and teachers that reinforced discourses traced throughout the Review process. The advertisement was written in the style of a newspaper item with a headline and lead. In contrast to many advertisements, the text was densely printed. Twynam (1979) identifies this type of advertisement as a non-linear directed/verbal text. Such a text has traditionally been the message of advertising and uses a consistent method of directing the viewing. This particular advertisement was ‘reader-directive’ (Fairclough, 2001), in that it pre-structured readers’ expectations through the use of grammar and of composition.

The advertisement was dominated by declarative sentences such as ‘the Premier made a commitment’, ‘it tackles all the issues’, ‘the community was still concerned’, and ‘a new syllabus would operate’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Such sentences worked to position the reader as the receiver of information (Fairclough, 1989). In addition, the use of space in the advertisement not only gave structure to the content but also worked to invite readers to scan and navigate the document in a particular way (Shriver, 1997). That is, the composition of the advertisement presented a strictly coded reading path to an implied, or hypothetical, reader (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The analysis that follows traces the discourses constructed through such a preferred reading of the advertisement.

**Reading through the basics**

The preferred reading path would begin with the most salient elements of the advertisement, in this instance, the headline and lead. Their salience resulted from the use of outsized capital lettering in bold type for the headline and their placement at the top of the advertisement, the position of heavier elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The bold type attracts attention, for as Twynam (1979: 125) notes, ‘it is assumed that the bold headings will be scanned vertically as a first operation’. Similarly, as noted previously, the use of capital letters is associated with importance and authority and are used to draw attention to important pieces of information (Walker, 2001). Assuming the Western cultural tradition of reading printed texts is followed, the reader is then invited to proceed to the left then right columns before turning attention to the boxed information and the government logos at the bottom of the page. This preferred reading path sets up an hierarchy of movement across the elements of the text (Kress & van Leeuwen,
which, upon analysis, sheds considerable light on the advertisement’s definition of the situation, that is on its preferred discourse. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of this preferred reading path.

The Ideal: Back to the basics

As noted above, the preferred reading path constructed by the composition of the advertisement began with the most salient elements, the headline and lead.
Together these elements dominated the top third of the page of the advertisement and read as follows.

**BACK TO BASICS?**

In 1992 the Premier, Mr Wayne Goss, made a commitment to overhaul Queensland’s education curriculum with special emphasis on standards of literacy and numeracy.

As a result a major report, ‘Shaping the Future’, has been produced. It tackles all of the issues to do with the education of our sons and daughters.

The Government now wants you to have your say.

Below is an outline of the basic findings and recommendations of this report.

There’s also details on where you can get more information. Read this information and if you have a view, the Government wants to hear it. It’s over to you.

*Source: Department of Education, 1994: 33)*

Together, the headline and lead established a concern with literacy and numeracy standards at the very beginning of the advertisement. Although it was qualified with the use of the question mark, this concern was reinforced by the lead that stressed the Government’s ‘commitment to overhaul Queensland’s education curriculum with special emphasis on standards of literacy and numeracy’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Such a statement led the reader to presuppose that standards of literacy and numeracy were low and that Queensland’s curriculum needed to be overhauled. Indeed if, as Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) maintain, information at the top of the page realised the value of the Ideal, then Back to the Basics can be construed as the ideal situation.

While the question mark in ‘BACK TO BASICS?’ raised some questions over this definition, these questions were qualified by the use of an imperative sentence. The imperative sentence positioned the reader as a compliant respondent to the question posed by the writer (Fairclough, 1989), that is as being in agreement with the need to return to an emphasis on the basics. Thus, the very existence of the question directed the reader to address the basics as the key issue within the advertisement’s discourse. Such an emphasis was reinforced by the use of an hyponymy in which the *basics, literacy and numeracy and standards* were used interchangeably. An hyponymy constructs meaning relations within a text by including the meaning of one word within the meaning of another word. Thus, all meanings are included within one particular discourse and a common ideological ground is established (Fairclough, 1989). In the BACK TO BASICS? advertisement, all three phrases were included within a discourse of literacy and numeracy. This discourse defined high standards of literacy and numeracy in a narrow sense as basic information, not in terms of the broader definition relating
to social expectations of proficiencies found in some sections of the Wiltshire Report. In this way, the headline and lead of the advertisement created an hierarchy of importance which gave precedence to the notion of returning to the basics and which led the reader to read the rest of the information in relation to standards of literacy and numeracy.

Also of significance in the headline and lead were repeated references to the state Government. They referred to the Premier, Wayne Goss, and to the Government three times in phrases such as ‘the Premier, Mr Wayne Goss’, ‘the Government now wants you to have your say’ and ‘the Government wants to hear it [what you have to say]’. Such repetition depicted the Government both as being concerned with, and as important decision-makers in, educational issues. It also portrayed the Government as being responsive to its constituents. As with the emphasis on the basics, this positioning of the Government was reiterated throughout the advertisement.

The heading and lead also positioned the reader in a particular way that resulted from the use of the deictic categories, *you*, *your* and *our* (cf. Smith, 1990, for a discussion of the ideological significance of deictic categories). The pronouns you and your in ‘the Government now want you to have your say’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33) addressed readers directly, including them in a group who were concerned about educational issues and as valued respondents to the information about the Review. Further, the pronoun our in the sentence ‘it tackles all the issues to do with the education of our sons and daughters’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33) defined these future respondents as parents. In this way, the advertisement excluded non-parents, including teachers who were not parents, from being possible respondents to the Review. This positioning was modified in later paragraphs that spoke of ‘our students’ and ‘our state’. Here our, and hence the reader and future respondent, included ‘all those who have an interest in the future education of our students – from parents and employer groups to unions and education associations’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). In this broader sense, students were positioned as being owned by everyone, perhaps even by the state.

**The Given: The need for a curriculum review**

Moving from the most salient elements at the top of the page, the reader is directed to follow the preferred reading path to the left column of the advertisement. This column devoted considerable space to establishing the importance of the Review and the need for curriculum change. It featured background material on the Review. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) information placed on the left of the page constituted the Given information. Thus an analysis of this column revealed the way the advertisement defined the current situation, including not only a definition of the Review but also of schools and of the school curriculum itself. The background material about the Review was listed in two sections in the left column. Both these sections, *About the Review* and *The making of the Review*, are reproduced below.

**About the Review**

The Review of Queensland’s school curriculum is the most comprehensive and far-reaching analysis ever undertaken in this state of what is
taught in our schools. It is a blueprint for modern learning that maps out the future direction of curriculum delivery from preschool through to Year 12.

Compiled after more than 12 months of work, the report takes in the views of all those who have an interest in the future education of our students – from parents and employer groups to unions and education associations.

Parent and the community expect greater accountability in school education. The community rightly expects that students, through the curriculum, should have the potential to influence the future for themselves and for society in general.

The making of the Review

State Cabinet decided on 2 November 1992 to review the curriculum in accordance with specific terms of reference.

Despite many years of school-based curriculum development, increased curriculum flexibility and a greater range of subject choices for students, the community was still concerned that students were finishing school ill-prepared for an increasingly technological and sophisticated job market and society.

Because the Queensland Government believes that the success of our state measured against any economic, social and cultural yardsticks depends on schools successfully preparing students for tomorrow’s world, this comprehensive review was undertaken as a matter of top priority. (Department of Education, 1994: 33)

In the above extract, the Given information described the Review as

the most comprehensive and far-reaching analysis ever undertaken in this state of what is taught in our schools. It is a blueprint for modern learning that maps out the future direction of curriculum delivery from preschool through to Year 12. (Department of Education, 1994: 33)

Undertaken as ‘a matter of top priority’, the Review resulted in ‘a major report’, compiled after ‘taking in the views of all those who have an interest in the future of our students – from parents and employer groups to unions and education associations’ and which ‘tackled all the issues to do with the education of our sons and daughters’. Here, the advertisement is making claims to present the authoritative version both of the Review and of the curriculum in Queensland schools.

However, these claims are de re claims in that they are about the object under discussion. In addition, they are transparently true in that they are assignable to the writer’s knowledge but are presented as beingopaquely true, or known as true to both the reader and writer. Jalbert (1983, 1995) identifies the combined treatment of de re/de dicto modalities and opaque and transparent references as being of particular ideological significance. Transformations of the de re/transparently true versions of events lead to them being read as being de dicto/opaquely true, presenting a particular version of reality. This version of reality needs to be read critically in order to secure a better understanding of events and issues. In this advertisement, the transformation of the de re/transparently true versions worked to establish a common ideological ground (Fairclough, 1989). These ideological understandings not only represented the report as being at the
forefront of educational thinking, but also as the definitive statement both about the Queensland curriculum and about Queensland schools.

The left column of the advertisement contained additional information that presented a particular definition of schools and their students, and of the curriculum. Questions were raised about the degree to which schools were successful, particularly in terms of how well they prepared students for post-school life. Initially, the question of whether ‘students were finishing school ill-prepared for an increasingly technological and sophisticated job market and society’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33) was presented as a community concern. However, the validity of this concern was reinforced in the government perspective presented in the following paragraph.

Because the Queensland Government believes that the success of our state measured against any economic, social and cultural yardsticks depends on schools successfully preparing students for tomorrow’s world, this comprehensive review was undertaken as a matter of top priority. (Department of Education, 1994: 33) Thus, the very existence of the review led the reader to presuppose that schools were not preparing students for society. In addition, the advertisement’s position implied that schools were failing not only students, but also the state.

No explicit reason was given for this failure. However, as the following sentence demonstrated, school-based curriculum development was depicted as one factor that led to community concerns about the preparedness of students.

Despite many years of school-based curriculum development, increased curriculum flexibility and a greater range of subject choices for students, the community was still concerned that students were finishing school ill-prepared for an increasingly technological and sophisticated job market and society. (Department of Education, 1994: 33) In this way, the questioning of the value of school-based curriculum development led the reader to presuppose that it was a significant factor in schools’ failure to produce high standards. Consequently, the curriculum was depicted as needing to be reviewed to ensure successful students and schools.

By this means, the advertisement’s position linked the failure of school and school-based curriculum development to the question of accountability. Once again, community concerns were depicted as being the source of this view of schools. For ‘parents and the community expect greater accountability in school education. The community rightly expects that students, through the curriculum, should have the potential to influence the future for themselves and for society in general’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Thus, the Given information outlined in these three paragraphs defined the situation in Queensland schools as a cause for concern. Concerns were raised about the curriculum taught and about the ability of schools to prepare students for the future. In these paragraphs, schools were depicted as failing students and the state, and hence as needing to be made more accountable.

The New: The proposed changes

The preferred reading path constructed by the composition of the advertise-
The future curriculum was to be based on ‘new comprehensive syllabuses … [which] would be delivered by flexible, student-responsive teaching and learning methods to achieve comparable and high standards across the state’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Such standards would be achieved by the introduction of a ‘core curriculum integrated across the Key Learning Areas’ in which ‘there would be both essential and elective components … identified in the syllabus’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Thus, in the proposed new system, school-based curriculum development would be directed by new centrally prescribed syllabuses in order to achieve the desired high standards.

In addition, the solution for the concerns about literacy and numeracy was presented as being increased intervention through standardised testing. This testing would take two forms. The first involved ‘new teacher running records and the diagnostic net in Year 2 [which] would identify literacy and numeracy needs and help direct resources to those who need them.’ The second form was ‘a new Year 6 Literacy and Numeracy test [which] also provides valuable information on progress to teachers, students, and parents’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Significantly, in these descriptions of both the Year 2 and Year 6 tests, teachers were positioned as the receivers, not the providers, of information about students’ progress. Such a positioning suggested that teachers were not able to identify literacy and numeracy problems without outside assistance and queried teachers’ curriculum decision-making. Thus, the New material continued the emphasis on literacy and numeracy and on the need for increased accountability of teachers first encountered previously in the Ideal and Given information. As such, it affirmed the definition of the situation constructed in other parts of the advertisement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

The Real: Directions and responsibilities

Finally, the reader is directed to proceed to the bottom of the advertisement. This section of the page featured text framed by a box, the names of the Department of Education and the State Government, and the Government logo. The box around the text presented the material as a separate unit of information from the rest of the advertisement (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). This information contained details of ‘how you can have your say’. Once again, the use of the pronoun you worked to ensure the material appealed directly to the reader who was positioned as a potential respondent worthy of being heard. The text read as follows:

How you can have your say

You now have the opportunity to respond to the Panel’s recommendations. Once the responses from the consultation phase are analysed, the Government will consider the Panel’s recommendations together with community comment.
A copy of the report is available, for you to read, at your local school, or you can get a free 16-page summary from your local state member of parliament. Your submissions should be addressed to:

Curriculum Review
PO Box 12279
Brisbane Elizabeth Street
Q 4002

They should be received no later than Friday 4 June 1994. (Department of Education, 1994: 33)

This material was noteworthy for its emphasis on the Government in the sentence, ‘once the responses from the consultation phase are analysed, Government will consider the Panel’s recommendations together with community comment’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). Here, the Government was depicted as the body that would decide on the future school curriculum, that is, as the final authority on curriculum matters.

Such a positioning was reinforced by the presence of the Queensland Government’s name and logo. Together with the Department of Education’s name, they were placed at the bottom of the page on the right hand side of the box. The presence of both names indicated that the information about the review was supported by both entities. It could be inferred that the Department of Education was responsible for the advertisement, although there was some confusion about whether or not this was the case. Indeed, one Panel member claimed responsibility for the advertisements about the Review. Whoever was responsible, the repeated references to the Government throughout the advertisement led the reader to presuppose that it presented the Government’s position on the Review and that the Government was the authoritative voice in education decision making.

The Reassertion of Government Authority

As noted above, the advertisement’s preferred discourse positioned the Government as the decision maker about curriculum. That the Government had created, and set the parameters of, the Review was affirmed in the sentence ‘State Cabinet decided … to review the curriculum in accordance with specific terms of reference’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). In doing so, it claimed to have responded to community concerns as a matter of top priority. The Government was also depicted as the final adjudicator on the recommendations once the public consultation phase was over in ‘Government will consider the Panel’s recommendations, together with community comment’ (Department of Education, 1994). In this way, the Government was presented as being the concerned authority, concerned with standards of literacy and numeracy, concerned about ‘our sons and daughters’, and as being responsive to community concerns.

This positioning of Government worked to construct an opposition that included and excluded groups from the preferred discourse. Groups that were privileged within the preferred discourse included the Government and those who agreed with its position on the Review. This position was committed to quality education, concerned about the basics, sympathetic to community expec-
tations of greater accountability from schools and valued the Wiltshire Report highly. Parents and the community who shared concerns about ill-prepared students and school accountability were included also in this positioning. Anyone, or any groups, who did not share these concerns about literacy and accountability were positioned as being not interested in ‘the future education of our sons and daughters’ and as not being committed to ‘successfully preparing students for tomorrow’s world’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). That is, those who did not agree with the proposed changes, or the belief that students were ill prepared for increasingly sophisticated job market and society were excluded from the preferred discourse.

Significantly, the positioning of teachers was not clear. On the one hand teachers were depicted positively in that their expertise in the fields of Early Childhood Education and student counselling was acknowledged and increased personnel in these areas was recommended. However, teachers were also positioned negatively, although much of this valuation was implicit. The first indication of a negative positioning was found in the advertisement’s failure to specifically define teachers as being part of ‘all those who have an interest in the future education of our students – from parents and employer groups to unions and education associations’ (Department of Education, 1994: 33). This omission placed teachers ambiguously, most probably as members of either unions or education associations.

Subsequently, this ambiguity left open spaces of meaning (Halliday et al., 1992) to be filled by reader presuppositions which drew on the positioning of teachers in the areas of accountability and teachers’ knowledge. In both these areas, teachers were valued negatively. As noted earlier, the very existence of the Review implied that schools, and hence teachers, were failing to meet community expectations on standards, students, and accountability. In addition, the proposals for testing in the new system implied that teachers were unable to diagnose the literacy needs of students and needed to be provided with information from external sources in order to ensure students’ needs were being met and high standards were achieved. This negative valuing of teachers’ expertise, together with their exclusion as a group from the target audience of the advertisement, worked to undermine their authority to speak about the Review. In this way, the positioning of the Government in the preferred discourse traced in the advertisement reasserted its authority to speak both on the Review process in particular, and on Queensland schooling in general.

A Preferred Reading of Back to the Basics?

This paper has described how the preferred discourse of the advertisement seeking public responses to the Wiltshire recommendations defined the situation as one of school failure, ill-prepared students and falling standards. Such a situation demanded that schools be made more accountable and that the curriculum be overhauled. In response, the Queensland State Government created the Wiltshire Review to develop a blueprint for doing just that. As a government in tune with the community, the Government sought public comment on the proposed changes that included recommendations for a core curriculum and increased formal, standardised testing. This discourse was noteworthy for its
emphasis on the authoritative voice of the State Government on education decision-making. Indeed, the reassertion of the Government’s voice on educational issues, a voice that had remained silent until this critical stage of the Review process, characterised the preferred discourse constructed through this advertisement.

Further, the paper has highlighted the need to explore the interrelationships, or interdiscursivity, of public discourses on education, particularly those constructed in media and policy texts. It has shown how such texts construct meanings through the interaction of both linguistic and visual elements. The paper notes the need for explorations that, of necessity, acknowledge the multimodality of these texts and the increasing importance of the visual in public communication. One means of doing so is to incorporate the study of visual elements in any analysis of such texts for, as the above analysis has shown, the inclusion of an analysis of visual elements can lead to a deeper understanding of the construction of discourses through these texts. Finally, this paper has demonstrated how the inclusion of a visual analysis can inform and broaden methodologies of Critical Discourse Analysis. In particular, it has shown how attention to visual design can make a significant contribution to a critical discourse analysis of public discourses on educational policies and practices.

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Notes

1. This paper refers to the school system in the state of Queensland, Australia. Queensland is one of the six states which, together with two territories, make up the Commonwealth of Australia. Under the Australian constitution, each State Government has responsibility for the provision of school education in that state.

2. While acknowledging that a range of methodologies can be used in the visual analysis of texts, this paper is concerned with ways of analysing visual elements of texts that broaden and extend current approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis. The focus here is on how meanings are constructed through the interaction of the linguistic elements and the visual design of the text, not on the effectiveness of the visual design.

3. School-based subjects are subjects that are developed and implemented by individual schools. As such, they do not appear on the Senior Certificate and are not accredited by the Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, the statutory authority responsible for subjects leading to entrance to higher education.

References


The Back to Basics? Advertisement

In 1992, the Premier, Mr Wayne Goss, made a commitment to overhaul Queensland’s education curriculum with special emphasis on standards of literacy and numeracy. As a result, a major report, “Shaping the Future”, has been produced. It tackles all of the issues to do with the education of our sons and daughters.

The Government now wants you to have your say. Below is an outline of the basic findings and recommendations of this report. There’s also details on where you can get more information. Read this information and if you have a view, the Government wants to hear it. It’s over to you.

Queensland School Curriculum – a proposed pattern for the future

New comprehensive syllabuses are the foundation of the new project system. They would be delivered by flexible, student-responsive teaching and learning methods to achieve comparable and high standards across the state.

The first three years of schooling could be a multi-level structure rather than being organised strictly by year. Some students may take four years to complete Years 1 – 3. It is expected that children in Years 1 – 3 will be taught by teachers with early childhood specialist training.

New teacher training programs and the diagnostic tests in Year 2 would identify literacy and numeracy needs and help direct resources to those who need them.

From 1995, Years 1 – 8 students would study a core curriculum integrated across the Key Learning Areas. Within each core area there would be both essential and elective components which would be identified in the syllabus.

For Years 9 – 10, students study subjects which fall within Key Learning Areas. The core subjects would be in English, Mathematics, Studies of Society and Environment, and Science, and COTE from the end of decade.

For Years 11 and 12, the core would be one subject in English and one in Mathematics. LifeSkills addressing areas such as Human Relationships Education, Active and Informed Citizenship, Ethics and Religious Education are also core, from Years 1 – 12, as indicated by particular needs of students in particular schools.

A new Student Reporting Framework would operate from Years 1 – 10, providing regular reports for students and their families to the basis for discussions on each student’s progress. A new Year 6 Literacy and Numeracy test also provides valuable information on progress to teachers, students, and parents.

Following Year 7, students would, at least, have their transition to high school. However, the pattern of study in Year 8 is still the integrated syllabus across the Key Learning Areas to facilitate a better interface between primary and secondary school.

In Year 10, career guidance counseling would take place, with schools making use of designed guidance packages and programs, as well as trained personnel.

In Years 11 and 12 the Student Education Profile would continue as now, with some modifications. General and vocational education undergo some degree of convergence, including possibilities such as within-subject embedding; cluster interfaces and sharing of resources between schools, TAFE, and vocational education providers; articulation of courses; accreditation and certification of subjects; offering of national modules; and registration of schools as vocational education providers.

Some students may take three years to complete Year 11 and 12.

How you can have your say

You now have the opportunity to respond to the Panel’s recommendations. Once the responses from the consultation phase are analysed, Government will consider the Panel’s recommendations together with community comments.

A copy of the report is available from school or, if you do not have access to a school, or you can get a free hard copy summary from your local state member.

Your submissions should be addressed to:
Curriculum Review
PO Box 1279
Brisbane Elizabeth Street
Q 4002

They should be received no later than Friday 24 June 1994.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT

Language and Education