

Education Policy beyond the Big Society: the paradox of neoliberal governmentality under the Coalition government

Alex Pickerden, Donna Evans and David Piggott

University of Lincoln

College of Social Science, School of Sport and Exercise Science



UNIVERSITY OF
LINCOLN

Presentation Aims...

- ▶ To portray the Conservatives Big Society as a response to the Third Way of New Labour
- ▶ To describe the key components of the Coalitions schools reform link them with the philosophy of the Big Society
- ▶ To illustrate the construction of political discourse and outline the different layers adopted by the Coalition
- ▶ To outline and highlight the fundamental paradoxes of neoliberal governance in relation to the key themes of the education reforms

What is the Big Society...

- ▶ In its purest form the Big Society was created to encourage the process of reforming our society. Essentially, it is the philosophy that will bring about a transition from Big Government towards a Big Society (Norman, 2010).
- ▶ Lingard and Sellar (2012) articulate the Big Society as being part of an evolution within Cameronism which situates itself amongst the broader neoliberal hegemony that has developed from Thatcher and Blair
- ▶ “The Big Society is many things in many departments, but rarely quite the same thing in each” (Evans, 2011, p.165)

The Coalition's reforms to Education (1)

- ▶ According to the former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, the Big Society is most apparent within the education reforms enacted and introduced by the Coalition Government (Gove, 2015)
- ▶ Under the Coalition the flagship reforms to education predominantly revolve around structural reforms to schooling. Academies and Free Schools in particular are specific policies in which the Coalition and the Conservative Party more broadly can claim ideological distinction
- ▶ Academies are a continuation of New Labour policy which has been hugely expanded since the Coalition assumed power (Gunter, 2011)

The Coalition's reforms to Education (2)

- ▶ Free Schools have their policy origins and foundations in the education reforms introduced in Sweden (Wright, 2012). These reforms continue to be shaped by the neoliberal ideals that have engulfed all aspects of public policy across the globe
- ▶ Lord Adonis (2012) argues that the differences between Academies and Free Schools are minimal and Free Schools are essentially 'Start-up Academies' in all but name
- ▶ These policies are controversial and enjoy widespread opposition from various individuals and agencies. It is however the case that evidence on both the success and failure of these reforms is equally as contested (Gunter, 2011)

Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis

- ▶ CDA is a methodology that is problem-orientated and focused upon studying social phenomena in a critical and interdisciplinary way (Wodak & Meyer, 2009)
- ▶ As Taylor (2004) argues, “[CDA] is particularly appropriate for critical policy analysis because it allows a detailed investigation of the relationship of language to other social processes, and how language works within power relations” (p.436)
- ▶ Jager and Maier (2009) offer a methodological and theoretical framework for CDA that is premised on multiple layers of analysis and iterative cycles of coding
- ▶ The use of different types of memos allowed the analysis to develop and the evolution of analysis to be documented through the memos. Additionally, the collection of memos aided the analysis in a practical sense as they allowed the process to be structured and contained (Charmaz, 1983)

Discussion: Policy mimickers...

Conservatives and the Big Society

- ▶ Academisation
- ▶ Teach First (expanded)
- ▶ Tuition Fees (increased)
- ▶ Aspiration Nation

New Labour and the Third Way

- ▶ 'City' Academies
- ▶ Teach First (introduced)
- ▶ Tuition Fees (introduced)
- ▶ Knowledge Economy

Discussion: Policy discourse...

▶ Example One:

“Our education system continues to be characterised by inequality **(1)**. The chances of a child who is eligible for free school meals getting five good GCSEs including English and Maths are less than one third of those for children from better-off families **(2)**. 42 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals did not achieve a single GCSE above a grade D in 2008. More pupils from Eton went to Oxford or Cambridge last year than from the entire cohort of the 80,000 students eligible for free schools meals **(3)**. This is a dreadful situation which no government should be prepared to tolerate. Not only does this let down hundreds of thousands of bright children who should have the opportunity to go to excellent schools and to swim in the pool of knowledge that pupils from the better off families take for granted, it will also impair all of our economic and cultural futures **(4)**”

(Gibb, 2010)

▶ Example Two:

“The scars of inequality run deep. We live in a profoundly unequal society **(1)**. More than almost any developed nation ours is a country in which your parentage dictates your progress. Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor **(2)** and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege **(3)** in England than in any comparable county. For those of us who believe in social justice this stratification and segregation are morally indefensible. And for those of us who want to see greater economic efficiency **(4)** it is a pointless squandering of our greatest asset - our children - to have so many from poorer backgrounds manifestly not achieving their potential. When more Etonians make it to Oxbridge **(3)** than boys and girls on benefit then we know we are not making the most of all our nation’s talents **(4)**”

(Gove, 2012)

Discussion: Policy paradox

“But autonomy isn’t just a mechanism for reversing underperformance - it works for accelerating high performance as well. So we decided to allow those professionals who were already doing a brilliant job to really spread their wings. We began by allowing any outstanding school to convert to an Academy. And now we’re enabling more schools to reap the benefits of autonomy by letting any schools apply for academy status - provided it’s teamed with a high-performing school. The rapid conversion of so many great schools to academies means there is now a pool of excellent institutions to build chains of schools, simultaneously autonomous and collaborative, working in partnership to raise standards. Over 1,200 schools have applied for Academy status. Over 800 of these applications have been approved. Over 400 have already converted and are open - bringing the total number of open academies to over 700.”

(Gove, 2011a)

“Officials from the Department will continue to support and facilitate the brokering of new academies between schools, local authorities and sponsors. I see this as a continuation of the collaborative approach that has been fostered over the years to secure the replacement of such schools with academies. I very much want that partnership approach to continue. For some years, we have also had powers on the statute book for the Secretary of State to intervene directly in failing schools. The new Academies Act enables me to make an Academy Order in respect of any school that is eligible for intervention. This includes, specifically, schools that Ofsted has judged to require special measures or significant improvement or which have failed to respond to a valid warning notice. I will be ready to use this power in the months ahead where I judge that academy status is in the best interests of an eligible school and its pupils, and where it has not been possible to reach agreement on a way ahead with the local authority, the school or both”

(Gove, 2011b)

Concluding thoughts...

- ▶ The concepts of the Big Society underpin and reinforce the neoliberal approach to governance
- ▶ It is extremely likely that the 2015 General Election result will mean a further entrenchment of the policies introduced under the Coalition
- ▶ Future research should focus upon the 'unintended consequences' of neoliberal governance and the paradox of freedom and responsibility
- ▶ Inquiry should build understanding of how policies are understood by policy actors and then how policies are put into practice

References...

Adonis, A. (2012) *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England's Schools*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Charmaz, K. (1983) The Grounded Theory Method: An Explication and Interpretation. In: Emerson, R. M. (ed.) *Contemporary Field Research*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. pp.109-126.

Evans, K. (2011) 'Big Society' in the UK: A Policy Review, *Children & Society*, 25, pp.164-171.

Gibb, N. (2010) Nick Gibb to the North of England education conference. [Online] Available at: <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-to-the-north-of-england-education-conference>. [Accessed 26th November 2013].

Gove, M. (2011a) Michael Gove's speech to the Policy Exchange on free schools. [Online] Available at: <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-goves-speech-to-the-policy-change-on-free-schools>. [Accessed 26th November 2013].

Gove, M. (2011b) Michael Gove to the National Conference of Directors of Children and Adult Services. [Online] Available at: <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-the-national-college-of-directors-of-childrens-and-adult-services>. [Accessed 26th November 2013].

Gove, M. (2012c) Education Secretary Michael Gove's speech to Brighton College. [Online] Available at: <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-michael-goves-speech-to-brighton-college>. [Accessed 20th November 2013].

Gove, M. (2015) Interview on Newsnight (April 7th 2015) [Online] Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cr6mNSJ60MU>. [Accessed on 20th April 2015].

References continued...

Gunter, H. (ed.) (2011) *The State and Education Policy: The Academies Programme*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Jager, S. and Maier, F. (2009) Theoretical and methodological aspects of Foucauldian critical discourse analysis and dispositive analysis. In: Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage Publications. pp.34-61.

Lingard, B. and Sellar, S. (2012) A Policy Sociology reflection on School Reform in England: from the 'Third Way' to the 'Big Society', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 44(1), pp.43-63.

Norman, J. (2010) *The Big Society*. Buckingham: The University of Buckingham Press.

Taylor, S. (2004) Researching Educational Policy and Change in 'New Times': Using Critical Discourse Analysis, *Journal of Education Policy*, 19(4), pp.433-451.

Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds.) (2009) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. 2nd edition. London: Sage Publications.

Wright, A. (2012) Fantasies of empowerment: mapping neoliberal discourse in the Coalitions schools policy, *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(3), pp.279-294.

Questions?



Thank you for listening. Special thank you to the Social Policy Association for granting me a Postgraduate Bursary in order to attend this Conference in Belfast