Paper proposal: **Mr Gove's education: a critical discourse analysis**

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**Introduction:**

This paper reports initial findings from a study of the speeches and newspaper articles of Michael Gove, in his capacity as Secretary of State for Education. The study covers the period May 2010-December 2012 and analyses 32 different speeches and newspaper articles. The purpose of the study is to identify the view of education which emerges from these publications and to probe and question this position in relation to its coherence, its stated priorities, its inclusions, and exclusions. The paper aims to clarify the particular view of education which is being presented and so render it amenable to further critique from interested parties, and to counter-conduct, if deemed appropriate.

**Theoretical framework and methodology**

The project is shaped by the work of several theorists. Situated within the broad framework of Foucauldian critique, the study is structured by the analytical guidelines for critical discourse analysis developed by Siegfried Jäger (2001). The transcripts of Mr Gove’s speeches and articles were subjected to a repeated process of analysis, involving an iterative coding and re-coding of the material, followed by further examination employing Jäger’s analytical guidelines (2001, p.55-6) of identifying issues of context, text ‘surface’, rhetorical means, ideological statements, and striking features. In addition, the paper also makes use of the linguistic ideas of Walter Benjamin, and the notion of ‘being’ presented in language. In particular, Benjamin’s theory is adapted so that the idea of ‘educational being’ is explored as a means of conceptualising Mr Gove’s pronouncements. This is two-sided: ‘educational being’ presents itself in relation to Mr Gove himself – how his own educational being is communicated in language; in addition, his words also serve to ‘name’ education in a specific way, and so seek to create a form of ‘being’. This aspect of the study also draws on the work of Nietzsche (1979 [1908], p.127) and his concept of ‘geisterkrieg’, understood here not in its more dramatic translation as ideological warfare but rather as contestation about human understanding. Thus, Mr Gove’s contributions are interpreted as involving, at least in part, a discursive struggle to establish and sustain a particular view of education. Michael Gove is thus presented in the role of ‘geisterkrieger’ engaged in a conflict of ideas but privileged by his status and discursive advantage.

**Research design limitations**

While the material was subject to a methodical, iterative process of hermeneutic analysis, the findings must represent but one reading of the material, rather than some sort of definitive reading. Despite this exhaustive exercise, there will inevitably be omissions and interpretive contingencies. The study was limited by focusing solely on these texts: no reference has been made to political events, to legislative developments, nor to empirical reality, such as activity within the wider educational community. No attempt was made to construct a longitudinal study, nor any form of comparative analysis, although these texts span a 30-month period.
Findings and discussion:

The following presents a summary of the main issues identified in this study. The two strongest themes present in the data are those of improvement and of inequality. There is a strong emphasis on the need to raise standards, framed in what may be termed a crisis narrative around PISA standings, and a further stress on issues of inequality, especially around school outcomes. The publications present three solutions to these two ‘problems’: increased autonomy for schools (that is, for headteachers) and staff, this achieved through the expanded academies and free schools initiative; reduced bureaucracy (specifically the removal of local authority involvement); teacher quality (drawn largely from the Finnish example). In addition, there are practical measures suggested about curriculum design and content, and about the nature of examinations.

Other features of the discourse are as follows: there is frequent use of simple binaries: good/bad; effective/ineffective; control/autonomy. There is a privileging of the ‘new’ over the ‘old’ particularly in relation to ideas and beliefs, although the opposite applies to views on the curriculum. There is repeated use of norm-referenced terminology, specifically ‘best’ (in relation to students, teachers, schools, universities) and so a tendency towards what might be described as elitist discourse. There is a persistent depiction of attitudes as being crucial causal factors, especially in relation to low attainment. This is ascribed to such attitudes as ‘complacency’ and ‘low expectations’, while research evidence about the effects of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage on pupil attainment is presented as evidence of negativity, as excuses, and as lack of ambition. Bureaucracy is presented as uniformly damaging, and it is repeatedly collocated with ideas of ‘control’; conversely, arrangements around academy chains and central government direction are presented as ‘support’.

School education is very much framed as centred on ‘knowledge’ and as something received rather than (co-) created: the curriculum as reproductive rather than productive. While there is reference to the instrumental value of schooling, there is also at times a strong defence of education as a broad, intrinsically valuable activity, and of a fulfilled life rather than mere economic success as the ultimate goal. Even so, in his defence of the value of studying French lesbian poetry, for example, its worth is stated in relation to its use as an object for technical poetic analysis and for identifying its historical place in the ‘canon’. Any wider value of the poetry is ignored. There is a strong sense of urgency and drive and, at times, a strong personal focus (“I will…I want…I do not…I have made…”), although there is also a repeated invocation of it being coalition policy. The two most prominent evidence sources drawn on are PISA and the work of Michael Barbour at McKinsey. In addition, there are repeated references to Asian examples such Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, as well as to Finland, and the USA (Charter schools, principally).

Amongst the silences and exclusions are the following: there is no mention of broader economic initiatives to tackle inequality at source. The emphasis is exclusively, and explicitly, on within-school measures. There is silence in relation to reform of the public schools, the independent sector. These are presented unproblematically as exemplars from which other schools should learn and as requiring neither justification nor change. In some senses, they could be seen as the approved, default position. The strong focus on knowledge as being central to school education is not matched by any similar focus on ‘understanding’ so that the impression is given of curriculum as fact-transmission. In each case where reference is made to other national or federal approaches, snippets of policy and practice are referred to so that, in the case of Finland for example, there is regular reference to the high status and qualifications of the teaching profession, but no reference to that system’s lack of an inspectorate or of high-stakes testing. In addition to silences on aspects of
Finnish education, there are many national systems not mentioned, Scotland being one – a predominantly comprehensive system rooted in local authority supervision - despite it being where Mr Gove was schooled himself and it being England’s near neighbour. There is almost no mention made of the expressive arts, creative and practical subjects, nor of sport – despite the period of the study covering the Olympics and Paralympics. Examinations are presented as unproblematic – particularly summative, stand-alone tests. There is little or no reference to formative or continuous assessment, except where presented as a bureaucratic imposition.

**Consequent claims**

The analysis aimed to identify how education is conceptualised by Mr Gove in these publications. The result is that more of a sketch than a finished work seems to emerge: there are certain identifiable features of the understanding of education promoted which can be observed but much else remains indistinct and incoherent. There are certainly clear areas of immanent tension and apparent contradiction: the championing of ‘autonomy’ while at the same time offering prescription about curriculum content and assessment procedures; the championing of ‘autonomy’ while apparently increasing central government direction and power; recognition of the need for ‘soft skills’ while promoting a very traditional, knowledge-based curriculum; a persistent attack on inequality of outcomes while repeatedly using the language of rank.

The material can be used to present Mr Gove as engaged in geisterkrieg – a struggle over human understanding, in this case over the construction of school education as a concept and practical reality. Despite his explicit rejection of that charge, he repeatedly attacks left-wing ‘ideology’, but argues that his own policies are, conversely, ‘evidence-based, practical solutions’. To adapt Benjamin, Mr Gove communicates ‘educational being’ in the sense of naming and categorising a specific sense of the term. He is engaged in shaping the discourse by pronouncing what is to be understood by school education, what is to be included under its aegis, and what is to be excluded and ignored. However, this is neither fixed nor necessary and so open to challenge, adaptation, rejection, or supersession.

**Select references**


