

ABSTRACT

Exploring the Rhetoric of Public Sector Choice

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Choice is considered to be an integral part of a consumption-led society where the consumer is sovereign and where public sector reform compels institutions such as schools to adopt marketplace behaviours. This emphasis on choice in education and the renaming of both parents and students as consumers in an education market has been a feature of UK education policy since government reforms of the 1980's (Fairclough 1996, Williams 1997). Such political discourses conceptualise parents/ students as active choosers who weigh up the educational options before making a reasoned choice. Within this discourse the 'good parent/student' is the 'good/active chooser'.

Yet the language of choice and consumerism has been criticised for limiting the lexicon used to refer to the benefits of education (Bottery 2005), for not translating well to the education context (Sharrock 2000) and for potentially harming the educational process (Eagle and Brennan 2007). Previous studies in the sociology of education have questioned the concept of choice as beneficial, suggesting instead that choice disadvantages some groups of parents, increases socio-economic segregation and intensifies the practice of social exclusion (Reay 2004, Gorard and Fitz 2006, Weekes-Bernard 2007). The language of choice and the process through which users of public services are persuaded to see themselves as consumers, and to accept choice as unquestionably good, as political consumerist ideology dictates, has not received attention.

This research proposes a critical discourse analysis of the rhetoric of public sector choice in government discourse in order to understand the means by which users (parents and students) are persuaded that choice is both positive and necessary. Corpus linguistics methods (Baker 2006) are used to facilitate an analysis of government publications and texts to explore how choice is conceptualised, what language is used to support the primacy of consumer choice in education and which metaphors are used to convey political arguments and ideology (Charteris-Black 2006) around choice in education. It is anticipated that the results of the study will reveal the rhetorical strategies through which the public are persuaded to accept the political ideology of choice and its behavioural consequences.

Key words:; rhetoric, choice, discourse, education, persuasion

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