Title

Using Foucault to interrogate teacher wellbeing as discourse

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Abstract

Teachers' work is increasingly complex and demanding. Across the globe, teachers are experiencing unmanageable workloads, high levels of stress, and demoralisation that is leading to unprecedented attrition. In this context, teacher wellbeing has emerged as a focus of political discourse and government policies and programs, whilst teachers in many jurisdictions express their dissatisfaction and grievances with work conditions, including through teacher protests. In this chapter we demonstrate the value and application of Foucault's historical-philosophical method to interrogating teacher wellbeing as discourse with a focus on education policies and teacher strikes. Through deploying various Foucauldian concepts, including 'discourse' and 'power/knowledge', among others, we illustrate how teacher wellbeing as a normative discourse works to position teachers and their work. We argue that deploying these concepts help us to better understand the powers that shape the creation and circulation of discourses through which teachers' work is understood, problematised and acted upon. This is especially important in socio-political environments that aim to diminish counter discourses and sideline teachers from policy debates and public discussions of their work.

Introduction and background

'Teacher burnout is why we have this turn out' – placard[1]

This is a slogan on the placard at a recent teacher strike in Western Australia. It was one of four large teacher strikes across three states in Australia from 2022 to 2024 related to industrial negotiations between teachers and their state government employers. The slogan and the strikes express teachers' frustrations of their work experiences, work conditions and wellbeing. This frustration is not unique to Australia. Teachers around the world report high levels of stress, frustration, dissatisfaction and overwork, which are linked to the crisis of teacher attrition afflicting many education systems, from Jamaica to Israel (see Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2021). It is in this context that teacher wellbeing and teachers' occupational wellbeing have recently become global concerns (OECD, 2020).

On the face of it, a policy and workplace focus on wellbeing appears to be a self-evident good. It seemingly demonstrates a concern for the healthy lives of teachers, and who would not want to be well in their workplace? At this particular conjuncture, where unending teacher attrition is masked by incessant platitudes about performance, sustainability and efficiency, wellbeing has emerged as a "seductive discourse" (Fineman, 2006, p. 270) for education leaders and practitioners and policy

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[1] Placard slogans quoted from Thompson (2024)

makers alike, "after all, most of us would rather not be ill, depressed, and in pain, so it does seem a little perverse to want to reject wellbeing" (Watson et al., 2023, p. 442).

However, upon closer inspection, teacher wellbeing can be understood to function as discourse, as constellations of action for making up particular selves; worse, as configurations of power/knowledge for delimiting the very spaces in which subjects emerge. Teacher wellbeing has arisen primarily through government responses to a perceived 'crisis' in teaching: low recruitment/retention of teachers in the workforce and diminishing teacher morale and mental health. Governments have responded to this crisis through the provision of various diagnostic, measuring and training tools designed to monitor or improve the psychological distress of teachers. In this sense, teacher wellbeing reflects a particular form of biopolitical power for governments: it creates the conditions of possibility for intervening upon and shaping the actions of others. Yet, the ways in which governments respond to this crisis are varied since the construction of 'problems' and their solutions inevitably change from one context to another (Bacchi, 1999). From this perspective, we must refrain from the treatment of teacher wellbeing as something uniform or self-evident across geopolitical contexts. Despite increasing global attention (OECD, 2020), teacher wellbeing emerges from various assumptive worlds that are culturally and historically unique. As Chapman (2015) explains, the "notion of wellbeing implicitly draws on a variety of normative or value-laden dimensions that often rely implicitly on moral and political values" (p. 144). Wellbeing discourse in schools can therefore be considered problematic and dangerous where the policy objectives for improving individual health are intimately connected to the political and moral aspirations of governments to govern more effectively. In this chapter we unpack how aspirations to govern individual health are communicated through discourses concerning teacher wellbeing and their application in schools.

Using Foucault's concept of discourse

Our use of the term discourse is taken from Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1972) and is one of his most influential concepts. Discourse is often used in fields such as linguistics and cultural studies to signify language and linguistic practice. It has been associated with the "linguistic turn" in the humanities, with scholars such as Fairclough (1992) outlining the analysis of text and textual practices as part of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Because of the association of discourse and the linguistic turn, Foucault "is often linked to 'linguistic determinism' and criticized for being concerned solely and simply with language" (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014, 175). However, this is a mistaken view of his use of discourse. Foucault (1972) writes discourses "are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe" (1972, p. 54).

While Foucault (1971) often employs an indiscriminate application of the term discourse (there is no single, isolated vantage point to study discourse since it is generative of, and generated by everything) he uses discourse in a limited sense to refer to knowledge as it is formed through social practices that are imbued with relations of power, hence he refers to discourse as "power-knowledge" (Foucault, 1990, p. 98). In doing so, he directs our attention to the strategies of power at work in the production and use of knowledge which come to define the sayable, thinkable and doable. According to Foucault (1979), "power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (p. 27). Put differently, social practices, like those within the field of education, depend on myriad forms of historically and institutionally contingent knowledge and know-how that inform and give direction to actions and activities. Without such knowledge, these social practices would not exist since they are mutually constitutive of each other: "relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93).

Foucault's approach to power made him distinct from other philosophers of his time, such as Talcott Parsons (1963) (who viewed power in possessive terms as a facility or resource for the performance of systems) or Steven Lukes (1974/2005) (who eschewed any necessary connection between power and conflict to reveal the subtle, often hidden complexities of power formation). Foucault cleaved power from its essentialist, typically feminist, radical and Marxist conceptions as repressive, negative and concealing, instead arguing that "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (Foucault, 1979, p. 194). For Foucault, power is not the property of one class, person or institution, but rather a product of strategies, manoeuvres, tactics and techniques that are socially embedded and historically contingent (Davies, 2004). Foucault (1997, p. 292) stressed that, unlike "domination", power relations are only possible when the "subjects are free", in that power comes "into play" "in every social field", because "there is freedom everywhere". He regarded power as a relation because, in the exercise of freedom, one guides the behaviour of others or is enticed to modify the behaviour oneself, based on interest, curiosity, incentives or the spectre of punishment. As O'Farrell (2005, p. 109) notes, "this happens through a complex interplay of choice, action and constraint". In an interview with Michael Bess (1988) conducted in 1980, Foucault explains this innovative notion of power as: "[When] I exercise power over you: I influence your behavior, or I try to do so. And I try to guide your behavior, to lead your behaviour". This could occur when one person uses a status like "age", "social position" or "knowledge" "to make you behave in some particular

way—that is to say, I'm not forcing you at all and I'm leaving you completely free—that's when I begin to exercise power" (1988, p. 12).

A Foucauldian analysis of discourse goes beyond the analysis of language and instead towards the performative by acknowledging discourse as a social practice of meaning-making and which generates subjectifying effects (the formation of selves). Social reality is not pre-given in a metaphysical sense, but is forged in the myriad ways in which subjects are required to know and act upon others and themselves through a range of social settings. This performative character explains Foucault's remark that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 54), meaning that discourses constitute the objects they purportedly explain. Wellbeing is one of those objects. From a Foucauldian perspective, wellbeing is construed as an "invented category" (McLeod and Wright, 2015, p. 6) brought into existence through "a larger repertoire of concepts and expertise that are mobilized – historically and in the present – to govern, organize and make sense" of the world (McLeod and Wright, 2015, p. 2). Wellbeing as discourse constitutes the workings of power insofar as it is an object of social, expert, institutional and political practices. It is not only an object constituted through its study, measurement, and wider cultural use, but it is also a vehicle of power.

Foucault's notions of discourse and power are useful analytics for mapping the conditions that give rise to 'teacher wellbeing', namely its deployment through political and government authorities and their attendant practices/policies, and subsequent installation into workplaces as various school-based strategies, plans, and actions. In this chapter we analyse the discourses of wellbeing mobilised by authorities through various education policies and programs. This analysis relies upon a political and discursive reading of teacher wellbeing as a problem of government, because as Bacchi writes, "to intervene, to institute a policy, 'government', including but beyond the state, has to target something as a 'problem' that needs fixing" (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2018, p. 18). Foucault uses 'problematization' to refer to (although not exclusively) the historical processes, relations and conditions that render objects uncertain and problematic and therefore amenable to specific kinds of intervention and remedy or change. We suggest that teacher wellbeing emerges too as a specific kind of problematic object in the recent history of political and governmental practices concerned with the management of the education and its users, workers, leaders, and managers. This is a form of power Foucault (1990, 2008) refers to as biopolitics, or the political power exercised through the 'arts of government' for the purpose of managing the life of and processes immanent to populations. Biopolitics represents the historical transformation from a politics of sovereign rule to political reasoning that takes the population as its object of concern for the purpose of ensuring, sustaining, multiplying and ordering life.

Wellbeing in policies

As suggested above, policies must be analysed "in the broader context of the plural and contingent processes involved in producing what they say as 'true'" (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014, p. 178). The purpose of such analysis is not to arrive at a definitive truth about wellbeing or the work-lives of teachers; rather, it is to capture the logics and practices at play to enable theorising about the operation of power. For instance, how has it become possible to frame the problem space of teachers' work and attrition through an appeal to the notion of wellbeing? In Australia, the term 'wellbeing' has not been used in relation to teachers' work lives until recently. Although high levels of attrition have plagued the teaching profession in Australia for decades, retention has typically been cast as problems of teacher stress, low morale and organisational stressors (Beare, 1983; Schwanke, 1981). Indeed, wellbeing entered educational discourse in the late 1990s in relation to addressing high rates of youth suicide and youth mental health. The MindMatters and ResponseAbility programs co-opted teachers into governmental programs and strategies to educate young people on mental health, to prevent suicide, and to create positive school cultures to support the self-mastery of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing (Wyn et al., 2000). This continues today through the recent national mental health and wellbeing *Be You* (2024) program. Although focusing on youth wellbeing, it construes teacher wellbeing as crucial to the wellbeing of students and the effectiveness of the learning organisation. In this instance, teacher wellbeing enters public policy through a concern to improve student health and reduce their educational risk.

Teacher wellbeing also emerged in Australia when academic research and professional organisations took issue with changes to principals' work and poor early career teacher attrition. Riley (2012) partnered with principal associations in identifying how work conditions caused by managerialism and decentralising policies were resulting in school principals being overworked, stressed and unwell. Wellbeing framed these studies which become known as the 'Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey' and continues to this day. Also, large studies on the resilience of early career teachers in Australia were conducted around 2010s in the context of high rates of attrition (see Mansfield et al.2021). Representing the inescapable bureaucratic and political concern for teacher workforce planning, the notion of resilience brought early career teachers' personal and affective lives within the realm of governmental and organisational scrutiny and intervention. Much like wellbeing, resilience as discourse eschews a focus on changing the working conditions that diminish teachers' willingness to stay in the profession, with its interventions typically aimed at developing the individual teacher's personal capacity and competency to cope, thrive and navigate the complex, demanding and exploitative conditions of their work and work environment. Through its inclusion of professional learning modules on the topic of resilience, the government's *Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leadership* (AITSL,2017) aims to change the thinking, attitudes, and outlook of teaching staff and school leaders.

National policies are shaped by wider global policy discourses and vice versa (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). From 2011, the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) began to use wellbeing in its *Better Life* initiative and *Measuring Wellbeing and Progress* program (Durand, 2015). Our point is not that wellbeing was finally recognised as a global concern, but that wellbeing was being constituted as policy object of knowledge, research and intervention through these programs. Endorsed by the OECD, wellbeing was put on the policy agenda of many nations with "widespread recognition that well-being statistics are critical for informing policymaking on a range of aspects that matter to the life of ordinary people" (Durand, 2014, p. 5). In this global context, wellbeing has taken on political significance in Australia in recent years, with the Treasury of the Commonwealth Government releasing its *Measuring What Matters* policy, described as "Australia's first national wellbeing framework that will track our progress towards a more healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia" (Measuring What Matters, 2023). *Measuring What Matters* makes individual and collective wellbeing, and their measurable social indicators, a crucial consideration for public policy and economic decision-making. Viewed through the analytic of governmentality (Foucault, 2007), this program captures the capillary processes through which power is expanded and consolidated through non-centralised, networked means; specifically, the strong alignment between governmental initiatives and parastatal and non-government organisations objectives, hence the program states: "It has been specifically designed to be drawn upon by business, academia, and the community to support their efforts to create better lives for all Australians" (Measuring What Matters, 2023, n.p.).

Such political discourse frames teachers' work in terms of wellbeing (a problem of the individual, of maladjustment or poor self-regulation). This is, however, a contested problematisation of teachers' work and the crisis of teacher attrition that avoids confronting the hard realities of teachers' work lives. The global evidence about teachers' negative feelings towards their work collected by education researchers (e.g. Windle et al., 2022; Langford and Crawford, 2022), teacher unions (e.g. NASUWT, 2022; BCTF; 2023) and independent organisations (e.g. OECD, 2020) show that teaching is currently one of the most emotionally difficult professions and mirrors much of the service care sector, such as social workers and nurses (Ashcroft. et al., 2022). A recent survey of West Australian teachers (Lawrence et al., 2023, p. 86) reported that close to 80% of teachers felt "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with their work, with many of these teachers seriously considering leaving the profession. These teachers cited their unmanageable workloads as well as "personal health and well-being concerns" leading to poor work-life balance and feelings of burnout as contributing factors to their workplace dissatisfaction. Australia's teachers feel their work is underappreciated and undervalued (Longmuir et al., 2022) and report experiencing anxiety, depression, and stress at levels up to three times greater than the general population (Black Dog Institute, 2023). The Federal education minister

says Australia currently faces a "crisis" (Clare, 2024) of teacher attrition. The discourse of wellbeing functions as therapeutic and organisational interventions designed to construct problems "from the bottom-up; as problems of the subject's inability to govern itself on the basis of the consequences of its choice and actions" (Chandler and Reid 2016, p. 28). A *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* was announced by the Commonwealth Government in 2022, which includes collecting data nationally on teacher wellbeing through AITSL's Australian Teacher Workforce Data Survey (AITSL, 2017). However, rather than assume this attention to wellbeing reflects a reality that is finally being understood, we should instead recognise how reality is being constituted and "how political practice necessarily 'takes part' in the 'emergence, insertion and functioning' of discourse, understood as knowledge, and hence in what is 'real'" (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014, p. 176).

Wellbeing in schools

'Overworked, underpaid, over it!' – placard

'You can't put student's first if you put teachers last! – placard

'I walk today to avoid walking away' – placard

'My bra supports me better than you do' – placard

'Make teacher exploitation extinct' – placard

'Respect us' – placard

Policy is not just what happens within domains of political and bureaucratic authority. Policies are translated, adapted, mediated and enacted locally (Wilkins et al. 2024). That is the focus of this section. As outlined at the outset of this chapter, Australian government schoolteachers have taken to public forums, such as rallies and strike action to express their concerns and problems with the profession. A public protest allows teachers to express their views in ways which may be difficult and problematic to express in their workplaces. The slogans on the placards above signal the decreased morale of teachers is due to the leadership of state schools and the system disregarding their concerns, in which they feel undervalued and unheard. Heffernan et al. (2022) found Australian teachers feel undervalued, underappreciated and worse, disrespected by school leaders, policy makers, parents, and the media. In Australia there is some indication (e.g. Adoniou, 2018) that teacher's voices are being silenced where their expertise is concerned. International research (Kassandrinou et al., 2023, p. 3) has highlighted a relationship between emotional exhaustion and job burnout when teachers feel it is "dangerous to express their opinions," so are silenced by a "fear to speak up". Teachers report that voicing their workplace concerns may "induce negative consequences for themselves" (p. 3). This indicates that teachers experience themselves under constant gaze and scrutiny (panopticon) (Foucault, 1995). They feel their conduct, especially in relation to speaking in public forums such as

staff meetings, is visible and policed, so much so that they "become the mechanism of their own subjection" (Bourke et al., 2015, p. 5) by remaining silent. Online conversations by teachers also show they use these digital online communities as places to debrief, decompress and speak honestly about thoughts and feelings they cannot utter in their workplaces, often about how schools' approach organisational wellbeing (Karnovsky and Gobby, 2024).

Wellbeing can be viewed as a strangely empty construct that can be 'filled in' by an array of ideals and investments that may serve the many ends of neo-liberal capitalist management societies. Foucault (1980, p. 58) asks "what mode of investment of the body is necessary and adequate for the functioning of a capitalist society like ours?" Organisational wellbeing can be conceived as a decidedly modern "mode of investment" upon the body of an employee, one which has seemingly become "necessary and adequate" to contemporary post-industrial, service-facing, performance-driven workplaces. Workplace wellbeing programs invest in the mental and physical capacities of the worker to enhance their productive energy and motivation towards organizational needs and ends (Wallace, 2020). There is organizational profit to be gained in engineering the 'well' body and mind through "insistent, persistent and meticulous" (Foucault, 1980, p. 56) calibration of employee's thoughts, emotions, and physical bodies. Founded upon the "happy-productive worker hypothesis" (Wallace, 2022, p. 21), it posits that workplace wellbeing programs can guide employees to calibrate an optimal wellness of self, thereby strengthening and augmenting workplace productivity. We can see this manifested in workplace health and wellbeing programs that teach breathing exercises and mindfulness, healthy eating and diet advice, structured office movement opportunities such as walking groups or office yoga and stretching. These technologies of the self, or 'little machines', provide a means by which policy can act on the conduct of individuals and collectives. In this sense, the what (definition) of wellbeing is not as important as the how of wellbeing, or what it does - the discourse of wellbeing functions to bring individuals' physical, social, mental, and emotional lives within the realm of governmental objectives and actions, including in the workplace (Wallace, 2022).

Several scholars point to a discourse of wellbeing that tends to locate the problem of wellbeing in the individual (see Carlisle and Hanlon 2008; McLeod and Wright, 2015; Wallace, 2022; Watson et al., 2023). If workplace wellbeing is positioned as an individual imperative, the responsibility to be well at work, to absorb disturbances, manage crises, stress, change and difficult conditions or people is the responsibility of employees, with wellbeing practices blurring the lines between the workplace and the private (Watson et al., 2023). Here problems of society, specifically the neoliberal capitalist management of economic and social change, are recast into problems of individuals, communities, and organisations. Wellbeing, on this account, is indicative of wider modes of political and social reasoning captured by the term 'advanced liberalism' (Rose, 1999). Advanced liberalism refers to contemporary ways of "understanding and acting upon human beings as subjects of freedom" and the

"strategies of governing autonomous individuals through their freedom" (Rose, 1999, p. 84). Rose elaborates that in advanced liberal modes of rule, "Freedom is seen as autonomy, the capacity to realise one's desires in one's secular life, to fulfil one's potential through one's own endeavours, to determine the course of one's own existence through acts of choice" (Rose, 1999, 84). We see in discourses of wellbeing a similar form of reasoning and intervention taking shape, which can be characterised as individualising and responsibilising (Saari, 2018).

Teacher wellbeing enjoins teacher responsibility for their personal wellness. Treated as self-realising choosers living in contexts of ontological insecurity and precarity, citizens cannot expect to call upon the state to directly secure themselves from need, want or illness. Wellbeing enjoins us, for our own good, to use its knowledge and techniques to understand and improve ourselves. In this discourse, individuals must draw upon their personal and social resources to form a resilient, positive, optimistic, and self-capitalising ethical relation to the self and to the world. Hence, "the task of responding to conflicting demands is located within the subject" (Saari, 2018, p. 145), which can be a cruel fantasy because locating personal wellbeing as something hardwired or specific to an internal state determined exclusively by practices of the self, minimises the serious treatment of work conditions or wider social, political and economic practices as detrimental to wellbeing (Karnovsky and Gobby, 2024). Case in point, an individualised approach to organisational wellbeing is problematic for teachers because some of the contextual causes of teacher ill-being, such as workload and entrenched under-funding, are "bracketed-off or deemed as immovable aspects" (Watson et al., 2023, p. 442) of modern schooling. As Watson et al. (2023) explain:

> All that remains is an individualised, often moralised, subjective response to these conditions that neglects both the causes of ill health, and the social-organisational factors that situate subjects with differential access to resources with which they can manage those factors and their impact. Stress and depression can be an outcome of the organisation of work. (p. 442)

This form of government (translated into self-government) exemplifies ethico-politics, which "concerns itself with the self-techniques necessary for responsible government and the relations between one's obligation to oneself and one's obligations to others" (Rose, 1999, p. 188). In this sense, wellness has become a bio-morality, a "moral demand to be happy and healthy" (Cederstrom and Spicer, 2015, p. 5) by working on oneself (e.g. body, mood, brain chemistry), lest one be judged as irresponsible and immoral.

In Australia, perhaps as a response to the issues of teacher illbeing and the growing attrition problem within the workforce, the Australian government has recently published on the *Be You* (2024) website a document entitled, *Beyond Self-Care: An Educator Wellbeing Guide* (Beyond Blue, 2023). Within

this document there is acknowledgment of "factors that hinder educator wellbeing", including *"unsupportive leadership, workload, emotional labour, feeling undervalued, job insecurity and toxic culture"* (p. 6). This shows that the teacher's sentiments as expressed in the placard quotes above have been at least acknowledged in some way by federal education authorities. The final point about toxic cultures is telling, given that governance reform of the past few decades has increased the authority of principals over school matters (Courtney and Gunter, 2015), however their autonomy is also constrained by systemic factors, such as reporting requirements and funding tied to strict compliance and regulation, which can burden schools. The notion of 'Toxic schools' has used by Mannix-McNamara et al. (2021) who explore, what they term, the "dark side of workplace culture" (p. 12). Schools can be become "toxic" when staff and leadership "develop dysfunctional values and beliefs, negative traditions, and caustic ways of interacting" (2021, p. 1). One aspect of this toxicity is the formation of "cliques" within schools. A privileged "inner circle" aligned with the school's leadership personnel is pitted against an "outer circle", who "feel silenced" lest they be undermined, bullied, punished, or humiliated by the inner circle (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2021, pp. 9-10).

The placard comments above are not simply teachers complaining or deriding their workplaces and colleagues; in fact, many enjoy their jobs. But neither are they simply 'speaking back' or 'speaking truth to power'. Rather, they are mounting a discourse counter to the wellbeing discourses of their institutions and education policy makers. They are enacting alternative discourses through which teachers and their work can be recognised.

Foucault explains that discourses are not deterministic and universal in some transcendental, metaphysical sense. Despite the seemingly omnipotent character of certain discourses as impenetrable or stable, they are nevertheless porous and contestable. Counter discourse is a concept that helps to conceptualise this openness and fragility. Foucault theorised counter discourse as the struggles over social and political truth-making and truth-telling, in which "the voiceless begin to speak a language of their own making" (Moussa and Scapp, 1996, p. 89). So, while some discourses appear dominant or oppressive, they can through the constellation of new alliances and interests be contested, refused, and even translated to serve different purposes. The placards of teachers recast workplace wellbeing in terms of employment conditions and practices as the problem and source of their *illbeing*. They use cynicism, humour and irony to critique decision-makers and to orchestrate a counter discourse that shifts the focus away from teachers. This challenges the teacher quality discourse of the past few decades (Mockler, 2020), which narrowly associates student and system performance with the competence of teachers, minimising the contextual factors such as work environments that shape teachers' capacities and practices. The wellbeing discourse works in concert with discourses of 'quality teachers' insofar as they conserve the logics of self-improvement and self-care, which Koivunen (2022, p. 469) warns "ultimately wear people down and lock them within the private, personal sense that it is all up to the individual to keep innovating and improving themselves

optimally and persistently." Such approaches to workplace wellbeing maintain rather than disrupt the policies and the organisational practices and cultures that are detrimental to teachers.

Counter discourse chimes with Foucault's (1997, p. 292) insistence that power relations are always "mobile, reversible, and unstable", describing "relations of power as strategic games of liberties" (Foucault, 1997, p. 299). Resistance operates as a part of power, for where there is power, there is freedom. Paradoxically, power can be understood to constitute the possibility of the subject's resistance towards it, as Butler explains: "the disciplinary apparatus produces subjects, but as a consequence of that production, it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself" (1997, p. 100). This theoretical vector opens to analysis power/knowledge as "points of agonism and struggle where different possibilities… can be glimpsed" (Ball and Olmedo, 2013, p. 86). Counter discourses are on display at political rallies (such as the placards that appear in this chapter) and on social media sites where teachers comment on wellbeing and their school's wellbeing strategies free from the judgment of their colleagues and employers (Karnovsky and Gobby, 2024).

Concluding thoughts

Taking inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's writing on morality and religion, Foucault (1998, p. 146) argues that ideas and thought systems are the "exteriority of accidents", including more strategic-deliberate ploys such as invasions, omissions and silences made possible by relations of power/knowledge. For Foucault, subjects are formed through historically contingent norms that, while seemingly universal or immutable, are in fact the product of a facile synthesis, a loose assemblage that is continually made and remade through restless and persistent struggles over meaning. Discourse, Foucault (1981, p. 52-53) writes, "is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle." In this chapter we have applied the analytic of Foucauldian theory to not only challenge the myths of teacher wellbeing, at least the official or normative discourse conceived by those in power, but to capture its open-endedness and contestability as a political project subject to changing meaning and purpose over time and space. In this sense, teacher wellbeing as a form of power/knowledge is defined by discursive boundaries that are always being unsettled and redrawn in the process of its expansion, implementation and revision. These insights, underpinned by the analytic of a Foucauldian reading of discourse, sidestep any deterministic arguments which reduce agency to a residual effect of power/knowledge. Moreover, they undermine any view of teacher wellbeing as a robust, scientific programme of rational planning, especially given the stark omissions and silences that define it, e.g. the inattention to real problems of unsafe workplaces, stagnating teacher pay against rising inflation and living costs, performance-driven cultures wedded to perverse incentives that run counter to many teachers' innate desires to teach, and wider systemic inequalities. Rather, as our analysis shows, teacher wellbeing is a field of

contestation and dissension precisely because it fails to produce communities of consent and support among those it intends to help.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. Are normative discourses of wellbeing evident in your life? What are their features in terms of knowledge claims, assumptions, and strategies/practices?
2. How does wellbeing link the management of schools and teachers to wider socio-political objectives?
3. How can the Foucauldian theories and concepts used in this chapter (e.g. power, discourse, counter discourse) be applied to other educational issues, policies, and leadership?

Further reading and resources

- McHoul, A. & Grace, W. (2013). *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject*. Melbourne University Press.
    - An accessible introduction to some of Michel Foucault's central concepts, including his rethinking of discourse, power and the subject.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-1979*. Palgrave MacMillan.
    - In this series of lectures Michel Foucault presents a genealogy of the arts of government which he began in his previous lecture series, *Security, Territory, Population*. Foucault explains neoliberalism as a mode of government.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
    - Using and extending Foucauldian concepts, this book analyses political power and its invention of freedom as a political resource for governing. It examines key rationalities and technologies of government that comprise modern forms of rule.
- Wallace, J. (2022). Making a Healthy Change: A Historical Analysis of Workplace Wellbeing. *Management and Organizational History, 17*(1-2), 20-42. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449359.2022.2068152
    - This paper uses Foucault's genealogical approach to examine workplace wellbeing historically, the emergence of multiple discourses of wellbeing, and its enduring use to produce 'fit for work' and productive employees.
- Karnovsky, S. (2023). *Conversations with Dr Saul Karnovsky: Insights into teacher attrition and retention*. Spotify Podcast. https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/dr-saul-

karnovsky/episodes/Conversations-with-Dr-Saul-Insights-into-teacher-attrition-and-retention-e2a7kmr/a-aaemi36

> o   This podcast explores and positions the current teacher attrition and retention issue in relation to workplace conditions and the dangers of individualistic conceptions of and approaches to teacher wellbeing.

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