**Everyday Neoliberal Discourse and its Discontents**

This presentation has its foundations firmly set in the life stories of teachers working in a range of post-16 educational settings in Britain. The first of the two projects which form the basis of this presentation looked at the life histories of teachers of literacy to adults who work on the Isle of Thanet in Kent, an area of great social deprivation. Thanet was largely bypassed by the years of economic growth in Britain and made the transition from the crisis of the 1980s to the crisis of 2008 with scarcely a flicker of prosperity in the intervening years.

The second project looked at the life stories of teachers working with adult learners who were studying although (or because?) they lived in very difficult situations; long term unemployment, prison, poverty, exile, homelessness, and combinations thereof. In the second project the focus was on how the teachers maintained an outlook which was hopeful yet realistic.

All the teachers on whose life stories the projects were based were working in environments which were either exposed to, or had succumbed to neo-liberal pressures. The teachers in these situations had to manufacture and maintain ‘hope’ with what little they could pull together in under resourced and conflicted environments.

What the teachers in these two projects say about realities at ‘ground level’ can be evaluated in the light of Bernstein’s (1999) model of horizontal and vertical discourses. In turn this can be related to what they say about their professional and work contexts and wider issues of neoliberalism.

For these teachers neoliberalism is not something which is ‘out there’, it is actually ever present in their quotidian realities. A powerful instance of this is the presence of regimes of ‘performativity’ (Ball 2003), as evidenced by the widespread use of ‘targets’ and other alienating forms of measurement in the work of these teachers. It is also interesting to note that these teachers mention neoliberalism rarely if at all when describing the realities of their work.

It is also possible to critique Bernstein’s model of horizontal and vertical discourses in the light of what happens in the real world. This raises the question of the dialectic of discourses and lived realities. Typically this latter problem is posed in terms of the question ‘does reality reflect discourse, or does discourse reflect reality?’ Work with life stories indicates that the relationship between discourse and reality is rich and complex. It will be argued that the study of relation between ‘lifeworlds’ and social discourses is always more fruitful than the study of ‘discourse’ as though it occurred alone as a world unto itself. The ‘absolutisation’ of discourse is a characteristic of some of the more arid reaches of post-modern academic work.

References

Ball, S. (2003) ‘The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity’*, Journal of Education Policy*, 18:2, pp. 215-228

Bernstein, B. (1999) ‘Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An essay,’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20:2, pp. 157-173