**Dominant discourses within an alternative education setting: the use of fictionalised autoethnography as a method for teachers to express personal voice, share experiences and develop as an adult learner within an academic thesis**

**Introduction**

My thesis initially focused on how it could be possible to illicit the authentic pupil voice of young Special Educational Needs (SEN) learners educated in an alternative education setting. However as my research progressed the focus shifted to encompass my own learning journey both as a teacher of SEN learners and as a teacher and emerging academic.

I work in a unique type of alternative education setting within the UK education system as I teach young people who have been permanently excluded from school, meaning that they are not allowed to return to the school that they have left, often for acts of violence and aggression. These establishment are known as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) although this term is increasingly falling into disuse as many, including my own setting, prefer to style themselves in a more positive manner using the PRU title as a means of explaining their function rather than as their own own self description.

In my current role, I work across the entire age range of the provision which caters for children aged 5 - 16. However the young children I primarily worked with during my thesis research were aged between 5 and 9 and included a range of SEN needs including social, emotional and communication needs. Many were also working at an academic level significantly below their peers and had often missed large periods of time away from school due to their behaviour.

Initially my thesis was very pupil centred with a focus on trying to understand their perspectives and views of permanent exclusion with questions relating to how authentic voice could be found and which methods were useful in supporting SEN learners to share or record their voice for others. During this stage, I found that so many thoughts occurred, or events happened that I wanted to record, that having a notebook easily accessible was an advantage. This paper discusses the development of my notepad into a journal which ultimately led to a change in thesis direction to include a focus on teacher voice and my own learning experiences shared through autoethnography. Through this later stage of my research, I began to hear the plurality of identities and voices recorded in my journals, those of myself as teacher, myself as academic and my own personal thoughts. Ultimately I realised that autoethnographic accounts allowed an insider perspective to be heard, specifically that of a teacher learning not only about her pupils but of herself as a professional.

**The dominant discourses in the current UK education system**

Before moving onto discussing lifelong learning within the context of teaching, I would like to situate my own learning experiences within the context of the education system that I work within and the current dominant discourses.

The focus of the majority of discourses in the UK education system, at a macro and micro levels, are discourses of power. This can be seen within the adult learning of teacher training whereby Britzman (Britzman, 1986) discusses how cultural educational myths are taught to trainee teachers leading to a reproduction of such ideas in their classroom practice. This led to cultural differences between pupils and teachers (Delpit, 1988), a lasting impact on pupils’ lives (Uitto and Syrjälä, 2008) and an impact on teachers’ understanding of their own identities (Sachs, 2001). This ultimately leads to a continuing cycle of discourses of power dividing us which, as Foucault reminds us, is due to their familiarity (Foucault, 1972/1995, p.24).

Within UK Government policy, these familiar discourses of teacher power are firmly established. For example:

* A 2012 Government guide refers to ‘exclusion [from school] as a sanction’ (DfE, 2012, p.4).
* A 2015 Government advice discussing the use of reasonable physical force to be used by teachers, refer to ‘control’ and ‘restrain’ (DfE, 2015, p.4).
* A 2016 Government advice on behaviour and disciple refer to teacher ‘power’ and their legal right to use ‘punishment’ as a tool (DfE, 2016, p.7).

These macro discourses effect the micro discourses within individual school setting across all age ranges and they are often found in their behaviour policies. For example:

* An 11 - 18 comprehensive school states, ‘No adult may be treated dismissively or unfairly’.
* An 11 - 18 comprehensive school indicated that teachers may enforce a ‘disciplinary penalty’.
* A 5 - 11 primary school says that ‘A child can have a maximum total of 18 days seclusion [educated in isolation away from peers] in one academic year’.

Although corporal punishment was made illegal in 1984 there are often calls, from both parents and teachers, for it to be reinstated[[1]](#footnote-1). The fact that this is the case is alarming especially in light of the discourses of power discussed above.

**Teaching in a PRU**

Whilst those are the macro and micro dominant discourses seen within mainstream schools, it is crucial to understand how different being educated in, and teaching in, a PRU is. Currently, being excluded to a PRU is a school’s ultimate sanction and use of power for poor behaviour. The path for the creation of PRUs was laid down in the 1980s allowing for the permanent exclusion of pupils from mainstream schools, there is no uniformity across the UK for how a PRU should function and instead a series of basic principles are laid down:

* The act of permanent exclusion transfers the pupil from the school roll to the care of the local authority.
* Parents have a right of appeal although their chances of success are slim; they are often confused about the process and trusting of the school's decision (Children's Commissioner Report, 2012, pp. 69-73).
* Unless they can get an exclusion over turned, convince the school to offer a move to a new mainstream school or offer home schooling, the only option is the local area PRU which is regulated at a national level by Ofsted (Ogg and Kaill, 2010).
* PRUs have to offer at least 25 hours of education a week (the national standard for pupils to attend school) but each PRU can decide how these hours are achieved.
* Pupils may attend a PRU on a short term basis to prevent a permanent exclusion; this is commonly around 3 months but may be up to 9 months.

**Life long learning - journalling as a method of recording voice and developing personal knowledge**

**First research journal - personal development**

Now I will turn my focus to life long learning and the use of journalling as a method of developing personal knowledge and adult learning. During the earliest stages of my research, my notebook was simply a lined school book belonging to a past pupil with the used pages torn out. This early recording was functional and contained to-do lists, aide memoirs and scribblings of notes. They did not contain any reflection or scaffolding of ideas as Elgin suggests that a teacher’s diary should contain (Marion Engin, 2011).

However it was a book my Moon (Moon, 1999) which detailed what benefits a learning journal could bring to personal development within higher education which encouraged me to change my approach. I started my first research journal with this line:

‘Current pupils I have and my thoughts…’

(14.9.12 Research Journal 1)

This journal became a place where I discussed my thoughts with myself including emerging concerns about insider/outside research especially sharing my ‘voice’ whilst maintaining my professional identity:

 ‘What struck me was that field journals played a massive role in her research. She recorded so much detail. Sometimes beautifully so….The researcher was not part of the community and therefore chose to show her emotions with the kids. I am not in that place and I need to act with them as I always have done. Professionalism? Yet dialogue is a two way street.’ (16.9.12 Research Journal 1)

However, these moments were rare and my journal was largely based around my pupils and the insights that I was having about their worlds and voice. As time progressed I began to question what my motivation for using a journal was as I had started to recognise that my focus had shifted at times to being about my own learning. This was something that I initially felt uncomfortable with:

 ‘I don’t think I have found my own voice yet. True, I have only been keeping one since September, but I am yet to find me in it. Maybe I am too conscious of how other people write and what I should write like. It’s funny that I am struggling with my own identity in this when I am so interested in the pupils’ identity.’ (4.1.13 Research Journal 1)

Towards the end of that first journal, my writing took a further change in direction with it becoming more personal with an increased focus on my own identity with hardly any mention of the pupils at all:

 ‘Candlemas. Thinking back to my time in Chad’s Chapel. That world all seems to long ago not yet I am still so fundamentally the same as I was.’ (2.2.13 Research Journal 1)

At this stage I had not even heard the term autoethnography and my journals had certainly not been written with the intention of ever sharing them. Yet what they had allowed was a continuation of my own learning both in terms of my knowledge about the pupils and of my own identity. It was this development of my professional voice as a teacher that became the focus of my second research journal.

**Second research journal - development of teacher voice**

As discussed earlier, the dominant discourses in education in the UK are largely about power and control. However my journalling led to a development in my own learning as a teacher and the development of my own voice wanting to offer a different approach to the power relationship between staff and pupils.

My own reflections highlighted that, within my classroom, my use of ‘power’ was very different to the cultural climate I was working within and the dominant discourses found in education. I investigated my own understanding of my relationship with my pupils and notions of ‘love’, whether working in a PRU effected my moral compass as a teacher and if teaching was a vocation rather than a profession (Buijs, 2005).

This new refection and learning on my professional role had begun to shape my identity as a teacher:

 ‘Reading about vocation in education. One article by Schwarz (Schwarz, 1999) quotes Huebner (Huebner, 1996) saying that vocation in teaching allows teachers to talk about feelings and themselves - I like!…So after all of that reading, what do I make of teaching as a vocation? I think I am more convinced that it is yet aware that the way we are judged is a professional one with a set of standards etc.’ (3.3.13 Research Journal 2)

Through this learning, I began to feel a sense of frustration that my professional voice, at odds with the dominant discourse of power, was unheard within the micro setting of my school and local area and the macro setting of the wider educational context within the UK. An example of this frustration was when new restrictions were applied by the local area education department about the physical support that we could give pupils. When we did use physical interventions it was not as a means of excising power or controlling behaviour: our rationale was to protect the young person, their peers and staff from injury. However the education department in my local area had applied new rules across all schools that there was to be a wider range of more punitive measures put in place before physical intervention could be used. Whilst I appreciated that, within the mainstream schools this had some value, I believed that this was at odds with the type of setting that I worked in and I was angry that there had been no scope to share my thoughts:

 ‘So my frustration is this. Change management. How this was decided and translated to us was by word of mouth. No discussion. No evaluation. No understanding of the job we do. They want to cut exclusion rates and MIR rates [major incident reports - the use of physical intervention] but the effect on the rest of the pupils’ learning is dramatic.’ (2.5.13 Research Journal 2)

My journals had allowed me to weave my own thoughts with my research and reading on wider issues. They were a tangible record of my own adult learning and my developing voice as a teacher speaking against the dominant discourses of education. Yet they remained private and book bound. This was to change through the use of autoethnography when I realised that I could share my own learning at an academic level by sharing my own narratives in my thesis.

**The use of autoethnography and as a means of sharing teacher voice and adult learning**

As I mentioned earlier, autoethnography was not a term that I was familiar with at the start of the research for my thesis. In fact I was actually 6 months into my research having realised that my journals and emerging writing had become so focused on my own learning, that I stumbled across the method. It was a chance reading of an article by Moriarty with title ‘leaving the blood in’ (Moriarty, 2013) that made me realise that, without knowing it, I was writing autoethnographically. The title summed up all that I felt about my own writing so far. However I also realised that I had taken on a new battle with a new set of dominant discourses: traditional academia. Moriarty sums this up succinctly:

‘I suppose he helped me to believe that I could do it on my own terms but that I had to be realistic about what those terms were in relation to a dominant and oppressive discourse that had thrived for hundreds of years. Let me make it clear: I did not knock down any walls when I completed my thesis but I tried to take part in helping those already at work building the tunnel through, the bridge over and the road around the concrete mass that is conventional academic research.’ (Moriarty, 2013 ,p.75)

Whilst I found some validity in the criticisms of the method as discussed by Delamont (Delamont, 2009), I found a greater wealth of material about the use of autoethnography to share adult experiences of their own learning in an open and accessible way. Although the evocative nature of some of this writing, such as that by Ellis (Ellis, 2004), was not something that I felt professionally comfortable with I encountered writing by a range of people involved within education. One author who became important for my own research was Clough (Clough, 2002) who wrote about his own experiences as a teacher using fictionalised narratives to protect his professional identity. This went beyond simply anonymising his writing as he created entire scenes and situations that had not necessarily happened in the manner he presented them, yet contained the ‘truth’ of the events that had occurred.

Combining both autoethnography and fictionalisation in this way enabled me to discuss my learning experiences in my thesis, share my voice as a teacher and show an alternative educational discourse whilst maintaining the professionalism required of me from my role as a teacher.

**Summary**

In this paper I have highlighted the current dominant discourses within the UK education system and have shown how the use of journals, the space that they create to express voice, can be used to offer a different discourse. I have shown how the use of journals as a tool used by adult learners can have developmental states enabling us to gradually form and shape our voice.

Finally I have discussed how this personal learning can be used to develop academic writing in conjunction with autoethnographic method.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, lifelong learning within the teaching profession, and the continued development of teacher voices to counter the dominant discourses, is crucial in shaping the education system at a micro. Future research would be beneficial in mapping the influence that such learning has at the macro level of Government policy.

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1. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/apr/04/corporal-punishment-student-behaviour-worse> - teacher viewpoint

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/parents-back-corporal-punishment-in-schools-2355544.html> - parental view point [↑](#footnote-ref-1)