

Dominant discourses within an alternative education setting: the use of autoethnography as a method for teachers to express emotion, share experiences and find a voice within a Pupil Referral Unit

Dominant discourses shape our opinions and beliefs and serve to make those beliefs appear ‘natural’ and ‘common sense’. This is true within the current educational climate in England. The dominant discourse within the English state school system is one that could be deemed to be traditional, hierarchical, authoritarian and from a neoconservative political stance (Hill 2010). The general principles appear to be focused on staff control of pupil behaviour and pupil conformity to school rules and expectations: it is a discourse of power which serves to divide (Foucault 1972/1995, p. 24). This power can be witnessed in cultural differences between teachers and pupils (Delpit 1988), the lasting impact of teachers on pupils’ lives (Uitto and Syrjälä 2008) and teachers’ understanding of their own identities (Sachs 2001).

These dominant discourses can be seen at a macro level within Government policy in England where the language used is that of dominance and control with terms like ‘teachers’ power’ and ‘punishment’ (DfE 2016), ‘exclusion as a sanction’ (DfE 2012), and ‘control’ (DfE 2015). However, these discourses can also be seen in a meso level within Local Authority policy and at a micro level within individual school behaviour management policies where again, language can be dominating and controlling with phrases like ‘No adult may be treated dismissively or rudely’ (11-18 Comprehensive) and ‘disciplinary penalty’ (11-18 Comprehensive).

The focus of this paper is the effect that these discourses, macro, meso and micro, have upon teachers’ identify and professional lives especially those working with young people who have been permanently excluded from mainstream education to a Pupil Referral Unit for acts of violence, aggression and disengagement. The Pupil Referral Unit is situated in the North East of England in an area of high economic and social deprivation; it caters for young people aged between 5 and 16. Some young people attend Pupil Referral Unit for several years due to the complexity of their needs, others stay for up to a year before transferring to permanent educational providers, whilst other stay for only a few weeks.

Use was made of autoethnographic writing, both in research journals and within the thesis which this paper discusses, to be able to explore a teacher’s emotional response to the pupils’ encountered, as well as responding to the macro, meso and micro discourses of Government, Local Authority and school policies. This paper addresses the use of autoethnography as a means of recording the emotional journey made by a teacher and their attempt to find a voice to counter the current dominant discourses encountered as part of their own life long learning journey.