A Qualitative Exploration of Pupil, Parent and Staff Discourses of Extended School Non-Attendance

Dr Kate Clissold
A Qualitative Exploration of Pupil, Parent and Staff Discourses of Extended School Non-Attendance

Dr Kate Clissold
kate.clissold@coventry.gov.uk
Aims of the session

- Introduce the focus of the research and position the study in relation to the literature and the service context.

- Frame the philosophical orientation of the study regarding the exploration of individual constructions of ESNA.

- Outline the methods employed in gathering the data.

- Position the analysis of the data in relation to the continuum of approaches that are labelled as ‘discourse analysis’.

- Explore the findings of the research, the conclusions, limitations and impact of the study.
Attending school is constructed in our society as crucial for developing not only children's academic ability but also their skills, values, cultural knowledge and sense of citizenship (Pelligrini, 2007).

It is recognised that most children will occasionally not attend school during their education.

For a proportion of the school age population, this absence becomes extended.
The Focus of the Research

‘Anxious non-attenders’
Constructing Non-Attenders as Anxious

- Words come to function as ‘truth telling’ within the rules of a particular ‘game’ (Gergen, 2015).

- Through the sharing of dominant discourses, these become social realities which are perceived as definitive truths whilst other versions of reality become marginalised.

For example...
...in the ‘game’ of education, school attendance is constructed as an expectation in our society, a social action that will be performed by children of a specified age group; as such, non-attendance is pathologised as a difficulty to be overcome.
Dominant Discourses of ESNA

Legal Discourses

- Legislation concerning school attendance
- Legal responsibility and consequences for parents of school non-attendance
Dominant Discourses of ESNA

Medical/Clinical Discourses

Types of non-attendance
- Emotionally Based Absence v ‘Truancy’

Emotional Basis for ESNA
- Clinical diagnosis and Classification e.g. separation anxiety, depression,
A range of terms are affiliated with school non-attendance, including truancy, psychoneurotic truancy, school phobia, school refusal, school refusal behaviour and school withdrawal.

Single terms are used to construct different forms of non-attendance which further complicates the nomenclature; ‘school refusal’ for example, is used to refer to:

- Emotionally based without anti-social tendencies
  (Berg, 1997; Elliot 1999; Heyne and Sauter, 2013)

- Lack of motivation
  (Archer, Filmer-Sankey and Fletcher Campbell, 2003)

- An over-arching term to describe all non-attendance
  (Kearney and Silverman, 1999; Lyon and Cotter, 2007)

The language used constructs the non-attendance difficulty; this often serves to support the dominant discourses, which often pathologise non-attendance and position the cause within child.
Despite the historic focus on the emotional basis of ESNA, further research has explored the function of the non-attending behaviour and examined the systemic precipitating and perpetuating factors.

ESNA is not a unitary concept due to the heterogeneous nature of the reasons for the presenting difficulty (Miller, 2008).

‘Children who fail to attend school are not a uniform group and SNA [school non-attendance], especially when prolonged and persistent, remains a puzzling and complex problem.’

(Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, 2008, p. 11)
Impact and Effects of ESNA

‘A serious mental and physical health concern.’ (Kearney, 2001, p. 452).

- Prolonged absence is aligned with:
  - poor academic attainment;
  - greater risk of developing a psychiatric disorder that may continue into adulthood;
  - difficulties with peer relationships; and
  - reduced future prospects, including employment difficulties.

- ‘Children missing education are at significant risk of underachieving, being victims of harm, exploitation or radicalisation, and becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) later in life.’ (DFE, 2016, p. 5)
Research Questions

- How do young people, parents/carers and educators construct the reasons for extended school non-attendance?

- Is there a differential in the construction of the reasons for extended non-attendance between the participant groups?

- Is the term ‘anxious non-attenders’ consistent with the construction of the reasons for extended school non-attendance by the participant groups?
Gathering Data: The Participants

Pupils: x 3
Parents: x 4
Staff: x 3
### Gathering Data: Facilitating Discourse

#### Data Collection Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Group</th>
<th>All About Me</th>
<th>School Timeline</th>
<th>Grid Elaboration (Joffe and Elsey, 2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis of discourse may be broadly defined as: ‘The close study of language in use,’ (Wetherall, Taylor and Yates, 2001, p.15)

To be considered DA, the analysis should go beyond a summative statement of the content (Antaki et al, 2003); DA is more than a set of steps applied to the data; it is an approach embedded in the theory of discourse and social construction of knowledge.

In social constructionism, the function of language is considered at both a micro and macro level, which relate respectively to the mechanics of language use and the linguistic structures that operate in society (Burr, 2015).

In discourse analysis, Gee (2014) correspondingly refers to discourse (micro) and to Discourse (macro) to differentiate between the focus of the analysis.
The Continuum of Discourse Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Micro</th>
<th>Macro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conversation Analysis</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ethnography of Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examines patterns in the structure and organisation of language above the simple sentence.</td>
<td>Aims to identify 'speech events' in a community or culture and to consider the socio-cultural significance of speaking in a particular way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discursive Psychology</strong></td>
<td><strong>Critical Discourse Analysis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explores how interpersonal objectives are achieved through the use of 'discursive resources' in social interactions.</td>
<td>Examines how phenomena are constructed through performative acts of language i.e. speaking and writing to expose issues of power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foucauldian Discourse Analysis</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on how identities, subjects and objects are continually restructured and redefined through discourse to examine power in society and how this is supported by 'regimes of truth'.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Focus of Micro and Macro Methods of Discourse Analysis, summarised from Pomerantz (2008)
**Discourse Analysis Procedure: ‘Kate’s DA’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>The interview data was transcribed verbatim.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Each transcribed interview was read whilst listening to the recording of the corresponding interview; initial discourses pertaining to ESNA were noted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>Phase 1 was repeated with emerging discourses being highlighted in the transcribed data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>Extracts from the transcription were copied into a table to reflect the discourses that had been elicited from the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5</td>
<td>The discourses and corresponding quotations were reviewed to further distil the data and to ensure that those relating to the reasons for ESNA were drawn from the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 6</td>
<td>A visual representation of the discourses was developed for each participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 7</td>
<td>The visual representations resulting from phase 6 were amalgamated to form a visual representation of the reasons for ESNA for each participant group’s data set.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 8</td>
<td>The discourses were subjected to a process of comparative scrutiny to elicit common and contrasting dominant discourses within and between the participant groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 9</td>
<td>The dominant discourses were examined and discussed in relation to each participant group and the relevant literature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visual Representations: Pupil Discourses

**NEGATIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE**
- Friendships and Peer Relationships
- Academic Experience
  - Lack of Support
  - Cumulative Effect of Absence
  - Teacher Motivation and Engagement
  - Pupil Motivation and Engagement
- Transition to Secondary School
  - Environmental Factors
  - Curriculum Factors
  - Parental Control Over Attendance

**MENTAL HEALTH**
- Anxiety
  - Pervasive Anxiety
  - Generalised Anxiety
- Depression and Self-harm

**LACK OF UNDERSTANDING**
- Mental Health Difficulties
  - Readiness for Re-integration
  - ASD
  - Professionals' Understanding of ESNA

**SUPPORT AND PROVISION**
- Lack of Support
  - Delay in Support including Professional Services
- Unsuitable Support and Provision
  - Inconsistent Support and Provision
Anxiety and ESNA

The Construct of Anxiety: Pupil B

The Construct of Anxiety: Pupils A and C
Parent Discourses
Staff Discourses

ANXIETY
- Academic Pressures
- Access to Specialist Services
- Transition
- SEND including ASD
- Unsuitable Provision
- Separation Anxiety
- Parental Anxiety
- High Achieving Families

THE FAMILY SYSTEM
- Value of Education and Collusion
- Parental Understanding
- Parental Control Over Attendance

SCHOOL FACTORS
- Academic Pressures
- SEND
- Systematic Provision

LEGAL DISCOURSES
- MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES
- MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES
- HETEROGENIC DIFFICULTY

LACK OF MOTIVATION and AMBITION
- High Performing Pupils
- Awareness of Grade Trajectory
- Environmental Changes
- Teacher Understanding of Needs
- Fear
- Control
- Lack of Nurture
- Lack of Nurture
- Education Policy
- Diagnoses
- Mental v. Physical Illness
- Pupil Choice
- Classification of Absence
- Categorisation of Absence
- Punitive Action
- Depression and Self-Harm
- Depression and Self-Harm
- Complex Presentation v. Within Child
The Vicious Cycle of ESNA

An Illustrative Example of The Vicious Cycle of ESNA based on Thambirajah, Grandison and De-Hayes, (2008)

- **ESNA**
- **Social isolation due to feeling that it is inappropriate to go out socially whilst not attending school**
- **Delay Accessing**
- **Increased levels of social anxiety both generalised and related to attending school**

The cycle illustrates how ESNA can lead to social isolation, which in turn leads to delay in accessing help, resulting in increased levels of social anxiety.
Extended school non-attendance (ESNA) is a heterogeneous difficulty.

Early identification of predisposing, precipitatry and perpetuating factors should be the priority of a multi-systemic approach to prevent and identify attendance difficulties.

The pupil construction of the causes of ESNA is more complex and multi-systemic than that aligned with the ‘anxious non-attender’; the need to seek and hear the voice of the child is imperative in any strategic approach to support and reintegrate a non-attending pupil.

The diversity in the constructions between the participant groups is illustrative of how the dominant discourses of those in power operate to misrepresent those experiencing a phenomena and the consequential impact on timely and suitable support and intervention.
Model of Support: Prevention, Identification and Intervention
Implications for EP Practice

- There is a clear role for EPs to work in supporting the individual pupil, their family and the school and to facilitate communication between these systems.

- This may involve individualised assessment of the presenting needs and of the potential need for therapeutic support, in light of the defensive discourses, the EP has a role in bringing understanding of the interaction of systemic factors to the school and parents, which recognises the multiplicity of contributory factors, and that aims to build capacity in the systemic relationships.

- EPs, whose role is to ensure educational inclusion of all pupils, including those with ESNA (Gregory and Purcell, 2014), are well positioned to offer therapeutic interventions (Atkinson et al, 2012).
Key References

- DFE (2016) School attendance Guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance
References: Social Constructionism and Discourse Analysis

DECP TEP Annual Conference 2019

Please tweet about the Conference using

#DECP19