

Educational and child psychology research using a Foucauldian-informed approach and analysis

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'A psychology that simply contributes to the status quo has little to offer the culture' (Gergen 1997: 34)

Abstract

This paper explores the utility of Foucauldian-informed thinking, methodology and analysis as part of educational and child psychology professional doctorate research. It is based on the experience of a researcher who undertook mixed-methods emancipatory and exploratory research with 14 children (11–15 years old) attending pupil referral units (PRUs) in one local authority setting. The researcher was interested in the label 'behavioural, emotional and social difficulties' (BESD),¹ exclusions and PRUs and, importantly, how the characteristics and constructions of children attending PRUs were made possible through historical, social and political influences and practices.

Background to the research area and approach

The researcher was interested in the area of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) from her work with children at risk of permanent exclusion from school (e.g., in her work coordinating a multi-agency team and in working as an education adviser for Children in Care (CiC)). The researcher noticed inconsistencies in the ways the children were labelled and the support they received and began to question this through a belief in inclusion, equality and social justice for children.

The researcher further investigated the construct of labels during master's degree research (2010) into mechanisms for multi-agency professionals sharing information and the impact upon the psychology of making attributions about the child. During the doctoral course, the researcher expanded her interest in the psychology of attributions of adults, to the psychology of constructs of adults (Kelly 1955). Following the researcher's early interest in the influence of policy upon practice, the researcher developed a critical psychology approach and was curious about power within the system in which the researcher works and

was drawn to the work of Foucault. Although Foucault was not a 'psychologist', and in fact he disliked psychology, his curious and critical questions about systems within society were incredibly interesting, as summarised below:

'A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based... To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy...' (Foucault 1994 [1981]: 456)

The researcher therefore drew upon the work of Foucault to inform the thinking, methodology and data analysis and to provide the analytic narrative in her thesis.

A systematic literature search was carried out to identify and critically review the research themes and identify gaps in previous research. It indicated that, whilst there is research into interventions in pupil referral units (PRUs), there is limited research into children in PRUs and their constructions. There was some research into the effectiveness of PRUs (e.g., Garner 1996; Ofsted 2007), some of which acknowledges the need for further assessment and insight into the needs of children excluded from school (e.g., Gross 2011; Taylor 2012) and the voice of the children in the PRUs (e.g., Salomon & Rogers 2001; Hamill & Boyd 2002; Mainwaring and Hallam 2010), although there are some methodological and interpretative limitations of this.

The search results showed a lack of Foucauldian thought being applied to educational psychology or indeed the impact of governmentality (Foucault 1979) on the subject (or child). Therefore, it was concluded

¹ It should be noted that 'BESD' was the term used in the SEN Code of Practice at the time of carrying out the research and writing the thesis (i.e., this was prior to the current term, 'social emotional and mental health' or 'SEMH', used in the current SEN Code of Practice.

that using Foucault in this thesis research was a novel approach for educational psychology.

Methodological approach: Foucault's contribution to understanding relationships as an interactional site for power

In adopting a critical psychology approach, key ideas from Foucault were used in

'... a readiness to find what surrounds us as strange and odd; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for traditional hierarchy of what is important and fundamental.' (Foucault 1980: 328)

In recent years there has been some progress from individualising psychology to understanding children with BESD within their context. This has included the expansion of a broader range of psychological theories applied to support understanding (e.g., systems psychology) and theoretical frameworks (e.g., Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecosystems model). However, there is an absence of critical consideration of the social, historical and particularly the political factors that make the existence of 'BESD' possible and the impact upon the psychological wellbeing of the individual. Therefore, this research utilised a novel way of understanding BESD and the influence upon children by introducing Foucault.

To describe Foucault (1926–84) has been noted by many as challenging (Rabinow 1984). Foucault did not want to be positioned as a psychologist or theorist. For accessibility in this research Foucault was termed a 'philosopher'.

Foucault was particularly interested in the social, political and historical conditions that make discourses and practices possible, for example writing about institutions of prisons (Foucault 1977), asylums, and civilisations and madness (Foucault 1967). He was interested in the influence of government upon policy and practice and how this was made possible via certain social and institutional practices. He was particularly interested in *how* practices were made possible, rather than *why* (Rabinow 1984). Foucault is often associated with the anti-psychiatry movement, particularly regarding the labelling (or what he termed 'subject position') of others. Therefore, his work was of particular interest to this research in considering the label 'BESD', and how this is made possible, maintained and the impact upon the child.

Specific aspects of Foucault's work were selected for this research to consider governmentality, institutional practices and how such practices make it possible for a person ('subject') to construct themselves in the way they do. Foucault's terminology, when used in educational psychology research, requires some operationalising to make it meaningful, as defined below.

1. Governmentality

Foucault's (2003) concept of 'governmentality' involves consideration of societal and governing policy and practices and how these influence institutional practices (e.g., the institution of education and psychology) from a distance. It is the political rationale which underpins and makes possible certain societal and institutional practices. Foucault suggests that certain practices exist to create, regulate and maintain government ideologies. For the purpose of this research, this includes seeking to create a 'norm' through the existence of the 'abnormal'. Furthermore, governmentality is made possible via the existence of regulatory practices and technologies of power.

2. Institutional practices

Governmentality enables and dictates that certain institutional practices should exist. For the purpose of this research, this included the regulatory power of the existence of labels of SEN, such as 'BESD'. In turn, the institutions (e.g., education and educational psychology) support this existence through their practices, and thus the government norm is created and maintained. This is further made possible via specific institutional practices, such as via regulatory and disciplinary practices (Foucault 1977), such as exclusion, which is made possible via the technology power available to schools. This is also made possible through dividing practices within the institution and subject positions given to people from others, such as dividing children according to their ability (reinforcing the 'norm' and the 'abnormal') or through the use and existence of specialist education, including the PRU. This is particularly prevalent in educational psychology practice in assessing children through an epistemological approach which views the child as a measurable object (Rose 1990).

3. Subjectification

Foucault suggested that through governmentality and institutional and social practices present in the individual's world, the individual can subjectify themselves. This can be via self-disciplinary measures, which are referenced against the social norms. Further, subjectification refers to when the individual accepts and complies with the social norm via self-disciplinary measures. Therefore, Foucault did not see 'power' as a direct act to a person, but as an indirect self-governing process through the existence of governmentality and institutional practices. It is the impact of this on the child (the 'subject'), which was of interest to this research.

Critique of Foucault

Foucault's ideas have elicited much controversy and critique based on his account of power and knowledge, his apparent change in views and lack of evidence-base. Therefore, in embracing a Foucauldian perspective, it is vital to be aware of the critique and consider how this will be addressed. For example, Horrocks & Jevtic (1997: 167) note, 'His work is spectacular, but has little historical accuracy

and shows patchy research. He just goes on instinct.' Foucault argued that his ideas were just that, ideas, or 'tools' to be used to fit their purpose.

Further his work has been criticised for being contradictory. His work has an ontological position of denouncing the existence of an absolute truth, and yet he has developed his own thoughts and account of how truth is made possible, in particular providing some order and reason to apparent chaos in social worlds.

However, his ideas, whilst controversial, offer fresh critique of systems, knowledge and power. It should therefore be noted that this research carefully selected specific Foucauldian ideas which fit the purpose of the research and it was not a 'purist' or exclusive application of Foucault's work.

Methodology: through the Foucauldian lens

The methodology used in this research explored the attitudes of children in PRUs towards themselves and school via a Foucauldian perspective. Additionally, a cognitive assessment tool was used (British Ability Scales – third edition, Elliot & Smith 2011) in two ways: (1) to consider the cognitive abilities of children in PRUs according to the traditionalist and positivist form of assessment, as there was a gap in the current research base, and (2) to engage in a critical analysis and deconstruct this form of social practice. Conversational-style interviews were conducted to provide individual data on participants' constructs and analysed using a deductive Foucauldian-informed thematic analysis.

Research aims and purpose

This research aimed to address the issues identified in the literature review. This included addressing gaps in the research regarding PRU children related to their 'profile' of socio-economic data, their attitudes towards school and themselves and their cognitive abilities. The research also aimed to consider how it was possible for the children to construct their experiences in the way they do and to ultimately consider those social, political and historical factors which make their constructions possible. The purpose of this research was exploratory and emancipatory. Exploratory research is interested in understanding a little-known or -researched phenomenon (i.e., the profile of PRU attendees and their discourse construction). This research also has an emancipatory purpose, which creates opportunities for groups (often minority groups) to be involved in change and seeks to empower them (ie seeking children's views about their attitudes and beliefs and how they talk about their school experiences).

This research adopted a critical realist ontological position. Ontology refers to the 'worldview' (Creswell 2009) one holds, which is '... a basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Guba 1990: 17). Within ontology there are various different types of positions, from viewing the world as having measurable phenomena containing 'truths' with cause and effects (positivism), to viewing the world as constructed from different perspectives rather than there being one truth (constructionism). Situated between these two polar opposites is a critical realist perspective, which

assumes there to be measurable realities influenced by perspectives, constructs and social history, and therefore there are multiple realities. This position was appropriate for this research which views the research through a Foucauldian lens, considering constructs and knowledge to be possible due to mediating factors from society, history and politics.

Research design and questions

This research used a single-case-study design of one local authority, involving 14 participants (11–15 years old) attending one of seven PRUs in the local authority. A mixed-methods design was applied to address the central descriptive, quantitative and qualitative integrated research question, 'What are the characteristics, beliefs and Foucauldian themes of children in pupil referral units?', and three subsidiary research questions. A number of research techniques were utilised to gather the data, which was analysed in using either quantitative or qualitative analysis. For the purpose of this paper, it is the qualitative aspect and Foucauldian-informed research question which is considered here: 'What are the Foucauldian themes identified from PRU attendees' constructions?'

Conducting a Foucauldian-informed thematic analysis

All conversation-style interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The verbatim transcriptions from the conversational-style interviews were analysed using a post-structuralist, deductive theoretical and semantic Foucauldian-informed thematic analysis. It should be noted that this is a novel approach to thematic analysis and is taken in response to Foucault being purposefully unprescriptive in how his work could be used: 'What I say ought to be taken as "prepositions", "game openings" where those who may be interested are invited to join in: they are not meant as dogmatic assertions that have been taken or left en bloc...' (Foucault 1994: 77). Therefore, a pragmatic approach to analysing the data was used in this research using Foucault's ideas and alongside a recognised qualitative analysis method of thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying patterns in the data by capturing 'themes' from the data, which are important to the research question. In the current research, frequency of themes was not the key factor in establishing a theme, but rather themes were derived in response to the research question and where items relating to Foucauldian thought were identified. Therefore, a deductive-theory-driven analysis was used by applying Foucauldian thought to identify relevant units of information and patterns across the datasets (Braun & Clarke 2006). Semantic themes were identified (i.e., those explicitly present in the data). Latent consideration (i.e., considering the assumptions, such as social conditions, on which the experience is based) was then applied at the interpretative and discussion stage. Braun & Clarke (2006) noted that thematic analysis is often poorly defined and, as a response, developed a six-step guide for systematically and accountably conducting a thematic analysis, which was used in the research, as noted below and illustrated in Table 1.

Phase 1 – Familiarise self with the data

The researcher typed all transcripts from the audio recordings in order to be fully immersed in the data. This enabled the researcher to become incredibly familiar with the data and reread each transcript several times before coding took place. Additionally, the researcher made notes in the research journal whilst transcribing, which was part of the interpretative stage.

Phase 2 – Generating initial codes

This phase of thematic analysis involved an initial list of what was in the data and was organised, via Foucauldian thinking, into the left column and each line for all transcripts. This included a series of analytical steps and is presented in Figure 1:

- a. Identifying the object, experience or event. *Objects* were identified as items talked about in general, such as the PRU. *Experience* was identified as the personal experience, thoughts or feelings about the object, such as the personal experience of being excluded. *Events* were identified as a specific incident, such as a particular discussion or incident with a teacher.
- b. Identifying how the object, experience or event was constructed. This was placed in the rightmost column on each participant's transcript and for each line, such as 'PRU constructed as "perfect"'. To promote the voice of participants, their language was used and quoted directly.
- c. In the rightmost column and below the construct analysis described above, a note on Foucauldian interpretation was added. Additionally, Foucauldian thinking and terms were operationalised following guidance from Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2008). This included the following areas:
 - **Problematisation:** The object, event or experience which is made problematic
 - **Technologies:** Including, power, governmentality, social practice and self-disciplining
 - **Subject positions:** Positions constructed within society of another person/group (a cultural repertoire)
 - **Subjectification:** Position taken up by the subject to achieve a social goal (such as 'normalisation')
- d. Other points of interest were also noted in this column, such as the participant's use of power and reference to attachment theory.
- e. All constructs were then colour-coded to make the task manageable and colour codes were noted in the research journal.
- f. Transcript line/s were each manually cut up and grouped according to their colour and construct (e.g., 'self').

Table 1. Example of generating codes in a Foucauldian thematic analysis

Key (Correct punctuation and codes have been used to support reading):

I	Interviewer
P	Participant
...	(three points) Unfinished utterance, or pause
[xxx]	Anonymised name (e.g., school, participant, teacher, other young people)
<i>Italics</i>	Used where words are emphasized
/	Interruption or overlap
(smaller font)	Information added to aid reading
<inaud>	Inaudible
word	Quiet voice

Participant No.	THEMATIC ANALYSIS: Objects, events and experiences identified	Time	Line number	Verbatim transcript of interview	FOUCAULDIAN-INFORMED THEME
4		07.16	187	I – Ok. And how about, um, who decides on ... what	

4		07.20	190	behaviour gets you excluded?	
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-makers	07.26	191	P – ... Them.	Exclusion decision-makers constructed as 'them' (People who make the decisions – technology of power available to others)
4		07.27	192	I – Who do you think's 'them'?	
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-makers	07.29	193	P – ... Like, head master, head teacher and that.	Exclusion decision-makers constructed as 'head master, head teacher' (Aware of hierarchical structures within education and power to make certain decisions – technology of power and social practice)
4		07.32	194	I – Ok. And how does the head teacher know?	
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-makers	07.34	195	P – 'Cause she's been told by someone else.	Exclusion decisions constructed as head teachers being 'told by someone else' (Head teacher as enacting technology of power given to her by another person/system. Social practice of exclusions)
4		07.37	196	I – Who do you think has told her?	
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-makers	07.39	197	P – I don't know. Someone in the head masters' ring	Exclusion decisions constructed as decided by 'someone in the head masters' ring' (Group of people with power to tell others how to enact their power – governmentality)
4		07.43	198	thing.	
4		07.44	199	I – Ok. So somebody, there's a group of head teachers,	
4		07.46	200	do you think? ... and they decide that?	
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-makers	07.48	201	P – Yeah and then there's like a shrivelled-up old man	Exclusion decisions constructed as made by 'a shrivelled-up old man' (Decision made by

					one person in power, elderly person – perhaps reflecting an old-fashioned system? Historical roots, and mystical, mythical systems of exclusions – governmentality and local social practice)
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-makers	07.51	202	who's like, the .. <i>master</i> of head masters	Exclusion decision constructed as made by 'master of head masters' (Hierarchy, decisions made by one person and enacted by others – governmentality)
4		07.56	203	I – So there's one person who decides it, do you think?	
4	Object is 'exclusion' decision-maker	07.58	204	P – Hmm. He's been there since the seventeen	Exclusion decision-maker constructed as 'He's been there since the seventeen hundreds' (Exclusion and education system decision as old practice – historical roots, governmentality and impact upon social practice)
4		07.59	205	hundreds.	
4		08.00	206	I – Ok/	
4	Object is 'teachers' (hierarchical system of teachers) Object is 'gender'	08.00	207	P – /and he like tells them all what to do.	Master of head teachers constructed as 'he tells them all what to do' (One person who has power over others to enact power – governmentality) <i>Gender constructed as 'he tells them'</i> <i>(Male master of head teachers who has power over others – social practice and comment on governmentality)</i>
4		08.03	208	I – Ok.	

4	Object is 'teachers'	08.05	209	P – It's a <i>cult</i> .	Head teachers group constructed as a 'cult' (Exclusive, affecting thoughts of others – power over others – governmentality and social practice. Historical roots – mythical, magic, them/us)
4		08.05	210	I – A cult of head teachers?	
4		08.07	211	P – Hmm mmm	
4		08.08	212	I – And how about the government? How do you think	
4		08.11	213	the government might be involved?	
4	Object is 'government'	08.12	214	P – They tell 'em, tell the shrivelled-up <i>old man</i> what	<i>Government constructed as 'tell' the group of head teachers and shrivelled-up old man (master of head teachers) what to do.</i> <i>(Governmentality – power to tell others what to do to enact power and social rules)</i>
4		08.14	215	to do.	

Phase 3 – Searching for themes

This phase involved searching for broader themes and therefore a broader and deeper understanding of how it was possible for the children to construct their experiences in the way they did. The codes were then sorted into potential themes. The cut-up constructs were stuck to flip charts as part of this process to identify both superordinate and subordinate themes and to start to consider the relationship between the themes.

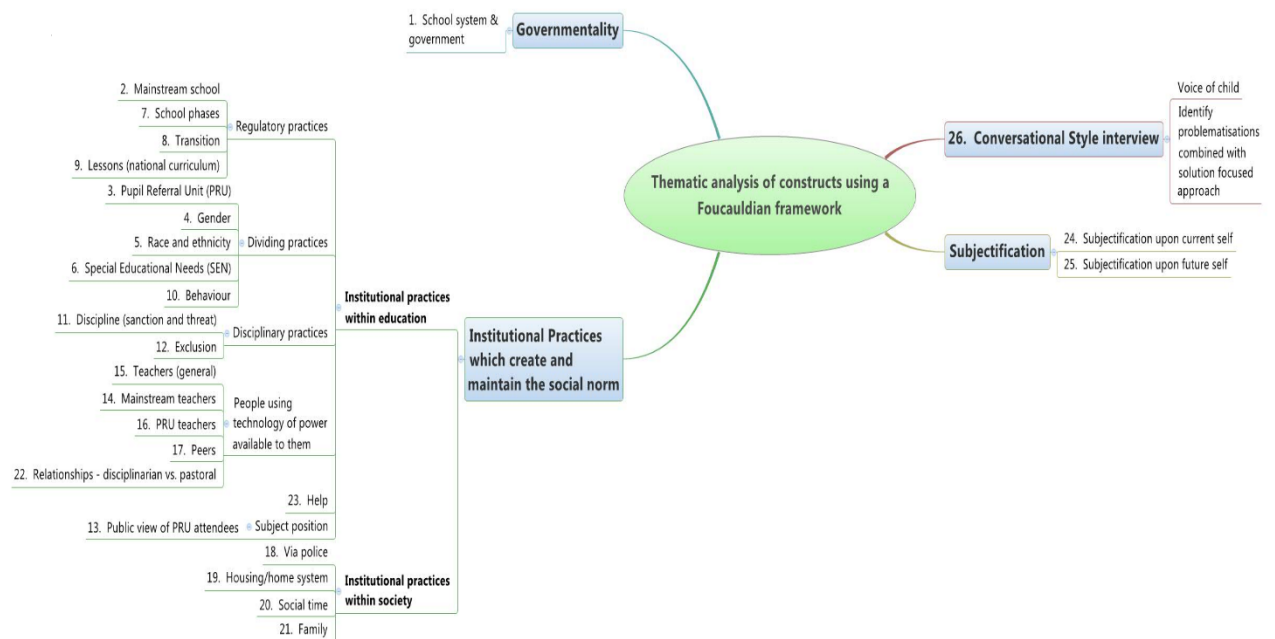
Phase 4 – Reviewing the themes

Phase 4 involved reviewing and refining the themes and collapsing some of the themes together, such as grouping 'family', 'social time' and 'housing' into a theme of 'home life'. All flip charts were then laid out on the floor and arranged through Foucauldian thinking, such as examples of institutional practices, governmentality and self.

Phase 5 – Defining and naming themes

The themes were again revisited and internal consistency was considered. Themes were again moved if it was felt that consistency was lacking. This phase of analysis also involved considering how the themes were located within the broader social, political and historical contexts. Analysis was again recorded in the research journal to start to interpret the analysis according to Foucauldian thinking.

Figure 1. Thematic map of superordinate and subordinate themes using a semantic deductive thematic analysis and Foucauldian framework



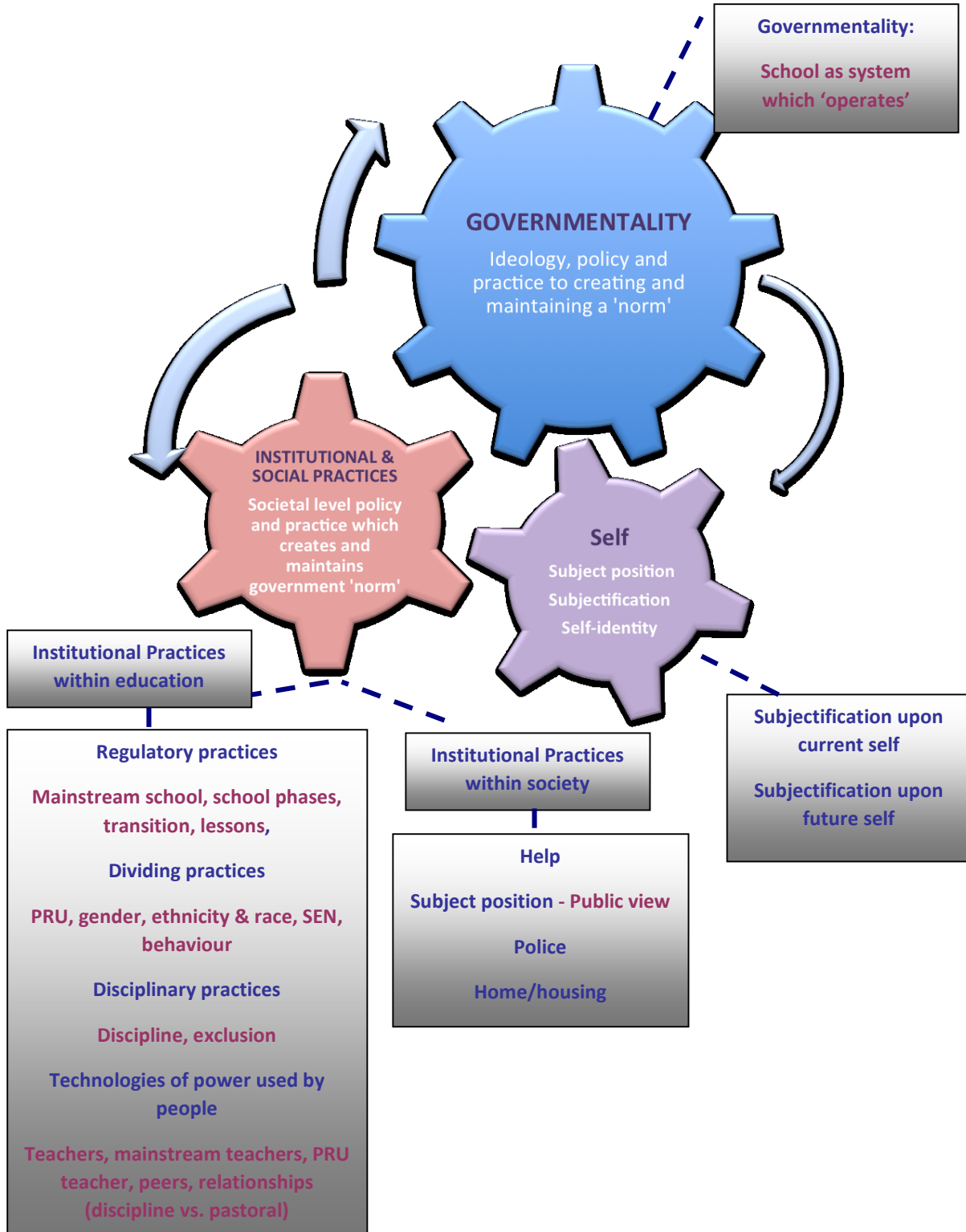
Phase 6 – Producing the report

This final phase involves the write-up of the analysis, which is not possible to report in detail here. Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that this phase needs to provide sufficient evidence for an analytic narrative. Therefore, the 'findings' were reported using direct quotes from the children as evidence of their constructions.

Using Foucauldian thought to synthesise and understand the data

Four superordinate themes and 26 subordinate themes were identified through the thematic analysis. The findings were conceptualised to consider how it was possible for the children's constructs to exist in the way they did through an interconnected cog-like conceptual representation (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Conceptualisation of the constructions of the PRU attendees by Foucauldian themes and the influence upon self



It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the findings in detail here, and these are being prepared for a further journal submission. However, the experience of using Foucauldian thought in EP research is discussed below.

Reflections on using Foucauldian thought and methodology in doctoral EP research²

I was inspired to carry out this research by the children I had worked with and also concerns about children's needs which had somehow been missed or masked by other labels. I started the research journey aware of social constructs and in part from a social constructionist and critical realist perspective. However, this research has challenged me personally and academically in negotiating Foucault. Challenges have included learning about Foucault's work and negotiating my way through the academic French translated work or *oeuvre*. I first had to consider his terminology and seek to operationalise it into terms more 'fitting' to psychological research. I then had the huge task of trying to reconcile two approaches stemming from polar opposite ontological and epistemological positions (positivist and social constructionist). I therefore had to ensure a sound knowledge of Foucault in order to negotiate and problem-solve this and keep my faith that this was the appropriate approach. An example of this challenge is noted in the following extract from my research journal,

'Feeling challenged by this research, but I need to recognise that's OK and expected in taking on research and methodology which is ambitious, structural and considers the meta-perspective. Stick with it! Have confidence!' (Researcher's journal extract, dated 18 October 2012)

At doctoral level, I felt it was necessary to academically address the complexities of the real world regarding children labeled 'BESD'. This includes historical, political and social factors, on which Foucault was able to shed some academic light. This certainly has been a steep learning curve and one of personal and academic discovery and has shaped my thinking in research and practice. It has also helped me to develop my identity as a critical psychologist and I am thankful for this journey. I take forward with me a new-found perspective and one which shapes my identity and my interactions with others, from my personal ideology of the world as being aware of power dynamics and the importance of relationships upon others.

Limitations in using a Foucauldian-informed approach

The first potential limitation for the researcher to address is the novel research design in terms of the type of ontological research position chosen by the researcher. It is acknowledged that combining aspects of positivism and socially constructed phenomena presents an ontological challenge. This was

addressed via selection of a critical realist research position. However, it is felt that it is also important to reiterate that the research did not adopt a purist and exclusive Foucauldian perspective and has used this flexibly in order to use Foucauldian thought in a unique way in psychology. The researcher was aware that the research design was complex. However, the researcher felt that as doctoral research in the 'real world', the design needed to respond accordingly and not simplify the complexities of the real world. This is further highlighted by a quote from Foucault,

'I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it?' (Foucault, 1977: 288)

Applying a Foucauldian perspective to research requires the researcher to adopt a specific critical perspective. It also comes with a specific ontological and epistemological approach of social constructivism. Therefore, this requires careful consideration before 'taking on' Foucault. It also requires the researcher to be reflective throughout the research to ensure that they are clear on their ontological position and when stepping into other positions, such as a briefly entering the world of positivist ontology as this research required the researcher to do, and that the rationale for doing so is made clear.

It is important to acknowledge that use of a Foucauldian perspective comes with certain critical beliefs about psychology and theory. Foucauldian thought considers psychology to be made possible via the existence of social conditions which problematise and normalise, rather than criteria for psychological health and wellbeing. For example the institutional practice used in psychology of 'testing' involves an assumed measurable 'truth'. Through the use of power the individual is measured against this 'truth' and given a subject position, which makes them an object of both hierarchical and normative gaze. Thus it is made possible for the individual to be quantified, classified and punished (Rose 1990).

This means that before the research commences there are certain beliefs which need to be considered about the social constructs and labels in society aligned with governmentality. This is not to say that it is a 'negative' view per se, but rather it is a critical view requiring the researcher to go beyond the construct to consider the historical and social conditions, which made psychological thinking possible. This can be challenging to the researcher and to the reader. It also requires a careful balance between a critical analytic narrative and considering possible ways forwards.

To reconcile potential ontological tensions this current research needed to be clear on the research position. Whilst a Foucauldian perspective was embraced in this research, it was not a purist or exclusive Foucauldian perspective. Instead it applied

² The reflections section is written in the first person to demonstrate the researcher's own personal reflections.

Foucauldian thought at the macro-level (i.e., using some of the main ideas as a structure for the research), rather than in a micro-level analysis. Importantly, this research was set within educational psychology and largely considers children's development, therefore it was the researcher's view that there needed to be capacity for key theories, such as attachment theory, to have room in this research.

Regarding Foucault and psychology, some have suggested that Foucault was in fact a 'pioneering psychologist' (e.g., Hegarty 2012). Embracing a critical psychology view, Foucault was restless with psychology during his time, when empiricism was particularly in vogue, and therefore, he actually contributed to the critique of psychology, although his work has not been assimilated into some areas of psychology. Therefore, this research embraces Foucault's work as a possible 'pioneering psychologist', as highlighted by Hegarty (2012). This research hopes to be an example of the possibility of using Foucault in current and further psychological research where critical psychology meets traditional and evolving psychology.

Recommendations for adopting a Foucauldian approach in research

Using the work of Foucault has been inspiring, as well as challenging at times. To help fellow researchers who may be contemplating the challenge of Foucault in their work, some potentially helpful points are noted below:

- Pre-reading – essential for learning about Foucault directly through his writing as well as critical review from others.
- Operationalisation of terms – to aid in understanding his terms and implications for your research.
- Expect and embrace the challenges – extending and challenging ourselves involves some uncomfortable feelings at times. Embrace these and be confident that this is part of the change process in yourself as a researcher.
- Find a Foucauldian consultant – to discuss and challenge your thoughts.
- Read other Foucauldian-informed research.
- Be clear on how you're using Foucault – are you doing a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) or Foucauldian-informed analysis?

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