

Abstract

With the introduction of the UK Government's inclusive ideology in the late 20th century, increased pressure was put on schools serving adolescent psychiatric units to support their pupils to return to mainstream education. However, there is a perception that a factor that makes the transition process difficult is the attitude of mainstream pupils towards their peers with mental health problems. The purpose of this research was to explore mainstream pupils' perceptions of mental health problems and the extent to which their understandings might lead to stigmatising attitudes.

A theoretical perspective encompassing the ideas of social constructionism, interpretivism and symbolic interactionism, combined with a linguistic based approach, underpinned the development of an empathetic methodological approach to researching sensitive topics with adolescents. The research involved collecting data using a sequence of questionnaires, individual interviews and group interviews with pupils in three secondary schools within socially diverse communities. The questionnaire was presented in comic booklet form and included such techniques as cartoons, vignettes, and adapted familiarity and social distance scales.

This dissertation reveals ways in which young people create their personal constructs around mental health and the complexities of the nature of stigma. It also highlights the implications that these findings have for staff and pupils involved in the transition process and for the development of practice in this field.

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Introduction to the unfolding of my thesis



‘The Liberation’ by M. C. Escher

‘On the uniformly grey surface of the strip of paper that is being unrolled, a simultaneous development in form and contrast is taking place. Triangles, at first scarcely visible, change into more complicated figures, whilst the colour contrast between them increases. In the middle they are transformed into white and black birds, and from there fly off into the world as independent creatures. And so the strip of paper on which they were drawn disappears.’

(Escher 2001: 9)

‘The Liberation’ (1)

Using the visual image of ‘The Liberation’, I represent three main threads that unfold simultaneously through the course of this dissertation. Through these threads I reveal my thesis and my multifaceted contribution to the field of mental health issues within the mainstream educational system. However, at the beginning of my research the intricacies of difference and the complexities of each thread are hidden. They, like the triangles, are represented as simplistic ideas endorsing assumptions of straightforwardness.

As I recount my research, differences come into view and I reveal levels of complexity, which open up a deeper understanding of young people’s individual perceptions of mental health problems experienced by their peers and a research process that allows for a different way of knowing. The flying birds represent this acknowledgement of individuality.

The three threads of which I speak are:

The research process:

Initially I unfold the young people’s perceptions of mental health problems driven by a research process, which at first appears relatively straightforward. But my findings at this initial stage mean that I need to develop another stage of the research process in order to carry on unfolding the understanding. This cycle of the research process, in which the complexity of these findings drives the research process forward, is repeated because at each stage of enquiry my understanding becomes clearer yet more complex than before. I demonstrate how I gradually develop a methodology, based on a linguistic approach, which begins with the tightness of a quantitative questionnaire and opens up into qualitative interviews and narrative accounts.

Young people's perspectives:

Initially I represent homogeneity within groups of young people. I consider that each young person may be simplistically characterised as a 'normal' mainstream pupil or a 'stigmatised' mental health patient, according to his or her mental health status and behaviours displayed. However, I show how I move from a place of considering a state of homogeneity to disclose one of individuality. I demonstrate how being an individual is bound by experiences and linguistic competency understood within the complex contexts of political, historical and social conditions. Illustrating my dissertation with narrative accounts of young people's individual experiences and personal constructs I reveal diverse beliefs and values surrounding mental health problems, which open up my own ideas around stigmatising attitudes.

**Voice of the developing researcher:**

Within my dissertation I also unfold my own story of educational experiences and of finding my individual place as a teacher in a school for adolescents experiencing mental health problems. I demonstrate how, as a consequence of carrying out my research enquiry, I develop my own voice as a researcher and practitioner, and as such exemplify a confidence in the voice of education within a multidisciplinary team, where education is often marginalized by the medical world. I also acknowledge how I examine my own constructs and am prepared to change and develop them as I gain more experience and understanding of others' perceptions.



At the beginning of each chapter I signal to the reader where and how I unfold and develop each thread, with the order in which I introduce them indicating their importance within that chapter.

