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Bullying in Secondary Schools
A Discursive Approach

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Abstract

This study attempts to transcend the narrow boundaries imposed on mainstream research into bullying by its adherence to a modernist discourse of individualism. The theoretical framework for this research argues that a modernist focus has both limited our understanding of the phenomenon and contributed to its continued occurrence. An approach that is underpinned by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of a social constructionist paradigm offers the potential for a broader and more encompassing analysis of this formidable social issue. Language is taken as a critical focus of attention because of its pervasiveness in social interaction. Discourse is understood as actively constructing the experience and meaning of bullying. Furthermore, a consideration of the power relationships embedded within discourse is an essential feature of this approach.

The study involved interviewing 24 senior students from a small provincial New Zealand secondary school to discuss a range of issues surrounding bullying. These interviews were taped and transcribed and a discourse analysis was carried out to gain an understanding of how students talk constructed bullying. Discourses were identified that constructed bullying as *disparity*, as *irrelevant*, as a consequence of *difference*, as a form of *discipline*, and as *inevitable*. The construction of bullying as *disparity* was seen to struggle against the other prevailing educational discourses that together functioned to maintain the status quo of power relationships in the educational institution. It is suggested that the acceptance of such 'common sense' constructions of bullying are effectively sustaining the pervasiveness of bullying in schools today.

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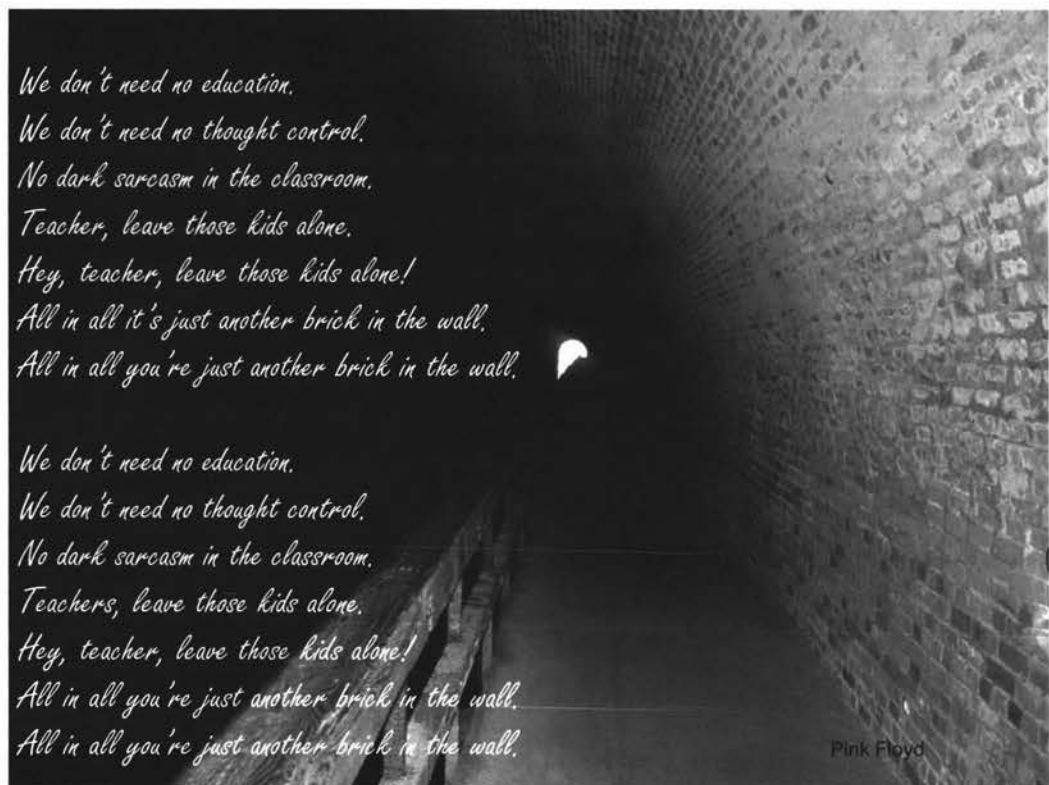


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