Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Teacher Talk about Student Characteristics and Patterns of Behaviour

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Psychology

at Massey University, Albany Campus, Auckland
New Zealand

Vasti Bester

2007

Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work except where due acknowledgement is made and that this material has not been included in a thesis or report submitted to Massey University or any other university for a degree or other qualification.

.....V.Bester.....

Vasti Bester
Candidate for Masters of Arts (Psychology)

Abstract

This thesis reports on the discourse analysis of two groups of secondary school teachers' conversation about student behaviour. The study involved a two stage analysis. The teachers' conversation was first analysed according to its reflection of teachers' views of students and the environment on continua from active to passive. Main themes emerging across the conversations were then identified with links between the themes established through understanding of the teachers' views on the active to passive continua. This method of analysis generated a theory of behaviour management for the teachers who took part in the study. It provided in-depth understanding of the relationship between the teachers' sense of agency at the time and the forms of interventions they implemented to address student behaviour. This theory identified contextual factors that affected teachers' choices of action in relation to student behaviour and indicated pivotal points for intervention to foster shared student-teacher problem solving.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the many people who supported me throughout this study. I express my appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Jean Annan, who constantly provided ideas, encouragement and guidance. My thanks also go to Dr. Kerry Gibson for her feedback and further constructive suggestions.

I extend my special thanks to the teachers who volunteered to participate in this study. These teachers gave so willingly of their time and thoughts and I really cannot thank them enough.

To my parents, I express gratitude for their support, encouragement and patience throughout the year.

Most importantly, thank you Lord for this opportunity. You provided reason.

Table of Contents

Title Page i
Declaration ii

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements iv
Table of Contents v
List of Figures ix
List of Tables x

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
1.1. Background: Historical views of the learner 1
1.2 The teacher's belief system 2
1.3 Organisation of the thesis 3

Chapter 2: Literature Review 6
2.1 Social Constructionist Theory 6
2.2. Language and meaning 8
2.3. Ecological Theory 10
2.4. Locating problems and solutions: A matrix of perspectives 12
2.5. Problem solving 16
2.6. Summary 18

Chapter 3: An Introduction to the Methodology 19
3.1. Introduction 19
3.2. Discourse Analysis 19
3.3. The ten stages of discourse analysis 21
3.3.1 Stage 1: Clarifying the research question focus in the light of the role of discourse 21
3.3.2. Stage 2: Selecting an appropriate sample 22
3.3.3 Stage 3: Collection of data in the form of documents or transcribed interviews 22
3.3.4. Stage 4: Carrying out the interviews 23
3.3.5. Stage 5: Transcription of interviews 24
3.3.6. Stage 6: Coding of the data 24

3.3.7. Stage 7: Analysis 25
3.3.8. Stage 8: Validation of results 25
3.3.9. Stage 9: Writing the report 26
3.3.10. Stage 10: The application or use of the study 26
3.4. Summary 27

Chapter 4: The Research Design 28
4.1. Introduction 28
4.2. Procedures 28
4.2.1 Stage 1: Clarifying the research focus 28
4.2.2 Stage 2: Selection of the sample 29
4.2.3 Stage 3: Collection of data/interviews 30
4.2.4 Stage 4: Carrying out the interviews 33
4.2.5 Stage 5: Transcription of interviews 35
4.2.6 Stage 6: Coding 36
4.2.7 Stage 7: The analysis of transcripts 36
4.2.8 Stage 8: Validation 37
4.2.9 Stage 9: Writing the report 39
4.2.10 Stage 10: The application 40
4.3. Ethical aspects of discourse analysis 40

Chapter 5: Results: Discourse 44
School A: Results
5.1. Question One: Ice breaker 44
5.2. Question Two: Challenging situation 46
5.3. Question Three: Time of day 47
5.4. Question Four: General solutions 49
5.5. Question Five: Satisfying situations 50
5.6. Undefined comment catagory 51
School B: Results
5.7. Question One: Ice breaker 52
5.8. Question Two: Challenging situation 54
5.9. Question Three: Time of day 56
5.10. Question Four: General solutions 58

5.11. Question Five: Satisfying situations 59
5.12. Undefined comment catagory 60
5.13. Summary 61

Chapter 6: Results: Consultation and Co-construction 64
6.1. Introduction 64
6.2. The consultation and co-construction process 64
6.3. Results: Co-construction - School A 66
6.4. Results: Co-construction - School B 67

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion 69
7.1. Overview of chapter seven 69
7.2. Teacher perspectives 69
7.3. Dominant perspectives 70
7.3.1 Student active/environment passive (Quadrant 3) 70
7.3.2 Environmnent active/student passive (Quadrant 2) 71
7.4. Less dominant perspectives 73
7.4.1 Student active/environment active (Quadrant 1) 73
7.4.2 Environmnent passive/student passive (Quadrant 4) 74
7.5. Discourses 77
7.5.1 Need to assign responsibility 77
7.5.2 Personal agency 78
7.5.3 Trying to understand 80
7.5.4 Reflective practitioner 83
7.5.5 Access to solutions 84
7.5.6 School rules 84
7.5.7 Students' disconnection from curriculum 85
7.5.8 Defensive reasoning 85
7.5.9 Isolation 86
7.6. A stuggle for power (undefined comment category) 87
7.7. The usefulness of the Matrix of Perspectives 89
7.7.1 The usefulness of the Matrix of Perspectives: Teacher understanding 89
7.7.2 The usefulness of the Matrix of Perspectives: Teaching profession 89
7.7.3 The usefulness of the Matrix of Perspectives: Research and educational psychology.. 91

7.8. Limitations 91
7.9. Future Research 92
7.10. Conclusion 93

References 95

Appendices 103
Appendix A Approval letter from Massey University Human Ethics Committee 104
Appendix B Consent form for participants. 105
Appendix C Information sheet for participants 106
Appendix D Feeback Questionnaire 108
Appendix E Interrater-reliability tally chart 110

List of Figures

Figure **Page**

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Perspective Model. 11
Figure 2. A matrix for conceptualising the relationship of the learner and environment as they function within specific contexts 13
Figure 3. Individual differences conceptualised within the Matrix of Perspectives: Perceptions of problems and solutions 15
Figure 4. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Introductory question – School A 45
Figure 5. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Challenging situation – School A 46
Figure 6. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Time of day - School A 48
Figure 7. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: General solutions – School A 49
Figure 8. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Satisfying question – School A 50
Figure 9. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Introductory question – School B 52
Figure 10. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Challenging situation – School B 55
Figure 11. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Time of day - School B 57
Figure 12. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: General solutions – School B 58
Figure 13. Perceptions of the location of problems and solutions: Satisfying question – School B 59
Figure 14. An illustration of T_5's indicated perspective of the proposed solution to the situation described involving a student misbehaving (Quadrant 2) 72
Figure 15. An illustration of T_8's indicated perspective of the situation described involving a student misbehaving (Quadrant 4) 75
Figure 16. A modified version of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Perspective Model illustrating T_8's indicated perspective of the situation described (Quadrant 4) 76
Figure 17. An illustration of T_6's indicated perspective of the situation described 79
Figure 18. Illustration of T_8's indicated perspective of the situation described 80
Figure 19. A diagram showing relationships among the discourses illustrated in the teachers' conversations 94

List of Tables

Table **Page**

Table 1. The interview schedule 31

Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis is a study of teacher talk about student characteristics and patterns of behaviour. The study intended to serve two purposes. The first was to examine two groups of teachers' perceptions of the location of problems and solutions of student behaviour. The study also looked at the contextual validity of the Matrix of Perspectives (Bowler, Annan & Mentis, 2007) (based on a concept described by Dent-Read and Zukow-Goldring, 1997) to understand these teachers' points of view. It specifically aimed to investigate the language teachers used when talking about student behaviour and the perspectives illustrated by teacher conversations. In addition, this study investigated the usefulness of the matrix of perspectives for teachers, in relation to their work and whether it reflected their thinking.

The study has been approached from a social constructionist perspective, carrying the assumption that understanding was socially constructed in the interaction between people. Understanding was seen as negotiable. Discourse analysis, as conceptualised by Potter and Wetherell (1987) was used to examine the understandings indicated by teachers' conversations.

1.1 Background: Historical Views of the Learner

Theories of learning and development suggest a number of ideas about what it means to be human. Bowler et al. (2007) observed that learners have been viewed in a number of ways throughout history. For example, they noted that in 500 BC Heraclitus, the first Greek philosopher to explore human nature, described learning as dynamic and interactive, as an 'attunement of opposite tensions'. The authors noted that Comenius, a Renaissance educator, also presented a developmental perspective of learning as a person-environment interaction. Other theories located learning in innate human capabilities or in the actions of the environment. Bowler et al.(ibid) discussed the impact of 19th century genome discoveries and the associated use of the term organism, a description that has been revived in recent times, and the work of Locke who described the neonate as tabula rasa, a blank slate awaiting

the imprint of the environment in 1753.

It appears that educational theory has turned a full cycle. Bronfenbrenner (1979), whose theory of ecological development holds favour in educational psychology today (Annan, 2005; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000), proposed a theory of learning that involved bi-directionality of the influences of the individual and the world. Learning was not an individual matter. It involved the dynamic interaction of the social ecology. Bronfenbrenner proposed that "if one member of a dyad undergoes developmental change, the other is also likely to do so" (p. 65). Bowler et al. (2007) noted that the significance of Bronfenbrenner's work was related to his emphasis on "the significance of the human dyad as a context 'not merely of reciprocal interaction but of reciprocal development' (Bowler et al., 2007, p. 389).

1.2 The Teacher's Belief System

Teacher beliefs about students will colour everything that happens in the classroom, both educationally and in terms of student discipline. Nespor (1987, p.323) suggested that in order "to understand teaching from teachers' perspectives, we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work". The way in which teachers believe their role should be fulfilled; their underlying philosophies and their implicit theories about teaching and learning can guide their behaviour in the classroom (Brophy, 1982; Clark & Lampert, 1986; Shavelson, 1983). Teacher beliefs affect the way in which information about learners is encoded, how that information is remembered and used, when making instructional decisions (Dusek, 1985).

A teacher's approach to control and discipline is linked to that teacher's belief system of teaching. A belief system is the "set of values and beliefs about how students learn, the aims of education, and the best approach to teaching which every teacher develops" (Barry & King, 1998, p.558). Knowingly or unknowingly, the teacher's belief system drives the teacher's classroom decision-making and behaviours and this is especially evident in the case of control and discipline. For example, teachers may adopt a behaviourist position with behaviour modification as a key strategy, or a humanistic position with the teacher taking on

a low level form of counselling role. Teachers may behave differently towards different learners depending on the beliefs and expectations they have for their learning.

Teachers' belief systems greatly influence the way teachers function in the classroom (Anderson, 1996; Quinn-Leering, 2000; Richardson, 1996 cited in Maslovaty, 2003). Empirical studies have generated two consistent findings. First, teachers' beliefs appear to be relatively stable and resistant to change (see Brousseau, Book, & Byers,1988; Herrmann & Duffy, 1989; Maslovaty, 2003). Secondly, teacher's beliefs tend to be associated with a congruent style of teaching that is often evident across different classes and grade levels (Evertson & Weade, 1989; Martin, 1989 cited in Kagan, 1992). Much about what teachers know or believe about their skills are implicit (see Kagan, 1992). Kagan (1992) found that teachers' reliance on their own experiences and prior beliefs suggests that "teacher beliefs functions like any other form of personal knowledge, the implicitly held assumptions about people and events that individuals bring to a particular knowledge domain" (Kagan, 1992, p.79).

Research on teacher belief suggests that the most significant characteristic of classroom teaching is its many uncertainties. A teacher cannot continue to organise instruction and maintain control in the highly unpredictable environment of the classroom without knowing whether things are going well. Kagan (1992) argues that a teacher must be able to identify, label, solve, and evaluate the solutions to problems and argues that "in a landscape without bearings, teachers create and internalize their own maps" (Kagan, 1992, p. 80).

1.3 Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis began with an introduction and background to the study. This is followed by six chapters, structured to match the research method. A brief description of the contents of each chapter is presented below.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 introduces the study, provides a background and explains the rationale for embarking on this study and for the particular focus selected.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 discuss the theoretical basis of this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology – An Introduction to the Methodology

Chapter 3 describes the research method selected for the study. This particular study uses discourse analysis, focusing particularly on the model of discourse analysis as proposed by Potter and Wetherell (1987).

Chapter 4: Methodology – The Research Design

Chapter 4 discusses critical features of the approach taken in the research. It contains the specific aims and research questions for the study, a description of the way information was gathered and processed. It also provides information regarding the involvement of participants.

Chapter 5: Results

This chapter presents the analysis of ten secondary school teachers' conversation.

Chapter 6: Consultation and Co-construction

Chapter 6 presented the findings, feedback and usefulness of the matrix of perspectives obtained from the reporting and feedback sessions. Furthermore, it outlined the consultation and co-construction process and results.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

The final chapter describes the results in more detail, presents the conclusions drawn in this research and discusses the implications of the study. The implications of the study are identified in addition to several suggestions for further research.

If psychologists understand the way teachers perceive problematic behavioural situations, they will be in a better position to develop better collaborative relationships with teachers. Psychologists require tools to discern discourses in schools around behavioural problems and

can support effective interventions by recognising, understanding and utilising the diverse views of people involved in their consultation work. I believe that it is important to understand our own perspectives and that of others as this will enhance our communication with people, our understanding of one another, and our ability to create solutions together. This chapter outlined the background and organisation of the thesis. The following chapter discusses the theoretical basis for this study.