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‘Co-constructing’ changes to classroom practice: Processes developed with early childhood teachers for students at educational risk.

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A thesis submitted to The Graduate School of Education
University of Notre Dame Australia

In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2005

Declaration of Authorship

This thesis is presented for examination as my own work. None of the material contained herein has been previously submitted for degree or diploma awards in a tertiary institution.

To the best of my knowledge, all materials quoted or referenced in this thesis are used within existing copyright and intellectual property right legislation.

The Ethics Committee of the University of Notre Dame Australia scrutinised this school-based research at the proposal stage. Professor Tony Ryan of the University of Notre Dame provided further critical comment. Professor Ann Zubrick supervised this research throughout the project.

I declare my authorship of this thesis. This work is an outcome of qualitative inquiry co-constructed with ten early childhood teachers and other members of one school community.

_____

Carmel P. Bochenek
17.1.05

Abstract

Current research confirms that high quality teaching makes the difference in students' learning outcomes. In addition, contemporary views of teacher education highlight the benefits of teachers being involved as active learners in their own professional development and whole school planning. This research examines processes by which teachers construct change in their thinking and classroom practice to better meet the needs of students at educational risk in early childhood classrooms. Ten early childhood teachers, in one rural primary school were supported in their professional growth by the participant researcher.

The most important outcome of this teacher-researcher action learning project was the development of "co-constructed" learning processes in classrooms. Teachers valued co-constructed practice more than the development and use of an Oral and Written Language Database (OWLD) for each student at risk. Teachers negotiated their individual beliefs about child language development, literacy learning and early childhood pedagogy with the participant researcher in order to plan, implement and reflect on effective classroom practice from Kindergarten to school Year Two. Participant observer and participant researcher roles sustained the collection of teacher interview data, oral and written language samples, classroom language plans, critical language teaching - learning incidents, and student learning outcomes during one school year.

Comprehensive teacher data are reported through structured narrative to confirm that co-constructed classroom language development practice made participants' thoughts explicit and enhanced their practice. Co-constructed classroom practice engaged participants in learning about teaching in their classrooms and schools, effecting sustained change for all participants. This study verifies factors shaping change in teachers' thought and pedagogy. It emphasizes interactive and reciprocal learning as catalysts for self-reflection and developing knowledge and expertise. Positive implications for the co-construction of school-based language support services, teacher education and for managing whole-school change are discussed.

Acknowledgements

Many people have critiqued, supported and inspired the learning necessary for the completion of this research. The following people shaped this thesis and these findings.

The teachers, parents and students of the rural school community readily participated in the classroom-based research, generously contributing their time, opinions and questions. I have great respect for each of these participants and for their truthful sharing. Jacqui, Toni, Penny, Maree and the other teachers discussed their thinking and challenged mine. This validated our practice, interpretations and retelling.

Teachers, speech pathology and university colleagues, especially those from 1999-2004, shaped my thoughts and practice through discussion, reflection and their enthusiasm for working together. In addition, I acknowledge the many students at risk who accepted me into their lives and taught me about learning.

Particular acknowledgement is given to the following individuals:

Pamela Stynes and Danielle Ellis: proofreaders extraordinaire! Thank you.

My supervisor, Professor Ann Zubrick. Ann guided me to strive for sound theory, impeccable methodology and a unique contribution to the field. She understood that I also needed to be wife, mother, daughter, sister and friend.

My parents, Tom and Bridie Cunningham, for their practical caring and persistent belief in the pursuit of learning opportunity. This completion is theirs too.

Daniel, Shannon and Liam, who journeyed through five years of childhood whilst this thesis was "work-in-progress." They asked questions, offered opinions and ensured that our co-constructions about early and middle childhood language development were engaging, purposeful and enjoyable.

Garry. My deepest gratitude is to him.

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Prologue

My daily challenge as a literacy specialist is to know how best to support ordinary teachers to move forward as learners, whilst also moving students to achieve new learning outcomes. Time to reflect on teachers' thoughts, practices and learning processes is a luxury, a contrast to the demands and pace of classrooms. Time to engage with other teachers to determine influential factors in their own learning processes comes only rarely. Indeed many of the teachers who over the last twenty years have helped shape my thinking and practice in primary schools, will be unaware of their contribution to this work.

Supervised research provided me with an opportunity to reflect on current theories of teacher decision-making, to investigate influences on teachers' decision-making processes, and to find means to support teacher and researcher growth. Relatively few researchers work each week in classrooms with ordinary (not exemplary) classroom teachers. Without this experience how do we find ways to support ordinary teachers to become highly effective?

This thesis almost began in several places before it became a classroom-based action research project. From these scattered beginnings, my research goals and intended outcomes changed as a consequence of my developing thought and practice. For twenty years I have been engrossed and challenged by a need to create optimal teaching environments and learning experiences for young students at educational risk. Many day-to-day moments (spent with teachers and students at educational risk in early childhood or primary classrooms) now stand out among a collection of memories of where risk impacts on literacy teaching and learning. These moments eventually culminated in my drive to co-construct a theory of practice *with,* rather than *for,* teachers, students, parents and school administrators.

In the early 1980s students with diagnosable speech-language-hearing impairments were managed from a deficit perspective. If time, resources and geographical proximity allowed, such students left their classrooms to attend speech pathology sessions. Skilled speech-language pathologists worked to 'fix' the diagnosed impairment, theoretically minimizing the impact of speech-language-hearing

impairment on literacy acquisition and classroom learning. I wondered why students left classrooms and why speech pathologists laboured to mimic classroom tasks in clinics. I was troubled by the assumption that clinical services could be transferred to classrooms, if only teachers would adopt comparable clinical practices. I noted that as teachers enthusiastically asked speech pathologists for teaching and learning strategies for use in their classrooms, I (like many others) confidently provided "treatment" ideas. Recommendations made with the best intentions would later be discarded as inappropriate and unacceptable in classroom contexts.

Drawing upon my earlier undergraduate teaching experience and a genuine respect for teachers' classroom expertise I sought further opportunities to work collaboratively with teachers in classrooms. I saw this as a way to experiment with what did and what didn't work for students with characteristics of language-based educational risk, and their teachers. The next decade confronted me with what I didn't know. How could dyspraxic students (who struggle to plan, initiate, imitate and sequence speech sounds) be well supported in early childhood classrooms? Is the construct of language disorder helpful in arriving at sound practice in inclusive early childhood classrooms? How might teachers provide differentiated language development opportunities during whole class, small group or individualised education activities? Where is the overlap between therapy activities, explicit teaching, authentic assessment and purposeful socially constructed learning? Why do therapists believe that students' complex needs cannot be met in classroom contexts?

My working relationships with classroom teachers evolved as I changed professional hats. Some days I taught language genre, modelled and supported reading strategies, designed and implemented spelling practices, facilitated conferences about process writing and sought to empower students to become committed and purposeful learners. This was the era in which oral language was regarded as a precursor to written language development and student assessment was akin to scoring individuals' progress against a hypothetical continuum of "normal" language development. On other days I worked with students, parents and teachers to trial, demonstrate and recommend ways to stimulate language development, correct speech, develop phonological awareness or compensate for impaired hearing and Central Auditory Processing Disorder. As students achieved new learning outcomes I

reflected on the roles of individual, clinical language services and the explicit teaching of reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing in purposeful and engaging classroom contexts.

About this time, claims and counter claims muddied the waters of the speech pathology and education arenas I worked in. Teachers debated the importance of teaching phonics, whole language and the place (if any) of direct instruction. Speech pathologists argued the case for evidence-based practice including research showing the essential role of phonological awareness in reading acquisition. While speech pathologists used naturalistic language sampling and conversational analyses, teachers completed running records and miscue analyses. I found myself code switching between teacher-talk and clinical jargon as I taught, entered into collaborative planning, provided therapy, consulted, presented and participated in professional development sessions. Regardless, my roles were for a common end--improved learning outcomes for students at educational risk.

For some time I continued to code switch as I made classroom recommendations to teachers of students at educational risk and negotiated clinical tasks with children struggling with oral and written language tasks. Somewhere in the 1990s I became professionally bi-dialectal and exhausted. The language and "best practice" of teachers and speech pathologists was becoming incompatible.

The current research arose from this context. I recognized that teachers and speech pathologists, both highly skilled professionals, wanted to work together for improved student outcomes. I proposed to re-examine how clinical expertise might better meld with classroom practice for students at educational risk. The selection, planning and implementation of classroom language development practices would be evidence based, using standardized assessment procedures (from speech pathology) and classroom based assessments (from teaching). A school year was chosen as a natural cycle over which to demonstrate teachers' (and my own) changed understandings of speech-language-hearing impairment and implications for classroom teaching and learning. I wanted to learn how to tailor teacher support to the strengths and needs of individual teachers and to gather evidence to argue the importance of specialist language data and specialist language expertise in classroom contexts.

This study did not unfold in this way. In later chapters, data and teacher stories explain the limitations of the initial action research approach and how final outcomes were shaped with teacher participants. All the teachers developed new skills in working with students at educational risk. However, a more important change occurred in my thinking about theory-practice relationships. These teachers taught me that until personal constructs are exchanged, valued and "co-constructed", classroom practice would remain as a bi-dialectal, code-switching task. The most important feature of co-construction theory was the evolution of understandings about *why* and *how* learning between teachers and speech pathologists needs to be co-constructed. In practice, teacher stories demonstrated how co-construction developed to reflect participants' shared beliefs, theories, practices and experiences.

This action research is reported as a structured narrative, focusing on four of the ten teacher participants. Data from these four teachers were most influential in the drawing of research generalizations. Collectively, the ten teacher stories are about the possibilities of change. This story is important because it features ordinary teachers in an ordinary school. The strengths and needs of individual participants contributed to the study outcomes reported here. The realities represented will be familiar to many in West Australian schools. This study shows what is possible for both teacher-speech pathologist and teacher-researcher partnerships in our schools.

Before beginning the literature review establishing the theoretical background and context for this study I recall the words of Barry (2002), "Listen to your informants and be prepared to be led to where they want to take you rather than you leading them to where you think they need to be taken" (p. 33). Indeed, the teachers in this study led me much further than I anticipated we could go together. Whilst hoping to learn how I might better provoke change in teacher thinking and pedagogy about students at educational risk in early childhood classrooms, we co-constructed a way of learning that has far broader application. The development, review and refinement of co-construction theory and practice has implications for effecting change in teacher thinking and pedagogy, building expertise within school systems, and facilitating future pedagogy, learning outcomes and school change. Together we were inspired by the practical possibility of us all working together as active learners.