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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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Chapter 1

Teachers' beliefs about language development practices in early childhood classrooms: Stimuli for research questions

"It's not immaturity. We've got to stop saying that."

(Penny, Early Childhood Teacher, 2000).

Introduction

Effective classroom teachers are active and creative learners who respond sensitively and appropriately to classroom complexity. Participant observation confirms that individual teachers can “successfully respond to a situation or solve a problem when no set pattern for responding exists”; that they integrate their existing knowledge to solve new problems (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001, p. 9). However, in order to support teachers working with students at educational risk in early childhood classrooms, I wanted and needed to know how and why some teachers integrate thought and experience to classroom practice more effectively than others. What determines teachers' different responses to given students in classroom contexts? How might I support teachers to develop further, to make a difference for early childhood students at educational risk? So began this research.

I began with words from one of the ten early childhood teacher participants. This teacher, Penny¹, provides an insight into her thoughts about children at educational risk. She states, with conviction, a need for change in teacher thought and pedagogy in relation to students with language-based educational risk in early childhood classrooms. Her voice begins this collective narrative of teacher stories for two reasons: to emphasize the essential partnership between teachers and classroom-based researchers, and to accord respect to teachers as contributors to processes of teacher education and professional development.

Since the impact of change is better understood when pre-existing features are known, this chapter sets the scene for change in teacher thought and pedagogy. The

chapter is presented in two parts. The first explores teachers' beliefs. This section highlights the important and practical problem (Hammond, 1996) of understanding the processes teachers use to make decisions about students in early childhood classrooms whose educational risk is language-based. Personal construct theory and social judgement theory are reviewed to explain how teachers' beliefs and prior experiences shape their practical responses to students at educational risk in early childhood classrooms. Models of school-based teacher development and alternative professional development practices are also acknowledged.

Later in this chapter, issues surrounding the teaching of students with language-based educational risk in early childhood classrooms are translated into three specific research questions. These questions are examined in subsequent chapters. Factors contributing to the complexity of teaching and the undertaking of classroom-based qualitative research are teased out. Teachers' engagement in this research is reported as a structured narrative that explains the research processes and outcomes.

Teachers' beliefs

Defining complexity in early childhood teaching

To naïve observers, the apparent simplicity of early childhood classroom language learning and teaching disguises its importance and potential for learning. McCain and Mustard (1999, Opening Letter) begin their *Early Years Study* with an evidence-based view that 'the period of early childhood development is equal to or, in some cases, greater in importance for the quality of the next generation than the periods children and youth spend in education or post-secondary education'.

In contrast to naïve observers, classroom teachers believe that they "make a difference" (Varghese, 2001, p. 33). Early childhood teachers understand how play-based learning and developmentally appropriate, integrated curriculum can facilitate the learning of each child in their care. A developmentally appropriate integrated curriculum (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997) is intended to facilitate learning by allowing children to use concrete objects, make choices and interact with peers and adults as they learn. The "integrated curriculum" describes the way that learning areas overlap in early childhood education, rather than being timetabled as separate subject areas

such as English, Maths or Society and the Environment (Biondo, Raphael & Gavelek, 1999). A developmentally appropriate, integrated curriculum respects that children learn in many ways and that appropriate play based activities provide multiple learning opportunities for the children involved (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 1997).

Early childhood teachers attend to each child's learning style and unique learning strengths and needs. "Learning style", acknowledges differences between children's preferred ways of learning. Some children will display different learning styles in spontaneous versus structured learning contexts. Learning style is acknowledged in current literature, particularly in reference to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and those at educational risk (Haynes, 1998; Haynes & Shulman, 1998; Lowell, 1995; Lowell, Gurimangu, Nyomba & Yingi, 1996). For uninformed observers, the informality of play-based learning can disguise the commitment of early childhood teachers to the principles of assessment, learning and teaching as documented in the *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council, 1998).

Various authors have documented the prevalence of children with speech-language-hearing impairments in early childhood classrooms (Alloway & Gilbert, 1998; McMahon, Carrigg, Kelso & O'Neill, 1998; McAleer Hamaguchi, 1995; Naslund & Schneider, 1993). The implications of speech-language-hearing impairments for classroom learning and teaching are extensively referenced (Emmitt, Pollock, & Komesaroff, 2003; Gambrell, Morrow, Neuman & Pressley, 1999; Merritt & Culatta, 1998; Stackhouse & Wells, 1997, 2001; Wallach & Butler, 1994). However, the priority for each early childhood teacher in his/her own classroom is to identify those children who evidence educational risk related to specific speech-language-hearing impairments. Once identified, the teacher's task, with or without specialist support, is to plan and implement explicit language teaching and learning opportunities to facilitate the development of each 'at risk' child.

West Australian teachers are well resourced with reference materials about language development, teaching and learning. The *Curriculum Framework* (Curriculum Council, 1998) details principles of assessment, teaching and learning for students

from Kindergarten to Year 12, across eight learning areas. *First Steps* materials (Ministry of Education Western Australia, 1991, 1992; Annandale et al., 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) outline language teaching and learning strategies that can be applied across the eight learning areas. Australian teachers have the freedom to work professionally without a prescribed curriculum or test-driven systems (Luke, 2003). Teachers' professional associations, such as the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) and the Primary English Teachers Association (PETA) encourage ideas and resource sharing between professional colleagues. Yet many teachers describe being overwhelmed, poorly equipped personally and professionally, as well as, under-supported to meet the needs of their students at educational risk related to speech-language-hearing impairment (Bochenek, 1989).

Furthermore, classroom teachers can feel physically and professionally isolated in their classrooms. Hay (2003) reports on the need for a culture of support and learning within schools. She notes, "when teachers are struggling, they don't feel confident in coming forward for fear of being censured as ineffective, or worse, incompetent" (p. 13). She identifies teachers' reluctance to offer professional or personal support to colleagues who are struggling in case this action implies blame for failure.

Three other features of classroom reality are acknowledged:

1. Current estimates that between 10% and 30% of students in Australian schools are experiencing literacy and or numeracy difficulties (Rohl & Milton, 2002, p. 31).
2. Estimates of the prevalence of school age speech-language impairment are 5-8% overall, with the percentage reducing as student age increases (Oliver et al., 1999).
3. The limited availability to classroom teachers of personnel with both specific speech-language-hearing expertise and experience planning for early childhood classes (Bochenek, 1989).

The Rohl & Milton (2002) study is a survey of 377 schools from around Australia. Reports of the incidence of students with learning difficulty are given for each of the states and territories. Total percentages specify whether the students are having difficulty with literacy or numeracy learning. 'Literacy difficulties were perceived to

be somewhat more prevalent than numeracy difficulties' (p. 30). A mean of 16% of total students with learning difficulties is given (p. 31). The estimate of the prevalence of school age speech-language impairment (Oliver et al., 1999) is given after acknowledging the issues in defining and reporting prevalence figures in childhood language studies

Early childhood teaching is a deceptively complex task. Fullan (1996) explains how differences between educational systems, schools and teachers have implications for the quality, effectiveness and excellence of teaching. He describes how these differences also impact on student-teacher relations, students' engagement in learning and learning outcomes. Other issues, such as teachers' professional confidence and competence, further complicate early childhood teaching. Teachers are well able to make decisions about the language learning opportunities they present, the teaching strategies they employ and the language learning strategies they encourage for whole classes and small groups. However, they are challenged by the need to make explicit decisions about what to change and why, especially when planning language teaching and learning specific to individual students displaying language-based educational risk in their classrooms.

Teachers' understandings of speech and language impairment have been reported in recent literature. Bishop (1997) notes that most early childhood teachers are better able to identify "speech" impairment than "language" impairment. This is despite the fact that the educational implications of specific language impairment are potentially more significant than that of speech impairment (Leitao, 1998). Roberts, Wallace and Henderson (1997), Lowell (1993) and McAleer Hamaguchi (1995) document the significance of hearing loss, middle ear infection and listening difficulties to classroom outcomes and discuss the issues in identification and management for classroom teachers.

Teachers believe they can make a difference to the lives and learning of individual students in the early years. The early childhood years are generally accepted as being from birth to 8 years of age. In Western Australia, the early childhood school years extend from Kindergarten entry (at 3 ½ years of age) up to and including primary

school Year 3, during which most children turn 8 years of age (Department of Education and Training-DET, 2004).

When children in early childhood classes demonstrate “educational risk” consequent to particular speech-language-hearing needs, teachers must consider implications for learning and teaching. “At educational risk” is a phrase used widely in educational literature. In this study the intended meaning is that the child has diagnosable features of “language-based educational risk.” Such features include diagnoses of impaired speech, language or hearing ability that are potentially detrimental to classroom learning (Aram, 1993; Bashir, Conte & Heerde, 1998; Bishop, 1997; Bryant & Bradley, 1985; Dodd, Campbell & Worrall, 1996; Grimm & Skowronek, 1993; Hastenstab, 1985; Haynes & Shulman, 1998; Kavanagh, 1991; Kuntze, 1998; Lowell, 1993; McAleer Hamaguchi, 1995; Nelson, 1998; Paradise, 1997; Richardson & Di Benedetto, 1991; Roberts, Wallace & Henderson, 1997; Sawyer, 1985; Simon, 1985a, 1985b, 1991a, 1991b; Stackhouse & Wells, 2001; Wallach & Butler, 1994; Westby, 1991). The term language-based educational risk is used frequently in this study. In later chapters, teacher stories clarify how terminology was negotiated and clarified to facilitate common understandings between research participants.

Teachers attempt to identify and respond to the speech-language-hearing characteristics of students at educational risk. They make decisions about the selection and implementation of strategies appropriate to the children’s needs. Teachers are responsible for devising and implementing individual education plans within inclusive classrooms, despite limited access to language specialists. In the context of this study, the following definitions apply:

1. Individual education plans, also known as IEP’s, are a record of planned teaching and learning opportunities to address the strengths and needs of individual students. Review dates and student outcomes are recorded as part of the process of planning further learning and teaching (Wearmouth, Soler & Reid, 2003). Group education plans (or GEPs) serve the same purpose for small groups of children.
2. Inclusive classrooms are those in which individual student needs are addressed within a philosophy of socially constructed learning. Linguistic and

cultural diversity is valued and the strengths and needs of individual students are accommodated in inclusive classrooms.

3. Language specialists include speech pathologists or language support teachers who have specialist training in the diagnosis and planning for children with speech, language, hearing or literacy difficulties. Ideally these specialists are also trained in classroom practice and are available to support teachers' thinking and practice specific to students at educational risk within classroom contexts. Funding restrictions, the limitations of departmental policies and a nation-wide shortage of trained language specialists have resulted in a shortage of qualified and experienced language specialists working in West Australian early childhood classrooms.

Classroom teachers, language support teachers, teacher assistants, parents, speech pathologists and others working in early childhood classrooms have opportunity to build and review their personal theories about oral and written language development as they plan or participate in classroom tasks. Many experiences shape personal theories. Undergraduate and in-service teacher training, personal study, classroom experience, peer learning, prior experiences, current expectations and prevailing language support policies all play a part. Theories are known too, to be shaped by personal interpretations from cumulative input (Bannister & Fransella, 1974). Teachers' prior experiences of students with speech-language-hearing impairment also influence their theories. Teachers see a relationship between oral and written language impairment and early childhood classroom learning and teaching. In addition, personal theories impact on individuals' expectations of early childhood education practice. Hall and Jones (1976) remind us that although individual theories greatly influence teachers' programs, there is no one "right" viewpoint. Furthermore, teacher skills alone cannot guarantee student outcomes.

I wondered how change in teacher confidence and competence, specific to students with language-based educational risk, could be scaffolded from teachers' current beliefs and practices. In classrooms, early childhood teachers are immersed in opportunities to compare new language learning and language teaching data against their existing beliefs and practices. Each day, class teachers and language support teachers make decisions about the nature and purpose of classroom activities in early

childhood settings. Theoretically, each activity and learning experience can be scrutinized for the language learning opportunity it presents to children, the response of each language learner to the experience, and the implications for further teaching. This linking of assessment, teaching and learning characterizes productive pedagogy (Annandale et al., 2004a). The multiple demands of early childhood teaching often prevent intentional and systematic matching of teachers' beliefs to their classroom practice. However, teachers are known to make expert practical judgements and justify these by reflecting on their personal beliefs and values (Tripp, 1993).

The variation in teaching styles, philosophies, classroom organization and explicit teaching within early childhood classrooms, demonstrates the extent to which teachers' decision-making is connected to their beliefs about optimal language learning conditions and the language learning needs of individual students. Yinger (1990) explains variation in goals, methods and outcomes of teaching practice. He emphasizes the "conversation of practice" determined by the language used by the teacher, the "multi-faceted give-and-take nature of human thought", and teachers "entering into and living within a context and its participants" (pp. 81-83). Yinger believes it is essential for educational researchers to understand the knowledge and skill of teachers, their interaction with others and their responsiveness to the particularities of their place of teaching, in order to comment on the nature and conditions of healthy, effective teaching.

Promoting changes to effective teaching practice for pre-service and in-service teachers is complicated by the strength of teachers' disparate personal beliefs, the busyness of early childhood classrooms and the need to acknowledge both. Tripp (1993) claims that professional judgement is always based on theory. He points out that teachers and teacher educators share responsibility for the current skills and knowledge of teachers, the additional skills and knowledge required, and the importance of teachers' professional judgements and practice for student outcomes. He advocates the joint theorizing of teaching practice by teachers and teacher educators-researchers in classrooms rather than removed from them. So, how might change in teachers' thoughts, judgements and practices be supported in response to the strengths and needs of students at educational risk?

Tripp's contention that classroom practice is determined by teachers' personal beliefs about teaching and learning is supported by interviews with classroom teachers (Bochenek, 1989; Cooksey, 1996). Although unable to find credible research explaining teachers' responses to opportunities for change in theory and classroom practice; observation, dialogue and co-teaching with early childhood teachers supported my perceptions about their perceived need for change.

Teachers recognize when their personal beliefs and prior experiences do not equip them to confidently respond to the strengths and needs of students at language-based educational risk in their classes. Potentially, data could determine factors influencing teachers to reflect on or update their personal theories of language learning and early childhood classroom language teaching. Based on the work of Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) discuss fundamental knowledge, time to be creative, working in an environment that values innovation, having access to others and having an interest in incremental knowledge, as factors that encourage teachers' creativity to develop. Recognizing the "need" for change in thought and pedagogy is a characteristic of creative and effective teaching. Bennett and Rolheiser (2001) highlight the importance of teachers "having the interest to continue pursuing knowledge in the field" (p. 10).

Hence, in the planning stages of this research the general statement, *Teachers' beliefs determine their classroom practice*, provoked a series of more specific questions:

1. To what extent do teachers' beliefs about language-based educational risk determine their practical response to students at risk?
2. To what extent can teacher beliefs and classroom practice be shaped? How?
3. What are the implications of developing, *with* early childhood teachers in their classrooms, the theory and practice of teaching students with language-based educational risk?

The issue of how to work with teachers to support their teaching of students with language-based educational risk in early childhood classrooms presented an important, practical and real research challenge. Empirical data were required to specify teachers' personal theories about early childhood teaching, their insights into processes of classroom decision-making and their interpretations of links between

teaching and student learning outcomes. I needed to ascertain whether or not individual teachers believed they could make a difference for students at educational risk (or language-based educational risk) in early childhood classrooms.

Existing literature acknowledged the importance of teachers' awareness of their concerns. Hall and Jones' (1976) referred to earlier studies by Frances Fuller, using the Johari window, to present their ideas on Competency-Based Teacher Development. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) specified the importance of knowledge and skill development, self-understanding and contextual (or "ecological") change to teacher development. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Loucks-Horsley, 1996; Pike Hall, 2003) and peer coaching (McDowall State School, 2002) are recommended as effective methods for furthering teacher development. Professional development outside of schools also recommended the use of peer coaching (Ladyshevsky, 2004) and reciprocal peer coaching (Ladyshevsky & Ryan, 2002). Each of these researchers attended to processes and content of professional development. Rather than pre-select any one of these methods to use with teachers, I intended to learn about teacher preferences for the content and processes of their professional development.

Prior to data collection and collation I reviewed relevant psychological theory. My intent was to better understand theories of decision-making as a basis for analysing and interpreting teachers' decision-making processes. Decision-making theory suggested that teachers' beliefs could be developed and linked to classroom practice. There was a need for data to demonstrate the change-potential and durability of teachers' personal theories and pedagogies. Personal construct theory and social judgement theory informed my particular interest in relationships between individuals' personal theories and their practical responses to challenging classroom situations.

Personal construct theory explains how individuals develop their thinking and the importance of cognitive and emotional factors for effecting change in these theories. Social judgement theory explains how ego-involvement and social interactions can influence or predict one's actions. My task was to interpret personal construct and social judgement theories alongside the negotiation of classroom practice with

teachers. The intended outcome was to use decision-making theory and empirical data to learn how I could better support teachers to change their thinking and classroom practice for students at educational risk. Personal construct theory and social judgement theory provided a framework from which I could interpret teachers' engagement (or lack of engagement) in change processes.

Personal construct theory

Personal Construct Theory was first presented by George Kelly in the 1950s and revisited by later researchers such as Bannister and Fransella (1974), Pope and Keen (1981), Diamond (1995) and Bevan (1995). Personal construct theory provides a theoretical basis for the influences and processes of personal theory formation. Bannister and Fransella (1974) offer detailed explanations of links between emotional and cognitive states as a way of understanding factors that predicate change or "transformations" in the personal constructs of individuals. Personal constructs are summarized as idiosyncratic terms of reference to which one refers consciously when making deliberate decisions, or unconsciously when improvising (Yinger, 1990). Personal construct theory can be applied to interpretations of relationships between teachers' prior beliefs, theories, experiences and practices and their routine pedagogy or expert practical decisions.

Although personal construct theory impacted primarily on psychotherapy and education in the early years, it is currently used more in management and disciplines other than education (<http://www.repgrid.com/pcp>). Bevan (1995) pointed out the potential of personal construct theory in a wide range of clinical and educational settings. Researchers such as Pope and Keen (1981) and Diamond (1991) specifically applied Kellyian theory to teacher decision-making. Pope and Keen apply personal construct theory to education as "a joint venture between the teacher and the learner" (p. 28). Diamond uses personal construct theory to discuss why some teachers are unable to elaborate their personal theories. He contrasts the influence of prior beliefs, experiences, theories and practices with contrary needs in current school contexts to explain why some teachers may adhere to previous, less appropriate pedagogy in new situations.

In current educational literature, the principle of finding common ground from which to facilitate pedagogical change with teachers, echoes personal construct theory. For example, Clark (1992) discusses the consequences of teachers' implicit theories and beliefs. He advocates teachers' self-directed professional development as beginning with the recognition of their individual beliefs, strengths and perceived needs. Thiessen (1992) believes that teachers need to identify meaningful connections to their personal views of teaching and learning prior to engaging in Classroom-Based Teacher Development (CBTD).

Personal construct theory is used in this study like a hypothetical master plan against which to analyse and interpret teacher beliefs and theories. Three aspects of personal construct theory contribute to the theoretical base for this research. The first comes from Fiest's basic corollaries of personal construct theory (<http://www.wynja.com/personality/pctf.html>). Fiest uses Kellyian principles to explain that "not all new experiences lead to a revision of personal constructs", some are "subject to change by experience" but others "resist modification regardless of experience." He calls this the Modulation Corollary. Other corollaries of interest to working with teachers in classrooms are the Commonality Corollary and the Sociality Corollary. The former suggests that when the experiences of two people are similar, their personal constructs tend to be similar. The latter corollary explains that we are able to communicate better with people whose constructions we share or understand.

The second aspect of personal construct theory informing this research is Beven's (1995) use of Kellyian principles to encourage tolerance of ideas and values. Beven uses examples to explain a fundamental premise of personal construct theory: We all construct our own worldview of events. The individuality corollary acknowledges, "people have different experiences and therefore construe events in different ways" (<http://www.wyna.com/personality/pctf.html>). Our worldview is made explicit when we share concepts and views. Shared planning by teaching peers requires that teachers share their constructs of teaching, learning and the students in question, and are explicit about their ideas for classroom practice. Without such sharing teaching peers cannot assume a common philosophy of teaching and learning.

The third important aspect of Kellyian thinking is the emphasis on personal constructs as determinants of how people use past events to cope with future ones. People are “driven by the need to cope with coming events” and they do so by using their prior experiences and resulting constructs to make sense of the future as they meet it (<http://www.repgrid.com.pcp/>). Teachers constantly need to cope with new and different teaching challenges. In doing so, they spontaneously or intentionally search prior experiences for familiar constructs with which to greet or resist new challenges, understand them and communicate them to others.

Personal construct theory is used in the current study within early childhood classroom contexts to make sense of teachers’ responses to classroom specifics. The principles can be used to support teachers and researchers to build shared worldviews of teaching and learning. Personal construct theory provides the basis through which I approached teacher change as a teacher-researcher. For example, since personal construct theory offers insights into teachers’ current thoughts, beliefs and practices I used it as a grounding philosophy for preparing teacher interviews. The purpose of initial interviews was to understand teachers’ individual worldviews and encourage the establishment of effective working relationships with all teacher participants. Furthermore, personal construct theory can explain teachers’ recognition of occasions when their existing beliefs, theories, practices and experiences do not equip them to cope with new teaching challenges. My intention in this research was not to replace teachers’ constructs with my own but to work from an exchange of constructs to some common ground for shared teaching (with a focus to students at risk).

Teachers frequently need to make decisions about students’ language development with associated professionals such as speech pathologists and educational psychologists (Bashir et al., 1998; Merritt & Culatta, 1998). While the aim of such professional collaboration is to establish individual language learning plans or negotiate learning opportunities for children with identified language-based educational risk, decision-making between professionals is influenced by individuals’ personal constructs of school policy, student strengths and needs, and early childhood pedagogy. Teachers required to identify children at educational risk or recommend students to available language support programs, may not be given

criteria to use in making these decisions. In contrast the teacher with prior experience of children identified with language-based educational risk and classroom-based language support programs can access decision-making criteria from prior judgements. Professionals such as co-teachers, or teachers and speech pathologists, making joint decisions about students' language development are likely to be influenced by implicit (or explicit) personal constructs of the shared task. Perhaps pre-existing personal constructs and decision-making criteria are not compatible with those used by collaborating colleagues, or constructs and criteria are inappropriate to the new situation.

Examples of teachers' language learning decisions suggest how personal constructs influence teacher decision-making. Classroom-based language support programs include a variety of ways of managing the language learning and teaching needs of individual children without removing them from the classroom. Some educators believe that improved classroom teaching ratios by the presence of additional staff (not necessarily additional teachers), changes to the classroom program by specialist staff in consultation with the classroom teacher, and the allocation of language support resources (such as CD Rom spelling programs to supplement whole class practice), improve student learning outcomes. Recommendations to include particular children in language support programs or the inclusion of augmentative communication practices (such as signing) in a classroom program are often contentious. Conflicting recommendations and competition for limited language support resources prompt debate about the rationale for teachers' decision-making. One possible outcome of contentious decision-making is that personal constructs are made explicit during the process of negotiating and reflecting on recommendations. Ideally, classroom teachers working with parents, colleagues, administrators or other professionals make their personal constructs explicit prior to the process of language development decision-making.

When criteria are specified to assist decision-making, teachers can choose to integrate these with their pre-existing constructs (Wigton, 1996). The allocation of developmental phases to reading, writing, spelling and oral language by classroom teachers for individual students, as with *First Steps* resources (Ministry of Education, 1992d, 1992f, 1992g, 1992m; Annandale et al., 2004b), is one such example. In *First*

Steps, teachers use “key indicators” along language continua to match their observations and records of individual children to developmental phases in oral language, reading, writing and spelling. *First Steps* resources (Ministry of Education WA 1991-2; Annandale et al., 2004b, 2004c) detail the assessment and monitoring of language development, language teaching strategies and language learning opportunities as recommended and used in West Australian schools. However, discrepancies exist between and among teachers when plotting developmental language phases for individual children. *First Steps* provides a system for matching a developmental view of oral and written language development to classroom observations. Teachers who share this mapping process may also negotiate language constructs and classroom language plans.

Personal construct theory cannot address all questions about early childhood teacher decision-making for students at educational risk. At times determining how to support change in teachers’ thinking and practice is difficult unless one understands both current constructs and how these developed from prior experiences. Nonetheless, the theory can be used to explain teachers’ response to change and contribute a rationale for supporting change in thought and pedagogy.

When planning to research how teacher-researcher dyads move from sharing personal constructs of early childhood language development to effectively co-planning the language learning and teaching of students with complex needs in a range of early childhood classes, I considered other accounts of teachers’ response to change (Bennett, 2003; Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001). Social judgement theory provided further insight into factors influencing change in teacher thought and pedagogy.

Social judgement theory

Social judgement theory suggests that recognition of affinity between an individual’s current personal constructs and those tacitly perceived in the suggestions of others increases the likelihood of the suggestion being accepted. Runner (1999) describes the connection as “the importance an issue holds in your life.” Krebs (1999) identifies the importance of ego-involvement in decision-making, especially for

issues of personal significance. When one is strongly committed to an issue s/he is more likely to respond to opinions of others on the same issue. Extreme responses are less likely when issues are not personally significant. Social judgement theory has been applied to decision-making in many professional fields (Carner, 2001; Curtis, 2001; Orban, 2001; Runner, 1999), including education (Cooksey, 1996).

Social judgement theory accounts for factors influencing individuals' responses to opportunities for change. It acknowledges that individuals may or may not be aware of factors that operate as persuasive or dissuasive influences in their decision-making. Since personal experiences, beliefs and practices contribute to each teacher's personal constructs of educational risk I hypothesized that teachers' responses to alternative thinking and practice about students with complex language needs could be predicted. Teachers who considered learning to be strongly language-based would be more likely to accept increased attention to language teaching and learning strategies. Teachers committed to the assessment, planning and monitoring of students with complex language needs would be more likely to embrace opportunities to enhance their thinking and practice than teachers who considered that such children should be managed by specialist staff or in withdrawal groups.

According to social judgement theory, "important" personal constructs influence individuals' responses to proposed language recommendations. Appropriate language recommendations will be discounted when the particular language issue is deemed not to be important. This is a simple and useful application of social judgement theory. Indeed, Social Judgement Theory can be very useful as a theory to expand "the listener's own ideas on a subject that they believe already" (<http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~dt225196/sj.htm>). Thus, social judgement theory may be usefully woven into the development of collaborative language plans. It could assist analysis of factors influencing teachers' support for, rejection of, or neutral response to opportunities for change in thinking and pedagogy.

Exploring teachers' acceptance, rejection or non-commitment (Orban, 1999) of recommended language development ideas could do more than inform researchers' understandings of teachers' personal constructs specific to language-based educational risk. According to social judgement theory, an exploration of teachers'

responses to explicit language development practices could provide insight into the importance of such issues for the teachers and their ego-involvement. These insights might be used to predict individual teachers' future responses. Furthermore, patterns of teacher responses to suggested change could be used to plan and improve change processes. This idea acknowledges earlier work by Frances Fuller and Gene Hall (Hall & Jones, 1976). Frances Fuller proposed an ordered sequence of concerns about self, teaching and students' learning as teachers moved from pre-service to in-service teaching. In the 1970s, Hall, Wallace and Dossett used the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) to examine links between the concerns of individual teachers and their responses to education innovation.

In effective collaborative language planning "each person's particular skill and knowledge are respected and valued" (Cerebral Palsy Association Western Australia-CPAWA, 1999, p. 20). Yet times exist when collaborative teams discard individual contributions to decision-making. Early childhood classroom planning for children with complex language needs often requires the combined expertise of teachers, teacher assistants, speech pathologists and others. For example, a speech pathologist or visiting teacher may recommend the use of cued articulation (Passey, 1990a, 1990b) for one child. Cued articulation (Passey, 1990a, 1990b) is a system of hand gestures used to simplify and help teach "the organization and pronunciation of spoken English" (p. 2). The classroom teacher considers when and how cued articulation might supplement her current language program. Social judgement theory might explain the teacher's decision to use or not use cued articulation in the classroom. Principles of social judgement theory may assist specialist support staff to build links between teachers' existing constructs and proposed changes.

In collaborative teams "each person is comfortable to share her (sic) knowledge" (CPAWA, 1999, p. 20). The development of "effective and implementable procedures is best assured through the active cooperation and collaboration of individuals who possess a range of information and perspectives" (Bricker & Cripe, 1992 in CPAWA, 1999, p. 18). Cairney and Munsie (1992), Bashir et al. (1998) and DiMeo, Merritt & Culatta (1998) recommend similar skills for effective collaborators. Reilly (1996) suggests that the reciprocal sharing of points of reference

(called “self-insight” and “other insight”) can facilitate a greater awareness of the value and possible relevance of these alternative points of reference.

Social judgement theory alone cannot explain the processes and outcomes of language development decision-making by teachers, for students at educational risk, in early childhood education. Yet, together with personal construct theory, social judgement theory might explain why individual early childhood teachers select particular language development practices and opportunities for change, over others. Together these theories provide insight into factors that encourage or discourage teachers’ responses to change in thinking and pedagogy.

Theoretically the reciprocal sharing of teacher and teacher-researcher personal constructs (Reilly, 1996; Mumpower & Stewart, 1996) specific to classroom language development practices, should encourage further negotiation of explicit language development practices. Such was the theoretical basis for investigating this important and practical problem (Hammond, 1996).

Early childhood teachers need to make specific decisions about the language learning opportunities they present, the teaching strategies they employ and the language learning strategies they encourage in students. In the current study I worked with ten early childhood teachers and their students with language-based educational risk, in early childhood classrooms. I intended to examine factors influencing change in teacher-researcher learning processes in that context. Although we implemented specific language development strategies, the focus of this research was on *how* and *why* teachers influenced the co-construction of our classroom teaching, rather than on the particular teaching practices used.

Naturalistic generalization

Naturalistic generalization is a way of thinking about the learning potential of teachers in classrooms. Bassey (1999) describes naturalistic generalization as “the learning processes through which we individually acquire concepts and information and steadily generalize them to other situations as we learn more” (pp. 33-34). This notion of individuals’ engagement with learning processes is important when

considering how and why early childhood teachers can be supported to develop their thinking and pedagogy in response to students at educational risk. Bassey's (1999) recognition of individuals' ability to generalize learning across contexts has implications for the durability of change in thinking and pedagogy. I wondered whether changes in teachers' thinking could be facilitated through the negotiation of classroom language development practices, or whether changes in teachers' thinking needed to precede their acceptance of new practices, planned collaboratively.

Flyvberg (2001) argues, "context and judgement are irreducibly central to understanding human action" (p. 4). He explores links between knowledge and context to explain that increments in learning from novice to expert can be analysed in terms of problem solving processes. Flyvberg refers to five levels in the "Dreyfus Model" of learning processes: novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer and expert. Novices, for example, attend to facts, characteristics and rules, independent of context demands. Competent performers prioritise tasks and learn from themselves and others. They deliberately plan their actions and begin to interpret and make judgements within the context of action as they "think on their feet". By contrast, experts in a given field "operate from a mature, holistic, well-trying understanding, intuitively and without conscious deliberation" (Flyvberg, 2001, p. 18). This model of learning processes forms a basis for Flyvberg's argument, "Context is central to understanding what social science is and can be" (p. 9).

Indeed, Flyvberg believes that social science matters when it is based on context, judgement and practical knowledge. I wondered about the extent to which teachers (and I) would generalize our learning to situations beyond the study classrooms. Given that the teachers in this study had some prior experiences of collaborative decision-making, I wondered how those experiences might influence their response to our teacher-researcher negotiations. Collaborative processes were reviewed prior to data collection for this study.

Collaborative decisions and teacher judgements

It is unlikely that even the most collaborative decision-makers hold identical beliefs and practices. Indeed the diversity of personal theories, interpretations, experiences

and expectations add to the benefits of collaborative planning in classrooms for both teachers and students (DiMeo et al., 1998; Southworth & Lincoln, 2000). In schools, recognition of disparate individual points of reference can prompt discussion and the documentation of criteria for future decision-making. For example, the proposed development of language support policies and the discussion of clear eligibility criteria for children attending Education Support Units (Kerimofski, personal communication, November 12, 2003) requires criteria setting to assist teacher decision-making. Education Support Units (ESUs) are separately funded educational centers for children with special learning needs who meet set criteria for inclusion. Intelligence quotient scores and descriptions of physical disability and adaptive behaviours are amongst the criteria used to define eligibility for placement in West Australian Education Support Centres (ESCs) or ESUs.

Tripp (1993) researched teacher decision-making in terms of what teachers already do and what else they might be trained to do. He identified four kinds of judgement necessary to professional teaching: practical judgement, diagnostic judgement, reflective judgement and critical judgement. He concludes that most teachers rely on practical judgements to make instant decisions about pedagogy. Teachers use reflective judgements to justify decisions made. Tripp (1993) states that although most teachers make practical judgements expertly, “they are generally not able to make either diagnostic or critical judgements” (p. 140). More than a decade ago Tripp acknowledged the need for further research into teacher judgement.

My particular interest was in supporting teachers to develop from being practical and reflective, to becoming diagnostic and critical decision-makers about students with language-based educational risk. In early childhood classrooms teachers must select and implement pedagogy appropriate to the needs of students, especially those whose language development may contribute to learning difficulty. Language planning, particularly for children at educational risk, is based on detailed diagnostic judgements and the critical matching of students’ language profiles to language learning and teaching strategies. Tripp (1993) advocates analysis of critical incidents in teaching and learning to enhance both skills and knowledge in teachers and educational researchers. What would be needed to facilitate development of

diagnostic and critical judgements? How could teachers be supported to become more diagnostic and critical in their decision-making?

Personal construct theory explained the idiosyncratic way in which theories, together with experiences and beliefs over time, shape teachers' future practice. Other works (Bashir et al., 1998; Campagne-Wildash, 1995-6; DiMeo et al., 1998; Mumpower & Stewart, 1996; Reilly, 1996; Southworth & Lincoln, 2000; Tripp, 1993) challenged the oversimplification of teachers' actions as outcomes of personal theories. The underlying premise that teachers plan, select and implement classroom language development strategies for children with complex needs arises from the teaching-learning-assessment cycle promoted in the Western Australian Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998). My alternative worldview was that teachers could be supported to develop diagnostic and critical judgement skills if this learning occurred in their classroom contexts. The outcome would be effective classroom management of children with language-based educational risk (rather than the withdrawal of children from classrooms for clinical language therapy).

I needed to better understand processes of change in teacher thinking and pedagogy, specific to early childhood students with language-based educational risk. In planning this research I reflected on whether teachers' prior experiences of collaborative planning with visiting language specialists had effected sustained change in teachers' thinking and practice. I wondered about the overlap and relative merit of collaborative, consultative and instructional forms of teacher support. I planned to interpret personal construct theory and social judgement theory as I examined the content and processes of teacher development. Each of these factors could contribute to the further investigation of influential factors changing teachers' thinking and classroom practice.

A context for research

Having reflected on a theory base for teacher decision-making in classrooms, the proposed research needed to be defined with researchable questions. To shape research questions, I considered current processes and opportunities for working with students at risk in early childhood classrooms. My day-to-day work with teachers and

their students in early childhood classrooms gave me the opportunity to plan to meet the needs of students at educational risk. Simultaneously I could examine the role of teachers' personal constructs (as well as, my own) in decision-making processes.

At the time of this study, the role of language specialists Western Australian schools to date, was to direct early childhood teachers to new language development practices; recommend changes in classroom contexts, and guide teachers to new thinking via professional development. The professional roles of consulting speech pathologists, school-based educational researchers and language support teachers were described as "collaborative". My contention was (and is), that many language specialists "inform" rather than learn with teachers.

A central problem in this study was that teachers frequently requested or needed planning support to meet the language development needs of students at educational risk. Teachers' problems in planning and implementing language development programs for such students in early childhood classrooms impacted upon language support specialist staff and teacher educators. Language specialists and teacher educators needed to determine ways to support teachers so that classroom language planning was a reciprocal negotiated learning task, originating from a mutual understanding of individuals' worldviews.

It follows that teachers, language support staff and teacher educators all need to change their thinking and pedagogy so language development planning is jointly constructed rather than imposed by one professional upon another. This study was designed to investigate the benefits of jointly constructed change whereby classroom teachers and language specialists were active partners in negotiated classroom practice. My own challenge was: How can I, as a teacher-researcher, learn to facilitate change in the teachers' thinking and pedagogy and be open to change myself?

While engaged in the early childhood teaching of children with language-based educational risk, I reflected on how teachers developed their language assessment and planning concepts and processes. To what extent did this occur? To what extent could I, as a participant-researcher in this setting, develop my own concepts and

processes to facilitate teacher change? If changes were evident in this group of early childhood teachers, what implications might there be for teacher and researcher development?

Here I sought to learn processes of shared decision-making to encourage change in early childhood teachers' thinking and pedagogy with specific reference to students at educational risk. Data were needed to inform two issues:

1. How and why do teachers decide to use (or not use) language development practices suggested, recommended or modeled for them?
2. How might teachers' personal constructs be used, together with principles of social judgement theory, to support teachers' decision-making about language development in classrooms?

So, in this study I set three research questions (below) and worked with ten teachers to investigate professional decision-making in eight early childhood classrooms in a single school. Daily experiences of language learning and language teaching negotiated from the respective worldviews of the early childhood classroom teachers and myself, as teacher-researcher, were translated to research data. I planned to collect data using an action research methodology and report findings against the principles of educational research as recommended by Bassey (1999). Data were interpreted as changes in both teacher and researcher understandings during one school year. As the study progressed, I recognized the importance of teacher voice in this action research and chose to report research findings using structured narrative. The reasons for refinement of the research process and distinctions between the action research project and the reporting of action research outcomes (Perry, 1995) are addressed in the next chapter.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the refining of the three research questions. As is the tradition within qualitative research, the problem is located within the intricate "real world" of early childhood classrooms (Hammond, 1996). Research questions are prefaced with the discussion of planned change and teacher decision-making.

Planning change in early childhood classrooms

Given the variety of speech-language-hearing impairments represented in mainstream early childhood classrooms, the explicit planning and implementation of language development strategies for individual students at educational risk is a complex task. In this study it was essential to recognize both teachers' personal constructs about the strengths and needs of individual students and the particularities of the classrooms. I anticipated two outcomes of negotiated change:

1. Appropriate language development practices for children at risk.
2. Teacher and researcher learning about the content and processes of change.

In the current study "planned change" focused on reciprocal learning about how and why teachers and I (as a teacher-researcher) could work together to effect improved outcomes for our students. Acknowledging personal constructs and social judgement theory, I planned to share understandings, experiences and classroom teaching with teacher participants in one school. I anticipated that we would develop ways of sharing and interpreting our worldviews to gain reciprocal insights into our personal constructs of language-based educational risk, language teaching and early childhood pedagogy. Next, we would negotiate and plan changes to language teaching and learning opportunities, and classroom strategies for students at risk. Together, classroom teachers and I would implement and review shared pedagogy.

Educational change is well documented in recent literature. For example, Joyce & Showers (1988) examined peer coaching as a way to develop shared language, common understandings and to expand teaching repertoires. Southworth and Lincoln, (1999) include general conditions for *Improving the Quality of Education for All*. Ainscow (1998) emphasizes the inclusion of the needs of all learners in educational planning. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) discuss the place of collegial and individual processes of educational change within schools. Anderson and Biddle (1991) address issues in research-based school change. Oliver's (1995-6) edition of Australian case histories of teachers embracing change, highlights the impact of outcomes-focused education on classroom teachers.

Studies specific to the constructs and processes used by the teachers planning change in classroom language development practices, for students at educational risk, were not located. Given that speech-language and hearing impairment are major contributors to educational risk in early childhood classrooms, I sought to specifically understand the personal constructs that participant teachers held of speech-language-hearing impairment, and of educational risk. I wondered about the change potential of these constructs and factors encouraging teachers' engagement in change processes. I sought to report teachers' and a teacher-researcher perspective.

Researching teachers' decision-making

This study began with an emphasis on teacher decision-making when teachers are required to identify children with language support needs and subsequently plan classroom language support programs for them. Since this study was designed to facilitate reciprocal learning, participant teacher learning and participant researcher learning are of equal importance. I intended to inquire about the extent to which teachers' personal constructs of speech-language-hearing and learning impairment (or language-based educational risk) could be shaped. I also planned to examine the influence of specialist language data on teachers' identification of students at educational risk and their subsequent classroom language planning.

How do teachers respond to specialist language data? Examples of teachers' responses to detailed language data, gained from specialist observation and transcripts (Bochenek, 1989) suggest that classroom teachers value diagnostic data when links to classroom teaching and learning are made clear. Social judgement theory places specialist information in the context of data teachers recognize as significant to their teaching role (Krebs, 1999). Classroom teachers choose to accept, remain neutral or reject assessment information provided by language specialists for classroom language planning. Standard language assessment results can be deemed unimportant or insignificant if the links to classroom teaching and learning opportunities are disguised by jargon. When the implications of language diagnoses are not connected to classroom contexts, associated recommendations can be perceived as impractical or antithetical to teacher beliefs and practices. One of my

intentions in this research was to explore teachers' responses to a range of language assessment data and specialist recommendations, for the children they taught.

A personal construct, arising from my prior experiences working as a teacher-language specialist in primary classrooms, is that teachers value language development data gathered from, interpreted within and used for planning within their classrooms. Apparently, teachers' familiarity with the context and processes of data collection adds value to recommendations arising from these data. I used this construct like a research hypothesis, to direct research planning. I asked, for example, to what extent are clinical language data - recommendations for classroom language development practices overlooked or ignored by teachers? And, conversely, to what extent are classroom-based language data - principles of teaching, learning and assessment overlooked by language specialists?

Theoretically, conflict in collaborative classroom language development planning can result from unrecognized dissonance between individuals' personal constructs of the issues and contexts of need (Cooksey, 1996; Doherty & Kurz, 1996; Mumpower & Stewart, 1996). The strong, shared theoretical base is not sufficient to ensure that teachers and language specialists jointly construct changes in thinking and pedagogy. Indeed, the relative merits of collaborative, consultative and co-constructed processes for supporting teachers through change in pedagogy have not been researched. Investigations into factors influential in the co-construction of classroom language development plans were required. This study was a response to these needs.

Research questions

The research focus on teacher and researcher learning, specific to facilitating changes in thinking and pedagogy, prompted three research questions. Each question is specific to the needs of children at educational risk in early childhood classrooms.

Research question 1: Teachers' personal constructs

Research question one asked: *To what extent do teachers' personal constructs of language-based educational risk determine their pedagogy for students at risk?* This question probed the breadth and depth of teachers' current understanding. I sought to understand how early childhood teachers define educational risk; identify children with language-based educational risk in their classrooms; select children for available language support services; chose language development practices for their whole class, small groups and children at educational risk; and plan language development practices to address the needs of children at educational risk in their classrooms.

Consequently the research design needed to include the collection, analysis and interpretation of teachers' personal constructs specific to this domain. A method sensitive to the complexities of early childhood classrooms and the personal constructs of individual teachers was required. In addition I needed a way to track connections and anomalies between teachers' personal constructs and their specific pedagogy, as well as to validate my interpretations as a participant researcher with those of the teachers.

Research question 2: Factors shaping thought and pedagogy

Personal construct theory and social judgement theory provided a framework from which to examine and explore teacher decision-making and changes in teacher decision-making. As acknowledged earlier in this chapter, these theories offered limited explanations of the extent, potential and implications of facilitating change in thought and pedagogy. Hence, question two broadened this focus. Question two asked: *Which influential factors shape early childhood teachers' thoughts and pedagogy for students at educational risk?*

Among other factors, question two probed the extent to which teachers' thought and pedagogy were influenced by available oral and written language assessment data for students at risk, by particular language resources, by specialist service providers and/or by co-constructing classroom language development plans. This study was an

opportunity for ten teachers and myself to share or divide teaching tasks in our time together. The sharing of classroom tasks defined our research context and provided on-going opportunities for teachers to accept, ignore or reject my assistance in classroom language planning. Co-construction developed from this beginning.

Research question two led to more detailed analyses as the teachers and I identified factors influencing teachers' decision-making. The use of action research cycles for data collection helped to "define what the researcher should do" (Bassegy, 1999, p. 68) at each subsequent stage of the study. Throughout this study, teachers retained the right to choose whether or not to continue their involvement, to negotiate their roles, to put priority to the educational outcomes of their students, and to participate in research reviews and triangulation processes. (These aspects of the research process are outlined in Chapter 3 and detailed in the structured narrative of chapters four through six.)

Research question 3: The implications of co-construction

Personal construct theory, social judgement theory, critical incident method (Tripp, 1993), naturalistic generalization (Bassegy, 1999) and current practices of professional development for teachers, grounded this study. Each perspective on changing teacher thinking could influence the qualitative interpretation of data. In turn, my interpretation of data directed the development of co-construction as an alternative way to support change in teacher thought and classroom practice.

Question three asked: *What are the implications of the co-construction of classroom language development plans for effecting transitions in teacher thought and pedagogy?* This question is important for debating, negotiating and understanding future teaching and learning. As co-construction was developed and explored, links between research questions, data, analytical statements, generalizations and conclusions contributed to the implications of this research.

This research focuses on co-constructed processes. This focus attuned research participants to the nuances of language content and alternative processes for negotiating and developing classroom language development plans. Teacher

educators need to reflect upon factors influencing teacher decision-making, as well as, processes for classroom-based research. I intended to research influences shaping thought and pedagogy, from the teacher's point of view. The possibility that research into the co-construction of language development plans could be used to "develop theory" and "enhance educational policy" (Bassey, 1999, p. xi) prompted further refinement of research questions and processes during the data collection year.

Summary

Teachers' prior theories, beliefs, practices and experiences may not adequately prepare them to meet the needs of students at educational risk in their early childhood classrooms. However, teachers' personal theories, decision-making and classroom practice can be understood through reflection on shared classroom experiences and by individuals exchanging stories. In later chapters, teacher stories reveal how shared teaching practice was negotiated and co-constructed, and how and why teachers in early childhood classrooms came to change their thinking and practice with students at educational risk.

The next chapter examines the suitability of action research for the conducting of this classroom-based research and my choice of structured narrative for reporting research outcomes. The potential of teachers as co-researchers is also addressed. Discussion focuses on reciprocal teacher and researcher learning in classroom contexts as both possible and necessary.

¹ In accordance with the consent form signed by all teacher participants, pseudonyms are used for all teachers and students in this study.