Thinking through ‘contradictions’ in teacher conversations

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Interviews were conducted with teachers as part of a 2002 research project into disadvantaged primary schools that were achieving above average outcomes in students' literacy and/or numeracy. These interviews contained sets of what appeared to be contradictory statements. Positive constructions of students like ‘We have high expectations of our students and they achieve them’ or ‘These students can do just as well as any other students’ often occurred in the same interview transcript as statements like ‘These students need lots of repetitive practice’, or ‘They need simple, routine tasks’. Analysis of the whole data set reveals that rather than being judgements, teachers used such statements as explanations for particular kinds of programs and pedagogical approaches. Rather than constituting a deficit discourse, these descriptors were a way of describing where students ‘were at’, of indicating a starting point for appropriate instruction.

Teachers who work in disadvantaged primary schools face a complex set of issues in providing literacy and numeracy programs which support student success. It is well documented that, as a cohort, students from poor and disadvantaged communities perform less well on standardised measures of literacy than do students from more advantaged backgrounds (Masters & Forster, 1997; LoBianco & Freebody, 1997; Freebody & Ludwig, 1995; Connell, Johnston & White 1992; South Australian Department of Education 1992; Commonwealth of Australia, 1991; Williams, 1987).

In 2002 a research team was commissioned jointly by the South Australian Primary Principals Association and The Department of Education and Children’s Services to collect data from eight disadvantaged primary schools whose students had achieved results above expectations on the Basic Skills Tests. Part of the brief was to use the data from these high performing disadvantaged schools to construct a ‘profile’ which could be used by other schools in working toward improved literacy and numeracy outcomes. This profile, Nothing left to chance (Grant, Badger, Wilkinson, Rogers & Munt 2002), along with the survey instruments and literature review, is available at http://www.thenetwork.sa.edu.au/nltc/.

Data was collected in three ways: through on-line surveys; through semi-structured interviews with principals, key teachers/ coordinators, and classroom teachers; and through observation in the schools. This paper focuses on the interviews, which provided a rich source of data for the research team as we attempted to identify the principles and practices which underpinned the success of these schools in achieving improved literacy.
and/or numeracy outcomes for their students. In particular, it examines the
discourses which school staff used to talk about the students they were
working with, their expectations of these students, and the kinds of
curriculum and pedagogies which they employed. Drawing both on the
original interview transcripts and the profile constructed from the data (Grant
et al 2002), the paper claims that the initial interviews and then the first
reading of the data can position a researcher in particular ways. It contends
that crucial factors in representing whole school approaches to achieving
improved outcomes are consideration of the data as a whole, and careful
analysis of the kinds of discourses that are used. An awareness of initial
impressions, and the ability to disrupt and critique these, is essential if the
data is to be reliably interpreted.
It is inevitable that researchers are positioned even before they begin data
collection. This positioning might come from personal beliefs and values,
thetical framings from the literature, even expectations based on findings
from previous research. The neutrality of the researcher, any researcher, is a
myth. In this research project, certain impressions were formed as I
interviewed principals and teachers. I began to ‘hear’ comments about ‘these
students’, ‘because of the type of children that we have’, ‘they don’t know …’
and ‘when they come from homes where …’ Students were frequently
constructed as ‘different’ from those in other schools.

They are not sit back, shut up, like other kids. Unless they can see
a purpose and a reason or something like that they so often dig
their toes in and won’t do anything.
(Key teacher, School C)

And because of the type of children that we have you can spend
a whole term working on one [text] type to make sure you do it
really, really well. But you’ve got to make sure you move on to
something else the next term.
(Key teacher, School C)

During the interviews this construction of students was running in parallel
with the expectation that they would succeed, indeed had succeeded, when
appropriate school structures and classroom pedagogies were in place.
Already there seemed to be two competing, somewhat contradictory,
discourses operating.

These impressions were (at least subconsciously) in my mind as I began
reading the transcripts both from the schools where I had collected data as
well as the others in the project. In my first reading of the transcripts I picked
up fragments like ‘our kids were reading two years behind where they should
be’; ‘poverty is associated very strongly with lack of literacy experiences in the
home environment’; ‘our kids could read but they couldn’t interpret or
understand’; ‘the kids borrowed books they couldn’t read and silent reading
was a nightmare’; ‘these kids are not going to know the answer to this
question’; and ‘they didn’t understand how you got the answer to a question’. And there were lengthier comments, like this one:

We had a really well stocked resource centre but the kids weren’t even going there. We looked at our borrowing records, our kids weren’t … borrowing. They just weren’t borrowing books to even take home.
(Key teacher, School E)

Again, these apparently negative constructions were running alongside fragments like ‘it is in schools like ours where you can make the most difference’; ‘[our students] can be successful learners no matter where they come from’; ‘every child that comes into this school – I don’t see any form of disadvantage with that child’; ‘you don’t lower your expectations simply because kids come from disadvantaged homes’. My impression that there were competing, somewhat contradictory, discourses represented in the data was, if anything, strengthened.

However, analysing the data proved salutary. Rather than using competing discourses, principals and teachers were ‘telling it like it was’ in order to be able to act, to effect agency and make changes. Rather than being judgements, the comments were explanatory, and often prefaced the description of an action taken to improve outcomes. The following passage is typical of such comments:

We had a huge number of kids from our database assessed, and found that most of our kids were reading at least two years behind where they should be. And so they then weren’t able to access easily any other area of the curriculum. So we then made a vary small specific goal that reading was the key to them being successful at everything else. And our primary aim was to get kids reading.
(Key teacher, School H)

Here we see reference to data collection, a description of ‘what was’ and the consequence of that, then school action related to an educational goal. This pattern was often repeated in the data, across schools. For example:

And we looked at students’ reading attitude, and we surveyed them. And as I said, we just didn’t have children who were reading. They were reading in junior primary, because books were levelled and there was lots of monitoring going on. And then once they got to year 3 [teachers thought] that they could read and that they would be OK. And there was very little checking on them after that. They had silent reading time in their classrooms but they weren’t actually being taught to read and weren’t being monitored as readers. So one of the outcomes for us was that … they know about themselves as readers, that they
know how to [read], know what their strengths are as a readers so that they can read text appropriately.
(Key teacher, School C)

When the data is viewed as a complete set, it presents an extremely strong and positive view in each of the eight schools which consistently emphasised that all students had the potential to learn, that expectations of them were high, and that teachers were the key to making a difference to student learning outcomes.

Students were viewed as capable, with the same potential for learning and achievement as those in more advantaged schools. In a study in 1996 Comber identified four key theoretical explanations for disadvantage and low levels of achievement:

- The ‘deficit’ explanation, which suggests that disadvantaged, poor, working class or minority students are deficient in some way and therefore not as capable of achieving literacy and numeracy success
- The ‘difference’ explanation, which asserts that these children have different language practices than those valued at school
- The ‘structural inequality’ explanation, which argues that schools actively reproduce the social inequalities in society
- The ‘resistance’ explanation, which suggests that certain groups of students actively resist the values represented by white middle class schooling

One of the most significant findings in these schools was there was no evidence of a ‘deficit’ discourse. Being poor, having different cultural capital, speaking another language, being Indigenous, made students different but not deficient. From principal through classroom teacher to school services officers, almost without exception, staff saw students as having the ability to succeed, to do as well as their peers from more affluent backgrounds. Comments like the following were typical:

[Students] can be successful learners no matter where they come from.
(Numeracy teacher, School G)

Every child that comes into this school – I don’t see any form of disadvantage with that child. I want them to get to their potential. They can achieve their potential through education.
(Deputy Principal, School F)

School staff were not blind to the disadvantage evident in the community that the school served, but understood that ‘disadvantage’ describes the circumstances in which students may live. It is in no way a defining or limiting characteristic of the students (Grant et al 2002). They were seen as capable learners who deserved a rich and complex curriculum that would challenge
and extend them so that their potential was realized. This meant that teachers had high expectations of them.

You shouldn’t lower your expectations simply because kids come from disadvantaged homes. You need to give them every opportunity to be as successful as kids from non-disadvantaged homes. And lowering expectations is not doing them any justice at all. ... Your expectations can never be too high. If you lower them, that’s where they will work.

(Teacher, School C)

Alongside their belief in students as potentially successful learners and the high expectations that were therefore held of students, teachers in the project schools believed that education could make a difference and that they had tremendous agency to effect change.

The message that needs to get across is that all schools can make a difference, no matter how disadvantaged ... that’s something you never forget ... and it is in schools like ours where you can make the most difference too.

(Key teacher, School A)

Belief in students, high expectations, and seeing teachers as the key to improving outcomes were crucial in underpinning success in each of the schools. However, there was also recognition that teaching needed to take into account where students were ‘at’. It was this recognition that had given rise in interviews to the comments reported above: ‘these students’, ‘because of the type of children that we have’, ‘they don’t know …’ and ‘when they come from homes where …’. Teachers were well aware that students in these schools often came from homes and communities that valued literacy and numeracy practices which were different from those valued by the school. Understandings about the cultural construction of literacy were highly theorized in the project schools. Teachers not only understood but were willing to acknowledge and attempt to bridge the cultural gap that could exist for some students between home and school.

A parent came in last night ... One of the books her child had chosen to read was about a level 4/5 book, relevant for his reading age, but what happened in the book – it spoke about messages and faxes and emails. It was all related around messages. And I thought it was a great instructional tool, a non-fiction book. I thought it would be fantastic. But she said, ‘My son doesn’t know what any of this is. He doesn’t know what a fax machine is.’ So she said it was impossible for him to even identify with the pictures to help read. And I thought, ‘You are so right.’

(Deputy Principal, School A)
We had a 3/4 class and there was a [text] with a picture of a church with a cross on top of it. Not one child in the group of eight could tell me that it was a church. You made that assumption. And they would have read something that was about a church and yet that word was not in their vocabulary. So they couldn’t build on anything because they didn’t have the basic understanding of what a church is. They had never been inside one, they had no experience with it, it wasn’t part of their life.

(Key teacher, School E)

Students for whom the language, culture, and routines of schooling are unfamiliar are particularly at risk of experiencing a spiral of failure which becomes more and more pronounced over time. So when teachers acknowledged that the cultural landscape of the classroom, its routines and procedures, tasks, ways of interacting, of turn taking, as understanding invitations as directives, remained alien to some students, despite the fact that they had been at school for at least three years, then they were more likely to support students to ‘crack the code’ of school and operate successfully as learners. Teachers in the project schools operated as ‘cultural mentors’ (McNaughton 2002: 125) actively assisting students to safely traverse the unknown terrain of the classroom. Teachers knew that when students were consciously inducted into ways of operating in the classroom their learning was enhanced, since they had to expend less time and attention ‘figuring out’ what was required to be successful as a learner and could therefore focus more on the actual learning. The more teachers and learners shared understandings about required outcomes, performance of tasks, and desired ways of participating, the more effective were the teaching/learning interactions.

What sounded initially like judgements were better interpreted as explanations which recognized cultural discontinuities (Au 1993) between home and school. Addressing these discontinuities, and building bridges for students so that they could access hegemonic discourses, the language and literacy of power, was a priority.

The reason we focused on academic English ... is that is the hardest hurdle for Aboriginal and ESL kids, many kids, to get over. And that is accessing academic language. They may or may not be able to talk standard English in everyday context but when it comes to understanding standard English in the language of reports, or the language of argument or discussion, the sort of stuff they need not just for high school but if they are going to have high powered jobs, admin jobs, which is what a lot of Aboriginal kids if they’ve got qualifications for into, they need that sort of language. And we didn’t want to make the assumption that because they are at [this school] they weren’t
going to access those jobs. We wanted to give them the language they needed and the literacy to access those jobs.
(Key teacher, School H)

Teachers in the project schools were not in the business of pretending that the (majority of) students had experienced the kinds of literate practices and texts which are often encountered by children from families with cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990) that is more closely aligned with what is expected at school. To do so would have skewed the starting point for developing a permeable and dialogic curriculum (Dyson 1993) that acknowledged the knowledges and skills which students brought from home to school. Assumptions about ‘normal’ children, which inevitably ignore the impact of class, race, and gender, were subject to scrutiny in these schools because they were unhelpful and in fact did a disservice to students. On the other hand explanations which described where students ‘were at’ provided a baseline for the implementation of particular pedagogical practices, like direct instruction and explicit teaching, which could address cultural discontinuity in constructive ways.

We [often] don’t give students any cultural clues or social clues about what the purpose of the text is or what the purpose of the orientation is or what the purpose of the illustrations are. Some kids don’t even know that illustrations somehow make a link to the text. Because we haven’t told them. We make all these assumptions.
(Key teacher, School H)

School H had a significant proportion of Indigenous students who did not usually use Standard Australian English in their homes and community. Knowing that the collection of specialized registers and forms of English needed for school success, described as ‘secret English’, are not learned through immersion or whole language teaching approaches (Martin et al cited by Walton 1993), teachers ensured that they provided explicit teaching of these registers and forms so that Aboriginal students in particular could gain control over them.

One of these explicit teaching strategies, called scaffolded literacy (Rose, Gray & Cowey 1999) involves a step called preformulation, where the teacher gives students enough cultural information about what you are heading for [so] every kid in the class, not just the two top kids, can answer the question.
(Key teacher, School H)

Rather than asking fake open-ended questions, the teacher modelled what the culturally valued aspects of the text were.
What I modelled was, ‘Now this is orientation. Now remember that orientation is where the author introduces the characters and the setting. And look, the illustrator is introducing the characters in the setting too. Can you see who the three main characters are?’ Now every kid knows that this is the orientation and the valued answer is the three Billy Goats Gruff.
(Key teacher, School H)

Gradually students internalize the questions and learn the valued responses, so the amount of pre-formulation the teacher does for that kind of genre can be reduced. Three texts later the teacher can say

This is the orientation. What has the illustrator put in the illustration to introduce the characters and the setting?
(Key teacher, School H)

This kind of pre-formulation reduced confusion for students who were uncertain what the culturally valued answers were, what particular knowledge it was that the teacher wanted them to focus on specifically within the complex event of shared reading.

It wasn’t only Aboriginal students who benefited from explicit instruction which laid bare cultural knowledge and assumptions. Teachers in the project schools understood the futility of playing ‘guess what’s in the teacher’s head’, a game that privileges those students who know what the valued answer is and sets up those who don’t for, at best, passivity and at worst failure.

[For] children … where poverty is associated very strongly with lack of literacy experiences in the home environment … the structure and the expectations and the predictability and the explicitness is essential. ...
We’ve had to very explicitly teach the kids the use of key words, key words in questions, key words in the text. ‘There’s your starting point. There’s where you need to start looking for the answer.’
(Key teacher, School E)

What teachers appeared to be emphasizing to the research team again and again was that their school sites posed particular problems and challenges, and that these, rather than any decontextualised ideas about what might constitute ‘good practice’ or ‘exemplary teaching’, were the starting point for their pedagogical decision making. Whilst theory was extremely important in these schools (Grant et al 2002; Wilkinson 2003) teachers did not start with theory when planning programs. They began with base line data, collected in systematic and varied ways, and used these data alongside their pragmatic knowledge of students’ prior experience and dispositions to schooling to develop programs and implement pedagogies that actually addressed where students ‘were at’, then supported their development toward specified
benchmarks or outcomes. Progress toward desired outcomes was constantly measured. Institutional wisdom and sanctioned educational practices were, like theories about teaching and learning, interrogated for their effect on learning. This sometimes meant that significant changes were made to whole school programs or structures.

The other [strategy] we’ve looked at, in terms of structural stuff, is where our kids are most and least successful in their learning. The least successful time without any doubt is Non Instructional time (NIT). So we changed the structure of the way the school worked so we no longer have NIT teachers in this school. We have three teaching teams, and they go across primary and special school and the are R-2, 3-5, and 5,6,7. They are geographically located. The primary classes have 2.2 teaching allocation. And that was easily achieved because we have a number of part time staff. And we’ve been able to work with fulltime staff as well.

(Principal, School D)

... So there is a strong decision that’s been made on a number of occasions, each time the issue has arisen, by School Council and by staff that we don’t need LOTE [language other than English] at the moment. So that is one way of significantly reducing that [curriculum] overcrowding issue ...

(Principal, School B)

School B had a very high percentage of students for whom English was a second language and who were involved in Mother Tongue language programs. Many of the students were already facing complex challenges in relation to language learning and literacy, and the school was prepared to ‘go out on a limb’ to temporarily put the needs and agreed priorities for the students ahead of demands made by the system.

Context and actual data, analysed through questions like ‘How effective is this pedagogy in developing the students’ learning? All the students’ learning?’, were also the basis for evaluation of classroom teaching.

We found that for a lot of our students we still needed to develop a lot of their verbal skills. We found talking, thinking aloud to be a very successful strategy for our kids. They didn’t understand how you got the answer to a question but by doing guided reading and the talking through they could actually see how you got the answer, how you found that piece of information in the text.

(Key teacher, School E)

Invariably the case in the project schools was that evaluation of what constituted ‘best practice’ for these students’ literacy and numeracy
development was grounded in the immediate context and actual data collected on student achievement.

The project schools established a culture where excellence and successful achievement were expected and celebrated. Data on current levels of student achievement was used by teachers in conjunction with their understanding of the discontinuities between home and school to implement programs and pedagogies that reduced the risk of failure. The actions the schools took were an expression of educators’ responsibility to deploy the considerable intellectual and social resources that are available in schools to construct and adapt learning environments so that students are given the support and instruction they need to experience success. The ‘conversations’ of these teachers illuminate the ways in which schools can make a difference to the literacy and numeracy outcomes of students from disadvantaged communities.

This paper has suggested that data collected in the research study was initially seen as ‘contradictory’. Analysis in 2002, when we were writing the initial report, resulted in the research team framing the data through a pedagogical lens. We adapted McNaughton’s notion of ‘wide curriculum, narrow delivery’ (2002: 101) to account for data which, on the one hand, constructed students as successful learners but, on the other, emphasized the need for frequent ‘narrow delivery’ of curriculum instruction because of their learning histories. However, even at that time, we noted that ‘all schools operate a wide/narrow curriculum to some degree’ (Grant et al 2002) so we re-interrogated the data using the question ‘What is making the difference?’ We concluded that ‘teacher judgement was the crucial factor, and that teacher judgement was informed by comprehensive knowledge of the students: their backgrounds and interests, their achievements to date, the challenges they were confronting’ (original, unpublished report p 126).

Another possibility for explaining teachers’ (apparently contradictory) comments about students would have been to foreground students’ shifting subjectivities as they negotiated their way through the changing contexts and positionings that each school day presents. Student subjectivity is not fixed and immutable. It is constructed and reconstructed as students attempt to present to themselves and their teachers ‘a coherent subject in the face of the contradictory, oppositional and changing subjectivities’ (Reid, Kamler, Simpson & MacLean: 90) experienced both within the classroom and more widely in the school. It is possible to see the data as encapsulating teachers’ recognition and acknowledgement of these shifting subjectivities.

What this paper highlights is the complex and contestable nature of classroom research. It reminds us that, as researchers, we are not looking for ‘truth’, but rather for increased understanding of the complexity of teachers’ work. And of our own.
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