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ABSTRACT

Schools are places where teachers evaluate students and where teachers alike are immersed in an ongoing evaluative discourse. Obligatory participants in this discourse throughout the length of their schooling, students internalize, reconstruct, and reproduce school's evaluative impulse. A study traced four tenth-grade students' descriptions, experiences, and interpretations of evaluative discourse in their junior high school, especially focusing on ways of talking about effort, ability, and school success or failure. Each student participated individually in five semi-structured audiotaped interviews, which were then transcribed and coded exhaustively for that student's descriptors of effort, ability, and performance. In a sixth session, each student reflected on these descriptors they had used, sorted the descriptors inductively into categories, and explained the rationale for this arrangement. Thus, students created an elaborated conceptual map of their perceptions of evaluative terminology used by them, peers, and teachers across a range of situational contexts at school. These meta-maps provide highly individualized pictures of four students' conceptions of school evaluative language and how it relates to their own and peers' achievement motivation, interpretations of instructional practices, and strategies for social survival. Examined across the four students, the meta-maps present an insight into the school community's accepted discourse, its subtexts and social implications, and the relationships between evaluative language and motivation for school learning. (Contains 4 references. A sample meta-map is attached.) (Author/RS)

Evaluative Language in Junior High School: Discourse Meta-maps

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Researcher: Give me some examples of situations or activities or times during the school day when students are not being evaluated or judged by teachers.
Sid: ...Have to be break at lunch because they're constantly watching. Every little thing is worth a mark.

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Abstract

Schools are places where teachers evaluate students, and where students and teachers alike are immersed in an ongoing evaluative discourse. Obligatory participants in this discourse throughout the length of their schooling, students internalize, reconstruct, and reproduce school's evaluative impulse. This study traced four tenth grade students' descriptions, experiences, and interpretations of evaluative discourse in their junior high school, especially focusing on ways of talking about effort, ability, and school success or failure. Each student participated individually in five semi-structured interviews with the researcher that were audiotaped, then transcribed and coded exhaustively for that student's descriptors of effort, ability, and performance. In a sixth session, each student reflected on these descriptors he/she had used, sorted them inductively into categories, and explained the rationale for this arrangement. Thus, each student created an elaborated conceptual map of his/her perceptions of evaluative terminology used by him/herself, peers, and teachers across a range of situational contexts at school. These meta-maps provide highly individualized pictures of four students' conceptions of school evaluative language and how it relates to their own and peers' achievement motivation, interpretations of instructional practices, and strategies for social survival. Examined across the four students, the meta-maps present an insight into this school community's accepted discourse, its subtexts and social implications, and the relationships between evaluative language and motivation for school learning.

Aims

1. Research programs are both guided and constrained by disciplinary lines of inquiry. Evaluative practices may be studied, or achievement motivation, or discourse processes within a school community. Yet, within the day-to-day experience of school life, evaluation practices and motivation for school learning are intertwined, grounded in social contexts, and constructed and reconstructed through discourse. An aim of this study was to make links across these three research domains.

2. As we move towards more inclusive and multivocal approaches to investigation, students are still the last to be consulted. They are the subjects of research, the proving grounds for theories, and the passive recipients of the application of findings. Therefore another aim of this study was to include students in the discussion. The focus was each student's perceptions and descriptions of evaluation and ways of talking about evaluation at school, as well as his/her interpretations about how this related to achievement motivations and behaviors.

3. Schools are places where teachers evaluate students, and where students and teachers alike are immersed in an ongoing evaluative discourse. Every day, students work under the watchful eye of a teacher who makes many small judgments and remarks both public and private. As participants in this discourse, students internalize, reconstruct, and reproduce school's evaluative impulse. By high school, they describe themselves in evaluative terminology, and also turn an evaluative eye on fellow students. A third aim of this study was to examine recurring themes across students to gain insight into this school community's accepted discourse, its subtexts and social implications, and the relationships between evaluative language and motivation for school learning.

Method

Participants were four tenth grade students at a junior high school in a small northern city -- two boys ("Sid" and "Too Short") and two girls ("Kelly" and "Tracy"). The students each spent five 40-60 minute sessions in conversation with the researcher describing the language they, their friends, other students, and teachers use to talk about evaluative processes and outcomes (for a total of 20 interview sessions), and a sixth session in a word-sort activity (for a total of four word-sort sessions). The semi-structured interviews explored the students' history of schooling, conceptions of effort, ability, and performance, and perceptions of school evaluative practices. This design drew on findings from attribution research (Weiner, 1992; Stipek, 1993) to focus on the ideas of trying hard or not trying hard (effort), being smart or not being smart (ability), and relationships between this discourse and the students' own beliefs about school success and failure (Covington, 1992; Raffini, 1993).

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts from each student's first five sessions were exhaustively coded for all of his/her descriptive terms referring to trying hard, not trying hard, being smart, not being smart, and performance outcomes at

school, yielding 300 to 700 words or phrases per student. Redundancies, near redundancies, and ambiguities were eliminated. In the word-sort session, the remaining 100 to 200 words and phrases per student were presented sequentially to that student on post-its, and he/she was asked to sort them into groups that went together on sheets of poster paper, explain why that arrangement was chosen, and label each category created. The talk in this session was also audiotaped and then transcribed.

Analysis

The word-sort activity resulted in two types of data for analysis, a physical map and a verbal transcript. Each student physically grouped into categories the words and phrases that in his/her view summarized the evaluative discourse of the school, thus creating a conceptual map. This physical layout represented, in a concrete way, each student's conception of key categories and content of evaluative talk as related to markers of effort, ability and performance. The analysis proceeded through an "archaeological" process of examining the arrangement and contiguity of the phrases and reconstructing the sequence of their placement. The resulting conceptual structures were diagrammed for each category, creating meta-maps. These visual representations summarized each student's own categorizations of terminology for describing and interpreting the evaluative discourse in the school previously elicited through the interview conversations.

The verbal transcripts of the word-sort sessions also provided data about the nature of the categories and both inter- and intra-group relationships. During the word-sort, a student was asked to read each phrase aloud, and state where he/she was putting it and why. In the transcripts, each of the read-aloud phrases was coded, along with all utterances explaining the relationship of words or phrases to particular categories or to other words and phrases. The coded words and phrases and their explanatory statements were then diagrammed represent inter- and intra-group relationships, and emergent category labels. Finally, utilizing both the meta-maps and the transcript analyses, prose profiles of each student's conceptual categories, their content, the interrelationships, and the student's reasoning about these concepts were written. These used direct quotes along with the researcher's summarizing interpretations.

Results

Tracy created "heaps" of post-its, creating ten different categories. She also permitted overlap on some of the categories. The other three students placed their post-its in columns, and created five or six categories with no overlap. Sid and Too Short were careful to place each phrase next to related ones, or, in Sid's case, directly on top in stacks. Both Sid and Too Short formed their categories early in the activity, and made relatively few changes to the categories or the placement of phrases within them. Kelly, by contrast, started with few categories and made frequent changes to their membership and nature, continuing to add and redefine categories until near the end of the activity.

Sid: Summary

In describing his history of schooling, Sid reported that he found the transition to eighth grade difficult and failed math. In ninth grade, things went from bad to worse, and he ended up in a bad crowd, doing drugs and some other stuff. However, he managed to pass all his courses, and was one of the top students in the adjusted Math 9 class, a source of some pride to him. Nearing the end of grade ten, he has decided that he has to work harder to make sure he passes, a decision reinforced by his mother's threat of summer school if he does not. His older brother is the first person in his family to have graduated from high school, and it is Sid's intention to be the second.

In Sid's meta-map his first three categories, which are also the largest, represent three levels of performance – *doing badly in school,*[1] / *being the average student*, and *better than average and just a smarter person.* Poor performance is seen as something that people "do," implying that low achieving students are responsible for their situation. The phrases in this category refer to not trying and negative performance outcomes. Although a few of Sid's remarks acknowledge that outcomes can be inconsistent with level of effort, his main view is that those doing badly get what they deserve because they don't try. Poor performance is a result of low effort, and it is morally reprehensible.

Conversely, average and better than average are what people "are." In particular, Sid seems to hold an entity theory about high ability. Better than average students perform well (as represented by good grades), and are also *naturally smart*; / *it's just in their blood.* For the most part, he sees smart people as hardworking, but also recognizes that there *are people that don't try hard and still get good work.* Performing well is both desirable and admirable.

Sid's average category is the most complex. It includes descriptors of smart people who should be doing better, students of average ability who try at least some of the time, low ability students who try hard, and students who perform acceptably in most areas but have difficulties learning in a particular subject area (for example, *a slow reader*; / *just can't write tests*). Sid's phrases in the average category include many that indicate rather low performance, *such as doing all right in some of the classes*, and *not failing any classes right now*, suggesting that being average has a low threshold in Sid's mind and is therefore accessible to anyone who tries. Interestingly, Sid has placed self-referencing phrases in all three of these categories.

A characteristic of Sid's meta-maps is that he does not link low ability with poor performance. Although he was able to think of a number of words and phrases denoting low ability and common in his school's discourse during the earlier interviews, he created separate category labeled *put-downs* for these words. Sid's categories also reflect some ambivalence associated with the notion of high ability. Sid sorted some phrases originally spoken during a portion of an interview in which he was describing people who are smart into the pejorative categories *a teacher's pet*, and *being spoiled.* The first of

[1] Italics indicate direct quotations from the transcripts.

these reflects favoritism teachers show to smart students, and the second refers to class markers, and includes kids from wealthy families who *always got brand name clothes*.

Too Sort: Summary

Too Short describes himself as a *fairly hardworking, ambitious* student who *wants to learn.* He often finds himself in the role of helping other students. Some of his friends are on the honour roll. On the last report card, his marks ranged from 53 to 88 percent. He notes that he was always a good student in elementary school, but his marks dropped when he entered junior high school in eighth grade. He is working hard to pull his marks up, but comments that in subjects like French and English he becomes frustrated and gives up if he doesn't succeed right away. He plans to go to college or university on graduation. His father is a teacher and has high expectations for him, so Too Short works hard to keep his grades up to impress his dad.

Too Short created four categories, all describing "types" of students. Although many of the phrases were originally elicited during conversation about his own motivations for school learning, he does not place himself within any of the categories. Two categories referred to levels of performance -- the *typical honour roll student*, and *the averaged sort of ones who are happy with just passing* (students who are *just barely getting by*). The other two referred to levels of effort -- *determined, hardworking sort of students*, and *the student with all the potential but they just don't take advantage of that* (*lazy students*).

In Too Short's view, people on the honour roll are *talented and smart*, / *a little more mature*, / *have their priorities straight*, and always *get the work done*. Because of this, they perform well as school. They *get good grades* -- *A's all the time*. Although Too Short observes that some honour roll students are *just naturally smart*, most of them *get there through hard work.* Thus, he emphasizes effort as the main factor in high achieving students' success at school.

Too Short's average category initially started as two subcategories -- students who are just getting by, and ones who try hard. This latter subgroup was subsequently moved and combined with the determined, hardworking sort of students. The main characteristic of average students is that they are performing poorly, even though they *could do better*. They *might fail the course*, and would be *happy with just passing*. Some of these students are *not quite as smart* but *still try hard.* It is interesting that Too Short has only two performance categories and they are extremes, with the low end labelled "average."

The main characteristic of determined students is that they put a high level of effort into their school work. However, trying hard is no guarantee of success for them. Their performance ranges from poor to usually doing all right. Although other students might respect them for working hard, these students have to be determined to overcome the frustration of not understanding despite trying hard. Some of the phrases in this category explicitly mention markers of low ability. The high effort descriptors implicitly suggest low ability because despite putting forward high effort, sometimes even their best

effort, these students are not assured a positive performance outcome. Despite clearly recognizing that high effort that does not yield a positive performance outcome marks these students as having low ability, Too Short insists that trying hard is a good thing. He claims that A's are available for everyone, even low ability students, as long as they're willing to work much harder for them. Thus at one level, he recognizes that for some students effort can be a double-edged sword (Covington, 1992) because it marks them as having low ability (a conclusion not reached with lazy students), but at the same time, he reflects the official view of educators that students ought to try hard, and that through effort every student can succeed.

Too Short's fourth category is *lazy students who don't do anything*. His subsequent relabelling of the category reflects his theory that these students have the necessary ability but choose not to take advantage of it. In his view, these students, despite having the ability to achieve, perform poorly at school due to laziness, immaturity, and lack of motivation to pay attention and do their work. These are the students that their peers consider stupid, and who can expect poor outcomes at school, even failure. Through their behavior, lazy students ensure their failure to learn, and their lack of learning will be reflected in a failure to grasp skills and material taught in class, as well as in low or failing marks. In contrast, Too Short characterizes low ability students as trying hard and therefore usually managing to pass. Students who exhibit high effort deserve the respect of their peers regardless of success level, while no-one should emulate lazy students.

Kelly: Summary

Kelly describes herself as someone who has always had performance anxiety problems at school. By grade three, she was so stressed out about tests that her mother transferred her into an alternative ungraded school for the remainder of her elementary years. Kelly felt she learned better with the pressure taken off, but in junior high school the anxiety and depression returned. She studied for hours every day to keep her grades up. She says she has relaxed somewhat in tenth grade, but continues to receive medical treatment for her anxiety and depression. She describes herself *as very conscientious* and *responsible -- a very good student*. She also comments that she *is a perfectionist*, and that *if [she] could be perfect, maybe [she'd] feel better about herself*. She has very high expectations for herself and is devastated when teachers or her father criticize her performance. Although she describes herself as terrible in math and gym, her lowest mark on the last report card was 77 percent, while the rest of her marks were in the nineties. She plans to attend university and enter a helping profession.

Kelly's first two and also largest groups crystallized around the terms *the bad kids* and *the good kids*. She labelled the bad kid category: *people who have a hard time in school*, then later relabelled it: *the people who don't try -- the bad group*. The good kid category became: *the good one -- people who try and do good*.

For Kelly, not trying is morally reprehensible. People in the bad group *goof off all the time*, / *always get in trouble*, try to copy off others, and *let other people down.* Because they *don't listen* and *don't put effort into it*, they do *really bad work* and *are not smart in anything*. Furthermore, in Kelly's view, these students *are wasting their time and their chance* and they *don't care about their futures*. Teachers treat students like this punitively; they *make them do extra* and they *wouldn't allow them to go to the washroom*. However, also among this group are some students who *don't understand*, have *problems keeping up*, and who *need help*. *Everything seems so hard* and they are *really bad at it so why bother*. For Kelly, low effort, negative behavior, poor performance, and low ability make someone a bad kid.

In contrast, trying hard is morally commendable. Working hard leads to being *more able to do it* and good performance at school. *If...you put your mind to it...you can always do it* and *in the long run you're going to end up having a better life for yourself.* These students *help other people to do things* and ask for help when they need it, but usually don't need help because they already know the material. Many of the good kids have marks in the nineties, *always get good grades,* and are *on the honour roll.* Others look up to them, and they have privileges like not having to write the finals and being allowed to go to the bathroom. However, also among the good kids are those who *do it over and over again and [they] finally know it*, who are *not so smart but [try] really hard*, and those who *try as hard as [they] can but [they] still don't do very good.* So although high effort usually leads to success, some students put in the effort and are still not successful. High effort is the factor that makes someone a good kid.

While Kelly's first two groups categorize students, her other three categories refer to types of evaluative language used in the school. The fourth group is words other people use to label students, while the third group describes the labels. The phrases in these two groups refer to either high or low ability, and often are implicit value judgments. Low ability example include: *worthless or no good at something*, / *part of the dumb group*, / *stupid*, and *challenged.* High ability examples include: *smart*, / *a goody goody*, / *geek*, and *could be perfect.* By attributing these words to other people, Kelly acknowledges the ability-laden discourse in the school, while also distancing herself from it. Her fifth category lists phrases referring to marks and performance on tests.

Tracy: Summary

In reflecting on her school experiences, Tracy said she used to love elementary school because they did creative activities and lots of sports, and she loved her teachers. School *is boring now* in junior high. The work is harder and she doesn't want to do it. She describes herself as a *lazy* student who *like[s] to socialize*. She sees herself as someone who has lots of potential but doesn't use it. Her teachers, school peers and family, as well as Tracy herself, have high expectations for her. She wants to graduate with high marks and go to university, perhaps on a sports scholarship. She is presently involved in several sports which, along with her social life, take up most of her time. In

specific subjects that she enjoys, like math, Tracy works hard and does well. But if she doesn't like the way a subject is taught or if a teacher doesn't like her, she *just [doesn't] want to learn.* Last report card, her marks ranged from in the sixties in English to 96 percent in Drama. About the English grade, she said: *I felt really dumb because I knew I could do it. It wasn't hard. It was just easy stuff. But I just got lazy and didn't do it.*

Tracy's ten categories were of two different types. Six categories described students' effort, ability, or performance, and three categories represented types of school discourse. The tenth category was miscellaneous. The first category formed (a large one) represented low ability and she called it *not wanting to learn because you're not as bright.* The second contained phrases referring to high ability and was labelled *naturally smart.* The third and fourth categories, representing high effort and low effort respectively, were her two largest categories. The title of the third, *average student and works hard,* reflects her belief that average students (unlike those who are naturally smart or those who are lazy) do work hard. Laziness, the biggest category, includes many self referencing phrases. Furthermore, she sometimes read these phrases aloud using a taunting, resigned, or warning tone of voice, as a commentary on her own achievement behavior. An example is, *"Won't get the good grades," because you're lazy...(taunting voice).* Her two performance categories were *excelling* and *negative [performance] -- not trying hard.* Thus, she attributes poor performance to low effort.

Tracy's discourse category, negative comments, included *mean* labels that students use for each other, like *teacher's pet, / goody goodies*, and *dumb*. Tracy commented that she didn't like having to read these words aloud. She also created discourse categories for *positive comments* and *teachers' comments*. These included phrases *like works well in class,* and *doesn't waste class time*. Tracy was the only one of the participants in this study to separate out remarks made in the teacher register.

Conclusion

This study draws on findings of educational psychologists and motivation theorists, but employs qualitative discourse analysis in keeping with a constructivist perspective. Through an examination of the evaluative language and practices in their junior high school, the four participants in this study all expressed different but highly elaborated personal theories of achievement motivation that varied according to their past experiences, their goals, their personal circumstances, and their beliefs about what schooling is all about. These individual theories have been summarized in the results section.

Despite the differences in the individual theories, there were some interesting consistencies across the four students. As a rather obvious starting point, all four were able to think of many words and phrases -- numbering in the hundreds -- indexing evaluative language used by themselves, their peers, and their teachers in the school. For all of the students, good and poor performance were highly salient, and they all created these two categories. Effort was also highly salient. They all expressed the belief that

trying hard at school is morally positive, whereas not trying is reprehensible. Even when they identified clear counter-indications against trying (for example, Too Short's observation that some students who try very hard still don't succeed, and Kelly's observations of the negative effects overstriving has for her), they still reflected the dominant educational view that effort is good.

Although all of the students generated many phrases descriptive of high and low ability during the earlier interviews, they all expressed discomfort about ability related discourse at school. Tracy was the only one to create high and low ability categories (and she mentioned she was uncomfortable about this), while the other three incorporated the ability phrases into either the performance or effort categories (sometimes with explanations about how lack of effort either caused the low ability, or could remediate the low ability). Another strategy the students used to deal with ability terminology was to create a discourse category (language used by others in the school; not themselves) such as *put-downs* (Sid), *labels* (Kelly), or *positive comments* and *negative comments* (Tracy).

Another interesting consistency is that all of the students sorted the majority of phrases into categories describing types of students. Given the wide-ranging conversations that yielded the phrases, and the many possibilities for organizing them (as suggested by Sid's *teacher's pets* and *being spoiled* categories, and Tracy's *teachers' comments* category), why did they exhibit this degree of consistency? It is possible that it is partly an artifact of the study's design, as the original interviews did focus on history of school experiences, trying and not trying, being smart and not being smart, and school evaluation, and phrases pertaining to effort, ability, and performance were selected out of these for the word sort. However, another explanation is that by junior high school, students have become so strongly socialized to see themselves as objects of educational change that they personalize evaluation, failing to recognize any of its other participants or dimensions. They have learned to internalize, reconstruct and reproduce schooling's evaluative impulse. They see academic performance as a moral issue, and denigrate those who do not perform well (because they do not try), and those why do not try (because they do not perform well).

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Determined, hardworking sort of students (Fourth group)

107. usually do all right

52. always have their hand up
51. some would have to work a lot harder than others
50. everybody should get an A if they wanted to
43. try just as hard as the next guy

8. tries to get his work done
10. they did their best
41. trying really hard

96. really have to try hard

111. pass
110. working a little bit harder to pull the mark up

100. give it a good effort

66. trying as hard as you can
65. persistent ...at learning more

11. determined

19. tries hard

64. keep at it

30. hard working

32. respected a little bit in the classroom
34. get frustrated...because they can't get it
36. he needs help
39. they just give up, don't care

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