Discourse analysis of (power) struggles in the classroom: confessions of a schoolteacher

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ABSTRACT: Perceptions about the relationship between teacher and student refer to the confidence, motivation and interest of the students, and to the expectations and attitudes of the teachers. With the aim of arousing and encouraging discussions about these aspects that can, eventually, improve the relationship between teachers and students through the study of a teacher's perceptions about this relationship, this article was carried out in the light of Critical Discourse Analysis and studies focusing on teachers' expectations. The corpus – answers to a questionnaire applied to a high school teacher at a San Diego/CA suburban school – was submitted to the analysis of the author's position regarding her role as teacher. The willingness to engage in a good relationship with students was present in the corpus as expected. However, there were a few unexpected occurrences: predominantly dominant attitude about problem solving, heterogeneity in the division of responsibilities, and explicit citation of power struggle in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION: THE CLASSROOM

HUGHES, J. N. et al. Indirect effects of child reports of teacher–student relationship on achievement. **Journal of educational psychology**, v. 104, n. 2, p.350, 2012.

BARILE, J. P. et al. Teacher–student relationship climate and school outcomes: Implications for educational policy initiatives. **Journal of Youth and Adolescence**, v. 41, n. 3, p.256-267, 2012.

RAUFELDER, D., BUKOWSKI, W. M., & MOHR, S. Thick description of the teacher-student relationship in the educational context of school: results of an ethnographic field study. **Journal of Education and Training Studies**, v. 1, n. 2, p.1-18, 2013

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Educational studies have emphasized the importance of research and debates on the teacher-student relationship (HUGHES et al., 2012; BARILE et al., 2012; RAUFELDER et al., 2013) to examine and develop techniques and methods of teaching (see ANTHONY, 1963). The concern surrounding the need to demystify and consider the relationship between students and teachers has been the focus in the discussions involving the reflection process of aspects of this relationship. Students' self-confidence, motivation and interest, as well as teachers' previous expectations and attitudes, are amongst the most important aspects of a relationship that, in turn, may result in these students' improved academic performance.

This research was, therefore, conducted with the purpose of awakening and encouraging discussions about these aspects that can, ultimately, improve the relationship between teachers and students. With this purpose, we analyze the voice of the teacher as a starting point to understand this relationship. This does not mean the devaluation of the other aspects mentioned above—motivation, interest and self-confidence of the student; as well as the school administration, the pedagogical approach of the teacher, among others—but rather the introduction to a debate that can generate the perception that the school environment is one of the determining elements for the improvement of the educational system. Through the discourse of this teacher, we intend to offer the possibility to other educators and education professionals to perceive their own attitudes and beliefs and that, in such way, improve (or reaffirm) their positioning in the classroom.

METHOD

The present case study was conducted with Elizabeth, an English-language teacher at an independent public elementary school located in San Diego, Southern California. The school is considered inner city with more than half of the student body composed of African descendants and Hispanics (CDA, 2015). Elizabeth had, at the time of data collection, experience that exceeded 15 years of profession, being the last eight years in this specific school. It is interesting to point out the transitory

characteristic of primary school teachers in the country, both between schools located in the same city and between schools within different states. This fact points to the difficulty in establishing a stable relationship between teacher and student that, thus, positively influences the academic development of the student as well as in his/her school experience.

The contact with the teacher began with the exchange of electronic messages, in which she was informed of the project and the objectives of the research. In agreement with the terms and conditions of the research, the data collection was carried out through a questionnaire (appendix) answered by the participating teacher. This questionnaire was designed to clarify, mainly, the expectations of teachers in relation to their students—specifically, related to students in situations of vulnerability.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE FOUNDATION IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

For the purposes of this study, the data analysis was carried out in the light of Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH 2005, 1995, 1994, 1991) and of educational studies regarding teachers' expectations (EGYED & SHORT, 2006, JUSSIM & HARBER, 2001, Muller et al, 1999). The method of analysis developed by Norman Fairclough considers discourse as a significant part of social relations. It is in this context that Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA) is inserted, in which its focus is on the search for revealing what is implicit, or otherwise hidden, in the discourse. The promotion of social transformation comes from these revealed meanings, since an author rarely produces discourse unintentionally and regardless of contextual meanings. This means that there are relations of power that work in the overlapping of discourse and that result, rather frequently, in the maintenance of the domination of an existing ideology.

Thus, CDA proposes to reveal the possible overshadowed meaning(s) of ideology and power through the study of discourse and, in order to do so, the context must be taken into account. That is, everything surrounding a given sample of speech (i.e., historical context, participants, circumstances) is significant to recognize what is being

FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. **Analysing Discourse**: Textual analysis for social research. 3.ed. New York: Routledge, 2005.

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said and why. The text is understood as the threshold of analysis and the ultimate purpose is to disclose its social, political and/or historical implications, only achieved through careful analysis.

The linguistic and intertextual research of the present work raises questions such as: who materializes as the person responsible for the actions and who is on the receiving end of this action; i.e. who is actor and who is acted upon? Are there occurrences that could indicate an authoritarian position of the teacher? Does the author take responsibility for the actions or place the responsibility on others? What does the author say puts her in the position of dominant or dominated?

In order to answer such questions it is necessary to realize that texts are written or spoken instances of language constituted by—at least—a paragraph, which consists of sentences, consisting of phrases, which in turn are formed by three main types of elements: processes, participants and circumstances. Processes are represented by verbal elements; participants can be represented as subjects, objects, etc.; and circumstances are materialized by adverbs (FAIRCLOUGH, 2005).

The analysis itself takes place in three interdependent dimensions (parted for analysis purposes only): textual, discursive practice and social practice. At all stages of analysis, the major concern was to unveil the author's "style," which involves a set of choices made by her of an almost infinite range of possibilities. These choices reflect the particularity of the author's personal and social identity, since there are no unintended, unpretentious or unintentional linguistic choices. For this reason, the representation of social actors was analyzed according to their different grammatical roles: whether as participants (actor or affected), whether within a circumstance (answering questions such as "what", "when", "where", and "how," usually adverbs), or whether as a noun or possessive pronoun. In such a way, it was analyzed to whom the author gives power or from whom he receives it.

Just as the style is part of the texture of the author's identity, so are the modality and evaluation. As Fairclough (2005) postulates, modality denotes the author's commitment to truth and what is needed, while evaluation denotes how the author commits herself to what is desirable/ undesirable, good/bad.

As previously mentioned, there are three dimensions of analysis: textual, discursive practice and social practice. Discursive practice involves the production, distribution and consumption of texts while social practice concerns the construction of social identity and the representation of the social world. The production of discourse involves the combination of the means of production available with the social relations involved. In order to understand these social relationships, attention to the specific positions of participants is imperative. In the production process, along with their social positioning, the authors produce representations of the world and of themselves. Therefore, the discursive and social practices are reached through a detailed textual and intertextual analysis of discourse through its linguistic materiality.

This discursive analysis, in the light of the CDA, was allied to educational theories about the teachers' role, the student and the relationship between them. As for the educational theories on which this work was based, it was noticed that the teacher's expectation of the students suggests how she directs and invests in a relationship with the students—since we believe there must be investment from both parties. Researchers argue that an effective teacher should spend time with students to listen to their problems, understand them, try to get to know them "formally and informally" by respecting and motivating them.

The role of the teacher, therefore, includes being responsible for the success of the students and being able to be criticized and self-critical as well as develop professionally from these criticisms. Two articles aided in the main objective of the present study to investigate how the teacher defines herself according to the (possible) implications of her expectations towards the students. The starting point was the use of two articles as support material for data collection: the first article deals specifically with the teacher-student relationship from the optics of both parties (MULLER; KATZ & DANCE, 1999); and the second article discusses how teachers approach problem students (EGYED & SHORT, 2006). Assuming a relationship between the students' academic development and the teachers' previous expectations and the teacher-student relationship, this study aimed to address the interrelationships of such relationships according to the perspective of an English language high school teacher.

The brief theoretical consideration described above sets the scenario for data analysis (and the principle of data collection) used in this research.

THE TEACHER SPEAKS: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Under the light of CDA, we activate the textual analysis (at textual level) with greater relevance to better understand the extent of the possible influence of the teacher's previous expectation on the academic development of the student—more specifically, the position of the participating teacher. The analysis at the level of the text contemplates two types of investigation: linguistic and intertextual. Linguistic analysis comprises not only the study of the linguistic surface of the text (grammar, semantics and vocabulary, phonology), but also textual organization, cohesion and coherence. Intertextual analysis, in turn, "shows how texts selectively focus on the orders of discourse—specific configurations of conventionalized practices (genres, discourses, narratives, etc.)" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1995, p 188).

In analyzing the text produced by Elizabeth as a whole, we perceive a high degree of subjectivity revealed by the abundant presence of occurrences with the personal pronoun of the tonic oblique case "me" and the personal pronoun "I" which demonstrates her commitment to the her discourse, although this is due, in part, to the conditions imposed by the questionnaire—genre chosen as instrument for data collection.

Still consistent with the expected questions and answers, most of these occurrences are of the participant representing herself as agent of action (use of the first-person pronoun "I" in 29 of these sentences).

However, even as an agent of action, Elizabeth relieves herself of certain responsibilities as in her answer to the sixth question: "I would like my students to take risks and gain confidence through their achievements." The modalized verb "would to like", by its ambiguous characteristic, may denote: (i) what the teacher wants for the future of her students, her desire and hope; or (ii) something she believes to be unlikely to happen, conveying some degree of uncertainty, lack of confidence and commitment to the future of these students, merely indicating a possibility perhaps based on her experience. Regardless of its (apparent) intentionality, in this sentence it is attributed (extra-linguistically) to the students the responsibility for their learning and their future.

This notion of detachment from their responsibility as an agent can also be observed in the passages "I feel that for me a high self-efficacy comes from achieving student success, which is achieved by establishing positive prior expectations for both performance and for their behavior [and] I think with experience it is easier to anticipate problems and deal with them efficiently"—answers to questions one and four, respectively. By using the terms "for me" and "I think", Elizabeth reinforces her lack of commitment. In making use of these expressions she extricates herself from the responsibility of what is being said to be absolute truth (or an indisputable fact), offering her position without compromise—perhaps because she believes that the responsibility should not be only of the teacher's positive expectations, but should also consider the motivation and investment of the student.

EMPATHY AND AFFINITY: "WE ALL HAVE OUR BAD DAYS"

In her response to the last question, in revealing that "we all have bad days," Elizabeth establishes a relationship of affinity with the detachment of her student, who faced personal problems and therefore was not motivated enough to fulfill their school responsibilities. This statement resembles her answer to the first question, in which she is dissatisfied with the lack of support from the administration and other school officials. Such dissatisfaction is also, according to the participant, allied to the bureaucracy of the educational system which she considers these two factors—the lack of support from superiors and colleagues and the bureaucracy—as the main source of her burnout.

In addition, by declaring that "behavior problems are generally not the source of burnout, as they are expected (though I wouldn't admit this to my students!). What is unexpected is the lack of respect and support that most new teachers receive from administration and other staff members" the participant compares these two common sources of teacher burnout.

However, the use of two negative expressions manifestly indicates a case of intertextuality, since the use of negatives presupposes the proposition contrary to another text, i.e. that "incorporates other texts to challenge and reject them" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1994, p. 122). Therefore, Elizabeth challenges and rejects two discourses: (i) the origin of teacher exhaustion is usually the result of students' behavioral problems; and (ii) school administrators and other staff members respect and support new teachers.

Her discontent with the school administrators is reinforced in her response to the first question, in which she states that "the lack of support and the burden of bureaucracy associated with education has always been a source of burnout for me" which denotes the existence of a habit, of a situation occurring frequently and invariably. That is, even if the participant explicitly cited the lack of support for new teachers, she in the position of an experienced teacher who still suffers from such negligence from administrators and other school staff members.

The semantic choice of representation of social actors in the two passages above indicates the impersonalization of those that make up the groups "administration" and "staff members". The first case is markedly of nominalization—process conversion to nominal groups (FAIRCLOUGH, 1995)—noticeably observed as opposed to the phrase "people who administer". Nominalization is a way of omitting social actors by manifesting, in this case, a distance from the administrative and bureaucratic staff of the school where Elizabeth works. However, the participant demonstrates a rapprochement with the "new teachers", or at least with the "majority of the new teachers", in which she defends their professional competence and attitude in the classroom, and declares that these are the ones most harmed by the actions of the administrators (or lack of such actions).

The position of the author in her speech is significant in order to understand how it is situated in the world and in relation to its representation. Such positions may lead the author to distance herself or to include herself in her writing, and two of the ways in which authors do it more frequently is by isolating themselves with the use of the "you-community" or by including themselves in the "us-community." The latter is of special importance because it is "often evasive, displaced and vague," according to Fairclough (2005, p. 150). In her answer to the last question of the questionnaire (in which the teacher is peremptory in indicating that "we all have our bad days"), the participant is included in this last community when confessing that, like her student, she also feels vulnerable and flawed.

AN EXAMPLE OF SUCCESS: "I HAD A STUDENT, NAMED MARCO"

Considering that 52% (CDA, 2015) of her school's students are Hispanic/Latino, in answering the last question of the questionnaire, Elizabeth tells

a success story based in her relationship with her student Marco. Even if previously asked about what it is to be a good student, the participant focuses on a case in which she was able to improve her relationship with this student, how she was able to monitor his performance in class and—something she seems to cherish—also to establish a relationship based on mutual respect.

Still on the representation of the social actors, the teacher uses the pronoun "they" when referring to the students in only two moments: in the answers to the second and sixth questions. Moreover, she refers to the "students" always using nominalization which, according to Fairclough (2005), is indicative of distancing and impersonalization of agents. Thus, by referring to "students" in general, Elizabeth generalizes her comments related to her students. Again, we must take the questions into consideration, as these may have influenced the participant's lexical choices.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP: "GENERALLY, IF A STUDENT IS ACTING OUT, THERE IS SOME UNSEEN REASON WHY"

The presence of modalization markers reveals the intention, the author's self-representation and the representation of the world in given discourse. In modalizing her speech, the author evidences her position according to the dominant ideology. Since all speeches refer to the social, political and/or historical position of the author, we bring here some of the evidences found in the discourse of this participating teacher.

In a single sentence, Elizabeth points out some problems she faces in classroom related to gender, authority, and violence. Recognizing that these are relevant matters in the classroom and that they should be treated with the necessary sensitivity, she expresses the relationship between these three problems:

> if I know that my student has a problem trusting female authority and acts aggressively toward me, I know that it is better to confront that child in a calm manner, and to never engage in a power struggle with him or her in front of his or her peers.

This passage exemplifies a case of maintaining the dominant ideology, in which the participant recognizes that it is inserted in the dissemination and maintenance of power struggle in the classroom and commits herself to what she states, which is evidenced in the use of two markers of modality: with the phrase "I know" and the adverb "never".

177

OPTIMISTIC BEHAVIOR: "MAINTAINING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE IS ESSENTIAL"

Elizabeth believes that the maintenance of an optimistic and favorable behavior is indispensable to be successful in her profession—legitimizing the studies about the importance and influence of the teacher's expectation on students' development (MULLER; KATZ & DANCE, 1999; EGYED & SHORT, 2006). In her answer to question 3, in stating that "maintaining a positive attitude is essential, and not always easy, in order to establish an interest and drive to [academically] succeed," the use of the adjective "positive" denotes confidence or a drive that tends to help her in improving the present situation. However, the adjective "essential" brings the idea that maintaining a "positive attitude" is fundamental, indispensable in classroom work and cannot be ignored or overlooked. However, she also admits it is difficult to maintain such attitude, which is evidenced by the use of the negative marker "not" followed by the adverb of frequency "always."

Furthermore, broadening the scope of how Elizabeth addresses her students' behavioral problems, she resorts to contact with their family or friends: "For example, it is always helpful to call home and investigate sources at home or with friends that might be affecting the child's classroom behavior." In this case, answering the fifth question, the use of the adverb "always" ratifies this sense of effectiveness of the action. Nevertheless, the use of this specific adverb associated with the adjective "helpful" can also be an indicative of her lack of confidence or of her inability to deal with problems in the classroom alone.

From this passage, it can also be inferred that Elizabeth believes that behavioral problems manifested in the classroom may have an external source—possibly related both to family and friends—and are reflected in the classroom. However, she does not consider the possibility that these problems are related to school/academic life or even to the relationship she maintains with these students.

Knowing the complexity of the teacher-student relationship in the classroom, the participant manifests elements of these relationships that are not limited to the source of the students' behavioral problems, but also expresses the value of the teacher's experience. Thus, she indicates that the knowledge and practice acquired in the classroom can help in dealing with problematic situations in the school environment, as in: "The most important thing I've learned in my experience is to always keep my calm, even if I feel upset, because losing cool only escalates the problem and gives the problematic or disruptive student more power." In this sentence, in answer to the fourth question, Elizabeth reveals her beliefs and attitudes generated throughout her professional experience. Therefore, the use of the expression "most important" refers to the reaction that she considers to be essential and more relevant.

ONE OF THE PILLARS OF GOOD TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP: "RESPECT"

In discourses, especially in those noted and markedly authoritarian, the use and analysis of assumptions becomes fundamental. Assumptions, according to Fairclough (1994), are propositions taken as already established and accepted by society—which correspond to public opinion, to the *status quo*. Since "presuppositions can have their source in other texts by the author himself or even by other authors" and therefore "are effective methods of manipulating people because they are difficult to challenge" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1994, p 121), the study of these propositions can point to the socio-political position of the author. In the instance of this study, we analyze how the participant inserts herself in her community and how she produces and reproduces discourses about the educational practice and the school environment.

An example of the use of assumptions appears in Elizabeth's response to the first question in the questionnaire: "Behavior problems are not generally not the source of burnout, as they are expected, (though I wouldn't admit this to my students!)." The fragment "they are expected" reflects a discourse embedded in the participant's practice and, more broadly, a proposition established in the community of high school teachers who face and deal with students' behavioral problems. The presence of the fragment "wouldn't admit" indicates that the teacher is not inclined to concede, or does not intend to share, her expectations with her students. The act of admitting her position and her beliefs may also point to Elizabeth's uncertainty in showing her concern of diminishing her authority, thereby losing her influence over her students.

Another issue also raised by the interviewee is the training and preparation of teachers in order to alleviate the problems of bad behavior typically encountered in the school environment. According to the teacher, in order to maintain a friendly and respectful relationship in the classroom, efficient class planning and preparation is of paramount importance. Her answer to the third question supports our analysis: "Effective planning also reduces behavioral problems and fairness is very important in order to maintain respect between teacher and student." Elizabeth corroborates these attributions associated with the role of the faculty by employing the adverb of intensity "very" combined to the noun "important."

According to Fairclough (2005), the choice of modalization in the text reflects the author's commitment to what is said, in addition to being considered part of the process of textual self-identity. Elizabeth, in discussing the issue of respect that students must have towards her, makes use of modalization when responding to the second question in the questionnaire, stating that: "Major problems with my students occur because of a lack of respect for me, for themselves, and for their peers. However, this respect can be cultivated over time." The choice of the modal

verb "can" is important not only regarding the author's identification, but also in terms of commitment, attitude, judgment, position and representation (FAIRCLOUGH, 2005). In this sense, the use of the modal verb can be indicative of the teacher's lack of conviction regarding the construction of a relationship based on respect in the classroom.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: WEAVING THE NORMALIZED AND THE IMPRESSIVE

In Elizabeth's speech, aware of the main conditions and intent of her contribution (for purposes of a research on a teacher's prior expectations and her relationship with her students), we find two unusual discursive-confessional genres, (by introducing her frustration with the relationship she maintains with the institution's administrators, for example).

The study of discursive genres constituted in a textual sample is part of one of the dimensions of analysis: the discursive practice. Discourse practice, Fairclough proposes, "contributes to the reproduction of society and also contributes to the transformation of society" (1995, p. 65). Elizabeth both reproduces solidified discourses in society as well as argumentative discourses. In this way, her lexical choices demonstrate her discursive positioning as maintainer and transgressor of the dominant ideology. This conclusion is evidenced if one observes the question that Elizabeth uses presuppositions to counteract these discourses (see subsection 4.5 above).

Another dimension of analysis, social practice, is formed by the articulation of discursive and non-discursive social elements: action and interaction; social relationships; people (with their beliefs, attitudes and stories); the material world, and the discourse itself (the language) (FAIRCLOUGH, 2005). These elements are associated with specific areas of social life, such as the social practice of a suburban California high school. This dimension, according to Fairclough, generates political and ideological effects on discourse. They are: systems of knowledge and beliefs, social relations, and identity relations (1995). In this context, Elizabeth claims to be against the actions of institutional administrators and be supportive of new teachers. She also identifies herself in a position of authority, focusing on gender issues in the classroom.

In addition, Elizabeth's speech highlights her willingness to engage in a good relationship with her students and also displays her concern to pay more attention to students who have academic and/or personal problems, as expected. However, other occurrences were not expected: the dominant attitude towards solving problems with students in and out of the classroom; the responsibility divided between her, her peers, and her superiors, but not with the students; the constant reference to respect between teacher and student and among students themselves; and explicit reference to power struggle in the classroom.

From these occurrences, we can conclude that Elizabeth reveals to be aware of the bureaucratic obstacles in educational institutions and of the difficulties of crossing the barrier of the behavioral problems that teachers encounter with students in the classroom. Therefore, the participating teacher demonstrates an awareness of the implications of her role in investing in a good relationship with her students, exposing her social positioning within the nuances of the construction of her identity as teacher, as authority, as a woman.

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Anexo

1. Do you identify with any of the problems dealt with in the articles? Which?

2. What are the major problems you have with your students?

3. How do you deal with these problems?

4. Do you believe that experience helps teachers notice problems more easily?

5. Does the perception of the students' problems make the teacher more sensitive to them?

6. What are your expectations in relation to their future as students and/or citizens?

7. Have you had any 'success' stories? If so, could you briefly describe one of them?

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RESUMO: *As concepções acerca da relação entre professor e aluno referem-se à confiança, motivação e ao interesse dos alunos bem como às expectativas e atitudes dos professores. Com o objetivo de despertar e incentivar discussões sobre esses aspectos que podem, eventualmente, aprimorar a relação entre professores e alunos, este artigo foi realizado à luz da Análise Crítica do Discurso e de estudos sobre as expectativas dos professores. O presente artigo foi, portanto, realizado por meio da análise das percepções de um professor sobre essa relação professor-aluno. O corpus – composto por respostas a um questionário aplicado a uma professora de ensino médio de uma escola no subúrbio de San Diego/CA – foi submetido à análise da posição da autora em relação ao seu papel de professora. A intenção de desenvolver um bom relacionamento com os alunos estava presente no corpus, conforme esperado. No entanto, houve algumas ocorrências inesperadas: atitude predominantemente dominante sobre a resolução de problemas encontrados no ambiente escolar, heterogeneidade na divisão de responsabilidades e citação explícita de luta de poderes na sala de aula.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Análise crítica do discurso; expectativas dos professores; relação professor-aluno; luta de poder; ensino médio; Sala de aula.*

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