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ABSTRACT

Australia's process for quality child care improvement has 20 core principles, 4 of which relate to interactions between children and staff: (1) staff interactions with children should be warm and friendly; (2) all children should be treated equally, and their individual needs and backgrounds should be respected; (3) both sexes should be treated equally; and (4) staff should use a positive approach in guidance and discipline. With regard to this last principle, teacher style is a key determinant of quality interactions. Teacher style can be mapped out using leadership style characteristics developed by Lewin, Lippit, and White. Semantic features differentiating teacher styles include: (1) type of questions asked; (2) timing and manner of evaluation; (3) type of commands issued; and (4) the offering of global or local information. Teacher praise might be of the student's product, of the student, or of either, combined with supporting information. Democratic and predominant leadership, which provides support and structure, engages children in activities which orient them to specific goals, shows the students how an activity's steps reflect those goals, and assists the students in learning and practicing their own role in the activity. Understanding the role of language in learning facilities understanding how the manner of teachers' speech influences students and can help improve the quality of interaction between teachers and children. Contains 14 references. (JW)

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Quality Talk in Early Childhood Education: Mapping Teacher Style

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Introduction

In all areas of education, there is increased pressure towards accountability and towards continuous quality improvement. Australia has a national system of accreditation for childcare centres. At this point in time, it is still voluntary, but it is directly linked to the Government's financial support of centres. Eventually unaccredited centres will not receive the same level of government funding. The accreditation system has arisen from recognition of the importance of the early years in terms of children's development, the clear statistical evidence that the number of children being cared for outside their homes has increased dramatically, and growing awareness of the length of time which many children spend in such care - estimated as up to 12,500 hours before starting school, a period of time which is *only 500 hours less than the child will spend in lessons during the whole 13 years of schooling* (NCAC 1993).

National childcare accreditation in Australia

There are fifty-two Principles which underpin Australia's process for quality improvement in childcare centres, twenty of which are Core Principles, ie those in which it is mandatory for centres to be able to demonstrate "Good" quality. Standards of care in relation to the Principles are Unsatisfactory, Basic, Good and High. Four of the twenty Core Principles relate to interactions between staff and children. They are

* Staff interactions with children are warm and friendly
* Staff treat all children equally and try to accommodate their individual needs: they respect diversity of background
* Staff treat all children equally and try to accommodate their individual needs: they treat both sexes without bias
* Staff use a positive approach in guidance and discipline.

Quality is notoriously difficult to measure, particularly when what is being measured is as general as are these core principles.

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Focus

Because our time today is limited, I will concentrate on one aspect of one Principle - using a positive approach in guidance and discipline. A positive approach can be demonstrated in many ways, both verbal and non-verbal. The most explicit verbal realisation of using a positive approach is teacher use of praise. Can we, on this criterion, differentiate between the standards Unsatisfactory, Basic, Good, and High and identify for teachers specific areas in which they might improve the quality of their interactions with children? If we can do this on any one aspect, we can apply the same method to other aspects of teacher-child talk and gradually build up a picture of what we mean by quality talk.

I would like to try to answer this question within reference to my recent research into language interactions in eight early childhood education settings - four childcare centres (studying 4 year old children and their teachers) and four Year 1 classrooms (studying 6 year old children in their second year of formal schooling and their teachers) (see Makin, White & Owen *in press* and Makin *in press*). In this research, I focused on teacher style as a key determinant of quality interaction.

Teacher leadership style

Many research studies suggest that leadership style, by teachers or others, affects group behaviour (Lewin, Lippitt, White, 1939; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1989; Makin, 1994). The styles are most commonly described as democratic, *laissez-faire* and authoritarian. The democratic style is associated with social harmony and on-task behaviour. One of the most important ways in which leadership style is realised is through teacher-child talk.

To map teacher-child talk, I worked out the linguistic realisations of the original leadership style characteristics described by Lewin, Lippitt & White in 1939 (see Appendix 1) and developed five semantic networks to use as tools to help me interpret transcribed data from everyday life in early childhood settings. Certain semantic features were seen to be important in differentiating between teacher leadership styles:

1. the kind of questions which were asked - whether they were display questions, ie asking for information already known to the teacher; whether they included opinion-seeking questions as well as information-seeking questions; and whether children were asked for reasons and explanations;

2. evaluation - the type which was most common, what it was that was evaluated, and whether supporting information was given to the children which assisted them in understanding why they were being evaluated in a certain manner;

3. the type of commands which teachers used - whether they were primarily behaviour-oriented, whether they included a metacognitive focus, ie, commanding children to think, remember, decide, etc. and, as in teacher use of praise and

criticism, whether the children were given supporting information so that they knew why they were being commanded to do something;

4. whether offers of information were global or local, in other words, whether they gave children some understanding of the bigger picture or whether they referred to discrete activity steps.

Semantic networks can help us make quite fine distinctions between typical interaction features so that teachers can identify specific areas for positive change. Let us look at the evaluation network from this perspective. (See Appendix 2)

The first point of differentiation is whether an evaluative message is positive or negative. In Australia, I think that we would see a situation in which children never receive any positive feedback as Unsatisfactory although this, like all other aspects of interaction, will relate to cultural expectations. Similarly, we would say that a situation in which all evaluative messages which children receive is negative is Unsatisfactory. Things begin to get more complicated as we move into the Satisfactory gradings. However, the network gives us a way to proceed. A differentiating characteristic of leadership style in the original Lewin, Lippitt & White study (1939) was being personal versus fact-minded in praise and criticism. Being fact-minded was associated with the democratic style. This division appears in the network, which also allows us to identify what is praised or criticised and whether supporting information is given which helps children see why they are being praised or criticised. Examples of some of these network nodes would be

praise of product:	*what an interesting construction you've made*
praise of person:	*you re a very clever girl*
praise with supporting information:	*fantastic - you can read your name.*

A summary of some of the interaction features of the eight teachers compiled from a study of their C network data collected over a period of between 3 and 4 hours each is as follows:

	More positive than negative evaluations	More praise of product than person	More praise supported than not supported
T1	**YES**	**EQUAL**	**NO**
T2	**YES**	**NO**	**NO**
T3	**NO**	**YES**	**NO**
T4	**NO**	**EQUAL**	**NO**
T5	**YES**	**YES**	**NO**
T6	**YES**	**YES**	**NO**
T7	**YES**	**NO**	**NO**
T8	**YES**	**YES**	**NO**

KEY T1-T4 were Year 1 teachers in schools
T5-T8 were teachers in childcare centres

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Discussion

In general, we can say that the children in the childcare centres were in a democratic environment, judged simply on their experience of teacher evaluation, both type and focus. The focus of evaluation is important to take into account. Although T3 made greater use of negative evaluation than of positive, it was seldom personal in its focus. She demonstrated a style which I categorised as *predominant*. She demonstrated certain authoritarian characteristics, but was clearly developing in the children an independent, problem-solving orientation. She encouraged children to be critical and analytical of products and processes, but not of individuals. On the other hand, T4 criticised individuals as often as products.

We can also see that, in all settings, supporting information was not commonly given. This is an area in which all eight teachers might look at positive change - ensuring that children are aware of why a certain evaluation has been made.

The view that knowledge is a social construct, with language as the main tool with which human beings construct and interpret their world (Halliday, 1975; Luria, 1976; Bruner, 1983; Heath, 1983; Vygotsky, 1987; Cazden, 1988; Rogoff, 1990), has led to renewed interest in the relationship between language and learning. Democratic and predominant leadership styles provide support and structure, engaging children in activities in ways that orient them to the goals of the activities, show them how various activity steps reflect the goals, and assist them to learn and practise their own role in the activity. These styles are associated with group problem solving skills and a more harmonious, supportive atmosphere, in which children are mutually supportive and remain on task.

If the goal of education is to develop independent learners, problem solvers, and capable communicators, then children need clear messages as to their role. This is particularly necessary for children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are learning to operate within the context of Australian schools.

The criterial factors are what powers children are given, what expectations are set out for them, what perspectives they learn to adopt. The differences can be summarised by the terms "global" and "local". Children who receive explanations for why they are praised or criticised, and who are praised for investigative, exploratory, intellectual endeavours rather than for being "good", passive, compliant and easy to manage, are developing a more global perspective in which they see themselves as able to manage their environment.

The word "education", a leading out, connotes the central importance of teachers developing global perspectives in their students so that children see beyond the immediate and construct themselves as active agents, as players, as people who can affect what is happening.

Conclusion

The impetus for the studies described today was a desire to gain insight into the role of language in education and to understand more clearly how teacher talk can influence children's approaches to learning. Anyone who has taught for long is familiar with the way in which the same group of children can behave quite differently with different teachers. A substitute/casual teacher is routinely tried out by her charges, as are student teachers. Teachers can begin the year with a class which is difficult and soon have them working together in a wholly new way. In one of the schools the comment was made (of a class not taking part in the studies from which the data in this paper have been taken), *they were a really 'ratty' class when Carol got them, but now they're a dream to work with. Carol always ends up with great classes.* Often this transformation is quite deliberate on the part of experienced teachers. However, even experienced teachers are unable to say exactly how they operate to bring about change. Semantic networks can reveal more clearly some of the machinery which drives early childhood education and help us improve the quality of our interaction with children.

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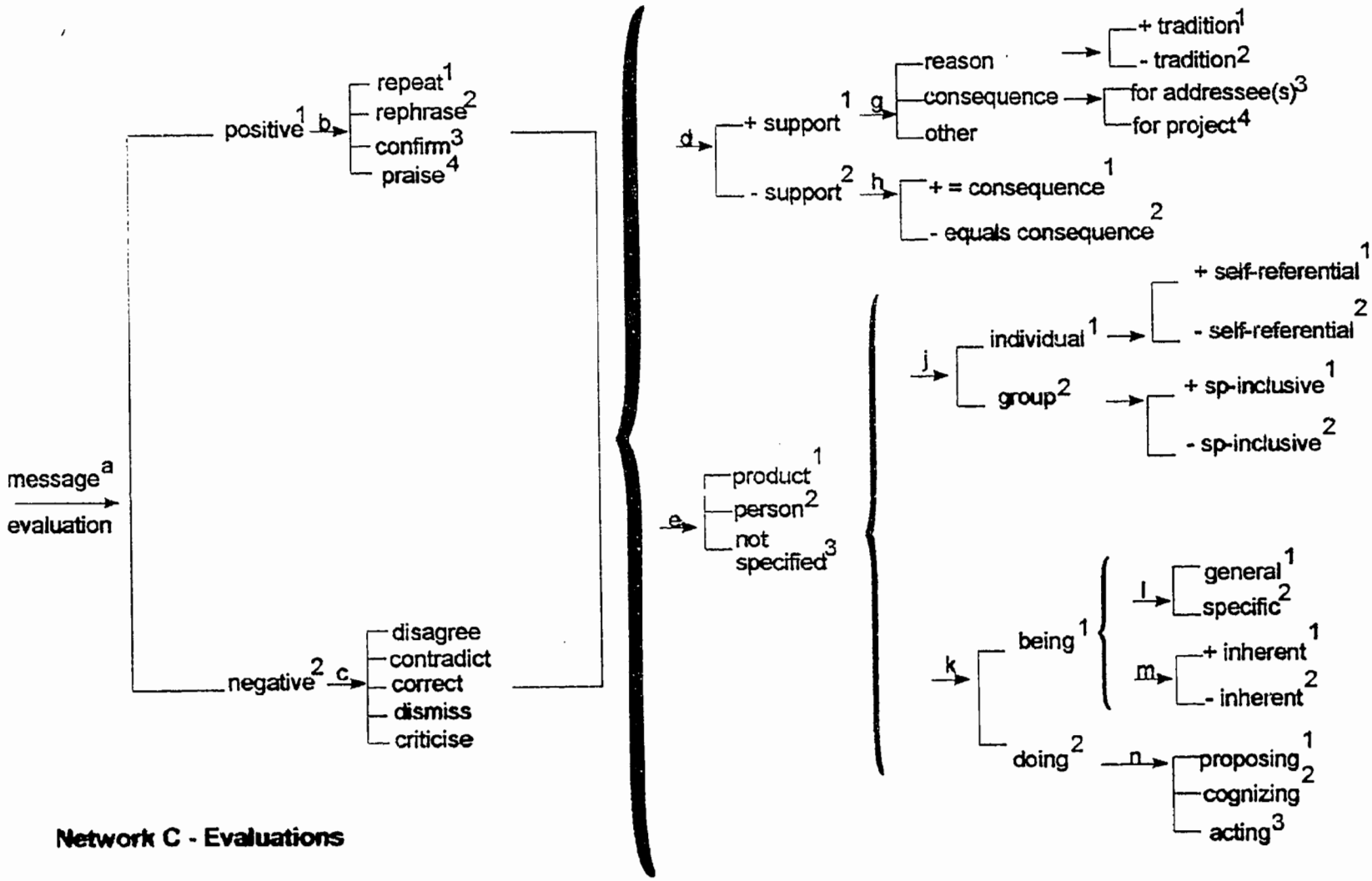

Network C - Evaluations

	More positive than negative evaluations		More praise supported than not supported
[illegible]	YES	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	YES	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	NO	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	NO	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	YES	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	YES	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	YES	[illegible]	NO
[illegible]	YES	[illegible]	NO

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Authoritarian	Democratic	Laissez-faire
1. All determination of policy by the leader.	1. All policies a matter of group discussion and decision, encouraged and assisted by the leaders.	1. Complete freedom for group or individual decision, without any leader participation.
2. Techniques and activity steps dictated by the authority, one at a time, so that future steps were always uncertain to a large degree.	2. Activity perspective gained during first discussion period. General steps to group goal sketched, and where technical advice was needed the leader suggested two or three alternative procedures from which choice could be made.	2. Various materials supplied by the leader, who made it clear that he would supply information when asked. He took no other part in group discussion.
3. The leader usually dictated the particular work task and work companions of each member.	3.The members were free to work with whomever they chose, and the division of tasks was left up to the group.	3. Complete non-participation by leader.
4. The dominator was "personal" in his praise and criticism of the work or each member, but remained aloof from active group participation except when demonstrating. He was friendly or impersonal rather than openly hostile.	4. The leader was "objective" or "fact minded" in his praise and criticism, and tried to be a regular group member in spirit without doing too much of the work.	4. Very infrequent comments on member activities unless questioned, and no attempt to participate or interfere with the course of events.

TABLE 2: Reproduction from Lewin, Lippitt, and White, 1939:273