

Burman, E. and Parker, I. (eds) (1993) *Discourse Analytic Research: Repertoires and Readings of Texts in Action*. London: Routledge.

## Chapter 8

---

### Case-conference analysis and action research

[pp. 135-154]

Deborah Marks

[Deborah.Marks@lineone.net]

---

This chapter investigates the feedback session to participants of an earlier education case conference and the attempt to share a discourse analytic understanding of that conference with its participants.<sup>1</sup> The first section describes the purpose of education case conferences and why the discourse analysis project was set up. The second section discusses the motivation for feeding back the analysis and the issues this raises for those interested in empirical and critical discourse research. The third section examines the fruits of this enterprise, assessing the specific advantages and disadvantages of sharing discourse analysis with the participants of the research.

### **BACKGROUND: CASE CONFERENCES AS ‘DISTORTED COMMUNICATIONS’**

In 1974 the expansion of multi-professional assessment became the express aim of the British Department of Education and Science. Growing emphasis was placed on the need to integrate people with ‘special needs’ into the community (Sines, 1988). Such a policy required co-operation between the various branches of the social services. It was in this context that multi-professional case conferences have come to take on increasing importance in Britain in recent years, for example, in social work (Robinson, 1978), clinical psychology (West and Spinks, 1988) and social service management. In 1978 the Warnock Report linked the concept of multi-professional assessment to education. The aim of education case conferences is to provide educational professionals (and other welfare professionals) and parents with the opportunity to meet and determine the nature of educational provision for a particular child. For instance, a conference might be arranged if a head teacher of a [136] school feels that a pupil is in need of some form of special education.

The 1981 Education Act gave local education authorities a new strategic role in arranging a complex range of services in meeting individual special education needs (Goacher *et al.*, 1988: 46). The consultative process was developed further by the Fish Committee (1985), which advocated that the school, relevant professionals, pupils, parents and the child work towards integration into all aspects of school and community life. Despite being presented as a panacea for ensuring a balanced debate the social-service decision-making machinery, reports from educational psychologists (MacIntyre and Burman, 1987), parents (Heard, 1987; Reepers, 1989) and reports from the Department of

Education and Science indicate that case conferences are fraught with communication difficulties and conflict. It has been argued that such meetings serve merely to rubber-stamp professional interests (Ford *et al*, 1982) rather than to engage in open debate. Moreover, since the Education Reform Act (1988), new strains have been placed on inter-professional co-operation. The Act increases pressure on school managers improve academic results (and weakens the jurisdiction of local education authorities) providing inducement to schools to have 'difficult' children placed in special schools. This conflicts with the educational psychologist's aim to integrate children with special needs.

The impetus for a discourse analysis of education case conferences came from the observation that children from manual working-class and West Indian parentage were over-represented in special schools (Tomlinson, 1982). Case conferences may confirm some practices of schools and allied educational services in reproducing patterns of disadvantage along class, ethnic and gender lines (Eggleston *et al.*, 1987). For example, by focusing on the child as a 'problem', rather than critically examining classroom interactions or socio-economic factors, the case conference may reinforce a number of other signifying practices, such as the way in which educational pedagogies and classroom practices reproduce socio-economic relations (Sharp and Green, 1975; Willis, 1977). Case-conference discourses help to structure the way in which a child's educational 'needs' come to be determined.

### **The case conference**

The education conference which was examined was that of a [137] 14-year-old black boy at a comprehensive school. The boy, who will be referred to as Mike, displayed (according to comments made by professionals) behavioural problems caused by 'difficulties at home'. Mike's teachers felt that he could no longer be managed within the school. For this reason a meeting of his parents, teachers and other (white) welfare professionals was called to discuss the possibility of his removal from his current comprehensive school into special education.

At this case conference professionals debated specific ways of catering for his needs. However, a discourse analysis of this meeting (Warren, 1988) challenged the way professionals defined the issues and failed to leave a space for Mike and his parents to contribute to the debate. In place of the idealized model of interprofessional communication at education case conferences, it was suggested that different interest groups in the case conference employed a variety of rhetorical devices to achieve specific interests.

## **APPROACH AND RATIONALE**

### **Two years on: the feedback meeting**

Two years after this study was carried out two psychology lecturers and a research assistant (myself) met with educational professionals (the teacher and education welfare officer) from Mike's original case conference together with Mike and his mother. The participants were brought together by the educational psychologist who had set up the case conference. The meeting took place in a classroom at the school Mike had attended.

At the start of the meeting the educational psychologist and two of the researchers took about one hour to describe the aims of the research into education case conferences and the reasons for setting up the feedback meeting.

The purpose of this meeting was to share our analysis of the way in which language was organized into sets of statements or discourses with participants of the earlier research. This would achieve the following objectives.

First, it would deepen our understanding of the way in which case-conference discourses were rhetorically organized within a specific context. By bringing people together to examine the way they conceptualized the issues at the original case conference it would be possible to show that the divergent 'attitudes' of participants are not fixed entities in the way that many social psychologists would [138] have us believe. Having had two years' distance from the involved exchanges of the original case conference, it was hoped that participants would be able to generate new ways of talking about the meeting which would undermine the image of them as autonomous 'subjects' with beliefs held independent of context.

The feedback meeting would provide the opportunity to carry out a piece of 'action research' which would eschew the positivist objective of 'observation' without intervention. The meeting would explicitly acknowledge the way in which theoretical categories do not refer to neutral external 'real' objects, but actually help to constitute these objects. For example, criteria for defining educational ability has changed through history and is applied differentially among social groups. The socially constructed nature of educational assessment generally, and special education in particular, has been well documented (Croll *et al.*, 1984; Rose, 1985; Bowman, 1986; Elliot, 1987; Billig *et al.*, 1988).

Second, sharing our interpretation of case-conference discourses with participants of the feedback meeting would impact directly on their lives. By recognizing this and attempting to collaborate with teaching professionals in critical reflection we aimed to avoid exploiting our professional participants by 'extracting' our 'material/data' from them and then withdrawing to 'write it up'. We had stated at the outset our desire that participants should find the research useful for their professional practices. The teachers and the psychologist had stated their interest in our 'findings' and their openness to new ways of seeing. In this way the benefits of the project would thus not simply accrue to ourselves as researchers interested in discourse analysis and educational policy. A commitment to share the fruits of research with participants of the original case conference had been made in 1988. Such a collaborative approach has become an important strand within qualitative and educational research (see Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

In addition to the critical impulse *vis-à-vis* challenging professional practices, we were also concerned with the liberatory goal of empowering the subject of the case conference. Critical reflection on language would expose the dominant ways of seeing in the meeting which we felt had served to regulate him. Specifically, we felt that in the case conference, Mike had had fewer rights to speak since the educational professionals took responsibility for finding a solution to his 'problems'. By exposing the way in which he was positioned in and through language, it was hoped that the feedback [139] meeting would open a space for challenging discursive practices and for enabling Mike to resist being positioned as the 'problem'. (In a prior interview Mike had constructed 'his

problem' in terms of racism in the school rather than in terms of his behaviour and home environment.)

Finally, we hoped that the process of feeding back would offer the opportunity for a reflexive analysis of the research process and our own role in case-conference discourses. This would 'democratize' the research by giving participants the opportunity to comment on our interpretations. We would explicitly recognize that there are multiple ways of conceptualizing the case conference.

Appreciation of the reflexive nature of language is a central feature of discourse analysis. By recognizing that the structure of language is not transparent 'all our claims are reflexive in a manner which cannot be avoided. For to recognise the importance of language is to do so within language' (Lawson, 1985: 9, see also Ashmore, 1989). Implicit within the discourse analytic project is the belief that, 'there is no longer any representation, there is only action, theory's action, the action of practice in the relationship of networks' (Deleuze, quoted in Kritzman, 1988:14). This is a point which is particularly salient when discourses are identified by participant observers. However, even where the researcher is not present, she still plays a crucial role in defining a discourse. The way in which language is heard, transcribed (Ochs and Schieffellen, 1979) and organized into discourse categories involves a creative process of construction for which the analyst ought to acknowledge responsibility. Yet some discourse analysts seem to put such issues to one side, discussing their texts as if they existed 'out there', in media sources or as if they could be collected unproblematically (cf. West's (1990) discussion of hidden video cameras to collect doctor-patient discourses).

The power to identify, define and label a set of meanings which form a 'discourse' enables us to exert our power as academics to exhibit, control, classify and thus reify meaning. Yet our philosophical commitment to the idea that meanings emerge within a context and can be interpreted only narratively rather than objectively, envie us to become self-reflexive. Feeding back would enable us to look closely at our practice in terms of how we contribute to dominance despite our liberatory intentions' (Lather, 1986:156). The feedback meeting would, we thought, encourage participants to challenge our interpretations and expose our own position to critical appraisal. This would allow conscious and deliberate [140] subversion of the positivist fantasy of being a 'fly on the wall' and having no impact on the world being studied. The challenge was, as Lather succinctly puts it, to 'foreground our own perspective . . . without putting ourselves back at the centre' of the narrative, Ld develop 'forms of inquiry that are "interruptors" of the social relations of dominance' (Lather, 1986:157).

Having reviewed our reasons for calling people back for a critical discussion of the original case-conference proceedings, the meeting was opened up for participants to make their contributions.

However, the aims, as delineated (in simplified form) for participants, and described earlier, seemed to be mutually incompatible. The attempt to encourage reflection and to instigate change in practices represented the clash between (postmodern) concerns to construct systems of meanings as contingent, positioned and partial with (modern) liberatory concerns to challenge social inequalities. Moreover, the goal of empowering the case-conference subject was itself problematic since it represented collusion in the very oppressive practices we were seeking to challenge. This is because our discourses of reflection and emancipation were underscored by our privileged

position as expert, professional (white, middle-class) ‘discourse analysts’. I shall illustrate some of these difficulties by discussing three ~courses which I have identified. These are the ‘therapeutic’ discourse, the ‘reflective’ discourse and the ‘rejectionist’ discourse.

## FEEDBACK DISCOURSES

### The therapeutic discourse: Mike’s ‘needs’ and our frustrations

The feedback meeting provided educationists with the opportunity discuss their role and the problems associated with it. One central issue to emerge was the failure of the meeting to address the ‘needs’ of various participants. These needs were defined by the education welfare officer, Sally, who began by talking about the failure to resolve ‘the situation’.

#### Extract 1

*Sally:* And we had this meeting (.) and I found that meeting very frustrating (.) . . . *the situation hadn’t been able to be resolved* (.) er (.) the pure fact that the person who actually isn’t here today [coughs from a couple of people who at the time [141] was responsible in the social services department (.) er (.) wasn’t able to to *bring the situation together for Mike* to come to school and feel good about himself (.) and (.) as I do remember it quite well, my own frustrations (.)\*

#### \* Key to participants

Trevor - teacher  
Jane - educational psychologist  
Emelia - researcher  
Tom - researcher  
Sally - education welfare officer  
Mrs Jones - mother of case conference subject (Mike)  
Mike - subject of case conference  
Kate - researcher at original case conference

#### Key to transcription

(.) pause  
underline emphasis  
= overlap  
) talking at same time

In this extract Sally refers to a mysterious ‘situation’ which could not be resolved in a general sense. This turned out to be the problem of Mike’s low self-esteem and the failure of another professional from the social services to deal with it. By referring to Mike’s presumed emotional difficulties in passive terms as ‘the situation no acknowledgement is given to the possible existence of competing accounts. The repetitious reference to ‘the situation’ serves to mask rhetorical positions by objectifying the assertion that the problem is Mike’s lack of self-esteem and the solution lies in the help of the caring professions.

Mike’s life is thus presented as being fragmented. Appeal implicitly being made to the humanistic therapeutic discourse which sees the subject as being unified and integrated (see Diamond, 1991). Mike’s potential helpers are empathetic towards him, and consequently, they need support and feel frustration. In this way conflict of interest between Mike and his mother and the professionals mystified.

This focus on both Mike's and his mother's feelings (and the stresses and strains this places on the professionals) continues in the education welfare officer's account of the reason for suppressing professional differences.

Extract 2

Sally: People don't often say in meetings (.) the things they want to say because *there's this perpetual barrier to stop you* (.) because you don't want to (.) involve *other people, involve parents* (.) [142] professionals (.) professional differences (.) *that's the word* (.) I think *you're* always very sensitive to people's feelings because they're not here to listen to your differences (.) but after the case conference (.) is called (.) that's where you could actually use it, isn't it?

Emelia: =Yes.

Extract 3

Sally: I don't think for one minute (.) any of us would get involved in professional differences (.) erm (.)

In these extracts we see the way the education welfare officer responds to the interests of the researcher by referring to communication difficulties and 'professional differences' in the case conference. However, the emphasis still remains placed on professional commitment to support Mike. The significance of professional differences played down by her description of such disagreements as 'the word'. In this way reference to actual conflict is clouded. Moreover, she distances herself from involvement in this interprofessional conflict by talking about her own feelings in terms of 'you'; 'you don't want to' and 'you're always very sensitive'. Yet it is clear from the context that 'you' is used in the sense of 'one'; Sally is referring to herself. She thus presents herself as a 'therapist' who suppresses acknowledgement of conflict in the interests of her client. Case conferences cannot simply be democratic forums since they must also be sensitive to clients' wishes. Just as a psychotherapist focuses on the needs of the client and therefore does not verbalize his/her own conflicts, so the education welfare officer doesn't indicate to his/her clients the underlying political conflicts which guide specific outcomes out of 'sensitivity' to the client.

When attention *is* focused on interprofessional conflict, it is immediately directed back to the 'real' issue of Mike's 'needs':

Extract 4

Sally: each and every one of us I'm sure would (.) do their utmost to support Mike (.) in terms of support ...

Mike himself is called upon by the teacher to reinforce the point at his needs were not addressed:

Extract 5

Trevor: I know they did have a pretty stormy relationship at one time didn't you Mike?=  
[143]

*Mike:* Yes=  
*Trevor:* Erm (.) but it improved ...

Extract 6

*Trevor:* I think Mike was under no illusions about what (.) er (.) support or otherwise he was or was not receiving from (.) the social services (.) em (.) (to Mike] I think we've talked on quite a few occasions about (.) the lack of help you were getting (.) from (.) the social services ...

By including Mike in the discussion of the 'support or otherwise' the teacher evokes Mike's collusion in the discussion and gives him a voice. Even if Mike fails to respond verbally, reference has successfully been made to the fact that he does have a voice. He's talked with the teacher 'on quite a few occasions'.

When asked if parents and pupils were given enough information, Mike criticized the amount of information he had been given prior to the case conference. This comment however, is immediately reformulated into an issue of trust (and sensitivity) rather than professional (non-) disclosure.

Extract 7

*Mike:* (.) er it could be a bit more (.)  
*Jane:* What kind=?  
*Mike:* =Well you know like more description (.) you could describe it a bit more (.)  
*Sally:* Right (.) What did you say about the trust thing before  
*Mike:* (.) people actually knowing and trusting people? Well ye e es (.)  
*Sally:* I think that in Mike's case .

The education welfare officer felt that the case conference failed to provide sufficient support for professional participants as well as for Mike and his mother. Unlike other case conferences (such as social-work case conferences relating to child abuse) in which professionals are provided with supervisory support and the opportunity to debrief, education case conferences provide no such support. Generally, it seemed to be felt that the research interviews following the case conference, and the feedback meeting helped by providing the space for therapeutic reflection.

[144]

Extract 8

*Sally:* It was only when I actually sat down with Kate and really thought about it (.) I didn't actually recognize how (.) how frustrated I was (.) coming from one meeting (.) although they were weeks apart (.) still feeling *the same situation hadn't been resolved* (.) er (.)

Just as Mike needed support in order to become integrated as a 'person', so his carers needed a feedback meeting in order to offload. Mike's difficulties were thus presented in parallel with their own. He needed a voice just as they did. The feedback meeting thus had many of the trappings of a humanistic therapy group, yet its function was not merely to give participants therapeutic space. The participants of the meeting were not strangers

but colleagues. 'Their 'reflections' would have real social implications. The professionals used the feedback meeting to place responsibility for decisions made in the case conference with the external situation which both professionals and Mike and his mother were equal subjects to. In this way power differentials between the case-conference subject and Mike were erased. For this reason the attempt to generate critical reflection in the feedback meeting was constrained by similar factors as had operated in the original case conference. Professionals needed to sustain a sense of personal efficacy and to present themselves as frustrated carers rather than figures of authority. Our attempts to 'challenge ways of seeing' and problematize the way in which needs were defined were thus not heard by educationalists.

Extract 9

*Emelia:* People would find it easier to say to one person who (.) I mean in Kate's position as someone who was not involved (.) er, who was not an interested party in any position (.)

In extract 9, the researcher is seduced into adopting a therapeutic discourse, describing the previous researcher as an impartial outsider who would allow therapeutic space for reflection.

### **Issues of reflectivity**

Following her explanation of the research and the reasons for the feedback meeting the educational psychologist distributed minutes [145] of the original case conference in order to refresh memories and facilitate discussion:

Extract 10

*Jane:* I wonder *how far* these minutes (.) reflect what you remember?  
*Sally:* Oh, *I can remember* it very clearly (.) Yes.  
*Tom:* Is this *the way* you would have described it?  
*Sally:* It's a *fair assessment* I think (.) I remember it very well because (.) Perhaps I shouldn't be talking now  
*Emelia:* =No go=  
*Sally:* =I remember coming to this meeting ...

Extract 10 exhibits subtle tensions between the reflective and therapeutic discourses. In generating a discussion about the difference between records and memory, Jane and Tom make the implicit assumption that there are different versions of reality, reflecting discourse analysts' concern with the symbolic representation of meaning. This is followed by reminiscences of the education welfare officer about her feelings in the case conference. Tom steps in, in order to steer the discussion back to the topic of interpretation. This serves to situate the education welfare officer's account within a variety of possible accounts. The education welfare officer, anxious to co-operate begins to adopt a more reflective style:

Extract 11

*Tom:* I guess these minutes would look very different if Kate had written them.  
*Sally:* Would Kate be writing (.) knowing what our views (are] ... would that perhaps affect the way she would write it? I think it would ...  
*Tom:* I'm sure it would=  
*Emelia:* =yes (.) yes (.)

The education welfare officer indicates her appreciation of the social construction of accounts, and is rewarded with enthusiastic affirmations.

Extract 12

*Sally:* actually analysing (.) what you really wanted to say but can't=  
*Tom:* =what (.) you didn't want to have arguments?=[146]  
*Sally:* =yes=  
*Tom:* =when Mike was there?  
*Sally:* =right yes ...

The therapeutic discourse of needs was thus temporarily disrupted our introduction of a discourse on discursive constraints. This tension between therapeutic and reflective discourses occasionally emerges as manifest conflict over precisely what was said at the case conference. One example of this is when Tom summarizes some of the issues within the case conference. He refers to people thinking Mike's pride at living in an area perceived as being predominantly black was problematic:

Extract 13

*Tom:* another way of talking about it was um (.) about Mike being proud of being from [black area] and this became (.) and issues that was talked about at the case conference (.) I don't know whether you remember that=  
*Sally:* =no I don't I don't=  
*Tom:* um and it wasn't only one person that was doing that (.) but it was another way of talking about the problem ...

Here, Tom explicitly overrides Sally's objection to the suggestion of racism. He is able to do this because of his greater rights to speak as someone who has been introduced as a researcher and who is summarizing, from a written report his 'findings'. When Sally does a chance to come back she says:

Extract 14

*Sally:* I can remember the case conference that Mike was at (.) he was so distressed at that meeting (.) he was never able to lift his head up.

In this way she reasserts (in a graphic and imperative manner) the therapeutic discourse. By implicating ourselves (as researchers with particular goals within conversation) in our discourse analysis, questions about our role in articulating and organizing discursive practices can be addressed. This us calls into question the social relations of the research act and problematic way in which we, as researchers, were privileging own reflexive/empowerment perspective and presenting ourselves as experts. Our rights to

speaking were predicated upon our authority as 'researchers' coming in from outside.  
[147]

### Rejectionism as discourse?

Mike, the subject of the case conference, avoided involvement in either the therapeutic or reflective discourses. He spurned participation in the debate and seemed to sit on the margins of the meeting. There is an interesting juxtaposition of a set of affirmatives expressed by the educational professionals, followed by Mike's negative response to the question of whether he appreciated the existence of interprofessional tensions. This serves to underline his role as outsider in his own case conference and challenges the ideology of equal exchange of information among all parties. Mike's silence through most of the discussion testifies to his refusal to participate.

#### Extract 15

*Sally:* Would you be able to say I'm not happy about that? (.) as a young person? [addressed to Mike] (.) Sorry (.) Do you think it would not be very easy? [addressed to Mrs Jones]

*Mrs Jones:* No.

*Jane:* Would you agree with that Mike or do you think (.) taking yourself back to who you were and not who you are now (.) but as a pupil (.) to actually say 'I'm not happy (.) I'm concerned with the way Jane and Sally or the school are treating me (.) I disagree with what you say.

*Mike:* Well mostly I could show that anyway.

*Jane:* That's how you felt?

*Mike:* Well most times yes.

*Jane:* Did you feel able to say that?

*Mike:* I could say it but I just didn't want to=

Mike's failure to confirm that he had difficulties in expressing himself is a source of disquiet for the adult participants. Being concerned to give the subject of the feedback meeting (the person with least status and power) a voice, it is disconcerting to have this offer to speak turned down. Mike's assertion that he positively chose not to speak is then disregarded by the researchers and educational professionals.

#### Extract 16

*Jane:* =Is that=

*Trevor:* I was going to say that I think it was probably on a one (.) or in a small situation when Mike would say= [148]

*Jane:* Yes=

*Trevor:* He's not happy with this and going back to Sally's point (.) I think Mike was under no illusions about what (.) er support or otherwise he was or was not receiving from (.) the social services (.) em (.) [to Mike] I think we've talked on quite a few occasions about (.) the lack of help you were getting (.) from (.) the social services (.) um (.) but as Sally said that's not something that's brought up in a meeting (.) in a case conference and is

not thrashed out ...

Trevor moves from a description of Mike's understanding of the situation, to a reference to his discussions with Mike which incorporate Mike, to directly addressing Mike. The therapeutic discourse of need is thus asserted with Mike's silent endorsement. This effectively challenges the agenda of empowerment and reflection and renders invalid Mike's claim that he positively chose not speak rather than was unable to speak. The possibility that he rejected the fundamental tenets of the debate (that he had 'special needs' which had not been addressed by the social worker) was overridden.

The above inference about the meaning of Mike's 'strategy' of silence is, however, problematic on two counts. First, by describing his non-participation or refusal as a strategy of opposing the therapeutic and reflective discourses we are sabotaging his aim to distance himself from a white middle-class regulatory enterprise which does not involve him. Bhavnani (1990) has spoken of the importance of silence as a form of resistance, and Mike's role in the case conference serves to underline his resistance to 'empowerment' by others. By interpreting Mike's silence as opposition to therapeutic and reflective discourses we were effectively undermining and sabotaging his resistance to professional gaze. Our attempts to empower Mike in the feedback meeting can therefore be seen as patronizing and oppressive.

Second, there are theoretical problems with conceptualizing Mike's refusal to speak as a 'discourse. While it is important to recognize that silences are meaningful, it becomes problematic to suggest that silence 'constructs an object' (Foucault, 1972; Parker, 1990). Whilst language analytically fixes and constructs subjects as autonomous selves, silence in this instance can be interpreted as an [149] attempt to resist unitary wholeness. In this way, it is problematic to characterize silence as a discourse.

### **Problems with feeding back: reflections, realities and irony**

Potter (1988) has spoken of the futility of analysing the readings of those people whose discourse we are analysing. He argues that this merely produces a proliferation of versions. He argues that it does not resolve the issue of reflexivity since there is no principled difference between our readings of the original extract and our readings of participants' readings of the extract. The attempt to draw attention to our own role in the construction of our data implies that the more reflexive we are, the more progressive our work is. Such an approach leads to navel gazing and a competitive struggle to be more reflexive than thou'.

The attempt to foster an ideal speech situation in which professionals and educational consumers could engage in undistorted communication (Habermas, 1970) was thwarted by the continued expression of mutually incompatible discourses (see Ellsworth (1989) for a critique of Habermasian attempts to establish genuine dialogue of differences out of conflicting subject positions). The feedback meeting seemed closer to a repetition of the positions adopted during the case conference.

This problem is hardly surprising given the context of the feedback meeting and the way in which people's interpretation of its purpose was structured by their different roles in the meeting. The feedback meeting took place in the same setting as the original case conference. When the teacher (Trevor) arrived at the classroom he asked, 'Is this Mike

Jones's case conference?'. The feedback meeting was seen as a rerun of the original case conference. Interprofessional rivalries, resource shortages, the need to defend against hostility from the government, media and a variety of parent groups required educational professionals to adopt a defensive posture. Thus, attention was directed towards the child as 'the problem'.

An emphasis on Mike's 'needs' seemed actually to be built into the structure of both the case conference and the feedback meeting. Such meetings focus on specific individuals rather than the approach of the school or other socioeconomic factors. In order to achieve effective critical reflection and to generate new ways of seeing, it is not enough just to attempt to spontaneously encourage people [150]to reflect on ways of speaking. Discursive practices emerge within specific power/knowledge contexts.

Real collaboration requires the creation of a space within which people can step outside their everyday positions, which are materially constrained. Otherwise our attempt to foster a liberatory discourse remains within the realm of idealism. Pseudocollaboration reinforces problematic power differential between academics who gain (publications, research grants) from the project and educationalist education consumers who are exploited (in terms of their time energy) by the research (see Ladwig, 1991).

This raises the problem of whether discourses are reified in our account. Have 'discourses' come to look like ideological apparatuses? The implication here is that people are imprisoned within their texts and that there is no such thing as communication, but only the battle between different, untranslatable ways of seeing.

Another problem with the feedback enterprise in discourse analysis can be heard as ironicizing (Potter, 1988). The implicitly critical way that discourse analysis scrutinizes its subjects, indicated by the that we do not tend to analyse the discourses of those we fully agree with, means that we tend not to take what people say seriously. Discourse analysis suspends belief in a naive realist approach to people's accounts. This means that it becomes difficult to share our discourse analysis with speakers. When we do so participants are forced into a defensive posture which makes it difficult for them to develop a critical view of the 'texts' they produce. Such a dynamic reinforces our own role as experts who can stand outside accounts. Any later attempt to graft on to this an analysis of our own subject position can operate more as tokenism to the idea of reflexivity rather than 'real' acknowledgement of our power. Grounded research and acknowledgement of engagement with the patterns of life which is analysing is important. However, academic reflection on the construction of accounts can be tedious and narcissistic. Exploring our own reasons for carrying out a piece of research serves to place ourselves at the centre of the account and leaves us locked in an endless cycle of reflexivity.

## **SUMMARY AND EVALUATION**

Participants at the feedback meeting interpreted the research goals in different ways. The educational professionals saw the main value of the feedback meeting as giving them the opportunity to air their [152] grievances regarding resource limitations in the provision of special education. This is an outcome reflected in other types of action research projects in schools (see Stenhouse, 1973). The academic agenda of reflection on education discourses and research practices arose from our own job remit. Mike's agenda was to

resist professional labelling which had, in the past, been the source of both punishment and support.

The difficulties of combining intervention and research have been well-documented (Morris and Rein, 1967; Cohen and Manion, 1984). The specific problems of using discourse analysis for progressive, critical and socially engaged research have received less attention (see Burman, 1991). This is because critical discourse analyses have tended to be historical (for example, Rose, 1985) or deal with texts which do not include the researcher, rather than being ethnographic. A number of problems are raised when we attempt to include ourselves in our discourse analysis. Specifically, questions around the power of the researcher as expert, the problems of empowerment of the 'oppressed' and issues of achieving reflexivity and change emerge. The value of our feedback meeting should be seen as an example of how not to do empirical liberatory discourse analysis. The problem of what to do with the feedback meeting transcripts points to an inherent problem with the whole enterprise. This is that research which is both liberatory and reflexive in its challenge to regulatory practices must be fully collaborative. If educational professionals, Mike and his mother had played an integral part in construction of the research project, on instigating self-reflection and on writing a discourse analytic critique, then we, as academics would not have been positioned as experts but rather as facilitators. Feeding back requires an egalitarian context. If this were possible we would not need to feed back.

For discourse analysis to have any critical value in drawing attention to the way in which meanings and subsequent outcomes are constructed in and through language, the analysis must be taken out of its context and examined in a non-threatening setting. Discourse analysis could be adopted as a training tool for participants of case conferences and as a strategy for criticizing case-conference management, rather than used directly to challenge participants about discourses in their own case conference. In this way the deconstruction of professional educational practices is carried out from outside. The task of developing a new culture within the system of special education lies with political action informed by critical [152] discourse analysis rather than idealist action research projects. The question arises, then, of the relationship between discourse analysis and its uses. Is discourse analysis merely a research method or rhetorical device for justifying political struggles?

#### **NOTE**

1 This chapter is based on a research project on discourse and education case conferences with Erica Burman, Leah Burman, Caroline Barrett-Pugh, Deborah Marks and Ian Parker, funded by Manchester Polytechnic and with the support of Manchester Education Authority.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Ashmore, M. (1989) *The Reflexive Thesis: Wrioting the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge*, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Bhavani, K-K. (1990) 'What's power got to do with it? Empowerment and social research', in I. Parker and J. Shotter (eds) *Deconstructing Social Psychology*, London: Routledge.

- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D. and Radley, A. (1988) *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*, London: Sage.
- Bowman, N. (1986) 'Maladjustment: a history of the category', in W. Swann (ed.) *The Practice of Special Education*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Burman, E. (1991) 'What discourse is not', *Philosophical Psychology* 4 (3): 325-42.
- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, London: Falmer Press.
- Cohen, L. and Manion, L. (1984) 'Action research', in J. Bell, T. Bush, R. Fox and S. Goulding (eds) *Conducting Small-scale Investigation in Educational Management*, London: Harper.
- Croll, P., Moses, D. and Wright, J. (1984) 'Children with learning difficulties and assessment in the junior classroom', in P. Broadfoot (ed.) *Selection, Certification and Control: Social Issues and Educational Assessment*, London: Falmer Press.
- Diamond, N. (1991) 'The fear of the flesh: constructions of the body', paper for Second Discourse Analysis Workshop/Conference, Manchester Polytechnic, July.
- Eggleston, J., Dunn, D., Anjali, M. and Wright, C. (1987) *Education for Some: The Educational and Vocational Experiences of Some 15-18 Year Old Members of Minority Ethnic Groups*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- Elliot, R. (1987) *Litigating Intelligence: IQ Tests, Special Education and Social Science in the Court-room*, Massachusetts: Auburn House.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989) 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy', *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (3): 297-324.
- Fish Committee (Report of the Committee Reviewing Provision to [153] Meet Special Education Needs) (1985) *Educational Opportunities for All?* London: ILEA.
- Ford, J., Mongon, D. and Whelan, M. (1982) *Special Education and Social Control: Invisible Disasters*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock.
- Goacher, B., Evans, J., Welton, J. and Wedell, K. (1988) *Policy and Provision for Special Education: Implementing the 1981 Education Act*, London: Cassell.
- Habermas, J. (1970) 'On systematically distorted communication', *Inquiry* 13: 205-18.
- Heard, D. (1987) 'Does statementing meet parental needs in north west Derbyshire?' unpublished B.Ed thesis, Manchester Polytechnic.
- Kritzman, L.D. (ed.) (1988) *Michael Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, New York: Routledge.
- Ladwig, J.G. (1991) 'Is collaborative research exploitative?' *Educational Theory* 41(2): Spring.
- Lather, P. (1986) 'Issues of validity in openly ideological research: between a rock and a soft place', *Interchange* 17 (4): 63-84.
- Lawson, H. (1985) *Reflexivity: The Post-modern Predicament*, London: Hutchinson.
- Mcintyre, K. and Burman, L. (1986) 'The educational needs of black pupils', Manchester Education Committee discussion document.
- Morris, P. and Rein, M. (1967) *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the U.S.*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ochs, E. and Schieffellen, B. (1979) *Developmental Pragmatics*, London: Academic Press.
- Parker, I. (1990) 'Discourse: definitions and contradictions', *Philosophical Psychology* 3

- (2): 189-204.
- Potter, J. (1988) 'What is reflexive about discourse analysis? The case of reading readings', in *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Sage.
- Reepers (1989) *Parent Partnership: The Reepers view*, Moss Side, Manchester: The Parents Centre and Education Shop.
- Robinson, D. (1978) *Schools and Social Work*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rose, N. (1985) *The Psychological Complex*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sharp, R. and Green, A. (1975) *Education and Social Control: A Study of Progressive Primary Education*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sines, D. (1988) *Towards Integration: A Comprehensive Service for People with Mental Handicap*, London: Lippincott.
- Stenhouse, L. (1973) 'The humanities curriculum project', in H.J. Butcher and H.B. Pont (eds) *Educational Research in Britain*, London: University of London Press.
- Tomlinson, S. (1982) *Educational Subnormality: A Study of Decision-making*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- (1982) *A Sociology of Special Education*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Warnock Report (1978) *Special Educational Needs*, Cmnd 7212, London: HMSO [154]
- Warren, K. (1988) 'The child as problem and the child with needs: a discourse analysis of a case conference', unpublished undergraduate project, Manchester Polytechnic.
- West, C. (1990) 'Not just "doctors" orders": directive-response sequence in patients' visits to women and men physicians', *Discourse and Society* 1(1): 85-112.
- West, J. and Spinks, P. (1988) *Clinical Psychology in Action: A Collection of Case Studies*, London: Wright.
- Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Hants, Farnborough: Saxon House. [end of page 154]