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Teacher-centred Pedagogy as Co-construction

Introduction

In Chapter One, I observed that one of the effects of technical rationality on research on teaching has been the tendency to focus almost exclusively on what the teacher does in class, rather than on what students also do to influence classroom practices. Students, it appears, do not matter really in classroom processes and curriculum implementation. This thinking suggests that their behaviour will change as and when that of the teacher changes. The thinking is perfectly in line with the logic of both process-product research and behaviourism – typically, students are portrayed as 'passive recipients of academic verbal information' (Prophet and Rowell 1993:205), which implies that they do not make any worthwhile contribution towards the shaping of the observed classroom practices. Where students' contributions are accepted, they are described as 'fairly artificial [comprising] short responses to closed-ended teacher-initiated questions' (Marope 1995:12). To use a popular metaphor, students are 'pawns' that merely respond, in a rather mechanical manner, to the teacher's actions.

This chapter makes a critique of this position through the presentation of findings from a study in which students were observed employing both subtle and overt strategies to keep their teachers in an information-giving position. The findings challenge the pervasive view that 'teacher dominance' of classroom activities is a product of the teacher acting *on* the students. Rather, teacher dominance results from teachers and students exercising power on one another. To this end, I argue that students make great input in classroom processes to the extent that they significantly influence the way a teacher carries out his or her teaching tasks. At the centre of this argument

is the notion of classroom reality as a social construction jointly constructed by both the teacher and students. Doyle's (1992:509) suggestion that 'the study of teaching and curriculum must be grounded much more deeply than it has been in the events that students and teachers jointly construct in the classroom settings' is undoubtedly apt. Thus, the classroom reality dubbed 'teacher-centredness' is a co-construction involving both students and the teacher. In Chapter Three, I discussed some of the strategies teachers used to keep themselves in an information-giving position. In the present chapter, I demonstrate how students kept themselves in an information-receiving position. The result of these actions was a teacher-centred ambiance.

The concept of 'co-construction' is potent in three main ways. First, it validates the view that as an immunological condition, teacher-centredness is antithetical to learner-centredness, a condition that increases the possibility of tissue rejection of learner-centredness where attempts to introduce it in a predominantly teacher-centred environment are made. Secondly, the co-construction concept rhymes with the concept of pedagogical paradigm as presented in Chapter Three in that adherents (teachers and students) of a paradigm tend to behave in ways that reproduce the paradigm. They are unlikely to behave in ways that challenge the fundamental bases of the paradigm.

Thirdly, the concept portrays the classroom as a living social system, and like all social systems it is a creation of human beings acting on one another. The meanings this social system imbues in both teachers and students make them purposeful sense-makers who constantly construct ideas in order to understand situations and events. This teacher and student-empowering position has spurred interest in research on *teacher thinking*, and this research has flourished since the 1980s. The research is premised on the assumption that teachers' thoughts, beliefs, judgments, and decisions guide their classroom behaviour (Stern and Shavelson 1983; Richardson, Tidwell and Lloyd 1991). The assumption implies a view of teachers as active and autonomous agents whose role is shaped by their classroom experience (Elbaz 1983). Thus, in opposition to the sterile and dependent view of the teacher promoted by the technicist approach, research on teacher thinking views the teacher as capable of mediating ideas and constructing meaning and knowledge. Unfortunately, not as much attention has been paid to research on *student thinking*, yet, as this chapter seeks to demonstrate, attempts to radically reform teaching and learning practices (e.g. by introducing a 'radically' different innovation such as learner-centred pedagogy) are surely likely to be resisted, not only by the teachers but also by the students.

This raises an interesting definitional problem – that of how we define teacher-centredness. Because in the technical rational model, the student-teacher relationship is hierarchised, invariably, teacher-centredness as a classroom ambiance is an orchestration of the teacher acting on the students. It makes sense, therefore, that attempts to change this ambiance must target the teacher, not the student. A view of classroom ambiance as co-construction, on the other hand, yields a definition of teacher-centredness that is radically different from the one engendered by the technical rational model. Co-construction assumes 'hierarchically flattened' relations between the teacher and students, meaning that the latter also influence the former. Followed to its logical conclusion, this line of thinking would define teacher-centredness as a 'joint project' of the teacher and his/her students, implying that students have 'interests' in the classroom ambiance. They will use every 'tool' at their disposal to police its boundaries. This position complicates pedagogical change in that it suggests that attempts to change classroom practices in African schools must include both the teacher and students.

To develop the argument for taking students seriously in pedagogical change, first I critique the 'power-as-sovereign' conception (Popkewitz 2000, as cited in McEneaney 2002:104) that undergirds technical rationality and, by extension, studies on classroom research that privilege the teacher in the construction of classroom reality. I offer an alternative analysis of power based on the ideas of Foucault. This alternative analysis portrays students as at once objects and subjects of power. Secondly, and on the basis of the alternative analysis of power, I advance an argument for viewing classroom reality as a co-construction. To illustrate these two positions, I present findings from an empirical case study in which students latently and manifestly contributed to the construction of the classroom reality that has been dubbed 'teacher-centredness'. Finally, I offer a set of conclusions derived from my analysis.

Power and Power Relations: A Foucaultian View

Orner (1992:82) recommends that researchers abandon what she terms the 'monarchical conception of power'. This is the conception of power as a commodity, as 'property' possessed by individuals or groups of individuals, which can be acquired or seized. For example, it is often taken for granted that teachers possess power and that students lack it. Talk about 'student empowerment', e.g. through a learner-centred pedagogy, often implies teachers giving some of their power to students. This view of power as property to be exchanged inevitably leads to the 'identification of power with repression'

(Cousins and Hussain 1984:230), and to a definition of power as primarily a negative force that serves the interests of domination. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985:154) have characterized this perspective of power as follows:

> Treated as an instance of negation, power becomes a contaminating force that leaves the imprint of domination or powerlessness on whatever it touches. Thus, social control becomes synonymous with the exercise of domination in schools… The question of how power works in schools is almost by intellectual default limited to recording how it reproduces relations of domination and subordinacy through various school practices.

As McEneaney (2002) observes, this conception of power implicitly informs much educational research. In classroom research, such a conception has led to the understanding of classroom power relations in terms of dominators (teachers) and the dominated (students); teachers possess power and use it to dominate students, hence the description of students as passive actors in class. Studies that describe classroom practice as 'teacher-centred' or 'teacher-dominated' are informed by this monarchical conception of power.

The problem with this conception of power as it relates to classroom power relations is that it denies the classroom its character as a site for struggles and contradictions. Teaching is characterized by gaps, ruptures, and contradictions occasioned by the interactions between teacher and students (Orner 1992). This means that the students are active agents who exercise power to produce classroom practice. However, this is not conceivable in the 'monarchical conception of power' paradigm. An alternative conceptualization of power (one that recognizes students as active agents) is necessary.

Foucault's (1980) analysis of power is instructive in this regard. His view is that power cannot be a commodity. It is 'neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and… only exists in action (Foucault 1980:89). It is only when people interact in relationships that power comes into existence. That is, power is a productive social dynamic. In Foucault's view, it is not power that differentiates between those who possess it (e.g. teachers) and those 'who do not have it and submit to it' (e.g. students). Rather,

> Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault 1980:98)

In Foucault's (1982) view, a power relationship, as opposed to a 'relationship of violence' (which characterizes a slave/master relationship), has two features. It requires, first, that the person over whom power is exercised 'be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts', and secondly, that, 'faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up' (Foucault 1982:220). That is, a power relationship is an open-ended relationship in which the exercise of power is a 'way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions' (p. 222). An important element of any power relationship is freedom. Where action is completely constrained, one may not talk of there being a relationship of power. As Foucault himself states, '[p]ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free (p. 221). In other words, the person over whom power is being exercised (e.g. the student) is also simultaneously a person who acts, and whose actions in the process transform the one exercising power. In Dreyfus and Rabinow's (1982:186) words, 'power is exercised upon the dominant as well as on the dominated'. Thus, the exercise of power is never unidirectional. It is never the 'province of one group and not the other' (Kincheloe 1997:xxiii). It is in this sense that power is seen as a productive force; it implies the capacity to act. Kincheloe (1997:xxvi) summarizes the argument in this way:

> If power is not a unitary force with unitary effects or unidirectional hierarchy, then we can be alert to different ways oppressed people elude control. If we are all empowered by our particular capacities and skills and we are all unempowered by our inability either to satisfy our wants and needs or express our living spirit, we begin to understand that power is exercised by both dominant and subordinate forces.

Thus, in the classroom the teacher exercises power over students and the latter also exercise power over the teacher. While one may not deny that there exists a power hierarchy in the classroom between teacher and students, one must, nevertheless, not be tempted to believe that total domination is possible. Oppression elicits resistance, and this may be manifest or latent. Far from being an imposition by the teacher, classroom reality is *negotiated* (Delamont 1976) and, as such, is a dynamic process in that it is constantly defined and redefined. Inasmuch as teachers employ certain strategies to influence students' learning, the latter also devise, consciously or subconsciously, strategies to influence the teacher's classroom behaviour:

> A new class is not a clean slate passively waiting for the teacher to inscribe his will on it. It is an ongoing social system with very definite expectations about appropriate teacher behaviour. If these are not confirmed the pupils will protest and

the renegotiated patterns of behaviour may not prove to be just what the teacher intended (Nash 1976:94).

This observation is echoed by Riseborough (1985:209) when he states that pupils can be 'overt curriculum and hidden curriculum decision makers'. He adds:

> [T]he lesson does not simply belong to the teacher, children can and do make it their own. They put so much on the agenda of the lesson, to a point where they are the curriculum decision-makers. They make a major contribution to the social construction of classroom knowledge. Children actively select, organize and evaluate knowledge in schools. (p. 214)

Similarly, Doyle (1983:185) cites a study in which Davis and McKnight (1976) reported '[meeting] with strong resistance from high school students when they attempted to shift information-processing demands in a mathematics class from routine or procedural tasks to understanding tasks. The students refused to co-operate and argued that they had a right to be told what to do.'

Research that portrays teachers as dominators of the classroom and students as mere pawns is flawed because it fails to capture the complexity of the ways power works both on and through people. The description of classroom practice as 'teacher-centred/dominated' requires problematization. Often it creates the impression that students have made no contribution in the construction of that reality. This is misleading, for the reality called 'teacher-centredness' is itself a co-construction, that is, there is a sense in which students are involved in the construction of their own 'domination'. The appreciation of classroom practice as a dialectical co-construction assumes a pivotal position in understanding classroom dynamics. How, then, is this co-construction to be understood?

Classroom Reality as Co-construction

The classroom as an arena for human activity has an inherent structure (Doyle 1992). This structure is constructed by teachers and students so as to make classroom social interaction possible. I borrow at this point Arnold Gehlen's twin concepts (as developed by Berger and Kellner 1965) of *background* and *foreground* to explicate the dialectic of the classroom as a co-construction.

Human life requires a stable background of routinized meanings. This background 'permits "spontaneous", barely reflective, almost automatic actions' (Berger and Kellner 1965:112). Life would be unbearable if it did not

have a background of routinized activities, the meaning of which is taken for granted. This background becomes a reference point for future actions and practices.

The classroom, as an arena for human activity, requires a background of routinized practices. Without that background there cannot be stability, and by extension, no teaching and learning. Both teacher and students know very well that stability is essential if learning is to take place; but because social stability is never a biological provision they have to 'construct' it. They accomplish this by developing common-sense images of the nature of teaching and learning. Such images and their accompanying roles are then routinized, and hence taken for granted. In their routinized form they come to constitute the classroom background. However, if human life only had a background, society would be static, because by its very nature the background constrains action. Social actors would then be reduced to 'choiceless' actors, pawns who are at the mercy of the overly oppressive social structure. As Giroux (1980:234) observes, this structuralist view of human action 'seals off the possibility for educational and social change'.

The coming into being of the background automatically 'opens up a foreground for deliberation and innovation' (Berger and Luckmann 1967:71) which permits 'deliberate, reflective, purposeful actions (Berger and Kellner 1965:112). Thus, the existence of the foreground ensures that the background does not become a 'determining' instrumentality. Rather it becomes a structure that 'mediates' human action.

The dialectical relationship of the background and foreground ensures the possibility of reflexive human action. Because it guarantees 'freedom' of acting agents, the foreground opens up a whole field of power relations. It is here where meaning is negotiated and renegotiated by the actors. In the processes of negotiation and renegotiation a 'definition of the situation' emerges. Thus, classroom social interaction 'can be viewed as "negotiated" between participants [teachers and students] on the basis of a mutual "agreement" to sustain a particular "definition of the situation"' (Jones, 1997:561). Because it has both a background and foreground, the classroom situation is at once stable and unstable. The stability occasioned by the classroom's background permits the reproduction of practices, while the foreground permits their production. In this sense, the classroom situation is simultaneously a constraining and an enabling field: it permits common participation (engendered by the existence of an agreed-upon 'definition of the situation') while at the same time allowing for tensions, contradictions,

and contests. In other words, students' and teachers' classroom practices are neither completely constrained nor completely free. Viewed this way, the classroom becomes a dynamic system in which teachers and students are not 'pawns' but are instead active agents operating within contextual constraints. In this situation of relative freedom, teachers and students exercise power on one another, leading to the co-construction of classroom reality.

The strength of the idea of classroom practice as co-construction lies in its difference from the views expressed by theorists (such as Anyon 1980) who see classroom practice as mechanistically determined by wider structural and economic forces. It also rejects the phenomenological (subjectivist) view of a structurally unconstrained agent. What remains, therefore, is the view that '[p]raxis is only possible where the objective-subjective dialectic is maintained (Freire 1985:69).

The study findings reported below illustrate the co-constructedness of teacher-centredness. The basic premises of the empirical study were that power and power relations are central to an understanding of classroom practice, and that students are capable of exercising power in the classroom, that is, they are co-constructors of classroom practice. The study, therefore, concerned itself with establishing the manifest and subtle strategies that students employ and the role of power and power relations in shaping those strategies. Because these strategies are under-researched, we do not have a clear understanding of how much of an impediment students may be to efforts to alter teachers' classroom practices. This chapter attempts to move closer towards such an understanding.

Findings and Discussion

Observed Classroom Dynamics

The findings of the study confirmed the findings of earlier studies on classroom dynamics: teachers play a 'dominant' role in the classroom, with teaching and learning being primarily based on information transmission by the teacher. As reported in the preceding chapter, teachers employed strategies that ensured sustenance of their dominance. For example, they ignored what they considered to be students' incorrect answers (conversely, they emphasized 'right' answers); mass teaching was the norm; and they asked closed-ended questions. All these techniques, I suggest, ensured the maintenance of the teacher's dominance in class; hence the description of lessons as teacher-centred/dominated.

Conventional interpretation of such findings tends to portray the teacher as the embodiment of the oppressive structures; he or she is presented as the one who possesses power which he or she uses for purposes of social control. The students are, therefore, cast as passive and powerless. The implicit view of power here is that of power-as-sovereign. However, in this study, teacher dominance was not necessarily seen as a product of the teacher's inherent desire for social control. The interviews and observation data showed that in many instances, teachers were 'forced' into the dominant position by the students themselves. Teacher dominance, far from being a teacher imposition, is a negotiated product resulting from students and teachers exercising power (within the limits of the constraints set by their context) on each other. In other words, students do contribute towards the classroom reality called 'teacher-centredness'. The question, therefore, is 'how was this accomplished'?

Construction of Teacher Dominance: The Role of Students

Student Expectations of Teacher Behaviour

Students had certain expectations of both their teachers' and fellow students' behaviour. These expectations regulated the participants' classroom behaviour. In particular, the expectations positioned students as 'gatekeepers' to the teachers' reputation. From the interviews with the teachers it was clear that they were aware of this powerful position of students. The students, however, were not as conscious of the power of their own position as the teachers were. Nevertheless, they had certain expectations of teacher behaviour. It was these expectations, which the teachers were fully aware of, that influenced how they conducted their lessons.

Whether the teacher was described by the students as 'good' or 'poor' depended on how well he or she carried out responsibilities that essentially had to do with imparting school knowledge (and not deviating from that role). Characteristically, a 'good' teacher was described by students in the following ways:

Student 1: A competent teacher, I think comes to class prepared and has a good mastery of subject content. It must be clear that he knows what he is talking about. Whenever we get a new teacher we 'test' him to find out if he knows his stuff. Depending on how he or she impresses us we either call him or her the 'deep' one or the 'shallow' one.

Student 2:   Notes are very important to us as students. We cannot pass our tests and examinations if we do not have notes for revision. Some teachers just give you what is in the textbook. A good teacher must prepare and give detailed notes. Yes, we can make our own notes but … we don't have time.

Student 3:   I like a teacher who satisfactorily answers students' questions. Some teachers have this habit of ignoring questions by students or ridiculing students who ask questions they themselves feel are stupid.

Student 4:   A good teacher keeps order in class and makes you do your work. You see there are students who always want to challenge the teacher by making noise. The teacher must be able to control those. Homework must be checked by the teacher.

The teachers' act of satisfying these qualities was described by the students as *go tshologa*, a Setswana equivalent of 'to pour out' – in this context, 'pouring out' knowledge. Metaphorically, the teacher was viewed as a fountain of knowledge. If teachers were perceived in this way, then probably the most important thing for students was how effectively the teachers transmitted that essential commodity, knowledge, and it was their ability to do so (or lack thereof) that determined if they were any 'good'. A teacher who did not live up to these expectations was labeled a *majesa*, a term developed by students in Botswana which, literally translated, means 'an incompetent' teacher. Students felt that a majesa displayed the following qualities:

> This is the teacher who gives notes without explaining them clearly or does not give notes at all. We have protested against such teachers before by reporting them to our class teacher.

> Some teachers, particularly female teachers, like teaching while seated on their front chairs. They also often speak very slowly. We do not respect such teachers. When students feel that the teacher is not watching them they tend to play. When the teacher is a slow speaker we doze off. It's like the teacher is not confident about what he or she is doing.

> Some teachers have the tendency to come late to class and to not mark homework and tests on time. As a student you need to know how you are performing. But some teachers take too long to give us feedback and we often wonder if these are not the lazy ones.

The label of majesa was one that every teacher dreaded, and all of them confessed that in their teaching they consciously and deliberately attempted to avoid it. How?

Teacher 1:   I make sure that I am prepared when I go for my lessons, and if I am not prepared I tell the students so.

Teacher 2: Every time I am in class I avoid habits that would make me appear a *majesa* – habits like not being well prepared. I collect their notebooks and check if they write notes, and I also give them quizzes at the end of the lesson.

Teacher 3: I make sure that I have my facts right. I try to mark their work on time and to give them feedback on time. I make sure that I am familiar and conversant with my material.

All these measures were taken by the teachers to appear 'effective' and 'efficient' in the students' eyes. In the comments above, teachers emphasized mastery of subject matter and preparedness. One may ask if these are not qualities expected of any teacher anywhere? The answer of course is, 'Yes, they are'. However, how teachers demonstrate possession of these qualities will differ, depending on the context. The teachers observed were aware that they had to demonstrate visible possession of these qualities by assuming an information-giving position. This would ensure that they 'effectively' executed their mandate of imparting knowledge or 'delivering the goods' to the students. Efficient transmission of information to students formed the cornerstone of almost all lessons observed in the school. Not all the teachers would have liked to approach their lessons in this fashion; but all were aware of the dangers of deviating from the norm.

Adhering to the 'norm', in Foucault's view, has the effect of disciplining human subjects. He terms this *normalization,* the internalization of correct behaviour. Through normalization, students and teachers internalize norms and rules that ensure consistency in their behaviour. Deviation from what is considered 'normal' is punishable, whereas adherence to the 'norm' is rewarded. One effect of normalization is self-regulation. Self-regulation is 'achieved through discourse practices that provide validation for behavior' (Anderson and Grinberg 1998:335). Being described as a 'good/competent' teacher is normalizing in that the label tells the teacher what kind of behaviour is rewarded. On the other hand, being called a *majesa* tells the teacher what kind of behaviour is unacceptable. The fact that the students are the 'primary source of the teacher's reputation among colleagues, administrators, and in the community, as well as among [other] students' (Schlechty and Atwood 1977:286) ensures that the teacher is continually under a disciplinary/normalizing gaze, a kind of surveillance that makes unnecessary constant reminding about the 'proper' way of behaving. The teacher, therefore, self-regulates his or her own behaviour. The 'social order' of the classroom (characterized by asymmetrical power relations between the teacher and students) is reaffirmed and reproduced.

Students, too, are under a normalizing and controlling gaze, not from the teacher as such, but from themselves. It is the students themselves who serve as the source of validation for their own behaviour. This is achieved, as will be discussed later, through such factors as peer pressure and humiliation of those who may be inclined to deviate from the constructed value system.

This analysis shows that in the classroom, power is not a monopoly of any one group. Rather, power is embedded in the relations among students and teachers. These relations are not static. Nor are they unidirectional. In other words, there is no imposition; as Butin (2001:168) puts it, a "good" student... is not simply made. Nor is a teacher simply the "authority" in control'. Butin contends that these identities are not simply inscribed upon these classroom participants: rather 'the individual does this to herself, one might say under duress, one might argue unwittingly, one might confess with scant choice, but it is not something done to her; it is something done with her'.

The point is that both the teacher and the student are involved in their own subjectification. That is, while they 'create' one another's identities they are at the same time involved in self-creation. This constitutive quality of power would not be possible if 'some individuals [were] active and control power while others [were] passive and controlled by power (Butin 2001:168). If classroom events, including the subjectification of individuals and groups, cannot be an imposition, researchers are left with only the view of classroom events as co-constructions.

Student silence: 'playing possum'?

Students also constructed classroom practice through 'silence'. Student 'refusal' to participate in classroom activities is interpreted in several ways. For some, it is idiosyncratic student behaviour, a sign of laziness: it is deviant behaviour. This interpretation is shallow and prejudiced. At a more sophisticated level, student silence is explained in terms of students' lack of 'voice', which is associated with powerlessness. The weakness of this interpretation is that it is anchored on the monarchical conception of power, a conception of power that (as noted above) positions students as 'pawns' in classroom practices. The view of power as relational yields a radically different interpretation of students' silence. In this view of power, student silence is not a manifestation of powerlessness or lack of voice. It is the 'active' exercise of power and construction of classroom practice. Silence is an important means of communication in some cultures (see Darnell 1979 and Chambers 1992 on the Cree and Dene of North America respectively, and Alverson 1978 on the Tswana of Botswana).

Goldberger (1996:343) urges researchers not to dismiss silence as lack of power, but rather to search for what lies 'underneath silence'. If researchers were to follow Goldberger's advice, they would, as the 19th century English novelist George Eliot imagines, 'die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence' (cited in Belenky et al. 1986:3). In other words, researchers need to theorize silence.

As Hurtado (1996:382) suggests, 'Silence is a powerful weapon when it can be controlled. It is akin to camouflaging oneself when at war in an open field; playing possum at strategic times causes the power of the silent one to be underestimated. The second sentence in this quotation clearly captures the general stance adopted towards silence in classroom research. This is what appears to be happening with student silence. In the episodes below, students constructed classroom practice (teacher dominance, in particular) through silence.

Episode 1: The teacher walks into a geography class and introduces his lesson by the usual way of the question-and-answer sequence:

Teacher: What is tourism? [There is no answer. He repeats the question but till there is no answer.]

Teacher: I will rephrase the question. What factors affect the development of tourism? [Still there is no response.]

Teacher *[Looking dejected]:* I am sure that you know the answer. Expressing yourselves is the problem.

The teacher continued for almost three minutes asking the same question and trying to give students clues to the answer. In so doing, a 'stand-off' develops between the teacher and the students. Students are resisting the teacher's attempt to move them into his own world of meaning.

Realizing that students were not 'willing' to answer his questions, he remarked, 'Well, I will do the talking since in the afternoons people are too tired to answer questions'. The teacher then abandoned the question-and-answer session and started lecturing on tourism and the factors that affect its development. While he was 'lecturing', the students listened attentively and caused no disruptions to the flow of information. Thus, the students succeeded in moving the teacher into their own frame of reference or world of meaning. Perhaps the attentiveness was possible because the students' game of possum was yielding the desired results.

Episode 2: Another teacher in a Form 4 class organizes students for a group discussion on 'The importance of the mining industry to the economy of Botswana'. The discussions are to be carried out in

English. The majority of students are observed doing nothing related to the task at hand. In another lesson, the same teacher asks students to discuss in groups five disadvantages of hydroelectric power. Only eight students (four pairs) out of a total of 23 are observed working. The rest are either doing nothing or reading the class textbook. In these episodes students appear to be 'refusing' to participate in certain classroom activities. This is what one teacher had to say in connection with the students' behaviour:

> Even if you give them group work, they do not have the motivation to do the group work. Only one or two students will do the work. In this way you find yourself compelled to lecture at them if they are to gain any school knowledge.

The way these students seem to express their refusal is through silence. How then is the phenomenon of student silence to be explained?

In this context, the post-structural feminist attempt to demonstrate the gendered nature of classroom practice may be helpful (e.g. Belenky et al. 1986; Orner 1992; Maher and Tetreault 1994; Goldberger 1996; St. Pierre 2000). These feminists, following Foucault, understand power as a dialectical force. This understanding predisposes them to adopt a contrary stance towards modernist dichotomies such as powerful/powerless, voice/silence, man/woman, subjectivity/objectivity and many others, preferring instead to see these categories as being in a dialectical relationship, that is, as being relational. Seen in this way, one category is not privileged over the other, as is the case in the ordinary binary system. Post-structural feminists would, for example, deconstruct the voice/silence dichotomy so that the two end up, not as opposites, but as 'definitionally interdependent (Anyon 1994:119). They would argue that as voice constructs knowledge, so, too, does silence, in that silence is resistance; it is the exercise of power, and thus the construction of knowledge (Goldberger 1996). In other words, silence is voice; it is power. Thus, the students in the episodes above were exercising power when they refused to participate (by keeping quiet) when their teachers wanted them to participate. In the process they actively constructed classroom practice, as indicated by one teacher's remark that when students 'refuse' to participate 'you find yourself compelled to lecture at them if they are to gain any school knowledge'.

Why did the students 'choose' to exercise their power through silence? Maher and Tetreault's (1994:165) observation is instructive:

> The construction of voice is also partly a function of position. Students fashion themselves in terms of their awareness of others in their particular classroom and institution, and in terms of their individual or group relation to the dominant culture.

Indeed, whether or not students participate in classroom activities depends on a number of factors, one of which is the position they occupy in relation to (a) other students, and (b) their teacher. This factor of positionality could explain the silent refusal of students to participate. Positionality factors (such as age, race, class, etc.) have 'an influence on teaching and learning, on instructors' and students' construction of knowledge, and on classroom dynamics' (Tisdell 1998: 147). Age, as a positionality factor, is pertinent to the understanding of student silence in the lesson episodes above. The significance of age in African classroom interactional patterns is treated in-depth in the next chapter.

Henry (1996:377) observes that 'refusal to participate is a kind of oppositional stance'. It is an action embedded in the classroom relations of power, and has an effect on how the lesson progresses. The effect of the students' 'refusal to act' is that asymmetrical power relations in the classroom are exacerbated and teacher dominance is perpetuated. Thus, students are accomplices in the production and reproduction of asymmetrical power relations in the classroom. Student silence (as resistance), therefore, may not be a manifestation of powerlessness or lack of voice. In effect, it is the active exercise of power and construction of classroom practice. Student passivity, so much reported in classroom research, is therefore, an illusion.

Teachers' Deficit View of Students

The teachers I worked with held a deficit view of their students. The view was linked to the perceived deficient social, cultural, and economic background of the students. Two factors related to students' backgrounds contributed to this perception: the students' poor mastery of English and their rural background. These factors were linked to each other in a somewhat causal relationship – poor mastery of the English language, the medium of instruction in Botswana's secondary schools, was attributed to the students' rural background. I observed that students were not eager to respond to questions posed by their teachers, nor were they prepared to participate in group activities organized by their teachers. Although the teachers interpreted this behaviour as 'unwillingness to participate', they acknowledged at the same time that students' poor self-expression hindered them from fully participating in planned activities. Indeed, I observed on several occasions students struggling to express themselves.

As I have noted, this deficiency was linked to their rural background, a background, it was believed, that did not include learning resources such as television and libraries that students could use to improve their English. This deficiency was not envisaged with students in towns. As the teachers said:

> If you compare these two groups of students [i.e. urban and rural] as far as class partici-
> pation is concerned, you will find that students from town participate more. They talk
> and ask questions.
>
> These students are really dull. No matter how hard you try to motivate them they just
> remain lifeless in class. All they want is information from you.
>
> They are not confident. They do not believe in themselves. They do not believe that they
> are capable of knowing anything that does not come from the teacher or the textbook.

The teachers thought that interactive methods of teaching (such as those
associated with learner-centred pedagogy) were more suited to students in
urban areas (although there is no evidence to that effect), and that directive/
transmission teaching was appropriate for the students they were teaching:

> We try some of these new methods of teaching. Say you give them a textbook and a
> topic and ask them to sit in groups and discuss. At the end of the lesson you realize
> that they haven't done anything because they believe that the teacher should impart the
> knowledge to them.

What should simply be seen as 'differences' between urban and rural students
is turned into 'deficits' on the part of the latter. The deficit view becomes
the basis for comparing these groups of students and for constituting their
identities (as 'dull' or 'brilliant'). In the classroom these deficiencies translate
into information that helps structure events. One effect of the deficit view is
that it invariably calls for more control from the teacher, thus exacerbating the
already prevailing asymmetrical power relations in the classroom.

Given the perceived student deficiencies, it is not surprising that teachers
viewed their own responsibility in therapeutic terms: 'My duty is to mould
students into responsible citizens'; 'The teacher's role is to impart knowledge
to the students'; 'Because they do not participate in class activities, I am
compelled to spoon-feed them'. Just like the doctor, the teachers viewed
themselves as charged with the responsibility for restoring to health those
they were in charge of (the students). Students, on their part, appeared
to be willing patients. The descriptions of their own classroom roles and
responsibilities were remarkably consistent with their understanding of
learning as a process of receiving the teacher's knowledge: 'Listening to the
teacher, reading and asking questions where I do not understand, doing
my homework and handing it in on time.' 'We should co-operate with our
teachers and whenever they ask us questions we should always try to answer.'
'To give the teacher the feedback to show that I understand his teaching.'
'Doing the work assigned to us by the teacher.'

The teachers' responsibilities, on the other hand, were described as: 'Giving us work and marking it.' 'Making sure we do our school work'. 'Giving us notes.' 'Clearly explaining things to us.' 'Keeping order in class.' It is interesting to note the symmetry between the way the students described their teachers' and their own responsibilities, and vice versa. For both groups, the teachers' responsibilities are described in terms of making students do something, keeping order, and imparting knowledge. Students' responsibilities are described in terms of listening to the teacher, asking and answering questions, and acquiring knowledge. These are the relationships necessary for the transmission-reception model of learning.

A further consequence of the view of the teacher as therapist was the call for the imposition upon the schoolroom of the teacher's commanding presence' (Jones 1990:71). Teacher visibility, in the image of teaching as a therapeutic exercise, is paramount. And as discussed in the preceding chapter, in the lessons observed, this visibility was heightened by the oblong-shaped classroom architecture and the arrangement of desks in rows and columns, which ensured unobstructed movement for the teacher in the classroom. This ensured that students were under constant surveillance.

However, the surveillance did not always require the teacher's physical enforcement. It appeared that students themselves had internalized the need for surveillance. For example, students characterized teachers who 'teach while seated' and who 'speak slowly' as *majesa*. What has the teacher's teaching while seated, or speaking slowly, to do with whether or not the teacher is doing his or her job 'effectively'? I suggest that in a context in which the teacher's job is perceived in therapeutic terms, the teacher's visibility becomes crucial, and he or she ensures it through both voice and physical projection. If a teacher's visibility is lost (because he or she is seated or speaks slowly), classroom processes may be paralysed, thus deleteriously affecting teaching and learning. The teacher, therefore, has to ensure his or her visibility, both physically and vocally. However, it should be noted that this is not always the result of the teacher's orchestration; the teacher's 'physical' and 'vocal' presence is a demand from the students themselves. Teacher visibility becomes a control mechanism that sustains asymmetrical power relations in the classroom, leading to both the production and reproduction of teacher dominance.

Not only had the students internalized the need for surveillance, they had also internalized their own perceived deficit status, thus reinforcing the teacher's image as therapist. Such internalization ensured that the students took 'responsibility for behaving "appropriately" without the "look" of the

teacher' (Gore 1994:116). This was achieved through students turning in 'upon themselves, creating reinforcing gazes among [themselves]' (Anderson and Grinberg 1998:336).

In the classroom this self-regulation is achieved through measures such as peer pressure. In the classes I observed, the students' awareness of their classmates had a profound effect on whether or not they participated in class activities. For example, it was common for students to laugh (in a ridiculing fashion) at those students who had made an attempt at answering the teacher's questions but gave incorrect answers or were struggling with expression in English – not that the laughing students would themselves have given any better answers or expressed themselves better. The laughing rather seemed to express the unpleasant sentiment that, 'Well, this serves you right. You think you are better than us'. Most students interviewed acknowledged that quite often they were inhibited from answering questions from the teacher for fear of being laughed at in case they gave a wrong answer or failed to express themselves well in English. In addition, students disliked fellow students who engaged the teacher in debates and arguments over subject content. Such students were seen as delaying progress and were often accused of posturing to win the teacher's favour, or even pretending to know more than the teacher. This was interpreted as unwarranted questioning of the teacher's authority. Given such an environment, many students withdrew into the safe cocoon of silence. The effect of this withdrawal is clear: the teacher is left to play the dominant role in classroom processes.

The analysis of teacher dominance I have been advancing suggests that the teacher is not entrusted with absolute power that is exercised willy-nilly over students. Rather, the teacher's encounter with students in the classroom engenders relations of power in which both the teacher and students are caught. As Foucault (1977:156) puts it, 'this machine [i.e. the classroom] is one in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power as well as those who are subjected to it'. In the process of this interaction, classroom practice is constructed. The constructed reality thus constitutes a 'shared field' or a mutually agreed 'definition of the situation' (Jones 1997:561). While this 'field' permits the participants' actions, at the same time it limits and regulates the diversity of possible and permissible actions.

Conclusion

Research on teaching in the African context has characterized classroom reality as teacher-centred or teacher-dominated, but deeply embedded in

this discourse of teacher-centredness are two assumptions that the research never challenges: first, that it is the teacher who possesses power to influence classroom practices; and secondly, that students are powerless, passive spectators in the production of classroom reality. These assumptions are predicated on the conception of power as a commodity that can be exchanged, traded, transferred, and withheld. It is implausible (if not almost impossible), where such a view of power is held, to conceive of classroom reality as a co-construction, involving both the teacher and students.

However, once researchers adopt the view of power as a productive force (necessarily implying the capacity to act), they come to appreciate that students are active agents who influence their teachers' classroom practices – that far from being an imposition from above, the teacher's apparent dominance is a negotiated product resulting from teachers and students exercising power on one another. The resultant shared, taken-for-granted classroom reality termed 'teacher-centredness' is, therefore, a co-construction. Students are active agents in the construction of teacher-centredness and it is a 'world' whose boundaries they police very effectively. I have sought to show how their perceived deficit status, their expectations of teacher behaviour, and their 'playing possum' influenced teachers to assume the 'dominant' position in lessons. The students' internalization of the need for teacher visibility/surveillance and of their perceived deficit status produced and reproduced teacher dominance. Thus, the taken-for-granted view in classroom research that teacher dominance is an imposition by the teacher needs to be problematised. When classroom practice is viewed as a dialectical co-construction, then what has been termed students' passivity must be recognized as their exercising of power. This study, like that of Willis (1977) on the 'lads', has shown that students exercise their own power to move the lesson in the direction the teacher never intended.

Conceptualizing classroom reality as a co-construction has important implications for the pedagogical reforms currently being implemented in many African countries. In such reform endeavours, no cognizance is taken of the students. This is not only in line with the tacit assumption that students do not make any significant contribution to classroom practice, it is also in line with the linear relationship between teacher behaviour and student learning that technical rationality encourages by suggesting that student classroom behaviour will change as that of the teacher changes. However, this position becomes a fallacy once it is acknowledged that classroom reality (such as 'teacher-centredness') is as much a student construction as it is a teacher construction. It is a reality that validates and imbues the participants' actions with meaning.