Behaviorally Challenging Students and Teacher Stress

Onderzoek naar zorg in het curriculum van de Theo Thijssen Academie

Gedragingenlijst voor Leraren; tweede onderzoeksrapport

Probleemouders en de school; een onderontwikkeld terrein

The contribution of the school environment to youths' resilience

Recognizing Resillience

Time-out or switch?

Teachers' Personal Constructs on Problem Behaviour

Levend leren: daar ga ik voor!

Teachers' personal constructs: 2 papers.

KG-publicatie nr. 10
Teachers' personal constructs.
2 Papers

Teachers' Personal Constructs on Problem Behaviour:
towards Professional Development
J.T.E. van Beukering
J.M.F. Touw
H. Everaert

&

Personal constructs on (problem) pupils: a teacher's view
Kos, P.

Paper presented at the International Practitioner Research Conference & Collaborative Action
Research Network Conference (PRAR 2005),
Utrecht, The Netherlands, November 4-6, 2005

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Kenniskring Gedragsproblemen in de Onderwijspraktijk,
KG-publicatie nr. 10. Teachers' personal constructs; *2 papers*

3/23

Voorwoord

De Kenniskring Gedragsproblemen in de Onderwijspraktijk aan de Hogeschool van Utrecht bestaat uit ongeveer tien personen met als lector J.C. van der Wolf.

Het lectoraat is opgericht in 2003 en heeft als taken het verrichten van vooral toegepast onderzoek en het helpen bij de ontwikkeling van curricula voor de onder de Faculteit Educatieve Opleidingen vallende afdelingen.

Door de 'leden van het lectoraat' worden allerlei stukken, artikelen, plannen, nota's etc. geproduceerd die dan in verschillende kringen worden verspreid zodat niet altijd een goed beeld ontstaat van de activiteiten van de Kenniskring. Via deze KG-publicatiereeks wil de kenniskring een vaste groep geïnteresseerden in staat stellen om op de hoogte te blijven van de activiteiten. Verwacht mag worden dat de KG-publicatiereeks uit zeer verschillende, uiteenlopende stukken zal gaan bestaan.

Voor U ligt KG-publicatie nr.10
U wordt van harte uitgenodigd om commentaar te leveren.

Kenniskring Gedragsproblemen in de Onderwijspraktijk,
KG-publicatie nr. 10. Teachers' personal constructs; *2 papers*

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        Levend leren: daar ga ik voor!
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        Teachers' personal constructs on problem behaviour: towards professional development

&   Kos, P. (2005). Personal constructs on (problem) pupils: a teacher's view.
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Teachers' personal constructs on problem behaviour:
towards professional development

This study focuses on revealing and developing personal constructs regarding problem behaviour in classrooms. Twenty-nine teachers (initial and in-service students) took part in the project. The main idea is that teachers' opinions about their pupils and themselves influence the way they act in their classrooms. Their thoughts and ideas about students - their personal constructs - are generally unconscious. To clarify and to develop teachers' constructs, we used Kelly's repertory grid technique and Garman's reflective approach. Both methods give a powerful impulse to the development of thinking and acting of teachers. They can use the experiences as an integral part of their own action research.

Background

The way teachers think about their pupils influence the way they interact with them. Thinking about pupils is connected with the way teachers think about themselves, their own competencies and vulnerabilities. Prior research revealed vulnerability as one of the major causes of educators' over-reaction to student behaviour and attitudes (Jordan & Rios, 2004; Pines, 2002). Teachers take their history, their entire selves, with them into the classroom, including the assumptions held by family and community. Own experiences and beliefs can play an important role in the pedagogical relation between teacher and pupil, especially with regard to pupils with special needs (emotional or behaviour problems).

Managing disruptive pupils, student violence and apathy, and a poor relationship between teacher and pupils were identified as very important predictors of teacher stress and burnout. The problem of pupil discipline ranks at or near the top of almost all teacher stress surveys. 'Nothing gets teachers so worked up and so ready to leave the profession as this issue' (Faber, 1991 in Pines, 2002). The reason seems clear, disruptive pupils make it impossible for teachers to teach the rest of the class. Lack of interest in learning displayed by pupils, talking, shouting and lack of attention in class cause stress and burnout because they make teachers realise that they have failed as educators.

All teachers want to work on positive relations with pupils. Like pupils, they also want to feel competent and autonomous (Greene, Abidin & Kmetz, 1997). Teachers have their own vulnerabilities and 'special needs'. The degree to which a teacher has acknowledged her or his vulnerabilities will have an impact on not only performance but also survival in schools, for both teacher and pupils. We could eliminate the large number of teachers leaving the profession and save many pupils from being mislabelled and sent to special education.

In this research project we focus on the critical role of dialogue and teacher self-evaluation as a personal introspective form of critical reflection. Our purpose is to help teachers to elicit their personal constructs towards problem children and to stimulate them to inquire their constructs. The main goal is to extend, deepen and differentiate between these constructs. The question is whether this reflection oriented method can contribute to 'well balanced' teachers. In our project

we try to integrate Kelly's construct psychology (1955), Atkinson's and Claxton's theories about thought processes in teaching (2000) and Garman's reflective coaching model (Garman, 1986, Pajak, 2000). In the following paragraph we will discuss these orientations.

Kelly's Personal Construct Theory

Kelly's personal construct theory forms an important source of inspiration for our project. He believed that individuals should be viewed as intuitive scientists. Like formal scientists, they observe the world, formulate and test hypotheses, and make theories about it. They also categorize, interpret, label, and judge themselves and their world. Like scientists trying to make predictions about events, people want to understand the world so that they can predict what will happen to them. Kelly argued that each individual uses a unique set of personal constructs in interpreting and predicting events. Those constructs tend to take an either-or form (i.e. independent – helpless), they have a double identity (Van Beukering & Touw, 2005, Touw, Van Beukering & Everaert, 2005). A construct-contrast pair does not necessarily have logical opposites. They are individual constructs. Two individuals may use different constructs in evaluating the same person. These differences can lead to differences in behaviour – one person will respond positively to a problem pupil for instance, while another may respond in an irritated way. Because typical personality tests measuring traits of character do not meet Kelly's basic criterion that individuals must be assessed in terms of their own personal constructs, he devised his own test for eliciting a person's personal constructs, the Role Construct Repertory Grid Test (Rep Test or Kelly's Grid). In our project we use a variation of his repertory grid technique (Van Beukering & Touw, 2005) to help teachers to elicit and clarify their constructs on problem children. The results of the self-evaluation are the building stones for the coaching sessions.

Content framework for professional development

To change teachers' thinking and acting we pay attention to three thought processes in teaching: *intuitive thinking, rational thinking* and *reflective thinking* (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000, Kansanen e.a., 2000). Teaching is based on these three main processes:
1. The intuitive thinking that underlies action and rapid decision making.
2. The rational thinking that allows teachers to plan for learning.
3. The reflective thinking that allows teachers to receive feedback, to learn from experiences and to develop themselves conceptually.

These thinking processes are highly interconnected. Intuitive thinking is characteristic of a person's own experiences. Its product is tacit *knowledge in action* which is evident and supportive of practice. However, tacit knowledge in action is not sufficient to function like an expert teacher.

At the preparation stage we need rational thinking (analytical and objective thinking) in order to draw up a plan of what is to be done. Rational thinking makes use of *theoretical knowledge* for instance research findings, scholarly contributions, examined practice and contributions of (networks of) colleagues in the same educational field.

Reflective thinking allows lessons to be learned from a person's own practical experiences and theoretical knowledge that merge into situational, contextual craft-knowledge.

Garman's reflective coaching model

To develop personal constructs on problem behaviour, we based our approach on Garman's developmental reflective coaching model (Garman, 1986, Pajak, 2000, p. 262-264). Her approach brings together the ideas about changing teacher's thinking and acting which we have just described. Proponents of developmental reflective models (like Schon, Zeichner, Liston, Garman) appeal to the coach to encourage teacher introspection in order to discover context-specific principles of the practice. They want to help teachers to understand their own practice and motivations within the contexts of their own classrooms.

Garman favours colleague consultation as the preferred means of contending with the uncertainty of the educational practice. The process of reflection can serve as a way to generate knowledge, as a means of attaining personal empowerment, and as a path to develop a mature professional identity. Garman considers every professional as having the responsibility to forge a personal rationale of teaching through inquiry and self-understanding. This rationale should make sense in terms of everyday events and also contribute to the teacher's professional community.

Garman elaborates on two aspects of reflective practice. First, she expresses greater willingness than many other proponents of reflective models to admit research and theory into the dialogue between supervisors and teachers as they reflect on data derived from observations of teaching.

Secondly she describes a procedure for reflecting on significant events that are remote in time and emotionally meaningful as an additional source of data for informing practice.

Garman describes two types of reflective inquiry: *reflection on action* and *reflection on recollection. Reflection on action* is appropriate for studying immediate events in the present. It involves a series of steps: involvement; observation; analysis or interpretation; construal and confirmation.

Reflection on recollection focuses on the past to help inform the present. Memories of incidents from the past are used as data. It involves the following:

1. *Recall*. The teacher begins by rummaging around in his or her memory for pictures or images of past events. Accuracy is less important as long as significant events and their emotional attachments are recalled.
2. *Representation*. The image of the event is captured, usually through journal writing. Representation through painting or music is another possibility.
3. *Interpretation*. The representation is interpreted in terms of issues such as the meaning of the past event on the present, new insights into the event, hidden meanings, revealing words or phrases in the representation, emotional tone, and subliminal motives.
4. *Confirmation*. Writings in the field of education are used in an attempt to determine if one's interpretation makes sense to others and how it may be useful. Literature can provide both insight and appropriate language for understanding.

In our research project we mainly use the reflective inquiry approach '*reflection on recollection*'.

Methodology

Our research project has a quantitative and qualitative orientation. In this paper we focus on the qualitative part of our project: the process of revealing and developing constructs towards problem children and the conditions to stimulate these process. We present the preliminary results. For the quantitative part of our project, we refer to Touw e.a. (2005).

Sample

Our database consists of the four series of data from 29 teachers (notably initial and in-service students). Together they scored 377 pupils. Some pupils were scored several times. The total number of scores in the database reached 597. The gender division is presented in table 1.

	Male	Female	?
Teachers	9	19	1
Pupils	204	170	3

Table 1 Graphical description of the sample

Generally the same teacher scored the same class twice (two series), in some cases the same class was scored three times (three series), twice by the teacher and once by a colleague. Totally, 125 pupils (one series), 191 pupils (two series) and 61 pupils (three series) were involved.

Measures

Each participant had to collect his or her own constructs on his pupils using Kelly's 'Repertory-Grid' (Scheer & Catina, 1993). Besides, each participant had to collect a colleague's constructs on the same pupils. We applied a step by step procedure. We describe the different steps separately. For concrete illustrations of this procedure we refer to Kos' contribution in this CD-ROM.

Step 1 Collection of personal constructs

The teacher was asked to write down the name of all pupils of his class on small cards. The cards were shuffled and laid down with the names up. The teacher had to consider these three pupils and to tell which of the two were most similar to each other but different from the third. This procedure was repeated with several other triads of pupils. We asked the teachers to continue their collection processes until the moment they could not think of any more new constructs. Next, we asked them to formulate their opposites to each construct.

Step 2 Arrangement of perceptions on personal constructs

We asked the teacher to determine which construct could be seen as a positive construct and which one was perceived as a negative one. We told them that it was not allowed to break the construct-contrast pairs, because of their uniqueness.

Step 3 Scoring students on the positive constructs

The teacher had to score each pupil on the positively experienced personal constructs on a five-point Likert scale (0 means not applicable at all and 4 means full applicable; the 2 in the middle is the most neutral score).

Step 4 To describe the constructs

We asked the teacher to give (in one sentence) his or her own definition of each positive construct.

Step 5 Arrangement of personal constructs in areas of attention

The teacher had tot arrange the constructs into seven areas of attention. These areas concern six areas referring to pupil behaviour and one area referring to the rearing at home (Pameijer & Van Beukering, 2004). We distinguish the following areas:
1. Schoolachievement (e.g. good reader, good at mathematics, speaks French fluently)
2. Working attitudes and task behaviour (e.g. concentrated, independent, motivated)
3. Cognitive and intellectual functioning (e.g. verbally intelligent, visually-spatially intelligent, excellent visual memory)
4. Social emotional and psychological functioning (e.g. positive self perception, spirited, good social skills)
5. Artistic and expressive abilities (e.g. musical, creative)
6. Physical functioning and outward appearance (good looks, healthy, sportive)
7. Rearing at home and the situation at home (supportive family, consistent rearing style)

Step 6 Measurement of psychological and social distance

We asked the teacher to fill in our psychological and social distance scale for each pupil. The scales measure the experienced psychological and social distance between the teacher and the pupil.

Step 7 Data-collection and data-entry

The data were first recorded in handwriting. Next the teacher entered his data (step 1, 2, 3, 6) into the computer. The main purpose was to offer the teachers possibilities to analyse their own data by means of a statistical program (means, standard deviations, correlations etc.). The remaining data were carefully copied and kept. These data were important to analyse as well.

Writing a reflection essay

The teachers had to write a reflection-essay about three main issues:
1. *The collection process of the own constructs and those of their colleague, e.g.*:
   How did it go? Are there differences in positive and negative constructs between the teacher and his colleague? Are there differences in student scores on the constructs? Did you discuss the differences and similarities? Which were the most interesting results of this discussion?

2. *The pupils with the social emotional and behavioural problems, e.g.*:
   Look at the arrangement of the constructs in the areas of attention. What stands out?
   How important are the constructs in area four (social emotional and psychological
   functioning) for you? And the constructs in area two (working attitudes and task
   behaviour)? To what extent are they new for you? Add up the scores of the students in area
   four (social emotional and psychological functioning). Is it correct that you consider the
   pupils with low scores on your positive constructs as more difficult than the pupils with
   high scores? Calculate the mean scores of the boys and the girls in your class. What are
   your conclusions concerning these figures?

3. *The content of the coaching and the coaching-approach, e.g.*:
   Look at the complete list with constructs and opposites and indicate if and how they are
   connected. Are they related with your personal ideas about your contact with pupils?
   Which construct intrigues you the most? Can you analyse this construct with respect to
   your own (school) history? Which role could your coach perform in this process? What are
   your expectations concerning the coach?

Coaching

The reflection essay was the main document in our coaching approach. The coaching period
lasted about six month. All coaches were university teachers (educational psychologists) of the
Faculty of Education. The coaching procedure consisted of five group sessions and minimally
three individual sessions. We followed Garman's basis procedure on 'reflection on recollection'
and adapted this approach to our working circumstances. The recall phase was part of the
reflection essay. In the representation phase we stimulated the students to capture their
constructs by making a mind map, writing a personal portrait, using pictures or photographs and
choosing music. In the interpretation phase we motivated them to consider the relationship
between their own constructs, the pupils' scores on their own constructs, the scores on the
psychological and social distance scale and other information with respect to the pupils
concerned (e.g. achievement scores). We paid much attention to a confidential relationship
between the coach and the student to promote deep reflection. Our basic assumption was that
the student had the fundamental right to decide what and how to write, what to reveal and what
not (Heikkinen, 1998). The student had to feel completely safe, also in the group sessions. The
main purpose was to help the student to get grip on the core of his self-evaluation. In the
confirmation phase the student was supported to choose a theoretical theme that fitted his or
her self-evaluation. We discussed the guidelines for a personal study and the literature the
student brought in.

The group sessions had a more general character, especially at the beginning. Ideas were
exchanged about the data collection process and the first analyses were discussed. Besides we
trained the students to search literature digitally, so that they would be able to find literature for
their personal studies. In the last two sessions the students talked about the theoretical themes
they want to elaborate in their personal studies. They asked and received feedback from each
other and the coaches. They exchanged their ideas about presenting their research to their
colleagues as well. One of the main purposes of this presentation was to stimulate their
colleagues to think about their own ideas and beliefs about problem children.

Summary of results

Twenty-nine teachers collected their constructs making use of Kelly's 'Repertory-Grid'. Eight teachers joined the coaching route as well. Recently four in-service students finished their coaching route with a reflection-essay, a personal theoretical study and a presentation of their research to their colleagues. The other four students will end their coaching period within a few months. Because this project is still in progress, we can only present our preliminary results, which will be qualitative in nature. The perspectives of two students will be described. Finally, in this paragraph, we will describe some additional reflections about this project.

Student A (age 26, primary school) wrote:

'After analyzing the problem pupils-scores on my constructs, the construct 'explosive' proved to be very important (the problem pupils got high mean scores), much more important compared with my other negative constructs e.g. 'autistic' (opposite to 'day-to-day reality') and 'to make friends' (opposite 'to make enemies'). Explosive children are (in my opinion) children who are very unpredictable; their behaviour can easily switch from one moment to another, without a clear cause. The opposite of my construct is 'balanced'. Balanced people are reflection oriented persons, they are usually quiet, they think before they act. I like balanced people more than explosive ones. I feel comfortable with them. Discussing the backgrounds of my constructs with my coach, in particular the construct 'explosive', it became clear that I struggle with explosive people in my personal and professional life. It is connected with my brother's behaviour, who regularly loses his temper. In such a situation I get scared and tend to avoid personal interaction. I have problems handling explosive situations. I hate unpredictable behaviour. It makes me feel incompetent. Reflecting on a few incidents I came to the conclusion that my overall reactions towards this particular problem behaviour are similar. I notice that my behaviour is professionally inadequate. I have to work on it'.

Student A wrote her personal theoretical study on teaching tactics on behalf of explosive and unpredictable children. She also did a case study in her own school. She formulated a written portrait of an explosive pupil (vignette) and interviewed some expert's colleagues about their approach regarding this type of children. She also went to a school for children with serious emotional and behavioural disorders. There she collected her data on teaching strategies as well.

Student B (age 38, junior pre-vocational school) wrote:

'It surprised me that my constructs were arranged in only three areas of attention (working attitudes and task behaviour; social emotional and psychological functioning; artistic and expressive abilities). I thought that I had a more holistic view. I had arranged eleven (of the eighteen) constructs in the social emotional area. It seems that this area is very important to me. My most striking constructs are 'self-assured' (opposite to 'insecure'), 'inspired' (opposite to 'passive'); 'positive attitude' (opposite to 'negativist') and 'social' (opposite to 'anti-social'). I have noticed that the pupils who scored low on the positive constructs scored low on the psychological and social distance scale as well. My conclusion is that I feel quite close to my problem children. My colleague scored just the other way around, he distinguished nearly the same problem children, but they scored higher on the psychological and social distance scale. We talked about the background of this difference. It turned out to be an attitude issue. I am a

more optimistic and helpful person towards children with special needs. I strongly believe that children can change if the circumstances at school change. My colleague is less optimistic. He believes that many behavioural problems cannot be altered; in his mind they are related to diagnostic categories, they are more static. My coach motivated me to think about the different points of view. I appreciated that he did not spoon-feed his advices. He stimulated me to examine my own opinions and beliefs'.

Student B wrote a personal theoretical study on the effects of diagnostic labels (categorical classifications) and personal contact on teacher's attitudes towards students with special needs. She repeated Kelly's 'Repertory-Grid' with other colleagues. Her main aim was to stimulate her colleague's to think about their own constructs on problem pupils, in order to deepen the weekly staff meetings.

***Additional remarks of some students*:**
'It was a real adventure to collect a colleague's construct on the same students and to compare these with my constructs. They were rather different. This project helped me to get to know my 'spectacles', at least the colour'.
'This self-evaluation triggered a turn in my thinking process. Now, I know a lot more about myself (my strong and weak points) and what I have still have to learn about myself'.
'I used to have strong ideas about pupils and their parents beforehand. I am still somewhat critical, but will not point my finger at someone anymore. I am developing a helicopter-view'.
'I have become more conscious of my opinions and beliefs about pupils. I liked the fact that my coach does not work at my school. This caused a safe feeling'.
'My reflection-process is deepened by reading about my constructs. I think that my research project has contributed to a more enquiring attitude'.

Brief discussion

In our research project we investigate how and to what extent teachers' personal constructs can change, especially towards difficult-to-teach pupils. In this paper we have presented the first qualitative results of the project. In the coming period we will examine the interventions (Kelly's grid and coaching model) which may influence the results. We expect teachers' personal constructs to change at the end of the project. After completing the self-evaluation, the theoretical study and the presentation of the results in the own school, we suppose that the constructs will be more distributed over the seven areas of attention. It seems conceivable to conclude that the teachers will develop a more balanced or differentiated view on pupils. Moreover, we expect the personal constructs (both the positives and their opposites), within the area of social emotional and psychological functioning, to be more balanced, i.e. teachers have developed an eye for different types of social-emotional functioning.
We are interested in the number and nature of the constructs with regard to gender, school type and working experience. The nature of constructs will be analysed in the qualitative part of this study. For instance it seems interesting to understand why one teacher considers a specific construct (for instance 'quiet') as a positive construct and another as a negative one.
In our quantitative study the number of constructs strikes us. 29 teachers formulated 478 unique construct-pairs (Touw e.a., 2005). We suppose that this enormous amount of different

constructs must have a negative impact on the transparency of the communication between teachers, for instance when they are discussing pupils in staff meetings.

Our preliminary conclusion is that both the repertory grid-technique and the coaching model give a powerful impulse to the development of thinking and acting of teachers. It can help them to build up their professional identity towards problem children. In a dialogue with other students and their coaches (in their role of critical friends), teachers shape their own practice based on insight, understanding and theoretical knowledge they have developed. They can use these achievements as an integral part of their own action research.

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Personal constructs on (problem) pupils:
a teacher's view

I am one of the teachers who took part in the constructs research.A personal set of fifteen constructs on twenty-eight pupils was collected. These constructs showed me what kinds of constructs I have (mainly social-emotional and cognitive ones) and made me reflect. They also made clear to me that I think less positively on problem children. Participation in this research includes coaching, theoretical orientation and continuous reflection, making me conscious of what (problem) behaviour I like or dislike and what I should change to get a professional, holistic view. Then problem behaviour will be more easily tolerated by me and I can teach my colleagues about my new insights in intercommunicative sessions and by personal counselling.

Introduction

The constructs research was first introduced to me at the start of the course "Behavioural and Developmental Disorders" at the University of Professional Education at Utrecht (Touw & Van der Wolf, 2003; Van Beukering & Touw, 2005). The thirty students, all teachers, with varying experience, were asked to participate in the research. Those interested could first attend an informative lecture and then decide to write a motivation for participation.

The main theoretical idea of the research that was presented at the informative lecture has interested me from the beginning: every person builds up his own reality with his own constructs or building-stones, based on his own personal experiences and perceptions, trying to get a grip on the reality around him. I was anxious to know about my professional constructs, the constructs that I have on the pupils I teach. Besides, after twenty years of teaching, some self-reflection was welcome. I had looked critically at my functioning as a teacher at the beginning of my teaching career but afterwards routine took over. My motivation was accepted and I was chosen as a participant, together with seven other students.

The methodology

The eight chosen students were asked to come to the University on five Saturdays and write an essay on the research afterwards in which they could elaborate on their own personal topic of interest.

The methodology chosen for the research was based on the construct theory by George Kelly (1955), the coaching methodology by Garman (Pajak, 2000) and the theories on the teacher's thinking processes according to Atkinson and Claxton (2000).

The main theoretical ideas that were in my head when I started to collect my constructs were: when I know how I think about my pupils (Kelly, 1955) I can try to adapt my thinking, make it more professional; I can do this by way of reflection and coaching (the coach can make me aware of hidden ideas or past events that influence my way of thinking = reflection on recollection); I should combine intuitive thinking, reflective thinking and theoretical thinking (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000).

The practical part of the research is based on Kelly's Repertory Grid technique. Kelly believed that persons describe, label and interpret the world around them by thinking in constructs which have a basic value and an opposite value. So when I was asked to write down my construct (for example 'lazy') I also had to write down its opposite (in my experience 'diligent').

The actual collection of the constructs took four steps. Step 1 meant that I had to write down the names of my individual students on small cards. The students I chose were twenty-eight students in the pre-exam year of a school preparing them for higher vocational studies, 15 or 16 years old, 13 girls, 15 boys. I am their mentor so I know them well. The cards were shuffled by a fellow student and three cards with the names up were laid down before me. My task was to compare the three students and to find two most similar students, compared to the third student . In one case, for example, two of the three students immediately struck me as carefree, whereas the other student was complex. A construct was born: 'carefree' (the original one) and 'complex' (its opposite). My fifteen constructs were created in this way and recorded (see Table 1, in which I mention 5 of my 15 constructs).

Personal constructs	Opposites
Complex	Carefree
Silent	Noisy
Serious	Playful
Childish	Grown-up
Intelligent	Average

Table 1 Index of 5 of my personal constructs and its opposites

In some cases it was very hard to devise a construct because the students seemed to be so much alike. In that case the cards were shuffled again so that I got the chance to devise a construct on another combination of three students. Kelly argues that each person has a limited set of constructs in which he defines his reality (about 8-12). I could come up with 15 constructs maximally, of which the last ones were hard to create.

Our second job was to determine which of the set of two constructs could be seen as a positive construct and which one was experienced as a negative construct (step 2). This seemed an easy task but it turned out to be difficult in practice. For example, after the steps were done, there was a discussion in the group about the set 'silent' and 'noisy'. Some of us liked silent pupils better than noisy pupils but other teachers in our group were of the opinion that silent pupils may hide a lot and are often complex (Table 2).

Positively experienced personal construct	Negatively experienced personal construct
Carefree	Complex
Silent	Noisy
Serious	Playful
Grown-up	Childish
Intelligent	Average

Table 2 My experience of the personal constructs

In this table we see two sets of constructs whose orders have been changed (the first and the fourth set).

Thirdly, we had to score each individual pupil on the positively experienced personal constructs (step 3). In my case this meant scoring 28 pupils on 15 constructs (420 scores). We used a five-point scale, in which 0 means not applicable at all and 4 means fully applicable. The 2 in the scale is in the middle and the most neutral score.

Pupil's name: Roald Class: 4HD				male	
Positive construct	*Not applicable at all*			*Fully applicable*	
1. Carefree	0	1	2	**3**	4
2. Silent	0	**1**	2	3	4
3. Serious	0	1	**2**	3	4
4. Etc.	0	1	2	3	4

Table 3 Scores of each individual pupil on the positive constructs

According to this table the pupil called Roald is seen by me as a rather carefree child, not very silent and sometimes serious and playful at the same time. The value 2 in the scale means that the positive construct 'serious' can be applied half of the time and so can the negative construct 'playful. Scoring the individual pupils on the constructs was a laborious task but not as difficult as the preceding tasks. The reason for this may be that working with your own constructs and pupils feels like "coming home": the constructs belong to you and you are familiar with your pupils.

The next step (step 4) was arranging the constructs into seven areas of attention. These areas concern six areas referring to student behaviour (like cognitive functioning, working attitude, artistic functioning) and one area referring to the educational situation, i.e. the situation at home. The results and the seven areas are shown in table 4.

Seven areas of attention	*Personal constructs*
Student behaviour 1-6	
1. School achievements	
2. Working attitude and task behaviour	Serious; Positive impression
3. Cognitive and Intellectual functioning	Grown-up; Intelligent; Not to be influenced; Meaningful
4. Social-emotional and psychological functioning	Carefree; Silent; Self-assured; Modest; Cheerful; Extrovert; Self-conscious; Docile
5. Artistic and expressive abilities	Attractive
6. Physical functioning and outward appearance	
7. Rearing at home and the situation at home	

Table 4 Arranging my personal constructs into seven areas of attention

The difficulty in the arranging of the constructs depended on the nature of the construct. A construct with a general meaning, like 'attractive', can refer to looks, mood, social skills etc. A construct like 'carefree' has a specific meaning and clearly belongs to area 4. When I came up

with my construct 'attractive' I had opposed a pupil that is interested in culture and literature to two pupils who weren't and the first word that came up was 'attractive' instead of 'artistic' or 'expressive'. 'Not to be influenced' means being 'firm', having an opinion of your own, and 'meaningful' is the opposite of 'superficial', referring to how pupils think about things (hence area 3). Obviously the meaning of the constructs should be described at an early stage. The areas of attention were not just presented to us in a table to fill in but clarified in an accompanying paper. The table above shows interesting findings, like to which areas of attention I ascribe many constructs, to which areas I ascribe a few constructs or none at all and to how many areas I ascribe my conducts.

The last thing to do in the practical part of the research was making scales that measure the psychological and social distance between you, the teacher, and your pupil (Table 5).
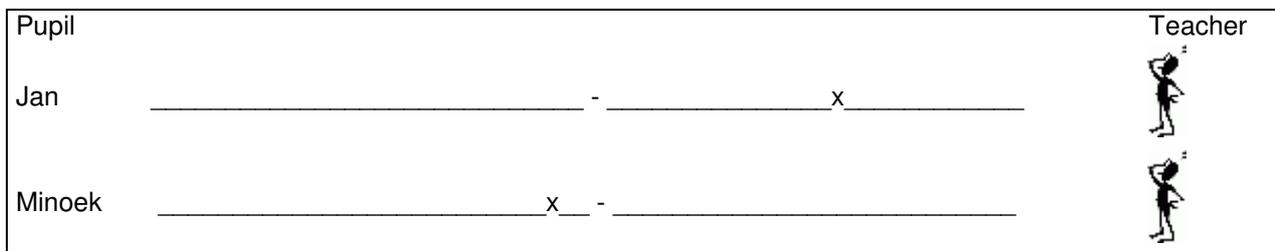
Pupil		Teacher
Jan	_____ - _____x_____	
Minoek	_____x__ - _____	

Table 5 Scale of the psychological and social distance

In Table 5 the hyphen on the line (the '-') indicates how close the pupil is to the teacher. The symbol '-' above the line indicates the middle of the line. On our sheets of paper we had to measure the distance in centimetres and the farthest away from the teacher a pupil could get was 19.5 centimetres. So the '-' in the middle was on the 9.75 cm position. In the case of Jan-Willem, I, the teacher, feel quite close to my pupil. There is much more distance in the case of Minoek. I feel less close to her, less involved. The making of these scales was difficult because it was self-confronting. It made you aware that you feel much closer to some pupils than to others and that was embarrassing to me because I was of the opinion that a teacher/mentor should be close to all his pupils. I have changed my mind in that and will come back to this issue later.

Besides collecting our own constructs, each participant had to collect a colleague's constructs on the same students. Being all teachers it was not so difficult to find a colleague. The colleague I chose is a man of my own age who started teaching at our school in the same year (1985) and who knows the pupils I describe well as he was their mentor last year.

The data were first recorded in handwriting, on sheets of paper, which were carefully copied and kept. The digital recordings took place in Utrecht: we fed the data into the computer and used a programme that was made for the research.

The process of collecting and recording my fellow students' and my data took place twice: in November 2004 and in April 2005.

The results

The digital recording made it possible to get new insights into the results. The results that will now be described are based on my constructs (not my colleague's), collected in November 2004. When I was collecting and recording these first data I was involved with four problem children in my class. In this case, problem children meant children of 16 years old, all girls, who showed deviant behaviour (extrovert troublesome or introvert depressive behaviour) that was serious enough for the help of a psychologist. Two of these girls were already visiting a psychologist when they came into my mentor class and the other two were referred to one by me. I was anxious to know if my constructs about these four problem pupils would differ from the other 24 pupils and how the psychological-social distance would compare. I asked Huub Everaert, a staff member of the University specialised in research statistics, to compare the four problem pupils with the other pupils. The results are shown in Table 6 (with thanks to Huub Evereart).

	the 4	_problem_	_pupils_		_the_	_Other 24_	_Pupils_
Constructs	**Average Value of Constructs**	**Standard Deviation**	**AverageDistance**		Average Value of Constructs	Standard Deviation	Average Distance
Attractive	**2.25**	**1.26**	**3.6**		2.17	0.82	7.98
Modest	**1.25**	**0.50**	**3.6**		2.25	1.07	7.98
Extrovert	**3.00**	**0.82**	**3.6**		2.42	0.83	7.98
Intelligent	**2.25**	**0.50**	**3.6**		2.75	0.74	7.98
Docile	**0.75**	**0.96**	**3.6**		1.79	1.02	7.98
To be influenced	**2.75**	**1.89**	**3.6**		2.04	0.86	7.98
Positive Impression	**2.00**	**1.15**	**3.6**		2.33	0.96	7.98
Serious	**3.25**	**0.50**	**3.6**		2.54	0.83	7.98
Quiet	**0.75**	**0.96**	**3.6**		1.71	0.95	7.98
Grown-up	**2.50**	**1.29**	**3.6**		1.96	0.81	7.98
Cheerful	**1.50**	**0.58**	**3.6**		2.38	0.65	7.98
Self-assured	**1.50**	**1.73**	**3.6**		2.08	0.97	7.98
Self-conscious	**3.75**	**0.50**	**3.6**		2.46	0.72	7.98
Meaningful	**2.50**	**1.29**	**3.6**		2.21	0.66	7.98
Carefree	**0.25**	**0.50**	**3.6**		2.08	1.10	7.98
	Total =30.25				*Total =* 53.4		

Table 6 My scores on the 4 problem pupils and the other pupils

The column on the left shows my fifteen constructs. The columns named "Average Value of Constructs" record the average score of the four or twenty-four pupils on a particular construct (the data on the four problem pupils are in bold letters). Each pupil could score on a construct on a scale of 0-4 (0= not applicable at all, 4 = highly applicable). Low scores (like 0.66, 1.50 etc.) on constructs mean that the pupils do not score high on positive constructs and this implies that the teacher does not think positively of these pupils. Adding up the average values of the four problem pupils gave a score of 30.25 and of the other twenty-four pupils gave a score of 53.4. Obviously I do think less positively of my problem children. Standard deviation measures divergence (the spreading of values). The higher the value of the standard deviation, the larger the divergence and the bigger the differences in a group of pupils with respect to a particular construct. In the group of the 4 problem pupils, for instance, there is a high standard deviation for the constructs 'to be influenced' and for 'self-assured'. This might mean in practice that only one of the four pupils are thought to be very self-assured or to be easily influenced and the other three are completely different (uncertain, firm). The distance refers to the psychological-social distance. The values that were recorded, 3.6 for the problem children, 7.98 for the other children, are averages and show that I feel psychologically much closer to the problem children.

A brief discussion of the results

For me the most interesting findings in Table 6 were the differences in distance between the problem pupils and the other pupils and the lower scores of the problem pupils on the positive constructs. These findings started reflection on my functioning as a teacher and as a mentor. At the time these findings were revealed, I was struggling with one of my mentor pupils (one of the four problem pupils). She was showing very irritating and troublesome behaviour during the lessons in class but when I spoke to her in private she was telling me openly about her problems. As a teacher I had to discipline her because she was disturbing the lessons and irritating her fellow pupils and her teacher but as a mentor I had to make sure that we had an open relationship, built on trust and respect. According to the findings I have a more positive view on my non-problem pupils but, at the same time, I feel less close to them. Apparently my involvement with my pupils has to do with the amount of concern I feel for my pupils. I am more involved with pupils that need my help. Their unpleasant behaviour does not tear us apart, does not increase the distance between us. I reflected on this and concluded that I might be too close to my problem pupils. Some more distance may solve the dilemma I suffered from: enough distance to see your pupil as a pupil who needs to stick to the rules and enough closeness and involvement to be able to guide your pupil and help him with his problems.

I studied the scores of my problem pupils on the positive constructs and it struck me that I have a certain image of a 'problem pupil': not modest, noisy, not docile (difficult to guide), low-spirited, uncertain and worrying' (low scores on 'modest, docile, silent, cheerful, self-assured and carefree'). Moreover, I see those problem pupils as 'worriers', 'thinkers' (high scores on 'serious, grown-up and self-conscious').

Another instructive part of the research was our arrangement of the constructs into areas of attention that illustrate a pupil's characteristics (see page 3). Six of my constructs turned out to relate to working attitude and task behaviour. I had expected to have more constructs in areas

one and two (the cognitive areas) as I teach English, a theoretical and compulsory subject at Dutch schools, to older pupils (16-18 years old) in their (pre)-exam years. Most of my constructs, eight in total, could be ascribed to the social-emotional/psychological functioning area. The fact that I only had one construct in the artistic and expressive abilities area and none whatsoever in the physical functioning and outward appearance area and the educational situation/home situation made me reflect on my thinking about pupils. The arrangement of the constructs into the areas of attention taught me that I think in a somewhat narrow-minded way about my pupils. I should develop a more holistic view.

My colleague's results cannot be discussed in detail here but his constructs on the same pupils were arranged in three areas. Four in the school abilities area, two in the working attitude and task behaviour area and the rest (ten) in the social-emotional and psychological functioning area. My colleague, though, takes much more psychological distance to the problem pupils (13.08 cm!). His distance to the other pupils is 8.77 cm. I had been wondering if a man would take more distance to female problem girls (he does) and if a man would take more distance in general (this is hardly the case as his distance to the other 24 pupils is 8.77 cm, which is only a bit bigger than my distance of 7.98 cm).

Coaching

The discussion of the major findings above illustrates self-reflection as taking part in the constructs research means starting an intense process of self-reflection. My coach, who guided me in this process, planned regular one-hour conversations with me. Talking with him about my constructs and my reflection on them provided me with valuable feedback. We talked about how teachers look at their pupils. Only children's behaviour is visible and behaviour is an expression of something. A child may seem cheerful from the outside but can be depressed and worried from the inside. Teachers think they know their pupils well, but they can never be sure. Besides, teachers often see their pupils in class groups and group behaviour is fundamentally different from individual behaviour. It is essential that teachers get to know their pupils really well and the best way to reach this goal is having personal talks with their pupils. Furthermore, we talked about how my behaviour may affect my pupils' behaviour. Communication takes place in a transactional model: people react to one another and adapt their behaviour to the person they are dealing with. Teachers should also look at their own behaviour critically and teachers should be willing to change in order to get a better relationship with their pupils. Finally we talked about the psychological-social distance. Probably I try to be as close as possible to my problem children because I am too keen on successfully helping them. I am a prestigious person and have to bear that in mind.

Personal essay

In my personal essay on the research I chose to elaborate on the teacher's involvement with pupils. I consulted some literature on the subject and got some new insights. Kugel (2004) sees behaviour determined by the organism (meaning the body and its workings) and the environment (meaning the total of factors around us). Kugel argues for a transactional model: our behaviour also determines the organism and the environment. Especially his elaborate account of the workings of the body and the way they affect behaviour has impressed me. I have become conscious of this ever since and pay attention to whether pupils sleep enough or eat enough or how they cope with physical problems. I have experienced that talking with pupils

about physical problems improves the relationship. It means getting close in the right way. Blase (1986) did some research on how teachers react to problem behaviour. A teachers' main emotions are annoyance, depression, fear, frustrations, feelings of guilt and even physical problems. Blase argues that problem behaviour is experienced in a negative way by the teacher and his irritation towards the pupil will aggravate the pupil's behaviour. Unfortunately, such an attitude is based on emotions and the ideas (constructs) a teacher has about his pupils. Van der Molen (1984) claims that teachers often struggle with an idealised view of pupils. Teachers want to achieve too much, have high ideals and a lot of self-criticism. This may cause a lot of tension. Blase and Van der Molen make me realise that I should not be ashamed that my problem pupils score lower on the positive constructs. However, they also make me aware of the fact that my own behaviour influences their behaviour and that a positive approach, based on positive thinking, will improve the relationship with my problem pupils. Besides, I should not try to achieve too much and have ideals that are too high.

Conclusion

The constructs that were collected were based on intuitive thinking. Teachers have some basic ideas in our heads about our pupils and we act towards our pupils the way we think about them. Taking part in the research meant that I have become conscious of the constructs I have. Reflective thinking led me to the conclusion that my constructs show a limited pupil concept. I should think about pupils in a more professional, holistic way. Besides, I should take more psychological distance to problem pupils. As a future specialist on problem behaviour I shall use this knowledge myself and spread it at my school in intercommunicative sessions and in colleague counselling.

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