Control and responsiveness in the learning partnership

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Aims and objectives

How does interpersonal interaction influence teaching and learning experience? My research addresses this question, and aims to:

- examine each of the N+2 relationships within the teacher-pupil-parent triangle
- Consider the teacher-pupil-parent triangle as a microsystem
- explore the dimensions of responsiveness and control
- Consider the possibility of conflict resolution through reframing individual constructs

Based on analysis of teacher survey data this paper presents a discussion of the interpersonal mechanisms of control and responsiveness in the context of teacher-parent and teacher-pupil relationships.

Context

A violin teacher’s ‘studio’ provides a unique setting for an exploration of interpersonal relationships between parent, teacher and pupil. This particular educational context is somewhat unique in two respects. First, the learning often takes place on a one-to-one basis and involves high levels of parental support. Second, the relationship between parent, pupil, and individual teacher often spans several years, thereby encompassing many life changes experienced by the three participants.

Methodology

A systems framework brings coherence to a diverse theoretical field that includes concepts of interpersonal relationships, family communication patterns, effective teaching and home-school relations. The parent-teacher-pupil triangle is considered as a microsystem embedded within a nest of larger social systems, central to the musical development of the pupil and integral to the personal and professional satisfaction of all three participants.

Phase one of this research employed a quantitative survey to examine how learning and teaching experience for teachers, pupils and parents is influenced by the dynamics of responsiveness and control, while phase two comprised qualitative methods to explore these dimensions within teacher-pupil-parent case studies.
The phase one survey was based on a model of interpersonal behaviour developed from Leary (1957), who maintained that all interpersonal behaviour could be represented around the two axes of responsiveness and control. The survey comprises groups of variables relating to scales for interpersonal mechanisms (control and responsiveness) and outcomes. Positive learning outcomes for teachers, generated by participants in earlier related research (Creech, 2001), are defined as professional satisfaction, self efficacy, involvement and friendship. It was expected that the responsiveness and control scales would function in a mutually exclusive way, and that the two scales would relate to different learning outcomes.

Quantitative data were analysed using chi square, factor analysis, multiple regression, and analysis of variance. Qualitative open questions generated a substantial amount of text which was analysed using the approach known as empirical phenomenology, following the guidelines laid out by Cooper and McIntyre whose stated aim was “to enable teachers and pupils to articulate their authentic understandings of effective classroom learning” (Cooper and McIntyre, 1993:384).

Results

**Control and responsiveness: teacher-pupil vs. teacher parent relationships**

A surprising result was the discovery that teachers were more responsive in their relationships with pupils, and more controlling in their relationships with parents (figure 1).

**Figure 1: teacher-parent and teacher-pupil interpersonal mechanisms**
Responses suggested that teachers consider themselves to be more receptive, patient and tolerant with pupils than with parents. Perhaps it is precisely because teachers hold the balance of power within the teacher-pupil dyad that they find the freedom to be responsive to individual pupil needs. Conversely, within the teacher-parent dyad where the balance of power is less clearly defined teachers may feel compelled to exercise control as a way of establishing authority.

**The influence of control and responsiveness on outcomes for teachers**

Despite Leary’s assertion that all human interaction can be plotted on the control/responsiveness graph (Leary 1957), a factor analysis of the control scale revealed four factors, interpreted as 1) leadership 2) commitment, 3) impatience and 4) confidence. Likewise, a factor analysis of the responsiveness scale revealed four factors, which may be interpreted as 1) sensitivity to pupils, 2) receptiveness to new ideas, 3) interest in the views of others and 4) communication skills.

Multiple regression, using the eight control and responsiveness factors as predictors, was employed in order to test the analytic statement that:

**Analytic statement 1**

*The qualities of control and responsiveness, as measured in the ‘Survey of Teacher Attitudes’ influence teaching and learning outcomes for teachers.*

The survey results suggest that teachers who are sensitive to the views of pupils and parents and who possess both leadership and communication skills may experience greater professional satisfaction and self efficacy. Furthermore, “by a process of collective efficacy enhancement, self efficacious teachers may empower parents with the confidence to help their children learn, and instil in their pupils self efficacious beliefs which support persistence with learning and enhance student attitudes towards the teacher and the subject matter” (Creech and Hallam, 2003).

**Control vs. Responsiveness: a dilemma for teachers**

**Analytic Statement 2**

*A challenge for teachers is to reconcile control and responsiveness in their relationships with both pupils and parents.*

Evidence suggests that a major challenge for violin teachers is to fulfil the role of ‘responsive leader’, striking a balance between retaining control of learning objectives and lesson content, yet maintaining a responsive, receptive persona. This challenge is perhaps most sharply felt within the context of the parent-teacher dyad when the pupil is still pre-teenage, where power relations and definitions of roles and responsibilities are fluid.

It has been suggested by family system analysts that the healthiest families are those characterised by relationships where there is variation in types of interaction, as opposed to individuals being locked into one type of exchange (Becvar and Becvar 1996). This model of a healthy system offers a solution to the control vs. responsiveness dilemma, allowing scope for, and embracing of, both types of interaction.
From a systems view it is impossible to treat outcomes experienced by teachers and teacher objectives in isolation from those of pupils and parents. That the interpersonal dimensions function in contradictory ways within the teacher-pupil and teacher-parent dyads supports the systems view that interpersonal qualities are not intrinsic characteristics, but may be a product of interaction between the human actors. The hopeful extension of this view is that there is possibility for change, including resolution of conflict, within human microsystems.

Thus whilst this paper has focused on evidence which suggests we may accept analytic statements number 1 and 2, a re-examination of these findings in light of parent and pupil data analysis will provide a more in-depth analysis.

References