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978-0-521-29505-5 - Tasks and Social Relationships in Classrooms: A Study of Instructional Organization and its Consequences

Steven T. Bossert

Excerpt

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1. Introduction

It is almost trite to say that schooling is a process of social interaction. Recognition of the intimate link between learning processes and social relationships permeates both the popular literature and the scholarly research on education. Images of the good teacher abound as do prescriptions for establishing proper classroom social relations. Yet our understanding of classroom processes is extremely limited despite numerous studies of teacher style, peer relations in school, and classroom climate. Besides failing clearly to relate classroom or teacher differences to pupil behavior, research on schooling has overlooked the influence of certain classroom structural properties on both the teacher and pupil behavior. If learning occurs within the context of social relationships that develop within a classroom, then the forces that pattern interaction between teacher and pupil and among peers are fundamental to the study of schooling processes.

This book concerns some of the consequences of classroom organization, particularly the analysis of structures that characterize differences between classrooms. Its major premise rests on the observation that the daily activities in which individuals engage play an important role in shaping the development of their social relationships: As teacher and pupils interact within the context of recurrent classroom activities, patterns of interaction emerge and particular social relationships develop. To the extent that classrooms employ different activity structures, different interaction patterns should emerge. This view differs from the usual highly individualistic conceptions of classroom processes in which characteristics of individuals are seen as the primary determiners of behavior, and instead focuses on the social organization of the learning environment as a frame for emerging social interaction. The research reported here examines the nature of classroom activities, particularly those elements that constitute differences in activity types, and the consequences of various classroom activity organizations for patterns of interaction that develop between teacher and pupil and

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among pupils. That is, it explores the linkages between classroom activity organizations and the social relationships that emerge within them.

Several sociologists have noted the importance of studying the factors that shape social relationships in schools and other socialization settings. In a seminal essay on the structural properties of people-processing institutions, Wheeler (1966) contends that the psychological outcomes of socialization result from the recurrent conditions in which members interact and that these conditions themselves are set by basic organizational properties. Forms of social relationships, from which social norms are acquired, derive from the structural characteristics of the institution. Wheeler indicates that differences among organizations in their goals, the composition and processing of their members, and their relationships to the external environment lead to differences in the socialization experiences of their members. Although Wheeler's paper clearly indicates the potential value of studying the structural conditions that shape socialization experiences, this has not been done. Except for Street, Vinter, and Perrow's (1966) study of the organizational goals and technologies of different correctional institutions, the empirical examination of the relationships among organizational factors, social relationships, and socialization outcomes has not developed.

Dreeben (1968), however, has applied this idea theoretically to the school in comparing its organization and socialization outcomes to those of the family. He contends that what children learn derives from the nature of their experiences and that different experiences develop in settings characterized by different organizational arrangements. Because the family and the school, as social institutions, differ in terms of the boundaries and size of social groupings, the duration of social relationships, the relative number of adults to nonadults, the degree of homogeneity in members' social characteristics, and the extent to which members can observe one another's behavior, they provide different tasks, constraints, and opportunities for interaction. These, in turn, influence the norms children learn within these settings. For example, independence learning is fostered by

the fact that school children are removed from persons with whom they have already formed strong relationships of dependency, and the sheer size of a classroom assemblage limits each pupil's claim to personal contact with the teacher, and more so at the secondary levels than at the elementary. This numerical property of classrooms reduces pupils' opportunities for establishing new relationships of dependency with adults and for receiving help from them [Dreeben, 1968, p. 67].

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Dreeben, then, argues that the structural properties of schools create tasks and situations in which children are more likely to learn certain norms than if they had remained only within the family unit. Norm learning occurs within the context of recurrent activities; therefore, the organizational factors shaping these activities and their attendant social relationships are central to the study of schooling.

In a review of moral socialization and schooling, Bidwell (1972) has labeled Dreeben's analysis of schooling effects as the "activity structures" approach. Following this perspective, Bidwell argues that characteristic school activities exemplify moral principles or, at least, give moral meaning to required behavior. The moral meaning of acts derives from the "social organization of the school as it structures opportunities for interpersonal and within-classroom-group comparisons" (Bidwell, 1972, p. 20). Social control attempts, for example, can be either heightened or weakened depending on the character of the relationships between teacher and pupil and of group identifications within peer networks. Learning moral principles occurs within the context of developing social relationships. In fact, Bidwell speculates that

learning commitments to forms of social relations will be more effective if it occurs through activity structure than through influence or identification (though the latter mechanisms are not without power to alter such commitments); the acquisition of such commitments requires the concrete manifestations of the rewarding qualities of a given form of social relation that an appropriate activity structure and its attendant sanctions can provide. Learning *commitments to moral orientations* may be more protean, occurring either by generalization from experience in activity structures or more explicitly through some form of social control [Bidwell, 1972, p. 25; emphasis in the original].

According to this perspective, socialization settings that differ in their characteristic activities and social relationships also should differ in the norms learned by members. The organizational properties of the setting, as they shape activities and patterns of interaction, are elemental to the learning process.

Although the importance of activity structures and social relationships is well recognized, these examinations of the organizational properties of socialization settings have focused on differences among institutions. Wheeler examines variations among prisons, schools, and mental hospitals, and Dreeben analyzes factors that differentiate the family and the school. Yet subsettings within an organization also differ in their organizational properties and in the social relationships that emerge. Within schools, for example, classroom organizations may vary

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substantially. The popular conceptions of “traditional” versus “open” classrooms express perceived differences in classroom social organization, differences that (theoretically) may affect the development of social relationships and learning outcomes. However, the variables characterizing differences among institutions cannot adequately distinguish many of the differences among subsettings within one institution. Even though subsettings are likely to share general organizational goals and similar problems in relation to the external environment as well as have comparable procedures for ordering membership composition, subsettings may differ considerably in their activity structures and the patterns of interpersonal relations that develop within them. Most classrooms, for example, share the institutional goals of moral and technical socialization, deal similarly with intrusions from parents and community members, and contain children who are ordered by age and mixed by sex and other social characteristics. Also, classrooms do not vary substantially in terms of the factors Dreeben uses to characterize differences between family and school: These institutional-level factors were not intended to differentiate classroom structures. How, then, do classrooms, as organizational subsettings, differ? In accepting the viability of Wheeler’s, Dreeben’s, and Bidwell’s general formulations, the identification of factors that distinguish among classrooms, particularly as these shape differences in interpersonal relations and daily recurrent activities, becomes an important topic for investigation.

Although it is beyond the scope of this research to examine the socialization consequences of identifiable classroom differences, the study of activity structures and their associated patterns of social relations should provide some implications for examining schooling effects. After all, learning is a social process – its outcomes being influenced by its form of social organization. Examining the organizational bases of classroom activities and interaction constitutes a first step in the study of learning outcomes.

Work and social relationships

The relationship between task activities and intragroup relations is not a new idea; sociologists who study industrial work settings and other task groups have long recognized its importance. There are numerous illustrations of the notion that the “scheme of activities” will affect the “scheme of interaction” among group members. Homans (1950),

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for example, has shown that the organization of tasks exerts considerable influence over the nature of the relationships that develop among workers. In his observations of the Bank Wiring Room, Homans noted that clique formation reflected the patterns of interaction that occurred during work. Those men who were stationed next to one another or worked on the same piece of wiring (a wireman and a solderman) were most likely to talk informally and play games during rest and lunch periods. Likewise, Borgatta and Bales (1953) have shown that patterns of interaction among members in small experimental task groups develop in response to the type of task performed by group members.

In analyzing the effect of work situations on group relations, several crucial variables have been discovered. Sayles (1958, p. 42) found that “the internal structuring of work operations . . . affects significantly the behavior characteristics of a group. That is, the relations between members prescribed by the flow of work processes are a critical variable shaping the internal social systems of a group.” In studying the responses of industrial work groups to grievance procedures and their propensity to strike, Sayles analyzed several factory settings in terms of the size of the work group, the essentialness of the group’s function within the organization, and the extent of worker responsibility for judgment in completing tasks. These variables account for differences in group cohesion, interdependence among members, and the propensity for group action.

Central to Sayles’s analysis was the division of labor within the group. Where the division of labor was high, for example, where there was the separation or elimination of workers doing identical tasks, members tended not to engage in concerted group activity: They were less likely to participate as a collectivity in union organizing and grievance procedures than members of groups in which workers completed a common task in a single area. Sayles attributed this to the fact that when workers are separated and/or performing different tasks, they are not able to interact freely with fellow workers: “. . . intrinsic personality characteristics are less the determining factor of whom the worker talks to, when, and how often, than the work process which requires that he spend more time with some people than with others, and may actually specify his entire interaction pattern [within the work group]” (p. 74).

Worker relations are not the only patterns of interaction affected by the structure of the work process. Woodward (1958) demonstrates how management-worker relations are influenced by the nature of the prod-

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uct manufactured. Her analysis of the effects of differing technologies on industrial relations shows that less conflict develops between supervisor and subordinate in process and unit production than in mass production settings. This suggests that certain characteristics distinguishing industrial technologies, such as the division of labor and the extent of worker responsibility over the task, also influence supervisory-subordinate relations.

In addition to the structure of the task itself, the method of evaluation is another important element of the organization of work, and many studies have examined the impact of supervision on work group relations. In one, Blau (1955) found that evaluation procedures comparing the productivity of group members decreased the amount of social cohesion in the work group. In the state agency he studied, the posting of output statistics for each counselor in the office created a highly competitive situation in which counselors vied for interviewees and hoarded job openings. The resulting competition produced weak social cohesion among counselors, curtailed lunchtime association, and inhibited the flow of advice within the group. By contrast, in another agency where agents were assigned to cases and evaluated individually, lunchtime association and advice were frequent even though the latter was proscribed.

In examining task evaluation systems, two important dimensions arise – the extent of differential rewarding, and the interdependence of task performance. For example, Miller and Hamblin's (1963) study of work group productivity found that high levels of competition among workers developed where individual performance was rewarded differentially and task performance depended partly on the cooperation of co-workers. When individual performance was rewarded differentially but task performance was independent of fellow workers, competition was less intense than in the interdependence situation. Moreover, it is generally known that status systems emerge when individual rewards are affected by other group members (Thibaut and Kelly, 1959). Evaluation procedures that allow for individual comparisons and make rewards contingent on comparative assessments of performance foster the development of competitive status systems within a work group. When the demands of work are instrumental and clearly linked to a competitive reward structure, status within a group and interpersonal bonding will depend on individual performance. The competition that results decreases group cohesion, making salient only those courses of action and

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social relationships that increase a worker's productivity and, hence, his chances of obtaining rewards. In settings that do not promote individual competition, group members are free to establish a variety of social contacts without regard for their instrumental value in securing performance rewards. But workers may organize informally to restrict competitive relations even when the method of evaluation rewards workers' performances differentially (Roy, 1952).

The structure of task activities and their associated evaluation mechanisms are important factors shaping the development of social relations within a group. Patterns of interaction among work group members and between supervisor and workers are influenced by factors such as the size of the work group, its division of labor, the amount of worker responsibility over his task, and the methods of evaluating and rewarding task performance. Unfortunately, the analysis of work organization has not extended beyond the study of industrial work units and experimental task groups. Except in a few studies, like Shils's (1950) examination of wartime and peacetime armies and Breton's (1973) analysis of community structure and work organization, the structure of task activities and its consequences for social relationships have not been detailed for many different types of groups.

Classrooms and task organization

Classrooms are places where teachers and pupils work; however, few studies of classroom differences or schooling outcomes have examined the consequences of distinctive types of work organizations, or activity structures, for the emergence of social relationships within classrooms. Even though a massive body of literature has been generated on the sociometric structure of a classroom and the effects of teacher style, we know little about the variable conditions under which interactions occur and social relationships form.

The sociometric tradition of classroom research has focused on the relationship between pupil background characteristics, such as social class, and peer group networks. Research has shown that children often choose friends within their own socioeconomic status group and that this tends to reinforce existing differences in educational aspirations among these groups (Neugarten, 1942; Dahlke, 1953; Lippitt and Gold, 1959). Other studies have attempted to examine how particular sociometric patterns within a classroom or a school affect pupil achievement

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and self-concept (Grolund, 1953; Grann, 1956; Schmuck, 1962). It has been argued that a classroom with “good” sociometric structure will promote satisfying intragroup relations and, hence, create high levels of individual motivation for achievement and group performance; the characteristics of “good” sociometric structure are high rates of interpersonal contact, a lack of sharp cleavages within the group, the absence of isolated individuals, and strong leadership. These sociometric studies, however, have presented unclear and often contradictory results. Most have not been able to identify significant associations between sociometric structure and pupil learning. Moreover, they have overlooked the possible effects that certain structural properties of the learning environment may have on the development of peer networks, either in influencing friendship choices within social class groupings or in reinforcing segregation between various friendship groups. The emergence of a classroom’s sociometric structure is usually attributed to the social and personality characteristics of class members. Yet, as the research on small task groups and industrial work groups has pointed out, structural characteristics such as a group’s activity organization and reward system strongly influence group sociometric structure. To understand the relationship between group organization and schooling processes, we must examine the structural arrangements that affect intragroup relations.

The second major tradition in classroom research has been the teacher “style” and “effectiveness” studies. One of the earliest studies attempting to link a teacher’s behavior to group patterns was the Iowa research on leadership styles (Lewin et al., 1939; Lippitt and White, 1962). Three styles, authoritarian, democratic, and laissez faire, were found to produce different patterns of interaction, satisfaction, and productivity among children in task groups. Although this research indicated some differences in group patterns – the democratically led group was most satisfied and least aggressive, and the autocratically led group was the most productive as long as the leader was present – the effect of leadership style remains vague: Group differences were small, and it is unclear whether the results from small voluntary play groups can be generalized to classrooms.

This research has stimulated other studies of teacher leadership styles, basically of the extent to which the teacher dominates classroom activities. Flander’s (1960) work on teacher influence and Gordon and Adler’s (1963) study of teacher leadership are exemplary. Stern (1963), however, has indicated in his review of this research that no consistent

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results have emerged: About the only conclusions that can be drawn from these studies is that there is no “best” type of teacher (Boocock, 1972).

In addition to their failure to identify clear relationships between teacher differences and pupil behavior, these studies have not examined teacher behavior itself as an emergent phenomenon within the classroom setting. Rather, they view certain teacher characteristics as static preconditions for all subsequent classroom interactions; and they assume that only pupil behavior develops in response to the classroom setting. This perspective obscures the dynamic processes involved in the formation of teacher-pupil relationships as well as the effect that certain structural properties of the setting, like its organization of work, may have on patterns of interaction.

In contrast to traditional classroom studies, research on “behavior settings” has not ignored the relationships between structural properties and patterns of interpersonal behavior in small groups. In a study of four camp activities, Gump and Sutton-Smith (1955) observed children’s behavior in six activity settings: sharing, helping, asserting, blocking, demanding, and attacking. They found “the amount and kind of social interaction is significantly affected by variation of activity-settings” (Gump and Sutton-Smith, 1955, p. 756). In other words, they observed different rates of the six behavior categories in the four different camp activities. Gump (1967) later extended his ideas about activity settings to classrooms. There he found relationships among activity patterns, teacher leadership, and pupil involvement in the activity. Gump’s research substantiated two earlier attempts to relate classroom activities to pupil and teacher behavior; Kowatrakul (1959) found that the amount of pupil “work involvement” depended on the type of task assigned, and Hughes (1959) found a relationship between task activity and dominative teacher authority.

This research on the consequences of activity settings for teachers’ and children’s behavior, however, has not analyzed the characteristics of the activity setting itself. In a sense, it presents a tautological argument. Gump and Sutton-Smith argue that children will exhibit cooperative behavior in activities entailing cooperative behavior. Likewise, Hughes finds activities that place the teacher at the center of instruction will produce dominative teacher behavior. No one, though has examined the constitutive elements of task structure, such as the division of labor within the group, the size of the task group, and the

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method of evaluation used in the classroom, as these shape interpersonal behavior.

Furthermore, the research on “behavior settings” has not examined fully the emergent qualities of pupil and teacher behavior. Although Gump’s and Kowatrakul’s studies have not assumed that teacher behavior is the central organizing component of classroom interaction, they have not viewed classroom social relationships as developing from the interaction of teacher and pupils within the context of the task structure.¹

Classroom tasks and social relationships

Many different activities occur in classrooms. Children recite, discuss, read, play, build, and paint. There are times when activities must be carried on independently; times when pupils work together in small groups; and times when the activity involves the entire class. Occasionally, children may choose the task they wish to do, but most often the teacher specifies what is to be done and how. Every classroom activity, though, can be described in terms of its task characteristics. Just as in the analysis of industrial work tasks, classroom task activities² vary in the size of the work group (from single pupil to the whole class), the division of labor, that is, the number of different tasks being completed during the same period (from single task for the entire class to individualized instruction) and the interdependence of task performance, and the degree of pupil choice (or teacher dominance) over the task (from total specification by the teacher to full pupil choice). For example, recitation is a common classroom activity usually characterized by full class participation, one member at a time, a single topic and task, and teacher control over topic and pupil participation. By contrast, individualized instruction atomizes the work activity and often involves substantial pupil choice over the topic and method of completion.

Classroom activities also vary in terms of the methods used to evaluate pupils’ performances. Although others have indicated that public, comparative judgments are an ever-present fact of classroom life (Parsons, 1958; Jackson, 1968; Dreeben, 1968), some instructional activities allow for public evaluation more than others. During recitation, for example, a child’s social behavior and academic performances are constantly open to appraisal by both teacher and peers. During individualized projects, however, behavior and evaluations are usually