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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

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A study of instructional organization and its consequences

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521295055

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First published 1979

Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Bossert, Steven T. 1948–

Tasks and social relationships in classrooms.

(The Arnold and Caroline Rose monograph series of the American Sociological Association)

Bibliography: p.

1. Teaching. 2. Interaction analysis in education. 3. Classroom management.

I. Title. II. Series: The Arnold and Caroline Rose monograph series in sociology.

LB1025.2.B675 371.1'02 78–67260

ISBN 978-0-521-22445-1 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-29505-5 paperback

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Preface

The search for school effects has not been particularly fruitful for educational researchers. Schooling environments have been described alternatively as structures of resources, roles, expectations, values, and verbal exchanges; yet variations in these properties have not been determinately linked to students' achievements, attitudes, normative orientations, or behavior patterns. The failure to relate structural properties of schools and classrooms to what students and teachers actually do has resulted, in part, from simplistic, input-output and "black box" research designs typically used to study schools. These do not capture the complexity of the schooling environment or illuminate the processes of education. However, even when everyday interactions in schools and classrooms are examined directly, models of classroom interaction generally suffer from the assumption that teacher personality or expectations are the primary determiners of classroom behavior and that classroom structure can be characterized as a system of dyadic exchanges between teacher and pupils. These views ignore the collective properties of instruction and the effects these may have on teacher-pupil and peer relations.

The research reported in this book rests on the simple observation that it is within the context of daily activities that teacher and students make judgments about themselves and others, interact and form social ties, and experience social sanctions. The study was designed to examine how the structure of activities, particularly the nature of common, recurrent instructional tasks, shape both teacher and pupil behavior. Extensive observations of several elementary school classrooms and interviews with teachers and pupils provide an in-depth look at how variations in certain forms of instruction affect a teacher's use of individualized versus formalized controls, the allocation of instructional assistance among pupils, the formation of children's friendship ties and peer groups, and the development of norms of group competition and cooperation.

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Chapter 1 presents the perspective guiding the research. It differs from traditional treatments of classroom structure and draws on concepts from small group and industrial work studies to characterize the social organization of instruction and its consequences for interpersonal interaction. Chapter 2 describes the study design and its rationale. Of particular note is the longitudinal and comparative nature of the research in which a subgroup of children was observed for two school years. This enables concrete comparisons to be made among teachers and among children who experienced similar and different classroom organizations, effectively controlling for personal characteristics to illuminate structural effects. Chapter 3 provides a descriptive ethnography of four of the classrooms studied. It gives a “natural history” of events without attempting to categorize or analyze the nature of classroom structure. Chapter 4 examines the teacher-pupil relationship in detail. The effects of different instructional organizations on group management, the exercise of control, and the allocation of special instructional assistance are analyzed in the light of competing personality and organizational explanations of teacher behavior. Chapter 5 describes the consequences of classroom structure for peer relations. How pupil peer groupings formed and changed throughout the school year and how academic performance played a different role in shaping friendship ties in the different classrooms demonstrate the way in which the structure of activities shapes peer competition and cooperation. Chapter 6 is an overview of the relationship between a classroom’s instructional organization and patterns of teacher and pupil interaction. A further illustration of the effect of instructional patterns on teacher behavior is provided in case materials that describe one teacher’s attempt to change classroom patterns and peer relations during the sixth month of school. The final chapter, Chapter 7, presents some implications of this research for studying the effects of classroom structure on pupil achievement and on normative socialization.

Research on classroom structure is just beginning to develop a detailed picture of the nature and consequences of instructional organization. This analysis of classroom task organizations and of their effect on the development of social relationships discloses some of the contents of the educational “black box” and moves beyond simplistic models of personality and social behavior commonly used in classroom research. The study provides clear conceptual and methodological implications for future research on schooling as well as fruitful ways for educational policy makers and practitioners to view the instructional process.

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I am most deeply indebted to Charles Bidwell for his support and encouragement throughout the course of this research and writing. He has the fine ability to help one transform scattered ideas and observations into solid questions and interpretations. Robert Dreeben and Barry Schwartz also played important roles during the research and analysis. Encouragement and helpful criticism were received from David Street, Richard White, Benjamin Hodgkins, and William Rodak, and I am grateful for their insights and understanding.

This research would not have been possible without the openness and patience of the teachers, staff, children, and parents at Harper School. The findings reported in this study do not reflect all that I learned from them.

Kathleen Vargo, Margaret Grillot, and Billie Norris were invaluable in the preparation of this manuscript.

S.T.B.