

AGE/GRADE LEVEL AND THE COMPLIANCE
STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship of one common institutional characteristic, the age/grade continuum, to contemporary schooling. More specifically, it poses the question: is the nature of the compliance structure of the school as it is manifested in the teacher/pupil relationship systematically related to the age/grade level of the pupils in the classroom. In order to answer this question, the rationale for the classroom structure is discussed. Etzioni's theory of compliance structure and Herriott and Hodgkins' theoretical development of Etzioni's taxonomy in terms of the school system serve as the theoretical basis for the decision. The thesis pursues Herriott and Hodgkins' premise that the type of compliance which is emphasized by the teacher in the classroom is related to the age/grade level of the students.

In order to test the general hypothesis that a relationship exists between the age/grade level of the pupils in the classroom and the nature of the compliance structure, three specific hypotheses are adduced. These hypotheses predict that the teacher's emphasis of an instrumental orientation as well as the emphasis and use of sanctions in the classroom are related to the age/grade

level of the pupils. The hypotheses are tested by means of a questionnaire administered to teachers within the St. Boniface School District in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Included on the questionnaire are questions designed to test the hypotheses. The means by which these questions are "operationalized" are subsequently described. The results of the study are mixed and both methodological and theoretical limitations are set forth which might account for the varied results. It is concluded, however, that a relationship definitely does exist between the age/grade continuum and the nature of the compliance structure in the classroom.

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although a great deal has been written about formal education in modern society, there is limited empirical information available about the effects of basic educational characteristics, common to all modern educational systems, upon the nature of the learning experience in the school. For example, the effects of compulsory attendance, the teacher/pupil ratio, or the length of the academic year upon the selection of subject matter, teacher/pupil relationships, or students' attitudes toward formal education are poorly understood. The purpose of this thesis is toward a clearer understanding of the relationship of one such common institutional characteristic to schooling. The characteristic to be considered is the age/grade continuum. This refers to the segregation of students into class grades, based primarily upon the students' age, as they progress through the educational system.

There have been various reasons advanced to explain this arrangement which is a relatively recent one in the history of formal learning.¹

¹ During the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries "children increasingly passed through an orderly sequence of classes and subjects, a temporal order was imposed on the various subject matters, promotion from class to class became more regular ... in short, a growing recognition of the connection between age, ability and school grade emerged, a connection later representing the underlying principle of modern graded schools." (Dreeben, 1971:102)

Perhaps the most commonly accepted explanation among educators today is a logical extension of the theory of Jean Piaget regarding the developmental learning process of the child. (1972) According to Piaget, learning by children can be conceptualized as a developmental process wherein

each stage of development is characterized much less by a fixed thought content than by a certain power, a certain potential activity, capable of achieving such and such a result according to the environment in which the child lives. (1972:171-2)

Piaget's research suggests that, until a child reaches a certain stage of cognitive maturation, there is a definite limitation in his ability to understand and internalize certain kinds of knowledge. Thus, to attempt to teach a five year old about conservation of energy is generally unsuccessful, while an eight year old has cognitively matured to the point where such learning is possible. (1972: 32-4) At the same time, the eight year old will probably have great difficulty in conceptualizing an even more abstract concept such as "egalitarian justice". (1972:42) This does not mean that each child develops at the same rate and learns the meaning of certain concepts at exactly the same time. Piaget takes pains to point out that his developmental model gives the average age at which this understanding occurs and individual students may vary from this average by a year or two. By logical extension, such a theory both explains and rationalizes the presence of an

age/grade continuum in modern education.

A sociological theory somewhat different from the psychological approach of Piaget which also can be used to explain the presence of the age/grade continuum in modern education is that of S.N. Eisenstadt. (1956) Given the adult role and knowledge demands of modern life, Eisenstadt suggests that age-homogeneous groups in the school provide a milieu for a kind of learning that cannot occur in the family, extended kin group, or community. Specifically, Eisenstadt argues that peer and formal authority relationships in the classroom are effective in developing attitudes, beliefs, and values consistent with the complex, impersonal, but highly interdependent adult life required in modern industrial society. (1956:160-63) In effect, according to Eisenstadt, the educational system of modern states is a mechanism to insure the "smooth and continuous transmission of knowledge and role dispositions" (1956:163), and the age/grade continuum is an important feature for the accomplishment of that end.

Both Piaget and Eisenstadt provide reasonable and complementary explanations of "why" the age/grade continuum is important for the educational institution. However, the implications of this structural arrangement for either the learning experience of students or the organizational nature of schools is not attended to by either theory and

has not been systematically explored in an empirical fashion. Accordingly, in this study we intend to consider in theoretical terms the possible effects of the age/grade continuum upon one aspect of the organization of the school -- its compliance structure. The perspective adopted in this consideration follows from the works of Amatai Etzioni (1961), and more recently from the study of Hodgkins and Herriott on the compliance structure of schools as formal complex organizations. (1970)

The term "compliance", as developed by Etzioni is defined as

a relationship consisting of the power employed by superiors to control subordinates and the orientation of the subordinates to this power. (1961:xv)

From this definition Etzioni goes on to define the "compliance structure" of an organization as the pattern of "asymmetric (or vertical)" authority relationships characteristic of that organization wherein

...those who have power manipulate means which they command in such a manner that certain other actors find following the directive rewarding, while not following it incurs deprivations. (1961:3-4)

Basically, Etzioni develops a taxonomic schema from this definition from the comparative study of organizations. He postulates three kinds of power: coercive, remunerative, and normative which can be used by superordinates to gain subordinate compliance. Parallel to this distinction, in-

volvement of subordinates is seen by Etzioni as being predominantly alienative, calculative, or moral. (1961:3-22) From this taxonomic model, Etzioni generates an extensive comparative analysis of organizational dynamics.

Hodgkins and Herriott, drawing from the work of Etzioni, applied his reasoning to the nature of the compliance system of schools within the educational institution. (1970) Theorizing that the institutional role of educational organizations varies by the age/grade level taught, they were able to demonstrate, using a national sample of teachers, the existence of a systematic change in the nature of the compliance relationship between teachers and principals from the elementary level through the high school level. (1970:98-102) Although they also theorized about teacher/pupil relationships, no empirical test of their reasoning was reported.

In this study the author proposes to develop further the reasoning of Etzioni, and Hodgkins and Herriott in exploring the nature of teacher/pupil compliance within the school. Accordingly, the specific problem to which this study addresses itself is as follows: is the nature of the compliance structure of the school, as manifest in teacher/pupil relationships, systematically related to the age/grade level of the pupils in the classroom.

To consider this problem in Chapter Two, we shall consider previous research on the subject and attempt to

integrate it into an analytical model drawing from the works cited above. Hypotheses derived from that model will be set forth. In Chapter Three a research design will be discussed by which the hypotheses generated in Chapter Two can be tested. In Chapter Four, the results of that analysis are reported. And finally, in Chapter Five a summary of the study and conclusions are reported as they relate to the above problem as well as implications of the results for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will briefly summarize past relevant research findings on the subject. Subsequently, a theoretical discussion of the nature of the institutional role of education and its compliance structure will be set forth. In the last segment of the chapter a theoretical framework will be developed from which hypotheses are deduced.

Review of the Literature

Although a great deal has been written about classroom activities, the vast majority of writings have been of a proscriptive nature.² Relatively little empirical research on teacher/pupil relationships, particularly as it relates to patterns of compliance has been reported. Most of the evidence on the subject must be adduced from either case studies on single classrooms or schools, or inferred from studies only indirectly related to the problem set forth in Chapter One.

The baseline for many of the studies relevant to the concern in this study is a series of analyses reported by H.H. Anderson and his associates dealing with the effect of teachers' actions on the attitudes of students in

² See for example Gnagey, 1968; Henry, 1959; Holt, 1969; Sorenson et al., 1968; Stebbins, 1971.

the classroom. (1939, 1945, 1946) Anderson et al. observed the classroom activities of a number of pre-school and primary teachers and classified their activities as being either "dominative contacts" (ordering and controlling statements) or "integrative contacts" (statements of approval and invitations for participation). Anderson reported that the teacher's activities appeared to stimulate more of the same type of activity by students in the classroom. Thus, students in a classroom in which the teacher displays predominantly integrative contacts will in turn react this way with each other. In a discussion of the work of Anderson et al., Flanders concluded that the findings revealed

a direct relationship between teacher influence that encourages student participation and constructive pupil attitudes toward the teacher, school work and class activities. (Flanders, 1964:206)

Hughes et al. (1959) in a subsequent effort, pursued the concept of teacher dominative and integrative behavior in the classroom. Developing a Dominative Behavior Index, Hughes analyzed the records of 35 elementary school teachers. He found that between 48% and 75% of the time in the classroom, teachers did employ dominative contacts. The question Hughes raised was: why were none of these teachers able to limit dominative social behavior significantly under 50%? What precluded the use of a sig-

nificant amount of student participation in the classroom? Hughes concluded that the milieu of the classroom was responsible for the level of dominative behavior. In effect,

the nature of the settings themselves may coerce social interaction patterns as much as teacher personality variables. (Hughes cited in Gump, 1964:177)

In discussing this same study, Gump concluded that the

study points up the predominant controlling aspects of the teacher's behavior in ordinary American classrooms ... The general tenor of the findings is that "something" is holding up the general level of the teacher's dominance in social relationships with children. (Gump, 1964:178)

Gump found in his own research that there were a number of other factors besides the teacher's personality which affect the classroom environment. Interviewing 196 junior-year students from five high schools in Kansas, Gump found that they rated a number of features as being influential in determining their attitude toward a specific class. These included the student's attitude toward the subject matter, his assessment of the teacher's pedagogical ability, his perception of the utility of the subject matter, and the characteristics of his classmates. As Gump summarizes:

these rankings again indicate the relative importance of variables of classroom environment that are not centered

on the teacher's social behavior ... students do not see the teacher's personal and social qualities as the most prominent factors in their classroom environment. (Gump, 1964:182)

Thus, according to Gump, emphasis should not be placed on the teacher's personality traits but rather, on the teacher's ability to develop an appropriate classroom environment.

A number of studies were done by Kounin and Gump to investigate various ways in which the teacher was able to influence the classroom environment. For instance, in one study they compared students of first grade teachers who were rated as punitive (relying mostly on threats and reproofs) and those rated as non-punitive (relying mostly on persuasion) in gaining classroom cooperation. (1961) Students in the first grade who had punitive teachers manifested

more aggression in their misconduct projections and are more unsettled and conflicted [sic] about misconduct in school and less concerned with learning and school-unique values. (1961:48)

Kounin and Gump also found that pupils with non-punitive teachers were more likely to use a reflexive justification ("it's bad because they say so") in connection with rule violations that were "milieu inconvenient" (talking, running in the halls, not taking a seat). They suggest that this "expresses a sort of naive faith and trust in

the rightness of what the teacher says." (1961:49)

In a series of related studies using students from kindergarten, high school and the college level as subjects, Kounin and Gump found that the teacher's influence on the classroom was felt even by students not in direct interaction with the teacher. The term "ripple effect" was used to describe the reactions of classmates to "desists" directed toward one student in the classroom. Kounin and Gump found that the classmate's reaction, e.g. whether he, too, desisted from deviant activities simultaneously depended upon the student's motivation to learn and his attitude toward the teacher. (1958)

This suggests, as the Anderson studies have, that the teacher is able to generate a certain type of classroom atmosphere through his relationships with the students. A later study by Kounin (1970) of 50 first and second grade classes indicated that the actual nature of the "desist" (punitive or non-punitive) determined neither the effectiveness nor the extensiveness of the ripple effect that followed. Instead, Kounin found different dimensions of classroom management (maintaining classroom focus, managing activity movement, demonstrating knowledgeability about student behavior, etc.) to have a greater effect on the learning environment than any single response of the teacher to classroom misconduct.³

³The term "classroom management" was first used by Waller

This finding was reiterated by Gordon and Adler (1963) who questioned grade school students in order to determine the amount of emphasis that the teacher placed upon authority, performance, and expressive behavior in the classroom. They found that

the teachers whose pupils showed the most favorable gains in learning, compliance and classroom order were those who were perceived by their pupils as stressing performance, seldom relying upon authority and placing average stress upon expressivity. (1963:463)

The preceding studies are, in large measure, supportive of the generalization that teacher/pupil relationships are important in the learning process. An important dimension of this relationship, of course, is the teacher's perception of the pupil's ability. In a rather controversial study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) teachers of selected elementary school classes were informed that there were students in the class who had been diagnosed as "late-bloomers" and that the teacher should anticipate a marked improvement in their work. Actually, these students had been selected at random. At the end of eight months, all of the students were retested and it was found that the students who had been singled out as "late-

as "all means of getting the teacher's definition of the situation accepted and the teacher's wishes carried out without a direct clash of wills between teachers and students. (1932:203)

bloomers" had indeed progressed at an accelerated pace. The development was most pronounced in the primary grades with the largest gain occurring for the experimental students who had gained 24.8 I.Q. points in excess of the gain (+16.2) shown by the control group of students in the same classroom. (1968:252) In support of these findings, a study by Brophy and Good found that "teacher-expectation effects" could be observed in the classroom and that teachers

were more likely to accept poor performance from students for whom they held low expectations and were less likely to praise good performance from these students when it occurred... (1971:478)

While academic learning is evidently influenced by teacher perception of student ability as it is interpreted in the behavioral context of the classroom, an early study by Corey and Froehlich points to the significance of teacher values and attitudes in learning the norms of appropriate classroom behavior. (1942) In this instance, students and teachers in a Chicago high school were questioned as to the relative importance of various student responsibilities. These items did not deal with classroom work per se, but rather, standards of behavior such as: students ridiculing or laughing at the mistakes of their classmates, playing fairly, and not cheating. Of the 42 responsibilities enumerated, the five which the faculty listed as most important (i.e. rated as "very important"

by 85% or more of the faculty), dealt with aspects of what might be called an instrumental orientation. (1942:571). The students' response was less consistent and there were only a few items on which both faculty and students concurred (i.e. rated as "very important" by both groups). (1942:573) However, the study does seem to indicate that getting students to learn to "accept principles of conduct or social norms, and to act according to them" (Dreeben, 1968:44), is a real goal in terms of the teacher's actions and attitudes.

Although limited in number, the above studies are either directly or indirectly supportive of the idea of the importance of the teacher/pupil relationship in determining the social milieu of the classroom and the nature and the extent of academic and social learning occurring within it. They are less instructive, however, in regard to the nature of the compliance structure within the classroom. More germane in this respect is the case study of a small town elementary school reported by McPherson. (1972) Relying upon her observations as a participant observer teacher in the school studied, McPherson stated that,

the teacher must do more than just instruct them in skills, she must ensure their appropriate behavior in pursuing and acquiring these skills. (1972:84)

As McPherson observed, students in the classroom were ex-

pected to conform to the standards and expectations of the teacher both in terms of academic work and behavior. These were inextricably linked for the

teacher believed that when the teacher failed to achieve discipline, that when confusion, noise, and rudeness abounded, no learning occurred. (1972:33)

In order to achieve discipline, McPherson reports that it was necessary for the teacher to remain in unquestionable command of the class. In terms of the student's behavior, this meant that the requirement for order in the classroom was simultaneously a "requirement for docility". (1972:90) Students who combined docility with effort in the classroom activities were defined as good students. Those who lacked either quality and failed to conform to the class standards were the troublemakers who had to be forced by the teacher to demonstrate at least an outward show of conformity to the teacher's authority. In such cases, according to McPherson,

the teacher attempted to instill a sense of shame and guilt and whether or not the pupil acquired these proper feelings, he did learn quickly to display the appropriate response. (1972:90)

In this manner, student compliance becomes an important aspect of the many values which the teacher instills in the students.

In a study of student compliance and rebellion on the high school level, Stinchcombe conducted a survey of