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THE PERCEPTUAL PRESS OF CLASSROOM CONSTRAINTS

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Knowledge of teacher pupil behaviour is considerably enhanced by an understanding of how teachers form impressions of their pupils The classroom as a place where interpersonal perception occurs is examined and the teacher's interaction goals identified The kinds of pupil information instrumentally relevant to the achievement of these goals are suggested and questions of category width, level of abstraction and association of such attributes are then considered Finally, some factors likely to cause significant perceptual differences between teachers are outlined

Recent research and controversy regarding teacher expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies (cf 5, 17) have drawn attention to serious limitations in our knowledge about teacher-pupil interactions in the classroom One important component of such knowledge is an understanding of the mechanisms whereby teachers make inferences about their pupils, i e , how they came to know them This paper is concerned with exploring the nature of the mechanisms involved and the conditions of the classroom which give rise to them and in which they operate

The concepts and theories of person perception, an area that concerns itself with 'the ways people react and respond to others in thought, feeling and action (2, p 14),' provide a conceptual framework for such a discussion By fitting what we know about classroom events to such a framework, it is hoped that a coherent and fertile approach to a step-by-step investigation of the formation of teachers' perceptions will result The specific theoretical assertions which we will borrow were formulated by Jones and Thibault (10) Their main theses can be summarised in this way We rarely find ourselves in interpersonal encounters lacking both the guidance and constraint of well-defined, mutually-recognised roles Thus our main requirement in these situations is usually for information relevant to adequate role performance and so, our perception or 'knowledge-making' of others is both conditioned by, and instrumental to, our social interaction Therefore,

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according to Jones and Thibault, if the goals for which an actor is striving in any social situation can be identified, one can venture to predict the types of cues to which he will be attentive, and the meanings he will most likely assign to them

CONSTRAINTS OF THE CLASSROOM

With these points in mind, we begin our discussion of the way in which teachers select and evaluate pupils' cues with a brief consideration of those classroom features which define the teaching role and its goals Today's classroom is a bureaucratic answer to the problems of standardised universal education Basic facilities, including a spatial location, a curriculum and a teacher are uniformly provided and acknowledged to be the right of every child But bureaucratic interest often stops at the classroom door Most curricula define the educative process in terms of final outcomes, prescriptions for specific goal-directed activities are usually vague or non-existent, so that the teacher is left largely to his own devices in the classroom Thus, while the curriculum might treat the teacher's formal role as the 'promotion of learning in pupils' the nature of the classroom as a workplace requires the formulation of other equally important goals prerequisite to actual instruction These informal goals can be summarily described as the setting up, first, of the physical conditions, and, secondly, of the mental conditions for learning

Physically the classroom is often seriously overcrowded especially at the primary level Yet formal instruction involves almost continuous speech, teacher monologues, recitations and teacher-pupil exchanges—up to 1,000 exchanges in a single day (7) It is the teacher's responsibility to devise and enforce rules for orderly verbal proceedings in order that this volume of speech may be both coherent and audible Such routine maneouvres as the distribution and collection of materials and the arrangement of pupil groups in preparation for formal instruction add to the organisational complexity of the classroom Thus another important teacher skill involves ensuring that movement within the classroom is controlled and purposeful Smith and Geoffrey (20) compare the teacher's tactics to ringmastership, a reflection of the complexity involved Despite the best efforts of the teacher to create favourable physical conditions, inevitably he faces a constant series of interruptions to his teaching sequence, both from within the classroom and *from outside* Jackson

has graphically described the instructional flow as a 'bubble of reality punctured by countless trivial incidents (so that) teacher must spend time patching up the holes (7, p 16)' Given these constraining features of the classroom situation, it is possible to see much of teaching behaviour as adaptive strategy rather than initiative (4, 7) Again, to quote Jackson ' the teacher frequently behaves like a musician without a score He ad-libs (7, p 145)'

The actualisation of mental conditions for learning, are probably even more difficult to establish and maintain Here the teacher is expected to inspire in his pupils the motivation to learn, and/or a commitment to the schooling enterprise

The first facts to consider in discussing motivation are the modes of affiliation to the classroom of teacher and pupils, which are different and, according to Dreeben, significantly so The teacher offers himself for hire and voluntarily contracts to instruct a group of pupils, whom, however, he has not chosen On the other hand, his pupils are for the most part involuntary conscripts to the classroom, subject to legal or parental jurisdiction, they have not come thirsting after knowledge, or to seek the teacher's services (4) Furthermore, the topics on hand are not always intrinsically interesting, the use of a uniform curriculum implies that the teacher, working alone, is not really expected to build on the existing interests of all of his charges Thus some techniques of extrinsic motivation are obviously necessary If these techniques are not to be brutal, they must be varied to suit a wide range of abilities, interest levels, aspirations and response to pedagogic efforts In other words, while his formal evaluation of pupils will be universalistic, the teacher's motivation of his pupils must be distinctly particularistic (22)

RELEVANT CUES FOR THE TEACHER

If we accept that the teacher's role extends beyond that of straightforward instructor to include demanding performances as classroom manager and pupil-activator, we can begin to predict the kinds of cues about pupil characteristics to which he is likely to attend For, although the teacher is exposed throughout the school day to a barrage of pupil information—personal and social, as well as academic—his preoccupation with the plethora of situational demands already suggested would make it impossible for him to register it all Some sort of perceptual selectivity must operate on his attention to pupil data Alerted by

Jones and Thibault, we suggest that the teacher will especially remark cues to those pupil attributes which are of *instrumental relevance* to him We would expect that the 'instrumental relevance of attribute X' would be measured by the 'extent to which behaviour based on perceptual focussing on X pays off in terms of goal achievement (16)'

Now, we submit that the teacher must regard the establishment of preconditions for learning as a goal equal in importance to his formal instructional aims if he is to fulfil his contract effectively Thus, when he comes to assess the degree of goal-achievement in his own ongoing performance, his intimations of success are at least as likely to be sought in the response of his pupils to his organisational and motivational efforts as in their ultimate levels of attainment For example, a teacher might not question his success in instituting measures of classroom order and control if his pupils exhibited *compliant* behaviour Compliant pupils would come to school on time, attend to the teacher and ignore the proximity of other children They would not distract the others or in countless other ways disrupt the order that they knew the teacher was trying to preserve They would act at specific times in specified ways Other times, they would patiently wait their turn

The teacher's satisfaction with his ability to motivate pupils might depend upon the degree to which his pupils *try* A pupil would be 'trying' if he was willing to concentrate on subject matter often running counter to his own prevailing interests, if he voluntarily exceeded the teacher's minimal requirements for participation (7), if he looked happy enough, or, if at the end of a long school day he was still resisting or at least politely concealing boredom

It must be emphasised straightaway that these specific behaviours are offered merely as illustrations of the 'complying' and 'trying' concepts Their instrumental relevance is obvious and would, no doubt, be recognised by practising teachers Teachers might well endorse their importance as bases for inferences about pupil attributes if such a claim were made But these are very gross units of behaviour and the fact that they might be recognised is not evidence for an assumption that they are the specific types of behaviour, or even the same quality of information, which teachers actually employ The point is stressed, because, too often, research in this area has provided teacher-subjects with behavioural categories judged on the basis of recognition (for example, 14), instead of pursuing the more laborious course of determining what sorts of categories, at what conceptual levels, and expressed in what types of

language, are actually in daily use Yet, without this knowledge, we cannot hope to relate the teacher's selection of information to his real behaviour (including expectations) with an acceptable degree of accuracy

There are several problems involved in attempting to establish the relevance of pupil information for teachers Firstly, we would expect to find a mélange of differing levels of abstraction in teachers' attempts to conceptualise and describe attributes of their pupils This prediction derives from an appreciation of the rapid classroom pace, where the teacher's overriding concern must be with what he is going to say or do next Pupil information cues are so fleeting and varied, and are immersed in so much activity, that we believe they must be registered and stored the moment they occur—selectively according to their instrumental relevance yet without conscious analysis or assessment These behavioural cues may, when retrieved, remain discrete impressions, or they may have combined with others to emerge as higher order inferences Thus a teacher asked to describe a pupil, may present samples of *basic* information, a directly observable cue which in itself constitutes an attribute (e g , he is overweight), together with *combined* information, an attribute made up of several cues (e g , he doesn't pay attention), mixed with integrated information, that is high-order inferences about intangible attributes such as values, attitudes and beliefs, deduced from direct cues (e g , he isn't interested) Our problem arises when the teacher finds these three levels of abstraction of equal value for his own purposes We need his help to identify the *specific* particles of behaviour which he has used—in the language of person-perception, we need to establish *identification rules* But, in his attempt to suit *our* purpose, the teacher may well have difficulty working back from his inference to reconstruct the component behavioural cues

The second anticipated difficulty which must be dealt with in establishing the relevance of pupil information for teachers is the factor of category width (6) With Bruner (1), we formally define a pupil attribute as any discriminable feature of a pupil which varies discriminably from pupil to pupil It follows that we must determine the extent to which teachers functionally differentiate between varying degrees of attribute possession Some attributes may be treated as binary—the child is X or he is not At the other extreme, perceived differences in degree of possession might occupy many points on an extended scale

The importance of category width is well illustrated in research

designed to assess the extent of agreement between IQ scores and teacher ratings Conclusions are commonly based upon a correlation of rank order The small correlation usually obtained (55 to 65) is often cited as evidence of the teacher's skill in objectively assessing mental ability However, there is every reason to suspect that teachers do not function with from thirty five to forty-five differing levels of ability—so that a correlation of that size has questionable interpretive value as an index of the accuracy of his functional assessments

Finally, there is the possibility that some attributes may not have bi polar relevance for the teacher For example, complying behaviour, facilitating the achievement of the teacher's management goal, may in some cases be simply the absence of disruptive behaviour, and may only be remarked by the teacher in that case

Up to this point, we have considered the context of classroom inter action, and the way in which that context may define the teacher's roles and goals, thereby, with the assumption of instrumental relevance, determining the selective perception of pupil information We have also stressed the variation to be expected in both category width and level of abstraction where discrete bits of information have been transformed and hierarchically organised, from simple identification cues up to high-inference attributes We now turn our attention to another sort of transformation this time by association We will look at the way in which some bits of pupil information are regarded as naturally 'going together' and here too, concepts from the field of person perception are of great use in ordering our thoughts

The first area of interest is that of *implicit personality theory* This is the term given to the range of attributes which any individual employs to describe for himself the attitudes abilities, interests, etc of others and his belief that certain of the perceived characteristics tend to reside together in people (e g , artistic talent and eccentric ty) while others are mutually exclusive (artistic talent and business acumen) Most individuals are never called upon to acknowledge in a formal statement either to themselves or to others, the complete theory of personality which they have evolved Indeed Rosenberg and Jones (17) doubt if most people *could* make their categories and beliefs explicit in an organised and parsimonious manner But an individual's categories, and beliefs are 'implicit' in his spontaneous descriptions of and subsequent behaviour towards particular persons or groups

The components of implicit personality theories have been identified

and measured through the use of two main methods the one correlational and the other phenomenological The application of analyses of clustering (8) and multi-dimensional scaling (11, 12) to implicit associations of attributes have made for sophisticated and significant methodological, if not substantive strides In both cases, the subject is typically called upon to rate the co-occurrence of attributes, or to estimate the likelihood of change in an attribute when another is altered The analyses yield, in the case of clustering, a hierarchical typology of attributes related to one another by the implicit theory, and in the case of multi-dimensional scaling, sets of traits interpretable as major attribute dimensions Unfortunately this approach to implicit personality theories is of limited utility As one recent reviewer of the area concluded 'there has been an emphasis on the dimensional aspects of trait similarity to the relative exclusion of questions concerning the content and dynamics of implicit personality theory (19)' However, for our purposes, within the hypothetical framework of a teacher's 'implicit pupil theory', such an approach, assuming an informed selection of pupil-attribute inputs, may well provide us with what Jones (9) calls *inferential sets*, that is predispositions to impression formation and, consequently, implications for behaviour within the goal-oriented classroom interaction Such inferential sets may well prove useful in formulating fruitful questions for further research

The phenomenological approach to the question of implicit personality theory is best illustrated by the work of Robert Zajonc As Crockett (3) describes it, Zajonc's method consists of asking the perceiver to describe on separate pieces of paper, all of the constructs applicable to another person He is then asked to sort them into groups of one or more constructs Finally, he is asked to examine each pair of constructs and to decide whether, if one of them were to change, a resultant change would occur in the other Zajonc (24) has been able to obtain, by these means, measures of homogeneity of unity and of organization of the perceiver's cognitive system These procedures, though laborious, promise us some insights into the way in which teachers hierarchize and group pupil attributes, and also into the weightings and semantic characteristics of any patterns which we find (For a critical comparison of the two main approaches see 3)

A final concept inherent in both the correlational and phenomenological procedures is that of attribute centrality, the degree to which one attribute dominates its 'cluster' of associated constructs Warr and

Knapper (23) remind us that as long ago as 1920, Thorndike noted that trait-ratings made in a variety of contexts were intercorrelated to a degree which he thought excessive He decided the problematic results were due to subjects 'suffusing ratings of special features with a halo belonging to the individual as a whole (21)' Clearly, in the context of teachers' perceptions of their pupils, this question of attribute centrality is a serious one But caution is needed in identifying central pupil attributes, the attributes involved should be of a comparable level of abstraction, since a study by Hinkle (quoted in 19) demonstrated that high-inference attributes were more resistant to possible change and thus may appear as central for that reason

CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS

In considering teachers' perceptions of pupils, the role of teacher characteristics cannot be ignored As in any professional group, individual teachers differ, often radically, in personality and previous interpersonal experience Some may bring to the classroom inferential sets more appropriate to other situations Beginning teachers, especially, would in all likelihood be less systematic in their selection of situation-relevant pupil attributes than their more experienced colleagues The perceptions of the latter would necessarily have been shaped to some extent by repeated observations of outcomes of goal-directed behaviours And perhaps more important to our main thesis, as classroom situational variables differ, so will the *balance of emphasis* on the three main teaching goals (managing motivating instructing) and on their corresponding instrumentally relevant pupil attributes, vary Among variables causing significant differences between preoccupations of individual teachers, the following are likely to be primary

Grade-level At lower grade levels, academic abilities are relatively undifferentiated, classroom conventions are relatively unfamiliar Therefore, we would predict that teachers of younger children would emphasise organisation, and to a lesser extent motivation, which they would look for in a generalised interest in school At higher levels, with differential abilities more crystallised and students more school-socialised, teachers would concentrate more on eliciting achievement and motivation in the form of academic ambition The pupil attributes of instrumental relevance to teachers at these two extremes should correspond to the emphasised behaviours and therefore, would show parallel differences

Socio-economic status Adaptation to the rules of the classroom, particularly the authority of the teacher, is easier if the child's home life is regulated by similar, well-defined sanctions Such home preparation is more common to children of high socio-economic backgrounds than to those of lower ones Therefore, we would predict that teachers of pupils who are mostly of high socio-economic status would expend relatively less energy in organisation and control than would teachers of pupils who are mostly in low socio-economic status Again, the pupil attributes of instrumental relevance to the two teachers would differ accordingly

Sex of pupils and teachers Boys and girls are subjected to different patterns of socialisation almost from birth (15), sex roles, whether inherent or learned are very early manifested in behaviour Male attributes, such as aggression, may make the adaptation of boys to the classroom more difficult than it is for girls, and consequently teachers of boys may spend more time setting up primary conditions The sex of the teacher is probably also a relevant variable Experiments in person perception have disclosed sex-related differences in the component attributes of impression formation Women tend to employ more personality-type attributes as opposed to the role-associated attributes preferred by men (13)

Needless to add, two or more such variables co-existing in any classroom situation would result in the increased complexity of interaction effects In studies attempting to throw some light on inferential sets, variables of this kind are likely to have the status of important covariates whose confounding effects must be prevented, or at least acknowledged

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this paper to indicate the complexity of the process by which teachers come to perceive and know their pupils This complexity is a function of the environmental conditions in which the process takes place, of the perceptual and conceptual processes involved, as well as of characteristics of the teachers themselves It is hoped that the present analysis may provide a research framework within which teachers' tendencies to select, organise and use pupil information may be explored

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