

Teachers' Theories and Methods in Structuring Routine Activities in an Inner City School

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This paper presents an ethnographic case study conducted in an inner city elementary school in Montreal. It focuses, first, on how teachers formulate assumptions about pupils' behaviours on the basis of past experiences; second, on how teachers group a heterogeneous student population less on the basis of ability than on practical organizational interests; and, third, on how teachers' purposes and pedagogical circumstances affect their perception of classroom behaviour to accomplish specific activities.

Dans cette communication, on nous présente une étude de cas ethnographique menée dans une école primaire d'un vieux quartier central de Montréal. Elle est axée sur la façon dont les enseignants formulent des suppositions sur le comportement des élèves d'après leurs expériences, dont ils regroupent une population homogène d'élèves davantage selon leurs intérêts pratiques sur le plan de l'organisation que leurs aptitudes et, enfin, dont leurs objectifs et leur situation pédagogique influent sur leur perception du comportement de la classe dans l'exécution de certaines activités.

This paper considers the significance of the manner and form in which teachers go about accomplishing their tasks. In contrast to studies which focus on how teachers define, interpret and categorize pupils' behaviours and abilities, this study recognizes and analyzes the effect of teachers' practical interests on their perceptions of pupils. The study illustrates, through the *troubles* teachers experience in structuring routine classroom activities, the kinds of information ordinarily taken into account when teachers make decisions about students. In a sense, it is an organizational study of teachers' knowledge of their ordinary affairs (Garfinkel, 1967). That knowledge is rooted not only in structural variables or role expectations but also in the characteristics of the school setting and the need for teachers to structure classroom activities in order to teach effectively.

Garfinkel used the technique of *making trouble* or disrupting everyday situations to expose the background assumptions underlying them. By placing people in confusing situations, we can observe how they then make sense of the situation – that is, how they negotiate a new social order. According to Garfinkel, this type of analysis should indicate “how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained” (1967, p. 38). The case study presented here was

conceived from this perspective. It illustrates the negative effect a diversified student population has on routine activities of teachers in a school which has here been named Essex. Teachers' activities were disrupted and attempts were made (through negotiations) to reestablish some order. In these very serious attempts to establish order we see the rules, conventions, and procedures by which teachers operate. What is significant is that teachers are not passive recipients of the school's bureaucratic rules; rather, they actively interpret and construct them. This study, then, captures the methods, the devices, and the practical activities which underlie the sorting and selecting process in an inner city school.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Theory

Alfred Schutz suggests that we could analyze social phenomena by asking "What does this social world mean for the observed actor within this world and what does he mean by his acting within it?" (1971, p. 7). What interests Schutz is the common-sense everyday knowledge required for life in the social world. The structure of this common-sense knowledge consists of a *network of typifications*. When we typify we place objects, people, and events in categories familiar to us. Schutz states:

All typification consists in the equalization of traits relevant to the particular purpose at hand for the sake of which the type has been formed, and in disregarding those individual differences of the typified objects that are irrelevant to such purpose. (1971, p. 234)

He goes on to explain that we form types to solve problems, and "numerous types can be formed and frequently have to be formed for the solution of one particular problem" (p. 235). A system of relevances and typifications, then, is what makes up common-sense reasoning, knowledge, or schemes of interpretation. This system is used to organize and structure our subjective world, and it serves the purpose of accomplishing a task. Schutz explains what determines the kind of structure of knowledge (scheme of interpretation) an individual might use:

It is the system of our practical or theoretical interest at this specific moment which determines not only what is problematic and what can remain unquestioned but also what has to be known and with what degree of clarity and precision it has to be known in order to solve the emergent problems. (Wagner, 1970, p. 74)

Schutz goes on to note that common-sense knowledge or schemes of interpretations (system of relevances and typifications) are "taken for granted in the absence of evidence to the contrary" (Wagner, 1970, p. 81). That is, they are rarely called into question unless a situation becomes problematic. As we shall see, this was precisely the case at Essex school. Teachers' problems in typifying and categorizing students' behaviours reflect the knowledge which teachers ordinarily use to make daily decisions in the classroom. In other words, it is through studying the teachers' problems in organizing classroom activities that we more clearly see what is *taken for granted* in decision making.

Part of what is taken for granted in schools is the role the teachers play in the moral socialization of students, that is, in teaching respect for authority, punctuality, order, work habits, and academic performance – the ideals and values of the larger society. When students respond to these moral expectations, teachers acquire a sense of normality. However, when teachers cannot decide whether students are complying with the accepted standards, then they attempt to negotiate the criteria in order to establish a sense of normality. This case study illustrates how teachers attempt to accomplish this task.

Garfinkel (1967) points out that our common-sense reasoning is organized by our perception of normality. Teachers, then, produce a social and moral order in the classroom from their understanding of the normal; what is considered as normal becomes the test for what is to count as moral. Moral concerns are personal and pragmatic, as well as social: the school structure and society allow only certain possible courses of action (that is, institutional practices). Thus, teachers' decisions about students' behaviours and abilities can be viewed as *moral accomplishments*.

Garfinkel speaks of the concern with normality in the following way:

A person responds not only to the perceived behaviour, feelings, motives, relationships, and other socially organized features of life around him, but more relevantly ... he is responsible as well to the perceived normality of these events. (Garfinkel, 1963, p. 188)

The theoretical orientation in this study draws on Schutz's phenomenology and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. This orientation points to the way in which social organizational characteristics of the school affect the teacher's common-sense reasoning in planning and organizing activities which in turn affect students. School is viewed not only as a process in which teacher expectations and objective tests of performance provide a basis for selection and differentiation of students but also as a place where routine activities structure the teaching-learning situation.

Teachers' common-sense, practical reasoning and moral concerns play a significant role in the differential treatment of students.

Traditional research tended to overlook the unique action of the individual (Hammersley & Woods, 1976; Leiter, 1980; Sarup, 1978; Sharp & Green, 1975). Phenomenology and ethnomethodology emerged in response to this traditional deterministic approach which suggests that a person is born into a world over which he has no real control. As Meighan (1981) notes, the phenomenologist's and ethnomethodologist's emphasis is on meaning which constitutes reality and "upon the nature, construction and expression of the regulative techniques, the conventional routine, the practical accomplishment by which members of society make their actions rational and comprehensible for others." (p. 228)

The analysis in this study is not the only way of interpreting teachers' actions. Their behaviour and accounts can be interpreted from many different perspectives – for instance, a structural perspective which emphasizes the socio-political and cultural constraints on teachers. What is being maintained here is that important contributions can be made to understanding how teachers' practical concerns effect differential treatment of students if we explore *the nature of the social reality of the school setting for school members* and do so through a comparative analysis of teachers' recorded conversations.

The Ethnographic Method

This study was made possible through the author's participation in an inner city school as a regular volunteer worker. This school, an old, worn, red-brick building in Montreal's centre, reflected the poverty of the general population in the area. The student population consisted of recent immigrant children (70%) and lower-class English children (30%). The research role developed over a period of time. The author had a rare opportunity to observe other researchers in the school (social workers, in particular) before establishing and maintaining a firm research position.

Field notes were taken throughout the day and were systematically recorded at the end of each day. Conversations were recorded as nearly verbatim as possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and as many events as possible were recorded on the basis of what seemed important for the teachers and what seemed related to their comments. Teachers' accounts of pupils' behaviours, how they coped with pressures, daily teaching tasks, and disciplinary problems were all carefully recorded. A significant problem which emerged from the comparative analysis of the data collected was that immigrant children posed serious problems for teachers. The researcher was requested to take children outside the

classroom (those who could not “fit” into groups or could not “participate” in regular classroom activities) and “teach them something.” Issues important to the teachers became clearer as each, unknowingly, made specific demands.

Teachers were asked about their education goals, general organizational features of the school, and the neighbourhood. These questions led to more specific questions concerning language problems and the pupil-teacher ratio, and their effects on teaching and classroom organization (particularly grouping). Only then did the focus of the study emerge. Of particular interest to the teacher was the problem of interpreting, sorting, and grouping a varied student population. Cultural, ethnic, and language diversities and existing organizational constraints generated an ambiguous situation to which teachers had to adapt to get on with the task of teaching.

The method of analysis in this study sees the teachers’ comments and observations as pointing to an underlying pattern. The pattern of difficulties in social typing, for example, was derived from the teachers’ explicit experiences. These, in turn, were interpreted on the basis of what was already known to the researcher about social typing.

An example of the use of this method is reflected in an interpretation of a teacher’s remark. “He doesn’t belong in this class. I don’t know where he belongs but he seems to be too advanced for some groups and not advanced enough for others.” On the basis of what had already been said, this was understood to mean “I just can’t seem to find a place for him in the classroom.” Previous information about “disruptive” pupils and teachers’ concerns with understanding pupils’ behaviours led to the identification of a general discipline problem in the school and the collection and comparison of more data. Encounters with teachers and observations of their routine activities provided more evidence of another general problem, that of interpreting students’ behaviour and abilities.

The gathering of data and the on-going analysis finally focused on questions about teachers’ routine activities and classroom organization. Generalizations made in the study are grounded in data collected from repeated questioning. The same questions were posed to almost all the teachers in the school to check for the validity of the information gathered. The generalizations (such as problems in interpreting pupils’ abilities) reflect concerns of the teachers, not of the researcher. Reflexivity and the systematic recording and comparison of observations and conversations by the researcher led to the illumination of “the problem.”

It is important to note that the study is not intended to generate theories about classroom processes but is a description and analysis of those activities which are part of teachers’ daily lives – what Schutz refers to as

the natural attitude. The natural attitude for teachers is to view the classroom as part of an organized world where the normal course of action is to identify and rank students' levels of achievement and performance. The data indicate that teachers view this practice as a moral accomplishment, one in accordance with the main objectives of schooling. The data presented are used supportively or illustratively, not to support a particular hypothesis but rather to illustrate the relevance of a theoretical orientation in studying teacher accomplishment of tasks.

THE CASE STUDY

The School Setting

Essex, an inner city, elementary, Protestant school, is situated in an area of the city of low socio-economic and immigrant groups. People live in old, run-down, mostly attached, row-type houses on streets that are often littered with rubbish. The school building itself is four stories high, a forbidding, old, red-brick structure closed in by a green, high wire fence.

During the year the data were collected, the school population fluctuated between 650 and 750 pupils. Most (roughly 70%) of the student population were children of recent immigrants, primarily Greek and Chinese, with a sprinkling of Italians, Portuguese, Yugoslavians, Indians, French, and West Indians. The remaining 30% were English-speaking children, frequently from one-parent households. According to the teachers, about 70% came from a home environment where neither English nor French was spoken. It was apparently common knowledge that the children in general came from low-income families or families on welfare.

The teaching staff at Essex consisted of 23 full-time teachers, and, on a part-time basis, a speech therapist and a drama teacher. In addition, the board hired librarians, teachers in home and industry, music, physical education, and French. There were also social workers who were part of a community health project and some volunteer workers, generally university students. Only a few of the staff members were of ethnic origin similar to the school population.

In addition to kindergarten, there were six grade levels in the school. Each level had two or three classes, with approximately 30 to 35 pupils per teacher. There were also two *special classes*, junior and senior. The official rationale for special classes is that they provide more individualized teaching for pupils with specific problems, for pupils classed as *emotionally disturbed* or *educable retarded*. Pupils referred to these classes were generally given IQ tests, and placement in a special class typically involved

parental consent in the form of the parents' signatures. Each special class had approximately 10 to 14 pupils (depending on drop-outs or those referred to more specialized schools).

There was also a language class for children who were recent immigrants. These children attended the language class for a maximum of one school year. Midway through the year, children in language classes were sent to regular classes for an hour or two a day so that they could slowly adapt to a new situation. Following a year of language class, they were placed at grade levels on the basis of age, according to government regulation.

It is this government regulation which constitutes a significant organizational problem at Essex school. Specifically, Regulation 1 is a ruling in the Province of Quebec requiring that pupil's placement in a grade be on the basis of age rather than on previous schooling or demonstrable level of achievement. This means, among other things, that a child cannot fail although there is a system of grading and report cards. The Protestant School Board requires that report cards be issued in all schools. The type of report is determined by each school. At Essex, these were primarily descriptive in nature, classifying students as commendable, satisfactory, or having difficulty.

Briefly, then, the organizational constraints imposed by government regulations combined with the large number of immigrant children to create unusual problems for teachers in the classroom. Teachers faced classes which were homogeneous in terms of age but remarkably heterogeneous in terms of cultural and ethnic differences, levels of previous schooling and achievement, and, above all, the degree to which children could understand the language being spoken.

Interpreting Pupil's Behaviour: A Classroom Activity

The categorization of pupils in the school setting is not based simply on standard categories of ability. The data demonstrate that teachers' decisions about pupils' behaviours and abilities are based as well on the reality of the classroom situation. The problem of sorting and selecting pupils for various groups lies in the criteria that operate in the structuring of classroom activities, not in predetermined standards.

In grouping children for the purpose of teaching and in dealing with children who are having trouble, teachers tend to rely, and perhaps they must, not just on assessments of performance but on some scheme for interpreting differences and problems in performance. The most common interpretive schemes, however much they may rely on other sorts of differences, in fact call on notions of ability, motivation, and, in the case of

children with severe problems, personal or family pathology. Above all, however, it is the level of performance which concerns the teacher. Indeed, basic to many ideas of teaching is the notion that students must be ranked in relation to each other's performances rather than simply achieve a satisfactory level of performance. Diversity in pupils' ethnic origin presented a fundamental problem for teachers; they could not rely on the usual criteria to rank, sort, and select their pupils.

In accounting for both the children's difficulties and their own, the teachers at Essex could easily appreciate the extent to which these difficulties were generated within the school itself. In speaking of children who were "behind," for example, teachers attributed these problems to the policy which placed children in grades on the basis of age without regard for their level of previous schooling and ability to understand the language. What they did was use their own knowledge of everyday activities in teaching and of what they perceived to be larger issues in terms of the educational ideology. Their comments are eloquent:

As it is, those placed [in regular classes] after a year of language class are so far behind! They can't function in a regular classroom situation. All they've really done there is oral work.

Teachers generally experience real problems here. Jane can tell you that; she was really broiling in it. Do you know that most of her kids in grade 2 can't even read? I don't believe they should be made to repeat in the higher grades but there's nothing wrong with it at this level. How could you keep pushing them through? Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I still believe in drill methods, and kids should be forced to learn certain things. Take a look at Regulation I, which states no one can repeat a grade. Well, I think exceptions should be made to that Bill! There's one grade that pupils should fail, and that's Grade 1. If they can't read, then they can't pass. These kids can't learn from each other ... They're all the same!

I have one that's a real problem. He's behind in everything. He's a real language problem and he too will get pushed through and hope he'll pick some up along the way.

Perhaps because ethnicity was the clearest and least ambiguous kind of difference among the children in their classes and because it made a real difference in pupil demeanour and background, teachers were also inclined to call upon cultural differences in accounting for some of the more specific variations of difficulty encountered. Teachers' sense of cultural differences did not, of course, proceed out of a disinterested concern for accurate cultural description but out of a more interested set of *practical* classroom experiences. They were inclined to experience and describe cultural differences in terms of the troubles these generated for teaching. From the teacher's point of view, Chinese children were so quiet

that it was especially difficult to assess their abilities; they therefore posed problems of interpretation. The Yugoslavian children lacked discipline and posed problems of control. The Greek children were generally more motivated and competitive and presented fewer problems.

The Yugoslavians seem to have learning problems, perhaps it's the part of the world they come from. I'm sure their parents haven't even been to school. The Greeks are different. They're the ones with the biggest school bags. Their parents I'm sure push their kids and stress learning in the home. I guess we have to be careful of our middle class judgments though. I visualize those Yugoslavian kids being brought up on farmland ... in wide open spaces ... where schools aren't even heard of. When I get them, they're still like animals.

Listen, you can yell at a Greek as much as you want. They'll bounce back. I go up to Nicky's desk and pound on it so he'll wake up. He's always day dreaming ... always in a daze! Greeks, you can do that to, but Chinese children ... never! They aren't used to being yelled at.

Often too, the teachers thought pupils' problems were due to the lack of parental support for learning English and doing school work at home, sometimes calling on their own past experiences as immigrants as a point of comparison:

When they play, they speak their native tongue, they don't speak English. And when they do [speak English], it's just awful, you get the feeling they'll never learn. When we went to Outremont [school], we were forced to speak English because we were only a few, and our parents forced us to do our homework. These kids take work home but they never do it.

While teachers might in these ways refer problems experienced in class to the general features of the situation and to the immigrant backgrounds of their pupils, they were nevertheless required to handle their classes and individual pupils in terms of more specific understandings, understandings that depended on the ability to select an appropriate response out of a number of possible interpretations in order to structure classroom activities.

In dealing with particular children, for example, teachers wanted to be able to decide whether a child's difficulties resulted from a linguistic inability to understand what was going on, an inappropriate assessment of the level at which the child could operate in various subjects, an emotional or intellectual problem of a more general nature or the child's culturally based unfamiliarity with subjects discussed. And it was at this level of rather more precise interpretations that teachers were unable to sort out and act on their understandings. Their problems were largely of interpretation, of an inability to interpret for practical purposes. So

teachers looked at (and not beyond) the verbal and non-verbal cues and content during the interactions with pupils.

You know Jovan, John and the two little Chinese girls, and Zoron, I don't know whether it's their ability or language or that they just can't perform, but since they don't respond verbally, I just can't put them in a fast group. I can't simply because I don't know if they understand what I'm trying to teach half the time. They probably don't, I don't know!

It's hard to tell if someone is high or low in ability because of language. I can think of several people in my class who are having difficulty in coping, and I don't know if it's because they are slow, lazy, emotionally disturbed, aggressive, nervous, shy, or whatever.

I'm having some trouble in deciding how to handle him. I don't know what my expectations should be in terms of his work. I don't know what he's learned. For example, can he multiply, divide? Or, what reader should he be on?

There are so many children like him in this school. I think it's such a pity. I'm sure he's still experiencing difficulty in expressing himself in English. But who knows what a good solution would be? If you put them in a regular class they just fall so far behind that you can't keep them in that class anymore.

Nicky can tell you all kinds of things about Greek myths, different islands, Greek dances. Tam is very much the same when you talk to him about China. Maybe that's part of their problem. They just can't make that transition from one culture to another. They just cling to their background.

Teachers were unable to do much more than deal with their pupils strictly on the basis of demonstrated ability. The great variety of children's difficulties undercut the invidious and moral evaluations which, in other circumstances, can become attached to assessments of performance, particularly when they are taken to reflect ability. As one teacher commented in objecting to even the minimal requirements for grading:

We have to hand in a report saying their work is either commendable, satisfactory, or having difficulty. I'm in a dilemma! I don't give them tests. How can I? They aren't all at the same level and I can't devise 30 different tests. As I get to know my kids, I learn to have certain expectations from them. To me, they're all satisfactory. From their positions, they are! How can I give them tests in Grade 5 science when they can only read at Grade 3 level? Do you see the discrepancies?

Teachers were aware that "appropriate" rules were not clear, and "discipline" problems resulted. Pupils often could not recognize rules and meanings in specific classroom interactions because the rules for appropriate behaviour and how to apply them were not explicitly taught. Rules were simply there (such as order in the classroom, doing assignments), set up by teachers and administrators for pupils to perceive and act upon.

Equally, where ordinarily the teacher could draw upon speech style, scholastic success, or attitudes to decide on a pupil's ability, at Essex it was necessary to develop situated interpretations and alternative frameworks for evaluation. Even in these alternative frameworks teachers tended to draw on general information regarding ethnic and cultural groups.

Teachers at Essex thus had practical, specific reasons for wanting to interpret more accurately children's classroom behaviours and for wishing to act on their interpretations. As trained professionals, they felt responsible for transmitting certain kinds of attitudes which the dominant culture of our society deems important. Yet the fundamental problem experienced was an inability to interpret children's difficulties, and therefore their own, in terms of accomplishing their tasks. The teachers' problems had to do not only with their inability to interpret and order their understanding for the practical purpose of teaching but also with the consequent inability to do the right thing. Specifically, teachers' complaints about their difficulties were as much a source as a consequence of the teachers' problems in the classroom. Teachers systematically complained of the difficulties faced in organizing classes.

Some just don't fit into groups. What they need is individual attention which no one has time to give.

No matter what I do in that class, I just can't get it organized. It's impossible for anything to run smoothly. I can't get any kind of routine going. I can't group them. Nothing! There's just too wide a range in the class!

I don't group them according to ability because I can't! I group them, but it's just for company. I have some that are real language problems, they're behind in everything and I have to give them individual work.

I feel I just can't group because it just doesn't work. The way to work it is to keep forming groups for whatever you're doing at the moment, then break them up and form another group. The idea is to keep the grouping as flexible as possible, so they can fit anywhere at any time.

The situation at Essex understandably produced discipline problems. The children there were faced with the difficulties of learning and getting along in a strange language, being subjected to new rules and regulations, coping with feelings and emotions generated daily in a situation in which meanings were often unclear, feeling criticized and inadequate, and not being able to explain themselves or their problems adequately. The children did not necessarily understand the demands made of them and in this sense their responses – ranging from withdrawal to aggressive trouble making – proceeded as much from the situation as from any more idiosyncratic sources. In other words, discipline problems resulted not so

much from student behaviour as from the inability of teachers to organize their classes.

Tinkering and Making do as an Everyday Classroom Activity

Several provisional strategies were employed by teachers in their collective and individual attempts to handle the ambiguities of their teaching situation. These strategies, emerging out of a process of trial and error and at best only temporarily effective, can most accurately be understood in terms of *tinkering*, *patching*, or *making do*.

Some relatively structured tinkering was done on a school-wide basis. While the assignment of children to grade levels was inflexible, being done on the basis of age, there was some flexibility in the assignment of children to teachers within a given grade-level. Before the school year started, the principal met with each teacher to evaluate personality, teaching methods, and so on, and to discuss children with specific problems who would be placed in the classroom. It was an evaluative process attempting to match the teacher's philosophy, approach, and personality with the pupil's problems and personality, as well as to distribute difficult pupils more evenly.

In addition to these informal assessment and placement procedures, the school had a formal grouping structure:

- (1) Children were grouped on ability within grade levels in math. They were assigned to fast, regular, and modified groups on the basis of the teacher's judgment. The principal assigned teachers to teach various groups.
- (2) There were two special classes for those classed as educable retarded or emotionally disturbed.
- (3) A language class was set up to teach new immigrant children enough English to enable them to go to regular classrooms.
- (4) Remedial classes were available for pupils with particular problems in either reading or math in Grades 4, 5, and 6.
- (5) An individualized reading program, referred to as the S. W. Sullivan system, had recently been implemented. Students were tested and grouped accordingly within each class.

Within these general guidelines, however, teachers both collectively and individually improvised informal ways of coping with diverse classroom situations, at times employing this general framework as one of several resources for solving problems. The improvisations reflect teachers' practical concerns and how these influence their perception of pupils.

Exchanging Pupils

Not only were students grouped on ability in math and switched from one group to another within grade levels for that subject, but some teachers also participated in an informal exchange system in other subjects using criteria other than ability and language to determine who went where. This exchange process, which developed as a means of coping with a heterogeneous population, was detailed and complex but did not necessarily occur in all grade levels; its use largely depended on the relationships between teachers.

The obvious general principles of exchange which apply to social behavior anywhere also applied to the teachers. Both parties had to benefit by the bargaining, and needs had to be jointly satisfied; the patterns of negotiation which existed depended on the teachers involved, the cooperation between them, and the kinds of pupils in their class. As one teacher explained:

There is an arrangement between the teachers. If a kid doesn't fit in a teacher's group, she could send the kid back but that doesn't happen if you want a favour in return. Whether you return or accept a kid depends on the kind of relationship you have with the teachers involved. You find this happens when you exchange kids for math too. Last year, I couldn't participate in this kind of thing because one of the teachers wouldn't allow any exchanges with her pupils. To her, that meant defeat. You must remember the high turnover of staff makes this kind of thing difficult to organize and maintain. And if you don't have a kind of arrangement with the other teachers in your grade level, then you want recourse to the principal who can impose some viable rules.

Exchanging Work Loads

Teachers in the sixth grade level participated in a different exchange system involving exchanging the teaching of different subject matter rather than the exchange of pupils. One teacher would teach part of a certain subject to all students in that grade level to reduce her work load in terms of teaching content. Grouping of the class did not occur here since the teachers did not know the pupils well enough to determine how they should be subdivided.

This system, too, had its disadvantages. Students who performed well for their own class teacher did not necessarily do so for the exchange teacher. Also, the teacher could never spend enough time with the students to learn what to expect from them or what demands to make. She therefore had to direct her teaching to the middle stream. Teachers explained:

This kind of exchange is good in a sense because the Grade 6s are treated as one grade and they get to know or learn what different teachers' expectations are. And at the same time they learn to interact with and respect all three teachers.

You can never really get to know the other pupils as well as you do your own, and even if you do and you know that they have certain problems, you can't really give them extra help because you don't have the time. There are a few I know who are good students. Their teachers tell me; but when I go into their class they don't do good work for me, and the same goes on in my class.

Use of School Resources and Services

In addition to the kinds of loosely organized and collective efforts and problem-solving examples above, teachers improvised their own solutions to specific problems, using the school's resources and services (which were presumably designed for other purposes). School services included open gym classes, drama classes, the speech therapist, special classes, part-time volunteer workers, and, less successfully, the group of social workers acting as consultants to the school. The open gym and drama classes could be used as stop-gap measures. If a child became unmanageable during a class, or, if it was Wednesday and the drama teacher was in the school, troublesome or withdrawn children could be referred to that class and encouraged to act out their problems.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the use of specialized services to handle other sorts of problems is the use teachers made of the speech therapist. Trained to handle speech problems, and accustomed in other schools to handling referrals whose problems were clearly defined along that dimension, the speech therapist, speaking of her experience at Essex, complained:

I don't think I can even group them because their problems aren't really speech problems. They come to me and just sit there. I don't even know if some of them can speak English.

Hardly any of these children have lisps or even stutter. The children I see have more than just speech problems. Things are generally clearer at the other school I go to. Kids there stutter and have lisps, but here there's just this vague problem everyone seems to have, and I don't think it's just the ones I see either.

I really think the kids here are having language-behaviour problems. But I'm not sure because I don't know very much about the kids I see. They're sort of just thrown at me. I ask the teachers about them but they can tell me very little. They don't know.

Because the special classes (intended for those with serious learning problems) were perceived by teachers as dead-end, they were reluctant to

refer pupils to them. Yet the decision to refer a child to a special class depended even more than usual on the teacher's judgment since, because of the language barrier, the sorts of educational testing relied on in most schools to warrant classifying a child as educable retarded or emotionally disturbed could not be considered reliable here. In this sense, the special classes served as a last resort solution, however reluctantly employed, for children whose problems of intelligence, language, or behaviour sufficiently distinguished them from others.

You know, there are so many kids who have different quirks. Last year, I had one sitting at the back of the class, constantly singing or making different weird noises or he'd hop on his chair, sitting there making like a bird. Like the kid was really out of it! Emotionally disturbed? So what are you supposed to do with him? Special! Special!

I had a little boy who kept crawling under his desk and I had to go and get him each time. Well, he wasn't playing under the desk, he was actually hiding, and I'd have to beg him or bribe him to come out. If he wasn't under the desk, he was crying his heart out in the back of the class. I'd have to drop everything and run to him and put my arms around him. It became impossible to cope with him. ... I had to refer him to special. I'm not sure I agree with this kind of class for someone like him, but there seems to be no choice.

There are so many children like him in this school, I think it's such a pity. I'm sure he's still experiencing difficulty expressing himself in English. But who knows what a good solution would be? If you put them in a regular class they fall behind ... if you put them in a special class, it's a dead-end.

I'm sure that he's not a dumb child. They've had him in there for two years, That's awful! He should be in a regular class. There's nothing wrong with his intelligence. His problem is an emotional one. He has temper tantrums; so what? That doesn't mean he's stupid and can't learn.

It was, in fact, this blend of possible explanations which made referring a child to a special class especially difficult, for the teachers at Essex were more aware than usual of the arbitrariness of the designation educable retarded or emotionally disturbed in this setting. The complex rationale used to make these decisions clearly made the Essex special classes serve more obviously as a structural solution to organizational problems than they might in schools where classifications were supported and supportable through testing.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has emphasized the taken-for-granted, common-sense knowledge and practical reasoning which teachers use as schemes of interpreta-

tions in their daily activities. It is these features which researchers in the area of sociology of education have taken for granted, particularly those who have concentrated on the problem of social typing in the school (Cicourel et al., 1974; Delamont, 1976; Keddie, 1971; Sharp & Green, 1975). I have addressed the significance of reflecting on and calling into question the manner and form in which teachers as individuals go about accomplishing their tasks. That is to say, this research study alerts us to how the conventions in categorizing pupils have been separated from practical interests and circumstances. The everyday life of the teacher typified the thought and action of individuals concerned with *moral accomplishments* in educational settings. Furthermore, analysis of teachers' everyday classroom existence reminds us that ordinary actions are grounded in accepted assumptions about reality. The teachers' reflections on what they do or ought to do exemplify what we all do in our daily lives as either social scientists or laymen. That is, we all use certain methods (which reflect practical concerns) to produce what we interpret or perceive to be the desired result.

The significant point is that the stability of the social structure of the classroom depends on the communicative, perceptual, judgmental, and accommodating or adaptive processes. The structure is emergent, not given (Giddens, 1976). Teachers' remarks point out that the accepted practice of interpreting ability and performance is morally required. It is not treated as a deliberate action for producing social differentiation. In structuring classroom activities, teachers did not group pupils on the basis of their previous knowledge about the pupils (or prescriptive judgments). They chose to act on the basis of what seemed to them a normal course of action as they went along. That is, they applied the rule of normality to their perception of pupils' behaviours. Teachers' common-sense reasoning is not organized by the expectation of normality but by something which they take for granted as normal. But, as Garfinkel notes: "for the bona fide member 'normal' means 'in accordance with the mores'" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 124). In other words, interpreting, defining, and categorizing pupils' behaviours in school is a *natural and moral fact of life* for teachers.

The teachers' rule-governed behaviours (those which are never questioned) are organized by a perceived normality. For the teacher, the student population is "naturally" ordered into good, average, and poor students. Teachers at Essex had trouble with this natural ordering of their student population not because they were unable to interpret certain types of behaviours but because conventional categories available were not sufficient to uphold the institutional practices.

The data do not point to a major ideological orientation on the part of

the teachers about how they should assess student abilities and performance. They point rather to the kinds of problems teachers encounter when their interpretive schemes break down. When life as usual in the classroom became problematic because of an inability to group students on the basis of the usual criteria, the unnoticed features (purposes and interests) which stabilize classroom activities became clear. These unnoticed features were the assumptions teachers made about students for the practical purpose of structuring routine activities.

If schools and school experiences are viewed as devices which affect pupils' future status positions, then we must understand much more clearly the content and effect of teachers' interpretational structures and how these relate to external structures as well as to organizational problems. Perhaps we have reached a time where research can concentrate on the negotiable aspects in the criteria to be used to judge pupils in the classroom. Or research could focus on the process by which teachers constitute and interpret their world. This type of research could generate an awareness among educators that would lead to a realization that their role is an active one which employs taken-for-granted cultural meanings, and that through their practical and routine activities they either reconfirm or challenge the dominant common-sense world. Indeed such research findings must become part of the teacher training curricula. Teachers actively seek to comply with the rules and procedures of the organization. They are active agents of moral socialization, encouraging punctuality, orderly work habits, and academic performance.

It is true that grades are the currency of educational institutions. But it is also true that teachers who rank students on the basis of grades do so for practical organizational reasons. There is no absolute satisfactory rank of performance. From the teacher's perspective, the interpretation and categorization of pupils into high, medium, or low rank is normal. An awareness of how this process occurs is essential to any attempt to change school policies and practices in the pursuit of a school system which presumes to be just and democratic.

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Este artículo presenta un estudio etnográfico de caso llevado a cabo en una escuela primaria del centro de Montreal. El enfoque del estudio es cómo formulan los maestros presunciones acerca del comportamiento de los alumnos en base a experiencias anteriores; cómo agrupan los maestros a la población de alumnos no tanto a base de habilidad sino a base de intereses de organización prácticos; y finalmente, cómo las metas de los maestros, así como las circunstancias de enseñanza afectan la manera como perciben el comportamiento en clase para llevar a cabo actividades específicas.

Diese Arbeit präsentiert eine ethnographische Fallstudie, die in einer Grundschule der Innenstadt Montreals ausgeführt wurde. Der Mittelpunkt dieser Studie ist die Frage, inwiefern Lehrer ihre Annahmen über Schülerverhalten auf Basis vergangener Erfahrung formulieren; inwiefern Lehrer eine heterogene Schülerbevölkerung weniger auf Basis ihrer Fähigkeit und mehr auf Basis der praktischen organisatorischen Interessen klassifizieren; und zum Schluß, inwiefern die Ziele der Lehrer und pädagogische Umstände die Auffassung dieser Lehrer über das Schülerverhalten in der Klasse beeinflussen, um spezifische Aufgaben zu erfüllen.

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