CLASSROOM STRUCTURE AND TEACHER AUTHORITY

STEVEN T. BOSSERT
Department of Sociology
University of Michigan

Teacher authority has been an important topic for educational
theorists and researchers alike. Yet little is known about the
conditions under which authority is differentially expressed or
about the consequences of this for teacher-student relations.
Most examinations of teacher authority have focused on the
effects of teacher "style" on group productivity, cohesiveness,
pupil achievement, or moral socialization (Lewin et al., 1939;
Flanders, 1960; Lippitt and White, 1962; Gordon and Adler,
1963; Bidwell, 1970; Spady, 1974). The mechanisms teachers
use to establish their authority have largely gone unexamined.

In part, this is because most treatments of authority have a
static view of the legitimation process. Once established, either
by power granted to the person by subordinates or by the
formal organization, authority is simply exercised (see Dorn-
busch and Scott, 1975, for a review of conceptualizations of
authority). This obscures the precarious balance in the
authority relationship. Even though the teacher has been
granted control over a group of students, she must actively
establish and maintain her definition of the situation in order
to exercise control over the class (Waller, 1932). This is

49

accomplished in different ways. Teachers rely on a variety of mechanisms to control students. Differences in the use of certain control mechanisms constitute differences among teachers in their exercise of authority. While some of these variations may be attributed to personality differences, others are a function of the instructional organization employed in the classroom. In this paper, I will illustrate how certain features of the classroom instructional format affect the exercise of teacher authority and how these, in turn, influence the authority relationship that develops between teachers and students.

TEACHER CONTROL
AND CLASSROOM STRUCTURE

The relationship among instructional organization, classroom management, and control forms has not been clearly detailed. In another report (Bossert, 1977), I have argued that the characteristic task structure of an instructional activity influences the type of group management situation faced by a teacher and, hence, shapes the types of control she may use. Comparing the control behavior of four elementary school teachers[1] (observed over the course of an entire school year), consistent patterns emerged among the teachers who employed similar instructional organizations as well as within similar institutional formats regardless of teacher.

When teachers use recitation, perhaps the most common instructional form, they face a fairly rigid control situation in which inappropriate behavior must be sanctioned before it spreads to other children and impedes the progress of the lesson. Because of its public nature, recitation optimizes the visibility of student misbehavior as well as the teacher's treatment of it. This forces the teacher to be impartial and consistent in sanctioning students, for if special treatment is given it threatens the sense of impartiality necessary to gain student

trust (Bidwell, 1970). As a result, teachers tend to rely on short, verbal commands ("desists") to sanction students. By contrast, when small group or individualized instructional formats are used, special treatment can be given to individual students without disrupting the perceived jural order of the classroom because such treatment is less visible when pupils are working separately. Moreover, the decreased visibility in these activity forms makes student misbehavior less problematic for the lesson and less likely to be sanctioned.

Teachers who rely on recitation exhibit higher desist rates than do teachers who predominately use more differentiated instructional modes. Yet despite overall differences in teachers' control patterns, all of the teachers had their highest desist rates when using recitation and their lowest rates during the most differentiated instructional modes. The initial choice of tasks may reflect a teacher's predilections for certain control forms, but, once chosen, the exigencies of the instructional organization shapes the types of control a teacher can exercise.

TEACHER AUTHORITY

Differences among the teachers in the extent of control behavior and types of sanctions seem to indicate differences in the exercise of teacher authority. Recitation provides a public situation in which the teacher must manage the entire classroom group equitably, while more differentiated instructional forms allow for much more individual and particular treatment of pupils. The authority of the teacher during recitation clearly depends on the teacher's equal application of sanctions and fairly constant control over classroom events, whereas the teacher's authority largely derives from her personal rapport with students in other types of tasks.

In describing authority relationships, Waller (1932) indicated that teachers rely primarily on *institutional* authority. He, as well as Dreeben (1968), contends that teachers do not

have the affective bonds with their pupils that allow for the exercise of *personal* authority. Institutional authority, which is based on formality and social distance, is exercised by a routinization of classroom behavior. This was evident in the relationship between teacher and students in the recitation-dominated classrooms where the entire lesson was teacher-dominated.

In addition to the routinization of sanctioning, teachers who use recitation tend to rely on a number of other mechanisms to reinforce their authority position. Perhaps the most common characteristic of recitation classrooms is the ritual adherence to the daily schedule. One teacher rarely deviated from her daily routine of calling the roll, saluting the flag, and dictating the dates—these were the standard rituals—and, as she pointed out,

> this is the way I always start the day. It lets the children know that school has begun and that it is time to work. When I do forget to do the flag salute and date dictation, I can tell the kids are not ready. The need to know that I'm ready to begin working and that I expect them to do it too.
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> I really think children need that structure because it lets them know what to expect. I makes it easier for me to get their attention.

While the other teacher did not lead the morning ritual herself, she sat at her desk, reprimanding children, while the class monitors called roll, collected the daily homework assignments, and passed out corrected homework. These morning rituals established anew each day the teacher's control over the functioning of the class. Their ritual form embodied the form of the recitation that soon would follow.

Another aspect of the formalism prevalent in the recitation-dominanted classrooms, though not present in the other rooms, was the extensive display of deference. Again, Waller (1932) has examined the use of social distance as a means of

social control in the classroom. His description of certain "social buffer phrases" used by teachers to establish and maintain their institutional authority parallels observations made in the recitation-dominated classrooms. Most illustrative of this process was the way one teacher enjoined "common language." Originally, the teacher explained to her students that they were to use only "Standard English" when addressing her.

[Second day of school. Ms. Field[2] in front addressing the class.]

Field: We're going to have English. I call it English. You can call it anything you like; language arts, communications, or any big fancy work you want. I'll call it English.

David: [hand raised, F nods to him] Last year we called it language.

Field: I know, but this year I will call it English. Because, it is the business of the school to teach Standard English. You must learn Standard English—Debby, quit talking to Linda—There is no wrong language. Our business is to teach you the rules of Standard English. You are growing up and can't really use the other. It's baby talk. [Fred pokes John, who then grabs Fred's pencil.] Boys, quit that. I'll not have that in my room. Standard English is what you use when you talk to your principal and teacher. You can use the other when you talk to your baby brother.

Ken: [shouting out] I don't have a baby brother.

Field: Well, when you talk to your friends. The other is ok. But, don't be offended when I correct you. I'm not saying you are wrong. You need to know Standard English to make yourself understood.

However, in actual practice, the "Standard English" injunction was applied primarily to control pupils. When a child began to argue with the teacher, she would demand that the child speak in "Standard English."

[Field asks for homework to be collected. Mike runs out of the door into the hall.]

Field: Wait a minute. Come back here, Michael.

[Mike comes running back in.]

Mike: I was just . . .

Field: You know that you can't just run out into the hall.

Mike: I wanted . . .

Field: If you need to get your homework from your locker you must first ask my permission.

Mike: But last year . . .

Field: I don't care what happened then. You must ask in my class.

Mike: Ah—can I go get my homework?

Field: What? Now in Standard English.

Mike: May I get my homework?

Field: Yes, you may—and walk.

This technique of controlling pupils worked well. It broke the confrontation and reestablished control over the situation. While other teachers may not have as elaborate a technique to create the social distance necessary to deal with troublesome students, they often use the standard teacher's line, "I am the teacher. . . ."

Another technique commonly employed by these teachers to maintain their control over the class was the use of highly formalized "games." During moments of free time the classes played "astronaut," a competitive game in which two children try to answer correctly a multiplication or addition problem, with the quickest answerer taking on a new challenger. While the children seemed to enjoy this game, it maintained classroom control for it kept the teacher in the dominant position, as recitation leader, and required that children remain silent (unless in the competing dyad) and in their seats. As one teacher put it, "This game will quiet down the unruly class. If you give the kids too much freedom to choose their games, you'll never get them onto the new assignment." The

maintenance of institutional authority seems to entail the constant expression of consistent, equitable control.

Certainly, teachers who utilize more differentiated instructional formats also use some of these devices to control their classes. However, the frequency of such mechanisms was considerably less prevalent in the other classrooms studied, and the teachers relied largely on what might be called "personal influence" to control their students. Their low desist rates reflect fewer commands to misbehaving children. These teachers were most likely to go over to the child or group of children and explain that their behavior was disruptive or inappropriate and that they should do their work because they were getting behind. These teachers were able to exert this personalized control, which often involved talking with the child and providing assistance, because the rest of the class was busy working on their own projects.

[Class working on a variety of tasks—some reading at desks, others writing, several finishing worksheet from earlier in the day, and one group of three girls painting in the back room. Mr. Stone reading at his desk.]

Stone notices Karen looking out the window [as she had been for the last ten minutes]. He gets up and goes over to her desk. He asks her why she hasn't been working. She shrugs her shoulders. [I can't hear her response.] Stone tells her something and Karen says that she can't do it [her homework]. Stone begins helping Karen; seems to give her several hints. She begins to try to do the worksheet. Stone goes back to desk. [Karen keeps working. Rest of the class continued working during the time.]

This type of control is impossible in recitation because the teacher must remain in control of the whole group. Individual treatment stops the lesson as well as creates the potential for other misbehavior to erupt while the teacher is dealing with the single child.

Furthermore, the teachers who used highly differentiated instructional modes often participated with their children in the projects and activities they were doing. They usually played along with the children during recess. And one teacher went with his children to many of their special classes and participated with them in drawing or doing science experiments. In their own classrooms, these teachers did art projects, crafts, math puzzles, and language worksheets with their pupils. This involvement with pupils seemed to facilitate the exercise of personal authority. Being involved in the activities themselves, these teachers could actually demonstrate the proper approach or technique when a problem came up rather than just give instructions to the whole class. While the teacher who uses recitation is also involved, the participation is not with the class, but rather as director of the action.

This involvement created a rapport with students that was missing in the other classrooms. In comparing their teachers, the children who had both types of teachers—one employing recitation (Field and Hunt) and one predominately using other instructional modes (Park and Stone)—noted substantial differences.

[From pupil interviews.]

Eliza: Ms. Hunt is much more stricter than Ms. Park. Ms. Park lets you do more things. In Ms. Hunt's room you just sit and do a lot of work.

Ellen: Ms. Hunt wasn't much fun. She never did anything with us, except lead some clapping games and singing games sometime.

Eliza: Yeah, Ms. Park is always doing stuff with us.

David: Ms. Field seems further away [than Mr. Stone].

Charles: You can't get to know Ms. Field as well. She never does anything with us.

Bill: I like Mr. Stone much better. He associated with us.

Mike: They have taught us about the same amount of work. But they are so different. Ms. Field doesn't play ball with us, for one. Mr. Stone is not as strict. Though, when he blew up, he really did.

Bill: So does Ms. Field.

Mike: Yeah, just about every day.

Lisa: I like Mr. Stone because he came to our special classes with us and did it [projects] with us, too. If you needed him he was right there.

Children who remained in classrooms where the task structure paralleled their previous year's experiences did not mention any differences between their teachers, except some minor personal differences like hair color, age, smile, and singing voice. The high degree of involvement in class activities and the use of personal authority sharply contrast with the rigid control framework, ritualization of activities, and extensive social distance of institutional authority—differences perceived by the children.

CLASSROOM STRUCTURE
AND AUTHORITY

The authority relationship between teacher and students is conditioned by the instructional format used in the classroom. Recitation entails a standardized form and places the teacher at the center of control: pupil's behavior is highly visible, as is a teacher's treatment of pupils. This visibility stimulates high desist rates as well as creating "demands of equity" that forces a teacher to rely on commands rather than on personal influence when controlling students. When the division of labor within the classroom is extensive, as it is in individualized and small group projects, the teacher does not control all activities. Each aspect of teacher and pupil behavior is less visible, allowing the

teacher to use more personalistic and individualized means of control.

Institutional authority must be maintained by the consistent and impartial application of sanctions, whereas personal authority depends on the ability of the teacher to provide special, individual treatment to children. While some of the mechanisms for the exercise of authority have been illustrated here, little is know about the variety of ways teachers establish and maintain their authority and the consequences of these for classroom functioning. How consistent are teachers in employing certain control forms? What is the effect of consistencies and differences in the exercise of authority? If pupil achievement and adjustment are dependent on teacher authority, as others have suggested (Bidwell, 1970; Spady, 1974), how does the exercise of authority affect these?

Classroom research must examine how authority is expressed. Yet its expression cannot be conceived of solely as a property of the teacher: many aspects of the exercise of authority are a function of the classroom instructional organization. These effects must be fully detailed.

NOTES

1. As part of a study to explore the influence of instructional organization on social relationships in elementary school classrooms, two third-grade and two fourth-grade classrooms in a private school were studied for an entire school year. Observations covered all classroom activities, and notes were made to provide as accurate an account of activities and interactions as possible. Informal and formal interviews with the teachers were conducted throughout the study period.

2. All names are fictitious.

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