Exploring Verbal Interactions in Desegregated Classrooms

Systematic analyses of pupil-teacher interactions across racial lines in desegregated schools have been largely untouched by educational research. The scarcity of these data, along with the importance of verbal interactions in the entire educational process, attest to the cruciality of empirical research on pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil social and verbal interaction in desegregated classrooms.

EVEN the most cursory search of social science and educational professional literature reveals a wealth of materials testifying to the general positive value of interracial contacts in social and educational situations. Equally as prolific are theoretical discussions and empirical data which document the preeminence of teachers' verbal behavior in the instructional process, which consider pupil-teacher verbal interactions as the core of the educational process, and which view interaction analysis as a viable approach to analyzing and evaluating what actually happens in the classroom.

Despite the professed potential of desegregation for improving interracial relations and Black pupils' academic performance, and the prominence of studies of teachers' verbal behavior in the classroom (for example, Amidon and Hough, 1967; Ebel, 1969; Gage, 1963; Rosenshine, 1971), systematic analyses of pupil-teacher interactions across racial lines in desegregated schools have been largely untouched by educational research. Theoretical and speculative statements are numerous about how White teachers interact with Black pupils but empirical data either confirming or discrediting these speculations are indeed sparse. Contrarily, both theoretical postulates and empirical data on Black teachers' attitudes toward and interactions with White pupils in desegregated situations are nonexistent. Continued neglect of these crucially important aspects of schooling will contribute mightily to the general malaise with regard to improving educational opportunities in desegregated situations.

Desegregation: What Then?

Arguments attesting to the positive value of desegregation have been issued by educators, social scientists, and social and civil rights groups alike. Several researchers have made some initial attempts to assess the effects of desegregation on intergroup relations and the academic performance of Black youth. Although the research methodologies and empirical instrumentation (systematic observations and analyses) are often unsophisticated, and the results are only tentative, they do contribute important insights to better understanding the dynamics operant in desegregated classrooms.

Gardner (1971) attempted to assess the effects of busing Black elementary pupils into White suburban schools relative to their academic achievement and intergroup relations. He reports finding no significant differences in Black pupils' grades on test scores, al-
though attitudes of Black and White pupils toward each other tended to improve somewhat. Laurent (1970) suggests, as a result of studying the academic performance of 160 Black and White pupils in desegregated schools, that neither pupil race nor the racial composition of the school per se has a substantive effect on the academic performance of pupils when other variables (grade level, intelligence, socioeconomic level, school staffing) are controlled. Studies conducted by Evans (1969), Singer (1970), Robertson (1970), and Purl and Dawson (1971) have produced similar results.

Despite Weinberg's (1971) predictions that desegregation would be beneficial to children of all races the research data reported to date as to whether this actually happens are by no means conclusive. No appreciable increases are noted in Black students' academic achievement as a result of desegregation. Rather, there appear to be multiple variables operant within the classroom which affect the student's performance. Among these are the degree of psychological and social integration present in the classroom, teachers' attitudes and their concomitant verbal behavior toward Black pupils, the social climate of the classroom, and the extent to which Blacks feel comfortable with and accepted by their White classmates (St. John, 1971; Chesler, 1971).

The philosophical assertions of Cuban (1970) and Banks (1970; 1972) assign special importance to the roles teachers play in determining the success or failure of the educational process for Black youth. Banks explains that teachers are significant others in the lives of pupils. As such their attitudes toward Black students, their perceptions of the child's cultural and personal experiences, and their expectations of the child are much more important in determining how the child relates to the classroom situation than instructional methodology or curricular content. Henderson and Bibens (1970) and Craig and Henry (1971) concur that negative teacher attitudes and unrealistic expectations are influential factors determining how White teachers interact with Black students.

Among the few empirical attempts that have been made to study these allegations scientifically are those of Ferguson (1970), Cohen (1971), and DeVries and Edwards (1972). Cohen studied the status rank ordering of a four-man interracial group working in two-man teams on tasks requiring discussion and decision making. He reports that Blacks tend not to take the lead in initiating discussions and to be acquiescent to Whites in decision making.

Ferguson and DeVries and Edwards report minimal interaction between students of different social and ethnic backgrounds. Ferguson attributes this to the failure of teachers to actively promote interracial communication between students in the classroom. DeVries and Edwards recommend the restructuring of desegregated classrooms to facilitate positive and constructive relationships between students who are culturally, racially, and ethnically different.

These findings are substantiated by Dennis and Powell (1972). They discovered that pupils interacting across racial lines tend to space themselves at a greater impersonal distance at the junior high school level than at the intermediate or primary grade levels. If these tendencies are to be reversed opportunities for intergroup activities and interracial communication in multicultural and multiracial classrooms must not be left to chance. Rather, classroom activities must be deliberately planned with these objectives in mind.

According to Sachdeva (1973) school integration has a positive effect on the feelings and attitudes of both Black and White students. However, he adds that personal contact by itself is not sufficient and does not lead automatically to improved racial understandings. Rather, when experiences are designed deliberately to bring students together, and when institutions minimize racial status differences, positive interracial attitudes and interactions may develop.

Lachat (1973) used a combination of interviews, questionnaires, and observations to examine the effects of school environments and intergroup contacts on students' racial attitudes. She, like Sachdeva, postulates that contact alone will not break down racial
stereotypes between Blacks and Whites if the contact occurs in situations where status distinctions are maintained. Data were collected from three suburban high schools, identified as segregated, desegregated, and integrated, in terms of opportunities for Black-White pupil interactions as reflected in the schools' racial composition, grouping procedures, and curricular options. Situational characteristics which might affect pupil attitudes were also examined.

The most favorable racial attitudes were expressed by students in the integrated school, while the least favorable attitudes were found among students at the desegregated school. These findings led Lachat to recommend a careful examination of situational variables surrounding attitudinal data in order to achieve a better understanding of pupils' behavior in interracial school situations. She also observes that pupils with the most positive racial attitudes attended the school that was committed to integrated education. Programs were designed for the children to achieve understandings and respect for all ethnic groups through curriculum changes, open classroom encounters between Black and White students, the use of heterogeneous grouping, and attempts to operationalize equal educational opportunities.

Teacher Influence on Pupil Behavior

Research further indicates that teacher expectations of pupil achievement determine, to a large extent, what opportunities teachers make available to students to participate in

Barnes (1973) finds that Blacks and Whites identify Blacks as those who do not get to say much in class.
classroom interactions, and how they will achieve. Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) seminal study documents a direct correlation between the two variables of expectation and achievement. If teachers expect students to perform poorly, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that students will perform poorly.

Kester and Letchworth (1972) replicated this study. Their results did not support the postulates that contrived teacher expectations have significant effects on pupil achievement, and pupil attitudes toward self and school in general. However, they did find that teachers' expectations influence the way they interact with students. They tend to spend more time with the superior students, and communicate in a more positive-accepting-supportive manner than with average or low achievers. These conclusions relative to expectancies of achievement and frequency and quality of pupil-teacher verbal interactions concur with earlier findings reported by Hoehn (1954) and Lahaderne (1967).

Brophy and Good (1969) and Good (1970) have examined the effects of teacher expectations on interaction with pupils in first grade classrooms. In both studies only minor differences were found in the frequency of teacher interaction with pupils of different achievement levels, while important variations occurred in the quality of teacher contacts with high achievers and low achievers. Teachers tend to communicate their expectations to students through their classroom behavior; and students, in turn, respond to them in ways confirming these expectations. Thus, the self-fulfilling prophecy is actualized.

The findings of Brophy and Good have been corroborated by the works of Mendoza, Good, and Brophy (1971); Cornbleth, Davis, and Button (1972); and Jeter (1972). Each of these researchers used teacher verbal contacts with individual pupils as the statistical unit of analysis instead of the entire class, as did Brophy and Good, to study teachers' differential verbal behavior with junior and senior high school, and fourth grade social studies students respectively. Each records significant differences in teacher behavior in accordance with expectancy of pupil achievement. If those educators who argue that classroom teachers, as a rule, have lower expectations of academic achievement for Black students than White students are correct, then ethnicity as a criterion measure of expectation is a significant variable to consider in analyzing pupil-teacher interaction in desegregated classrooms.

**Recent Research**

This writer is aware of only two interaction analysis studies to date which deal specifically with pupil and teacher ethnicity as a significant variable in analyzing differential pupil-teacher interactions in desegregated classrooms. The first, conducted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1973),
examines White teachers' and Mexican American teachers' verbal behavior with Anglo and Chicano students in 429 classes and 52 schools in California, New Mexico, and Texas. The Flanders System of Interaction Analysis was used to collect data.

The results show disparities between teacher interactions with Mexican American and Anglo students in six of the ten categories on the Flanders System. Evidence indicates that: (a) Mexican American students receive significantly less praise and encouragement than White students; (b) teachers accept and use Mexican American students' ideas less often than those of White students; (c) teachers spend significantly less time asking questions of Chicano pupils than Anglo pupils; (d) teachers address significantly more noncriticizing talk to Anglo pupils than to Chicanos; and (e) Mexican American students speak less often in class than do Whites, both in terms of responses to teacher questions and their own initiations. These disparities did vary significantly with the ethnicity of the teachers—that is, White and Mexican American teachers acted similarly. This study suggests further that Chicano pupils are not receiving the same quality of education as Anglo pupils in these three southwestern states.

Barnes (1973) uses observational data of dyadic interactions, teacher perceptions, and pupil perceptions to explore pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil interactions in social studies classes in desegregated high schools. He reports that teachers made more direct contacts with White students than with Blacks, that White students were asked more product questions and sustaining follow-up questions, and given more process feedback than Black students. Black students, on the other hand, were asked more choice questions than Whites. Moreover, the teachers indicated that they expected the quality of Black students' classroom interactions to be lower than those of White students. Both Black and White pupils identified Whites as the best students and the ones most often called upon to answer questions, while Blacks were named as the ones who did not get to say much in class.

Research data argue convincingly that teacher attitudes and expectations, and pupil behavior toward the teacher cause teachers to interact differentially with pupils. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and Barnes add ethnicity to this list of determining variables. Research on the latter is extremely limited but that which does exist is highly suggestive. The desirability and necessity of additional research on pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil verbal behavior and social interactions in desegregated classrooms appear to be obvious. We might expect such research to contribute to (a) assessing teacher performance in culturally and racially mixed classrooms; (b) demonstrating the interrelatedness of racial attitudes and classroom behavior; (c) helping teachers to become aware of their differential behavioral patterns and how these might be changed; (d) modifying the classroom climate so as to make it more conducive to learning; and (e) redesigning teacher education programs to move closer toward the goal of quality education for all children in desegregated settings.

References


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—GENEVA GAY, Associate Secretary, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Washington, D.C.