



# **Teacher expectations and pupil learning**

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# **Teacher expectations and pupil learning**

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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>1 Some theoretical considerations</b>	5
<i>Norms, ideals and attitudes</i>	6
<i>Interactionist theory and perception</i>	8
<i>The attribution of meaning</i>	10
<i>Ideal types and social causality</i>	11
<b>2 Teacher perception and expressed attitude</b>	17
<i>Taken for granted perceptions</i>	18
<i>The Repertory Grid Technique</i>	21
<i>Social influences on teacher perception</i>	22
<i>Interactions transmit attitudes</i>	24
<i>Attitudes are interpreted by pupils</i>	27
<b>3 Teacher expectation and experimental research</b>	30
<i>The experimenter bias effect</i>	30
<i>Evidence from survey research</i>	32
<i>The Pygmalion experiment</i>	34
<i>Studies which found a teacher expectancy effect</i>	35
<i>Studies which failed to find a teacher expectancy effect</i>	38
<i>Some complicating variables</i>	39
<b>4 Classroom climate</b>	41
<i>Describing classroom atmosphere</i>	41
<i>The development of category systems</i>	44
<i>The Flanders Interaction Analysis System</i>	47
<i>Classroom climate and pupil performance</i>	49



## Contents

<b>5</b>	<b>Self-concept and school achievement</b>	53
	<i>Major theories of the 'self'</i>	53
	<i>Early studies of the self-concept in children</i>	54
	<i>The Brookover researches</i>	56
	<i>Achievement and self-concept</i>	58
	<i>Evidence from survey research</i>	58
	<i>Self-concepts and school regime</i>	60
<b>6</b>	<b>Attitudes and expectations of pupils</b>	63
	<i>What pupils think about teachers</i>	64
	<i>Pupil performance and attitudes to school</i>	65
	<i>An empirical study</i>	67
	<i>Friendship groups</i>	70
<b>7</b>	<b>Classroom teaching and classroom research</b>	74
	<i>Research perspectives</i>	74
	<i>How subjective ideas become objective fact</i>	76
	<i>Patterns of interaction</i>	79
	<i>Classroom studies</i>	81
	<b>Suggestions for further reading</b>	82
	<b>Bibliography</b>	85

# Introduction

The present work will discuss those studies which have tried to get to grips with the inter-related opinions, attitudes, feelings and actions of teachers and pupils in the classroom. It will look at the perceptions teachers and pupils have of each other, the impact of classroom organisation on patterns of interaction, the effect of teachers' 'expectations' on pupils' performance and so on.

There are people who have always appreciated that teaching is not just a matter of filling empty heads with facts. They have understood that teaching is vitally concerned with personal relationships. Relationships between teachers and teachers, teachers and pupils, and pupils and pupils. But one group who have seemed slow to grasp this, until quite recently anyway, are educational researchers. Over the years they have developed a whole series of standardised tests of ability and intelligence, accumulated a vast quantity of data on demographic variables (social class, family size, school type and so on) and established the correlations of success and failure within the school system in these terms. No one wants to suggest that the achievements of all this research have not been worthwhile, but it has certainly distracted attention from the workplace of education - the classroom. In the typical classroom - one may almost say in every classroom - there is a teacher and a number of pupils. The teacher is adult, in charge, and trained to instruct her pupils in a number of valued skills. The pupils are children, under authority, and directed to learn whatever they are given. After only a little exposure to mainstream educational research one might imagine that the teacher and the pupils were mere puppets acting out, as if without will or consciousness, performances directed by the push and pull of outside forces. Sociologists

and psychologists probably don't intend their work to leave this impression but they generally manage it all the same. Butcher's (1968) regularly revised and influential survey of educational research in Britain illustrates the emphases of this tradition perfectly. Not one study related to perceptions and attitudes is mentioned throughout.

It might be helpful to mention some of the general characteristics of the type of research we are concerned with. Except for the most empirical work most studies derive from what, in some circles, is called 'grand' theory. Freudian theory, Gestaltist field theory and symbolic interaction, to mention the three most important, have been significant influences on educational research in this area. It is because he works within a particular theoretical orientation that the researcher formulates the hypotheses he does. In order to test hypotheses the researcher's concepts must be operationalised - that is translated into measures. This is the crucial methodological problem. Suppose, for the sake of example, that a researcher wants to test the hypothesis that self-concept is related to school achievement. The former will present no problem, there are dozens of acceptable ability tests, but it will probably be necessary to design a way of testing self-concept. Almost certainly the researcher will construct a paper and pencil test, a kind of questionnaire, in fact. It might include such items as, 'I'm good at school', 'I'm OK at most things' and 'I'm proud of the marks I get in class.' The theoretical definitions of self-concept which led to the original hypothesis will have been highly abstract but the operational definition will be concrete and simple. Sometimes, though not very often, the researcher will make sure that all the test items are correlated with each other. This provides at least some assurance that all the items are measuring the same basic idea. It is assumed on commonsense grounds that the measures will have some relationship to the theoretical concept the researcher started out with. There is no way of making sure that it does: it must be assumed. Well over half of the studies described in this book use a paper and pencil test of some sort to provide operational definitions of theoretically defined concepts.

It commonly happens that different concepts derived from different theories have in practice very similar operational definitions. The questions above were given as examples of a test of self-concept. Imagine now a researcher whose interest is not in self-concept but in attitudes. Among the items included in his test are 'I

get on well in school', 'I like the lessons I have' and 'School is OK for me really.' These items measure attitude to school and the former set measure self-concept. The concepts may be dissimilar but once operationalised there is a close resemblance. The similarity of the items will be unintended and easily overlooked. The conclusions given in research journals - and there is a strong temptation to read only the conclusions, summaries or abstracts - will state that a correlation has been observed between self-concept and ability or attitudes to school and ability, as the case may be, and only in the main body of the article, probably in small print, will it be revealed that the tests used to measure both concepts have more than a little in common.

That so many concepts derive from different theories makes for another problem. There has to be a respect for serious attempts to conceptualise experience scientifically. It is only through the development of precisely defined concepts that a science can progress. Yet there is a difference between the language of science and the jargon of technical terms. There is no real excuse, for example, for the word 'subjects' (or even worse 'Ss') where children or teachers are meant. Writing about social science research in ordinary language is more difficult than it seems. There is a long tradition of doing just the opposite and it can be unnerving suddenly to realise that stripped of jargon what one wanted to say sounds much less impressive. 学术语言

It is difficult to see how the worth of a study can be appreciated unless the theoretical background and the methodological procedures are known. Consequently I have made a point of giving the fullest details about the research discussed here. Details of the studies - time, place, numbers, instruments, relationship to previous work - all are essential to any reasoned criticism. Too often we are given only the conclusions of a study, for example, 'Smith (1970) showed that self-concept was related to strong parental discipline.' Only if we are able to look up the original study will we learn that Smith used as a measure of self-concept a list of such items as, 'I am generally pleased with the things I do - Yes/No/Don't know' and as a measure of parental discipline ratings by the children's teachers. And that these measures were found to be correlated in a sample of 36 secondary school pupils. Knowing this it is possible to examine the findings critically. Without this information there is no chance of doing so. There is only one way to understand research and that is to read it raw. It can be tedious, mistaken, wrong-headed and it can also be intell-

igent, thought-provoking and ingenious. For those of us who get hooked it is the only thing there is. But I know that it is unreasonable to expect students who read this book to look up more than a few of the studies it reports. In any case a lot of the material is not easily available. A good college library will take the major British journals but it is unlikely to have more than a few of the American journals, if any, and ordinary students do not normally have access to the inter-library loan system. It is for this reason also that I have included as many details as possible: the critical student should have enough to work on.

One last point. It may seem that there is a disjunction between the first chapter and those that follow. A conviction is growing among many of us that research must be interpreted within an overall theory of social action. The interactionist theory outlined in the next few pages is intended to provide an over-arching theory which can be seen to relate together the empirical studies which follow. It is not essential and readers who do not find the argument useful or convincing are free to skip it.

## Some theoretical considerations

I hope this chapter will be a little easier to read than it was to write. Its aim is simple enough: I want to bring some conceptual clarity to the findings of recent research concerned with the actions of teachers and pupils. The difficulty stems from the multitude of concepts used by various writers in this field. One will use the term 'expectations' where another will use 'norms'. Again, one will use the word 'opinion' as synonymous with 'attitude' where another will make a clear distinction, which has importance for his own work, between the two terms. One solution to this problem of terminology might be to define precisely in advance all the concepts which will appear in the pages to follow. This might make for clarity but it would also make for tedious reading. Instead, each concept will be defined as it is introduced and where my definition differs significantly from that of other writers these differences will be pointed out. I shall argue that it is the failure to develop a theoretical perspective which is responsible for directing this branch of social science towards those dead ends it seems especially prone to end up in. My own theoretical perspective is derived from the studies of A. Schutz (1932/67) and the symbolic interactionism of G.H. Mead (1934).

Before we progress further let me explain my understanding of those terms. Symbolic interactionism is simply a convenient name given to G.H. Mead's account of how people interact with each other. In short they understand each other through symbols - typically and fundamentally through the symbols we call words. In 'Classrooms Observed' I wrote (Nash, 1973, p.41):

These symbols are the guides to action that members of a society follow; the direct guides (norms), the guides to actions we ought to do (ideals) and the

subjective guides to individual actions (attitudes). These symbols are meaningful in so far as men are able (most of the time) to predict each other's behaviour and to gauge their own behaviour according to the expectations they believe others to have for them.

We can add a little more to this. The passages which follow will elaborate the concepts of norms, ideals and attitudes and demonstrate their centrality to the theory of interaction which is developed.

## NORMS, IDEALS AND ATTITUDES

Norms are the socially upheld rules which govern behaviour. Some of these will have the status of statutory law, others only the status of custom, and yet others the status of both custom and law. Within British family life, for example, a man and woman may live together without being married but their behaviour is not customary. A man may even set up house with two women, which is even less the custom, but only if he tries to marry them both will he be in breach of the law. Clearly, not all norms have the authority of law, and equally, not all laws are upheld as social norms. To some people it seems quite acceptable, for example, to drive at 40 mph in built up areas and to 'fiddle' the occasional 'phone call or odd roll of sellotape from the office. Generally speaking jurists like to keep legally regulated norms in line with what is customary or acceptable in the community. This is why laws are being constantly added to and removed from the statute book. All norms are enforced by the application of sanctions of one sort or another upon those who violate them. Legal norms are enforced in a highly formalised manner by the police, judicial and penal systems. Customary norms are enforced by less institutionalised but often more powerful sanctions. For example, a young couple who do live together without being married will most probably come under some pressure from their parents, relatives and even neighbours.

The distinction between legalised norms and customary norms usefully points up a matter of some interest to sociologists. The law assumes one common community and sanctions will be applied to anyone found guilty of breaking the law. It doesn't matter very much whether he knows of its existence or not. Customary norms, however, by no means assume one community, on the contrary they are commonly specific to one particular sub-culture or group co-existing within the larger state. Commonly the norms of these groups can only be enforced

by sanctions which assume that those they are directed against wish to remain members of that group. An example might be provided by the newly elected councillor who discovers that one or two of his colleagues are less than perfectly scrupulous in declaring their financial interest in matters before them. An honest man himself he mentions his concern to a friend. The friend advises him that this is not uncommon, that it has always gone on, that no real harm comes of it and that publicity would only damage the image of the council and, in all likelihood, ruin his own chances of advancement. These considerations could quite possibly lead our new councillor to revise his standards a little so as to remain in favour with the group. If he decides that he no longer wants to belong to the group then clearly these sanctions can no longer be imposed on him.

Sociologists are especially interested in sub-cultures. In particular there are evident normative differences between socio-economic groups and these have been the subject of extensive study. The business of learning social norms begins in very early childhood. The child is first socialised into the norms of his family, then into the norms of the school, and - more or less simultaneously - into the norms of his peer group. These three social entities are considered to be the main socialising agencies in the child's life.

Ideals, the guides to actions we ought to do, are learned in a similar way from our social environment. If they are to be held distinct from norms we must say that a failure to live up to our ideals can subject us to no other sanctions than those stemming from our own conscience. Ideals are, therefore, by definition, set higher than the customary norms within a particular society. For example, within Christian societies a man might believe as an ideal that he should give all that he has to the poor but, it scarcely needs to be said, this isn't the normative thing to do. No one will castigate him for failing to meet his ideal. We might say that norms are enforced by others whereas ideals are enforced only by oneself. To the extent to which we fail to meet the ideals of our society our own conscience is responsible. A man may hold ideals derived from various sources. Many ideals have a religious basis, others are political and many are specific to a particular sub-culture or group.

The concept of attitudes is particularly difficult to pin down. We saw above that it refers to the subjective guides to individual action. To say that an attitude is subjective indicates that we are concerned with the



personal meanings which an individual places upon his actions. Sometimes we find attitudes directly expressed through words, at other times we note attitudes expressed through bodily stance or gesture. This latter sense was the original meaning of the word attitude. Understanding attitudes in everyday life is very much a matter of 'reading between the lines' in other words, of interpreting the subjective meaning of the actions of another. Attitudes can be understood as the characteristic mood of an action. If we observe a man driving on the crown of the road with one arm around his girl friend and within feet of the car in front, we should take that as an indication of his careless attitude towards driving. Attitude is often used where 'opinion' or 'belief' would be more accurate. Most so-called attitude tests are, in fact, opinion tests - but more of that later.

#### INTERACTIONIST THEORY AND PERCEPTION

Interactionist theory holds that in any given culture people in a social relationship act within the taken-for-granted framework of what things and events are considered relevant to that culture. Interaction takes place within the context of a set of background expectancies shared by each. Recently, 'expectations' has been used by empiricist psychologists in a much broader sense as an explanatory concept for teacher-pupil interaction processes. Their research will be examined in a later chapter. The theory is very much concerned with the idea of the self. One may be as metaphysical about the self as one likes but so far as this account is concerned, the self is understood as a taken-for-granted proposition. That is to say that in any social interaction I take for granted that the other has a reflective self and a self-consciousness of just the same sort as my own. The self then, - the self-conscious knowledge we all have of our personal history, our present existence, and our projected future - emerges as a result of social interaction. How the infant develops a consciousness of himself as an independent being is a fundamental concern of theorists in this field. For what a person believes about himself will form part of his motivational structure. That is to say that a person will choose to act or not to act in a given way because he regards himself as the sort of person who does or does not act in that way. For example, a man who rejects a suggested course of action saying, 'what sort of person do you think I am?' is clearly