

CHILD PSYCHOLOGY

A CONTEMPORARY VIEWPOINT

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SUMMARY

The school is an extremely influential, although often neglected, socializing force. In this chapter several factors that affect the kind and extent of the school's influence were examined. First, the physical structure of the school environment came under scrutiny. School size, for example, determines the extent of involvement in extracurricular activities; children at small high schools are not only more likely to participate but are also more likely to occupy positions of prestige and importance. One result is that there are few potential dropouts in small schools. Next, the impact of the size, shape, and seating arrangements of the classroom were examined. Both class size and the pupil's location in the class determines the extent to which he participates in classroom activities. While participation is higher in smaller classrooms, the child located in the front and center of the class, the action zone, participates more than children seated in other parts of the room.

The most important individual in the academic drama is, of course, the teacher. First, the interaction patterns between teachers and children of different sexes were exam-

ined. Teacher disapproval of male sex-typed behavior may result in a clash between female teachers and young boys; this in turn may account for the poor adjustment and lower achievement of boys in the early elementary grades. Teacher encouragement of dependency in young girls, however, may account for the lower levels of achievement in older female students. Teachers have a great deal of flexibility and freedom in the classroom; individual differences in beliefs, attitudes, and styles of interacting with children are evident. The effects of variations in teacher behavior were explored in the next section of this chapter. Often teachers form early impressions and expectations concerning a pupil's probable success. Evidence shows that these expectations, even when they are experimentally induced, have a powerful impact on the child's academic progress. A self-fulfilling prophecy is evident: children succeed when teachers believe they will do well, while pupils are likely to perform poorly when instructors expect them to fail. Next, the effects of different classroom organizations were discussed. Students generally prefer a group-centered classroom in which they are allowed some opportunity to participate in the decision making. Recent evidence suggests that this type of arrangement even may be correlated with better academic performance. However, this is still an unresolved issue and, in the final analysis, any conclusion about the advantages of a traditional, authoritarian regime over more pupil-oriented arrangements must take into account the kind of pupils involved. Different personalities apparently function better under different types of classroom organizational arrangements.

One promising technique in classroom organizations is the peer-teacher approach, where older children are cast in the role of assistant teachers and given responsibility for teaching younger peers. Early evaluations indicate that both the helper and the child who is assisted benefit from this arrangement.

Is the teacher's preferred reinforcement style important? Do children learn just as well under a teacher who is positive and encouraging as under a punitive teacher? While there is no clear-cut answer to this question, there is some indication that self-esteem and peer group status are correlated with a positive classroom teacher. Recent applications of behavior modification techniques for controlling children's classroom behavior were examined and found to be successful. This is particularly true when these programs have used material or token reinforcers for shaping appropriate behavior. Generally speaking, positive approaches to classroom discipline work better than punitive approaches.

Finally, the teacher may influence her charges by serving as a social model. Evidence was presented indicating that a rewarding teacher tends to be imitated more than a negative instructor tends to be. Again, the sex and social class of the child observers must be considered. Middle-class girls, for example, tend to imitate a teacher model to the greatest extent, while lower-class boys are influenced relatively little by a teacher model. The impact of the teacher as model is not restricted to reinforcing style; the typical problem-solving style of the teacher is often imitated by her students as well.

After this discussion of teachers and their tactics, primary-school textbooks were examined. Texts are important vehicles for learning and reinforcing attitudes and social values. Unfortunately, most current primers are grossly inadequate; rather than presenting a realistic picture of American culture, the typical text offers a Pollyannaish substitute. This is not merely an adult evaluation: children's library choices indicate that children themselves prefer very different kinds of books than those usually available as

primary readers. Tentative evidence indicated that children provided with more reality-oriented interesting readers scored higher on a variety of reading and language measures. Although texts are changing, many of the white, middle-class, suburban biases still persist in more recent "new look" primers.

In the final section, the impact of the schools on the academic progress of the lower-class child was examined. A number of factors militate against the success of the lower-class child. In this chapter, some of the reasons underlying the school's inability to effectively educate lower-class children were presented. The incongruity between the attitudes and motivations of the lower-class child and the middle-class school was seen as an important factor. The school is a strange and often hostile environment for the lower-class child. Even if he does succeed, he is unlikely to receive either parental support or peer acceptance for his accomplishments. Some have blamed the teachers for their failure to appreciate the differences in background, experience, and values of the disadvantaged pupil. In fact, comparisons of middle-class white and lower-class black instructors suggests that this charge has validity; teachers from lower-class origins were more accepting and less pessimistic in their evaluations of their lower-class charges than were middle-class teachers. Clearly, any program aimed at solving the problems of the lower-class child's chronic academic failure must include alterations in teacher preparation. Curriculum and content changes are not enough; teacher attitudes toward children must change as well.