

THE USE OF OBSERVATIONAL DATA IN ELEMENTARY COUNSELLING

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Abstract

A strategy for dealing with problems of underachievement within the elementary classroom is proposed. The strategy entails collection of behavioral data within the classroom by the consultant and the development of intervention strategies to be implemented by the classroom teacher. It is suggested that current research on the classroom behavior-academic achievement relation can serve as a source of behavioral measuring instruments. The strategy stresses the importance of a cooperative relation between consultant and teacher in the process of interpreting the behavioral data and in the process of arriving at decisions respecting intervention procedures.

Résumé

On tente de mettre sur pied un plan d'action concernant les problèmes de l'insuffisance du rendement au niveau élémentaire. Dans ce but, un conseiller recueille des données sur le comportement en classe et élabore des modes d'intervention que l'enseignant sera chargé d'appliquer en salle de classe. Des études se poursuivent actuellement sur la relation entre le comportement en classe et le degré de réussite académique. On suggère que ces recherches servent de base comme techniques de mesure du comportement. Ce plan d'action souligne l'importance d'une collaboration étroite entre le conseiller et le professeur dans l'interprétation des données sur le comportement et dans la prise de décisions concernant les modalités d'une intervention éventuelle.

The Use of Direct Observational Data Within Elementary Counselling¹

Meyers (1973) has presented a consultative model which describes various levels of service that can be provided by school consultants. One level within the model is labeled "indirect service to the child" and involves the case where the consultant develops an analysis of the individual pupil and then works with the classroom teacher in developing an intervention strategy which is to be implemented by the teacher. This type of counselling strategy has a number of potential advantages. First of all, it represents an efficient use of consultant time. Secondly, the strategy calls for a focus on the individual pupil, the advantages of which have been argued by a number of writers (Good & Brophy, 1970). The third potential advantage of the strategy is that it places the burden of treatment or

remediation on the classroom teacher, the individual in closest contact with the pupil.

The first issue that arises in the implementation of the proposed strategy concerns the means whereby the consultant's analysis is to be developed. Meyers (1973) appears to reject the use of complex psychological diagnoses in favor of a dependence on behavioural data collected in the classroom by the consultant. This dependence on behavioral analysis is consistent with the recommendations of a number of writers (Fine & Tyler, 1971; Good & Brophy, 1970, 1974; Peck, 1971) and reflects a feeling that both consultants and teachers are more effective and more confident when dealing with overt behavior than with complex motivational or personality analyses. Two other advantages can be mentioned in connection with the proposal. First, the strategy encourages the consultant to spend time in the classroom gaining direct familiarity with the behavior of the pupil and the types of situational demands that exist in the situation. A second, and related point, is that the strategy

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¹All of the observation schedules in question allow for coding of up to 15 pupils at any one time.

discourages an absolute dependence on teacher reports of classroom behavior. While teachers are generally concerned and sensitive observers of pupil behavior, they are not infallible. Because of the rapid pace of classroom events and because few teachers have received any training in systematically observing classroom behavior (Good & Brophy, 1973), it is, in fact, unrealistic to expect teachers to demonstrate complete accuracy in pupil observation. Empirical support for this position is provided in a study reported by Martin and Keller (1976) in which marked discrepancies were shown to exist between teacher reports of classroom interactions and data on interactions collected by means of independent observations.

Decisions respecting behavior categories and instruments constitutes the next step in the process of developing the proposed strategy. The use of an observation schedule allowing for frequency counts of discrete overt behaviors is perhaps the most effective type of instrument in the present case. Such instruments are relatively easy to use, and they have the added advantage of calling for low levels of observer judgment at the data collection phase. The latter point is considered important in light of the argument to be developed below which states that inferences about pupil behavior and decisions regarding intervention strategies should arise out of discussions between consultant and teacher. Fortunately, there is a growing literature from which consultants can draw material for such instruments. This research is directed toward the discovery of classroom behaviors which relate to academic achievement. It must be acknowledged that research in this area is of fairly recent origin and that firm relations have not yet been established between observable classroom behaviors and achievement. Still, the literature in question represents a valuable source of behavior categories and measuring instruments.

All of the studies within the literature mentioned above deal with relations between observable classroom behaviors and academic achievement, with the latter measured in terms of standardized achievement scores or teacher grades. The studies are also characterized by the fact that the individual pupil, rather than teachers or classrooms, serves as the unit of analysis. Two general types of behavior categories are represented in the studies. In one case the focus is on aspects of the pupil's relation to academic work. Among the behavior categories of this type which have been shown relevant to achieve-

ment are the following: attentiveness (Cobb, Note 11; Lahaderne, 1968; Samuels & Turnure, 1974; Soli & Devine, 1976), distractible behavior (McKinney, Mason, Perkerson, & Clifford, 1975), and constructive self directed activity (McKinney, et al., 1975). A second type of behavior category reflects aspects of pupil-teacher interactions. Among categories of this type which have been shown to relate to achievement are the following: frequency of pupil initiated work interactions (Brophy & Good, 1970; Garner & Bing, 1973; Lahaderne & Jackson, 1970), frequency of teacher afforded behavioral interactions (Brophy & Good, 1970; Garner & Bing, 1973; Good, Sikes, and Brophy, 1973), and total response opportunities provided by teacher (Good, et al., 1973). The set of categories of both types is sufficiently large that teachers and consultants should have no trouble in selecting items which appear meaningful and relevant to their purposes.

Data collection constitutes the next step in the procedure, and a number of practical considerations arise in this connection. Consultants would have to receive some training in the collection of behavioral data. Fortunately, the measuring instruments involved here are relatively easy to use and manuals are available (Brophy & Good, Note 2; Cobb, Note 3). Insuring reliability of measurement will perhaps constitute the most critical methodological issue. The utility of the data collected will depend to a large extent on the stability of the measures, and some efforts at reliability assessment will be required. The most satisfactory procedure would involve two consultants working together in the same classroom for some period of time and the calculation of inter-observer agreements from the data collected. Reliability levels should also be rechecked from time to time. A related issue concerns the amount of time that should be devoted to data collection. In general, the longer the period of observation the more stable the measures. There are, on the other hand, considerations of consultant time and other factors which may serve to limit time available for observation. Emmer and Peck's (1973) finding that moderate stability levels can be achieved after 2.5 hours of observations is perhaps relevant here. Certainly that should be regarded as a minimum observation time. The amount of time required will depend to some extent on the level of generality being sought. For example, less observation time would be required where the concern is with performance in arithmetic rather than where the concern is with behaviors during all types of instructional activity.

Decisions about feedback procedures constitute the next step in implementation of the proposed strategy. The major recommendation is that the feedback should begin with presentation of the raw data to the teacher, and that the consultant should refrain from imposing value judgments and inferences at this point. There are a number of ways in which the behavioral data could be presented to the teacher, but perhaps the most efficient means is in terms of behavioral profiles. This would involve plotting average frequencies or percentages of occurrence of the various categories. The utility of these profiles is enhanced when the averages are plotted against normative data; that is, averages for the class or some other sample. Examples of such profiles are presented in Figures 1 and 2. Data for those profiles were collected within a study of relations between classroom behaviors and academic achievement. The sample profiles present data on eight male pupils within one of the grade 4 classrooms included in the study. The data were collected during math instruction. Data within Figure 1 are based on the Lahaderne (1968) attentiveness measure and reflect the average percentage of time the pupil was scored as inattentive. Mean level of inattentiveness for the group of eight pupils is also shown in the figure. Figure 2 reflects the average frequency with which the pupil approached the teacher on a work related matter and is based on the Brophy-Good Dyadic Observation Schedule (Brophy &

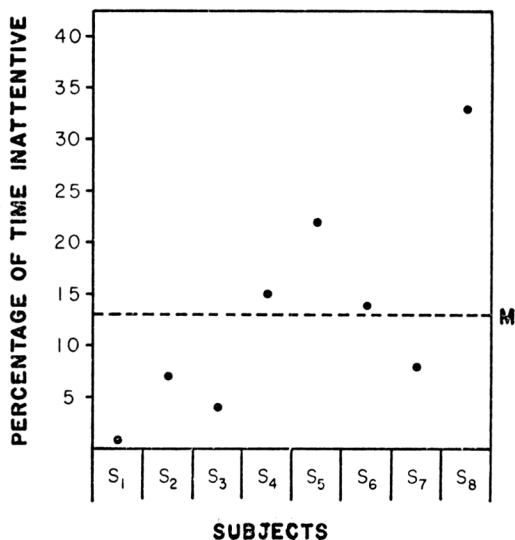


Figure 1. Percentage of time inattentive during math instruction for eight male pupils.

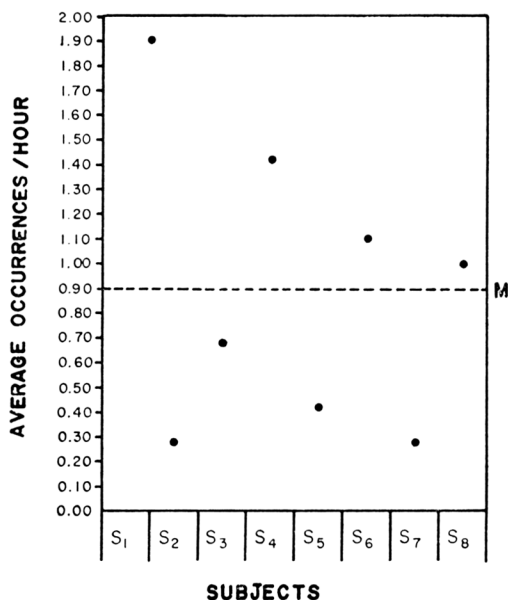


Figure 2. Average occurrences/hour of pupil initiated work interactions for eight pupils during math instruction.

Good, Note 2; Good & Brophy, 1970). A group mean is also presented in that figure.

The initial presentation of the behavioral profiles would be followed by attempts, on the part of both teacher and consultant, to draw inferences and conclusions from the data. This would, in turn lead to decisions regarding treatment or remediation strategies, with the latter designed to be implemented by the classroom teacher. The strategy implies no specific intervention procedures, but the procedures would probably involve efforts to modify overt classroom behavior. The final stage in the process would involve assessment of the effectiveness of the intervention procedures. The assessment might involve achievement test scores, grades, or teacher judgments, but it should also involve the collection of additional behavioral data by the consultant.

Some of the suggestions made above may appear inconsistent with the position that a consultant should function as a change agent within the school. The suggestions may also appear contrary to the assumption that the consultant has some expertise in the treatment of achievement problems. Those inconsistencies are, however, more apparent than real. The

proposed strategy provides ample opportunity for the consultant to effect change and to exercise expertise, but it also calls for some very special skills in communicating with teachers and in guiding the decision process. These are, however, skills which would well serve the consultant in a variety of contexts.

There are a number of aspects of the strategy suggested above which merit research attention. It is clear, first of all, that more basic research is needed on relations between overt classroom behavior and academic achievement. The work of Cobb (1972), Brophy and Good (1973) and others represents an important start in this direction, but more data are needed on such issues as the role played by mediating variables (e.g. pupil sex, subject matter) in the behavior-achievement relations and the question of direction of effect within those relations. The ability of consultants to collect and interpret behavioral data also merits attention, as does the issue of teacher receptivity to behavioral feedback. A study reported by Good and Brophy (1974) demonstrated that teachers can change their behavior and the behavior of their pupils in response to behavioral feedback, but much more work of that sort is needed. The strategy outlined above stresses the importance of communication and decision processes within consultant-teacher interactions, and clearly more research is needed on those processes.

Reference Notes

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