Classroom Structural Bias

Impact of Cooperative and Competitive Classroom Structures on Cooperative and Competitive Individuals and Groups

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There is now considerable theoretical support for the claim that classroom structures common in the U.S. public schools discriminate against the achievement, the cultural values, and the well-being of Mexican-American and black students (Kagan, 1980, 1983). The purpose of the present chapter is to present empirical evidence that bears on that hypothesis, called the structural bias hypothesis. Although some of the evidence to be presented comes from published research, much of the evidence was generated by a large-scale investigation of the structural bias hypothesis conducted as part of a cooperative project by the School of Education and the Psychology Department at the University of California, Riverside. Before describing and discussing the empirical data relevant to the evaluation of the structural bias hypothesis, theoretical support for the hypothesis is reviewed, and the Riverside Cooperative Learning Project is described.

THE THEORY OF STRUCTURAL BIAS

DEFINITION OF STRUCTURAL BIAS

Structural bias is the bias against an individual or a group that occurs as a consequence of the task and/or reward structure of a classroom. Numerous types of task and reward structures are possible in a classroom.
For example, students may be required to work alone at their desks at a learning task and may be rewarded (e.g., graded) based on how well they achieve in relation to other students. In such a classroom, there is an individualistic task structure and a competitive reward structure. Or students may be asked to work in a small group, using peer-tutoring techniques to master the learning task, and may be rewarded on the basis of how well their team does compared to other teams. In such a classroom, there is a cooperative task structure, a cooperative within-team reward structure, and a competitive between-team reward structure. A detailed discussion of various possible cooperative, competitive, and individualistic task and reward structures is presented elsewhere in this volume (see Chapter 3).

The choice of task and reward structures has the potential for either positive or negative academic and social outcomes for various individuals and cultural groups, and reliance on a single type of classroom structure can bias educational outcomes in favor of or against certain individuals and groups. Just as a psychological test can be biased in favor of the performance of some groups over others, an instructional program, because of its reward and/or task structure, can be biased to favor the outcomes desired by certain groups more than by others. Various types of negative effects can occur as a result of structural bias; these include lower academic achievement, poorer interethnic relations, and greater self-deprecation and the erosion of important cultural values.

ACHIEVEMENT BIAS

Different rewards for achievement are associated with different types of classroom structures. Some of these rewards are extrinsic, including teacher praise, peer approval, and points or rewards that are given for superior performance. Depending on the classroom structure, various kinds of cooperative and competitive outcomes are also associated with achievement. For example, in a competitive class structure, achievement may be associated with advancing to the highest achievement group in the class or with having one’s name at the top of a performance list. In a cooperative classroom structure, achievement may be associated with helping one’s teammates to learn, and to receive good grades or class recognition. Because various individuals and ethnic groups place a different value on these various rewards, different classroom structures are differentially rewarding of achievement for various individuals and groups. Thus, a given classroom structure can be biased for or against the academic achievement of certain individuals and groups.

Obviously, it would be unfair to give pink bracelets to all students, boys and girls, who do well on their spelling tests each week. With that