THE DIFFERENTIATED CHILD BEHAVIOR OBSERVATIONAL SYSTEM*

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ABSTRACT

The Differentiated Child Behavior Observational System (DCB, Ross, 1971) which provides for systematic recording of children's interactions in ongoing classroom activities, was applied in 48 classrooms with children aged five to eight. Three groups were studied: the first, representing a nontraditional, open-classroom approach was drawn from the Bank Street School for Children (middle-income); the second, with a similar approach, from Bank Street Follow Through classes in public schools (low-income); and the third, from traditional classes in public schools (low-income).

The groups showed striking differences in amount of children's interactions, with significantly greater amounts in the two nontraditional groups. Analysis of the content of the interactions revealed further important differences. The Bank Street School and Bank Street Follow Through groups totalled significantly more higher-order cognitive statements and questions, and more autonomous behavior. Results indicated that although in SES background, Follow Through classes were more like the traditional classes, the interactions of the Follow Through children were more like those of the (nontraditional) Bank Street School.

In recent years, researchers have increasingly sought to characterize classroom interactions in a systematic and relatively objective manner. These efforts can be justified in terms of the need for a description of the life experience of the child in the classroom. Although it is recognized that the classroom constitutes a significant influence on the child's development and is a major source of each individual's introduction and exposure to society, we lack even basic information about the nature and content of classroom interactions. However, a number of critical issues have generated these efforts: (1) the search for generalizable information about teacher effectiveness and classroom climate that could be used both for teacher training and evaluation purposes, and (2) the growing discontent with using applied standardized tests for evaluating educational programs. The increasing recog-

nition of the limitations of these measures, particularly in reference to assessment of the effects of federally-funded programs on inner-city children’s cognitive abilities, has stimulated a search for broader and more encompassing evaluation and program analysis measures.

Overview of the System

The Differentiated Child Behavior Observational System (DCB) was originally developed under the auspices of a Follow Through sponsor — Bank Street College of Education — as one of a number of self-evaluation measures designed to assess the extent to which its own program had been successfully implemented. The Bank Street sponsorship of Follow Through classes in 14 communities in the United States involves the implementation in inner-city public school classrooms of a “developmental-interaction,” open-classroom approach (see Shapiro and Biber, 1972) developed and applied over many decades in the College’s School for Children.

The complexity of life in the informal or open classroom makes recording of all relevant information difficult. The term “relevant” used in this context defines the extent to which choices are made on the basis of values, or of judgments as to which behaviors will provide criterion measures of children’s classroom behavior. The content of the DCB instruments reflects a set of assumptions and values underlying the Bank Street approach (Gilkeson, 1970), with “competence... conceived functionally in terms of how the individual interacts with the challenges, the people and the work of his environment” (Biber et al., 1971). It also reflects an attempt to delineate a comprehensive and detailed roster of typical classroom interactions. The basic assumption underlying the design of the DCB is that children’s behavior (cognitive, affective, social and physical) reflects the attitudes, values and curriculum foci of the classroom instructional team.

The Open Classroom Versus the Traditional Classroom

How are the differences between an open and traditional classroom reflected in children’s interactional behaviors? What is the effect of informal spatial arrangements and greater teacher and pupil mobility on the quantity and quality of classroom interactions? Does an “open,” independence-fostering, child-centered environment, that supposedly encourages self-expression, produce a greater incidence of destructive, acting-out behavior than a setting which has a high degree of control as one of its major practices? Does the attempt to integrate and balance cognitive, affective, aesthetic and social learning experiences result in less cognitive involvement than that