

RESEARCH NOTES

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TEACHER APPROVAL AND DISAPPROVAL IN HONGKONG SECONDARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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SUMMARY. OPTIC (Observation of Pupils and Teachers in Classrooms) was used to study Hongkong secondary school teachers' use of approval and disapproval and pupils' on-task behaviour. Despite great individual differences, the sample of teachers was found overall to focus upon pupils' academic behaviour and to emphasise the use of approval. However, disapproval was emphasised as a means of responding to pupils' social behaviour. Positive correlations were found between approval (particularly to academic behaviour) and on-task behaviour. Negative correlations were found between disapproval (particularly to social behaviour) and on-task behaviour. In all these respects the findings were similar to those of a recent UK study.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom interaction research has a long history. Some of the more interesting research in the field over recent years has been in the area of teacher approval and disapproval and the relationship with pupil behaviour. These studies have spanned primary and secondary education sectors in a number of Western developed countries and have utilised a variety of observation instruments. In view of the different settings and instrumentation involved there is a strikingly consistent pattern in the data. That pattern may be summarised as follows: (1) teachers' general rate of responding (approval and disapproval combined) is lower with older age groups, (2) disapproval is often more frequent than approval, particularly at higher grades, (3) disapproval is particularly common in response to pupils' social behaviour. Some studies have attempted to identify pupil correlates of teacher approval and disapproval. For example, Nafpaktitis *et al.* (1985) found that rates of approval and disapproval were both correlated (negatively and positively respectively) with pupil off-task and disruptive behaviours. For a fuller review of this and other studies see Wheldall *et al.* (1989).

In the last few years some interesting work on approval, disapproval and pupil behaviour has been done using OPTIC (Observation of Pupils and Teachers in Classrooms), a schedule developed at the Centre for Child Study at the University of Birmingham, and described by Merrett and Wheldall (1986).

OPTIC provides a method for observing pupil behaviour and teacher responses in mainstream classrooms during periods in which pupils are engaged in activity individually, in groups or as a class. It is designed to be used over observation sessions of 30 minutes, half of which time focuses upon pupil on-task behaviour and upon teacher approval/disapproval respectively.

Teacher responses to pupil behaviour are recorded as positive (approving) or negative (disapproving), and are further categorised in terms of the type of pupil behaviour (academic or social) that has prompted the teacher's response. Additionally, responses may be categorised in terms of certain semantic features. Purely instructional teacher behaviour is ignored at all times during observation of teacher responses. Pupil behaviour is recorded by way of a simple system that enables each pupil's on-task behaviour to be observed individually. On-task behaviour is defined as eye-contact with the teacher or the task or otherwise following the teacher's instructions. For further details of OPTIC the reader is referred to Merrett and Wheldall (1986).

OPTIC data from secondary school classrooms

Wheldall *et al.* (1989) trained independent observers to employ OPTIC to record teacher and pupil behaviour in 130 secondary school classrooms in the UK. All classes were mixed ability. Pupils were aged 11 to 16. Most school subjects were observed. Mean class size was 22. Total observation time for each teacher was 45 minutes.

The data from the study by Wheldall *et al.* is summarised in Table 1. It shows that as a group teachers used approval more than disapproval, that they responded more to academic behaviour than

to social behaviour, and that they employed disapproval more than approval when responding to social behaviour. Wheldall and his colleagues report that, in regard to social behaviour, women teachers seemed particularly prone to use disapproval. They also report that approval was given rather less where older classes were being taught. Their findings are therefore consistent with the pattern described in the opening paragraph of this paper.

TABLE 1

SUMMARY DATA FROM THE WHELDALL, HOUGHTON AND MERRETT (1989) STUDY: TEACHER RESPONSES

Pupil Behaviour			
Involved	Academic	Social	Total
Type of Response Given			
Approval	45	10	55
Disapproval	15	30	45
Total	60	40	100

Note: Figures indicate approximate percentages of total observations for the group concerned.

Wheldall *et al.* found that, over the 45 minutes of study, teachers averaged 52.9 responses of the type measured by OPTIC. However, there were great individual differences between teachers in their rate of responding; the standard deviation for this variable indicates that one in three teachers gave either less than 26 or more than 79 responses.

Wheldall *et al.* also report that the mean proportion of lesson-time spent on-task was 80 per cent. However, this figure again concealed a wide range, running from 17 per cent to 99 per cent in the classes observed. They add that they found a positive association between on-task behaviour and the use of approval to academic and to social behaviour, and the use of approval to academic and to social behaviour, and a negative association between on-task behaviour and disapproval to social behaviour. They stress that no causal connection can be inferred from this association.

This paper reports a Hongkong replication of the Wheldall *et al.* study. OPTIC was used to study patterns of teacher and pupil behaviour in Hongkong secondary school classrooms. Very little classroom interaction research has been conducted in Hongkong schools, and it was expected that distinctive characteristics of the education system (relating to organisational features, language of instruction, values and resources) might promote patterns of classroom interaction very different to those in the West. For further details of the Hongkong education system the reader is referred to Morris (1983, 1985, 1988), Johnson (1983), Hongkong Education Department (1986) and Hongkong Government (1987).

METHOD

Graduate students engaged in a postgraduate initial professional training course in education at Hongkong University and enrolled in a course on "Behavioural Approaches in the Classroom" were trained to use the observation schedule. The author first gave verbal instruction, then gave out written guidelines for using the observation schedule. The guidelines included samples of completed record forms. Then students practised using OPTIC in a video exercise which depicted a range of teacher and pupil behaviours in a role-play situation. Finally, students were given opportunities to ask questions related to the use of OPTIC.

Eighty-six students acted as observers in the present study. Forty students were studying on the full-time course. They were required to use OPTIC during a two-week period of school experience and were asked to observe a class taught either by a teacher employed at the school or by their student partner at the same school.

The remainder of the observers were drawn from a group of 80 part-time students. These students were all experienced teachers who, having obtained several years of teaching experience, were now intent on obtaining a professional qualification. These students were given the option of two exercises, one of which involved OPTIC. Forty six students from this group chose to do the OPTIC assignment. They were asked to observe classes taught by other teachers employed at the school at which they worked.

All observers were required to indicate basic details relating to the class being observed: the school, the form level, the number of pupils present and the status of the teacher being observed (student or staff). Date and time of the observation was noted. All observations were collected between November, 1986 and March, 1987.

Each observer observed one class for one 30-minute period. Class size averaged 39.13. The range was from 28 to 56 pupils. The classes represented Forms 1 (17 classes), 2 (22 classes), 3 (29 classes), 4 (13 classes) and 5 (5 classes). The majority of pupils observed would therefore be in the age range 12 to 17, although there would inevitably be a number of over-age and under-age pupils present in the sample.

In the 86 lessons observed, most subjects were represented. Fifty-four fell into the arts, social studies and language category, while 30 fell into the science and mathematics bracket. The nature of two was not recorded.

Observation time for this study was 43 hours; 21.5 hours for observation of teacher behaviour and an identical figure for pupil behaviour. During this period a total of 2033 teacher responses (approval and disapproval) and 19,300 pupil observations were made.

RESULTS

Separate analyses of observational data from the two groups of students revealed no substantial differences. No relationship was found between class size and on-task behaviour. On-task behaviour and teacher responses were found not to be associated with pupils' form level or type of subject taught ('arts' or 'sciences'). Consequently, analyses are henceforth presented for the entire sample of 86 teachers and classes.

On-task behaviour

Pupils were on-task for an average of 69.93 per cent of observations. The range for this variable was 25 per cent to 97 per cent, with a standard deviation of 16.46. These figures indicate that a significant number of classes in this study displayed rather low rates of on-task behaviour; in fact approximately 25 per cent of those studied displayed on-task rates under 60 per cent.

Teacher responses

Rates of teacher approval and disapproval to academic and social behaviour are displayed in Table 2. Responses to academic behaviour were overwhelmingly approving (approximately 50 per cent of total responses compared with 16 per cent for disapproval). In contrast, responses to social behaviour were more often disapproving (about 21 per cent of total responses) than approving (13 per cent). Responses to academic and social behaviour combined were overwhelmingly approving (around 63 per cent, largely because of the fact that most teacher responses were to academic behaviour (about 66 per cent)).

TABLE 2

MEAN TEACHER RESPONSES FOR THE HONGKONG STUDY (SDs IN BRACKETS)				
Pupil Behaviour				
Involved	Academic	Social	Total	
Type of Response Given				
Approval	50.38 (25.16)	13.02 (13.59)	63.40	(25.01)
Disapproval	15.94 (15.14)	20.66 (18.67)	36.60	(25.01)
Total	66.32 (20.78)	33.68 (20.79)	100.00	—

Note: Figures indicate percentage of total responses

As is evident from the standard deviations for these variables, these mean figures conceal massive differences in figures from individual teachers. Figures for academic approval ranged from 0 per cent to 100 per cent of total responses. The range for social approval was 0 per cent to 53 per cent. Those for academic and social disapproval were 0 per cent to 71 per cent and 0 per cent to 75 per cent respectively.

Although the general tendency was for teachers to give more approval than disapproval there were 22 teachers (27 per cent of the sample) whose disapproving responses exceeded their approval. Similarly, although the general trend was for teachers to emphasise academic behaviour, there were nevertheless 16 (19 per cent of the sample) who responded most frequently to social behaviour.

In terms of absolute numbers the mean total of responses given by teachers during the 15 minutes they were under study was 23.64 (SD 12.40). The range was again wide, one teacher failing to respond in any way during the period observed and one displaying 61 responses (about one every 15 seconds).

Correlations between different categories of teacher response

Teachers who emphasised approval also tended to focus upon pupils' academic behaviour. The Pearson's r correlation between these two variables (expressed in terms of proportion of total teacher responses) was 0.5387 (significant at the 0.001 level). Conversely, an emphasis upon disapproval appeared to be linked to a focus upon pupils' social behaviour. The correlation here was 0.5384 (again significant at the 0.001 level). All tests of significance were one-tailed.

Correlations between teacher responses and on-task behaviour

Strong associations were found between teachers' use of approval and disapproval (expressed as percentages of total teacher responses) and pupils' on-task behaviour. As may be seen from Table 3, higher rates of on-task behaviour were associated with greater emphasis upon approval and upon pupils' academic behaviour. Academic approval and social disapproval were both strongly correlated (one positively and the other negatively) with on-task behaviour. These figures should be interpreted in the light of the strong association, mentioned above, between approval and academic behaviour on one hand and between disapproval and social behaviour on the other.

TABLE 3

PEARSON'S r CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TEACHER RESPONSES
(AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL RESPONSES) AND PUPILS' ON-TASK
BEHAVIOUR

Teacher Variable	Correlation with On-task Behaviour
Academic approval	0.3470**
Social approval	0.0983
Academic disapproval	-0.1744
Social disapproval	-0.3966**
Approval (acad. & social combined)	0.4032**
Disapproval (" " " ")	-0.4032**
Academic (appr. & dis. combined)	0.3250*
Social (" " " ")	-0.3250*

* $P < 0.01$; ** $P < 0.001$

There was a negative correlation between pupils' on-task behaviour and the absolute number of responses (of all types) that a teacher made. The correlation coefficient was -0.2663 ($P < 0.01$), indicating an association between lower teacher response rates and higher on-task rates.

DISCUSSION

Many of the findings of this study confirm those of Wheldall *et al.* (1989) in their UK OPTIC study. The great variation in the behaviour of teachers and their classes are findings shared by both studies. The focus upon academic behaviour, and the emphasis on approval except in response to social behaviour, are as evident in the Hongkong research as in the Birmingham study. Strong positive correlations in this study between the use of approval (particularly academic) and on-task behaviour, and strong negative correlations between disapproval (particularly social) and on-task behaviour confirm the findings of the UK study.

The similarities between the UK and Hongkong findings are striking in view of the distinctive features of the Hongkong education system. One of these features, large classes, was apparent in this study, the figure for the Hongkong study being almost double that for the Birmingham research.

A number of differences between findings in the two studies should be noted. First, the level of on-task behaviour appears to be on average lower in Hongkong classes. This may be related to differences in the content of lessons and in teaching method, there being a great emphasis upon lecturing, rote-learning and preparation for in-school and public examinations in Hongkong schools (Morris, 1988). The presence in the class of pupils who are being made to repeat an entire year of schooling, or the use of English as a medium of instruction, may also have an effect. Differences in class size in England and Hongkong may be another factor, even though no relationship was found between the two variables within the Hongkong study itself.

Teachers in this study appeared to emphasise pupils' academic behaviours even more than their UK counterparts. Figures for the two studies were around 66 per cent and 60 per cent respectively, with corresponding figures of 34 per cent and 40 per cent respectively for social behaviour. The more pronounced focus on academic behaviour in Hongkong may be related to the priority given to academic success by individual teachers and the education system generally (Morris, 1983, 1988).

The emphasis upon approval (at around 63 per cent even more pronounced than that of 55 per cent for the UK study) is more surprising. Student teachers at Hongkong University sometimes suggest that the use of reinforcement for desirable behaviour is alien to traditional Confucian notions of the responsibility of teachers to instruct and pupils to study and obey without question and without requiring encouragement. The findings of this study suggest that, regardless of cultural traditions and some student teachers' notions of what may be appropriate, most teachers emphasise approval in ways consistent with the recommendations of modern Western behavioural psychology.

Further research using OPTIC is planned in Hongkong to investigate the variations individual teachers display in their patterns of response to different groups of pupils, and the relationships between patterns of teacher response and the expectations and attributions employed by teachers.

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