

# **Classroom Management – the Significance of Reduction of Complexity for Good Teaching**

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Is classroom management a new programme? Is it a catalogue of recipes full of advice like “If a pupil is not paying attention, tell him straight away that you have noticed it”? Or “If he disobeys rules, remind him of the rules and the consequences of contravention”? Certainly not.

The fact that nowadays education is seen as being something like physiotherapy in which one exercise follows the other, or with a set of rules that everyone has to fit in with like in a board game (“Ludo”) is due to the systematic denial of the significance of teacher personality for successful teaching in the last decades, which flourished in the atmosphere of structural interpretation.

Classroom management is not a programme, not a set of rules, not a board game, not an organization – classroom management is a way of dealing with a school class that reduces complexity, it is compensation for the disadvantages that arise from having to learn with several people all at the same time. Classroom management is always happening – there are no breaks. To speak with Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson it could be said that “it is not possible not to manage the class” – classroom management is unavoidable, there is no project, no programme that could replace it (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 169). Hence it is a responsibility and burden even when one is a passionate supporter of some project, programme, educational concept or other.

Classroom management has to be effected with “personal means of influence”: with verbal and non-verbal communication, with the senses, with personality and character, relationships with pupils and with attention.

Reduction of complexity also means: “doing justice to each and every pupil”.

The basic significance of classroom management for successful teaching (according to cognitive and social criteria) is proven not only historically but also by international empirical research on education. To quote the gist of what Kerschensteiner (1921) said, “talented one-to-one teachers sometimes failed as class teachers”, they did not succeed in making “children’s souls that tend to flutter apart” into a coherent group (Kerschensteiner, 1921).

An observation that was familiar in the case of many teachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were first private tutors and then as schoolteachers were faced with a larger number (Delitsch, 1900). If I can teach *one* child something, it does not mean I can also do it with several at the same time. The pedagogue and psychologist Winnefeld wrote in 1948 (1967, P. 143, in the new edition): “If the groups are made larger or smaller according to a plan, some of the

people observed succeed in managing even large groups brilliantly while others, who are able to manage the smaller groups relatively well, fail with the larger groups” (Winnefeld, 1967). In Winnefeld’s view, group management proved to be a problem of the nature of the teacher (Schorb & Louis, 1975). Winnefeld called for a *complex capacity* for teachers, which he divided into *capacity for perception* and *capacity for contact*. Both qualities are not needed in one-to-one teaching. Also *personal spaciousness* or *personal weightiness* is an ability that is particularly needed when teaching groups: it describes a capacity of the teacher’s to be able to cope tolerantly and generously with very different characters, different abilities. At the same time, one must be able perceptively and through rapport to manage many different things that are happening. The ability for “multitasking”, as one would say today, characterizes optimal class management. Teachers are like “attentive hosts” – they do not fail to notice individual needs and difficulties nor do they organize their lessons in such a way that only a few benefit from them.

When a larger number of people are being taught together a considerable number of conditions are necessary for this teaching to succeed. School classes as groups have disadvantages, they disrupt the optimal individual learning process. Even in a group of two, the learner learns on average more slowly and less than when taught on his own. It could be said: the best teaching is teaching one pupil on his own. That was – without ever denying the necessity of the organization of social togetherness and social learning – already common knowledge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Fortunately there are today national and international empirical studies that provide impressive confirmation of the exceptional significance of classroom management.

The most important study, in which over 11,000 comparisons of good and poor teaching were meta-analysed (a large number of studies is combined using special statistical techniques), comes from Wang, Haertel, Walberg. It produced a ranking list of factors that influence good teaching and top of this list is “classroom management“. Second and third were pupil characteristics and parental support, and also interaction between teachers and pupils, the peer group, class atmosphere etc. At the end of the list are factors such as “student demographics“, “student use of out-of-school time“, “program demographics“, “state and district policies“, “school policy and organization“, “district demographics“ etc.. – in other words, the whole arsenal of politically prominent factors (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Recent German studies also confirm this universal finding: Helmke and Jäger carried out a complete survey of the schools in Rhineland-Palatinate from 2001 and their findings on a profile for the highest-achieving classes and courses again emphasized that efficient class management in particular is the number one mark of quality of successful teaching (Helmke & Jäger, 2002).

What does “classroom management“ actually mean in terms of concrete behaviour?

Unfortunately there was only a short period of time in the Federal Republic of Germany in which a book by Jacob Kounin "Classroom Management Techniques" was available. The work was published in the original in the USA in 1970 and in German (Techniken der Klassenführung ) by Klett in 1976 and was already out of stock by the early 1980s (J. Kounin, 1970; J. S. Kounin, 1976). In the meantime it is again available as a reprint from the publishers Waxmann Verlag Münster. Those who encountered this book during their training at a time when everything else was considered more important than "Techniques of Classroom Management" knows what it is about. It is about pupils being kept busy all the time in lessons, taking an active part and hardly misbehaving and this is achieved namely by using a series of unusual techniques that the teacher can put into practice in very different ways.

A fundamental dimension is for example "withitness", meaning that the teacher does not err on object and time in questions of discipline i.e. he notices misbehaviour immediately and signals that he has noticed it, he also shows that he knows who was misbehaving or rebukes the more serious misbehaviour when less serious misdemeanours occurred at the same time, and not the other way round. Thus he signals that he is aware of what is going on in the classroom. Pupils believe and know that he is alert to everything that happens. The second dimension is "overlapping", meaning that the teacher is capable of handling several events at the same time (in computer language today we would say "multitasking"). The third dimension is "smoothness", meaning there are no interruptions, no stopping short, no inconsistency in subject matter, no indecision about what should be done, but rather the entire lesson is of a piece. Everything follows from what went before, a feature that of course can be achieved by good preparation on the part of the teacher (see above, that was mentioned there). The fourth dimension is "momentum", meaning no delays such as overdwelling on pupil behaviour, work material etc. The fifth dimension is "group alerting" meaning group mobilization (i.e. all pupils feel involved), a high level of activity (in a lesson as many pupils as possible are "on task") and the accountability principle (everything I do will be checked by somebody else, e.g. partner or teacher). The other dimensions such as "avoiding tedium" and "valency and challenge" complete the management dimensions with qualities of contents and didactics such as interesting work sheets or group tasks, stimulating and enthusiastic teacher behaviour etc. The above mentioned dimensions have a huge impact on teaching success compared with all other studies: correlation of up to .64 are not unusual despite being a video study. The level of active participation can be increased noticeably from one lesson to the next and misbehaviour can be reduced when these dimensions are implemented.

In a lesson geared to Kounin's dimensions it is quiet and most of the pupils participate actively. Kounin tested this study in primary schools both in teacher-centred (chalk and talk)

lessons and in group work, both with normal pupils and with emotionally disturbed pupils and in all situations the same positive effect was observed.

In conclusion: international teaching research answers the question, “What makes teaching successful?” after meta-analyses, video studies and studies of increase in learning quite clearly: first of all, the necessity for efficient “classroom management” that consists of synchronizing and reducing the complexity of group activity in such a way that everybody participates actively and there is a minimum of misbehaviour. It is not “understanding” the dimensions such as withitness, overlapping, smoothness, momentum and group alerting that is the problem here, but putting them into practice in lessons. In Kounin’s book there are hundreds of examples because you cannot explain such dimensions without reference to a large number of practical examples. Generally, relatively strict, disciplined teaching proves to be advantageous for the achievement of successful cognitive and social teaching results.

Is this really so? A more exact analysis shows clearly: a high level of active participation and a low level of misbehaviour can be achieved quite differently. Reduction of lesson complexity can ensue in very many different ways. If a lesson is extremely attractive – the pupils will be fascinated. If the teacher is a pleasant, humorous person – boring topics will be survived without major disruption. If the teacher shows understanding of the pupils, knows what stage they are at and can respond to this – the learners will reward him with attentiveness and active participation. Every teaching method, every action, every concept and every programme casts a “projective shadow” on the dimension of reduction of lesson complexity, i.e. it contributes to it (to a different degree). In consequence, newer works on “classroom management” (Eichhorn, 2008; Evertson & Weinstein, 2006) also contain all the personal qualities that have long been known to contribute to successful teaching: good teacher-pupil relationships, trustworthiness, mutually agreed-on rules and so on – Evertson and others are even of the opinion that “classroom management” is a “moral curriculum”. Virtual or “psychological reduction of class size” (Dollase, 1995), in other words, “perceived” reduction, can be achieved with classic personal qualities of teaching.

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