

Classroom Management and Loss of Time at the Lesson Start: A Preliminary Study

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Lesson starts are transitional events which may cause management problems for teachers. In this study 131 lesson starts of equally many teachers were observed in primary and secondary schools in Finland. The results indicated that, in general, the problems were minimal. However, for various reasons lesson starts were delayed by an average of about six minutes. Calculated on this basis, the total loss of instructional time in the whole school year was about five weeks of schooling. No statistically significant relationships were observed between disturbances in the classroom and any background variable studied including grade level, classroom type, (special or mainstream), group size, presence of classroom assistant, sex of the teacher, weekday, time of day of the lesson, or subject of the lesson. In order to maximise instructional time more attention should be paid in future to starting lessons promptly.

Keywords: class size, school, children, behaviour problems, time for learning

Introduction

The lesson start is a transition period in which both students and teachers enter the classroom and orient themselves to the commencing class. Starts have been identified as typical moments in which teachers have difficulties in attracting students' attention (Jones & Jones, 2007, 223). Some time is always required to get the teaching underway. Lesson beginnings also have been used to exemplify the "hidden agenda" of school life in the sense that they have often turned into instances of meaningless waiting. The concept of hidden agenda was introduced by Philip Jackson in his book "Life in Classrooms" in 1968. He described the school as a place where the virtue of patience was exercised through learning to suffer in silence during the dreary waiting periods characterising typical school life (Jackson, 1990, 18).

Jackson's ideas have achieved empirical support through other empirical studies concerning school life. Walberg, Niemic and Frederic (1994) made a distinction between allocated, engaged, and productive time. Allocated time is the time assigned by curricula for learning. Engaged time means time on task. Productive time is the proportion of engaged time in which the student is really learning with high success. Yair (2000) observed in a study of 865 participants that the students were engaged with their lessons about half the total class time. Weinstein and Mignano (2003, 158) estimated that productive learning time cannot be more than 33% of the total time used in school. Smith (2000) studied the fragmentation of annual instruction time in United States schools. She reported that the percentage of lesson time that classes spent on noninstructional activities was 23%. She also found great differences between teachers.

Because of the difference between engaged time and productive time, the relation between learning outcomes and engaged time has remained at a moderate level, rising to an effect size of .38 (Hattie, 2009, 184). However, the connection between learning time and learning is well established, and several methods have been sought to extend the time available for meaningful learning (Walberg, Niemic and Frederic, 1994).

Thus far lesson starts have not been separately studied. This study was carried out in order to fill this gap and to discover what really happens during the first minutes after the programmed lesson start, and how much time is wasted during this transition period.

Method

Data Collection

Every pre-service teacher student participating in a course on scientific methodology in the fourth year of their university teacher training selected, as a part of their studies, one comprehensive school teacher to be observed in this study. Each student then observed one lesson start of the teacher chosen. The students could freely select both the teacher and the lesson to be observed with the restriction that no teacher could be selected twice. Permission to observe was obtained in advance from the participating teachers, but the exact lesson start to be followed was not determined in advance, neither the specific research questions. The observation sheet used by the observers contained a set of items to be observed and written down. It also contained a few questions to be answered using a Likert scale. The observers were seated at the back of the classroom with a structured observation sheet on which they wrote their remarks. After the lesson had got properly underway, the observers left the classroom.

The observations took place roughly within a single month in the 2010 autumn semester on various weekdays and at various hours of the school day selected by the students themselves. Most data (74%) were collected during the first three morning hours. The data were analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 20 program.

Participants

In all, 131 teachers and lesson beginnings were observed. Of the teachers, 72% were women and 28% men. Teachers in the sample represented all grade levels of the comprehensive school from grade one to grade nine. There were more teachers from grade levels one to three (44%) compared to grade levels four to six (36%) or grade levels six to nine (20%). Half of the participants were teaching in the same small university town while the other half was dispersed across 44 local municipalities in different parts of Finland. Of the teachers, 11% were special class teachers. The mean class size was 17 ($SD = 6.2$). The largest class had 32 students while at the opposite extreme there were some special education classes with only single or a few students. In 25% of cases there was a paraprofessional support assistant in the class and in 4% of cases there were two teachers. The most common subject of the lesson was Finnish language (33%), and mathematics (28%).

Measures of Disturbance

Three measures were constructed to assess the disturbances at the lesson start. The first measure was the delay in the beginning of the lesson counted as a difference in minutes between the assigned time and actual lesson start. The second was a Classroom Order Scale which consisted of three statements evaluated by the observer on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items were: "The lesson began without delay and in good order", "The teacher had difficulties calming the class down" and "The teacher used effective methods to manage the classroom". The scoring of the second item was reversed, and a sum score was calculated. The scale had a Cronbach alpha of 0.78, indicating good reliability.

The third measure was an Observed Disturbances Scale. This four-item sum scale consisted of four items preceded by a sentence: "What kind of disturbances there still was happening in the classroom immediately after the teacher had given a sign indicating the start of the lesson." The four items, each containing two response alternatives, yes or no, were as follows: 1) all students were not on their seats, 2) some students were speaking loudly, 3) all students did not listen to the teacher, and 4) something else, specify. The correlation between observed disturbances and the Classroom Order Scale was statistically significant, $r = -.47$, $p = .000$, which confirmed their validity.

Results

At the time when the lesson was scheduled to begin, the teacher was present in 56% of cases and all students in 35% of cases. Only in every fifth classroom were both teachers and students present at the scheduled time. On average, the teacher was two minutes late and the lesson started six minutes late, counted from the assigned time. Some teachers spent the breaktime in the classroom and were therefore immediately present at the lesson start. If this did not happen, the teacher came in four minutes late on average and the lesson began seven minutes late. The maximum delay was 15 minutes, observed in four cases.

Management Procedures and Typical Problems

In order to get the students to settle down for the lesson teachers used several means. Some teachers asked the students to stand up. This happened most often (44%) in grade levels one to three, less frequently in grade levels five to six (31%) and only rarely (9%) in grade levels seven to nine. If the students were asked to stand, in most cases (77%) they were allowed to sit down only after a sign was given by the teacher.

Other means used were verbally prompting pupils to go to their own desks (57%) and requesting silence (47%). Teachers praised students in 44% of cases and used some punishment in 3% of cases before they started the lesson. Typical problems in the classroom immediately at the start of the lesson were talking (53%), lack of attention (43%), and students not sitting in their seats (21%).

The observers were generally satisfied with the level of order at the beginning of the lessons: 84% agreed with the statement "The lesson began without delay and in good order", 95% disagreed with the notion "The teacher had difficulties calming the class down", and 87% agreed that "The teacher used effective methods to manage the classroom".

The three measures of classroom disturbance had no statistically significant association with any measured background variable, which were grade level from one to nine, classroom type (whether special or mainstream class), number of students in the classroom from one to 32, presence of the classroom assistant in the classroom, sex of the teacher, weekday, time of day of the lesson, or subject of the lesson. Of these variables group size is of special interest because teachers generally agree that small groups are easier to manage than large groups. In this study the correlation of group size with the delay of lesson start was $r = .032$, with the Classroom Order Scale $r = .045$, and with the Observed Disturbances Scale $r = -.050$ indicating no differences in relation to group size.

Discussion

A typical organization of the school day in Finland consists of single 45-minute periods with a break of 15 minutes between the periods. This is determined by the Decree on Basic Education (1998) according to which at least 45 minutes must be used for instruction in each school hour. During the break time the pupils typically go out to the school yard. Half an hour is typically set aside for lunch and is included in a longer break.

Lesson endings and lesson starts are usually signalled in Finnish schools by bell rings separated by 15 minutes. In actual practice these bell rings mostly signal the beginning and end of break time, not lesson starts. In a few schools the bells ring to signal the end of break time, and then, after two minutes, the beginning of lessons. Only these schools obviously obey the rule laid down by school legislation on the minimum duration of the lessons. In addition, in some schools the bell rings only to signal the end of break time, while the teacher decides the end of the lesson.

The loss of time at the lesson starts seems small, but when it accumulates, the total amount grows abundantly. If six minutes instructional time is lost in every lesson start, it grows during one week to approximately 150 minutes and during the whole school year to 5700 minutes or 127 lessons of each 45 minutes. This equals five full weeks of school attendance.

In order to save more classroom time for efficient instruction, the lesson starts are one important part of the school day in need of restructuring. The practice of two bell rings, the first indicating the end of break time and the second the lesson start, should be adopted generally. Second, working practices and routines should be introduced to ease the start of the lessons. When considering lesson starts it seems that the children's behavioural disturbances are not so much the problem, neither group size. More important seem to be the routines adopted by the teacher. The classroom management literature has developed recommendations for how best to start lessons so that disturbances are minimized (Jones & Jones, 2007, 223-224). Using these recommendations it should be possible to add more instructional time to schooling and accordingly achieve better learning outcomes.

Because the lesson starts have been only minimally researched, replication studies are needed to validate the results of the present study. It is recommended that future studies use interrater assessment by means of a second observer to evaluate the accuracy of observations. Thus far the classroom management literature has given some attention to the importance of lesson starts. However, empirical research concerning the outcomes of various recommendations concerning lesson starts is still mainly lacking. The present study was intended to function as a kind of pilot study to generate interest in this somewhat neglected corner of classroom management literature.

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