

### Allocation to social positions in class: interactions and relationships in first grade school classes and their consequences

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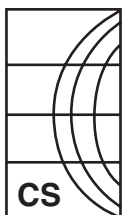
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# Allocation to Social Positions in Class

## *Interactions and Relationships in First Grade School Classes and Their Consequences*

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**abstract:** Using the approach of qualitative social network research, this article focuses on two 'systems of social inequality' on the basis of which learning is organized: one is the institutional and organizational framework structuring the encounters between teachers and students, the other is a system of social inequality incorporated at the level of emotions and affections. Both systems seem to be virtually inevitable and, due to the tacit nature of their workings in class interactions, escape attempts at deliberate control. The article demonstrates how the web of social relationships in the early grades acts to reinforce both systems of social inequality and how they mutually affect one another in the class setting. Two first grade classes were studied for this purpose using mixed methods. The findings clearly support these conclusions: in both classes under study, a configuration of relationships consisting of a range of distinct (student) positions has emerged, and all parties involved have a similar perception of this social configuration. These social positions, each of which offer different opportunities for learning, are reflected both in interactions (as evidenced by video analysis) and the students' stories (as evidenced in interviews). Such stabilization processes determine student careers early on and render the class setting 'porous' as a space of learning.

**keywords:** classroom interaction ♦ inequality in school classes ♦ mixed methods ♦ qualitative social network research ♦ relationships in school classes ♦ video analysis

## Introduction

This article tackles a long-established sociological topic – social inequality in school classes and their reinforcement through interaction – anew from an unorthodox angle. The proposed approach adopts a relational sociology

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perspective, on the one hand, and, closely related, employs a triangulation of network analytical methods, video analysis and the traditional repertoire of qualitative social research,<sup>1</sup> on the other.

Relational sociology emphasizes the configuration of social relationships as a significant factor in explaining social phenomena. Social actors and patterns of social order also fall into the category of phenomena to be explained in this way. The concrete configuration of predominant social relationships defines the position assigned certain students in the classroom, who are then limited to specific lines of action and are exposed to certain patterns of behaviour in their environment depending on the position occupied. Student perception of the network depends on the position occupied as well. Emotions play an important role in dealing with such configurations of social relationships since they are a crucial factor in transforming a relation of dependency into a social relationship in the narrow sense in the first place.

Accordingly, this article focuses on two 'systems of social inequality' on the basis of which learning is organized: one is the institutional and organizational framework structuring the encounters between teachers and students, the other is a system of social inequality incorporated at the level of emotions and affections. Both systems seem to be virtually inevitable and, due to the tacit nature of their workings in class interactions, escape attempts at deliberate control. The article demonstrates how the web of social relationships in the early grades acts to reinforce both systems of social inequality and how they mutually affect one another in the class setting.

Two first grade classes were studied for this purpose using the following methods: interviews with first graders, supported by the use of network maps, teacher interviews, a parent survey, as well as video analyses of numerous taped lessons.

The findings clearly show that in both classes under study, a configuration of relationships consisting of a range of distinct (student) positions has emerged, and all parties involved have a similar perception of this social configuration. These social positions, each of which offer different opportunities for learning, are reflected both in interactions (as evidenced by video analysis) and the students' stories (as evidenced in the interviews). Teacher behaviour and the teacher perspective play a key role in the interactive and narrative stabilization of the relationships defining the setting.

Such stabilization processes determine student careers early on and render the class setting 'porous' as a space of learning. This has consequences for research on schools, teaching and learning. An expansion of opportunities for learning not only depends on the learning process as such, which already attracts much attention, but also requires understanding and addressing both systems of social inequality and how they interact.

A reflective approach in dealing with such social relationships and positions is crucial in this respect. Relational sociology provides perspectives and methods for achieving further advances in this area of research.

### **Two Systems of Inequality in Class**

People occupy certain positions in social spaces. The person entering a bakery to buy bread adopts the role of a customer. The woman giving birth to a child turns into a mother. And the passer-by who is asked for directions ends up in the role of a person giving information. Taking a certain social position – no matter how ephemeral the situation may be – implies the existence of specific social relationships. Persons assuming a particular position face certain expectations and pressures from their environment. They are also limited in the ways that they can intervene in events – depending on who or what they actually can exert influence on. And last but not least, a specific social position invariably goes along with a restricted, fragmentary view of situations, events and actors. This ‘embeddedness’ (Granovetter, 1985) plays a crucial role in how one interprets one’s surroundings.<sup>2</sup> We are thus talking about an abstract conception of space that does not necessarily coincide with physical space. The friend living in a different part of the world is closer to me than a neighbour with whom I am only casually acquainted. Hence, actors occupy positions in a social landscape where proximity (or distance) is defined by the intensity and endurance of the reciprocal relationships maintained with others.

In school lessons, as a prominent place of learning, the institutional<sup>3</sup> and organizational<sup>4</sup> framing predetermines two positions: that of the teacher and that of student. Since the role of the professional teaching staff rests on formally instituted foundations, its members command a superior position in the respective organization in terms of competence, qualification, knowledge and social status.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the organizational regime intends for students to willingly submit to pedagogical intervention, in this sense placing them in a subordinate position dependent on teacher action and communication. The asymmetrical relationship is conceived to serve the purpose of imparting knowledge, skills, norms, values, patterns of thought and modes of conduct to students and monitoring whether the objective has been sufficiently accomplished with regard to the core curriculum defined as essential (evaluation of the learning process including sanctioning options). In class, the teacher’s position of power becomes manifest in communicative dominance: the teacher determines structure and content of communication, form and extent of student participation, and typically relegates students to a reactive role while enforcing rigid, unilateral rules of communication (e.g. having to wait to be called upon) (also see Ulich, 1998: 385ff.).

Apart from this institutionally and organizationally determined, rationally constituted system of inequality, if you will, there is a second, and put pointedly, non-rational system of inequality rooted in emotions and affection.<sup>6</sup> Although the latter system of inequality is created by the participants themselves, they nevertheless are also subject to its workings and can neither rid themselves of it nor compensate for it in any way. This 'system of inequality based on emotional dispositions' is a significant factor in accounting for the fact that we find a far greater range of social positions in a class setting than those prescribed by institutional and organizational arrangements. In fact, the latter must be considered as rather vague determinants that the participants must further specify and give concrete shape to.

Taking these considerations seriously forces a change of perspective in school research. We must abandon the primary concern with methods of effective teaching and the respective structural framework conditions and depart from our preoccupation with the individual actors (whether student or teacher). Instead, we need to turn to what goes on between actors, the in-between: the world of relationships and interactions.<sup>7</sup> Interaction is always a response to previous events. Those involved in interaction can attempt to intervene in ongoing processes by making an individual contribution. Whether the contribution is received at the interaction level according to the intentions of the contributor depends on the interpretations of the other participants (these interpretations being tied to the particular social positions). The second, emotional system of inequality affects this interpretation in a specific way.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a student's sincere attempt to constructively participate in class can fail due to the fact that a teacher – for example based on previous experience – interprets this attempt as an instance of disruptive action.

How people judge each other and what relationships they choose to enter based on this appraisal crucially affects how they behave towards one another in everyday encounters – not just at the level of explicit communication and action but especially at the level of non-verbal messages conveyed through body language, which continuously goes on at the same time (also see Westphal, 2004). All participants in an interaction constantly send such signals. Bystanders perceive these signals as acts of stating emotions (e.g. expressions of liking or disliking). This leads to the perpetuation of a specific emotional system of inequality. Such inequality cannot be fully offset by formally rational arrangements of any kind (Tietel, 2003). Hence, we must expect it to affect the social positioning of actors in the class setting – and this takes place from the first grade on.

This research perspective is now spelled out in greater detail based on an empirical study. I focus on questions concerning the social significance of such emotionally determined social positioning in class and how it interacts with the formal system of inequality.

## Research Topic and Methodology

In pursuit of answers to those research questions, two first grade classes (with 22 and 25 students respectively) at two schools in two different German states were studied in 2006.<sup>9</sup> The instruments used for data collection were a written questionnaire for the parents, interviews with the first graders based on a standardized questionnaire, a guided questionnaire for interviewing the homeroom teachers and a number of lessons were video taped for video analysis. The written parent questionnaire concerned the two key social environments where their children spend most of their time: the school class, including the teacher (the questionnaire contained network analytical questions pertaining to friends at school, the relationship with the teacher and relationships with other parents), and the family and leisure situation (questions referred to hobbies, activities, friends, as well as sociodemographic characteristics of the family).

The student interviews covered the same topics, i.e. relationships in class, at home and in leisure activities. Qualitative social research methods applied in network analysis have proven to be especially suitable for this purpose (see Hollstein and Straus, 2006). First and foremost, the network map employed for assessing so-called 'emotional networks', as developed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980: 383–405), needs to be mentioned in this respect. It allows mapping bonds to other actors (but also ties to things and circumstances). Buttons representing persons are placed onto the map according to the emotional proximity of the person to the interviewee.<sup>10</sup> Due to its playful elements, this method lends itself particularly well to interviewing first graders. A frame story was composed for this purpose. The students were to imagine that they would be spending their school vacation at a castle and were free to decide who of their class (including the teacher) would be allowed to come along and who definitely would not (those excluded were placed outside the map). The map was supposed to represent the castle ballroom; invited students (and the teacher if invited) were to be positioned on the left half of the map (Figure 1). Subsequently, the interviewees were asked to complete the right half of the ballroom by adding the family members they would like to invite.

The teacher interview focused on the teacher's conception of teaching and his or her perception of the individual students. The video recordings,<sup>11</sup> on the one hand, served to analyse social interaction in class with special attention paid to the structures (social positions) and dynamics (typical trajectories, interaction sequences, routines) of such interaction as well as the emotional expressions involved. On the other hand, video taping aimed at reconstructing the web of relationships in the class – between teacher and students but also among the students – for purposes of comparison with the results obtained from the network analysis based on the

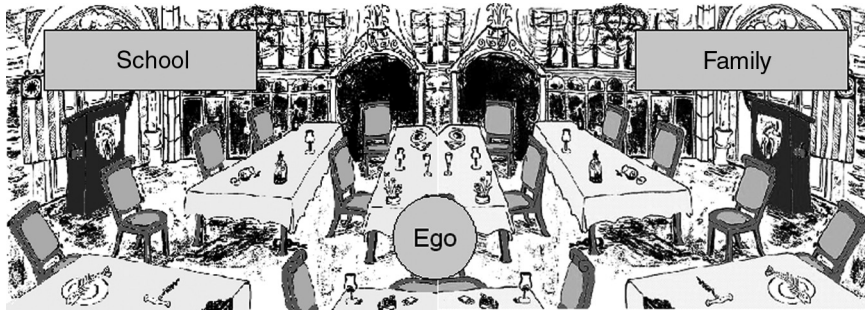


Figure 1 Network Map for Interviewing the First Graders

written survey and the interviews. For technical reasons, two students had to be selected for the video recordings, and a camera was focused on each of them (without their noticing) in order to document their behaviour in class.<sup>12</sup> A third camera was focused on the teacher. In both classes, a teacher-centred approach was applied in the teaching.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the students sat in rows facing the teacher's space of action marked by the blackboard and teacher's desk. The following presentation of results are limited to one of the two classes under study since the findings in both cases were quite similar at the structural level. Enrico and Florent are the names of the two students on whom the cameras were focused. They are students at the school with the more lively class. Enrico is a very lively student who was seated in the last row. Florent is a quiet student who sat in the second row.

### The Production of Social Inequality in Interaction – Empirical Findings

Video analysis of Enrico, Florent and the teacher revealed with great clarity the prominent role of non-verbal communication in interaction in which actors indicate distance towards one another. The sequence of events was interpreted based on a video transcript (see Figure 2), leading to the analytical distinction of four levels.

The class setting provides the context.<sup>14</sup> The interaction level describes the main focus of the social situation, against which the particular interventions and emotional expressions<sup>15</sup> of the three protagonists must be distinguished. The students Enrico and Florent were chosen to represent the 22 students in the class, all of which continuously engaged in their own individual interventions directed at the teacher. The bottom line of the figure illustrating the sequence of events displays the timeline.<sup>16</sup>

Sequence of events									
Context	Response is repeated	increasing restlessness	increasing noise level						
<b>Interaction</b>	T. calls/answers/ T. calls /response/corrects/explanation/ corrects / T. calls on /response /calls on /response /corrects/calls on /response on student	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal	calls on Pascal
<b>Teacher</b>	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'	steps to blackboard, Denies 'We had that already.'
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Enrico</b>	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left	talks to student to the left
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Florent</b>									
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Context</b>	18'00"	18'19"	18'39"	18'52"	19'00"				
<b>Interaction</b>	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence
<b>Teacher</b>	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Enrico</b>	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Florent</b>									
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Context</b>	19'00"	19'03"	19'04"	19'20"	19'31"	19'37"			
<b>Interaction</b>	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence	T. omics / demands / T. calls on /response /student /silence
<b>Teacher</b>	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'	We already 'had that.'
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Enrico</b>	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself	gathers himself
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									
<b>Florent</b>									
- Intervention									
- Emotional expression									

Figure 2 Interpretation of a Short Sequence of Events



In the following sequence, the class is preoccupied with learning the letter 'd'. The teacher asks for words containing the letter 'd'. In the process, we were able to observe the emergence of situational interaction patterns. For instance, the teacher repeatedly attempts to establish a specific rhythmic pattern in which to conduct the lesson – apparently intending for the students to join in to the tune called by the teacher: ask for words, call on students for answer, comment on answer and write on blackboard. Soon, the students are already raising their hands while the teacher is still writing on the blackboard. As the lesson progresses, the rhythm orchestrated by the teacher is first interrupted when Enrico is called on. Although Enrico gives the correct answer, the teacher in this situation nevertheless departs from the rhythm that he has consistently adhered to up to that point to involve a 'good and reliable student'. Only after this student has responded does the teacher again step to the blackboard to write something down (see Figure 2, timeline:<sup>17</sup> 18'10"). This incident suggests the following interpretation: in situations where the teacher feels confident of having things under control, he takes the risk of also calling on students who are more prone to unpredictable behaviour, such as Enrico. After their response, he immediately calls on a 'reliable' student (such as Florent or Pascal) to balance out the situation. Only after receiving the response from this student does he proceed to write on the blackboard. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction sequence graphically.

While the 'reliable' student makes his contribution, Enrico is distracted and then causes a disturbance as the teacher writes on the blackboard. In general, writing on the blackboard always marks a critical moment as the teacher turns his back to the class. As the sequence unfolds, we observe that students, such as Enrico, take advantage of this situation by deliberately engaging in disruptive action. As soon as the teacher turns back to face the class, Enrico 'takes cover' by blending in with the rest of the class as if nothing had happened.

Teacher reprimand may also trigger interaction sequences: for instance, the teacher reprimands a student seated in the first row (18'42"), and Enrico, who seemed to not be paying attention, immediately participates in class again. He even raises his hand although no question was asked

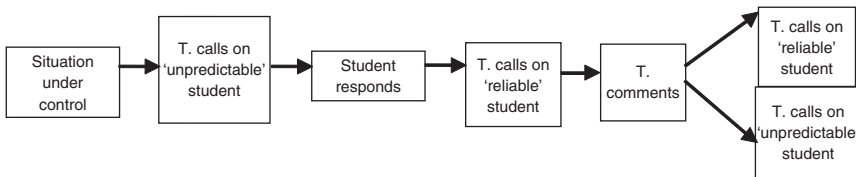


Figure 3 Path of Interaction When Situation under Control

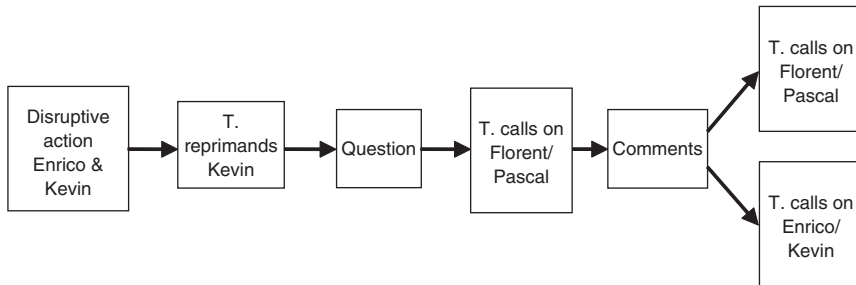


Figure 4 Path of Interaction in Case of Disturbance

(18'44"). Florent, on the other hand, is not affected in any way by the teacher taking such disciplinary action. It is noticeable that the teacher never directly reprimands Enrico although there is often due reason to do so. This strategy is especially astonishing in situations where Enrico is clearly identifiable as the chief troublemaker. Contrary to what might be expected, it is not him who is taken to task but another student who is also involved in disruptive action. Close observation of students subject to teacher reprimand over an extended period of time provides a key to a plausible explanation: typically, they are students (such as Kevin) who are slower in their behaviour than Enrico. For the teacher, this makes them more predictable in their response to reprimand. After reprimanding a student, the teacher calls on a 'reliable' student to balance out the situation. The answer given is then deliberately commented on with greater intensity to underscore the teacher's determination to proceed with the lesson. Depending on whether he believes he has regained sufficient control of the situation, he may again call on a less predictable student (see Figure 4).

A particularly critical situation is observed in the interaction sequence 19'03" to 19'15. The teacher once more asks for a word with 'd' whereupon Enrico raises his hand and is called on by the teacher. Enrico suggests the (German) word *Watte* (which is German for absorbent cotton) which the teacher misunderstands as the swearword *Ratte* (literally rat in German). The teacher, angry and obviously struggling to maintain his composure, repeats the word as he heard it in interrogative form. However, this sounds less like further enquiry and more like disgust. After Enrico has repeated *Watte* twice, his classmates come to his aid by also repeating the word *Watte* directed at the teacher. The teacher now realizes his misunderstanding, calms down and forces a smile onto his lips. After briefly pointing out that *Watte* is written with 't' and not with 'd', he goes on to call on a 'reliable' student to balance out the situation again. The teacher makes no attempt to discuss the incident or to justify his reaction; he simply ignores what happened.

This incident exemplifies the discrepancy between the nature of an intervention and the resulting interaction. Enrico actually intends to make a constructive contribution. Because of the teacher's power of interpretation in the class setting, Enrico's input is initially received at the interaction level as an act of disruption. Only after his classmates, realizing the explosive situation, come to his aid can the situation be defused.

The incident is also a striking example of the problematic relationship between the teacher and Enrico. Its problematic nature does not surface as open conflict or in Enrico being constantly disciplined but takes on a more subtle form.<sup>18</sup> At a non-verbal level, the teacher persistently communicates to Enrico, as a student with behaviour problems, what he thinks of him. At the same time, he seeks to avoid open confrontation as much as possible because he considers Enrico to be unpredictable. In this vein, the teacher's emotional expressions towards Enrico can be interpreted as a mixture of dislike and respect. For instance, the teacher tends to only respond to Enrico's many attempts to actively participate in class in situations where he feels confident of having class interaction completely under control. Hence, Enrico is only very selectively allowed to participate in the focal thread of class interaction. Yet, even in these situations latent respect and inner dissociation define the teacher's behaviour towards Enrico.

Enrico's non-verbal behaviour towards the teacher is no less ambivalent.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, he seeks teacher attention. In so doing, he applies creative as well as subtle strategies of testing and expanding the limits. This suggests that he has only limited respect for the teacher. Moreover, Enrico gains the recognition denied by the teacher from his classmates. The relationship between Enrico and the teacher is represented in Figure 5.

The relationship between the student Florent and the teacher rests on a very different emotional foundation. His classmates consider Florent an attentive and 'good' student. The teacher confirms this view – and maybe even gives rise to it – through his non-verbal behaviour. Especially in class situations where the teacher is on the brink of losing control, he calls on Florent – as a kind of 'last resort'. Any time the teacher addresses Florent, he always exudes an aura of confidence and goodwill. And Florent's

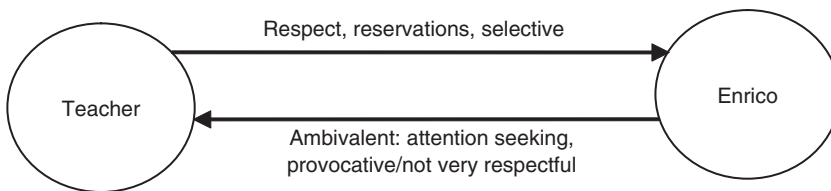


Figure 5 Relationship between Teacher and Enrico

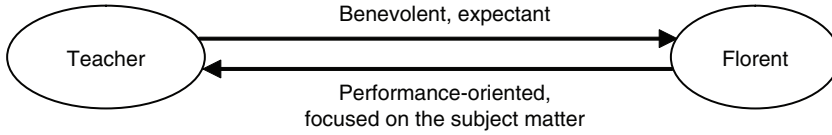


Figure 6 Relationship between Teacher and Florent

performance justifies the trust placed in him. Florent not only gives thoughtful answers but also displays self-confidence in his responses and rarely gets distracted in class. His attention is mostly focused on the teacher. The pattern of relating to one another is represented in Figure 6.

The key point is that the teacher treats certain students in the same way as he does Enrico (for instance Andy and Ottis-Jon). At the same time, we observe that the teacher displays the same behaviour towards certain other students as he does towards Florent. This observation leads us to conclude that the teacher applies an implicit typology of students, which can be understood as a means of maintaining control to keep the lesson going.<sup>20</sup> A rough typology of the male students, developed from the video analysis, is shown in Figure 7.

A typology essentially represents a ‘story’ (White, 1992) about individual students. It leads to treating students differently. The fact that the teacher’s stories and interventions play a pivotal role in the classroom is the result of a formal, organizational regime. He commands the power of interpreting the situation and therefore controls students’ chances of participating in class. In this respect, formally established relations of inequality facilitate the installation of a system of inequality based on emotional dispositions. Organizationally instituted structures of inequality support the teacher in asserting narratives that give shape to relationships with students along the axes liking vs disliking, performance vs disruption and strength vs weakness.

In turn, one can expect students to respond in certain ways – and they do so not only through their actions but also through their interpretations. At this point, they are eventually cast in certain positions in the class setting.

Type of student	Reaction	Behaviour	Possibility of control
Enrico	quick/erratic	unpredictable	difficult to control
Kevin	slow/easily distracted	unpredictable	easier to control
Florent	slow/calm	predictable	easy to control
Pascal	quick/restless	predictable	easy to control

Figure 7 Implicit Student Typology Based on Video Analysis

We might speak of an interactive process in which (cognitive) typifications congeal into (real and physically experienced) social positions. And once the children are placed in certain positions, their environment perceives them in certain ways, which ultimately limits their opportunities for participating in class (for instance, they may have less of a chance of being called upon by the teacher).

The stories teachers compose about students and student interventions in turn have an effect on how students shape their interventions and also affect how they judge interventions by other students. In the process, teachers' interpretations thus have a reifying effect. The findings from the student interviews are in striking agreement with our assessment of the web of class relationships gained from video analysis of the lessons. Considering student responses to the network analytical question as to who should be invited to the castle, a few 'stars' can be identified whose names were mentioned by a number of students (see Figure 8). With nine votes, Fabio is the uncontested star of the class, followed by Florent and Pascal who received seven votes each – it is telling that all three of them are students who receive benevolent teacher treatment and are considered

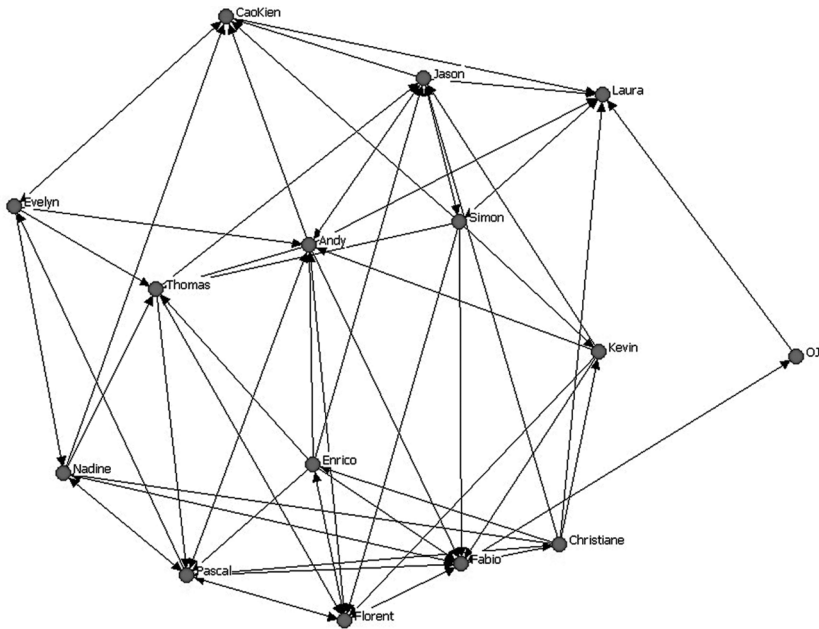
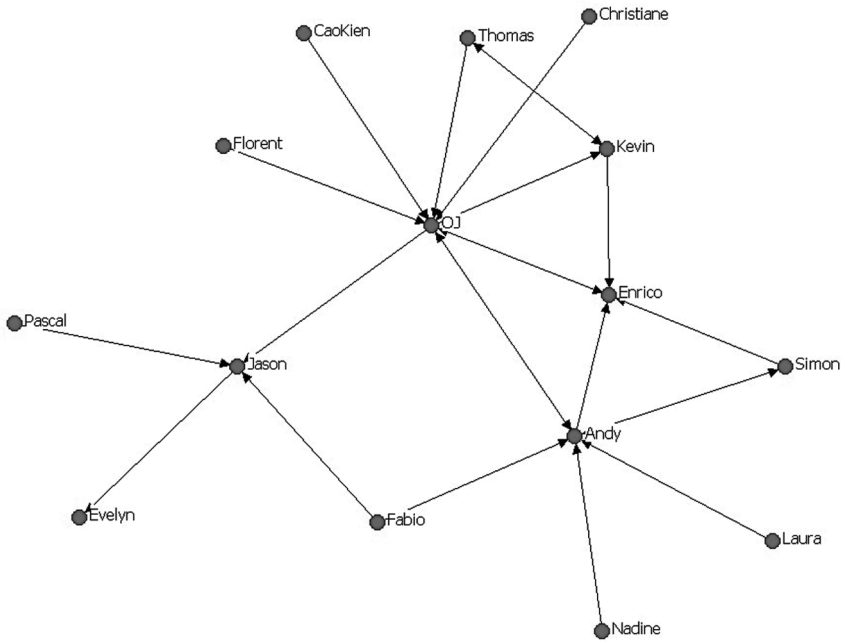


Figure 8 Relations of Liking among Students



*Figure 9 Relations of Disliking among Students*

to be 'good' students.<sup>21</sup> Enrico, in contrast, was only mentioned twice by his classmates – one of the two to invite him was Florent.<sup>22</sup>

This finding must be considered in connection with another question pertaining to relationships of dislike (see Figure 9). In this context, Enrico was explicitly mentioned four times. Along with Andy, he was the second most unpopular student by negative votes received.<sup>23</sup>

If we compare these findings with the student responses when asked about who they think the teacher likes and dislikes (see Figure 10), the parallels in terms of negative mentions are striking.<sup>24</sup> In light of this observation, one may speculate whether the students dislike the three unpopular classmates because they believe that the teacher dislikes them as well or rather if they are projecting their own preferences or aversions onto the teacher. Either case leads to the same self-reinforcing effects: the students' perception of the 'pecking order' in class largely corresponds with their own feelings of like and dislike. In this respect, Ottis-Jon, Andy and Enrico are the outsiders of the class.<sup>25</sup> Florent, on the other hand, was not once explicitly uninvited.

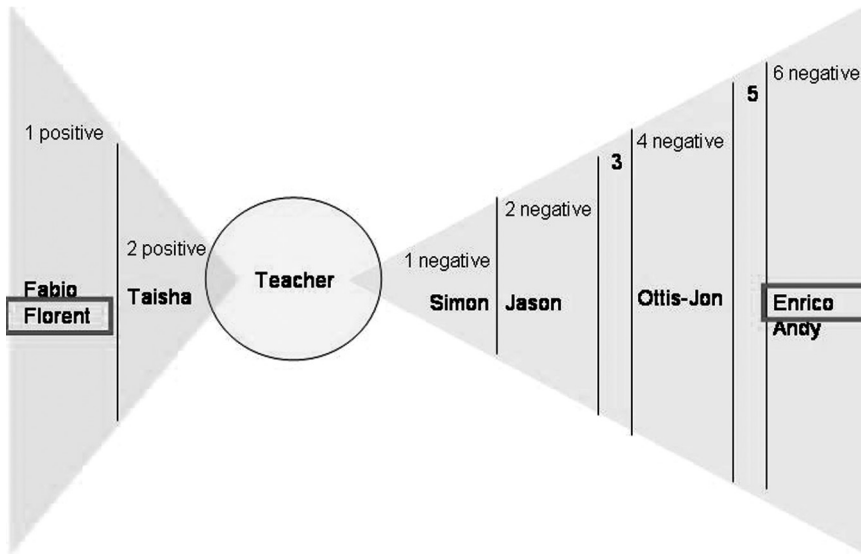


Figure 10 Assumed Relations of Liking and Disliking on the Part of the Teacher; Number of Mentions in Student Interviews

## Conclusions

The findings from both analyses show that hopes of neutralizing formally instituted structures of inequality and transforming the class setting into a more integrative environment<sup>26</sup> deny social reality in two respects. It is not only impossible to suspend the formal system of inequality, we must further reckon with a second system of inequality at the emotional level. The latter has profound effects for the social positions assigned students in class.

The teacher can also do little to alter this circumstance. In the class situation, the teacher is for the most part virtually overwhelmed by the large number of student interventions going on at the same time (see Breidenstein, 2006: 61). In order to keep the main process going, which is teaching a specific subject matter, the teacher is forced to consistently select those interventions most suitable to the purpose. Depending on the situation, it is not always the constructive student contributions that best fit this category. For instance, when background noise grows louder, the choice may fall on disruptive student interventions – for purposes of reprimand in the hope of quieting not only the student explicitly addressed but also of calming the whole situation as a side effect. As shown earlier, the student targeted for disciplinary action is picked strategically. In other words,

the teacher must constantly consider how to intervene most effectively to keep the lesson going. In so doing, he or she must exercise great prudence in employing the two intervention strategies 'call on a student' and 'reprimand a student' since, in critical situations, choice of the proper target is crucial for achieving the goal. The more or less implicit classification of students applied by the teacher can be conceived as a means of maintaining control that enables keeping the lesson going while putting him or her in a position to be able to effectively make decisions at any point in time on what needs to be done next to achieve the objective.

On the other hand, the fact that certain emotional dispositions affect the social constellations that emerge from social interaction is an inevitable aspect of interaction in any social situation. The volatile nature of such constellations in the class setting results from the fact that they are reinforced by formal structures of inequality. Unequal treatment takes the shape of a persistent pattern only in interaction: the teacher acts based on stories about students and their interventions, and shapes his or her own interventions accordingly. Emotional expressions play a crucial role in the process because they particularly are a source of unequal treatment of students, which, as our video analyses show, is perceived with great sensitivity by the first graders targeted as well as their classmates. Each kind of treatment triggers a different response on the part of the student. Although unequal treatment may be subtle and implicit (non-verbal), the impact must not be underestimated. A student's status can be cemented to the point of being virtually resistant to change. The consequences are immediately apparent: the social position that students are assigned defines their chances of participating in class. Students are typically treated differently according to social position<sup>27</sup> – by third parties as well. At the same time, what goes on in class and the persons involved in the class setting both appear in a different light depending on the specific position of the observer. Thus, from this vantage point, too, the system of inequality has a significant impact.

The opportunities for learning are distributed unequally across social space by social position in class – and a number of students come up empty-handed. Social positions conducive to learning, less favourable to learning or that may even make learning virtually impossible are all products of the relationship dynamics in class. Which student ends up in which position in this 'porous' space of learning is 'negotiated' by those involved. Of course, the teacher's institutionally and organizationally legitimized power of interpretation, action and communication plays a decisive role in this respect; in the case under study, this power is additionally underscored by a teacher-oriented seating arrangement. In this environment, the relationship with the teacher and the emotional basis upon which it rests are decisive factors determining the social position in



which the student is placed. And once the position is occupied, it becomes extremely difficult for the respective student to move out of it since the status quo is continuously reproduced in an ongoing process of interpretation and interaction in which all actors are involved. The bottom line is thus quite disillusioning. The relationship-based system of inequality is an implicit result over which the actors have little individual control – due to the interactive nature of the process – and which in fundamental ways sets the course for the future in terms of the relationships among those involved, their social positions in the class and the interactions yet to come. This of course does not provide an excuse for continuing to ignore this. Rather, shifting attention from processes of learning to social interaction – including non-verbal communication – seeks to enhance awareness of the significance of this interpersonal, emotionally based (not rationally founded) system of inequality for what goes on in class and for the educational careers that evolve from this arrangement. Only if this shift succeeds can teachers adopt a reflective stance towards their own actions that embodies the potential for expanding the social opportunities for learning.

### Notes

1. For two other examples of work using the approach of qualitative social network research, see Mützel (2009) and Keim et al. (2009). A current review of qualitative social network research is given by Hollstein (2009).
2. In this context, I draw on the notion of 'story' as employed in Harrison C. White's (1992: 65 ff.) phenomenological network theory, according to which people, based on their social position, devise stories about the context, situation, other participants and particularly about social relationships.
3. Describing school as an institution directs attention towards the role it plays in society. According to Parsons (1968), school performs qualification, allocation and selection, as well as integration and legitimation functions in society. The last involve imparting social values and norms; the second mentioned pair, allocation and selection, refers to the function of disseminating knowledge according to society's needs; and the first-mentioned function serves to prepare members of society for the occupational roles to be assumed.
4. Hurrelmann (2002: 199) characterizes schools as 'people processing organizations' whose main objective is to 'stimulate in a controlled process the self-development of their clients' (my translation), which is mostly implemented in face-to-face interaction.
5. What has been coined 'the pedagogical relationship between the generations' (Kramer et al., 2001) further reinforces this superiority.
6. In a similar sense, Scholz (2005) speaks of 'atmosphere'.
7. A host of studies are concerned with social inequality in education. For an overview, see Georg (2006). However, research so far has not specifically addressed the reproduction of inequality in interaction in class. In German school research, only a few studies have touched upon the issue. Among them

are studies on microstructures in class (e.g. Böhme, 2000; Combe and Helsper, 1994), on the imparting of knowledge and evaluation of students in class (e.g. Kalthoff, 2000; Wiesemann, 2000), on practices marking gender differences between school children (e.g. Breidenstein and Kelle, 1998; Faulstich-Wieland et al., 2001) and on the lifeworld of school children (e.g. Breidenstein, 2006; Krappmann and Oswald, 1995). Krappmann and Oswald (1995) have made the proposed shift to relationships, yet without employing methods of network analysis. Breidenstein and Kelle (2007) discuss the problems power and inequality pose for qualitative research in the class setting.

8. In this respect, the path laid out by Luhmann's systems theory (Luhmann, 2004: 19ff.) is rejected. Luhmann proposes conceiving the system of interaction referred to as a 'school lesson' as a self-referential system that cannot be influenced by the emotional state of participating individuals in a direct way.
9. One of the schools was mostly attended by children from a lower middle-class background. It clearly was the livelier of the two classes. The other class was made up of children from upper middle-class families.
10. Straus (2002: 196ff.) provides an overview of the variety of network maps that can be used in qualitative interviewing.
11. On the use of video cameras in research in school class settings, see Wagner-Willi (2001, 2004).
12. The students became surprisingly quickly used to the cameras so that they had a negligible effect upon the setting under observation.
13. The traditional seating arrangement in teacher-centred instruction is set up in a way as to communicate immediately the distribution of authority and power relationships. Differences between the students are generated by proximity or distance of the rows where the students are seated to the teacher. In this arrangement, the individual person, as if by fate, is cast into a certain position in class (also see Breidenstein, 2006: 39ff.).
14. Additional context factors were assessed by other means, for instance, by the parent survey and the children interviews, but also by analysing sequences from the lessons. Concerning the situation at home, the information provided suggests that Florent's parents spend time with him (according to Florent – both his and Enrico's parents did not complete the questionnaire) whereas Enrico seems to be mostly on his own at home (he also said that 'watching TV' and 'watching DVDs' are his favourite activities at home).
15. The interpretation of the three protagonists' interventions and emotional expressions refers to the classroom interaction and situation. It thus involves an assessment of communicative actions and non-verbal expressions (which are documented in detail in the transcript) relating to the main flow of events.
16. After reaching the end of one segment, we continue with the next segment (below) as if one were reading a musical score.
17. In the following, the point in time indicated by numbers (minutes and seconds) refers to the timeline (last row in the illustration of the sequence of events).
18. For instance, the teacher generally takes a step towards a student or stays put when calling on a student. Only when calling on Enrico, he takes a step back. The video analysis discloses a number of such subtle differences in teacher behaviour. In sum, they are evidence of mental reservations. We can assume

that the children perceive these non-verbal messages and understand what is being communicated.

19. Westphal (2005) characterizes the relationship of students to their teacher as alternating between participation and dissociation (also Breidenstein, 2006: 260ff.).
20. The teacher interview confirms that he actually employs such a classification system and that he mostly does so implicitly.
21. Having received six votes, Laura is the 'star' among the female students.
22. Enrico, in contrast, was quite hospitable and wanted to invite as many as seven classmates; while Florent was much more selective, inviting only three other students to the castle.
23. Only the student Ottis-Jon fared worse: six students mentioned him when asked who they would not want to invite, among them Florent and Enrico, who both only mentioned one classmate (Ottis-Jon) in response to this question.
24. Florent and Enrico's responses to this question are also very instructive in this respect: Florent believes that the teacher does not like Ottis-Jon and that Taisha and he himself are the teacher's favourite students. Enrico also claims that the teacher does not like Ottis-Jon.
25. By sitting in the last row their socially marginal position in class is also reflected in physical space.
26. Such hopes are reflected in notions such as 'student participation' and 'school culture' (see Helsper and Lingkost, 2002).
27. Even the general rules governing conduct in class are enforced differently. While in the case of some students, talking to one's neighbour is not tolerated at all and breaches of the rule are immediately sanctioned, in other cases, much greater leniency is exercised.

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