
CLASSROOM DECISION-MAKING

Joseph Fenech

It hardly needs pointing out that decision-making is a central feature of classroom life and that the teacher as the person responsible for what happens inside the classroom, is at the focus of the decision-making process. What I intend to do in this chapter is to discuss decision-making, the role of the teacher as decision-maker and the context within which decision-making occurs. But perhaps I must first clarify what a decision is and the different kinds of decisions one can make.

The dictionary defines decision as a choice of a course of action from a range of alternative courses. It has been observed that decisions are a bridge between thought and action, understanding the environment and acting upon it, and the actions one takes reflect the interpretation one has made of one's situation.¹ Such a concept considers decision-making to be a pervasive as well as a highly situated human activity. Decision-making, therefore, features in everything we do, as it is always assumed that we could have done one thing rather than another.

Decisions are not of one and the same kind, however. We sometimes decide after we have thought long and hard: in this case the course will be chosen as a result of reflection, involving the weighing of pros and cons, anticipating consequences and so

¹ CALDERHEAD J., *Teacher's Classroom Decision-Making*, (Rinehart and Winston, Holt., London 1984), p.1.

on. Such a decision is of the reflective kind. On the other hand, we make many decisions on the spur of the moment, without doing any thinking at all, often times as an immediate response to the demands of the situation we find ourselves in. These are immediate decisions, based more often than not on snap judgements and intuitions. But perhaps we have learnt to make a greater number of decisions as a matter of routine; these are repeated, mechanical responses to familiar situations and can be defined as routine decisions.

Teaching can cover a family of activities.² These activities can follow reflection, be immediate responses to the demands of the moment or repeatedly done in a more or less mechanical manner. The planning of work for the class is expected to require an amount of reflection. On the other hand, dealing with a classroom event may involve an immediate reaction based on an intuition or snap judgement whilst preparing for a class activity can be done as a matter of routine.

Reflective decisions are more likely to occur at what Jackson calls the 'preactive' phase of teaching³, that is, at the moment of planning and designing courses, choosing what is to be taught and the appropriate methods for teaching it. It can also occur after the teaching event when the teacher reviews the day's work on his/her way home or in the silence of his/her room. The latter is an exercise in what Schon calls reflection-on-practice⁴ which helps the teacher to enhance his/her professional expertise.

Routine and immediate decisions, on the other hand, occur at the interactive phase of teaching⁵, that is, when the teacher is in front of the class. Jackson makes so clear and helpful a distinction that it is worth quoting in full:

² HIRST, P.H. and PETERS, R.S., *The Logic of Education*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1970).

³ JACKSON, P.H., 'The Way Teaching Is', in *N.E.A. Journal*, 1962, 54.

⁴ SCHON, D., *The Reflective Practitioner*, (Temple Smith, London 1983).

⁵ JACKSON, P.H., *ibid.*

One of the chief differences between preactive and interactive teaching behaviour seems to be in the quality of the intellectual activity involved. Preactive behaviour is more or less deliberative. Teachers, when grading examinations, planning a lesson or deciding what to do about a particularly difficult student, tend to weigh evidence, to hypothesize about the possible outcome of certain actions and so forth. At such times, teaching looks like a highly rational process.

Contrast this with what happens when students enter the room. In the interactive setting, the teacher's behaviour is more or less spontaneous. When students are in front of him/her, the teacher tends to do what s/he feels or knows is right rather than what s/he reasons is right. This is not to say that thought is absent when class is in session, but it is thought of quite a different order.⁶

Before I proceed to consider in some detail classroom decision-making at these two different phases of teaching, we should be clear about what the decision-making process involves.

Decision-making can be seen as a series of interlocking steps, namely:

1. Perception of a situation as an occasion for a decision;
2. Interpretation of the situation;
3. Deliberation about the available courses of action;
4. Action; and
5. Reflection on its effectiveness.

Hargreaves's example of the child disrupting the lesson by talking when he is expected to be attentive illustrates each of the above five stages.⁷ The teacher notices that during the explanation one of the pupils starts talking with his classmate. The teacher interprets the situation as demanding an immediate intervention on his part, otherwise the disruption will escalate. The teacher then, on the basis of what Schutz calls 'recipe knowledge', selects the most appropriate intervention from a range of options available to him/her : stopping the lesson momentarily, giving the pupil a hard look, calling him/her to the front of the

⁶ JACKSON, P.H., op. cit., p.11.

⁷ HARGREAVES, D.H., 'A Phenomenological Approach to Classroom Decision Making', in EGGLESTON, J. (ed.), *Teacher Decision-Making in the Classroom*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1979), p.78.

class, or sending him/her to the headteacher. On the basis of an interpretation of the pupil's act, founded on an understanding of the act-actor-situation matrix⁸ the teacher selects what s/he considers to be the appropriate action. Finally, the teacher considers the effectiveness of the decision in terms of whether it has brought a stop to the pupil's misbehaviour or not.

The teacher's decision to choose one course of action rather than another in a situation of this kind may lead the observer to conclude that the teacher's decision was 'instinctive', 'automatic' or too 'instantaneous' to be seen as a consequence of a series of interlocking steps. It is indicative of the teacher's skill, however, based on tacit knowledge as well as professional expertise, that decisions are so quickly and easily made.

For the beginning teacher, however, decisions may prove neither too quick nor too easy to make. In spite of the fact that teacher educators are constantly aware of the predicament inexperienced teachers can find themselves in, once they are with a class on their own, and in spite of the gradualist approaches used to introduce them to classroom responsibilities (school experience, closely supervised teaching, lightened teaching load), beginning teachers continue to feel apprehensive about what might happen once they are in front of a class.⁹ They become concerned about whether they will be able to gain and maintain the attention and interest of the class, whether they will cope effectively with unpredictable events or whether they will succeed in pitching the subject matter at the pupils's cognitive level, for instance. Whereas, as Calderhead points out, for the experienced teacher many of the interactive decisions become routine ones, for the novice every decision is consciously taken, absorbing much mental energy, increasing thereby situational anxiety.¹⁰ This is because the inexperienced teacher has not yet accumulated that repertoire

⁸ HARGREAVES, D.H., 'A Phenomenological Approach to Classroom Decision Making', in EGGLESTON, J. (ed.), *op. cit.*

⁹ FULLER, FF., 'Concerns of Teachers', in *A.E.R.A. Journal*, 1969, no.6., and TAYLOR, Ph., 'A Study of the Concerns of Teachers on a P.G.C.E. Course', in *British Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 1 no. 2, 1975.

¹⁰ CALDERHEAD, J., *op. cit.*, p.15.

of knowledge and skills which are a precipitate of extensive teaching experience. Let us now examine decision-making at the two different phases of teaching.

REACTIVE DECISIONS

As we have already said, at the preactive phase the decisions the teacher makes deal mainly with planning, that is that process, so aptly described by Clark and Yinger in which the teacher

visualizes the future, inventories means and ends, and constructs a framework to guide his or her future action - thinking in the future tense¹¹.

Planning for teaching usually involves a wide range of activities. These can include preparing a scheme of work, writing lessons plans, making audio-visual materials, consulting reference works, choosing textbook exercises, anticipating problems pupils might have and mentally rehearsing appropriate responses to them.

Various writers have seen this kind of activity as a series of rational steps in which the teacher starts with a statement of objectives, continues with the selection of content and how it is to be organized for teaching and ends with evaluation procedures to establish the extent to which the initial objectives have been achieved.¹²

Empirical research on teacher planning has revealed, however, that teachers hardly ever start with the specification of objectives.¹³ Decisions at this stage regard the content the teacher intends to cover or the activities the pupils are intended to carry out. The teacher's hunch, therefore, is to decide how his/her

¹¹ CLARK, C.M. and YINGER, R.J., 'Teacher Planning', in CALDERHEAD, J. (ed.), *Exploring Teachers' Thinking*, (Cassell, London 1987), p.86.

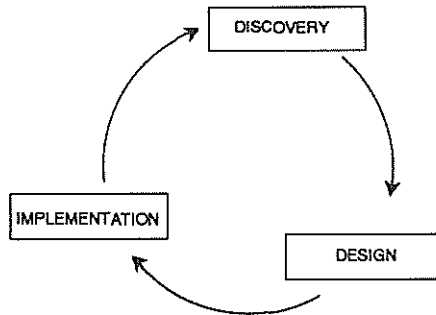
¹² TYLER, R.W., *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1949). TABA, H., *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*, (Harcourt Brace and World, New York 1962). WHEELER, D.K., *Curriculum Process*, (University of London Press, London 1967).

¹³ ZAHORIK, J.A., 'Teachers' Planning Models', in *Educational Leadership*, 1975, No.33. Mc CUTCHEON, G., 'How do Elementary Teachers Plan? The Nature of Planning and Influence on It', in *Elementary School Journal*, 1980, 81. TAYLOR, Ph., *How Teachers Plan their Courses*, (N.F.E.R., London 1970).

pupils' time will be occupied in the classroom.¹⁴ Not only do teachers not start with the specification of objectives, but, perhaps due to the nature of teaching itself, which demands flexibility to meet contingencies, teachers are very much reluctant to plan for the long term. McCutcheon's research shows that teachers do not make decisions about long term planning for a number of reasons: a) they feel it is impossible to foresee eventualities like how pupils will progress and what interruptions might occur; b) long term plans constrain teachers unnecessarily; c) there is the danger that they may be enslaved by plans; d) this may lead to inflexible attitudes towards learning opportunities that may arise; and, e) it will not lead to an educationally wise use of teaching time.¹⁵

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Yinger¹⁶ derived a model of teacher planning based on data culled from observations, interviews and think-aloud protocols comprising discovery, design and implementation cycles which can be represented diagrammatically as follows:



¹⁴ MORINE, G., *A Study of Teacher Planning, Research Report of the Far Western Laboratory for Educational Research and Development*, (San Francisco, California 1976). PETERSON, P.L. and CLARK, C.M., 'Teachers' Reports of their Cognitive Processes during Teaching', *A.E.R.A. Journal*, 1978, no. 15. YINGER, R.J., 'A Study of Teacher Planning', *Elementary School Journal*, 1980, 80. BEN-PERETZ, M., 'The Form and Substance of Teachers' Lesson Planning', Paper presented at A.E.R.A. meeting, Los Angeles, California 1981.

¹⁵ McCUTCHEON, G., 'How do Elementary Teachers Plan?' *op. cit.*

¹⁶ CLARK, C.M. and YINGER, R.J., 'Teacher Planning' in CALDERHEAD, J., (ed.), *op. cit.* p.92.

At the discovery stage the teacher finds that his/her beliefs about teaching, his/her knowledge and experience as well as the resources available present him/her with a problem for further exploration. At the design stage the teacher is engaged in devising approaches to the problem and formulating plans for adaptation. In the final stage, the teacher implements the plan, evaluates it and incorporates what he/she has learnt into his/her repertoire of knowledge and experience. This model is cyclical because it describes the way professionals (doctors, architects, lawyers, engineers) go about their work as illustrated by Schon¹⁷ and because it considers

that each planning event draws from prior planning and teaching experiences and that each teaching event feeds into future planning and teaching processes.¹⁸

How does planning influence actual practice? Peterson's and Carnahan's findings indicate that teachers' plans affect the general organization and structuring of teaching activities rather than the actual verbal interchanges between teacher and pupils as the latter's responses are always unpredictable.¹⁹ At infant level, however, teachers are more concerned with the selection and arrangement of learning materials in classrooms for children's activities. In this case because of the near total reliance on materials and their arrangement, teachers' planning heavily influenced children's learning opportunities.²⁰

¹⁷ SCHON, D., *op.cit.*

¹⁸ CLARK, C.M. and YINGER, R. J., 'Teacher Planning' in CALDERHEAD, J. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.92.

¹⁹ PETERSON, P.L. and CLARK, C.M., 'Teachers' Reports of their Cognitive Processes during Teaching' *op.cit.*, and CARNAHAN, R.S., 'The Effects of Teacher-Planning on Classroom Processes', *Technical Report Madison Wisconsin Research and Development Centre for Individualized Schooling*, No.541, 1981.

²⁰ HILL, J., YINGER, R.J., ROBBINS, D., 'Instructional Planning in a Developmental Pre-School', Paper presented at an A.E.R.A. meeting, Los Angeles, California 1981.

MENTAL PLANNING

A form of planning which teachers engage in, but which is not recognized by those who educate teachers as a legitimate professional activity, is mental planning. It has been found that before writing lesson plans or teaching a lesson, teachers engage in a complex mental dialogue, mentally rehearsing the lesson, anticipating what would actually happen during the actual delivery.²¹ At this stage the teacher is engaged in a deliberate act which Dewey described as

a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various possible lines of action... Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulse, to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon. But the trial is in imagination not an overt fact.²²

Such a deliberate act allows the teacher to consider the effects of more than one course of action before actually trying it out in the classroom. Once tried out, as Dewey observes, an act becomes 'irrevocable' and 'its consequences cannot be blotted out'.²³

On what basis do teachers finally decide on one course of action rather than another? In the ethnographic study reported by McCutcheon, many teachers were found to rely on what worked well in the past, others accepted the first idea that came to mind because of limited time for planning, while others felt that prescribed textbooks dictated many of their decisions.²⁴

As a process of reflective thinking mental planning has a lot of potential for enhancing the professional expertise of the teacher. Through such an exercise in reflective thinking, the teacher can derive principles of practice which, in turn, can provide the basis for decision-making in the future. Furthermore, mental planning helps the teacher to anticipate what might go wrong, to move from one segment of the lesson to another, to use time more profitably and acquaint himself/herself with the subject matter of the lesson.

²¹ McCUTCHEON, G., 'How do Elementary Teachers Plan?', op. cit.

²² DEWEY, J., *Human Nature and Conduct*, (Holt and Co. New Jersey 1922), p.190.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ McCUTCHEON, G., op. cit.

It can also provide psychological support by reducing fear of uncertainty and giving the teacher more direction, security and confidence in the classroom.²⁵

This kind of planning is not done at a fixed time and in an established place; as McCutcheon points out:

Driving home from school, or standing in the shower in the morning, or walking down the aisle in the grocery store, or sitting on the beach in July, the teacher might reflect on the past and plan for the future.²⁶

Indeed, it has been the complaint of many teachers that they carry school home with them.

Let me pass on to consider now interactive decision-making.

INTERACTIVE DECISION-MAKING

It has been remarked earlier that the classroom situation, with its multidimensionality, immediacy, unpredictability, publicness and history,²⁷ does not allow the teacher to make decisions of the reflective kind. In such a situation the teacher as decision-maker has either to act on the basis of snap judgements and intuitive insights or in a mechanical fashion. However, whether decisions are routine or immediate ones, the basis always is, as Hargreaves argues, the teacher's 'commonsense knowledge which becomes tacit in the decision-making itself'.²⁸ Hargreaves suggests that this tacit knowledge can be uncovered by inviting teachers to comment on classroom decisions through the adoption of stimulated recall procedures.

Taking this suggestion, I videotaped lessons in an opportunity class²⁹ in a Primary School and a science lesson in a secondary

²⁵ CLARK, C., 'Teacher Planning', *Communication Quarterly*, 1978, vol.1, no. 4.

²⁶ McCUTCHEON, G., 'How do Elementary Teachers Plan?', op.cit.

²⁷ DOYLE, W., 'Classroom Organisation and Management', in WITTROCK, M.C., (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching 3e*, (Macmillan, New York 1986).

²⁸ HARGREAVES, D.H., 'A Phenomenological Approach...', in EGGLESTON, J. (ed.), op.cit., p.75.

²⁹ Opportunity classes were set up in the early 1980's as an experiment which was actually abolished in 1987. They used to take pupils aged 11+ who had finished the Primary School course, but who were unable to secure a place in the Grammar School or the area Secondary School due to their extremely low attainment. At the moment opportunity classes are housed in Opportunity Centres.

Grammar School and then, during review, asked the teachers concerned to make comments on selected decision points in the lessons. In the opportunity class, the teacher was delivering an Art and Craft lesson while in the Grammar School pupils were learning about chromatography.

Below I reproduce a selection of classroom events with the teacher's comments:

Event	Teacher's Comment
1. Teacher introduces the lesson on the mixing of colours by calling the pupils around the table where the necessary materials (water, paints, bottles) had been displayed.	1. I wanted the pupils to take the best position to be able to see.
2. Teacher selects pupils to mix colours. Pupils take turns.	2. First I chose those pupils whom I was sure would carry out the task well and then I chose the less able to involve them in the task.
3. At the end of the explanation pupils form various groups take up different activities.	3. Pupils were expected to take up an activity but nothing was rigidly imposed. Pupils were free to take up the activity then or at some other time.
4. Teacher goes to a group doing fretwork.	4. I wanted to show them how to handle tools correctly.
5. Teacher goes to a child mixing paints.	5. I wanted to ascertain that he was using the right procedures.
6. One of the pupils joins a group to help them transplant the seedlings.	6. I assigned him special responsibilities. Sometimes he acted as my deputy.
7. Teacher joins the group transplanting the seedlings and tells them how to go about their task.	7. They had not spaced the seedlings correctly.
8. Teacher claps his hands and calls 'Time is up'.	8. It was time for mid-morning break and I did not want to deprive them of it.

The teacher's commentary on parts of the lesson indicate his multiple concerns in the classroom: to motivate the pupils, to ensure that they adopt the right procedures, to encourage leadership, and to ensure that tasks are done well. It is through teachers' commentaries of this kind that we can understand teachers' decisions in the interactive phase of teaching.

Using the same stimulated recall procedure, I asked the teacher of a science class in a Grammar School to comment on a single event which occurred towards the end of the lesson. Through it we can gain an insight into the teacher's tacit knowledge on which many of classroom decisions are based.

After the students had carried out the chromatography experiment, one of them stood up and asked the teacher what would happen if paraffin instead of water were to be used as a solvent. The teacher told him to try the experiment at home and report the results during the next lesson. Although, in the immediacy of the moment the teacher's reaction seemed so natural a move in the flow of classroom events, yet, on closer analysis, we would find that the teacher could have reacted in a different manner. He could have told the pupil the result there and then, he could have expressed uncertainty about what would happen or he might have conducted the experiment with the suggested solvent during the lesson itself. In his commentary he made it clear that he had chosen that course of action because he wanted pupils to learn the skills of 'doing' science and how to communicate scientific results to others.

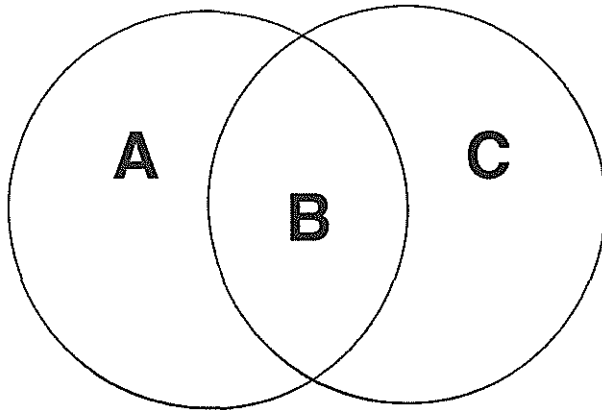
Much of current classroom research, especially that based on observation schedules, remains oblivious to what motivates the teacher to act in one way rather than another. It is, as Hargreaves points out, by inviting the teachers' comments on their decisions after the event that we can uncover the tacit knowledge on which so much of decision-making inside classrooms is based.³⁰

³⁰ HARGREAVES, D.H., *op. cit.*, p.75.

DECISION-MAKING CONTEXTS

What degree of discretion does the teacher have to make decisions inside schools and classrooms? In a system like ours where so many things are prescribed, from curricula and syllabuses to books and examinations, the teacher's discretion is much more limited than in a system, like the British, where these things are decided at a more local level. In our situation it can be said that teachers are allowed more discretion in the manner of teaching to be adopted rather than in the matter of what is to be taught.

A very helpful way of analysing decision-making inside schools is by looking at the organizational pattern of the school as made up of zones within which decisions are made. Three important zones can be identified: the administrative, the curricular and the teaching zones, as illustrated in the following figure.



Decision-making zones inside schools:

A=Administrative, B=Curricular, C=Teaching.

At the administrative level, the headteacher is much more involved in decision-making than the teacher whose sphere of influence is the classroom. Relationships in zone A are hierarchical and the teacher is expected to implement decisions taken by the administration of the school. In curricular matters, however, (zone B), relationships tend to be more horizontal, with the headteacher and the staff involved as partners in making

decisions about the school curriculum. It is in matters of teaching approaches that teachers feel they have more say and in which it has been found that the headteacher has a diminished influence. It is argued that this is due to: a) the relative isolation of teachers inside classrooms; b) the immediacy, spontaneity and unpredictability of classroom events which demand a high level of teacher discretion; c) the vague definition of educational goals; and, d) the lack of generally agreed criteria of what constitutes good practice.³¹

It cannot be said, however, that in matters of method teachers' autonomy is very wide or of the same degree. Although the classroom is an enclosed space, it is not impermeable to external influences and constraints. As Hargreaves has consistently argued, the strategies teachers adopt to cope inside classrooms are very much determined by constraints external to educational institutions themselves.³² These influences and constraints work themselves into the system with different vehemence at the different levels and segments of the educational set-up. Furthermore, one must not be oblivious to the fact that there are constraints internal to the classroom system itself, so aptly summarized by Esland as follows:

Children are put into age and ability groups; there is a specified teacher-pupil ratio; there are existing textbooks with only limited resources for their replacement. Prescribed syllabuses and examination courses are also already in existence. Furthermore, the training procedures and career structures of teaching are likely to predispose the teacher to support one kind of pedagogical practice rather than another.³³

³¹ ROSS, J.A., 'The Influence of the Principal on the Curriculum Decisions of Teachers', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 1980, 12(3).

³² HARGREAVES, A, 'Strategies, Decisions and Control: Interaction in Middle School Classrooms', in EGGLESTON, J. (ed.), op. cit. HARGREAVES, A., 'The Significance of Classroom Coping Strategies', in BARTON, L. & MEIGHAN, R., *Sociological Interpretations of Schooling and Classrooms*, (Driffield, Nafferton 1978).

³³ ESLAND, G., *Pedagogy and the Teacher Presentation of Self*, Unit 5, E282: *The Social Organisation of Teaching and Learning*, (Open University Press, Bletchley, Bucks., U.K. 1972), p.10.

Added to these, there are the physical constraints of the classroom such as its physical dimensions and its furniture. Classroom constraints can be illustrated by the following examples.

In the case of the opportunity class in the primary school the teacher is much less externally constrained than in other classes. S/he does not have to deal with a class of thirty pupils, as s/he has less than half this number, s/he chooses his/her own textbooks from those available in the school, s/he devises his/her own syllabus for the class and the pupils are not expected to sit examinations and do well in them. These are characteristics of a class marked by what I call 'low visibility', the educational authorities and the parents are not very watchful over what happens in such classrooms and the work in the class is not attached that much to official programmes, with prescribed syllabuses and textbooks and tested nationally at the end of each scholastic year. Such a teaching context, therefore, allows the teacher much discretion to do his/her own thing, unhindered by the constraints external to the classroom and the school.

This cannot be said about the top stream in the Primary School preparing for the 11+ examination or in the classes of the Secondary Grammar School. This is a context which, in contrast to the previous one, is marked by 'high visibility'. The teacher has a prescribed syllabus to which s/he has to adhere, schemes of work and lessons have to be planned on prescribed textbooks the content of which is examined at the end of each year by a body external to the school. Furthermore, parental expectations for these children are high and the children themselves look forward to doing well in externally-set examinations.

It is not hard to see, therefore, that decision-making occurs within a context which not only provides a situation for decisions to be made, but also acts as a restraint on the process of decision-making itself.

One must not conclude, however, that teacher's decision-making is so circumscribed by contextual constraints that he/she becomes a helpless creature of circumstance. The teacher still has, in my view, quite an amount of discretionary latitude to enable him/her to make a personal impact on classroom events. This implies that there are decision-making skills to be acquired and the quality of

one's teaching as well as the level of one's professionalism, depend on the adequacy or otherwise of the decisions one makes. Who would quarrel with the claim that, ultimately, good teaching is good decision-making?