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### Lastige leerlingen. Een empirisch onderzoek naar sociale oorzaken van probleemgedrag op basisscholen.

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# SUMMARY

This dissertation addresses the question why some pupils behave less well in school than others. To what extent can differences in the problem behaviour of elementary school children be explained by the social influences of teachers, parents and peers on this behaviour?

Since the 1920's, many empirical investigations have been carried out to establish the frequency of problem behaviour in schoolclasses. The outcomes of these studies vary widely. These variations are not only related to the country in which the investigation takes place, but also to the criteria and variables used. Comparisons are therefore difficult to make. If factor-analysis is used, two main types of behavioural disorders emerge: emotional problems and anti-social problems. Emotional disorders show themselves in anxiousness, withdrawal, passivity, and shyness. Anti-social disorders are connected with aggressivity, disobedience, incooperativeness, untidyness, poor concentration and rebelliousness. The behaviour problems teachers find most troublesome are those that interfere with their teaching. Pupils should be attentive, active or quiet according to the situation. This behaviour can be described by the concept of *rule competent* behaviour. A rule competent person is aware what the rules in a specific situation are, and complies with them without needing external pressure to do so.

Partly because there has been a lack of consensus on which aspects of behaviour in class should be investigated, empirically tested explanations of rule incompetent behaviour are rare. Nevertheless most research shows a relationship between the behaviour of parents and teachers on the one hand, and children on the other. If teachers show approval of good behaviour, organise their lessons well, and keep an overview on the classroom, their pupils will behave more rule competently. If parents lack in emotional support for the child, if they are rigid at the same time, or if they tolerate aggressiveness of the child, the child will behave less rule competently at school. Although socio-structural factors, such as size of class, absence of one of the parents in the family, employment of the mother, housing facilities, family size, position of the child in the family, and peer group relations have been investigated frequently for their effects on the behaviour of children, these effects have seldom been related to the behaviour of teachers and parents.

In order to understand better which causal processes in the social environment of the pupil influence his rule competent behaviour, this study follows a strategy of model building (cf. Lindenberg, 1984a). Predictions on the behaviour of social actors are deduced from a) general goals people pursue, and b) specifications of the conditions under which this purposive behaviour



leads to the choice of certain behavioural alternatives. Our starting point is De Vos' model of the interaction system of the school class (De Vos, 1989). It is assumed that social actors in school have one purpose: to obtain *social approval*. The teacher tries to obtain social approval from parents and colleagues by stimulating rule competent behaviour and good achievements in her class. Pupils strive for social approval from teachers, parents and peers, but differ in their capabilities (rule competence and IQ) to reach these intermediate goals: rule competent behaviour and good achievements. It is also assumed that rule competent behaviour has a positive influence on achievement. The more difficult it is for a pupil in getting good grades because of a low intelligence, the more important will it be for him to behave rule competently in order to reach the achievement standard of the teacher. The more pupils in a class have difficulties to get good grades, the more time and energy the teacher will spend in creating an orderly atmosphere of rule competent behaviour. It is assumed that children whose parents have a low socio-economic status (SES) will experience more difficulties in achieving good grades than children whose parents are well educated and have high social positions. This implies that the social composition of the school class affects the consequences of rule incompetent behaviour on the level of achievement in the class. The social composition of the class will therefore also influence the teacher in his choice of teaching style. It is predicted that teachers in low SES classes will try to apply a high standard for order under all circumstances. Teachers in high SES classes on the other hand, will only under special conditions like a big class or a close parental community, opt for a high standard for order.

The parental community of a school class is close, if many parents know the parents of their children's friends. A close parental community facilitates parents to get information on what happens in school. Because parents in a close parental community are better informed on how their children are doing at school, the achievement of pupils will be influenced positively by a close parental community. It is assumed that middle class parents expect their children to get better grades than lower class parents do. Parents will give more attention to rule incompetent behaviour in class when the achievements of their children remain below expectations. In such situations high SES parents in a close community will exert pressure on the teacher to apply a higher standard for order.

For those effects on behaviour in class which have been established by family-research, new predictions are deduced from the behavioural assumptions of the model. These conditions are the absence of one of the parents in the family, outside employment of the mother, housing, family size, and the ordinal position of the child.

Because teachers and parents approve of rule competent behaviour and good grades of children, and children strive for social approval, school chil-

dren will be more popular with their peers if they behave rule competently and get good grades. However, if it is difficult for children to meet their teacher's standards of conduct and achievement, they tend to attach more importance to the approval of peers. Only peers who are in the same situation will want to be friends with them. Because children who have difficulties at meeting standards will more frequently have a lower class background than a middle class background, lower class pupils will have a higher peer group involvement than middle class pupils. The more social approval children get from their peer group (the higher their peer group involvement), the less will they try to behave rule competently in class.

The model is tested by means of a representative sample of 573 elementary school children aged ten to thirteen years in the city of Groningen and the suburban village of Haren. The data were collected in the school year 1985/86.

The empirical analyses show a strong positive effect of rule competent behaviour on teacher's predictions for secondary education, even when the social background of the child is accounted for. Girls behave much more rule competently in class than boys. Even when accounting for differences in behaviour, there are however no sex differences in the expected level of secondary education. This means that boys are judged to be more suited to secondary education than girls.

There is only a weak positive link between socio-economic status (SES) and rule competent behaviour in class. Nevertheless, in classes with many lower class pupils rule incompetent behaviour has a much more negative influence on the average level of achievement than in classes with many middle class pupils. When controlling for the level of rule competence of children, low SES classes show a strong positive and high SES classes show a strong negative connection between the teacher's standard for order and the class' level of rule competent behaviour. Teachers in high SES classes set a higher standard for order when their class is big or the parental community is dense, while teachers in low SES classes try to set a high standard for order whatever the circumstances. A close parental community has a positive effect on the achievement of children. Contrary to our predictions this effect is strong for lower class children as it is for middle class children. Probably the school classes are socially too homogeneous to show a stronger effect on lower class children.

As to family conditions, single parent families show to have a negative influence on the rule competent behaviour of boys. Both boys and girls behave less rule competently in class when their mother works more than 30 hours a week. Cramped housing has not a negative, but a positive influence on the behaviour of children. There is no linear negative relationship between family size and rule competent behaviour in class. However, children from fami-



lies with six or more children behave less rule competently than children from smaller families. Especially youngest children behave less rule competently if they come from bigger families. Children who are only child do not behave less rule competently in class, but are nevertheless less popular with peers than other children. More than 20 per cent of the rule competent behaviour in school is explained by the rule competence children show at home.

Pupils are more popular in class if they get good grades and behave more rule competently. However, good behaviour does not help low achievers in getting more popular, and good grades do not raise the popularity of badly behaved children. In conformity with our predictions, a high peer group involvement is a separate source of popularity when the effects of achievement and behaviour are accounted for. Especially lower class pupils are strongly involved in peer groups. According to their own, these children also participate more frequently in forbidden activities outside school. In school children with a strong peer group involvement behave less rule competently but this behaviour is not aggravated by their peer group.

The major proportion of the model hypotheses passes our tests. Insofar as the hypotheses are not confirmed, this has to be attributed to circumstances not connected to the basic assumptions of the model. The model used in this study seems therefore suited to application in further research.