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The Question of Whether Students Are Truly Learning: A Study of the Formation of the "Bustling Facade" in Secondary School Classrooms

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Abstract: *The classroom atmosphere appears active and fluid, yet individual students frequently make errors when answering questions. This study examines, from a micro-level perspective, the deep tension between active interaction and genuine versus superficial learning—a tension closely tied to educational quality in ethnic minority regions. Drawing on Interaction Ritual Chains as its theoretical framework and adopting a qualitative research paradigm, the study conducts an in-depth analysis of secondary school classrooms . The findings reveal that the "bustling appearance" is not an occasional mishap at any single stage, but rather something that gradually develops through a cyclical process. Because praise becomes decoupled from the quality of thinking, teachers and students form a consensus at the initiation stage that raising one's hand equals participation. On this basis, teachers and students jointly sustain a formal-level collective effervescence through three interrelated processes: collective choral response, superficial grounds for judgment, and a disconnection between students' life experience and instructional symbols. The cycle concludes with students shifting genuine learning off campus and teachers lowering their instructional objectives. Within micro-level interactive contexts, this study clarifies the relationship between teachers' and students' rational choices and the ritual structure, traces the generation of the "bustling appearance," and proposes strategies to break this cycle.*

Keywords: *Interaction Ritual Chains; secondary schools; classroom interaction*

1. Introduction

Both the “New Basic Education” and the “New Education Experiment”, two basic-education reform initiatives, have constructed corresponding conceptual systems and practical frameworks at the level of classroom instruction. The former emphasizes classrooms featuring “interactive generation”[1], whereas the latter advocates building connections between human cultural knowledge and students’ lived experiences in classrooms, so that teachers and students may achieve profound resonance with knowledge, daily life and life itself[2]. Furthermore, the Outline for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial Implementation) (2001) states that “the teaching process is an interactive one in which teachers and students communicate and develop together”[3]. Accordingly, positive teacher-student interaction in the classroom can not only motivate teachers’ instructional enthusiasm and broaden their pedagogical thinking[4], but also foster students’ innovative and critical thinking while boosting their learning motivation and academic performance[5], thus exerting markedly positive facilitative effects in educational practice[6]. Nevertheless, behind some lively classrooms, under-achieving students are commonplace. Does animated teacher-student interaction necessarily equate to sound and effective teacher-student interaction?

Existing studies on classroom teacher-student interaction have largely centred on “silence”. Such scholarship dismantles the prejudice that silence equals absence of learning: classroom silence may signal reflective thinking[7], serve as a covert strategy for students to navigate classroom power dynamics[8][9], or manifest naturally from a culture of circumspection[10][11]. If silence does not signify non-learning, does liveliness therefore equal learning? The phenomenon of “flipping without transforming”--energetic classroom atmospheres paired with superficial thinking--is not uncommon in flipped classrooms[12]. Smooth question-and-answer exchanges between teachers and students may merely represent performative compliance from students[12], and physically active yet cognitively passive participation prevails in many lessons[13]. These studies all point to one core concern: liveliness may be merely ostensible.

Current research on education mostly identifies weaknesses in its education system through

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cross-regional comparisons and indicator-based measurements[14][15]. Many such studies investigate weak performance in science subjects[16] or explore educational informatization[17]. Most of these works locate contributing factors to educational challenges at the macro-level, such as educational input, while few delve inside classrooms to examine the intrinsic quality of teacher-student interaction itself. "Getting students to speak up" remains a taken-for-granted goal in some classrooms[18].

2. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the formative mechanism of the "ostensible liveliness" phenomenon in classroom interaction of secondary schools. Focusing on micro-level teacher–student interactive processes, the research takes Interaction Ritual Chain theory as the core analytical framework to interpret how interactive rituals are initiated, sustained, and solidified in ethnic minority classroom contexts, as well as how superficial classroom prosperity is gradually constructed through repeated ritual cycles.

The research mainly adopts classroom observation and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods. Long-term field observation is conducted to record real-time classroom interactive behaviors, including teacher questioning, student responding, collective choral participation, and teachers' evaluative feedback. Semi-structured interviews with teachers and students are further carried out to supplement subjective perceptions, classroom behavioral motives, and practical dilemmas that cannot be fully observed on-site.

Through thematic coding and situational analysis, this study sorts out the continuous developmental logic of classroom ritual interaction, identifies the structural mismatch between interactive form and cognitive learning, and finally summarizes the generation process and internal causes of the "ostensible lively classroom" phenomenon, so as to propose targeted optimization strategies for classroom teaching in ethnic minority areas.

In accordance with ethical principles, all original data were anonymized and systematically coded for confidentiality. The unified coding framework adopted in this study is specified as follows: classroom observation data were coded in the format of "G + serial number + subject" (e.g., G1-History); teacher interview data were coded as "T + serial number + subject" (e.g., T1-History); student interview data were coded as "S + serial number" (e.g.,S1); and teaching research observation data were coded as "Y + serial number + subject" (e.g., Y1-History). Given that the collected data primarily consist of contextual texts regarding teacher–student interactions, this study adopted a situational analysis approach. All participants and interactive events were organized and interpreted based on their chronological sequence and causal logic. The qualitative analysis and iterative coding of textual materials were conducted with NVivo 11.0 software.

3. Findings and Discussion

In classrooms of middle schools, the ostensible liveliness does not emerge abruptly at a single instructional segment. Instead, it gradually develops, accumulates and solidifies within the continuous cyclic chain of "initiation-process-outcome". It is neither deliberately designed by teachers nor intentionally created by students. Rather, it constitutes an unintended consequence jointly generated by the rational choices of both sides, forming a systematic, self-perpetuating ecosystem.

3.1 Ritual Initiation: Diverged Focus of Attention Between Teachers and Students and the Formation of Performative Interaction Norms

The initiation of interaction rituals hinges on participants'development of shared focuses of attention and collective emotional states. This does not merely mean "everyone looks at the same object", but a high degree of intersubjectivity — participants recognize one another's attentiveness, whereby a "momentarily shared reality" comes into being. Nevertheless, in middle-school classrooms, this ritual, which ought to treat knowledge as its "sacred object", suffers structural deviation from its very onset.

Mutual focus of attention lies at the heart of ritual operation. It requires participants not only to direct attention toward the same object but also to recognize that they are jointly attending to it, thus building "collective awareness that everyone is engaged in this activity together". In middle-school classrooms, teachers initially aim to foster students' cognitive development, while students seek to earn teachers' praise. Though linked through seemingly positive teacher-student exchanges, these two focuses never

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genuinely converge. Teachers ask students to summarize textbook content. Repeated student failures prompt teachers to shift strategies: cognitively demanding summarization tasks are replaced by reading aloud and locating textual information, and these low-difficulty tasks persist throughout instruction (G1-History). Teachers adjust question difficulty to match students' actual performance levels, yet questioning activities remain confined to students' current attainment, leaving their potential developmental zones and cognitive conflicts untouched.

Furthermore, teachers offer lavish affirmations such as "That is quite good for your response" even when students give inaccurate answers. Under such circumstances, the correctness of answers becomes secondary. Students perceive that teachers care more about responses than about factual accuracy. Consequently, more students raise their hands when further questions are posed.

Within interaction rituals, participants tacitly establish an"operating consensus", namely a collective implicit acceptance of prevailing realities. In class, the student collective consensus evolves into pursuing praise through participation rather than mastering knowledge. "Comments can inspire and encourage them to express themselves (T1-History)." Yet feedback is not always affirmative. When encouragement vastly outweighs intellectual demands, students, as rational actors in interactions, readily detect new implicit interaction rules: praise can be obtained merely by verbal participation without deep thinking. A tacit exchange thus unfolds between teachers and students. Teachers dispense praise in return for smooth, seemingly vibrant classroom proceedings; students perform ritual acts of hand-raising and reading aloud in exchange for a sense of security and instant gratification. Knowledge construction is thoroughly marginalized in this transaction.

3.2 Ritual Process: Superficial Collective Excitement Masking Students'Real Learning

Collective excitement represents the core experiential dimension of successful rituals. In middle-school classrooms, however, such excitement becomes formalized. Frequent eager volunteering creates an illusion of dense, prosperous learning. Beneath this surface lie widespread individual cognitive struggles among students. The success of a ritual is ultimately judged by whether it yields group solidarity and individual emotional energy, both of which entail respect for and internalization of group symbols. In these classrooms, knowledge as a group symbol fails to be respected or internalized. The absence of these core outcomes demonstrates that so-called "collective excitement" is purely performative — a state of ostensible liveliness, in which authentic learning fails to occur.

3.2.1 Choral Responses as a Shield for Individual Ignorance

Choral answering both embodies ostensible liveliness and serves as its core generative mechanism. Teachers' questions elicit vigorous, seemingly correct collective replies, yet outcomes deteriorate substantially when students are called on individually (G2-Mathematics). This pattern is not coincidental. Students who raise their hands enthusiastically often display nervous mannerisms such as scratching their heads, touching their faces, or speaking softly with heads bowed upon being nominated (G1-History). The liveliness belongs to the collective rather than to individual members within it. Choral responses function as an invisible shelter: students grappling with cognitive difficulties blend into the group, fabricating an illusion of mastery to evade individual questioning and preserve self-esteem. "I feel embarrassed; I won't speak up in class, I am rather shy (S3)."

Ritual power generates a "momentarily shared reality". In these classrooms, this shared reality does not revolve around consensus over subject knowledge, but around collective pretense of understanding. Genuine confusion and cognitive gaps are concealed amid collective commotion.

3.2.2 Overt Behaviors Replacing Cognitive States as Teachers' Assessment Criteria

Successful interaction rituals depend on continuous fine-grained feedback and mutual adjustment among participants. Teachers' in-class diagnostic judgments are formed based on such micro-level exchanges. In functional conversational rituals, participants are highly attuned to interaction rhythm. Minor disruptions trigger immediate affective unease and prompt adaptive adjustments. When rituals devolve into performative display, teachers' diagnostic benchmarks shift accordingly.

Teachers observe raised hands and comment, "Excellent; he already knows the answer." Still, nominated students frequently fall silent or appear perplexed, forcing teachers to supply answers themselves (G1-History). Students associate hand-raising with opportunities for praise: "It feels great; I get to stand out (S1)." Teachers likewise select respondents chiefly according to hand-raising conduct. Past academic performance constitutes another criterion: high-achieving students receive priority nominations."I know he performed fairly well in the last biology examination (T4-Biology)."

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Nonetheless, these previously high-scoring students frequently glance toward teachers, requiring nods or verbal prompts before articulating tentative, incomplete understandings:“I am not quite sure (S4).”Such assessment bias stems from pressure to maintain instructional pacing. When silence follows a prompt asking students to summarize avian flight characteristics, the teacher walks among desks, urging students to consult textbooks. With guidance, several students identify the answer “short rectum” (G4-Biology). Initially teachers retain command of classroom order, yet their capacity for oversight diminishes as lessons proceed. Instruction continues uninterrupted until moments such as: “Huh? Has someone fallen asleep? I did not notice (T4-Biology).” Teachers’ attention becomes occupied by procedural obligations to cover curriculum content. Diagnoses of student conditions come to rely on whether procedural steps are completed rather than evidence of student thinking.

Evaluating symbols solely by superficial manifestations yields naïve interpretations. Teachers’ classroom diagnoses unconsciously fall prey to such naivety: judgments draw on overt behaviors or historical grades instead of real-time in-class engagement. Actual learning is supplanted by the performance of learning. Ritual failure often originates from overlooking trivial details. Hand-raising, originally a symbolic act signalling reflective individual viewpoints, is reduced to mere proof of physical presence within middle-school classrooms.

3.2.3 Disjuncture Between Lived Experience and Instructional Symbols

Functional rituals require participants to fix attention on shared objects or activities. Students’ lived experiences constitute effective shared ground connecting learners with curricular content. Taking the campus arts festival as context, one Chinese-language teacher assigns students to adapt “Nian Nu Jiao · Reminiscing on Red Cliffs” into short dramas, design shot lists and generate visuals via AI tools (G3-Chinese). Rooted in students’ real-world experiences, the campus festival briefly captures student interest and fosters authentic learning. Engagement evaporates, however, once drama production, screenplay writing and AI prompts are introduced. Rituals break down when participants cannot comprehend one another’s symbolic frameworks.

Upon hearing the drama-production assignment, students explicitly respond “No” and “Not interested”. Meanwhile, the teacher reflects: “I have taught this lesson before; I deliver it in its original form exactly as it was designed (T3-Chinese)”, “When I taught this in Beijing, the effect was wonderful; students competed to volunteer answers (T3-Chinese)”. Lesson plans developed for Beijing contexts are transplanted wholesale to classrooms, ignoring profound disparities in cultural backgrounds and resource conditions. The teacher attributes poor class outcomes to local students: “Children here clearly lack expressive self-confidence (G3-Chinese)”. What the instructor overlooks is the turning point at which promising initial rituals collapse into hollow ones: students cannot participate meaningfully in rituals built upon experiential frameworks alien to their own cultural realities.

3.3 Ritual Outcomes: Cyclical Chains of Ostensible Liveliness

Rituals generate durable emotional energy and symbolic imprints that feed into subsequent interactions, producing self-reinforcing cycles. Under persistent ostensible liveliness in middle-school classrooms, both teachers and students expend emotional energy without attaining their original anticipated rewards. Reconfigured rituals amplify vicious cycles: students grow distrustful of classroom learning, while teachers lower their professional expectations.

3.3.1 Eroded Trust in Classroom Learning

“Coming back, I felt out of place… My only impression is strict discipline, yet academic progress remains stagnant. In Chengdu, you could still make some gains even if you did not study hard. After returning here, you truly cannot improve if you do not exert effort (S2).” As rational ritual participants, students with learning difficulties receive no resolution to their struggles amid ostensible liveliness. When asked how to address their academic hurdles, students mention “attending remedial tutoring (S2)” or “watching online courses (S3)”, and teachers are aware of such out-of-class arrangements. Ostensible liveliness sustains superficial order and harmony.

Individuals gravitate toward interaction contexts yielding high emotional-energy returns and avoid contexts that deplete or fail to deliver emotional energy. Students lose faith in classroom rituals: “We are treated far too much like unruly children (S3).” They perceive classroom settings as sites of surveillance and discipline. As a rational adaptive strategy, they raise hands and participate in choral responses to accommodate instructional pacing, while seeking genuine learning support through private tutoring or online resources outside school.

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3.3.2 Instructional Goals Downgraded From Cognitive Growth to Order Maintenance

Alongside student disillusionment, widespread expectation downgrading emerges among teachers. “I feel they lack learning motivation. I have tried various approaches: sticker-based reward systems… these barely work. Completing exercise workbooks still leaves low-performing students behind. I have spoken with them to analyze weaknesses and even bought snacks to avoid making them feel punished. Yet students I never consulted also came merely for treats instead of academic feedback (T4-Biology).” Despite substantial efforts, teachers fail to secure desired improvements. Academic outcomes do not rise, and incentive schemes become misinterpreted, evoking frustration and powerlessness. Many teachers adopt resigned attitudes: “Do what you can; focus on high-achieving students if nothing else, and hope they grow up happily”,“It is already an achievement for them to tackle moderately difficult questions. Classes I previously instructed averaged merely 28 points. I have done my best; they seldom take initiative to practise exercises (Y2-Mathematics).” A pervasive sense of disillusionment permeates teaching staff. Failed rituals trigger participant disappointment, interactional fatigue and desires for escape. Teachers cease expecting genuine mastery and settle for “no trouble-making” classroom conduct (Y2-Mathematics). A mutual understanding centred on ostensible liveliness thus solidifies. This outcome in turn reinforces ritual initiation and operation: if smooth lesson flow suffices, teachers’ uncritical praise and students’ performative participation become acceptable substitutes.

Those on the receiving end of directives tend to lose emotional energy and may grow alienated or resistant. Traditional frameworks frame teachers as holders of power in teacher-student relations. Within the micro-context of middle-school classrooms, students’ perceptions align with this conventional view, whereas teachers perceive themselves as micro-power underdogs. Unable to compel student thinking or alter prevailing educational evaluation systems, teachers divert emotional-energy resources toward sustaining classroom order and collude with students to produce ostensible liveliness: “If some students simply cannot keep up, focus on those capable ones. There is little else you can do; it is almost like comforting small children (Y2-Mathematics).”

4. Research Implications

Ritual outcomes such as emotional energy cannot be permanently retained after a single acquisition; instead, they require continuous activation and emotional investment in subsequent interactive rituals, otherwise they will gradually dissipate. Accordingly, negative ritual interactions must be optimized into positive ones and continuously reinforced to sustain long-term positive ritual outcomes. Based on the above findings, the corresponding optimization strategies are proposed as follows.

4.1 Culturally Responsive Teaching to Stimulate Learning Interest

Culturally responsive teaching regards students’life experiences and cognitive styles as valuable pedagogical resources rather than learning barriers. Existing domestic studies have combined culturally responsive teaching with instructional practices in ethnic minority regions and verified its local feasibility. Therefore, grounded in China’s national conditions and guided by the goal of forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, culturally responsive teaching should be further developed as a vital approach to improving classroom teaching in ethnic areas . Possesses distinctive local educational resources encompassing dietary culture, ecological characteristics, traditional arts, and other regional elements. Several teachers interviewed admitted that their limited understanding culture made them intentionally avoid relevant cultural content in classroom instruction. Nevertheless, most teachers unconsciously adopt local cultural symbols such as “butter tea”, “yaks”, and “agricultural and pastoral areas” to facilitate students’ knowledge comprehension. This indicates that teachers have already applied culturally responsive teaching strategies implicitly to bridge the gap of symbolic capital with students, though such practices remain simplistic in form and have not been systematically promoted.

4.2 Adjust Classroom Rhythm to Break Ostensible Liveliness

Teachers ought to continuously perceive and judge students’real learning status during instruction, instead of relying merely on superficial interactive signals. While maintaining smooth classroom progression, teachers may adopt targeted intervention strategies. For instance, after collective student responses, teachers can initiate follow-up individual questioning such as “Who can restate this viewpoint in your own words?”Additionally, a three-minute in-class quiz at the end of lessons can effectively identify students’learning confusion. These practices separate individual students from group collective

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responses and eliminate the conditions for performative classroom liveliness. Such methods help teachers capture individual learning signals usually concealed by unified group replies and maintain rational pedagogical judgment amid routine classroom interaction.

4.3 Focus on Cognitive Confusion to Reconstruct Classroom Learning Trust

Before the end of each class, teachers can design a short, independent learning task based on the key knowledge of the lesson. This task requires no scoring or comparative evaluation and solely aims to help students gain authentic learning achievement and cognitive acquisition. Since the formation of ostensible lively classrooms stems from long-term cumulative interactive rituals, breaking this vicious cycle cannot be accomplished overnight. It is necessary to conduct phased effect verification and flexible instructional adjustment in long-term teaching practice to gradually realize the transformation from superficial interactive prosperity to substantive learning effectiveness.

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