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ABSTRACT

An experimental version of the one semester high school sociology course, "Inquiry in Sociology," was taught by 222 teachers throughout the United States in the spring of 1969. The purpose of this field test was to learn something about its relative success in rural, small-town, suburban, and central city schools, and with students of various socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations. The techniques used were: 1) visits by staff members who observed classes in session and interviewed both teachers and students, 2) multiple-choice tests, and 3) an essay test. Students expressed a generally high level of interest in the course, with the high points at the beginning and the end. Despite the fluctuations in interest, the objective tests indicated a uniformly high performance and a low correlation of less than .12 between interest and performance, and a consistently high correlation between ability and performance. Critical thinking skills in analyzing social problem situations from a sociological perspective were measured by the essay test. The students appeared to have a good grasp of substantive ideas and concepts, but a considerably less adequate grasp of sociological methods. Certain substantive weaknesses and the effect of teacher style are also mentioned. SO 000 241 is a related document. (SBE)

A NEW SOCIOLOGY COURSE: SOME RESULTS OF THE FIELD TEST

F. Lincoln Grahls

In the spring of 1969 an experimental version of the one semester high school sociology course, Inquiries in Sociology, was taught by 222 teachers throughout the United States. The purposes of such an extensive field trial were several. This course had been a major effort of the project, Sociological Resources for the Social Studies and the best information possible was desired for use in its final revision prior to publication. In addition, it was desired to learn something about its relative success in rural, small-town, suburban and central city schools, in different parts of the country and with students of various socio-economic backgrounds, abilities and aspirations. During the planning stage hopes for a third kind of information arose; this last would be some insight into the most effective way of preparing teachers to use these materials.

A variety of techniques was employed for the purpose of obtaining data. There were visits by staff members who observed classes in session and interviewed both teachers and students. There were also multiple-choice tests and an essay test. Unfortunately no control populations were used for the tests, nevertheless they provide some valuable diagnostic information.

A paper presented by Dr. Gruene Fraser at the 1969 meeting of the American Sociological Association discusses in detail some of the attitudes and opinions of students and teachers concerning the course. To recapitulate briefly from that paper, students expressed a generally high level of interest in the course, but the high points of interest were at the beginning and the end; teachers thought, also, that the first and last parts of the course had the greatest relevance to the students, thus accounting for the higher interest at those points. It should, however, be noted that teachers gave the entire course satisfactory ratings with regard to relevancy as well as understandability of sociological

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concepts and stimulation of student thinking and discussion.

I have, of course, gone on record elsewhere with the opinion that interest to students is important, but should not become such a goal of curriculum designers that they sacrifice other important considerations in its pursuit. I think the designers of this course have handled the matter of interest admirably. It starts with material that is relevant and interesting to the student, thus getting him off to an enthusiastic and fruitful start. In the middle it contains some of the necessary and important elements which do not generate such high interest; then, finally, it concludes on a high interest level.

Despite fluctuations in interest there is a uniformly high performance and a low correlation (less than .12) between interest and performance.

Let us look more specifically at the statistics from the objective tests. There was a combined total of 159 multiple-choice questions on the four tests. On these tests there was a consistently high correlation between ability and performance, an insignificant correlation between interest and performance and a high correlation of performance with both the student's educational aspiration and his father's education. These correlations certainly seem to bear out the contention I have made previously that we should not go overboard in trying to make material interesting. Make it as interesting as possible, yes! But, in any course of study there are segments which are at one and the same time both necessary and vital and also lacking in popular appeal. We should not, in an attempt to be popular, slight these topics. I might also note in passing that there is only a negligible correlation (.039) between interest and ability.

Certain other features emerge from the test results, such as the fact that rural students did slightly more poorly than all others, and central city students were next to rural students. Also, students in the southern part of the country did slightly more poorly than students from other sections of the country.



It must be noted, though, that these differences were quite small and that they might well be partly caused by the kind of selection which operated in obtaining classes for the trial of the course.

What did the students take away from this experience? Analysis of the response patterns for the several tests reveals a number of features. First, there appears to be a definite weakness on the methodological side. If we isolate the questions which deal with social research techniques, methods and vocabulary we find performance quite poor. Half of these questions were missed by a majority of the students whereas only about a sixth of the substantive questions fall into that category. The students, then, appear to have a pretty good grasp of substantive ideas and concepts but a considerably less adequate grasp of sociological methods.

There are a few small substantive deficiencies which show up in the test results. There seems to be a tendency for the students to accept geographic determinism; they seem not to perceive that ascription of roles inhibits change; they fall prey to a misconception common to beginning students in sociology when they identify kinship as a necessary ingredient of the primary group. The last point is, I suppose, largely attributable to the fact that we always cite the family as an outstanding example of a primary group. Many students thought coercion was the control of others through persuasive argument, whereas the course defines it as implying the use or threat of physical force. Finally, a number of questions relating to specific elements of the civil rights movement in the United States were included. All these things have been brought to the attention of the appropriate SRSS staff members and hopefully they will have been remedied in the published version.

Certain things are quite difficult to measure in a precise way. We tried to include in the multiple-choice tests a large number of questions which require

the student to apply what he has learned in new contexts. Generally, the results were encouraging in this regard, but we wanted to go a bit farther. How would the student think through a social situation? To answer this we had some of the classes respond to an essay question concerning inter-group tensions. Again, the results were quite encouraging. Students demonstrated a good grasp of such concepts as stereotyping, social class, types of authority and the relationship between group purpose and attitude. They also appropriately cited studies from the text which applied to the problem, and made some rather sophisticated comments about the role of the church.

One thing people frequently ask about sociological course materials is whether they will encounter difficulty because of family or community value systems. SRSS has been conscious of and alert to this from the beginning. Inevitably, too, there have been extreme reactions by isolated individuals, but these have been minimal. In this connection, students were asked upon completion of Inquiries in Sociology what aspects of the course, if any, they found offensive. Approximately 87% said nothing was offensive to them, but it is interesting to note that a large part of the remainder indicated that they were offended not by the material, but by the teacher and his/her handling of it. This brings me to a most important point.

SRSS is committed to an inquiry approach in instruction and SRSS materials have been designed with that in mind. It becomes increasingly evident, as one works in this area, that the teacher is a crucial link in the process. We therefore built into our student questionnaire an attempt at measuring the extent to which a particular teacher's classroom was inquiry oriented. Responses to these questions and student achievement on the multiple-choice tests show a negligible correlation. At this stage it is impossible to say whether the instrument was inadequate or the materials are equally effective within a wide variation of teaching style.

We were, at this point, still concerned about one thing. We often say in the social sciences that we want our students to emerge with an attitude, a stance, an affect, which has, among other things, been referred to as a "sociological perspective." We have all wished we could measure this quality, but haven't known how. Finally, after much deliberation, Mr. Hering and I came up with an instrument which we think taps one dimension of this affect.

The person we seek, we said, is one who responds to social questions by investigating the alternatives before he acts. So we devised a series of problem situations, with four possible responses to each one: two of the responses in each case advocate immediate action and two indicate investigation first. Our instrument has four such situations.

For this instrument we managed to obtain control populations. The instrument was administered to 100 classes who had studied Inquiries in Sociology, to 20 classes who had studied sociology using another text, and to 39 classes who had not studied sociology at all. With only four items, our potential range of scores is only 0 to 4 and we can't hope for statistical significance. But the results are, nevertheless, encouraging. The mean score* for those who had no sociology was 2.66, for those who studied sociology with another text was 2.90 and for those who studied Inquiries in Sociology was 2.94.

In conclusion, let me say this. No one set of materials is going to please everyone, and this course is no exception. By and large, though, the negative comments cancel each other out and, in total, come from a small portion of the trial population. Thus, a few thought we presented a white racist position while a few others thought we were too black oriented, a few thought the writing style too difficult while a few others thought it over-simple and "talking down" to them.

We have attempted to examine Inquiries in Sociology as thoroughly and from as many vantage points as possible. We have even tried some new approaches which

*The higher the score the greater the tendency toward investigation.

need further development themselves. We found a few small problems which we hope will be remedied in the revision which is now in progress. Nevertheless, the reception of this course has been generally enthusiastic and the enthusiasm seems justified.

It is my feeling that a significant part of this course's success lies in the fact that its developers have attempted at every step to maximize participation of social studies teachers in its development.