Children Can Understand Social Conflicts

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Sixth graders in this study learned much about broad social conflicts. The findings in this experiment suggest again the importance of the school program's dealing with issues that are basically significant in today's living.

Several interesting and significant findings on children's understanding of broad social conflicts are now available as a result of a study made on this hypothesis: sixth grade children can understand a great deal about broad social conflicts if the conflicts are presented in materials suited to the children's interests and reading skills.¹

The sixth grade was chosen for the study because it was felt that the children in this grade have sufficient interest in social problems and sufficient reading ability to make a study of this kind feasible. It was felt that both fifth and sixth grade children have a greater interest in social problems than has been generally utilized by curriculum planners, but the sixth grade was chosen rather than the fifth to take advantage of the increase in reading ability between the two grades.

Sixth graders' comprehension was compared with that in other grades to see if the materials were actually better suited to sixth graders. The fifth and seventh grades were used for comparison because of their proximity to the sixth. The ninth grade was used to compare sixth graders' performance with that of high school students.

Stories Dramatize Conflicts

Five stories were written for the study. The stories deal with contemporary controversial broad social conflicts. One story is on antivivisection, another on the sale of yellow margarine, the third on discrimination against Negroes in the national capital. The fourth is on the struggle of the musicians' union against commercial use of recordings and transcriptions. The fifth story is based on the report of the investigation of a social historian, John Bartlow Martin, into the 1947 Centrallia, Illinois, mine disaster. Many complexities of the broad social conflicts are spelled out in each story by having opposing points of view expressed. The texts clearly distinguish opinions and facts. The stories dwell on what happens to people whose interests are affected by the conflicts. Whenever possible the conflicts are presented in the conversations of these people. To increase readability for children the narratives are built around children's activities. The sentences and vocabularies are simple, and there is liberal use of personal pronouns. According to the Flesch Yardstick of Reading

¹ This article is based on a doctorate thesis by the author: A Study of Sixth Graders' Comprehension of Specially Prepared Materials on Broad Social Conflicts, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, 1951.
Ease, the stories are judged suitable for the reading skill of most sixth graders.

The experiment was conducted in thirty classrooms over a period of thirteen weeks. Each story was read by 532 sixth graders, 184 fifth graders, 169 seventh graders, and 160 ninth graders. In each classroom the children read one story a day for the five successive days of a school week. Sixth graders could read a story in about fifteen minutes. After reading a story each child was tested on his higher comprehension of that story. In the total test there were 125 multiple-choice items which had been validated by comparing one group of children's verbal responses in discussion with their written answers. The thirty classroom teachers participating in the study considered the items to be far more complex than the type of question usually asked sixth graders. This judgment added confirmation to the author's intention to make questions which would test the higher mental processes rather than questions which would test mere memorization. Each item tested one of a variety of kinds of comprehension:

- Concept comprehension
- Understanding opinions held by characters in the stories
- Knowledge of motives
- Ability to generalize
- Knowledge of rights and duties of groups or group members
- Ability to note similarities between situations in the stories and other situations involving hypothetical sixth graders, that is, the ability to note analogies.

Two sample items follow: The first was used to test for comprehension of a concept, the second for comprehension of a motive.

What are civil rights laws?

- a. Laws which say that particular citizens have the right to live only in certain neighborhoods
- b. Laws which allow people of a particular color the right to use only separate sections of buses and hospitals
- c. Laws which say that only white citizens can have certain important rights
- d. Laws which give to all citizens certain important rights.

Why did Mr. Petrillo want to be arrested?

- a. He had broken the anti-Petrillo law and he wanted to get it off his conscience
- b. He wanted to prove that Congress did not have the right to make laws about musicians
- c. He wanted to prove that his union was not forcing stations to hire more men
- d. He wanted to prove that Congress did not have the right to pass the Lea Act.

As a final step in gathering data from the children, each child was asked to complete an interest questionnaire specifying the hierarchy of his interest among the five stories.

Findings of the Experiment

- A large majority of the sixth graders understood the conflicts as presented in the stories.

It was judged that if 50 percent or more of all of the items were answered correctly, comprehension had occurred.
Seventy-nine percent of the sixth graders achieved this arbitrary criterion of comprehension.

Theoretically, a criterion of comprehension could have been established at any point between and including a chance score and a perfect score. It was considered, however, that if 50 percent or more of all the items were answered correctly comprehension of a significant quality had occurred. This criterion was reasonable because that percentage of items could hardly be answered correctly on the basis of chance alone. Since no teaching was done as part of the experiment, it was reasonable to assume that the children’s understanding could be developed considerably further by various teaching procedures such as discussion, field trips and films. If the children could comprehend 50 percent of the items without teaching, it is likely that they could comprehend substantially more with a teacher’s guidance. Alfred Binet when validating his Scale of Intelligence similarly used an arbitrary criterion when selecting or rejecting test items as valid or invalid for a particular level of mental ability.

In the preliminary try-outs children who correctly answered at least 50 percent of the items could talk intelligently about the actions and arguments presented in the stories. This finding lends an empirical as well as a theoretical basis for the 50 percent criterion.

- Readiness for these materials was found to be more marked in the sixth grade than in any other grade tested.

The distribution curve of the sixth grade scores most nearly approached a normal curve. The curve for the fifth grade had a low broad plateau showing that many children had about the same degree of quite limited understanding. The curve for the seventh grade showed only slight improvement over the sixth. The ninth grade curve suggested that by interlinear interpolation a hypothetical eighth grade curve would show only slight improvement over the seventh, and similar slight improvement between eighth and ninth.

The important finding in this area is that the increase in comprehension from grade to grade above the sixth is very slight compared with that between the fifth grade and the sixth. The maturity needed, or readiness factor, develops most markedly between the fifth and sixth grades.

- The amount of comprehension as measured by test scores varied according to the type of item.

The test distinguished three levels of difficulty among the six types of comprehension:

Level 1: concepts
generalizations

Level 2: opinions held by characters in the stories
reasons and motives

Level 3: analogies to their own possible experiences
rights and duties of groups or group members.

There was no significant difference in means within any one of these levels. But there were significant differences among the three levels.

The high rank of “concepts” is a reflection of the fact that many of the terms required by this category were simple, colorful terms. There is a general belief that children can easily learn the names of persons, places and actions, and this study supports that be-
lief. But the fact that the category on generalizations ranks with that on concepts challenges another commonly held belief, namely, that children cannot engage successfully in the higher mental processes. The high rank of items involving generalizations suggests that generalizing about broad social conflicts, if exercised in an interesting context, can be for sixth graders as natural and as easy as name-learning.

Comprehension of opinions and reasons, that is, knowing about the thought life of people, might be expected to rank lower than understanding concrete concepts. The mean score on opinions and reasons, however, was only 5.5 percentage points lower than that on concepts and generalizations—a significant difference as stated above, but by no means an excessive one. So there is indication that most sixth graders who read these stories were capable of distinguishing fact from opinion. Also they understood conflicting motives.

The items testing for comprehension of similarities between situations in the stories and possible experiences of the children were complex, and it was probably the complexity of these items and the rather subtle reasoning necessary to see these analogies which were responsible for the low rank of this type of comprehension. The low rank of items on rights and duties is judged to be due to the fact that the rights and duties in the stories were not usually integrated into the actions of characters. For example, the Centralia story treats the duty of the mine safety committee, but the duty discussed was one of which the members of the committee themselves were ignorant.

- The children's comprehension of complex relationships, such as those inherent in social conflicts, was directly contingent upon the terminology in which the relationships were presented.

The difficult sections were those which presented relationships in abstract terms. Difficulty was not caused by the actual complexity of the relationships, but rather by the telescoping of several relationships into a few phrases. On the basis of this finding it is reasonable to assume that children can understand many complex relationships in society if the relationships are sufficiently spelled out step by step in terms of people and actions. For example, sixth graders can probably understand this paragraph: "The men who move the trains around in railroad yards have all stopped working at once. They did this to try to force the men who run the railroads to pay them more money." But it is unlikely that without specific teaching sixth graders can readily understand "the Brotherhood of Railway Switchmen's strike." As long as social conflicts can be translated into direct accounts of men and their activities it is likely that sixth-graders can understand them.

- Children in each grade expressed a similar "pattern of interest" in the stories.

In every grade the children scored highest on the stories they liked best. On a particular story on which sixth graders scored high or low, fifth, seventh and ninth graders also scored relatively high or low. Children in each grade scored markedly higher on the discrimination, antivivisection and Centralia stories than on the margarine...
or musicians' conflict stories. In general the children in all grades were bored by the two conflicts based on ideas which for them were essentially abstract. The experimenter thought that many children would be interested in the margarine conflict because they eat margarine daily. He also predicted that since many children are avid radio listeners they would be interested in the employment problems of musicians and broadcasters. Both of these assumptions were found to be false. The fact that children eat margarine does very little to make them interested in whether their parents pay a tax on it or not. Nor does the fact that children listen to the radio make them interested in the causes of unemployment.

- *Children's interest and understanding were high when the conflicts aroused their emotions.* Practically all of them felt strongly about vivisection and discrimination and men killed in a coal mine. Their feeling for these people or animals made them willing to read further into the relatively complex data pertinent to the conflicts. Curiously, the farm children were less responsive to the margarine issue than were lower economic class city children. This was interpreted to be because most of the farm children were from prosperous homes and had little feeling for unemployment. But the lower economic class city children had had enough experience with work stoppages and unemployment to feel acute empathy for the farmers whose source of income might be jeopardized by a widespread sale of yellow margarine.

- *The tendency to answer with stereotypes was much more marked in the ninth grade than in the sixth.*

In the text items forty-three stereotypes relevant to the social scene were included among the false options. Most sixth graders chose answers based on the stories in preference to stereotypes. But stereotypes had more takers than non-stereotyped false options. Before reading the stories sixth graders expressed flagrantly prejudiced ideas such as that Negroes are stupid or that they are too lazy to have nice homes. When such stereotypes were included in false options few sixth graders chose them. The stories apparently caused sixth graders to revise their ideas in the obvious areas. It was only the more subtle stereotypes which persisted despite the stories.

On eight of the forty-three items containing stereotypes a higher percentage of ninth graders than sixth graders chose the stereotype options. In two more of these items the percentages of sixth graders choosing the stereotypes were only slightly larger than the percentages of ninth graders. In view of these facts it was concluded that ninth graders were more reluctant than sixth graders to answer in terms of the stories rather than in stereotypes. This suggested that if the schools are to introduce ideas to children on the resolution of social conflicts—ideas which may be of broader scope than those in the children's homes, there is more possibility of reasoned acceptance in grade six than in grade nine. Stereotypes are not yet as firmly entrenched.

The implications of this study are worthy of consideration by curriculum planners. Sixth grade children are capable of understanding much about social conflicts. They can learn a great deal about propaganda.