

# An Experiment with Core for Puerto Rican Students

Special core classes in a vocational high school create a setting in which Spanish-speaking boys can learn a new language and can relate themselves confidently to a new culture.

**O**URS IS AN all-boys general vocational high school offering instruction in a number of different trade areas. Our students come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. On the whole they are what are characterized as slow learners. We are not a neighborhood school, but draw our students from many parts of the city.

Three years ago we did not have even one Puerto Rican student. Today, 35 percent of the student body is Puerto Rican. This influx created a host of new problems.

Most of our Puerto Rican students were new arrivals. Their knowledge of English was either nonexistent or else rudimentary. Our most pressing problem with these students was one of language. Unless they could surmount this obstacle, they could not hope to succeed in their classes or adjust to the American scene.

When Puerto Rican students first began entering the school we tried to

cope with the problem by instituting special remedial reading programs, special speech classes, and additional foreign accent speech clinics. In some cases these special classes were in lieu of regular English and Speech; more often they were assigned in addition to the regular work in English.

The above program worked reasonably well as long as there were comparatively few such students in the school. But as the influx continued, we found it inadequate. Nor did it meet the needs of the growing number of boys whose knowledge of English was so slight as to prevent their understanding what was transpiring in class. Truancy began to rise; cutting increased; teachers complained of boys chattering in Spanish, and of boys who could not understand the simplest directions. In some shops, teachers used student interpreters. Everywhere there was talk of the Puerto Rican boys forming unwholesome cliques.

When we were notified in the spring of 1952 that we were scheduled to receive a new group of 250 Puerto Ricans in the incoming September class, we decided that this inundation would swamp us if we continued to follow the traditional approach. We, therefore, decided to try a new tech-

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*Max Berger is principal of the Tottenville High School, Staten Island, New York. Dr. Berger was formerly chairman, Academic Department, Murray Hill Vocational High School, New York, N. Y. This article concerns the practices in his former school, the Murray Hill Vocational High School.*

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nique, strictly on an experimental basis. This new experiment consisted in the launching of a language-centered Core Program for Puerto Ricans.

Inasmuch as these students were unable to hold their own in the regular school program when grouped heterogeneously with English-speaking students, we felt that the only alternative was segregated classes. Moreover, it was hoped that the longer time blocks, the life adjustment approach, the closer teacher-student relationship and the improved guidance possibilities inherent in the core program would provide more suitable and more flexible media for accomplishing the desired goals than did the traditional curriculum (with which these students could not cope). The aims of the core program were threefold: to improve language ability, to help the student adjust to the American scene and to prepare him for entry into the regular school program at the end of the transition period.

### Teachers for a New Program

Despite our desire to accommodate our entire Puerto Rican population in such core classes, we were unable to do so because of lack of teacher personnel. Only three teachers could be spared for this program, two at the main building and one at the annex. We had decided to restrict each core class to 25 students. This meant that only 75 of the incoming 250 could be accommodated in the core classes. The remainder would have to be satisfied with language assistance in remedial reading classes and/or speech clinics.

It was agreed that the group with poorest language ability should go into

the core classes, the next poorest group to remedial reading and/or speech clinics, and the remainder should follow the regular schedule of the school. An interview committee, consisting of our speech and remedial reading teachers, screened all incoming students on the day they reported for registration. Where the boy failed to report, a tentative decision was made on the basis of his lower school records, a decision checked on the first day of the boy's appearance in person. At the main building, where two core classes were scheduled, the very poorest language group went to Core I, and the next poorest to Core II. Homogeneous grouping on the basis of language ability was thereby attained.

Teachers for the new program were selected on the basis of teaching ability and of a sympathetic approach to youngsters. It was also felt that since improvement in language was the primary goal of the program, speech teachers were the logical ones to handle the assignment. In view of the fact that the new program was entirely experimental, without fixed syllabi or texts, and particularly in view of the difficult nature of the student personnel and the difficulties inherent in a teacher's remaining with the same group for extended time blocks, the proper selection of teacher personnel was of crucial importance.

When our Puerto Rican core program opened in September 1952, the class remained with its teacher for the entire morning (four teaching periods plus the homeroom period). For a high school, this was indeed a drastic innovation, an innovation which the core teachers regarded with some dread.

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*The program described in this article took place in Murray Hill Vocational High School. It was designated by New York City's Superintendent of Schools William Jansen as "one of the best programs in the city for education of Puerto Ricans of high school age." The program also was awarded the B'nai B'rith award in human relations (June 1954).*

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In the afternoon, the class split up into various shops where they mingled with boys following the normal school program. In succeeding terms, curtailment of available teacher time necessitated reducing the four-period core to the more usual two-period program, with students following a non-core curriculum the rest of the day. This is our program today.

None of our core teachers had ever taught core before. Indoctrination, training and planning were essential. This was accomplished through their visiting core and basic English classes in other schools, daily conferences with the chairman, investigation of relevant professional literature, joint planning and periodic evaluations of the program. Time for these activities was provided by reducing teaching assignments to 20 periods per week.

### **An Experimental Approach**

The entire program was frankly experimental. The core teachers themselves were highly dubious concerning either their ability to cope with these classes or the possibilities of success in the program. We were fearful that the segregated classes might create an adverse reaction among the students, parents and/or community. We lacked the type of building facilities and instructional supplies normally associated

with core. The language barrier posed still another problem superimposed upon the usual problems connected with instituting a core program in a traditional school.

Typical of the units that were developed as the result of teacher-student planning were: Life at Murray Hill, Getting To Know New York City, Getting Along With Others, Planning a Party, Getting and Keeping a Job, A Trip to Puerto Rico, Baseball.

In class, the sole language used was English. Our teachers were convinced that this was the best method for teaching the language. Where students failed to understand even the simplest English, pantomime was used. The teacher of the poorest group knew Spanish, but utilized it only for comparative purposes in the teaching of speech sounds.

In order to improve parental-school relations, a special bilingual report card, developed along core lines, was instituted for these students. Bilingual cards and circulars were also drawn up for acquainting parents with Open School Week and Parent-Teacher Association meetings.

The experiment was originally scheduled for one term, with the expectation that it would be extended to a year if it proved reasonably successful. Beyond that we dared not even make predictions.

Today the program is completing its second year—and there is no thought of termination. Why? Because it has solved more problems than it has created. It has provided the one approach we have found to be successful with our type of Puerto Rican student.

Our fears of student-parent reaction

to segregation proved unfounded. At the very start we informed the student that the core program had been set up to help him. Because of this briefing and because the student felt he was really getting something out of the program, we have never had a complaint on the score of segregation.

From the start, the most obvious benefits of the program were in the area of guidance. Truancy, in the core classes, became practically unknown. Cutting never appeared. Attendance was excellent—far better than in the school as a whole. The holding power of the core classes was far higher than that of the school as a whole. General Organization membership was very high. Few of these boys got into trouble with the dean—and this with boys who traditionally had constituted the most troublesome element in the school. A close teacher-student relationship developed, so close in fact that both teacher and student preferred to remain together.

The core teachers' early skepticism concerning the value of the program evaporated as the weeks passed. Their trepidation concerning core teaching techniques was replaced by confidence as they mastered these techniques.

As regards language ability, core teachers were unanimous in stating that tremendous strides had been made both in oral and written work. Moreover, the core boys had enjoyed a richer curriculum than had students following the traditional program.

All was not milk and honey, however. Teachers found, for example, that the language handicap made library research on special reports difficult. When working in committees,

there was a tendency to lapse back into Spanish. Suitable reading materials were practically nonexistent. Teaching these classes proved taxing, and called for more ingenuity than the traditional approach. Yet at the end of the year, the core teachers agreed that the experiment should be continued.

To assure a smooth transition from the core grouping into the regular school stream, a special one-term core Transition Class was created. Students entered this class at the end of a year in core. This class was scheduled in addition to the regular English course for the grade. The Transition Class was designed to provide a rapid overview of the literary content of the English courses the boys in the core classes had missed, and to provide additional drill on items in technical English which had not been covered in core units. Interestingly enough a number of former core students requested that a special foreign accent speech clinic be established to help them improve their speech. This was arranged with alacrity.

Last year's core class members are now a regular part of the school population, following the same curriculum as their non-core, English-speaking schoolmates. The absorption has been successful. If they are distinct in any respect, the distinction is on the positive side since they are unusually well-behaved, diligent and successful.

Our core experiment for Puerto Ricans is continuing. New materials, new units, new techniques are being tried out and/or developed. We feel we have made an important step forward in coping with our Puerto Rican problem.

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