



# INNOVATION:

... The socio-political organization of American schools, in conjunction with the formal curriculum in civics and government, combines to produce a situation where democratic theory has been so divorced from practice that students are skeptical of both and unable to develop an understanding of the skills necessary for meaningful participation in the political life of the society (PS 4: 446; Summer 1971).

THE criticism that political education in American schools cripples the development of participation skills is clearly justified (Hess, 1969; Hess and Newmann, 1968). Yet many of the innovations designed by educators to respond to this criticism seem doomed to failure. Recent innovation in social studies has been limited largely to canned inquiry episodes, problem "solving," and value clarification models contrived for classroom use. We must go beyond these practices.

A review of the most outstanding social studies projects reveals that most curricular innovation is faulty on at least one of two counts (Krug, Poster, and Gillies, 1970). First, educators have made little or no attempt to modify and measure changes in student behavior in both the classroom and, more important, in the community. Second, references to teaching "reality" and making students "more realistic" ignore the problems of perceptual biases, suggesting a frozen definition of "the truth" which is often in-

compatible with the living and learning of the individual student. While neither idea is new to social scientists or social psychologists, both have been largely ignored in American schooling.

## **Influencing Attitudes and Changing Behavior**

If attitude and value appraisal is to be the crux of social studies education (Smith and Cox, 1969), the promotion of selected behaviors through action experiences in the field as well as in the classroom must become a central objective of political education. A common misconception in our society asserts that "attitudes cause behavior" (Bem, 1970, p. 54). Hence, even though student behavior may be the ultimate target, most educators have focused directly upon attitudes with little success in effecting change either in attitudes or in behavior. Since the correlation between attitudes and behavior is low, this is predictable.

On the other hand, we can often assert the reverse, that behavior causes attitudes (Bem, 1970; Zimbardo and Ebbeson, 1970; Triandis, 1971). This is not to imply the existence of a simple cause-effect relationship between behavioral and attitudinal change, but sufficient evidence suggests that changing attitudes by changing behavior may be more effective than vice versa.

# THE STEPS BEYOND

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CHRISTINE BUTTON\*

Even the most vigorous and thoughtful proposals for pre-collegiate political education programs have overlooked the possibility of effecting change in student behavior as a means of promoting the affective and cognitive goals they posit (for example, the Committee on Pre-Collegiate Education of the American Political Science Association). Further, it may be argued that the apparent failure of most curricular innovation to influence students' political orientations is due to the neglect of political action (for example, the Indiana Curriculum Project in Government). Simply "studying about" cannot be thought of as having the same power as being "involved in."

This argument is difficult to validate as yet, since few curricular programs have been tested regarding the effects of promoting selected student behaviors in the classroom and community. However, a recent study conducted in eight twelfth grade government classes (N=252) in Austin, Texas, lends support to the argument that the attitudinal salience of formal political education *can* be enhanced by implementing curricular changes designed to affect students' behavior (Button, 1972).

The overall goal of this study's experimental curriculum was to "teach for political efficacy" (Button, 1971). The experimental units developed for use in the investigation emphasized the following: (a) each student's

introspective analysis of his own political socialization; (b) an exploration of different "reality constructs" or models of the American political system, such as elitism, political linkages, and institutional racism; (c) an examination of past and present case studies of political change; and (d) individual student fieldwork designed to involve students in the political structure of their city.

Questionnaire and in-depth interview data indicate that students' feelings of political efficacy, interest, and knowledge were enhanced by the experimental curriculum, as were selected political behaviors (that is, involvement in political and/or social action). Further, analysis of classroom interaction revealed significant increases in the number of different students initiating questions and statements as the experimental treatment progressed, indicating that student behavior in the classroom changed along with the changes in students' attitudes of political efficacy and interest.

The student interviews attempted to ascertain the extent to which the experimental units had indeed influenced the development of these attitudes by coding the amount of specific evidence of curricular influence described by the student. Anglo students appear to have been most influenced by the

\* Christine Button, Assistant Professor of Education, The University of Texas at Austin

study of racism and minority group cultures, political socialization, and the action research, while Blacks and Mexican Americans appear to have been most influenced by the case studies of political change. The probability that the experimental curriculum may have had lasting influence on students' political attitudes and behavior is suggested by the fact that the in-depth interviews were conducted two to three months after the experimental treatment had ended.

### Reality as a Social Construction

"Reality" is a term too loosely used by many curriculum innovators. Educators are frequently exhorted to make their courses more relevant to the student by teaching about "reality." The task is logically impossible.

We cannot teach "reality"; we can only present students with organizational tools for understanding what they perceive. Reality, in this case political reality, cannot be defined. Not only are definitions of "the truth" continually changing; personal perceptions of truth also vary according to individual biases. Knowledge of reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Holzner, 1972). That is, knowledge is determined by such factors as personality and socialization as well as the senses. Thus teachers cannot teach "reality." What we educators *can* do is suggest alternative models of reality—*heuristic devices* which the student can then use to organize and simplify the complex reality he confronts.

This is exactly what the experimental curriculum described here appears to have done through case studies of political change (for example, Crystal City, Texas; the Montgomery bus boycott; gun control legislation; and the Watts riot), small group problem research in the classroom, and political action research. The action research seemed to be a particularly valuable means for promoting a student's understanding of the reality he perceived through the individualized process of applying political models learned in the classroom. The following comments are representative of student reactions to the course:

"I learned how minority groups can get power—and this made me interested in politics. I didn't used to be interested in politics because I didn't think a Mexican American could ever do anything. But class opened it up—it showed us how *any* minority group can have more power and recognition. . . . The teacher gave us problems and said 'solve 'em.'"

"We studied the bus boycott and Chavez. It shows you that if you want to do something you can do it; all you have to do is try—but it is harder if you're not Anglo. . . . I didn't even know about that thing they had in Crystal City. *These* people got themselves together and did something; somebody else wants to do it, they could do the same thing."

"For a while I've been feeling kind of down on the establishment, and when I found out how you can be influenced this way—how some groups can make you feel effective and others make you feel alienated, I had to stop and think. You begin to realize all the influences around you, and it made me feel a little bit less down on the establishment, because like the Black Panthers can have this influence. . . . We chose the speeding problem for our action research. We had to contact officials and police . . . , and we were successful. That made us feel a lot better. If it worked once you can do it again."

### Articulation into the Ongoing Program

Curricular changes designed to promote programs for student involvement in the community and understanding of the social construction of knowledge may be implemented inexpensively, using existing facilities, scheduling patterns, and staff. During the testing of the experimental curriculum in Austin, Texas, students with after-school jobs (this included 60-70 percent of all students) made their own arrangements to obtain released time from school to pursue their action research in the community.

Once the overall project had been approved by school district officials, it was up to the individual student to secure parental and teacher permission to be absent from school. The teacher in charge of the students' government course kept all necessary records (such as permission slips and record of students' whereabouts). Students regularly

submitted progress reports to bring the teacher up to date on their activities, information gained, and problems encountered, as well as a plan of action for the next few weeks.

Student reading materials used in the case studies and the development of political models were gathered and developed during the summer, and were then typed on stencils and distributed to students in the form of inexpensively bound pamphlets. Experimental group teachers met weekly to discuss and coordinate the curriculum, and to clarify unfamiliar concepts (for example, political socialization). It became clear that the experimental units could be used by teachers with "average" amounts of time, background, and expertise.

The possible impact of curricular innovation can be measured with minimal disruption. Student behavior changes inside the classroom can be measured by readily learned

interaction analysis schedules which focus on student behavior, as opposed to teacher behavior (Cornbleth, Davis, and Button, in press; Brophy and Good, 1969; Button, 1972). Behavioral and attitudinal changes may also be measured by using questionnaire and semi-projective testing techniques as part of the regular testing and class assignment routines.

While this discussion has focused solely upon political education and innovation, the arguments may be equally valid in other curricular areas. Interest in student attitudes and values permeates much of the school curriculum, as does the call for relevancy. But the promotion of selected student behaviors and awareness of the social construction of "reality" appear to be as severely neglected outside of the social studies as within. The directions and tools to end this aspect of educational lag are available. They need only be implemented.

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