

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMIC UNDERSTANDING IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

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SUMMARY

The study attempted to survey the level of economic understanding of high school seniors in Southwest Florida and the contributions made to the development of this understanding by the social studies curriculum. Senior classes were drawn from randomly selected high schools in ten Southwestern Florida counties yielding an N of 455 students. The Test of Economic Understanding was administered to the subjects. The summary results suggest that students in Southwestern Florida are significantly below both the standard set by the National Task Force on Economic Education and the mean reported for the group used to norm the TEU. The number of social studies courses taken by seniors was found, in general, not to affect the student's level of economic understanding. One exception was the existence of a significant difference between those students who had taken no more than two social studies courses and all others. To test the possibility of selection factors in operation in the social studies design, secondary analyses on academic and personological differences were conducted. As noted by Kerlinger (1966), the internal validity of ex-post facto research is enhanced by secondary analyses such as these since they can serve to eliminate viable alternative explanations of the results. The results of these analyses indicated no systematic differences on identified educationally important variables among the classifications used in this study.

INTRODUCTION

Included among the major goal statements adopted by the Florida State Board of Education was the following: "All students shall acquire knowledge of and develop an understanding of the fundamental economic structure and processes of the American system, together with an understanding of the opportunities and requirements for individual participation and success in the system." (Goals for Education in Florida, 1971, p. 7).

The rationale underlying the importance of and need for economic education rests on five major considerations: 1) the scope and complexity of the American economy is increasing; 2) it is necessary for individuals to make personal and social decisions on many issues that contain substantial economic content; 3) the economic philosophy and policies of government at the national, state, and local level all have direct, significant effects on the well-being of the individual citizen; 4) the overall effectiveness of a society's economic system is dependent upon the effectiveness of its individual participants; and 5) the progress and survival of this nation are directly related to the effectiveness of the economic system (Kastner and Jackson, 1965; Baker, 1960; National Task Force on Economic Education, 1961; Frankel, 1965; Committee for Economic Development, 1962).

There are a number of factors that would seem to indicate that the public high school has a major role to play if the need for the development of a high level of economic understanding on the part of citizens is to be met. The attainment of economic knowledge and analytic skill is not a simple task. It can only be achieved through deliberate, formal effort. Thus, the development of economic competence cannot be left to the undisciplined attainment of economic knowledge through personal experience. The proper development of such competence requires the structure that is characteristic of the substantive, cognitive environment of the school. Economic education must also be made widely available if the level of economic understanding that is characteristic of the body politic is to be improved. This requirement for broad coverage is best met by the public school since there is no other educational institution that reaches as many Americans in a systematic way.

Economic education is currently provided to students in the public schools of Florida through a program "designed to develop economic understanding whenever and wherever the appropriate concepts appear in the school curriculum" (Economic Scope and Sequence Chart, 1969, p. 1). Economic content with its component concepts and understanding is to be incorporated into subject areas such as business education, home economics, and mathematics. However, the majority of this needed economic content must be provided by means of the social studies curriculum. The social studies curriculum provides the most frequent opportunity for the inclusion of economic content because many past and present social issues and concerns have important underlying economic bases.

The social studies curriculum, since it plays the major role in imparting economic knowledge to students, should be investigated to determine if it in fact is significantly contributing to the development of economic understanding. Further evidence of the need for this investigation is provided by a considerable body of opinion that considers the approach to economic education in Florida to be incomplete and therefore inadequate since it does not include a straight economics course (National Task Force on Economic Education, 1961; Committee for Economic Development, 1962; Alexander, 1964; Kastner and Jackson, 1965). On the basis of these factors, there is a need to evaluate the economic education program in effect in Florida high schools with respect to its product, the economic understanding of students.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to provide a description of the current levels of economic understanding that are characteristic of high school seniors in Southwest Florida and to describe the contribution made by the social studies curriculum.

SAMPLE

The first stage of the sampling process consisted of selecting ten high schools at random from the following Southwestern Florida counties: Charlotte, Desoto, Hernando, Highlands, Hillsborough, Lee, Manatee, Pasco, Polk, and Sarasota. The second stage of the sampling process involved the random selection of two intact senior classroom units from each sampled school that met both of the following criteria: 1) the selected classes were either homerooms or in required subject areas and 2) the membership in any of the selected classes was not based on ability grouping. These procedures were designed to maximize the probability that the sample included a cross-section of students who were representative of the senior population in the selected high schools. The sample consisted of 455 seniors.

INSTRUMENTATION

The measure selected for use in determining the economic understanding of students was Science Research Associates', Test of Economic Understanding, Form B, (TEU). The TEU was developed directly from the guidelines of the National Task Force on Economic Education describing the minimum level of economic understanding essential for the practice of good citizenship.

The reliability for Form B of the TEU for students with no exposure to economics was reported as .81 using the Kuder-Richardson formula 20 methodology. Content validation of the instrument was provided through review of the instrument by the Joint Council on Economic Education.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Level of Economic Understanding Analysis. The mean and standard deviation for the sample students were 18.92 and 5.79 respectively. In order to give these results more meaning, they were compared to the TEU Form B national norm group. This norm group was composed of 2294 seniors from 62 schools in 24 states. The students in this group had had no formal training in economics. The mean performance for this group was 24.00 with a standard deviation of 6.68. The results of this comparison are summarized in Table 1.

The results of this comparison showed that the overall level of economic understanding that is characteristic of Southwest Florida high school seniors in the schools surveyed is significantly below the level found for the comparison group. This finding would seem to indicate that in the area surveyed, the Florida approach to economic education is not working. The deficiency of the Florida high school student with respect to his level of economic understanding becomes even more evident when one considers the recommendations of the National Task Force on Economics. The Task Force asserted that the high school graduate needs to know all of the economic concepts covered in the Test of Economic Understanding in order to function as an intelligently voting citizen. The seniors at the surveyed schools do not meet this standard, although it should be pointed out that the comparison group also failed to meet this rigorous standard.

TABLE 1

Comparison with National Norm Group

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
National Norm	2294	24.00	6.68	40.64*
Florida School Group	455	18.92	5.79	

*Difference significant at the .001 level.

Social Studies Course Analysis. The approach to economic education currently used in Florida schools is based upon the teaching of economic content wherever it is appropriate. As noted previously much of this economic content will be introduced in social studies courses since a significant number of the trends, issues, and problems that are the content of the social studies are in differing degrees economic in nature. In order to determine if economic understanding was being developed through the social studies curriculum, subjects were grouped by the number of social studies courses they had taken. Summary descriptive statistics for the four categories of subjects classified by the number of social studies courses taken are displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Level of Economic Understanding by
Number of Social Studies Courses Taken

Number of Courses	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
0-2	27	14.59	5.12
3-5	196	18.55	5.67
6-8	190	19.16	6.36
9 or more	42	19.07	5.50

TABLE 3
Analysis of Variance for Number of Social Studies Courses Taken

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	503.62	3.	167.87	4.78**
Within Groups	15823.20	451.	35.08	
Total	16326.82	454.		

** p .01

A one-way analysis of variance was applied to these different groups to see if significant differences existed. The underlying rationale for this approach was that if the social studies curriculum was contributing to the development of economic understanding, there should have been an accumulation of economic knowledge as the student took more courses in social studies. This accumulation should have led to significant differences between the groupings of students by the number of social studies courses taken.

This analysis at the senior level allowed a maximum of diversity of course content to operate thus permitting each social studies course to make its potentially unique contribution toward the development of economic understanding. When the means of the different groups were analyzed significant differences were found. The results of the analysis of variance are presented in Table 3.

The significant differences were found, by use of Kramer's extension of Duncan's New Multiple Range Test, to be attributable to the differences between those students with a maximum of two social studies courses and all other groupings, (Kramer, 1956). The differences between the three highest groupings (3-5, 6-8, 9 or more courses taken) were not significant. These findings would seem to indicate that the social studies curriculum as it is presently operating is not contributing to the development of economic understanding on the part of Florida high school seniors. The differences that were found were hypothesized to be the result of group composition differences in factors other than differences in number of social studies courses taken which might influence the level of economic understanding. To examine this possibility, Pearson correlations between (1) the number of social studies courses taken, and (2) student socio-economic status, and (3) student grade point average were computed and tested for significance. The resulting coefficients of interest (1 vs 2 and 1 vs 3) were found to be non-significant. This would seem to lessen the possibility that personological and academic variable differences between the groups were viable alternative explanations of the results.

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