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The post-16 subject guidance series currently comprises: art and design; business education; classics; design and technology; drama and theatre studies; engineering and manufacturing; English; geography; government and politics; health and social care; history; information and communication technology; law; mathematics; media education; modern foreign languages; music; physical education; religious studies; science; sociology.

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Introduction

This booklet aims to help inspectors and staff in schools and colleges to evaluate standards and quality in sociology for students post-16. It complements the *Handbook for Inspecting Secondary Schools* (1999), the supplement *Inspecting School Sixth Forms* (2001) and the *Handbook for Inspecting Colleges* (2001).

This guidance concentrates on issues specific to sociology. General guidance is in the *Handbooks*. Use both to get a complete picture of the inspection or evaluation process.

This booklet is concerned with evaluating standards and achievement, teaching and learning, and other factors that affect what is achieved. It outlines how to use students' work and question them, the subject-specific points to look for in lessons, and how to draw evaluations together to form a coherent view of the subject.

Examples are provided of evidence and evaluations from college and school sixth-form inspections, with commentaries to give further explanation. These examples are included without any reference to context, and will not necessarily illustrate all of the features that inspectors will need to consider. The booklets in the series show different ways of recording and reporting evidence and findings; they do not prescribe or endorse any particular method or approach.

Inspectors and senior staff in schools and colleges may need to evaluate several subjects and refer to more than one booklet. You can download any of the subject guidance booklets from OFSTED's website www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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OFSTED's remit for this sector is the inspection of education for students aged 16–19, other than work-based education. In schools, this is the sixth-form provision. In colleges, the 16–19 age-group will not be so clearly identifiable; classes are likely to include older students and, in some cases, they will have a majority of older students. In practice, inspectors and college staff will evaluate the standards and quality in these classes regardless of the age of the students.

This guidance applies to General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and Advanced level (A-level) sociology courses. It has relevance for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) sociology as well as for other courses for which sociology is a contributory discipline, notably General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) or Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) health and social care, and AS and A-level social policy.

This booklet concentrates on the most commonly found courses in sociology for students 16–19. However, the principles illustrated in this guidance can be applied more widely.

Some students taking AS and A-level courses may have studied the subject for GCSE, but this is likely to be the exception rather than the rule, and teachers will assume no previous knowledge. Nonetheless, where AS and A-level groups comprise a mixture of beginners and those who have studied the subject previously, inspectors should consider the effectiveness of the teaching in accommodating the needs of both groups of students.

Common requirements

All inspectors share the responsibility for determining whether a school or college is effective for all its students, whatever their educational needs or personal circumstances. As part of this responsibility, ensure that you have a good understanding of the key characteristics of the institution and its students. Evaluate the achievement of different groups of students and judge how effectively their needs and aspirations are met and any initiatives or courses aimed specifically at these groups of students. Take account of recruitment patterns, retention rates and attendance patterns for programmes and courses for different groups of students. Consider the individual goals and targets set for students within different groups and the progress they make towards achieving them.

You should be aware of the responsibilities and duties of schools and colleges regarding equal opportunities, in particular those defined in the Sex Discrimination Act 1957, the Race Relations Act 1976 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. These Acts and related codes of practice underpin national policies on inclusion, on raising achievement and on the important role schools and colleges have in fostering better personal, community and race relations, and in addressing and preventing racism.¹

As well as being thoroughly familiar with subject-specific requirements, be alert to the unique contribution that each subject makes to the wider educational development of students. Assess how well the curriculum and teaching in sociology enable all students to develop key skills, and how successfully the subject contributes to the students' personal, social, health and citizenship education, and to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Judge how effectively the subject helps prepare students aged 16–19 for adult life in a culturally and ethnically diverse society.

¹ See Annex *Issues for Inspection arising from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Macpherson Report)* in *Evaluating Educational Inclusion*, OFSTED, 2000, p13.

1 Standards and achievement

1.1 Evaluating standards and achievement

From the previous inspection report, find out what you can about standards and achievement at that time. This will give you a point of comparison with the latest position, but do not forget that there is a trail of performance data, year by year. Analyse and interpret the performance data available for students who have recently completed the course(s). Draw on the school's *Pre-Inspection Context and School Indicator* (PICS) report or, in the case of a college, the *College Performance Report*. Also analyse the most recent results provided by the school or college and any value-added information available. When numbers are small, exercise caution in making comparisons with national data or, for example, evaluating trends. For further guidance on interpreting performance data and analysing value added, refer to *Inspecting School Sixth Forms*, the *Handbook for Inspecting Colleges* and the *National Summary Data Report for Secondary Schools*.

Where you can, form a view about the standards achieved by different groups of students. For example, there may be data which enable you to compare how male and female students or different ethnic groups are doing, or how well 16–19-year-old students achieve in relation to older students.

Make full use of other information which has a bearing on standards and achievement, including success in completing courses, targets and their achievement, and other measures of success.

You should interpret, in particular:

- trends in results;
- comparisons with other subjects and courses;
- distributions of grades, particularly the occurrence of high grades;
- value-added information;
- the relative performance of male and female students;
- the performance of minorities and different ethnic groups;
- trends in the popularity of courses;
- drop-out or retention rates;
- students' destinations, where data are available.

On the basis of the performance data and other pre-inspection evidence, form hypotheses about the standards achieved, whether they are as high as they should be, and possible explanations. Follow up your hypotheses through observation and analysis of students' work and talking with them. Direct inspection evidence tells you about the standards at which the current students are working, and whether they are being sufficiently stretched. If the current standards are at odds with what the performance data suggest, you must find out why and explain the differences carefully.

The specifications for GCSE and GCE sociology courses make clear what students are expected to learn. In broad terms, you should look for evidence of the following knowledge and understanding, skills and intellectual attitudes.

Knowledge and understanding

Students should have a sound grasp of:

- principles and issues underlying both micro and macro aspects of social life;
- primary and secondary evidence related to social institutions and processes, and to contemporary issues;
- concepts and theories drawn from different sociological traditions;
- principles and practice in different approaches to research methodology.

They should be able to apply their knowledge and understanding; that is, be able to:

- use a range of evidence to generate and support generalisations about social life, to support and develop argument and to set alongside personal experiences, opinions and ideas; and be able to assess the value of different types of evidence;
- use concepts and theories to clarify and sharpen accounts and explanations of aspects of social life.

Investigative skills

Students should be able to:

- identify research questions;
- collect data systematically;
- analyse and present findings;
- produce tenable conclusions.

Intellectual attitudes

Students should have developed to a high level their objectivity, which will be shown in:

- a critical attitude towards social, economic and political issues;
- a critical attitude towards sources of evidence;
- an understanding of the variety of standpoints and perspectives held by others;
- a recognition of racism, sexism, ageism and other forms of stereotyping and taken-for-granted assumptions.

1.2 Analysis of students' work

Notes and assignments in students' files provide substantial evidence of attainment. The analysis of work is important for judging the nature of the demands made on the students and their progress over time. Hence, it can give valuable insights into their achievement. In addition, it raises questions for further investigation, notably about the quality of teaching, curriculum, assessment and resources. The following example demonstrates the kinds of judgement which can be derived from the analysis of files.

Example 1: evidence from analysis of Year 12 and Year 13 A-level students' files in a school sixth-form.

Files well organised and provide a valuable learning resource. Good use of diagrams to summarise ideas and information, but little evidence of pagination and indexing to enable students to find their way around more easily and make cross-references. Students able to make comprehensive and clear notes from a range of sources. Apart from the teacher's printed materials, students have acquired additional, relevant material from their personal reading and from the Internet, highlighting important points and linking the material to work covered in class. Students' notes from classwork are similar; those from personal reading and research reflect students' personal styles, and all show an ability to pick out the important points relating to theoretical perspectives, individual theorists and research studies. Many research studies in Year 13 files; students are noting links between sections of the course specification.

Standard of essays ranges from good to excellent. In Year 12, students already becoming competent at marshalling relevant evidence in considering particular questions. In Year 13, all the students whose work is being analysed can do this well. The higher attainers write in a mature, sophisticated style which weighs evidence and reaches well-balanced conclusions, and at a standard which is likely to result in high grades. Relative to where they are on the course, students are explaining theoretical perspectives clearly and can demonstrate how particular theorists fit, or fail to fit, within these traditions. Year 13 students have made at least good progress in their essay-writing skills in just over a year, and the majority of students have made very impressive progress. For example, some at the beginning of the course had little idea how to marshal the evidence or draw conclusions from it but are now producing work of at least Grade C calibre. Hence, indications of very good achievement. The only obvious shortcoming is the teacher's failure to correct some careless spelling errors in essays: the spelling policy is being inconsistently applied. Overall, students have made very good progress in developing their skills in literacy.

Coursework assignments from last year are overall of a high quality: sophisticated rationale, excellent understanding of methodological issues, research conducted very competently and reported very well. They link work to other studies, but are very much aware of limitations. Some very impressive work, well worth the grades awarded. All the students in the sample have used ICT to present their assignments. Although this results in effective presentation (with different headings and fonts for clarity and readability), it is noticeable that students represent their data in manually produced graphs and tables rather than using software. This apparent limitation in their information skills merits further enquiries, because it is at odds with the students' competence in word processing and use of the Internet.

[Attainment well above average (2)]

Commentary

Students' learning is very effective: well-organised files; comprehensive and clear notes in class, from personal reading and the Internet, which highlight important points relating to theoretical work or a research study and link the material to work covered in class. It is reasonable that notes from classwork are relatively but not unacceptably similar. If they were mostly identical, it would indicate excessive copying or dictation, thereby prejudicing the development of students' note-making skills.

The substantial number of research studies in Year 13 files shows that the teaching is paying proper attention to developing the necessary evidence base, thereby making theory and principles concrete and real. That students are noting links between sections of the course specification also reflects a high order of subject knowledge on the part of the teacher.

In their essays, students demonstrate that they can marshal evidence and explain theoretical questions. Year 13 students have made at least good progress in their essay-writing skills in just over a year, and the majority of students have made very impressive progress, now weighing evidence and reaching well-balanced conclusions.

Coursework assignments are of high quality because students understand the principles of sociological methodology, can conduct modest investigations, relate their findings to other work, and evaluate their limitations.

Although this section of the guidance is concerned primarily with students' attainment and achievement, Example 1 also illustrates how the analysis of work can provide evidence on the quality of teaching (see Section 2.3). The standard of the students' notes and essays is likely to be attributable to the quality of the teaching and the demands it makes. Such evidence should help you to see how the teaching contributes to the students' progress over time, their achievement and their standards.

Exercise care in scrutinising students' notes. Compare those in different files in order to establish the extent to which they are similar. Notes which are very similar or identical will provide evidence of the teaching rather than attainment. However, notes which are distinctive, particularly those which students have made from their own reading, will provide evidence of attainment. So also will students' essays and other assignments, including coursework modules. In essays, look for indications that students have a grasp of terminology and theoretical explanations, and that they can use evidence to explain and illustrate theories, concepts and principles. In coursework investigations, look for the students' awareness of the reasons for the choice of data collection techniques and their understanding of the limitations of what they are doing or have done.

Acknowledge students' skills in using information and communication technology (ICT) to present their work, but be aware that the skilful use of ICT can mask poor sociological understanding. This may happen, for example, in coursework assignments in which students present accounts of their personal research.

1.3 Talking with students

Talking with students during lessons and more structured discussions will help you to assess the level at which they are working. There is no need to fire 'test' questions at students. It will often be better for you initially to invite students to tell you what they have been or are doing, what they have found straightforward and what they have found difficult. Subsequently, there are other lines of inquiry you can follow. You can ask students to:

- describe briefly a particular theory or the work of a theorist and explain how it can be used to illustrate and account for different aspects of social life;
- summarise some of the main findings of a piece of empirical research, comment on the research methodology and/or theoretical implications, and assess the usefulness of the study for understanding social life;
- describe a piece of research which they have conducted: its focus or hypothesis, the methods of data collection and the findings, and its overall adequacy as research.

A preliminary examination of the teacher's planning and scheme of work and/or students' notes and assignments will indicate whether films, television programmes, literature and outside visits are used as resources for learning. If so, you can ask students to describe the sociological implications of one of these.

Example 2: evidence from discussion with first and second year A-level students in an FE college (middle of autumn term); their entry qualifications were average overall.

First year students can explain their recent work on the family, summarising very effectively the functions of the family and locating these functions in the context of family change over the past couple of centuries. They can also identify the main findings of a piece of empirical research (of their own choosing) into family life, and cite its applicability to their own family and wider community. Second year students can compare and contrast alternative theoretical orientations, and can apply them to unfamiliar situations. They are also adroit at showing how parts of their course are interlinked. For example, they mention that they have studied Gouldner's Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy and show how to use this research classic to illustrate work orientations as well as bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic forms of organisation. Overall, students' understanding of recent work is at the level expected; but their ability to interpret and apply research studies, and make links, is well above average. This shows good progress since GCSE and is an indication of the quality of the teaching.

Overall, a positive picture and the students themselves appear confident, thoughtful and perceptive.

Students greatly appreciate the combination of independence and support, the systematic way in which learning is consolidated, the use of diagrammatic representation of ideas, the pace of working in lessons and their variety. They also speak highly of the way most teachers link the work to current events. They appreciate the way in which independent learning and homework are fully integrated with lessons, so that, as one student puts it, 'If you don't do the homework, you can't do the lesson.' Students find the marking of essays very constructive and well supplemented by oral comments which very much help them in target-setting and improving their work.

[Attainment above average (3)]

Commentary

That students are learning well is evident from the way that, relative to whether they are in the first or second year, they can describe particular theories and show how they can be used to illustrate and explain different aspects of social life. Further evidence comes from the way they can summarise some of the main findings of a piece of empirical research. Second year students are intellectually imaginative, because they can show how single pieces of research can illustrate different aspects of social life.

As in Example 1, broader comments are included because they highlight possible links between standards and the quality of the teaching. Here, students are attesting to the teachers' management of learning and, particularly, the good balance between independent work and support from the teacher. They can see how their teachers' constructive assessments are helping them to learn.

1.4 Lesson observation

In lessons, you will find evidence of attainment in students' questions, their answers to the teachers' questions, and in any interaction among students during group work.

Example 3: evidence from a Year 12 A-level sociology lesson in a school sixth-form (end of spring term); most of the students had below average GCSE results, but 2 are higher attainers.

Students individually completing research studies.

Even the higher-attaining students have a very limited grasp of the principles of research methodology. All the students can use some of the relevant terminology, such as 'hypothesis', 'qualitative evidence' and 'bias'. They are familiar with research methods, such as questionnaires and participant observation, but their understanding is well below the standard expected for this stage of the A-level course.

Although all students nominated several hypotheses for their studies, they were very general and data collection was poorly designed to verify all of them. All collected a considerable amount of information from secondary sources, including documents from voluntary organisations and government websites. However, only one student is able to relate her hypotheses successfully to previous findings and theories, using these secondary sources.

All have elected to use questionnaires or interviews, and the sizes of their samples are realistic and manageable. However, there is a heavy reliance on approaching people in shopping centres and school, without controlling the quantity of particular categories of respondent. This reflects a poor understanding of the nature of stratified and quota sampling, and of the way research can illuminate the relationships between variables such as occupation, age and sex. The result is that students' analyses of their findings are very thin and over-generalised. Some of the questions posed are leading or double questions, which will affect the status of the findings.

All students are currently attempting an evaluation of their studies, but they all emphasise only the limitations in sample size. They do not stress the composition of the sample, the design of their questionnaires or interview schedules, their own interview techniques, or the general limitations of quantitative evidence. In conversation, students can explain cogently some of the general ethical issues facing researchers, and they are particularly strong on the importance of confidentiality. Yet they have not applied this understanding well to their own studies – for example, by explaining the effects that their own characteristics (age, sex, ethnicity) may have had on their respondents.

The majority of these students started the AS course with relatively low previous attainment, but nevertheless this level of attainment indicates unsatisfactory achievement.

[Attainment well below average (6)]

Commentary

Students' understanding of research methodology is weak and not up to the standards expected at this stage of an A-level course. Their grasp of different methodological traditions and the associated research procedures is insubstantial. They know insufficient about the principles of sampling and of questionnaire design to be able to conduct a piece of research likely to produce informative findings. All but one have been unable to use secondary data effectively to inform their research. All could determine what sample size they needed and had a clear view on the limitations of sample size, but most were unaware how to construct a sample in order to illustrate the effect of particular variables. The students have a general understanding of sources of bias and ethical issues, but their application of these issues to their own research is weak. Only one student has grasped some of the differences between the major methodological paradigms, and has a sound knowledge of research techniques, which he is able to evaluate.

The poor standards here probably reflect weaknesses in the teaching. In a situation like this, you should verify, through scrutiny and discussions with the teachers and students, the extent to which there was appropriate teaching on research methodology before the students took this unit.

Example 4: evidence from AS sociology lesson in a sixth-form college (beginning of summer term); average previous attainment in GCSE overall.

Revision session in which students present oral summaries of data on the changing distribution of wealth and poverty, and on life chances.

Students' presentation skills are weak, as is their contribution to formal discussion. Difficult to comprehend fully what they are saying but, in later conversation, all students are able to explain clearly how the distribution of wealth has changed over past half century, with particular reference to more recent years. It is also clear that they have a sound grasp of the correlation between socio-economic status and life chances and can illustrate this well by reference to factors such as fertility, mortality, medical care and educational opportunity. Overall, then, their subject knowledge is at an average level. Their public communication skills are weak but face-to-face their expression is substantially better. This points to satisfactory achievement in sociology (but apparently unsatisfactory communication skills).

[Attainment average (4)]

Commentary

Weaknesses in oral presentation to the whole class detract from the content of what students have to say and might easily lead to an incorrect judgement on their competence in the subject. In this case, the opportunity was taken to talk to students individually about their material and, in the course of these conversations, it became clear that their understanding was average for this level. In practice, it may not be possible to hold such conversations during the lesson, but you should always try to test the evidence of the lesson with additional evidence from discussions with students, work scrutiny and other lesson observations.

This observation also poses a question about the teaching. In principle, such oral presentations, through which students help themselves and each other to revise their knowledge and understanding, are valuable in facilitating participative learning. The inadequacies of the students' presentations here might be attributable to the lack of guidance from the teacher on presenting findings orally. The teacher's planning or discussion with the students could confirm whether this is the case.

2 Teaching and learning

2.1 Evaluating teaching and learning

In order to form judgements, we have to apply evaluation criteria to evidence. The *Handbook* identifies criteria for judging teaching and learning: some of these have a particular application in sociology courses. The following lists are not exhaustive but illustrative of the ways in which you should base your judgements on clear criteria.

Criteria for effective teaching

The teachers' *subject knowledge and understanding* will be good when they:

- clearly and succinctly explain terminology and theoretical principles;
- clearly explain generalisations about social structures and processes, and effectively demonstrate exceptions to rules;
- clearly present evidence about social structures and processes, including any contradictions in the evidence;
- use well-chosen evidence and illustrations from sociological and other sources and contemporary events to illustrate concepts, theories and methods;
- skilfully draw out links and cross-references between the different topics studied.

The teaching of *skills* will be effective when students are required to:

- use language accurately, particularly sociological terminology;
- produce and interpret numerical data;
- use ICT to interrogate social research and present their own research findings.

The teachers' *planning* will be effective when it:

- ensures a balanced and detailed study of different theoretical traditions;
- accurately applies sociological theory and concepts to the study of social structures and social processes;
- incorporates wide-ranging quantitative and qualitative evidence drawn from primary and secondary sources;
- includes a balanced and detailed study of 'positivist' and 'interpretivist' methodological approaches and related data collection techniques.

The teachers will *challenge* and have *high expectations* when they require students to:

- use accurately sociological terminology and theories to explain social phenomena;
- practise for themselves the interpretation of quantitative and qualitative evidence;
- collect data for themselves in ways, and for purposes, which are manageable and fit for purpose.

The teachers' *methods* will be effective when they:

- stimulate sociological imagination and students' curiosity in micro and macro aspects of the social world;
- promote understanding by the adroit use of analogies and models;
- incorporate questioning and discussion which are fit for purpose (consolidation; challenge; extension);
- require students to apply their sociological knowledge and understanding to resources additional to textbooks;
- read sociology, and about sociology, for themselves.

The teachers' *use of students' personal study* will be effective when it includes exercises which:

- reinforce students' understanding of sociological concepts and theories and their ability to apply them;
- reinforce students' understanding of sociological methods and their ability to use them;
- require the analysis of a rich variety of materials, including original sources;
- involve the interpretation of empirical data.

Criteria for effective learning

Students' learning will be effective when they:

- acquire new knowledge of concepts, theory and methodology;
- acquire new knowledge of empirical evidence related to a number of substantive areas, such as the family, deviance and social stratification;
- expend intellectual effort in trying to explain concepts and theories in their oral and written work;
- expend intellectual effort in applying their understanding to familiar and unfamiliar problems and situations;
- can use a wide range of books, including original research studies, and other sources in order to learn for themselves;
- can explain what they are currently doing and how it fits into the course as a whole;
- can illustrate the ways in which the parts of the course interlink and how specific pieces of research can be used in more than one part of their course.

The application of evaluation criteria is not always straightforward. This is because there are no fixed rules about which teaching methods should and should not be used. Therefore, you should look carefully for teaching which may, on the face of it, have positive features but which lacks sound mastery of the subject and/or fit-for-purpose methods. Look carefully, too, for the converse. The following are some examples.

- Extensive dictated notes, used to deal with a large knowledge base, may be academically sound but inappropriate for ensuring that students develop understanding in depth. However, not all dictation is inappropriate: brief dictation may be useful in ensuring that definitions are clear and accurate, especially if students are struggling to come to terms with new terminology.
- Discussion in pairs or in groups does, in principle, break up lengthy exposition and provide students with an opportunity to participate actively. However, you should judge whether discussion is fit for purpose. In sociology lessons, it should enable students to practise the application of terminology, share with each other the outcomes of reading and research, and so on. Discussion should be sharply focused and should require students to reflect on, rather than simply describe, their personal experience; it should enable them to develop their critical faculties rather than merely express their personal opinions and attitudes.
- An assumption is sometimes made that extended exposition by the teacher is inappropriate, and that lessons must be punctuated by frequent opportunities for discussion. Apply an open mind to this. Extended exposition can be particularly effective: for example, to map out a topic, to explain difficult material or to introduce material which is not readily available and/or at the right level in textbooks. Conversely, extended exposition is likely to be inappropriate when it replicates basic material which students could consult and digest for themselves, or when the presentation is neither challenging nor inspiring.
- Practical investigations are potentially valuable ways of enabling students to practise data collection and thereby familiarise themselves with sociological methods. However, such exercises are not intrinsically worthwhile. First, look for evidence that they have clear and manageable objectives. Second, look for evidence that they develop students' awareness of different methodological approaches, of the strengths and limitations of particular methods of collecting data, and of the validity or otherwise of conclusions based on those data. Third, look for evidence that teaching enables students to develop their key skills sufficiently to demonstrate their sociological knowledge and understanding. These issues are particularly relevant to those courses which include practical research assignments.

2.2 Lesson observation

The evaluation criteria will, of course, provide the basis for your judgements in lessons. Although all the criteria are important, in some lessons particular criteria will assume greater importance in explaining students' attainment and progress. In the following example, it is the teacher's subject knowledge which is decisive.

Example 5: evidence from first year A-level sociology lesson in an FE college (middle of autumn term).

Functionalist perspective on religion: key theorists; links with social control and morality.

Very good relationships with students; good humoured yet industrious working atmosphere creates the right environment for learning.

Teacher has extremely good command of subject knowledge, with up-to-date references (eg, crisis of life theory). Lucid explanation of theories by teacher, using effective, well-thought-out support material for reference and consolidation. Skilfully emphasises main points and main omissions in students' mini-presentations on Durkheim and Malinowski. Injects cross-cultural analysis to great effect and thereby explicitly counters ethnocentrism. Adroitly introduces less well-known material, notably studies of 17th-Century puritanism in Boston, Massachusetts and American memorial day ceremonies. All this empirical information brings the subject to life, enabling students to relate theory to the contemporary world and their own experience. At the end, the teacher challenges students with a brief indication of the way Marx's study of religion deployed essentially functional analysis.

All students are able to respond to the teacher's questions which, on occasions, are addressed to particular students and are cleverly formulated to enable students of different abilities to demonstrate some learning. Thus they all, not least those who in this group are the lower attainers, are able to recall accurately (though with varying levels of detail) the gist of theoretical arguments and important sources of evidence from the previous lesson. Although still only two months into the course, without exception they take considerable pains to try to explain basic theories to each other and the teacher, and to apply theories to contemporary situations.

The lesson is a tour de force: second year standard because of excellent subject knowledge and presentational skills, very good working relationships, and enthusiastic and effective learning.

[Teaching and learning excellent (1)]

Commentary

This is a record of impressive teaching, characterised by the teacher's excellent subject knowledge. This knowledge manifests itself in the clarity of the teacher's explanation of theoretical material which is difficult at this stage of the course. The teacher skilfully uses a wide range of empirical data to illustrate the theoretical analysis, so that not only do students understand the theory but they can also discern its relevance to the contemporary world and to their own experience. Kai Erikson's study of Wayward Puritans, in particular, strikes immediate resonances with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, with which the students are very familiar, and they make clear connections with more recent political events and legal cases. The teacher's final comments about functional analysis in Marx's work are challenging but successful in stretching the students at an early stage in the course. They lay the seeds for later, more sophisticated work on the relationships between theoretical paradigms. Skilful use of questions tailor-made for students of different levels of capability ensures that all students are able to make good progress.

Example 6: evidence from Year 13 A-level sociology lesson in a school sixth-form (middle of autumn term).

Lesson on the role of the media in amplifying deviance.

Towards the close of the lesson, the teacher sets an individual study exercise to use the Internet, starting with identified websites, to investigate two examples of moral panics and read the critical account of Cohen's work in Sociological Review. A demanding but interesting task which will be used as the starting point for the next lesson, which is to examine critically deviancy amplification theory and explore some alternative explanations.

[Teaching excellent (1)]

Commentary

This short extract illustrates how teachers can set individual study tasks which are intellectually demanding and integral to the way the teacher has planned the course.

Example 7: evidence from first year A-level sociology lesson in an FE college (middle of autumn term).

Sociology of education: cultural deprivation and compensatory education.

Weak subject knowledge, marked by lengthy and convoluted explanations, the absence of higher level conceptualisation, and insufficient examples to bring the material to life.

The lengthy introduction results in some loss of interest. Lack of appropriate stimulus material and reference resources of insufficient quality contribute to students' failure to understand compensatory education. Teacher laboriously covers Bernstein's theory without clarity or conviction. Contributions at first from students who are eager to take part in discussion but not given the chance. Over-dependence on textbook and reading through information. Slow pace with embarrassing pauses and difficult questions. Teacher sits at desk and refers to information from previous week, without focus. Poor organisation does not allow for emphasis on key skills or reinforcement. Students not given sufficiently stimulating tasks or challenging exercises. Teacher talks approximately 80 per cent of the time. The result is that, after 30 minutes, students have lost interest. No group work or serious debate. Insufficient progress or direction to give students focus. Lack of key skills development or active approach to learning results in little involvement and unsatisfactory progress in learning.

Despite the poor teaching, students initially have a mature approach to learning, with good skills in listening and concentration, but these are stretched to the limit by the lengthy introduction and explanation. The lack of depth to back-up material causes some frustration.

[Teaching poor (6); learning unsatisfactory (5)]

Commentary

Exposition by the teacher plays a fundamental role in the learning process, but it is too long and lacks clarity. It is over-dependent on information from the textbook, much of which is simply read out. Overall, it is not fit for purpose. The quality of presentation is attributable to weaknesses in the teacher's subject knowledge, reflected in convoluted explanations, lack of familiarity with relevant concepts and examples, and a slow pace. As a result, students lose interest and do not grasp the main concept. They are initially eager to take part in discussion but not given sufficient opportunity to clarify their understanding and ask questions when uncertain. Poor organisation does not allow for the development or reinforcement of key skills.

Example 8: evidence from AS sociology lesson in a school sixth-form (end of autumn term).

Groups carrying out small research enquiries into various aspects of family life.

Aims and objectives not made explicit at the start; no evidence of checking students' recall and understanding of previous work which had covered some classic research studies on changing family structures. Teacher's planning notes scrappy and disjointed.

Students work effectively in their groups; the teacher exercises his support role well. He provides good advice to show how students can base their own research studies on those of the classics, both for hypotheses to investigate and research methods to use. While circulating, he checks not only on students' progress but on their understanding, as a result of which he judiciously interrupts the class at intervals to draw attention to the broader methodological implications of the classic research studies and to pose questions about them.

One group of male students initially slow to get down to work, apparently with an immature reluctance to show interest in 'families', but teacher sensitively engages them in discussion and overcomes their reticence; they subsequently work well.

Unhurried but acceptable pace. No change of activity during the 60 minutes but the teacher quietly ensures that students make effective use of their time. They do accomplish as much as could be expected, maintaining interest throughout.

Resources available and used are generally satisfactory; although some of the handouts are poorly presented, their content is good.

Lesson quietly ends at the bell, but with no indication of what has been achieved. Brief reference to working further on these enquiries before the next lesson.

[Teaching and learning satisfactory (4)]

Commentary

It would be easy to write off the teaching in this lesson. It does not get off to a focused beginning, and the closure does not draw threads together; the teacher's written planning is unimpressive and his handouts poorly presented. However, the quality of his guidance to students is good: it demonstrates that he knows his subject well (both family studies and research methodology), and knows, too, what he wants students to gain through the exercise. The poor planning notes, then, do not mean that the lesson has not been adequately planned, only that the recording of the planning is defective.

There is no change in activity during the session, but variety is not a virtue in itself. What matters is whether the activity is fit for purpose and whether it enables students to make progress. On both these counts, the activity is appropriate. Further, the teacher ensures that the whole class benefits from important points which are emerging from discussions with individual students or groups. This is good practice in dealing with group work. The handouts might be poorly presented but the content is secure.

This example illustrates how quality might not be what it at first appears, and shows why you must keep an open mind on whether what you see works. This example of teaching has its strengths as well as some apparent deficiencies but, overall, it is sufficient to ensure that students' learning is satisfactory.

2.3 Other evidence on teaching and learning

Lesson observation is usually the most important source of evidence on the quality of teaching and learning, but the analysis of work and discussions with students can also yield valuable information. This is particularly important when the work includes a coursework component undertaken over time. Under these circumstances, the observation of individual lessons may give a very partial picture of the students' learning experience and of the support provided by teachers.

The work analysis will give you a good feel for the overall rate of progress, and, therefore, the pace of the teaching and learning. It will show the range and depth of the work which the students are required to do. For example, the quality of students' notes will help to show whether sufficient time has been spent by teachers in equipping students with relevant study skills. Example 1 illustrates how evidence may be obtained on the range of research studies students are expected to undertake.

Discussions with students will give you a sense of their motivation and the range of their experiences. You can ask questions to show whether they understand clearly how well they are doing and what they must do to improve.

3 Other factors affecting quality

You should mention other factors only in as much as they have a direct bearing on students' achievements and the quality of teaching and learning. The areas to consider are curriculum, leadership, management, staffing, accommodation and resources. The following are possible examples.

Curriculum planning and management

It is not unusual for A-level classes to be taught by two teachers who plan a division of labour for covering the topics on the course specification. In sociology, however, the links between topics are crucial: they include links between theory (such as functionalist analysis) and substantive topics (such as education or religion), as well as links between one substantive topic and another. Furthermore, some empirical studies can be used to illustrate more than one substantive topic. If made effectively, these links add much to students' learning, so what you should look for is whether the teachers ensure that cross-references between topics are drawn out explicitly. The evidence might be found in teachers' lesson plans or suggested in the departmental schemes of work.

Note whether teachers draw attention to these links in lessons; for example, ask whether students remember covering a particular piece of research when studying the family with Ms X. Such cross-references would be evidence of good subject knowledge and effective lesson planning, both of which relate to the quality of teaching. If students themselves are able to cite links between topics, you will have an additional piece of evidence on their achievement.

Resources

There is a wide range of books for sociology courses: they include comprehensive and up-to-date text books, some examining standard topics and themes in depth, and others which provide source material and/or activities. In addition, departments usually have a considerable number of printed materials which teachers themselves have produced to support teaching and learning. In making a judgement on the quality and quantity of the books and materials available, you should take account of the extent to which they give students access not only to the theoretical and methodological foundations of the subject but also to up-to-date evidence, including relevant research studies. Effective teaching will provide students with opportunities to interpret quantitative and qualitative evidence for themselves.

4 Writing the report

The following is an example of a post-16 subject section from a school inspection report. (It does not necessarily reflect the judgements in any or all of the examples given elsewhere in this booklet.) In an FE college, it is likely that sociology would be reported together with some other subjects. The summative judgements in these reports use, for schools, the seven-point scale: *excellent*; *very good*; *good*; *satisfactory*; *unsatisfactory*; *poor*; *very poor*. For colleges there is the five-point scale: *outstanding*; *good*; *satisfactory*; *unsatisfactory*; *very weak*. The summative judgements *excellent/very good* used in school reports correspond to *outstanding* in colleges; *poor/very poor* used in schools correspond to *very weak* in colleges.

Sociology

Overall, the quality of provision in sociology is **good**.

Strengths

- In Year 12, standards are well above average and critical skills are impressive; achievement is very good.
- In Year 13, coursework is a particular strength.
- Teaching is good and uses successful methods, which result in effective learning.
- Students are enthusiastic in their learning and are making very good progress.
- The head of department provides dynamic leadership and manages the department well.

Areas for improvement

- Year 13 students have difficulty applying theoretical concepts to unfamiliar situations.

The most recent GCE A-level results in sociology are below the national averages both for the proportion of students achieving a pass and the proportion achieving grades A or B. In the last few years, results have declined. Comparison of individual students' A-level results in sociology with the GCSE grades they obtained before starting in the sixth-form shows that they have not achieved as well as they should. There have been no significant differences in the standards attained by female and male students.

However, the standards of attainment observed during the inspection were markedly better than those shown by recent examination results. The work of Year 13 students is at a level which, overall, meets the standard expected, while that of the Year 12 students represents well above average attainment for the stage of the course they have reached. This recent improvement in standards has followed changes in the management and staffing of the subject. Current attainment in Year 13 is similar to that at the time of the last inspection.

Year 13 students have a sound understanding of the theoretical foundations of the subject, although they have difficulty applying theoretical concepts to unfamiliar situations. They are able to describe in detail the findings of both quantitative and qualitative research, but they are not always sure what underlying principles each study illustrates. A particular strength of the Year 13 students is their coursework. Their planning has been impressively thorough, demonstrating that they appreciate how to relate their enquiries to previous research and that they have a sound knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies they are planning to use. They are very competent in collecting data, analysing findings and coming to conclusions warranted by their evidence. From an average standard in GCSE, their overall achievement is satisfactory. Their current progress is very good, but previous staffing problems in Year 12 left them with ground to make up because the work was insufficiently demanding.

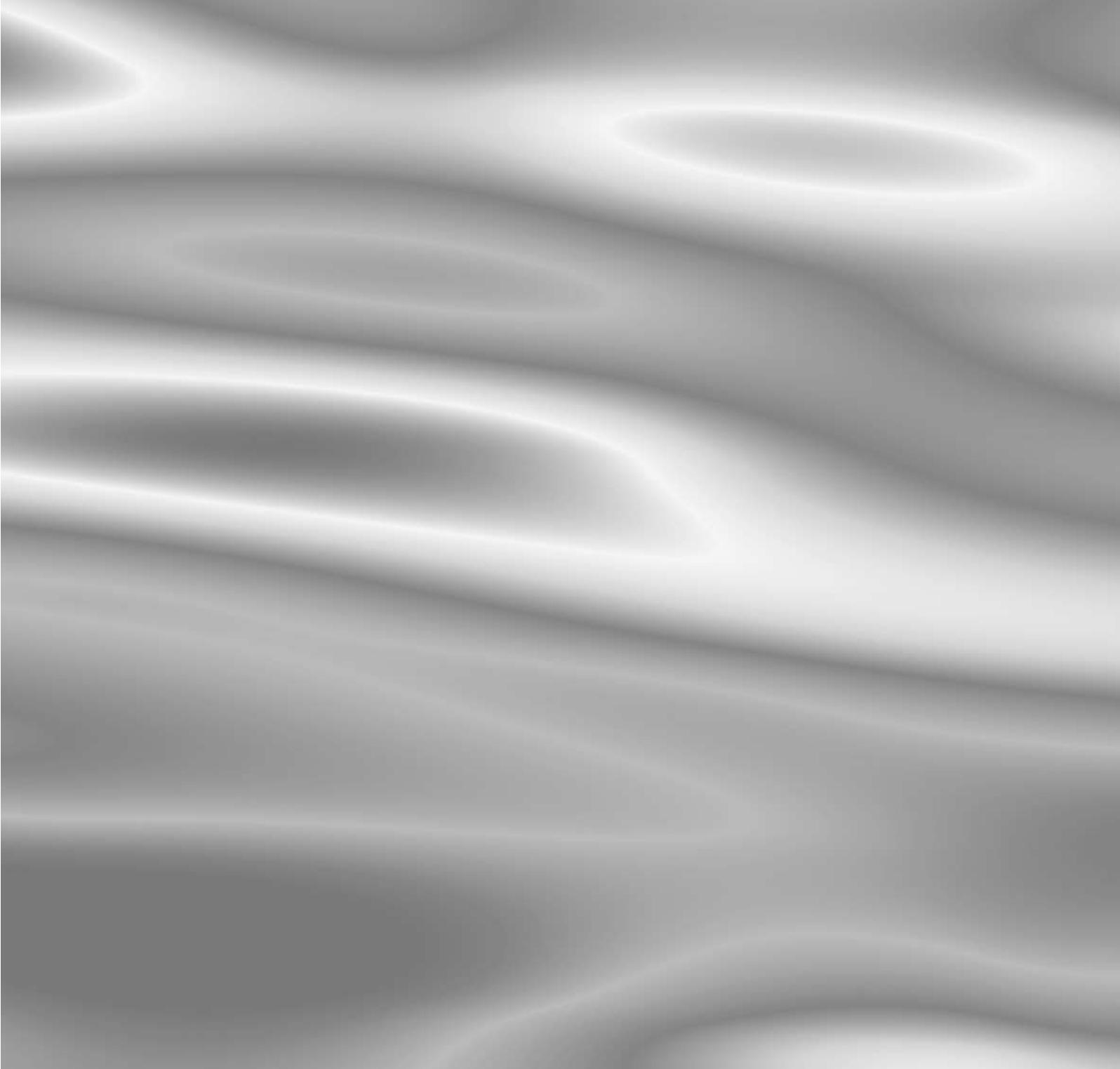
Year 12 students have made a good start to their course. They already have an understanding of different theoretical traditions and can define and illustrate key concepts by reference to the family and religion in contemporary society. What is also impressive is the students' critical skills: they shrewdly question whether or not everyday assumptions and stereotypes are supported by evidence. This intellectual skill is much superior to that normally found at this stage of the course, especially given that the students' attainment in GCSE was average overall. Their achievement is very good.

The teaching of sociology is good. The depth and breadth of the teachers' understanding of the subject enable them to give clear explanations of concepts, theories and principles. They are particularly skilled in making use of contemporary events for illustration. They use successful methods in their teaching and these result in effective learning. On the one hand, they do not hesitate to make extended presentations when necessary to explain tricky points or to map out the interrelationships within a topic or theme. On the other hand, they intervene skilfully during class or group discussion to emphasise important points, clarify misunderstandings and, above all, to provide a model to students of how and when to question propositions and assumptions.

This latter feature is teaching of high quality. In one lesson, students gave brief presentations of research evidence on changes to family structures and roles from different cultural perspectives. Without undermining their sense of achievement and confidence, the teacher asked searching questions, carefully matching the complexity of the questions to the abilities of the different students in order to stretch them all. In this way, she skilfully brought out the main points and omissions in these presentations, and introduced additional concepts.

As a result of this good teaching, the students show enthusiasm for their learning. They are keen to read round the subject in personal study time, and use books and other resources confidently, including ICT. Year 12 students are already keen to attempt extracts from original empirical studies. All the students show interest and insight in discussions in lessons, are keen to express their ideas but also ready to listen to and consider the views of others; they show intellectual excitement in grasping new concepts and in appreciating the force of evidence. Overall, they are making very good progress.

The head of department, appointed at the start of this academic year, provides dynamic leadership and is managing the department well. She has drafted a new scheme of work which specifies, comprehensively and often subtly, relationships between theories and empirical studies, and cites the most important research studies to be covered. It also incorporates substantial guidance on teaching approaches and the use of resources. With colleagues, she has developed an effective system for monitoring the progress of individual students through their course, and she has broadened the range of resources in the department. During the past year, all the staff have updated their own knowledge and pedagogy through a local network of sociology teachers and through their professional subject association. It is clear that these initiatives have been effective in raising standards in sociology.



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