

A Portrait of Blight

TEACHERS who have worked over a period of years with large numbers of disadvantaged children have little difficulty in identifying them. These teachers readily recognize characteristics which, if not treated and redirected, foretell failure for the school in making education count in the lives of children and their families.

The Disadvantaged

What does a teacher see when he looks at his disadvantaged children?

A Self-Image That Reflects Worthlessness

Thousands of boys and girls entering the elementary school as five and six year olds have already learned that they are worth little. Life has taught them this in a short span of time. Many do not know who their parents are; they have been shunted around among other adults, living in many homes. Many have a one-parent home, often living with their mothers and brothers and sisters in a fatherless home. Children in the same

family group sometimes have a number of different fathers. These youngsters are accustomed to seeing a succession of men in the home whose relations with the mother are transitory. *Such children lack the stability of normal family life centered in the welfare of the children which helps a child feel important and wanted.*

Poverty That Overwhelms

Disadvantaged children are basically economically deprived. Many of these children have never known what it means to go to sleep for the night with full stomachs. Their only complete meal each day is obtained as "free lunch" at school. One child who was having her first lunch at school was observed carefully wrapping half of her sandwich. On being questioned, she explained that her father was hungry; there had been no food in the house for three days.

Economically deprived children suffer because of poor and inadequate housing. Let the children describe how they live:

Franklin: "My family would like to move to another house because when it is cold the owner will not give us much heat to keep us warm. My mother said she was going to move when she finds a good house. That's what would please us the best."

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Earl: "I wish that we had enough food, money, and clothes for every one in our house. Sometimes we run out of food and money, and when we run out of money the bills pile up."

Ursula: "The best thing that could happen to my family is to move. I would like to move from the place we are living because of the living conditions. It is very bad. It is also a very slum area. We have no backyard to play in nor front. My sisters and brothers don't go outside unless we take them. So I think that is the best thing that could happen to my family."

Samuel: "If we had more money we could get the house over Riverside because the apartment is falling apart. The door is falling down. The ceiling is falling down and when it rains the rain comes in. We have roaches now but I hope we won't have them if we move over to Riverside."

Louis: "I wish that we could have a new house because the old house leaks when it snows. It has no back yard to play in and we will meet new friends."

Jacob: "I would want my family to have an icebox so that every time my mother puts some meat in it it would not spoil, and so that we won't have to throw anything away and go to the store to buy more food to put in it again."

Among the deprived, physical survival blots out all other needs. In many families, mother is the sole breadwinner. With long work hours in unskilled employment, the mother is away from home during most of the child's waking hours. The demands upon the mother during her short time at home make it impossible for her to meet the needs of growing children. Family meals are unknown in many instances.

The oldest children in the family are forced to assume the burdens of maturity too early in life. They handle the family food budget, shopping while mother is at work. They prepare what-

ever food is available for younger children. They often assume full responsibility for younger brothers and sisters. One nine year old explained that he loved his neighbor because she took care of his little brothers and sisters so that he could play.

Among the economically deprived are many whose health has been crippled. Poor nutrition, insufficient food, inadequate clothing and housing, and lack of simple, routine medical care have made deep inroads prior to school entrance. In one typical city, 65 percent of all public school children have never known what it means to have a family doctor, nor any medical service, except emergency clinic care. A preventive program of inoculations, vaccinations, annual physical examinations, and dental service must be provided by the school.

Many disadvantaged children are the victims of a poverty so crushing that early in life poor health not only drains the energy, but blights the spirit.

Values That Block Personal Development and Social Consciousness

For many disadvantaged children moral and spiritual perversion is the price of deprivation. Cramped and crowded living space, denying any form of privacy, early sensitizes the child to adult sexual behavior before he is mature enough to comprehend the significance of it. He is often the victim of adults living in his home. This is particularly true of girls who often become mothers when they are little more than children. Illegitimacy is an accepted pattern of life and marriage of little consequence in sexual relationships.

The source of family income frequently affects the values developed by the disadvantaged child. Many children are growing up in an environment in

which, for several generations, the chief source of income is from public and private welfare agencies. A pattern is established wherein it is normal and acceptable to receive financial support without individual effort and initiative. This factor, together with an early awareness of the fact that, to many, racial discrimination closes the door to opportunities for work, results in attitudes of defeatism and acceptance of the status quo. It produces generations of children without hope and the will to become individuals with a sense of dignity and worth.

A value system bred in deprivation is in sharp conflict with the established "middle-class" value system held by the school and community. And we find youngsters caught in the bind, rejected but not knowing why.

Blocks to Education

The disadvantaged child suffers most when he comes to school. His experience in living has ill prepared him for the demands of the typical school. Shaped by an environment whose harshness has indelibly stamped him in his own eyes as a person of little worth, he now must be able to conform in a situation which places primary emphasis upon verbal skills. He finds that his natural vocabulary fails to communicate; and the school's means of communication, informal standard English, is almost a second language to him. He resolves this problem often by becoming quiet, and his teacher classifies him as lacking in language facility and unable to express himself, in spite of the fact that his natural language is often dynamic and that he is quite facile in its use.

Next, the disadvantaged child becomes the victim of the group intelligence test. Lacking the experiences and the language tools which are incorporated in

the typical group intelligence test, the child emerges from this measurement of experiences he has never known as a "slow learner," one whose potential is severely limited. And his teacher proceeds to build his curriculum upon a false diagnosis, thereby making certain that a low ceiling for potential is permanently established. In many schools, the matter is confounded by rigid segregation based on the findings of group intelligence and achievement tests, thereby blocking the deprived child from the stimulation of association with more fortunate children.

And, finally, the typical school holds onto common standards and common curriculum, sometimes watered down for the deprived. *The disadvantaged child early discovers that there is little relationship between the problems in living and his living in school.* He early discovers that there is little "use value" in what he learns in school and he leaves it behind him when he leaves the school each evening. This is the child for whom, figuratively, "drop-out" is the first entry on his school registration card the day he enters kindergarten.

Which Road?

The situation of the disadvantaged child, the one for whom "failure" succinctly describes the school's prognosis, is not totally dismal. Increasing numbers of the disadvantaged, frequently found in urban areas, but not exclusively so, are finding hope in their schools.

The tremendous acceleration of change, chiefly characterized by social forces of mobility, racial desegregation, industrial mechanization, and world political tensions, is finding a parallel in changing concepts of education. Never before have educators been confronted with such difficult choices in selecting

the road we will take and the directions we will follow.

Part of the difficulty is centered in the *bind* in which we find ourselves—wherein man's vastly accelerating conquest of the universe has left far behind his achievements in the social and spiritual aspects of his world. We find man standing at the crossroads. Here his choice may be, on the one hand, a broad, dual highway in which the achievements of his intellectual might are enmeshed with the needs of his spirit, each supporting and lending strength in reaching his ultimate destination: a world in which men live in harmony with themselves, with others, and with the infinite world. On the other hand his choice may be a monorail, deceptive in its speed, single-minded of purpose, and capable of delivering man to his destination: destruction of himself and his world.

Crossroads for teachers no longer present two relatively equally desirable paths to the education of children—one, slow-paced; the other, comfortable and satisfying. In making choices among the variety of directions we choose, it will help to remember the words of Robert E. Lee, who, in other times of crisis, wrote: "The march of Providence is so slow and our desires so impatient, the work of Providence is so immense and our means of aiding it so feeble, the life of humanity is so long and that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the advancing wave and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope."

Today, standing at a new crossroads, the directions we take depend upon:

—our ability to recognize our challenges

—our ability to meet them

—and, most of all, our commitment to children.

The challenges facing elementary education are not those alone of the elementary schools.

In a recently completed formal study of schools in changing neighborhoods,¹ schools attained widely varying levels of achievement, as could be expected. In those making the greatest gains, significant clues have been obtained, not only affecting *motivation*, which is the concern of schools for all children, regardless of economic level, but for *teaching processes* which are effective in helping deprived children in their achievement of human relations skills, sensitivities, knowledge and information, and in academic achievement.

Challenges and Clues

Some of the challenges and some clues for meeting these through education follow:

1. Lifting the ceiling on potential through:

—Planning curriculum with high expectations, but realistic in nature

—Planning experiences which change the self image of the child.

2. Assuring economic survival of deprived children through increasing command of standard English.

3. Providing many experiences in seeing the relationship between cause and effect. Making wise choices depends upon anticipating possible outcomes. In essence, this is the process of thinking, notably lacking in the life experiences of deprived children.

4. Rooting the curriculum in children's perceptions of their own needs through the use of diagnostic instruments which reveal children's perceptions, concepts and needs and lead to changing attitudes of teachers toward children.

¹ Muriel Crosby. *An Adventure in Human Relations*. A Three-Year Experimental Project on Schools in Changing Neighborhoods, Third Year Report. Wilmington, Delaware: Public Elementary Schools.

5. Planning curriculum that is rooted in use value for children.

Newer developments in teaching processes and instruments, of which team teaching, programmed learning, teaching machines, subject matter specialization for elementary teachers are illustrations, need to be examined critically. They should be evaluated in the light of research in human growth and development and in the learning process, if we believe that education *must* be an integrative experience if it is to be effective.

1. The nature and developmental needs of the learner differ in some respects among the educational levels of a school system. Therefore, practices which may be appropriate for one level may be inappropriate for another. For example, team teaching in the secondary school may simply be another way of organizing the staff for instruction within the departmental structure of the school. In the elementary school, team teaching, where it has been initiated, has usually resulted in a radical *change in organization* of the school, resulting in highly departmentalized teaching and learning in what have become miniature secondary schools. We need to ask ourselves, "What is the research basis which justifies this type of organization for children 6-12?"

2. The values of machine teaching and programmed learning for each level need to be assessed. They will probably differ between the elementary and secondary schools, depending upon the developmental characteristics of the youngsters. Such questions as these should be asked:

—"What is gained and what is sacrificed in machine teaching?" There are implications here for the quality of education and the cost of education and certainly machine teaching and programmed learning are not financially inexpensive.

—"How are machine teaching and programmed learning changing the role of the teacher and his impact upon children?" "Is teaching a 'tutor' role and is this to be desired?"

3. The increasing numbers of armchair educators, often proficient and capable leaders in their own fields of specialization, but completely unqualified to prescribe teaching methods, have panicked many professional educators into regressive action which is unsupported by research and detrimental to children. We need to ask ourselves: "How can we develop the fortitude and courage to deal with pressures without bias and without fear?" "How can we develop the inner security to fight for deep convictions and to count upon a position which we are able to defend?" When educators know what they believe and are able to defend it, we will no longer deny children the things of the spirit.

In *The Fires of Spring*,² James Michener has written:

"For this is the journey that men make: to find themselves. If they fail in this, it doesn't matter much what else they find. Money, position, fame, many loves, revenge are all of little consequence, and when the tickets are collected at the end of the ride, they are tossed into a bin marked Failure. But if a man happens to find himself—if he knows what he can be depended upon to do, the limits of his courage, the position from which he will no longer retreat . . . the secret reservoirs of his determination, the extent of his dedication, the depth of his feeling for beauty, his honest and unpostured goals—then he has found a mansion which he can inhabit with dignity all the days of his life."

It is imperative that educators find this mansion which Michener describes. Whether or not it is found will depend upon the directions we take at "Crossroads Education." And our choice of direction will determine whether the disadvantaged child of today will become the father of a new generation of disadvantaged children or the creator of a new way of life for himself, his children, and his children's children.

² James Michener. *The Fires of Spring*. New York: Random House. Copyright 1949.

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