

Research in Review

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The Culturally Deprived Child: A New View¹

THERE is now great interest on the part of practitioners and academic people in the problems of lower socio-economic groups. We are nearing a major breakthrough in dealing with these questions. There is, I believe, considerable agreement regarding many of the recommendations for treating these problems (although there are some very different emphases). What is missing is a theoretic rationale to give meaning and direction to the action suggestions.

A sound theoretic approach has to be based on the culture of lower socioeconomic groups and more particularly the elements of strength in this culture. The terms, "deprived," "handicapped," "underprivileged," "disadvantaged," unfortunately emphasize environmental limitations and largely ignore the positive efforts of low-income individuals to cope with their environment.

Most approaches concerned with educating the disadvantaged child either overlook the "positive" elements entirely, or merely mention in passing that there are positive features from which middle class groups might learn. But they do not spell out these strengths to any extent, and consequently they build edu-

cational programs almost exclusively around the weaknesses.

Let us call attention to the positive features in the culture and the psychology of lower income groups; in particular their cognitive style. One major dimension of this style is slowness.

Slow or Dull?

Many children of disadvantaged groups are relatively slow in performing intellectual tasks. This is an important feature of their mental style. Our culture has probably placed far too much emphasis on speed. We reward speed. We think of the fast child as smart and the slow child as dull. This is a basically false idea; *there are many weaknesses in speed and many strengths in slowness.*

A pupil may be slower for other reasons than because he is stupid. He may be slow because he is extremely careful, meticulous, cautious, or because he refuses to generalize easily. He may be slow because he cannot understand a concept unless he does something physically in connection with the idea he is trying to grasp. The disadvantaged child is typically a physical learner and the physical learner is generally a slower learner. (Incidentally the physical style of learning is another important characteristic of the deprived individual and

¹ Condensed from the opening address, Conference on Education of Disadvantaged Children, held by U. S. Office of Education, May 21-23, 1962, Washington, D. C.

this style, too, has many positive features hitherto overlooked.)

A child may be slow because he learns in a one-track way, and does not easily adopt other frames of reference, such as those of the teachers. Very often this single minded individual has considerable creative potential, much of which goes unrealized because of lack of reinforcement in the educational system.

Analysis of these many reasons demonstrates that slowness should not be equated with stupidity. In fact, there is no reason to assume that there are not a great many *slow gifted children*. The school in general does not pay too much attention to the slow gifted child, but is alert to discover fast gifted children. Excellence comes in many packages and we must begin to search for it also among the slow learners.

An assumption that the slower pupil is not bright functions as a self fulfilling

prophecy. If the teachers act toward these pupils as if they were dull, the pupils will frequently come to function in this way. The teacher must pick up what the child says, appeal to him, and pitch examples to him. Typically this does not occur with the slower child. In my own teaching, I easily fall into the habit of rewarding pupils whose faces light up when I talk, who are quick to respond to me and I respond to them. I generally do not pick up, select or respond to the slower pupil. He has to make it on his own. In teacher preparation programs, future teachers should be taught to guard against the almost unconscious and automatic tendency to respond primarily to the pupil who responds to them.

A great deal has been said about the language deficit supposedly characteristic of disadvantaged children. Everybody in the school system, at one time or an-

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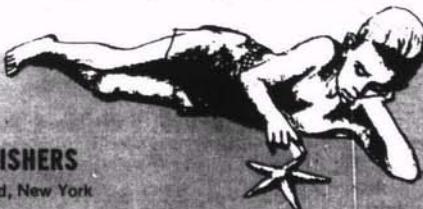
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other, has heard that these children are "nonverbal." But is the matter this simple? Are not these children quite verbal in out-of-school situations?

Hidden Verbal Ability

The educationally deprived child can be quite articulate in conversation with his peers. This fact is well illustrated by the whole language developed by urban Negro groups, some of which language is probably absorbed into the main culture via the so-called "beatnik" and the musician.

Many questions about the verbal potential of disadvantaged children must be answered by research. Under what conditions are these children verbal? What kind of stimuli do they respond to verbally? With whom are they verbal? With whom are they not verbal? What do they talk about? What parts of speech do they use? Martin Deutsch of New York Medical College is doing some very significant research trying to specify these factors. I have surveyed some of his findings in *The Culturally Deprived Child*.²

Disadvantaged children are often surprisingly articulate in role playing situations. One day I asked a group, "Why are you sore at the teachers?" Even though I was on good terms with them, I could not get much response. Most of them answered in highly abbreviated sentences. However, after holding a role playing session, in which some of the youngsters acted as the teachers while others acted as pupils, these "inarticulate" youngsters changed sharply. Within a half-hour they were bubbling over with very verbal and very sensitive answers to the question asked earlier. They

²Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962.

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reported that they knew the minute they entered the room that the teacher did not like them and that she did not think that they were going to do well in school. Their analyses were specific and remarkably verbal.

However, the quality of language employed has its limitations and herein lies the deficit. As Basil Bernstein³ indicates, the difference is between formal language and public language, between the language of a written book and the informal everyday language. There is no question that there is a deficit in formal language. Since this deficit is fairly clear, the question might be asked, why make such an issue of the positive verbal ability of these children?

The reason is that it is easy to believe, and too many people have come to be-

³Basil Bernstein, "A Public Language: Some Sociological Implications of a Linguistic Form." *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol X, No. 4; December 1959.

lieve, that this formal deficit in language means that deprived people are *characteristically* nonverbal.

If teachers could hold that these pupils are basically very good verbally, they might approach these youngsters in a different manner, looking for additional techniques to bring out the verbal facility. They might abandon their conviction that deprived children will not go very far in the education system and might predict instead that these pupils can go far indeed because they have good verbal ability. An awareness of the positive verbal *ability* (not merely potential) will lead to demanding more of the disadvantaged child and *expecting* more of him.

Education vs. The School

There is much evidence that deprived children and their parents have a more positive attitude toward education than is generally believed. One factor that obscures the recognition of this attitude is that while deprived individuals value *education*, they dislike the *school*. For the sake of clarity their attitudes toward education and toward the school must be considered separately.

A recent survey asked, "What did you miss most in life that you would like your children to have?" Over 70 percent of the lower socioeconomic groups answered, "education." The answer was supplied by the respondents, not checked on a list. They could have answered, "money," "happiness," "health," or a number of other responses. A nation-wide poll conducted by Roper asked, "If you had a son or daughter graduating from high school would you prefer to have him or her go on to college? Do something else? Wouldn't care?" Sixty-eight percent of the "poor" said "yes" to college. A large absolute number were in-



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terested in a college education for their children.

Why do these people hold a negative attitude toward the school? They may recognize that they are second class citizens in the school and are angry about it. From the classroom to the PTA, they may discover that the school does not like them, does not respond to them, does not appreciate their culture, and does not think they can learn.

Also these children and their parents want education for different reasons than the ones presented by the school. They do not easily accept the ideas of expressing yourself, developing yourself, or of knowledge for its own sake. They want education much more for vocational ends.

Yet underneath there is a very positive attitude toward education and this is particularly prominent in the lower socio-

economic Negro groups. In the Higher Horizons Program in New York City, parents have participated eagerly once they have seen that the school system is concerned about their children. One of the tremendously positive features about this program and the Great Cities Programs is the *concern* for disadvantaged children and the interest in them. I believe that, even if the programs accomplished little else, the parents and children still would be responsive, and would become involved in the objectives of the school, because of this demonstrated concern for them.

Some Weaknesses

A basic problem of deprived youngsters which the school can help meet is a lack of "know-how." Included here is the academic "know-how" of the school culture as well as the "know-how" of the middle class generally. Knowing how to get a job, to appear for an interview, to fill out a form, to take tests, to answer questions, to read, and to listen. The last is of particular importance. The whole style of learning of the deprived is not oriented to respond to oral or written stimuli. These children generally respond much more readily to visual and kinesthetic signals. We should remodel the school to suit the styles and meet the needs of these children. But no matter how much we change the school to suit their needs, we nevertheless have to assist these children in certain ways, namely in reading, use of formal language, test taking and general "know-how."

There is also a basic limitation at the value level, namely the anti-intellectual attitudes. I am much more concerned that the schools impart needed skills, techniques and knowledge than that

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they train the disadvantaged to become "good middle class" children.

In summary, the positive elements in the culture and style of lower socioeconomic groups should become the guidelines for new school programs and new educational techniques for teaching these children. There are several reasons why the positive elements should be emphasized:

1. This will encourage the school to develop approaches and techniques appropriate for the cognitive style of these groups.
2. It will enable children of lower socio-economic backgrounds to be educated *without "middle-classizing"* them.
3. It will stimulate teachers to aim high, to expect more and better work from these youngsters. Thus, it will constrain against patronization and condescension, and against the permanent double track system in which the deprived child never arrives on the main track.
4. It will function against the current

tendency of overemphasizing vocational, nonacademic education for these children.

5. It will provide an exciting challenge for teachers if they realize that they need not simply aim to "bring these children up to grade level," but rather can actually develop new kinds of creativity.

6. It will make the school more pluralistic and democratic because different cultures and styles will exist and interact side by side. Thus, each can learn from the other and the idea that the teacher has much to learn from deprived children will take on real meaning. Genuine cultural interaction between equal cultures can become the hallmark of the school.

7. It will enable the teacher to see that when visual aids or techniques such as role-playing are used, it is because these devices or techniques are useful for eliciting the special cognitive style and creative potential of these children.

8. It will lead to real appreciation of slowness, one-track learning, and physical learning as potential strengths which require careful nurturing.

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—FRANK RIESSMAN, *Mobilization for Youth and the Department of Psychiatry, Columbia University, New York, New York*.

Editorial

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in whether or not a child dropped out of school. The parents' attitude in turn was heavily influenced by their own experience in school.

Education must constantly go to the public for funds. The voters will support the school adequately only if they remember school as an institution interested in their welfare and that of their children. Where education has been an escalator to success, as it has to most suburbanites, teachers are making a good living. However, where many of the parents feel antipathy toward the schools, the status of teachers in the community and at the bank is low. Our pupils and their parents set our salaries, and our humanity and our competencies in large measure determine their support.

In summary, we must better serve disaffected children because we owe every child the opportunity to become a productive happy person, united with his fellow citizens by a feeling of identity. If we fail in this quest with large numbers of youth, we seriously endanger not only the mental health of our students, but also the economic life of the nation, and democracy itself.

—GORDON P. LIDDLE, Associate Professor of Human Development, University of Chicago, Illinois.

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