

Reading for the Culturally Disadvantaged

Every teacher and probably every parent knows that it is imperative for boys and girls to learn to read adequately.—Paul McKee

EDUCATORS have been talking about a high quality of education for all children for many years. Most would quickly agree that every boy and girl should benefit from quality education tailored to his or her particular needs; yet the door to opportunity is not easily made available to every child.

One of the problems currently receiving considerable attention, particularly in urban centers, is how to cope with the deficiencies that burden too many children when they begin school. This paper suggests that a different approach is needed to teach culturally disadvantaged boys and girls to read.¹

Reading, as we all know, opens the door to learning. Reading unlocks the portals to world splendors, to adventure, to all the fascinating knowledge about people, animals, places, things. Yet, reading does not do this for the disadvantaged youngster. For him, the first experiences of reading can present fear and

¹ In this context, the term "culturally disadvantaged" refers to the many children who lack the necessary environmental motivation to achieve. Reading, for example, has not been made to seem important for them and they, therefore, do not "want" to read.

ego-shattering barriers to all future learning. Such a child requires what we know to be good instruction—and *something more*.

It is the content of this "something more" that puzzles and all too often baffles educators. Before proceeding on this topic, let us examine the social-psychological setting of the disadvantaged, which creates the need for attention.

The Socialization Process

The good teacher knows that a child's behavior is learned through the socialization process, one of the inevitable functions of our society.² Chief among the socialization agencies in our society are the home and the school, each of which shares an essential role. The family, however, exerts the first and perhaps the predominant social influence upon the child. As a primary group, the family defines

² *Socialization* is referred to as the process of inducting the individual into the ways of the group. For further discussion of this concept, see W. B. Brookover, *A Sociology of Education*, New York: American Book Company, 1955; Bernard Barber, *Social Stratification: A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process*, New York: Harcourt and Co., 1957; and Mildred B. Smith, "Interpersonal Influence on the Occupational Expectations of Sixth Grade Students," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1961.

the basic ideas, values and emotions that are to influence the child throughout his life span.

If a child's family members read extensively in his presence, the child soon realizes that learning to read is important. No other communication is necessary for this value to be transmitted to the child. Similarly, an uneducated father can indicate to his son the importance of a college education by admiring in his presence a friend who attends college. Working-class parents who demonstrate interest in books or formal education transmit their values to their children. Other parents can limit their children's values to areas of entertainment-satisfaction or possessing a car. As the child interacts with members of his family group, he internalizes the expectations of these "important" people, and their values become his.

Although it is the first socializing agent, the family is not the only one for the child. When the child enters school, the teacher becomes for him an additional important person. It is at this stage that the expectations of both parents and teachers influence the attitudes, values and aspirations of children.

Culturally disadvantaged children who are underachievers possess characteristics that are usually identifiable. This underachieving child invariably exhibits a poor attitude toward classroom work as well as unsatisfactory work habits.

This child is frequently without pencil or paper, but is likely to have an assortment of gum or candy wrappers in his desk. His notebook (if he has one) is untidy. He can be described as "working with one eye on the teacher and the other on his paper." He may talk to and poke other students the moment the teacher turns his back to write on the chalkboard. He plays with gadgets kept in his pockets

or desk, and spends considerable time eating candy, pretzels and the like. The disadvantaged child (a) is not interested in his school work; (b) sees little value in it; and (c) finds himself forced into a strange and often a hostile environment.

On the other hand, the child who comes to school from a home in which he is required to complete a job on time, is rewarded for doing it well; sees his parents reading books and magazines; and is encouraged by his parents; has a good chance for success in reading. This student is motivated from within to achieve. He acquires the determination, desire and ambition to learn. These qualities seem to contribute as much as native ability to success in reading.

The importance of the home environment as a factor in reading achievement should be understood by the educator. The sympathetic teacher understands that the culturally disadvantaged child is severely handicapped by an environment which he did not request and over which he has no control. Such a child may read and perform in other subjects at a level far below that he is capable of achieving.

The Reading Program

All children require good basic instruction in reading. However, additional motivation techniques and material must be employed in such instruction to compensate for the deficiencies that are inherent in the disadvantaged child's environment. Ideally, motivation should come not only from the teacher, but from the parent as well. Since many parents of disadvantaged children are unaware of the im-

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portance of stimulation, it becomes the task of the teacher and the administrator to bring this to their attention so that together, educators and parents can provide the child with the kinds of experiences that will encourage him to want to read.

Prereading Experiences

The disadvantaged child often enters school with a subnormal vocabulary which severely retards his reading progress. An effective, well-designed preschool program can enhance intellectual stimulation and greatly improve verbal language ability.

What causes the experience void of these children? In most cases, parents do not challenge their boys and girls to explore their environment—by asking questions, answering questions, and calling attention to details. Such parents overlook obvious points: (a) differences in colors of objects, “red chair,” “blue ball,” “blue and green boxes”; (b) differences in sizes of things, “large chair,” “small box”; (c) differences in shapes of things, as “square table,” “round ball”; (d) words that express how objects feel, “damp cloth,” “soft sponge,” “heavy iron,” “fuzzy chicken.”

Educators will agree that disadvantaged children need a variety of experiences but it should be noted that these children, however, do not *intellectually experience* their present environment because they are not challenged to “see,” to “distinguish,” to “know about” it. Many of these children frequently relocate both within the city and from city-to-city—frequently moving to other sections of the country. Yet, all they can say about such traveling is an expression such as, “we went south.” They are unable to identify cities, buildings, animals, high-

ways, rivers, and historical landmarks along the route. This situation occurs because parents, brothers, or sisters have not encouraged the children to examine their surroundings for detail. They are not asked, “Did you see . . . ?”, and “Did you notice . . . ?”

This “pattern of thinking” or behaving is learned at an early age through interaction with adults and older siblings. A good preschool program should not only help the child develop this “pattern of thinking,” but should help to unlock the child’s door to intellectual experience about his total environment.

Experience and Vocabulary

Closely allied with intellectual stimulation about things, places and ideas, is vocabulary. If the child observes detail and “tests his experiences” by talking about them, he then learns specific vocabulary.³ In this manner, the child enlarges his speaking and listening vocabularies. Both types must be developed. It is not enough for the teacher to say the appropriate words. The child must say them also; and he will be reluctant to do so when such words are never spoken in his home. The teacher must realize that the child is experiencing a language that is “foreign” to him.⁴ At this point, he must teach it as a foreign language (for example, using the word in a sentence and having the child repeat it).

In summary, disadvantaged preschool

³ It is believed that this kind of learning and behaving causes children to earn a higher score on standard intelligence tests. If this assumption is correct, intelligence tests do not adequately reflect the potential of culturally disadvantaged children.

⁴ Since so much of the language spoken by the teacher is foreign to the disadvantaged child, English should be approached in this setting for what it is—a foreign language to the child.

children need (a) to build ideas and concepts through intellectual stimulation and (b) to develop oral language facility. An effective program must include both direct and vicarious experiences. Direct experiences would include trips to such places as the grocery store, drug store, hardware store, zoo, library, fire station, farms (fruit, vegetable, animal), and horticultural gardens. Vicarious experiences would include the use of filmstrips, recordings, storybooks, and imitation realia, as toy fruits, vegetables, flowers, and animals, all of which can help build concepts and vocabulary.⁵

Involving Parents in Preschool Program

A parent education program is an indispensable part of any preschool program for disadvantaged children. Parents not only can assist the teacher on field trips, but should be encouraged to learn along with the children. Parents can be taught the finger plays, songs, and games their children are learning, allowing for carryover experiences in the home.

All parents need to be encouraged to read daily to their children, and many need to be taught how to do this.⁶ A take-home library that is managed by volunteer parents can provide read-aloud materials for the entire family.

⁵ It is not uncommon for these children to be unable to identify common fruits and vegetables, even though they may frequent the grocery with parents (an indication that parents are not calling their children's attention to details in their immediate environment).

⁶ A booklet, "How to Help Your Child with Reading," has been used at parent meetings to explain techniques of reading aloud to parents in Flint, Michigan. (It should be noted that an illiterate parent can encourage his child to enjoy books by looking at storybooks and discussing the pictures with him. The very fact that this parent takes time with a book "shows" that he values reading and wants the child to learn to read.)

The prereading program described earlier, emphasizing ideas, concepts and vocabulary development, should be continued in the kindergarten and primary years.

It is important that children not be forced into formal reading instruction before they are ready. However, undue emphasis must not be placed upon "waiting" until they are "ready to read." Instead, action is best directed toward getting children ready to read and providing materials that are meaningful in relation to their life experiences. Real-life stories which utilize the culturally disadvantaged child's own experiences and vocabulary make excellent beginning-to-read material.

Typewriters are ideal for creating interest in reading. The teacher types stories of children's experiences as told by them. These then are distributed as "reading stories." Children not only enjoy reading about their own happenings, but get an extra incentive from seeing their thoughts in print. Classrooms equipped with typewriters facilitate this teaching method. Children should also be encouraged to use the typewriter.

The regular reading program can be augmented by many good trade books. Children should be motivated to read trade books both at school and at home. Since many disadvantaged children are poor readers, additional techniques are very helpful. One technique is to begin a Bookworm Club, offering every child an incentive to read trade books. Another idea that usually works is to take the time following a library period to allow each child to get started reading the story. Otherwise, boys and girls are likely to forget the book soon after taking it home. With the reading of the story started

at school, they are already interested in it and more apt to continue reading once they are at home.

The teacher should frequently read to the class and see that there always are many interesting books in the classroom. The teacher who reads books for her own enjoyment lets the students know that their teacher likes to read.⁷ It is important that the teacher set a time for sharing reading experiences with the students. In this way, the teacher becomes a member of the learning group, sharing in the excitement and interest.

Children who already have experienced failure with a standard reading program find the basal reader most formidable. Such materials may be eliminated in lieu of some type of multilevel self-help reading materials. These consist of short stories which can be completed during a single reading period. This approach gives the child immediate reinforcement and a feeling of accomplishment. A typical result is that children like the self-help reading material because it "puts us on our own more and the teacher does not have to tell us what to do all of the time."⁸

Parents and Reading Achievement

Parents may be invited to the school to help in many ways. A successful involvement can be achieved by invited parents during the library period. In addition to assisting the teacher with clerical chores, mothers show their children that they not only want but *expect* them to learn to read.

Fathers, too, can provide this encour-

⁷ It is a paradox that the person who teaches reading and who is constantly encouraging children to "enjoy books" is seldom if ever seen doing the same by the students.

⁸ A quotation from a Flint, Michigan, elementary class.

agement by taking turns with library duties as well as reading to the class during the library period. They thus demonstrate to their children, particularly boys, that men value reading. Culturally disadvantaged boys especially need this type of masculine approval, since most prodding to achieve is normally associated with mothers or female teachers. All too often boys look upon their chums who take school work seriously as "sissies."

Mothers can help, also, by making single-story reading booklets. The child who finds thick hard-covered books difficult to "read for fun" will be delighted to discover he can finish a thin booklet and he gets the added satisfaction of reading several books. One mother simply cut up outdated reading books into individual stories under the teacher's direction. They then added covers.

Underachieving students require special help with vocabulary development. A file box of word cards enables the child to keep his own record of words that cause him difficulty. He can study these words at school, and also take them home for study. Again, teachers should instruct parents so they can help by flashing the word cards.

The following are suggested study steps that can be explained to parents as a guide for helping their child study reading words. The child should:

1. Look at only one word at a time. Think about how it begins and ends.
2. Say it softly. Think about how it sounds.
3. The meaning should be in *your own words*.
4. Your sentence should be a good sentence—it should make sense.
5. Check to see that you have given the correct meaning and have used it in a sentence.

Another suggestion is to encourage parents to provide dictionaries and other reference books for home study. This produces an academic atmosphere in the home, facilitating the desire to learn. A quiet period in the home every evening can be managed by parents. Such a reading and study period helps all the children in the home to complete their homework, to read, write, or play games quietly. Parental support of this kind strengthens the school program, instilling an interest in reading beyond the regular school day.

Summer Reading Activities

Summer carryover of reading experience is very important in maintaining interest, fluency, and vocabulary. For this reason, summer reading activities that parents can manage are suggested. Suggestions⁹ for parents may include: (a) continuing the daily "quiet time" in the home for individual reading, reading aloud to children, and playing quiet games; (b) having educational materials available—trade books, educational records, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and newspapers; (c) taking children to the library regularly; (d) encouraging children to make out grocery lists from newspaper advertisements; and (e) while riding in the car, encouraging children to read road signs and posters and see how many states they can identify by recognizing license plates.

A New Role for the School

As this article has emphasized, cul-

⁹A more comprehensive list of suggestions could be printed for distribution or could be explained to parents at meetings during the last month at school.

turally disadvantaged children require special programs, teaching techniques, and materials to compensate for the areas of lack in their life experiences. This cultural lack, attributable in part to their homes and in part to their community environment, calls for stepped-up educational efforts if achievement is to match individual potential.

It is important to point out that such a realization does *not* mean that the school should simply take over and do everything for the child, thereby assuring his educational development to a satisfactory level. In the first place, the school, as structured in our society, cannot assume such control over the child. Secondly, no outside agency, school or otherwise, should assume the proper role of the parent.

Rather, the rightful role for educators is seen to be that of teaching and of assisting parents to assume their responsibilities, and of assuming their obligations to the public for the educational development of all children. The ideal and productive relationship, then, is the cooperative sharing of mutual responsibilities by the parents and the schools, working together to bridge the cultural gap with purposeful planning and educational programing.

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