

THE NONPROFESSIONAL

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ALTHOUGH educators may lack unanimity in other respects, most would assign a high priority to the problem of the lower-class child whose early underachievement in reading and other basic communications skills usually results in low grades in school and a low-grade future.

The usual approach to a solution of this problem is to hire additional professional staff and build programs of remediation around them. Considering the great number of children who need special assistance, often it is prohibitively expensive to hire as many specialists as would be needed to provide individualized help. Furthermore, the specialist may be no better equipped to communicate with lower-class children than is the middle-class-oriented teacher typically found in our slum schools.

Assistance Through Tutoring

Within the context of the Great Society programs, considerable interest has been focused on the role of the nonprofessional in education. Several of our larger cities now have programs in which parents from low-income areas are hired as nonprofessional teacher aides and young adults are being encouraged to serve as tutors for children who are educationally retarded. There is a growing belief that important contributions to the educational development of culturally disadvantaged children can be made by other young people whose life experiences provide a basis for empathy with the population being served.

While little is known about the efficacy of employing lower-class adults as teacher aides, the effects of using high school students as tutors for low-achieving pupils have been demonstrated through Mobilization for Youth's Tutorial Project.¹ In this remarkable program, tenth and eleventh grade students from low-

¹ Mobilization for Youth, Inc., was established in 1959 with funds from the National Institute of Mental Health, the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, the Ford Foundation, and the City of New York. It was a forerunner of the present Community Action Programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The present program was known locally as the Homework Helpers Program.

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income areas were hired at \$1.50 per hour to tutor fourth and fifth grade Negro and Puerto Rican pupils who were achieving below grade level in reading.

The tutoring took place from 3:15 to 5:15 p.m. on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons in tutorial centers established in local elementary schools. Each center was administered by a "master teacher" recruited from the faculty of the school in which the center was located or from a nearby school. The master teacher was responsible for training the tutors, organizing and supervising the tutorial activities, and coordinating the center's program with the instructional program of the school.

Before being assigned to pupils, the tutors were given 16 hours of intensive training in the goals of the program, the duties of a tutor, the characteristics of the pupils, and tutorial methods and activities. Once they took up their duties, they met once a week for instruction in the elementary-school curriculum, teaching techniques and materials, and various aspects of the tutor-pupil relationship. In their sessions with pupils, the tutors used a variety of devices and techniques including standardized exercises in reading and writing, filmstrips, books, pictures, newspapers and educational games. While tutors often assisted the pupils with their homework assignments, emphasis was placed on helping the pupil to help himself by developing good work habits and study skills.

The Effects of Tutoring²

To evaluate the accomplishments of the program, classical experiments were set up, with eligible pupil and tutor applicants assigned at random to control and experimental groups. The samples for the studies included 356 experimental pupils, 157 control pupils, 97 experimental tutors and 57 control high school students. Experimental pupils were provided with tutorial assistance on a one-day- or a two-days-a-week basis. Control pupils were systematically denied service in the program. Similarly, the experimental high school students were hired as tutors.

² For a more detailed description of the research findings, see Robert D. Cloward, "Studies in Tutoring." Mobilization for Youth, Inc., 1966. (Mimeographed.)

Control high school students were tested pre-study and post-study, but were not given jobs as tutors.

The findings in the study of the pupils demonstrated that high school students, working under the guidance of professional teachers, can effectively tutor low-achieving fourth and fifth grade pupils in reading. At the beginning of the study, the average pupil was reading nine months below grade level. At the end of five months, pupils who were tutored as often as two afternoons a week showed a gain of six months in reading as compared with only three-and-a-half months for control pupils. This difference was statistically significant.

Pupils tutored only one afternoon a week showed a reading gain of five months in five months' time. While their growth rate exceeded that of the control pupils, the differences in growth rates were not statistically significant.

The growth rate of the controls was quite in keeping with the progressive school retardation which occurs among Negro and Puerto Rican youngsters in the Mobilization area. Experimental pupils who were tutored as often as two afternoons a week not only arrested their retardation, but began to catch up.

Tutoring Benefits the Tutors

The tutorial experience had an even more dramatic effect on the reading skills of the tutors. At the beginning of the study, many of the tutors were themselves retarded in reading. Indeed, twenty percent of the high school students participating in the study were reading three or more years below grade level. While there were no prestudy differences between experimentals and controls, after only seven months' experience as tutors, the average experimental subject was found to be reading 1.7 years ahead of the average control subject, a difference that was significant far beyond the .01 level of probability. Thus, the teen-age tutors not only were able to provide substantive assistance to their pupils, but in doing so they greatly helped themselves.

The findings in the tutorial studies have added a new perspective to education in the ghetto. The fact that many of the tutors were themselves retarded readers raises the intriguing question of whether potential school dropouts could be rescued from the certainty of a bleak future by employing them as tutors for younger children. Youngsters with long histories of humiliation in school will continue to rebel against learning situations in which they are cast in the role of a student. Assigning tutorial roles to such adolescents might help to make learning enjoyable and profitable for them.

In any case, there is good reason to believe that nonprofessionals can make some substantive contributions to the education of lower-class children. What is even more important, it is highly probable that in doing so, the nonprofessional may greatly enhance his own educational skills. ❧



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