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*Teachers must learn to translate curricular understandings into concepts meaningful to urban disadvantaged learners.*

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# Needed: Curriculum Diversity for Urban Economically Disadvantaged

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**S**OME of the recent moves to bring about more equal opportunities in American education have had unfortunate consequences. Perhaps the most obvious consequence has been the "white flight" from the urban areas coupled with the "instant academies" of the South and rural areas. Because of these trends, many public schools (both urban and rural) are now comprised of majority Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and other ethnically distinguishable groups who share the common plight of being economically poor: the disadvantaged. Because of the number of pupils from these groups in many schools, particularly urban schools, the challenge to curriculum developers, teachers, and specialists is greater now than at any other period in the development and service of the public school.

The curriculum has not assumed the levels of diversity possible to meet adequately the needs of the urban poor and economically disadvantaged learner. Many of those who must be responsible for creating such cur-

ricular diversity have been too concerned with an old concept of "academic respectability" and a series of other traditional ideas. Such diversity would permit the exploration of the American economic system from a viewpoint more consistent with the economic, ethnic, and social realities of the learners to be served.

The educational needs of the disadvantaged have been discussed in professional journals, seminars, conferences, workshops, and graduate classes for the past decade. Yet, very little has happened substantively in the classroom. It may be that school norms, both academically and socially, need to be re-established in order to enable disadvantaged pupils to benefit from the instructional and curricular services of the school. This is not to suggest a de-emphasis on subject

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matter but rather to suggest re-vitalization of subject matter by making it more meaningful to *learners in their world*. The world of the disadvantaged is essentially a different world than that on which most school programs are built, because the instructional sequences in the latter are drawn from middle-income life styles.

To make subject matter more meaningful to disadvantaged pupils, it must help to provide them with explanations and illustrations of the social system which places them at a disadvantage. In reality, the classification "disadvantaged" has two aspects: *internal* and *external*. To be internally disadvantaged, one must perceive oneself to be inadequate. We speak of this as having a low self-concept. To be externally disadvantaged, others must perceive one to be inadequate due to characteristics not unique to the individual.

### **Economics for the Disadvantaged**

To live in a particular section of the community or the city, to hold a certain job, to belong to a particular racial or ethnic group, or to exhibit certain modes of conduct are some of the characteristics of individuals perceived by others to be disadvantaged. Curriculum diversity and subject matter must relate to the forces which operate to give structure and form to perceptions which are externally imposed on learners and their families. The structure and form of these perceptions come from the organization of the social system.

The economic organization is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the American social system. Therefore, disadvantaged pupils need a thorough understanding of this system. What is it? How does it work? How is it organized? Who controls it? Where do I fit? To attempt the study of basic economic concepts with disadvantaged learners without emphasis on these questions is little more than an exercise in futility but the effort must be emphasized.

The selection of key economic concepts might serve as an organizing center for instruction which more adequately speaks to urban disadvantaged learners as well as rural

individuals. The concept of goods, production, and allocation could serve to unify the area: What goods should be produced? How should these goods be produced? For whom should these goods be produced? More significantly, however, are the questions facing American poor individuals which the instructional sequence must address. For example, how are decisions made about employment in a national crisis? How can we communicate the effects of the changing economy on the economically poor? What are the implications of the energy crisis for the curriculum? In addition to efforts to conserve energy, what factors constitute the most urgent concerns for the urban disadvantaged learner? And are they different for the non-urban disadvantaged learner?

Some would argue that the subject of general economic understandings would be too complex for the disadvantaged. The argument advanced here, however, is that our failure to deal with the subject from diverse perspectives could be a major factor contributing to the school's lack of success with the disadvantaged.

With disadvantaged learners, economic concepts must be dealt with in relation to a descriptive formulation of the social structure of the society. To have economically disadvantaged groups in the society implies that there are advantaged groups. A descriptive formulation of the society should therefore depict this continuum in some way.

### **Disadvantaged-Advantaged Continuum**

On what variable is the continuum based? Is it income? Is it race? Is it ethnic identification? Is it education? Is it geography? Whatever variable is chosen to depict the advantaged-disadvantaged continuum, the relationship of economic concepts to the descriptive formulation of the social structure must be demonstrated by concrete meaningful examples. While voluntary movement of families has resulted in neighborhoods (and cities) which are racially or ethnically identifiable, what criteria do we use to develop the continuum? There are

still many educators who feel that all disadvantaged pupils are members of racial or ethnic minorities. Nothing could be further from the truth, yet the economic, social, political, and educational decisions surrounding life for those who happen to be from racially different or ethnic groups appear to have even greater devastating effect than on the other members of the society.

In teaching the disadvantaged, the principles of concreteness through meaningful examples cannot be overemphasized. Teachers committed to curriculum diversity will need to experiment with many examples in order to find the most vivid and most functional. Examples can be concrete, however, without being meaningful. To present concrete examples that have no meaning for disadvantaged pupils, urban or rural, is also an exercise in futility. Meaning comes from values attached by the student to concrete experiences in his environment. Therefore, the effective teacher must select and use *current, contemporary* examples related to the daily experiences of the disadvantaged pupils.

### Urban and Ethnic Realities

One of the significant aspects of the urban disadvantaged learner's environment is the presence of many people. These people also represent several racial and ethnic differences and, considering this reality, the school's program should focus on a people-oriented curriculum and permit other dimensions to grow out of the people-related conditions. In the descriptive formulation of the social structure, the disadvantaged environment is affected in various ways by persons and groups who fall on the advantaged end of the continuum.

To make economic concepts meaningful (as well as social, political, and historical), the varied economic roles played by advantaged as well as by disadvantaged *people* must be made obvious. People are the most visible reality of the pupil's world. In what ways do salesmen play economic roles? What does a statistician do? Who are the businessmen who have major impact on employment

trends? Do I now or have I ever played an economic role? The realities of the urban learner's life make these imperatives among questions that cause the diverse curriculum to be a meaningful entity for the learner.

The ethnic and racial realities of the disadvantaged learner's life require the development of a value orientation that creates tolerance for differences in view, in perceptions, and in behaviors which the curriculum will respect and appreciate.

### Translation for Diversity

To effectively communicate economic concepts, teachers and curriculum developers must be able to translate economic terminology into a form directly associated with the realities of economic and ethnic dimensions reflected in the schools of this decade. There should be no limit to the amount or manner of translation regardless of the perceived damage to the integrity of the traditional subject. The translation should result in non-traditional implications and applications for more adequate service to disadvantaged learners. Once the student comprehends the meaning of school concepts *in his environment*, the perceptive teacher can further translate the concepts utilizing economic terminology more widely known. The act of transferring meaning back to economic terminology is crucial for increased appropriate understandings of the economic system.

The education of the disadvantaged, benefiting from increased teacher translation, could very well be the acid test of American public education. Our cities continue to be characterized by movement, activity, political, and economic decisions which need new applications constantly. For example, what does Watergate mean for the disadvantaged? The challenge of instruction for economic and ethnic diversity presents new and different problems for which new and different solutions must be found. One such solution is a new look at the extent to which curricular offerings respond to the real needs of economically disadvantaged pupils whether they are urban Blacks, Indians, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Orientals, or Whites. □

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