"Disadvantaged" or "Different"?

Two Approaches to Minority Education

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The "culturally different" approach, with its basic recognition of the inherent dignity of a group's cultural identity offers an affirmative response to difficulties encountered by minority group children.

A CURRENT source of controversy within the academic community is the debate regarding research conducted by Nobel prize winner William Shockley. Although Shockley's controversial research was not conducted in the field for which he was awarded the Nobel prize, his findings coupled with Jensen's work have once again raised the ugly specter of white supremacy (Jensen, 1969).

The Shockley controversy threatens to eclipse a less emotional but nevertheless significant issue related to the education of minority group children. I refer to the schism which exists between the proponents of the "culturally different" paradigm and those who subscribe to the "culturally disadvantaged" paradigm. Although the conflict has primarily focused on the education of black children, it is equally applicable to the problems currently being experienced by Chicano, Indian, and Puerto Rican youngsters.

The "Culturally Disadvantaged" Paradigm: Social or Genetic Pathology?

The "culturally disadvantaged" model enjoys widespread consideration in the literature and posits the theoretical premise that persons of low socioeconomic status, irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, are characterized by deficits when evaluated according to culturally determined norms (Cole and Bruner, 1971). Invariably, the norm which has been employed as the criterion for evaluation has been the middle class socioeconomic norm.

Shockley's assertions represent the more extreme component of the "culturally disadvantaged" paradigm. This component has been described as the "genetic pathology" concept and includes Jensen and Shockley as its most vocal spokesmen. Historically, the "genetic pathology" concept has occupied a recurring place in the literature relative to black-white as well as to Native American-immigrant relations (Gossett, 1968; Higham, 1967). Critics of the "genetic pathology" notion have generally viewed this position as still another "excuse for the failure to educate" (Gordon, 1969).

A more widely noted concept of deficit currently enjoying support among academicians and program designers is the "social pathology" component of the "culturally disadvantaged" paradigm. Due largely to the research conducted by Deutsch, the "social pathology" component has generated considerable support (Deutsch, 1971). This component is predicated on the premise that Negroes and other minority group members of low socioeconomic status are "sick white men" and as such, are in need of compensatory treatment. According to this notion,

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A viable alternative to the "culturally disadvantaged" components and one which is the philosophical offspring of Kallen's cultural pluralism concept is the "culturally different" paradigm (Kallen, 1924; Simpkius, Williams, and Gunnings, 1971). This model is predicated on the assumption that differences between minority groups and the dominant group are essentially cultural. Advocates challenge intervention programs on the basis that such programs and proposals are designed to eliminate deficiencies which in reality do not exist. A concomitant charge is that intervention programs tend to impress upon the child the inappropriateness of his or her culture within the contemporary milieu.

Although the black community has historically been the chief spokesman for the "culturally different" concept, representatives of other ethnic groups such as American Indians, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans are beginning to demand that acculturation be accompanied by a greater awareness of a group's cultural heritage (de Leon, 1970; Wax, 1971). It is important to note, however, that the "culturally different" notion is an idea which has encountered opposition from within ethnic communities.

Because proponents of the "culturally disadvantaged" hypothesis have pointed to "linguistic deficiencies" to buttress their position, supporters of the "culturally different" paradigm have proposed that standard English be taught as a second language with black English or Spanish, for example, as the basis of instruction (Stocker, 1967). Others emphasize the importance of integrating aspects of a group's literature, music, and history within the fabric of the total curriculum. The major thrust of this position, however, is the elimination of policies and programs which take the view that the minority group child is a "sick white man."

The Culturally Different Paradigm: An Alternative in the Quest for Dignity?

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A Position on the Issue

Although the current literature displays studies and projects predicated on both the "culturally different" and "culturally disadvantaged" paradigms, the "social pathology" component of the "culturally disadvantaged" model continues to exercise inordinate in-
fluence on the policies and programs of educational and governmental institutions. The "genetic pathology" hypothesis has been sufficiently refuted throughout history to preclude its serious consideration in the formulation of educational policy and design of curricula (Gordon, 1969; Hirsch, 1969).

It appears increasingly apparent, at least to this observer, that the "culturally different" concept takes cognizance of both acculturation and cultural identity needs. As such, it constitutes a positive response to growing demands that educational policy and curricula be more sensitive to the needs and expectations of ethnic and racial groups.

The "culturally disadvantaged-social pathology" concept with its inherent denial of cultural identity and concomitant emphasis on "melting" down cultural differences appears grossly inadequate in coping with the demands and needs articulated by minority group spokesmen.

It seems that the "culturally different" paradigm with its basic recognition of the inherent dignity of a group's cultural identity offers the more just, appropriate, and affirmative response to the alleviation of difficulties currently encountered by minority group children. As Kallen stated: "Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or lesser extent: they cannot change their grandfathers" (Kallen, 1924).

References


