

The Teacher Helps Inner City Children's Communication

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Can disabilities in communication skills be overcome by an alert and understanding teacher in a setting that exemplifies acceptance and competent professional support?

THIS writer is primarily concerned with the enhancement of communication skills of children who reside within inner city school districts, who are generally labeled as disadvantaged or culturally deprived, and who primarily represent the non-white minority populations. It is extremely disturbing when one begins to look at the statistics regarding children who reside within the inner city communities and their scholastic records within these schools. One of their main difficulties has been that of gaining sufficient competencies in the literacy arts, that is, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, all of which are the cornerstones of educational achievement.

One is appalled in looking at the school dropout record among the various minority groups. The major cause of dropouts among teenage children from our educational system and in some instances the general society, is the fact that they never have gained appropriate skills for coping within the structure of our society. One cannot deny that there are many aspects of institutional

racism which complicate this matter, but nevertheless, it must be understood that children need certain basic skills which will hopefully enhance them academically and economically in their adult lives. It boils down to the fact that competency in the communication skills is most essential in developing other skills that are considered important for scholastic and economic success.

Several years ago, this writer attended a special committee meeting of a national professional association, dealing with the needs for future professional services. In the course of the meeting, it was pointed out that a great number of individuals who are in penal institutions also have severe communication problems. It makes one wonder whether the communication problem was the etiological factor for these individuals to be placed in these institutions in the first place, or if maladjustment in the penal institution caused the difficulty. At any rate, the communication problem exists, and the individuals have been removed from the general society with a poor prognosis for rehabilitation, an extremely unfortunate situation.

On a more practical level, it is important

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for educators to take a good look at the various communicative processes. Most of the textbooks dealing with general speech development list the developmental patterns of speech as progressing from a very simple utterance to the point where the child is able to speak simple sentences by the time he or she is three years of age. Hopefully during this period the parents or other adults in the child's environment are providing adequate stimuli to enhance language and communication skills. Most research studies indicate that when this kind of stimulation has been provided, the child is adequately prepared for the teacher's instruction by the time he or she reaches kindergarten. Considering that the child is normal and assuming he or she has had adequate stimulation, it can be expected that the child will continue to gain all of the necessary communication skills and competencies necessary for achieving in school.

We need to direct special attention to children who for one reason or another have not received adequate stimulation, which would have enhanced their speech and language development. These are the types of children who have not received a great deal of verbal stimulation from adults at home. These children may not have received stimulation for a variety of reasons, and the behavioral symptoms are generally uniform, for example, limited vocabulary, shorter utterances, and in certain instances an unwillingness to initiate conversational speech. To further complicate matters, some of these children may be speaking nonstandard grammatical forms of English.

Need for Teacher Orientation

If the teacher has not received special orientation to these nonstandard communication behaviors, he or she may find it easy to label these children as being unable to learn, poor speakers, poor readers, etc. Some teachers may attempt to "correct" certain nonstandard grammatical forms in a way that puts the child on the defensive, for example, "You said that wrong, the right way to say it is _____." The danger here is

that the teacher is implying that everyone in the child's speaking environment speaks poorly.

This approach in the educational environment is most inadequate. Many sociolinguists have stressed the point that there are many nonstandard forms of English spoken which are legitimate and correct for a specific population group, and to label these forms of communication as substandard is to imply that their culture is substandard as well. Even though many sociolinguists argue the point of legitimacy with respect to certain dialects among minority populations, it must be recognized that the tools for learning in school are delivered in a standard English package.

This in essence means that in order for a child to realize educational success, he or she needs to become competent in the speaking, reading, and writing of standard English. In order to minimize interference problems for the child who speaks nonstandard English, who is suddenly exposed to standard English, a transitional program is needed. This is especially important when attempting to teach the child to develop reading competencies. Most current research reveals that children who speak nonstandard English also read in the same nonstandard manner, using the same syntactic and phonological forms as that of their conversational speech patterns.

This point needs to be stressed to teachers since there is some evidence that in certain instances teachers have labeled this type of behavior as poor reading, as opposed to recognizing the carryover of their conversational speech patterns. Correction does little to help the child make the necessary grammatical transitions to standard English, and it definitely does not foster the competencies needed for reading or other academic skills. Many of these children may literally give up if the type of correction mentioned earlier persists for any period of time. Alternative methods are therefore drastically needed in order to give these children a sense of accomplishment and success, and most of all, competency in standard English usage.



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The Teacher's Role

If the teacher finds that the child's verbal expression is depressed, then it is most important to encourage the child to verbalize as much as possible without subjecting him or her to any undue and harsh criticism. It is most important to have the child gain competency in naming and describing. Perhaps the teacher can set aside a certain period during the day when this could be accomplished, or even better, incorporate it within the total instructional program.

The traditional methods which have focused solely on correction and telling the child that he or she is speaking or reading incorrectly need to be discarded. As an alternative, the teacher needs to recognize the legitimacy of the nonstandard, English pattern the child is speaking, and attempt to reach the child through understanding the native dialect and gradually exposing him or her to the standard dialect on a comparative basis without demeaning the native dialect. The best time to initiate this type of program is while the child is in elementary school.

Teachers should be very much aware of the fact that in many instances minority

group children in inner city schools perform at a lower level on standardized tests than do their middle class counterparts. This is partially due to the fact that there may be many test items which are culturally biased. Consequently it is easy for one to assume that those who perform poorly may have lower cognitive abilities. Such attitudes may be totally unfounded and may cause the teachers to generate negative biases regarding minority group children's true abilities. It is necessary for teachers to be aware of cultural biases when looking at a test score, since the score itself may be inaccurate in assessing a child's potential.

Teachers should encourage the child to speak as much as possible, first in his or her own dialect, and later by using "school talk," which would follow a standard English model. It is important that the child recognize the fact that the school wishes to impose an additional standard on the child, but at the same time the school must recognize the legitimacy of the way the child may talk at home or on the playground. Standard English is not considered the only way, but should be considered as another way to talk, especially when the child is in school. □

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