

New Directions for Educating the Children of Poverty

Disadvantaged children are capable of much more than we typically require of them. If they are to fulfill their potential, we must adopt practices that reflect this higher expectation.

More than one in five schoolchildren in the United States come from families in poverty.¹ For educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public, improving these children's schooling is an increasingly urgent concern. Despite extra resources from the federal government and despite recent educational reforms, the children of poverty experience failure disproportionately in their early school years, and they often leave school ill-equipped for adult life.

The predicament of these disadvantaged children is not new. Over the past few decades, scholars and practitioners have invested considerable energy in the search for effective ways of educating such children at the elementary school level. From their efforts, a set of principles and prescriptions has evolved into the conventional wisdom about educating the children of poverty. Stated oversimply, the conventional wisdom focuses on the deficits of disadvantaged learners and sets forth solutions in the form of principles of curriculum organization, instructional approach, classroom management, and instructional grouping.

We do not suggest that this way of thinking must be discarded, although

some researchers advocate doing so.² Applied skillfully, it may result in good student performance on standardized tests, especially the tests administered in the elementary grades, which em-

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phasize basic skills. However, new evidence and recent analysis call into question many of the tenets of this conventional wisdom. Further, this approach may place an unintended ceiling on the learning of disadvantaged students.³ Our purpose here is to summarize the shortcomings of the conventional wisdom and to suggest alternative approaches for both regular classroom instruction and supplemental programs.

The Conception of the Disadvantaged Learner

Conventional wisdom. A great deal of research and practice has been predicated on the assumptions that disadvantaged students are deficient in their preparation for school and that their families have given them a bad start in life.⁴ These assumptions, in effect, locate the problem in the learner and his or her background.

A critique. These conventional assumptions can be criticized on two general grounds. First, stereotypical ideas about the capabilities of a child who is poor or who belongs to an ethnic minority will detract from an accurate assessment of the child's real educational problems and potential.

Second, by focusing on family deficiencies, educators may miss the strengths of the cultures from which many disadvantaged students come. The adverse consequences of these conceptions include (1) low expectations for what these students can accomplish in academic work; (2) failure to examine carefully what the schools do that exacerbates (or facilitates the solution of) these learning problems; and (3) misdiagnosis of the learning problems these students face (e.g., interpreting dialect speech patterns as decoding errors).

An alternative view. The disadvantaged child may well bring to school speech patterns, cognitive predispositions, and behavior patterns that do not match the way things are done in school. These students must learn the culture of the school while they are also attempting to master academic tasks. While recognizing that there may be gaps in disadvantaged students' experience, the educator builds on their experience bases and at the same time challenges the children to expand their repertoires of experiences and skills. This perspective gains support from a decade or more of cognitive research and related theories of learning that portray the learner as an active constructor of knowledge and meaning rather than a passive recipient of information and skills.

The alternative to the common practice suggests that disadvantaged students are better able to meet the academic challenges of school when

- teachers respect the students' cultural/linguistic backgrounds and communicate this appreciation to them in a personal way;
- the academic program encourages students to draw and build on the experiences they have, at the same time that it exposes them to unfamiliar experiences and ways of thinking;
- the assumptions, expectations, and ways of doing things in school—in short, its culture—are made explicit to these students by teachers who explain and model these dimensions of academic learning.⁵

Sequencing and Challenge in the Curriculum

Conventional wisdom. Conventional curriculums, especially for disadvantaged students, are characterized by two basic traits.⁶ First, they break up reading, writing, and mathematics into fixed sequences of discrete skills, ordered from the simplest (the basics) to the more complex (higher-order skills). Second, instruction typically emphasizes mastery of these skills by linear progression through the sequence. Children who haven't mastered spelling, for example, are considered not ready to write stories. Or, in mathematics lessons, practical problems involving multiplication are not introduced until the students can do paper-and-pencil multiplication problems, to say nothing of knowing their multiplication tables. Such rigid sequencing appears in curriculums at all elementary grade levels.

From one point of view, this way of building curriculums makes good sense. With basic skills isolated, teachers can identify and teach those assumed to be deficient in the student's repertoire, provide a clear structure for learning, facilitate the charting of students' progress, and have a common vocabulary for diagnosing what low-achieving students need.

A critique. Despite these advantages, however, there is broad agreement among experts in mathematics and literacy that such curricular assumptions and structures are critically limited in several important respects. They often (1) underestimate students' capabilities; (2) postpone more challenging and interesting work for too long, in some cases forever; (3) fail to provide a context for learning or for meaningfully using the skills that are taught; and (4) even reinforce academic failure over the long term. The students are literally charged with putting the pieces together into an integrated and useful base of knowledge and, more often than not, they don't. In the view of many experts, this approach to curriculum lacks both coherence and intellectual challenge for the students who experience it.

An alternative. The available evidence suggests that effective curriculums should:

- focus on meaning and understanding from the beginning—for example, by orienting instruction toward comprehending reading passages, communicating important ideas in written text, or understanding the concepts underlying number facts;
- balance routine skill learning with novel and complex tasks from the earliest stages of learning;
- provide a context for skill learning that establishes clear reasons for needing to learn the skills, affords opportunities to apply the skills, and helps students relate one skill to another;
- influence attitudes and beliefs about the academic content areas, as well as skills and knowledge;
- eliminate unnecessary redundancy in the curriculum (e.g., repeated instruction in the same mathematics computation skills year after year).⁸

The Role of the Teacher in Instruction

Conventional wisdom. Since the mid-1970s, the instruction of disadvantaged students has been dominated by a category of teaching approaches known as direct instruction.⁹ Although there are variations among them, these approaches typically feature (1) teacher-controlled instruction, with considerable time spent presenting lesson material and directly supervising students' work; (2) extensive opportunities for practice and frequent corrective feedback; (3) careful structuring of academic tasks so that content can be introduced in small, manageable steps; (4) rapid pacing; and (5) whole-group or homogeneous-group formats. Logically, this class of approaches lends itself particularly well to the linear, discrete skills-oriented curriculums discussed earlier. And the research evidence indicates that, for disadvantaged populations, direct instruction does enhance some kinds of academic learning, in particular, those involving discrete basic skills.¹⁰



Photograph by Kenneth A. Thom

By teaching the cognitive processes that underlie a skill, this teacher lays the groundwork for her student to become a more responsible learner.

ing the central role of the teacher but instead suggests balancing it with different approaches. A balance of teacher-directed and learner-directed instruction, for example, has much to offer disadvantaged students, especially if the goal is to engage students in activities that are intellectually challenging.¹¹ The key is to strike the right balance between teacher direction and student responsibility, so that students understand what they are doing (and why) and that, over time, their capacity for self-regulated learning increases. To achieve an appropriate balance, teachers should:

- teach explicitly the underlying thinking processes along with skills—for example, by modeling the cognitive process involved when interpreting a story problem in mathematics or trying to understand the author's point of view in a piece of literature;
- encourage students to use each other as learning resources and structure their interaction accordingly, as in many cooperative or team learning arrangements;
- and, as students become more accustomed to constructing knowledge and applying strategies on their own, gradually turn over responsibility for their learning to them, within sequences or units of instruction and across the school year.¹²

The Relationship of Classroom Management to Academic Work

Conventional wisdom. The conventional wisdom holds that a uniform structure provides students with clear expectations and guidance regarding interactions with teachers and other students. While all classrooms present teachers with the problem of establishing and maintaining order, those that serve large numbers of disadvantaged students confront teachers forcefully with management problems as the year begins, inviting solutions that impose a uniform—sometimes rigid—structure.

To an extent, well-established principles of classroom management have been developed that support this view.¹³ These principles combine good prevention, chiefly through

A critique. There is growing dissatisfaction, however, about the ability of direct instruction to convey more integrated and challenging curriculums to students. First, students do not learn to think for themselves when the teacher breaks the learning task into small, manageable steps and explains how to accomplish each step. Second, some important academic learning goals don't lend themselves to small, manageable steps. Third, students can easily become dependent on the teacher to monitor, motivate, and structure all aspects of the work they do.

An alternative. In this area, current research does not support abandon-

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tone-setting and the development of routines early in the year, with appropriate remediation as disruptive behavior occurs.

A critique. However, this way of thinking about classroom management omits a critical element: the relationship between classroom management and the actual academic work that goes on in the room.¹⁴ This relationship is not necessarily problematic or complex when the work itself is routine and oriented toward basic skills instruction. But when more challenging curriculums are introduced, this approach can become unsatisfactory. Conversely, lack of challenge in the curriculum can contribute to classroom disruption, as students get into trouble out of boredom. Project learning in mathematics, for example, may involve simultaneous student groups engaged in projects that, together, increase the level of noise and activity in a room beyond what teachers and principals have come to expect.

An alternative. A better perspective on classroom management retains two elements of the conventional wisdom: (1) the teacher establishes general ground rules at the beginning of the school year, and (2) the teacher maintains order over time through vigilant monitoring and ongoing problem solving, as he or she anticipates challenges to, or distractions from, learning in the classroom. But this perspective also encourages teachers to find a new basis for order that emanates as much as possible from academics rather than generic rules, incentives, and consequences for misbehavior. In general, then, classroom management should be intimately linked to the nature of the academic work being done. From this perspective, teachers can most effectively manage behavior if they:

- plan a strong program of action, rooted in interesting and engaging academic activities;
- set expectations for classroom order that are appropriate to the academic work at hand, within broad boundaries established for overall behavior in the room (Students need to be taught explicitly that noise levels, the degree of movement around the

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classroom, and so on, can vary, and under what circumstances).

- encourage students who initially may resist novel and unfamiliar work that accompanies a more challenging curriculum.¹⁵

Accommodating Differences in Student Proficiency

Conventional wisdom. Several common arrangements for instructing diverse groups place low-achieving children together and separate them from those who do better. Three are especially pervasive: (1) ability-based reading groups in the primary grades; (2) formal or informal tracking in literacy and mathematics instruction in the upper elementary grades; and (3) group-based supplemental services (e.g., Chapter 1 pullout instruction) in both literacy and mathematics. These arrangements appear to solve a fundamental instructional problem—that of matching students with appropriate learning tasks.

A critique. These differentiated arrangements, however, may create or exacerbate other problems.¹⁶ Most important, low-achieving students often become permanently segregated in these groupings or tracks. To make matters worse, determinations of "low achievement" are not necessarily reliable. Misdiagnoses of students' aca-

demically happen all too often when ethnic or linguistic features (e.g., dialect speech or limited-English-proficiency) are interpreted as signs of low ability. In addition, some of these arrangements create groupings of convenience—for example, four to six poor readers in a Chapter 1 reading room drawn from two or three different classrooms—that may not be particularly effective from the students' point of view. Furthermore, segregation in lower-track groups carries a stigma that may lead to certain students' being labeled "dummies," not to mention the more limited curriculums that are sometimes offered such groups.

Still, the research evidence on the efficacy of ability-grouped learning arrangements for low achievers is mixed.¹⁷ Some reviews find positive effects, while others find harmful or inconclusive influences of such arrangements on academic outcomes.

An alternative. Research evidence does not warrant doing away with ability-based differentiation altogether.¹⁸ However, schools should consider:

- using (1) heterogeneous grouping, such as cooperative and team learning, and (2) more flexible and temporary ability-grouped arrangements;
- integrating supplementary assistance, such as Chapter 1 instruction, as much as possible into mainstream classroom activities and/or providing supplementary instruction at times when students do not need to be away from their main classrooms;
- maximizing individual help to low-achieving students on an ad hoc basis rather than in long-term group-based arrangements.

Putting New Ideas into Practice

The preceding discussion suggests alternative conceptions of the learner, the curriculum, and instructional practice that apply across all subject areas in elementary schools. Guiding these conceptions is a conviction that disadvantaged students are capable of much more than is typically expected of them and that schools can organize themselves to demand high academic performance from these students.¹⁹

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There is evidence on which to base this conviction—ranging from advances in understanding of student cognition to dramatic demonstrations of results, such as the performance of inner-city youths on advanced-placement calculus tests.²⁰

It would be a mistake to take the principles we have presented as new received wisdom about the education of disadvantaged children. These ideas are not a blueprint for change but a call for further experimentation by practitioners and scholars alike, who, as they try these out, will evolve better principles, in addition to discovering altogether different ones. There is much still to be learned about ways to apply them to particular grade levels, mixtures of students, and school settings. We hope that the ideas presented here will lead to the curriculums that disadvantaged students need to participate fully in a complex technological society. □

Authors' note about endnotes: Because the argument in this article relies heavily on the commissioned papers and literature review chapters contained in *Better Schooling for the Children of Poverty: Alternatives to Conventional Wisdom—Volume II Commissioned Papers and Literature Review* (M.S. Knapp and P.M. Shields, eds.,

January 1990, Menlo Park, Calif. SRI International), we refer below simply to the paper or literature review author and "Volume II" to avoid unnecessary repetition in referencing.

¹H. Hodgkinson, (June 1985), *All One System Demographics of Education, Kindergarten through Graduate School* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership).

²For example, see L. Moll's paper, Volume II.

³See W. Doyle's paper, Volume II.

⁴See J. Brophy's paper, Volume II, which makes useful distinctions among common conceptions of the "deficits" many poor children bring to school.

⁵See papers by B. Neufeld and L. Moll, Volume II, which summarize evidence related to these principles; see also J. Comer, (1988), "Educating Poor Minority Children," *Scientific American* 259, 5: 42-48.

⁶See W. Doyle's paper, Volume II, for an analysis of conventional approaches to organizing curriculum.

⁷See papers by A. Porter, R. Allington, and J. Brophy, Volume II.

⁸Papers in Volume II review existing evidence regarding the efficacy and desirability of balancing basic skills learning with more challenging curriculums. For example, see papers by A. Porter and C. McKnight regarding mathematics curriculums, by D. Pearson and G. Garcia regarding reading curriculums.

⁹By "direct instruction," we mean instructional approaches that emulate the model of the same name that was part of the Follow Through Planned Variation Experiment in the early 1970s. We distinguish direct instruction from what has been described more generically as "active teaching"—that is, instruction in which students spend most of their time being taught or supervised by their teachers rather than working on their own (or emphasize direct teacher control of learning activities in the classroom). However, unlike direct instruction, active teaching does not presuppose any particular type of academic task, pacing, or grouping.

¹⁰For a review of this evidence, see H. McCollum's paper, Volume II.

¹¹Clear examples can be found in the teaching of reading, for example, the work of Palincsar and Brown with "reciprocal teaching"; see paper by D. Pearson and G. Garcia for a review of this and related work.

¹²See papers by D. Pearson and G. Garcia, and J. Brophy, Volume II; see also work

by R. Slavin and others on the efficacy of cooperative learning arrangements, as discussed in H. McCollum's review, Volume II.

¹³J. Brophy, (1986), "Research Linking Teacher Behavior to Student Achievement. Potential Implications for Chapter 1 Students," in *Designs for Compensatory Education: Conference Proceedings and Papers*, edited by B.I. Williams et al. (Washington, D.C.: Research and Evaluation Associates).

¹⁴See W. Doyle's paper, Volume II.

¹⁵The basis for these principles is best described in W. Doyle's paper and also in H. McCollum's review, Volume II.

¹⁶See H. McCollum's review, Volume II.

¹⁷Consider evidence from research syntheses by Slavin, Hallinan, Persell, and Wilkinson, reviewed in H. McCollum's paper, Volume II.

¹⁸See, for example, R. Slavin, (1986), *Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools: A Best Evidence Synthesis* (Baltimore, Md.: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University).

¹⁹The point is persuasively argued by R. Calfee, (1986), "Curriculum and Instruction in Reading," in *Designs for Compensatory Education: Conference Proceedings and Papers*, edited by B. I. Williams et al. (Washington, D.C.: Research and Evaluation Associates).

²⁰J. Mathews, (1988), *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart).

Authors' note: This paper is a condensed version of the first report (summary volume) to emerge from the Study of Academic Instruction for Disadvantaged Students. The summary volume, entitled *Better Schooling for the Children of Poverty: Alternatives to Conventional Wisdom*, synthesizes ideas contained in a companion volume (see endnotes). We wish to acknowledge the contributions of other study team members and scholars who wrote commissioned papers and literature review chapters in the companion volume: R. Allington, J. Brophy, W. Doyle, G. Garcia, H. McCollum, C. McKnight, L. Moll, M. Needels, B. Neufeld, D. Pearson, A. Porter, W. Secada, and A. Zucker.

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