

1-1-1976

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Recommended Citation

Ball, H. G. (1976). How Johnny Can't Learn. *Reading Horizons*, 16 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol16/iss2/5

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HOW JOHNNY CAN'T LEARN

Howard G. Ball

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Johnny's learning problems have troubled his parents and haunted his teachers since the first group of students met in the pervasive "little red schoolhouse." Because of Johnny's academic inadequacies, his teachers are admonished by public officials; teachers censure Johnny's parents; Johnny's parents criticize his lack of motivation, capability or interest; and Johnny, through his frustrations, condemns all society for its insensitivity and lack of understanding. This description includes the Johnny who is black. This Johnny responds to *his* society in a similar way, but his problems are more intense. His relationships with his environment are more complex. His learning problems are more confounding. (Ashmore, Hayakawa, Reissman, Woodson)

Before we can offer reasons *why* the Johnny, who is black, has difficulty in progressing through his learning environment, we must discern more than his basic recognition of words and their meanings. We must look beyond his insufficiencies in ordering and organizing numerical concepts. We must extend our view past the concepts of street academies, open and unstructured classrooms, occupation-oriented programs, and all other contemporary declarations of educational alternatives. In order for our black Johnny to learn, he must first understand the philosophy and principles of the Anglo-ethnic tenets of education; which, in most cases, are quite different than Johnny's. We must investigate Johnny's total learning environment and his relationships with it. (Alexander, Coleman, Frazier 1967, Giovanni, Hayakawa, Salaam) As educators and potential educators, we must understand some of the conditions of our black Johnny's world:

- *The probability of his coming from a broken home is three times as great as an Anglo child. (Ploski)
- *The unemployment rate for the head of his home is 20% higher than for Anglo children. (Henderson)
- *Johnny's school environment is less receptive . . . less responsive to his personal learning needs than it is for Anglo children for whom the educational superstructure of this society is built. (Grier)
- *Johnny's racial group is less represented . . . less considered by the most immediate and distant political structures. His needs are the least, in priority, than any other group in this society. (Altschuler)
- *The neighborhoods, to which Johnny has been relegated are sub-standard and are seldom maintained. His immediate surroundings are usually inferior and subordinate to the "accepted standards" of the dominant members of society. (Silberman, 1962)
- *Although his parent's wages are 63% of those of the dominant group, Johnny's costs of living is 27% higher than in other nearby communities. This is reflected in higher costs for food, rentals, and other consumable goods. (Daniel)
- *His institutions are rapidly depreciating.

- (a) The abridgement of Black colleges is rapidly increasing as a result of desegregation efforts and
- (b) There is a rapid reduction of black dominated and controlled churches as a result of black-white denominational infusion.
(Doddy)

Therefore, the black Johnny assumes a profile of a subordinate member; a second-class membership in a society that does not seek nor solicit any of his thoughts or concerns. Johnny quickly realizes that the people who make decisions about his learning environment seldom consider his particular needs; nor are they really concerned about what he might eventually contribute to this society. Johnny soon recognizes that his life styles, his needs, his problems, and yes . . . even his perceptions are not reflected in this nation's educational programs. Johnny quickly understands that his entire existence is to evolve within the narrow parameters of neutrality . . . neither giving nor receiving.

In order for our Johnny to learn with a functional degree of adequacy and sufficiency, he must first be taught to perceive himself as a contributing member of his *immediate* learning milieu. He must not be permitted to view himself as an isolated entity . . . neither involved nor participating within his academic setting. Johnny must recognize that he has a function, a role, a part he must play within his learning environment. He must readily become aware that he will be expected to be a giver as well as a receiver of information . . . of knowledge. School must become a real representation of Johnny's world. School must reflect the substance of his total surroundings. It must reflect this in a wholesome and meaningful way. School must not be a fragment of the hostile world to which Johnny is quickly becoming acclimated. An alien school environment must be something apart from the disarranged and chaotic milieu within which he is forced to survive.
(Tyach)

Through well-planned and sequenced instruction, we can transmit ideas, values, attitudes, and cognitive understandings which are not apart of and foreign from Johnny's immediate world. While it is not considered impossible for school to compensate for many of the deleterious and detrimental variables impeding the physical, mental, and social psyche of Johnny's being, we must attempt to add some precision, some stability to his disordered and hectic life. But, generations of children growing up in broken homes—surrounded by unemployment, social dissonance, insensitive and unempathizing teachers and school administrators, sub-standard housing, swindling and gouging merchants, harsh and rude public officials—are now demanding more. Already youthful black students have demonstrated incredible sophistication in their interpretations of their emerging role and their requirements for fulfilling it.
(Commager)

What can we as black faculty and student scholars do to assist our black children to fully develop more positive self-concepts and awareness? One suggested method is to provide Johnny with the best instruction possible. His learning environment should be charged with excitement. It should be

full of meaningful and proven learning materials. The instructional presentations should be rich arrays of learning activities and experiences that will continuously stimulate Johnny to be a discoverer. Johnny's learning should come to him through all his sensory modes. He should be exposed to visual stimuli which are active and dynamic; he should hear sounds which are tastefully pleasant and melodic, bridging the familiar with the unfamiliar. He should use touch and smell to aid him in discovering new and expanding experiences. He should be physically, emotionally and mentally involved in all these exhilarating, stirring and moving learning activities. He must be encouraged to be an inquirer of knowledge rather than an acquirer of data.

The classroom is only one of Johnny's learning arenas. To view the classroom as the singular center of learning would be a serious mistake for an instructional planner to make. The instructional planner must be aware of the other conditions which are altering and influencing the learning behavior of Johnny. Other forces involve the home, local communities, peer relationships and other phenomena which exert influence, and govern Johnny's learning behaviors. (Reissman)

As Johnny's instructional mentors, we must look beyond the ordering of instructional strategies. We must expand our curricula designing efforts beyond the objective building stage, curriculum planning phase and establishing correlative instructional strategies. All of these are important considerations in instructional planning, but until we focus upon Johnny as a human entity with individual needs, problems, feelings, anxieties, goals, intellectual capacities and limitations—all of our curricula planning and instructional developmental activities will be meaningless and sterile.

As we plan for black children, we, as educators, must effectively use all of the tools and techniques of our profession. But, as we plan, we must continuously be aware of the personal needs which Johnny will be bringing with him when he enters our nation's classrooms.

*Johnny needs to view himself as an integral part of his society, his world. (Silberman, 1964)

*He must have a part in deciding what he is to learn and how he is to go about it. (Carmichael)

*We must provide for and encourage two-way communication. Johnny must feel free to express honestly, his needs and concerns, his problems and anxieties without fear of vindictive rebuttal or reprisal. (Hayakawa)

*Curricula and instructional planning must incorporate discussions, experiences, activities, and materials which develop Johnny's self-esteem. (Ashmore)

*Johnny must perceive the teachers' behavior as sincere and genuine. He should receive their respect in order that he will be better equipped to return it. (Winthrop)

*He must be allowed to grow and develop in an atmosphere of mutuality and human concern. (Meier)

*He must perceive school as both an extension of himself and his environment. (Jones)

When there is a closer agreement between the perceptions of Johnny as to what he wants to learn and the expectations of educators as to what he should learn, then learning becomes more significant and meaningful. When there is too little agreement between instructional expectations and Johnny's perceptions of the instructional goals, learning becomes less effective. (Woodson) Therefore, it is important that teachers of black children have some understanding of what makes a "good" and "meaningful" instructional climate.

Before deciding upon a particular unit of instruction, the educator must develop some standards which might significantly improve the instructional atmosphere. For instance, the teacher must consider:

- *If the learning objectives are realistically defined in terms of the child's capability and interest levels.
- *If the materials selected are appropriate to the child's particular entry level.
- *If the educational conditions reflect the experiences that the children have or will be having.
- *If the unit will be an integral part of the total instructional system.
- *If the unit will offer many opportunities for Johnny to respond in an involved and overt fashion.
- *If the unit contains those instructional ingredients which are necessary for making a satisfactory assessment of their impact on our black learner.

As teachers discover more about how the structure of learning environments are planned and organized to convey clearer and more meaningful instruction to children, we will be better able to reach black children through more effective instructional planning.

As teachers of black children assess these techniques and methodologies, they must consider some of the premises and principles which have been validated as having efficiency for developing curricula and instruction for black children like our Johnny. Johnny's teachers should ascertain that their instructional presentations must:

- *Possess inner consistency. The instructional unit must be related to other units with each unit subsequently contributing to the over-all instructional goal.
- *Provide instructional presentations which are clear, understandable and unambiguous.
- *Be so arranged that the main ideas become readily apparent to the learner.
- *Provide instructional strategies which will stimulate Johnny to continue on through towards the completion of the instructional unit.
- *Be interpreted by Johnny in a manner that was intended by the instructional planner.
- *Present persons, contexts and experiences realistically and honestly.
- *Possess instructional presentations which are concrete and subsequently

relate to Johnny's immediate environment.

- *Contain those experiences and activities that reflect a particular interest for specific groups of black learners.
- *Contain dynamic and vibrant presentational qualities.
- *Be so structured that the learner can make the perceptual jump from the instructional content to a real life situation.
- *Contain only those presentational qualities which Johnny will be able to perceive and understand.
- *Be able to stimulate an emotional reaction from Johnny as he interacts within the instructional unit.

Many research efforts and studies which have been directed toward effective approaches for delivering instruction to black learners can be summarized as follows:

- *Children, like Johnny, are most responsive to concrete experiences which reflect their most immediate environments. (Woodson)
- *There is a paucity of substantiated information about how the black child's immediate environment influences his perceptual, verbal and visual vocabularies. (Ploski)
- *The level of the child's ability to respond satisfactorily, on a culturally based IQ instrument, is reflected by the depth and breadth of his background of experiences. (Grier)
- *Black children from lower, socio-economic backgrounds seem less able to perceptually interpret complex visual-verbal messages than children from upper socio-economic levels. (Deutsch)
- *Black children generally appear to be more oriented toward the non-verbal, gestural communication dimension than Anglo children who have a general bent toward verbal-literal areas. (Allport, Frazier 1962, Stern, Woodson)

Investigation on analysis of instructional materials have revealed that many of the current commercially prepared instructional materials are not linked with the cultural and experiential background of black children. Many of these studies conclude that the vast amounts of instructional materials were designed for middle-class, Anglo children. (Winthrop, Ashmore) Consequently, many of the instruction presentations, used by teachers of black children, are alien to the black learners' perceptual understandings and subsequently have little instructional value. At this point, research unequivocally evidences a perceptual dissonance existing between the black child's cognitions and commercially prepared materials. (Ploski, Winthrop) A careful analysis of many commercially prepared instructional materials will indicate that many materials do, in fact, contain elements which discriminate against the black student. They discriminate not only in terms of the uses of unfamiliar and uncommon instructional elements (pictures, words, and physical arrangements), but also in perpetuating harsh and unfavorable stereotypes of the lives, behaviors and environments of ethnic and racial minorities.

We are aware that instructional breakdowns occur when the originator of an instructional message does not share or understand the com-

munication skills, attitudes, knowledges, and interests as Johnny, who is the ultimate focal point of the message. (By “originator”, we refer to the teacher, or the instructional planner, or the producer of the instructional materials: anyone or anything that originates an instructional message to another.) There is no standard set for a common language for our society. A phenomenon for commonality of referents and meanings would increase the quality of information sending between various groups of people. But, such is not the case. If the receiver does not share a commonality of experiences, understandings and values, then the probability for an instructional message breakdown is increased. For example, I am reminded of an instructional encounter I had with a group of 26 second grade, black youngsters. I was employed in a large school district located in the central part of one of our mid-western states. I was presenting a filmstrip that had as an objective, the development of spatial concepts. Each frame had a short, concise caption superimposed on the pictorial text. These captions were located at the bottom of each frame. While I was engrossed with the teaching of spatial concepts, the learners were fascinated on how the human figures, in the context of the filmstrip, could balance themselves on the captioned words without appearing to be unbalanced or falling through the words and letters. After I became aware of the interests and concerns these children were displaying about technical aspects of this medium, I discovered that *none* of these children could give a rationale or a reasonable explanation for the captions within the filmstrip. I presented this same filmstrip to a group of predominately white, middle-class, 7-year old youngsters attending school in the same city. Their unanimous responses were normal and they saw the captions as additives to the pictures and not a part of the nonprint text. It is interesting to note that three of the children in the latter group were black, and their responses were immediate and normal in that they saw what the other (white) children had seen in the filmstrip . . . the captions were an appendage. This brief illustration points out what research is saying about the impact of the black child’s environment on his learning processes. That is, the extent of the child’s exposure to “accepted” visual stimuli directly affects his abilities to relate to a variety of innovative and diffuse instructional forms of visual language. The former group of black children lived and attended school in a community deprived of a variety of culturally and socially “accepted” stimuli while the latter group of children seemed to have been exposed to an array of “accepted” stimuli.

This and many other instructional incidents evidence that racial, cultural, ethnic, social, and economic factors seem to be important considerations when selecting appropriate goals, objectives, strategies, and materials. It appears that Johnny’s environment has a significant impact upon his abilities and capacities for perceiving information and drawing appropriate inferences. Black children who have seemingly been deprived of *acceptable* visual-verbal stimuli have less opportunities for advancing in their conceptual and perceptual development. (Reissman) As a point of reference, Deutsch views the child who has been restricted in his exposure to

a variety of the socially and culturally “accepted” stimuli, he says:

This does not necessarily refer to any restriction of the quantity of stimulation, but, rather, a restriction to a segment of the spectrum potentially available. It might be postulated that the segments (stimuli) and accessible to these (black) children tend to have poorer and less systematic ordering of stimulation sequences, and would thereby be less useful to the growth and activation of cognitive potential.

Deutsch is not inferring that there are inherent weaknesses or psychodynamic flaws in the black child’s perceptual map. He is but pointing out the effects of the child’s cultural base upon his ability to see, analyze, interpret, order, and synthesize new learning tasks. This indicates that we, as teachers, and future teachers of all the black Johnnies of this country, must be aware of how environmental conditions can inhibit and retard Johnny’s conceptual and perceptual growth. Therefore, we must plan and develop structured and systematic programs for training black children to overcome these perceptual parameters.

In order that an effective program of instruction can be developed around learning needs and problems of black children, it is important that an educational climate be established that will nurture inquiry, exploration and experimentation. (Ashmore) This climate will develop a student-teacher relationship that will provide interactive experiences and activities, develop more effective and meaningful communication, and increase Johnny’s abilities and skills for analyzing and interpreting new instructional experiences.

As planners for the instructional intervention directed toward assisting black children, we need to consider many factors. We shall develop standards and criteria for selecting and utilizing a list of do’s and don’t’s for building appropriate and meaningful instructional experiences which can assist Johnny to understand himself and the world about him. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but only to offer a base for developing a cluster of conceptualizations and techniques: creating a more viable and intense involvement between Johnny, his school and community environment.

*Have Johnny rate a series of instructional activities as to their relevancy, interest and appropriateness. Analyze the characteristics of those presentations that received the highest ratings and develop a set of criterion for planning and incorporating subsequent activities. Johnny may assess these activities formally or informally, verbally or non-verbally.

*Avoid implementing any instructional units which are too abstract, ambiguous or beyond the entry levels of black children.

*The instructional unit should incorporate an interaction quality among black children and their teachers. Instruction that elicits little or no human interaction, lacks meaning and substance.

*Offer a variety of instructional experiences, particularly those which will broaden the perceptual horizons of black children beyond their im-

mediate environment.

- *Select and incorporate instructional materials and activities which not only focus upon the basic perceptual awarenesses of particular groups of black children, but expand and broaden their awarenesses toward more vicarious concepts and understandings.
- *Observe the independent activities of black children in the classroom. Record those activities and involvements which the children opt toward for greater satisfaction. Plan for these, and similar activities and involvements, to be used in future instructional presentations.
- *Encourage black children to verbalize their awarenesses and assessments of the instructional unit. Record their responses for identifying curricula and instructional design strengths and weaknesses.
- *Encourage Johnny to order and sequence learning materials and experiences by some criterion or standard, i.e., developing a story through arrangements of pictures; arranging objects by size, complexity, personal preference, feeling, personal meaning or understanding, density of informational content, color, shape, or proportion.
- *Plan and develop instructional presentations which will result in a display of behavior that will demonstrate the effect of the instructional objective, i.e., perform a psychomotor skill, display more acceptable social behavior, show respect for the property of others, present a more positive approach behavior toward children of different racial or ethnic origins.
- *Johnny's attending behaviors should be directed toward the more salient features of the instructional plan. Johnny should be encouraged to describe the plan's purposes, analyze its effectiveness, and discuss its personal applicability toward himself.
- *Johnny must not be exposed to an instructional unit that contains too much unfamiliar information. He should be exposed to uncommon elements in small sequential steps, along with sufficient explanations and related experiences, that will buttress their meaning.
- *It is important that Johnny be exposed to a variety of instructional materials. Impoverished environment leads to socially 'unacceptable' cognitive development. Exposure to specific and prescribed instructional materials directly affects the cognitive structures. (Deutsch)
- *The instructional unit should not contain static, passive and inactive presentations. Teachers must plan and incorporate presentations that exemplify dynamic, moving, on-going and changing qualities.
- *Johnny needs to be exposed to instructional presentations other than those with realistically based content. Fantasy and improbable themes encourage and stimulate him to be imaginative and originative in his perceptions, thoughts and expressions.
- *Instructional presentations should be selected on the bases of the perceptual and literal skills which Johnny brings into the classroom: rather than upon unfounded and invalidated expectation of uninformed and inexperienced educators. It has been established that black children bring their own meanings to our instructional presentations, so

the presentation must be selected and incorporated with this principle in mind.

One final note, instructional units must be an integral part of the total educational process. The instructional units are selected in terms of their impact for attaining defined and prescribed educational goals. Each presentation, within the unit, must have the qualities for presenting all levels of reality. Teachers, and future teachers of black children, must assume a more scientific and systematic approach toward organizing and arranging instructional presentations. Teachers cannot assume that Johnny, who has been deprived of a variety of rich and meaningful stimuli, will have the same cognitions, perceptions and language as children who have had greater access and experiences with wider forms and varieties of culturally "acceptable" stimuli. Educators of black children must realize that structured and proven instructional units must offer information that not only reinforces and augments the foundations of the total instructional plan, but extends Johnny's awarenesses out of the restricted and narrow confines of his close and constricted environment.

As educators and students responsible for the instructional growth and development of black children, we must be aware of the importance of encouraging the use of a structured, well-ordered and systematic plan of instruction that will have a positive effect on changing Johnny's learning behaviors. (Orderindie) We must become sensitive to his learning needs and how these needs are being met within the matrix of our complex and complicated educational system. As we come to grips with the problems and issues for educating black children, we will be in a better position to implement practices and procedures toward assisting our children to attain newer and higher levels of intellectual and emotional development.

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