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TEACHING READING TO THE DISADVANTAGED

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The effective education of disadvantaged learners constitutes one of the greatest challenges confronting American education today. Central to meeting this challenge is the development within such learners of the capacity to read effectively(15).

How else can children and youth get the pertinent information that is required for useful and clear thinking in speaking and writing than by acquiring the ability to read effectively? How a child gets started in reading will determine to a great extent how well he learns to read in later grades(6). If a child fails in reading during the primary grades, his chances for success in any other academic area are greatly reduced(3).

Learning to read is of vital importance to the disadvantaged child. It has proved in many cases to be a status symbol for the child not only at school, but also at home. This ability gives him a place at home as a source of information and a help to his parents and brothers and sisters, for he is able to read to them and take care of certain business arrangements. He soon learns that reading opens many doors of information and brings a satisfaction he has not known before(11).

A culturally disadvantaged child is one who comes from a home environment which does not provide him with experiences that transmit the cultural patterns needed for learning and success in the larger society or its agents (schools). Under no circumstance is cultural disadvantagedness equated with any ethnic or racial group membership. Any child whose early experiences in the home, whose motivation for learning, and whose personal goals handicap him for completing *school* tasks is disadvantaged(8).

One major characteristic of the disadvantaged child is his inadequate language preparation. This child has extremely limited language resources to use as aids in conceptualizing his world. He is usually characterized by 1) a lack of vocal stimulation during infancy, 2) few experiences in conversation with more verbally mature adults in his early years, 3) severely limited opportunities to develop mature cognitive behavior, 4) a greater deficit in the auditory-vocal modality than in the visual-motor areas, and 5) a lack of quantity and quality of verbal expression(8).

Language deficiency in the background of the disadvantaged child is *the* greatest concern of the classroom teacher. Children living in poverty do not hear a language rich in expressive patterns and their limited experiential backgrounds produce an understanding of limited concepts(6).

The language of the culturally disadvantaged child is usually informal or restricted, lacking breadth and depth for precise statements of ideas or emotions. It does not require the type of thinking which results in conceptual development. This restricted language development during the early years results in almost irreparable damage in academic relations. The child arriving at school with language unacceptable to the school will be unable to communicate with some of his peers or with his teacher(7).

At about five or six the child comes to school. If the home has done its job well, the task of the school is usually uncomplicated. On the other hand, the child from a culturally impoverished home may arrive at school with numerous deficiencies. Bereiter and Englemann(3) state that a culturally disadvantaged pupil comes to school inadequately prepared to deal with the variety of sentence patterns he encounters in school. He may survive in his own environment, yet he cannot function well in school. The language deficiencies of the culturally disadvantaged child are not just those of failure to master certain uses of language. He also fails to master aspects of social behavior vital to maintaining social relationships and to meeting social and material needs.

In school, language is necessary for obtaining and transmitting information and for carrying on verbal reasoning. Having failed to master these cognitive uses of language, which are of primary importance in school, the disadvantaged child is doomed to failure(8). Bereiter and Englemann(3) claim "disadvantaged children do not have enough time to participate in the same experiences as privileged children. Therefore, selection and exclusion of experiences is necessary to provide those activities which will produce a faster than normal rate of progress."

Broadening experiences and interesting conversation and discussion make the child want to discover the unknown by reading. Reading is important for success in the world of work. He must learn to read well so that he can secure immediate success in his chosen work. Later, when confronted with technological changes, he must be able to use reading as a means of gaining new information and skills (16).

Studies indicate, however, that children of the poor, on the whole,

are two or more years behind the norm in reading as they progress through the grades. They just do not receive stimuli in the same manner, type, or degree that their more culturally favored counterparts do(4).

Deutsch(5) states that by the time disadvantaged children reach junior high school, 60% are retarded one to four years in reading. He states that lack of appropriate language stimulation early in life, both at school and at home, may make success in reading as well as in other school activities progressively more difficult since the child becomes less and less responsive to remediation as he grows older.

A study by Barton(2) showed that in classes where children came from lower paid, lower skilled families, mean percentages of classes reading one or more years below actual grade level were 33% as contrasted with 6% among middle class families.

The study reported in 1963 by Walter Loban(10) showed that children who were low in general language ability were also low in reading ability. The gap between the high and low groups seemed to widen each year. His study found that reading and writing ability were related to socio-economic position; those in the lowest socio-economic groups were below average in reading and writing achievement.

Because of these debilitating effects of experiential poverty upon the culturally disadvantaged, a mandate for materials which reflect what is familiar to them is necessary. A multi-sensory approach to reading must be paramount to orient these children to the academic sphere in order to close the gap caused by lack of experiences(4).

A fundamental approach to the development of reading proficiency among the disadvantaged is the language experience method advocated by Van Allen(1). This plan incorporates children's immediate and personal experiences as material for vocabulary and general reading development, and lays the groundwork for the commercial materials which are now being prepared(4).

A language involvement program is constructed on the premise that children learn from adult models. No lectures or rules are used. The teacher demonstrates pattern after pattern until the child inductively assumes the correct behavioral task(8). After the children have had an opportunity to contribute their thoughts about an experience which they have similarly shared, the teacher suggests that they write a story about it. As the children dictate the details of their experience, the teacher records them on the board or large manila tablet so that they may be preserved for future reading. When the

chart is finished, it may be used for many other learning activities. The teacher may have each child copy it or use it for individual or group reading.

As the children increase their sight vocabulary, they begin to select books to read which can be read for themselves, read to other classmates, and to their teacher. When a child finishes a book, he may wish to draw a picture about it or select another one to read. In addition to selecting their own books to read, the children continue to work with the teacher on experience charts for the development of skills and to increase vocabulary(12).

The teacher, throughout the language involvement program, is an intermediary between the child and his world. The teacher selects some experiences, provides some limitations on explorations, creates structure, and activates the child's senses. She interprets some of the child's reactions, acknowledges his perplexities, confirms his conclusions, and disentangles his misconceptions but never expounds, preaches or moralizes. The language involvement program succeeds only if the disadvantaged child explores his environment, tests it, reacts to it, labels it, and tries to explain it just as the average child does in his verbally oriented, multi-experiential environment(8).

One advantage of this program is that the child picks the books he wants to read; however, there must be appropriate books within the classroom or library for his selection. Young people need a variety of reading experiences and materials of differing reading difficulties. They must have materials which confirm their identity and experiences, and they must have reading materials which help them go beyond the limitations of their disadvantaged backgrounds(13).

Disadvantaged children fail to identify with the book characterizations represented in both schoolbooks and children's literature. The book characters differ from the contemporaries around these disadvantaged children in appearance, speech, and behavior(6).

The current story characters, their pets, and the family helpers constitute efforts to base reading materials in the basal readers on the experience of "typical" six, seven, and eight-year-olds on the thesis that such material will be more meaningful than the fanciful or moralistic content of the earlier reader. It goes without saying that the child in the slum districts finds it difficult to identify himself with the typical basal reading story characters (14). As Nancy Larrick (9) has said, 6,340,000 non-white children across the country have been learning to read and understand the American way of life in books which either entirely omitted them or scarcely mentioned them.

The teaching of reading has been considered the most important responsibility of the elementary school and there is particular need for the improvement of the level of achievement of our deprived children. At the moment, wherever reading is being taught in a program for the deprived, the approach, the procedures, the methods, the materials, and even the desired results vary from situation to situation(11).

Educational research, including the twenty-seven U.S. Office of Education first grade reading studies, continues to provide evidence that there is no *best* method of teaching reading. The first grade reading teacher who is able to provide the most stimulation for the greatest number of her children consistent with developmental levels appears to be most effective regardless of method. However, the types of learning that are not measured by common data-gathering instruments should also be considered. Among these are the most important results of teaching—attitudes, appreciations, insights, habits. A careful measurement of these results might show that certain approaches are more effective than others under particular circumstances; however, it seems doubtful that any one standard method will ever serve all children. In the absence of clear direction regarding the most effective method, teachers must rely heavily upon what is known about the developmental character of children in striving for language continuity (7).

Knowing how to teach reading, knowing books, and how to bring children and books together requires knowledge, caring, intelligent instruction, cooperative planning, and flexibility(13). With these the classroom teacher can initiate the disadvantaged child to the world of books and reading.

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