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# WHY WASTE OUR TIME ON THE CULTURALLY DEPRIVED?

*Pat Houseman*

BATTLE CREEK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Why should we waste our time with the culturally deprived student? Yes, I said waste. When a child is in our charge for at least ten years of his life and at the end of this time cannot function as a productive member of society, then we have wasted not only our time but also his time. We have wasted our energies, money, and talents. There is a tragic waste of human potential. What can we do to end this waste? How can we prepare the culturally deprived child to live in our complex world?

Educators very often try to place the blame for their failure on the circumstances of the child's birth and home environment. Indeed, the problem begins there but how can we re-evaluate our educational programs to fit the needs of these unfortunate children? Surely, we cannot be so cold-hearted as to leave them to their unhappy fate of frustration and despair. As reading teachers, we hold a key that will unlock many doors for these students. Improvement of reading and the related language skills can make these children more at home in the adult world.

Let's take a closer look, then, at this child that we label as culturally deprived, disadvantaged, underprivileged, or whatever the current educational jargon is calling them this year. This child comes to us from a home that is usually in the lower social and economic levels of society. In this home the child is deprived of many of the things that other children take for granted. Most important to his future educational success or failure, he is deprived of the many varied language experiences needed for initial success in reading. This child is deprived of books and other reading materials. Frequently his parents do not read because they lack the time and skill. Perhaps reading is looked upon as a waste of time or a "sissy" activity. The child is not usually read to nor does he ever see anyone reading just for enjoyment. Nobody talks to a child in this environment except perhaps in abuse or in monosyllable directives. He, therefore, is denied vocabulary-building experiences and is not accustomed to hearing or speaking in complete sentences. This impoverished child does not have the opportunity for exposure to the many experiences in life that would prepare him for future learning experiences. He has never been to a zoo or a farm or, indeed, anywhere.

We, in reading, should realize the importance of the child's self-image as related to his success in reading. The deprived child comes to us with a very poor image of himself and our educational system is designed to damage further this meager measure of self-esteem. His sub-standard language is immediately corrected and he is told that it is wrong. The child immediately senses the conflict between the standards of his family and this new and frightening institution with which he is faced. He frequently rebels.

Our deprived child is also frequently burdened with physical problems because of poor medical care as an infant or even the lack of adequate pre-natal care. The possibilities of trauma and injury are many and the interested teacher should make every effort to become aware of and try to compensate for these problems.

As soon as possible, the child is judged according to his ability level and grouped with children of the same ability. These children are not given work designed for their own needs but are usually given the same materials at a slower pace.

Later an intelligence test is given and the results usually confirm the teacher's evaluation of the child's innate intelligence. He is then tracked with children of similar abilities and is again given a watered-down version of the same materials given to all children. Even so, he frequently fails.

This is not to serve as an indictment of all schools but I am afraid that we have to admit that this pattern is all too common in our urban ghetto schools. It seems amazing that educators can continue to place so much emphasis on the results of intelligence tests when so many times we have been told of the significance of the cultural factor in the success a child experiences in taking a test. A deprived child has limited test-taking skills, therefore, he must do poorly even though his ability is equal to others who may score higher on the test. By the time this child reaches the junior high school, he has become a rebellious, frustrated, "problem child." What can we do, then, in the secondary schools to compensate for the deprivation to which this child has been subjected?

The reading teacher, therapist, consultant, or clinician who wants to help this child must be a very special kind of person. She must, most importantly, be an understanding person. She must be an accepting kind of person. She must not present a threat to the child. This child is all too often threatened in his educational experience. The reading teacher should be educated in and be fully aware of the problems

the child is faced with and should not evaluate but should understand and accept the child.

What methods should the reading teacher use to reach and teach the underprivileged child? This question cannot be answered in any simple manner because the treatment of each student should be varied to suit the personality and needs of the individual.

First and most important, the reading teacher must become acquainted with the child and, in this process, try to gain rapport with him as well as a good working relationship. Sometimes the student will be hostile. Can you blame him? He has failed so often. Perhaps genuine interest in him and compassion on the part of the teacher can get through this armor that he has donned to protect himself against the sting of failure.

Some kind of process must be developed for the teacher to ascertain the reading level and the specific needs of the student. Many of our so-called diagnostic tests are useless for this purpose because, as we have noted previously, these students are definitely not good test-takers. An informal reading inventory could be developed with which the culturally deprived child could be appraised. This would serve as a useful tool in determining needs, especially if the teacher is a trained and skilled observer.

After the needs of the student are ascertained, materials must be chosen that are appropriate and relevant to the child. Many publishers are developing reading materials that fill this need. Sets of paperback books are now available that deal specifically with urban, ghetto, and teen-age interests and problems. This child is stimulated only by reading materials that are related to his experiences and are therefore meaningful to him.

The reading teacher should have definite objectives in mind when working with the culturally deprived child. One of the most important of these is the development of study skills so that the reading improvement that, hopefully, results can be carried over into the child's work in other classes. Teaching a child how to read a textbook should result in more successful experiences in learning.

Development of problem-solving skills should also be a primary goal of the reading teacher. This can be done most easily in discussions of the reading materials. "How" and "why" questions should be helpful in guiding the student to a greater awareness of his own place in society and how to deal with his own every-day problems, now and in the future. In these discussions, the child can be helped to develop his means of self-expression. Some writing could be done centering

around the themes discussed. The teacher should make an effort not to be critical or to be too easily shocked by any of the child's statements. Only in this way can the child become aware of and develop a regard for his own ideas and thoughts.

A child who is culturally deprived cannot be blamed for what he is. These unfortunate children should be compensated rather than penalized for the fate that circumstances have dealt them. We should make every effort to ensure that our time with them is not a waste. We must see that it is a contribution to the betterment of the child's future and to the enrichment of our society and of our nation.