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ENGLISH AND THE CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED

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The term “culturally disadvantaged” is used in this paper as it applies to those groups (foreign speaking whites, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Appalachian whites, and Negroes) who have migrated to the urban industrial areas in an effort to improve their living conditions and whose backgrounds have not been conducive to ready assimilation by the communities in which they settle. In this paper I shall be concerned primarily in discussing the Negro group because students of this group make up the total enrollment of the school of which I am principal. Although not all within the groups mentioned are newcomers, many of these have been born in and have never been out of their home city; but they are equally deprived because their home and local community reflect in large measure the culture of their disadvantaged parents. Many terms have been used to describe these youngsters—“culturally different,” “culturally and/or linguistically deprived,” “disadvantaged Americans,” “children of slum schools,” and others—yet all refer to a significant segment of our population which is receiving increased attention from our schools and more recently from the federal government as it plans its antipoverty program. I think that most are in agreement that the problems of the group described are overlapping, involving housing, employment, and education, and, as such, must be approached from all three directions.

As educators, we must determine our role in breaking the vicious cycle which generally binds the culturally disadvantaged—inequitable education because of the impact of a substandard culture, poorly paying jobs or no jobs at all because of inadequate education, and inadequate housing because of inadequate education and inadequate income.

Among the “culturally disadvantaged” entering and attending our schools, many enter the elementary level with such a limited background of experiences that they lack the readiness to progress normally through the instructional program and thus fall behind two to six years by the time they graduate from elementary school. As a result, far too few attain scholastic excellence and far too small a percentage of those entering high school are graduated.

The large number of school dropouts during the past few years occurring simultaneously with a shrinking market of unskilled jobs has created a situation which has commanded the attention of educators and governmental agencies. Formerly, dropouts did not pose as serious a challenge for several reasons. In the first place, there were fewer students in school; hence, numerically the dropouts were fewer. In the absence of compulsory education laws and child labor laws in many states, those youngsters who left before high school graduation were absorbed into the jobs available on the farm and into the unskilled jobs then available in the cities. But today the picture has changed. Our tremendous population growth, accompanied by the steady shift from rural to urban industrial areas, rapid advances in technology and automation, what is frequently termed “the
explosion of knowledge," and a job market incapable of absorbing a sufficiently large number of those needing employment—describe the conditions which the dropouts now find. This situation creates a grave social problem, and the rapid increase in the number of jobless youth, largely from the underprivileged group, has been aptly referred to as "social dynamite."

As the number of culturally disadvantaged children increased in elementary and high schools, the teachers of these pupils faced problems for which many were unprepared. For too long a period, teacher training was designed to prepare teachers for a curriculum geared to the needs of children of middle class families. The result was often frustration for both pupil and teacher. The teacher frequently felt "these children can't learn" and the children, in turn, felt that "teacher doesn't like me." In the field of English, the specific area with which we are primarily concerned, the colleges are only recently awakening to the challenge which this situation presents to the teacher and to the teacher training institution.

At the elementary level, the culturally disadvantaged child comes to school woefully inadequate in vocabulary, in the ability to express himself in complete sentences, in the ability to discern differences between shapes and colors, in the curiosity exhibited through asking questions, in the ability to use crayons and similar materials, in the use of acceptable speech patterns—in fact, he is inadequate in his total background of experience. These illustrate some of the differences between pupils from the middle class home and those from the culturally disadvantaged home. In addition, children from middle class homes take it for granted that reading is important, and they go about it as an expected thing. On the contrary, those who are culturally deprived see little value in reading, for they know few who read "just for the fun of it" and have not been stimulated or motivated to learn to read.

Children of the latter group must receive much additional help at school to counteract their shortcomings. Already in a number of localities, projects are being planned and operated for the preschool aged child of the culturally disadvantaged to provide experiences necessary for successful adjustment to the beginning program in school. For those already in school, programs and administrative provisions are being made by many school systems to compensate for deficiencies of the culturally disadvantaged student. Among these are inservice education of teachers; smaller class size; supplementary professional services; special summer school programs, both remedial and enrichment; after-school libraries, reading clinics, study centers, and speech clinics; and after-school classes in remedial arithmetic and remedial reading.

The teacher must be willing to expand the experiential background of all the students whose lives need enrichment, but this is vitally important in the education of the culturally disadvantaged child. In many Chicago schools, groups are organized to visit places of civic, cultural, and historical interest and to attend cultural events such as the theatre, concerts, exhibits and the like, and are given the opportunity to participate in assembly programs, clubs, drama, the choir, and other activities designed to expose them to broader and richer cultural experiences. On the part of the teacher, this requires insight, concern, cultural interests of his own, and a considerable expenditure of extra time and effort to
plan, motivate, and sponsor these activities. Teachers who work with the culturally disadvantaged and put forth this extra time and effort find the experience genuinely rewarding.

On the secondary level, critical deficiencies in oral and written communication among the culturally disadvantaged are evident. And now, apparent to a marked degree, is the attitude on the part of these students of the futility of striving to overcome the readily recognized retardation, due to the low achievement level in English. To help these students recognize the need and acquire the skills and tools necessary to communicate effectively and with ease poses one of the most critical problems of the teacher of English at all levels. To quote Ruth Golden, "Determining what are good standards in our language and then kindling a love and respect for them are joys that should be shared by all teachers and even all English-speaking adults. But this task is the special trust of the English teacher."

The school of which I am principal is the general public high school, grades 9 through 12, serving the near south side, one of the older sections of Chicago. The school district includes a large industrial area bordering the central business district of the city and a residential area with some industry interspersed. The housing is largely public housing, with two private housing developments near the lake; however, only a few students from the latter attend the public high school. The balance of the housing ranges from middle class homes to substandard houses and apartments, with the latter type predominant. Those involved in the teaching of English or those representing teacher training institutions may find that our experiences at this school indicate what has been happening generally in large cities, and methods of approaching some of the resultant problems may be suggested.

At present, this school has an enrollment of about 3,000, with approximately one third of this number in the first year. To facilitate instruction, students are grouped in reasonably homogeneous English classes. Basic English is a double period class carrying double credit, providing a one year program for students reading below the sixth grade level; Essential English is designed to meet the needs of those who enter with reading scores between the sixth and eighth grade levels; and Regular English and Honors English are for those reading above the eighth and ninth grade levels respectively.

It is of interest to note that of 428 entering the ninth grade in September, 1962, 187 (44%) were in Basic English; of 836 entering the ninth grade in September, 1963, 293 (35%) were placed in Basic; and of 846 in September, 1964, 138 (16%). Although pupils in the district had made marked improvement by 1964, there were still 16 percent of the entering pupils with reading grades below sixth grade level.

Perhaps the problem for the teacher of English will be more apparent when we observe the number of classes in which entering students were reading below the eighth grade level: in 1962, 22 of 29 classes were in this category; in

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1963, 29 of 40 classes; and in 1964, 31 of 38 classes were so classified. The remaining classes each year consisted of regular and honors classes.

Teaching English to the students in a school such as I have described requires broader training than that which is now generally provided for prospective teachers. The teachers are obviously faced with the necessity of remedial instruction in many of their classes. This presents a more complex problem than teaching the reading skills for the first time. Diagnostic techniques must be acquired and corrective techniques developed. The Chicago teaching guides for Basic and Essential English present approaches, objectives, and activities which offer help. But in order for guides to be of greatest benefit, teachers need training in methods of diagnosing reading problems. Learning the techniques of informal diagnosis is an important aspect of this preparation. The teacher must also have a knowledge of remedial techniques in order to help students overcome their reading difficulties, once these have been identified. It would be of great benefit if this knowledge could be acquired while the college has the teacher in training.

Inability to read, combined with a lack of interest in engaging in a laborious task, results in deficiencies affecting all areas of the educational program. The failure to obtain the information handed down to us through literature, the inability to have his spirits soar as the result of reading and sensing the beauty of a literary selection, the limited knowledge with which he approaches the study of all other subject areas—all point to the need for corrective measures to be taken with the culturally deprived.

Dr. Conant, in his report on the junior high school, recommends that all English teachers should be prepared to teach reading skills; I subscribe to this recommendation, but I am of the opinion that the teacher of English in a secondary school serving the culturally disadvantaged must have more than a knowledge of how to teach or reteach reading skills. As indicated, many pupils from culturally deprived homes enter high school seriously retarded in reading, and, as a result, they do not like to read. A first challenge to the teacher, then, is that of motivation. The alert and creative teacher will find among the wealth of books published for children many which can be used to help those from deprived areas "raise their sights" and stimulate them to read more widely. Colleges must offer training and opportunities for the prospective teacher to become well acquainted with these books and collections.

In addition to a deficiency in reading, students from culturally deprived homes usually bear the handicap of poor speech habits. Common errors include improper vowel sounds; errors in usage involving tense, number, or agreement; complete omission of a verb; and failure to sound the beginnings and endings of words. Despite these nonstandard patterns of speech, the student has been able to communicate with others in his home and among his acquaintances. The conflict occurs when he attempts to communicate with those who represent a different cultural level. He therefore comes into conflict with the teacher and the school curriculum. However, "It must be acknowledged," says Ruth Golden, "that standard language is a key that will open many doors, and conversely, many doors may be closed to those with nonstandard language." The student, there-

*Ibid., p. 5*
fore, must learn that social and economic mobility are generally related to the ability to learn and use effectively standard patterns of speech. His willingness to participate in a speech improvement program is usually facilitated when the social and vocational values of standard speech are understood and accepted.

Because the student has not developed the habit of listening carefully, he has difficulty in reproducing standard English. His problem is increased because normally he hears the word, phrase, or expression correctly spoken only in school. The teacher who expresses shock, dismay, or disgust at his effort to express himself, however poorly, can only serve to cause the student to withdraw into his shell to avoid the embarrassment of what he may construe as ridicule. The important thing is the manner in which he is corrected; therefore, a climate of mutual understanding must be created by the teacher—one in which the teacher understands the influence of the student's cultural background and one in which the student understands the value of mastering standard speech patterns. Only in such a climate can improvement in both listening and speaking best be effected.

To be of help to speech-crippled students, the teacher must have preparation in speech. His own speech must set an excellent example; he must develop an ear trained to discern errors in speech and convey this skill to the students; and, finally, the teacher must be trained and prepared to teach phonetic skills and standard language patterns.

English, to the foreigner, is a foreign language. In essence, the standard language patterns of English as taught in our schools are a "foreign language" to some of the students from culturally and thus linguistically disadvantaged homes. Techniques, equipment, and materials now being used in teaching modern foreign languages suggest methods of teaching English as a second language to such students. The language laboratory has been tried in some schools and the results have been encouraging. For retraining the students in certain skills at the secondary level, programmed learning may bear investigation.

Inasmuch as many of the students from disadvantaged homes are lacking in the use of standard language patterns and have not developed adequate listening skills, it follows that these students are generally unable to spell correctly and to put their thoughts in correct written form. Written communication in the culturally deprived home is usually limited. The teacher, then, must be ingenious enough to create a need for writing. Written composition should be started early in the primary grades; however, if high school students require instruction in elementary composition, it must be given. The teacher of English on the secondary level in a school serving the culturally disadvantaged, then, should be able and willing to teach composition at any level and must develop proficiency in recognizing the levels of achievement for evaluation. The teacher must likewise be sensitive and alert to the emergence of creativity and artistic literary talent on the part of these pupils, and recognize the danger of overlooking these abilities because nonstandard English may be the student's vehicle for expression.

In this connection, it is important that we point out a very real danger in drawing conclusions from test data and from the language deficiencies of the culturally deprived. A teacher may conclude that these children cannot learn.
But they do learn, though some may learn more slowly than others. In my school, for example, as in other schools, some of the students are achieving remarkably well in the regular English classes, some are making superior progress in the Honors classes, and still others are successfully pursuing courses in college before graduation from high school—all this despite the fact that these, too, are "culturally disadvantaged." (Perhaps these students are not aware that they are "culturally disadvantaged.") Fortunate is the child whose teacher is guided by the thought expressed by Thomas Gray in his Elegy:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

In addition to the special teaching skills and subject knowledge required, the prospective teacher should have some knowledge of the culturally deprived child and his community. Although understanding, empathy, respect, and a constant awareness of circumstances affecting the students are important in all educational programs, these are essential for the teacher working with the culturally disadvantaged. As one psychologist explained in discussing the needs and desires of the culturally disadvantaged, "They don't want just 'love'—but they do need and respond favorably to understanding and respect." The teacher's respect is the secret. In the booklet, Education and the Disadvantaged American, it says,

To provide the basis of that respect and awareness must be a major purpose of teacher education. Observation in disadvantaged areas is an important element in teacher preparation. But observation is not enough, for superficial experience may confirm stereotypes rather than produce understanding or respect. Teacher education should provide the insights of psychology, sociology, and anthropology and of the science of human development regarding the influence of environment. It should help teachers understand the impact of their own background on their personality and behavior. It should help them to examine the relationships among their values, attitudes, and actions. It should cause them to examine their attitudes toward culturally different children. Above all, it should develop in them a dedication to teaching for the unique opportunity it offers to give children hope.4

To aid the prospective teacher of English in developing the desired understandings, some experiences which may have value would include:

1. A course in contemporary American culture. Included would be field trips, guest speakers, audiovisual materials, etc. Here the case study, if carefully developed, could be a most effective instructional technique.

2. Experience after school, on Saturdays or during the summer in camps, churches, schools, community centers, and other agencies serving groups classified as culturally disadvantaged. Some volunteers even work in the homes, thus acquiring a deeper understanding of their culture.

3. Means should be provided to bring to the college actual reports of classroom activities involving pupils of culturally disadvantaged areas. Videotaping of actual practice teaching in schools serving the inner city has been tried with some degree of success.

4. It would be valuable experience for all prospective teachers to visit schools in a variety of socioeconomic areas.

5. Projects could be conducted at the colleges during the summer, bringing in students from underprivileged areas. Student teachers and graduate students working under supervision could have the opportunity of firsthand contact with the group to study techniques for meeting their needs.

6. Training should be received, not only in diagnosing reading problems, but in what to do for remediation after problems are identified.

7. Practice teaching under supervision involving a member of the English Department would make available to the prospective teacher expert help in the subject area on the job. Firsthand knowledge and direct contact with the teaching situation should make the supervision more meaningful. The college staff should be sufficiently knowledgeable about the impact of cultural deprivation so as to be able to help prospective teachers become aware of the students’ needs.

8. The prospective teacher should be trained in the selection of reading materials to meet the individual needs of culturally disadvantaged children. Courses for this purpose should be offered by the colleges. Opportunity should be provided for careful examination of curriculum guides and other curriculum material and equipment. Maintenance of an instructional materials center would be of value to both graduate and undergraduate students.

9. Colleges, in cooperation with schools, could conduct research in the use and evaluation of instructional materials and techniques to be used with the culturally disadvantaged.

10. Seminars and workshops should be organized which would involve teachers who are successfully working with disadvantaged students together with the college staff and the teachers-in-training.

11. Practice teaching should include working with students from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, in cooperation with the University of Chicago and the Chicago Board of Education, have followed such a plan for the past two years. Student teachers from these twelve colleges spent eight weeks as practice teachers in schools serving privileged neighborhoods and then spent another eight weeks in schools in less privileged areas. The consensus was that though this experience provided them with their first contact with students from culturally deprived neighborhoods, it was their “most rewarding teaching experience.” Many of the student teachers indicated that observation in a variety of schools during their third year would have been a valuable addition to their education and would have bolstered their self-confidence.
It is recognized that there will be many problems in schools serving culturally disadvantaged children which cannot be solved by the teacher without help from others on the staff. Solving these problems may require the assistance of the administrative staff and also require special services, such as those provided by the teacher-nurse, psychologist, counselor, and fellow teachers who may, by sharing experiences, increase the effectiveness of their work with disadvantaged students and their parents.

If the situation that I have described appears to be discouraging, then I have failed to achieve the purpose of this paper. On the other hand, our consideration of this problem will not have been wasted effort if I have succeeded in suggesting

— that the problem is complex, but not insoluble;
— that there is more hope than ever before in the united attack being made to identify and resolve some of the problems facing the culturally disadvantaged;
— that we, as educators, must assume the key role in approaching the basic problem; and, finally,
— that despite the overwhelming numbers of these young people in our classrooms today, they can through our efforts be stimulated, encouraged, and led to put forth the effort necessary to more nearly achieve their potential and increase their value to themselves and to society.