

SCHOOL LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THE EDUCATIONALLY DEPRIVED CHILD

by

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My topic for consideration today, "School Library Services for the Educationally Deprived Child", is most provocative. Educational deprivation can occur at many levels and in many places. It can occur in school in terms of curriculum or out of school in terms of environmental experiences or lack of them. It can occur in the heart of the city, in the suburbs, or in the most rural area. It can occur with the mentally gifted, the average, and the retarded.

For our present consideration we need to determine, also, who or what is causing the educational deprivation. I am reminded in this regard of a statement by Dr. Nancy Arnez in a recent issue of *SCHOOL AND SOCIETY*, "Too many of our schools are like tailors trying to fit the boy to the pants instead of the pants to the boy."¹ It may well be that we are prodding our pupils along curricular avenues which are unsuited to their needs and unreconstructed in terms of their weaknesses.

Increasingly large numbers of boys and girls are coming to our public schools the products of unstable and arid backgrounds in terms of middle class standards and middle class mores. They have been categorized by many terms, not one of which I intend to use today, because it is my feeling that each of the phraseologies has "had it." It is high time that we look at our educational charges simply as *children*, assay their strength, and weaknesses, and plot a course that will steer them through the troubled waters to a safe harbor of some educational progress.

To continue this rather weak metaphor, the school library can play a significant part in the cruise. Although it may not be the whole boat, as the learning resource center of the school it certainly may be the mainstay. Because my greatest experience has been with inner city children, I am going to discuss school library services for the educationally deprived in terms of the inner city child of a large urban area.

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1. Nancy Arnez, "The Effect of Teacher Attitudes Upon the Culturally Different," *School and Society*, XCIV, (March 19, 1966), pp. 149-52.

Most large urban areas are experimenting the same growth pains. As technological advances revolutionize their industrial economies, they are beset by the problems of migration to the city of many rural persons. Simultaneously there is a withdrawal to the suburbs of a large portion of the economically stable citizenry. The remaining populace represents a diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic levels. These are the people whose children challenge our schools.

The standard of the school, in spite of attempts to meet the needs of pupils, is essentially middle class, dedicated to education, books, and formal language. Many of the negative attitudes of these children are directed, not toward education, which by and large they desire, but toward the school which overlooks and underestimates their particular skills and mode of intellectual functioning.

In spite of great technological advances and increasing emphasis on the visual and auditory, ours is still a highly verbalized society. The person whose culture places little emphasis on the verbal is, therefore, at a great disadvantage when he comes up against the accepted norm of the American way of life. Many of our inner city children, particularly those newly arrived from rural sections of our country, function poorly when they are thrust suddenly into an urban environment.

Something relevant to this occurred to me one day. Always I have had a secret desire to be bilingual. How satisfying it would be to be able to live in a country long enough to learn the language by speaking it every day. This would really be the way! But suppose I had settled in a less favored section of town and learned the vernacular around me. Proudly I would speak forth, assuming that I had mastered the tongue, just like a native. But I would not be very impressive on the right side of the tracks. They would think me educationally deprived and, probably, mentally deficient because of my poor speech and because I did not understand theirs. This is akin to what happens to many of our inner city children when they come to school.

Typically we find these children lacking in the communication skills of reading and writing. Listening skills may be poor because they are strangers in a strange land, listening to a strange tongue. They are often reluctant to talk in school because they find themselves speaking in ways which are unintelligible to persons spoken to and because they may be ridiculed about their unorthodox speech habits.

To say that these children are non-verbal, however, is to lack perception. They are non-middle-class verbal. But outside the confines of the school, theirs is the speech which abounds with the rich imagery of the language of the streets. We have a definite obligation to these children, and it is our responsibility as educators to take these children at the level where we find them and go on with them from there. We must "accent the positive."

In one of his thoughtful books about such children, Frank Riessman emphasizes again and again that we must search for the hidden IQ's which are not revealed by tests based on middle class experiences and which are not evidenced by the characteristic performances of these children which are slow, deliberate, cautious, and more stimulated by provision for physical activity in response.²

These children need respect, friendship, and help. When they see that these are forthcoming, they will respond. Most of my teaching experience has been with such

2. Frank Riessman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

children and I have found that one finds among them the same normal variety of abilities. They have the same basic needs of all children, needs so well expressed by May Hill Arbuthnot:³

(1) The need for security, (2) the need to belong — to be part of a group, (3) the need to respect and be respected, (4) the need to achieve — to do something worthy, (5) the need to know, (6) the need for change — play, and (7) the need for aesthetic satisfaction.

A little while ago I said that this child may be positive in his attitude toward education and negative in his attitude toward school. Some of this negativism is encouraged by the blind, well intended, but insidious ways in which we discriminate against such children by assuming that they cannot learn and setting up for them inferior standards. Transitional techniques may be needed, but these should not necessitate a capitulation to their deficiencies. Don't use tests to tell whether the children are teachable; make the assumption that they are and push it to the limit — teach!

Books can certainly point the way, particularly in providing vicarious experiences for children who lack necessary first-hand contacts with certain settings and situations. What books? Basically the same books of any well-rounded children's collection, but perhaps in a different ratio, weighted in the direction of the existing problems of a particular situation, and always in the hands of a capable librarian who gauges at what level a book will best be used in her situation. The going may be slower, but progress can be made.

I assure you that I am realistic enough to realize that all children who lack the verbal aptitudes that are considered essential will *not* blossom forth overnight, in some miraculous way, as readers. Nor do I pretend to bring to you today a magic formula for instant education for children who fall in this category. We say these children are lacking in terms of certain middle class arbitrary rules and ideals. Maybe these rules and ideals are the best and maybe they are not, but they represent the present terms on which society accepts or rejects these children. If they are expected to achieve the desirable norm, they must be inspired to rise to and above the normal level of conformity. They cannot do this if motivated by lowered and adjusted standards.

In discussing these children many educators and sociologists point out the advantage of posting pictures and articles which illustrate that persons of the same racial and ethnic backgrounds are in the mainstream of national and international life, participating successfully. This has much to do with the attitudes of these children toward school. Their activities no longer seem futile when the possibility of occupational advancement appears as something possible. They take on new meaning and the children learn better.

Large groups of inner city children come to school with many deficiencies. We often decry this and question how many roles it is feasible for the school to accept without jeopardizing its basic responsibility. Some things it could not do if it wanted to. The school cannot supply money or better housing. It can make only feeble attempts at providing food or clothing — a few free lunches here or there or refurbished hand-me-downs. It cannot change significantly home conditions or adult attitudes. But one thing the school *can* do and has an *obligation* to do. That is to provide standards and to interpret these standards as being meaningful and possible of achievement.

3. May Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1957), pp. 3-11.

These children should not be motivated by lowered and adjusted standards. The school can and must promote the best in each child. And so, the "howness" rather than the "whatness" of library materials emerges as the dominant factor.

As has been pointed out in many studies, the academic downfall of these children often occurs because the school is not getting through the academic block that separates. When we *really* understand *how* these children learn and adapt our methods without compromising content, the true breakthrough will have been accomplished.

The present trend toward the functioning of the school library as a learning resource center, in which books *and* other instructional materials are used in a purposeful and functional program to undergird and extend the curriculum of the school may provide part of the key to this breakthrough. Let us constantly explore those possibilities inherent in a school library which functions as such a learning resource center.
