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SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED AMERICANS, SLOW LEARNERS.

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THIS PAPER DOCUMENTS THE GENERAL CONDITIONS OF DISADVANTAGED AMERICANS AND EXAMINES THE PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS WHICH GROW OUT OF THEM. SPECIFIC STATISTICS ARE REPORTED WHICH DESCRIBE INADEQUATE MEDICAL SERVICES FOR NEGROES, POOR HEALTH, POVERTY LEVEL INCOMES, AND EDUCATIONAL RETARDATION. THE PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL FACTORS DISCUSSED INCLUDE VISUAL PERCEPTION, INTELLIGENCE, WORD ATTACK SKILLS, READING AND ORAL LANGUAGE PATTERNS, AND EMOTIONAL STABILITY. THE PAPER CONCLUDES THAT DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS HAVE LESS GENERAL INFORMATION THAN ADVANTAGED CHILDREN AND THAT THERE IS A HIGHER INCIDENCE OF SEVERE VISUAL PERCEPTUAL DYSFUNCTIONS AMONG LOWER-CLASS GROUPS. MOST SIGNIFICANT, HOWEVER, IS THE TREMENDOUS NUMBER OF DISABLED LEARNERS AMONG LOWER-CLASS CHILDREN. AMONG THE REASONS WHY THESE PROBLEMS HAVE NOT YET BEEN SOLVED IS THE POSSIBILITY THAT EDUCATORS ARE RELUCTANT TO RECOGNIZE THE SLUM CHILD'S POTENTIAL ABILITY. ADDITIONALLY, EDUCATORS HAVE NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE METHODS AND MATERIALS NEEDED TO MAKE THE SLUM CHILD LEARN. (LB)

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SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED AMERICANS: SLOW LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

America's unique experience in this decade is the discovery of its own immorality. We find our sons systematically raping another man's land, murdering his people and subjugating most of the "free" world in a unique form of economic imperialism. More shocking than these atrocities thousands of miles from home is the American soldier who pumped over 30 bullets into a 15-year-old child, in Newark, New Jersey, last summer. He and his comrades under the command of the Governor of New Jersey, slew 22 American's most of whom were innocent bystanders to the Newark holocaust of 1967. (10) American violence both beyond and within its boundaries has jolted educated Americans into a new perspective of its own morality.

The sight of helmeted policemen with riot guns and rifles patrolling my own main street last summer was a rude awakening to most of my neighbors that something is wrong in America. Its invisible people dared to advertise their plight; white America reacted sharply and decisively. It defended its material tranquillity with violence, but its psyche had finally been reached.

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No American can erase the horrors of Vietnam, Newark, Detroit and over 30 cities with more still to come. The die is cast; America will either enfranchise disadvantaged people or find a "final solution." And it is the latter possibility that is causing many Americans to see themselves in a new perspective.

In some respects it is an exciting time to live, especially if one cares about human beings, human rights and particularly education. For education is the focal point of America's domestic poverty problem. Even when we speak of housing, employment and civil rights, educators seem to end up in the eye of the domestic hurricane, a predicament due less to education's potential and more to its vulnerability. In America the school is society's scapegoat. When the social system roofs, it spans the school. The disadvantaged condition of one out of four or five Americans is more directly the effect of not the school, but of an unjust social-economic system and of the perpetual problem of man's insensitivity toward his brother. Certainly the school is party to these causes, but the main thrust of these causes comes via the obstinacies of elected social leaders, churchmen, business tycoons, civil servants and particularly police who have been outrageously insensitive to American slum dwellers. Still, education becomes the proposed panacea, and in education we see the final results of a social system's subtle persecution of subcultures.

These results are tucked neatly into the label "educationally disadvantaged" which is our new term for "slow learner" in American urban schools. Let us first document the general conditions of disadvantaged Americans and then see the psychoeducational dimensions that grow out of these conditions.

SOME DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY IN AMERICA

The Civil Rights movement resulted from a United States Supreme Court decision in 1955 directing all schools to desegregate. This was supposed to be the beginning of a change. Thirteen years later more non white Americans are in racially segregated classrooms than there were in 1955. Over the same period national unemployment went down as national standard of living went up. But non white unemployment went up while non white standard of living went down. Meanwhile, over the past 20 years America has spent 57% of its budget (904 billion dollars) on war while only six percent of its budget (96 billion) has gone to social programs.

In 1930 twice as many pregnant Black women died in childbirth as pregnant White women. Thirty-four years later, that figure increased to three to one with Black women at the high end. In 1940 fourteen times as many Black mothers had their babies delivered by midwives as White mothers who were delivered by licensed medical doctors. Twenty years later that ratio jumped to 23-1.

In 1950, 66% more Black infants died than white infants. In 1964, non white infant mortality jumped to 90% higher than Caucasian. All of this is taking place while the American government has been waging its biggest war against poverty which suggests two obvious conclusions: First, the problem is out of hand. It is so bad that the haves are pulling farther and farther away from the have nots. Second, however big the war on poverty is, it is not big enough.

The fact is that in the richest land in the world, over 30 million Americans live in poverty. About 32 million more live in marked deprivation. Poor Americans do not starve to death Indian style. But they go to bed hungry every night. They are "fat with hunger," says one writer (9), for that is what cheap food does. Cheap food and unhealthy environments also account for 13% higher rate of chronic ailments among these people. In one Chicago slum populated by over 150,000 Americans, a 1962 study revealed that one out of five slum dwellers had been infected with TB germs; 30 cases of rat bite were on record but many more were never recorded; one out of four had marked visual dysfunctions, and over a third of the children had no legal fathers. (2) In 1963, 50% of men taking preinduction exams to military service failed because of physical or intellectual deficiencies. Over 80% of these were from lower socioeconomic groups. (15) In the 1960's over six out of ten Black families and almost three out of ten white families

had incomes below the poverty level set by the U.S. government. Seven percent of the White and almost 25% of non white families qualified at abject poverty levels. (12)

About 17% of total national family income in the United States is in the hands of only 5.4% of the population. Only 14.6% of the total national family income is owned by almost 37% of the population. One problem is that the social and economic deprivation suffered by these disadvantaged Americans gets worse as the conditions of middle class Americans improve. (6)

How does this disadvantaged condition look in school? Almost 10% of Americans are illiterate and most of these are non white, disadvantaged people. In one survey of a school subsystem of New York City that had about 21,000 children in 22 schools, 55% of the children were lower class Puerto Rican Americans, 19% were Blacks and 26% were White and Chinese Americans. (11) About 56% of the population lived in slum tenements while another 32% lived in low rent public housing facilities. Almost 92% of the Puerto Ricans, 82% of the Blacks and 46% of the Whites were already below grade level in reading in the third grade (about 8.5 years of age). By the sixth grade (12 years of age) 78% were retarded readers. This figure omitted non English speaking Puerto Ricans. The area we studied was not as deprived as the slums of Washington D.C., Harlem, or Bedford Stuyvesant in New York City, migrant farmworkers areas all over the country or slum schools in the south.

These are the disadvantaged Americans that the school is failing. Let us move from statistics to clinic and see their learning disability patterns.

PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL FACTORS IN DISADVANTAGED RETARDED READERS

Perception: In a study of six-year-old disadvantaged children, this author found ethnic differences in visual perceptual development among disadvantaged urban children. (4) Puerto Rican and Black children scored about a standard deviation lower in average perceptual development than White and Chinese children. Over 40% of the children were two or more years retarded in perceptual development. More shocking were clinical exams of a sample of these children which revealed severe perceptual dysfunctions specifically in visual-motor development, kinesthetic awareness of body parts, laterality, visual motility and functional binocularity. They displayed classic symptoms that neurologists have labeled "minimal organic," "minimal neurological dysfunction," "dyslexic," etc. This finding corroborated other findings by Knobloch, (14) Pasamanick (13) and Deutsch. (7) Some of these investigators using behavioral measurements explain the deficits as organic, resulting from poor diet ~~and~~ pre and post natally and intrauterine complications associated with lower class environmental conditions.

Etiology is not as important as our professions often like to think. Assuming the organic explanation of these perceptual dysfunctions were correct, SO WHAT: How is it that about 15-20% of middle class children we see manifest the same perceptual dysfunctions but read and write adequately? Could it be that we overestimate physiology and underestimate learning? Our conclusions are that minimal organicity is a factor only when an individual's environment delimits his potential to develop other skills. Organic or not, perceptual dysfunctions may be causal factors in learning disability only if the child does not have other skills, attitudes and perceptions to rely upon. We are teaching disadvantaged and advantaged children to read using known methods and materials that are not particularly dramatic, but are sequential and thorough, and we are not first retraining their visual perceptual skills. Only in extreme cases do we resort to perceptual-motor training.

On the Benton Visual Retention Test (1) disadvantaged children are not deficient according to the scoring manual, but their geometric drawings are crude, choppy and display poor closure at the angles. These problems would be considered part of the perceptual dysfunction syndrome. We find, however, that drawings around templates on the chalkboard and on drawing paper once per day improves the children's performances on the Benton in six weeks or less. But we are not sure what value this is in learning

to read and write. We have no evidence that this type of improvement carries over to scholastic achievement.

Intelligence: Socially disadvantaged children score low on group intelligence tests, which is not unexpected. Urban slum children score higher in non verbal than in verbal IQ on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). A number of children surprise us, however, with very high verbal and low non verbal scores in spite of all other symptoms of poor verbal development we usually see in the socially disadvantaged child. This finding is no different from the analysis of our clinical records of "advantaged," middle class retarded readers.

Disadvantaged children tend to earn lower Information and Vocabulary than Comprehension scores. This appears to be a persistent pattern differentiating socially disadvantaged from more advantaged children. In fact many middle and upper middle class children tend to have the very reverse pattern. It appears that children from the "wrong" side of the tracks lack information about the world perceived by middle class children. But they are more capable than middle class children in making their way in the practicalities of everyday life.

The Digit Span subtest may be higher or low depending upon anxiety level and concentration ability. Arithmetic subtest scores are low and seem to be more a result of poor school achievement

than anything else. What has surprised us at the Reading Center is the Similarities subtest which appears to tap verbal abstraction ability and concept formation. Some disadvantaged children score very low--this fits the stereotype of cultural deprivation. But a large number of cases with depressed total IQ's score above average on this subtest. According to Wechsler (16) this subtest is one of his weaker measures, but we are still unable to explain this phenomenon.

Our impressions of the WISC performance scatter show Block Design low but nothing else that might discriminate disadvantaged from more advantaged children with reading problems. It appears that the subtest scatter is more pronounced on the Verbal than on the Performance tests.

Word Attack Skills: Studies using the Diagnostic Test of Word Attack Skills (DTWAS) (5) have supplied us with abundant data for firm conclusions about word attack skills patterns in this population. DTWAS is a series of 10 short tests of various phonic skills.

Most Black and Puerto Rican children tested in various projects over the past three years are sight readers. They have never learned the relationship between grapheme and phoneme. Over 50% of junior high school pupils in one slum school district tested by this author did not know the alphabet. Most elementary school disadvantaged children cannot blend sounds..

Visual discrimination of letters is weak but better than scores on auditory discrimination of sounds in words tested on various levels of difficulty (matching, identification, reproduction). Beginning consonants are usually heard well enough, but ending consonants, beginning blends, ending blends and medial vowel sounds are almost always missed by these children on our tests of auditory discrimination. Ability to hear beats in words, however, is excellent when the children understand what is asked of them.

Visual memory of unknown words is lower than visual discrimination of known words, but this too is far below expectancy.

When we look at these patterns we cannot help concluding that these specific behavior deficits are what we usually find in most retarded readers, economically disadvantaged or not.

Reading Patterns: Oral reading scores are low, of course, but comprehension scores are high. Listening comprehension scores are significantly higher. Usually these scores are at grade placement indicating skills problems rather than problems of intellectual potential. This again is the usual pattern in retarded readers regardless of ethnicity or economic status.

Oral Language Patterns: Much has been said about oral language patterns of Black and Puerto Rican children. Most of it has no basis in fact. We have not found any difference in the incidence of speech impediments between middle class and lower class children. We have found differences in articulation and

dialect patterns. The studies show no difference in verbal productivity of middle class and lower class children except when the latter are requested to speak to adult authority figures. There is no evidence that dialect differences or mild articulation problems interfere with learning to read, except that the seven sounds most often misarticulated by American Negroes and most often poorly discriminated. (8) But the rest of the sounds do not follow this pattern . There is no evidence that oral language training in pre-K or K affects reading achievement. In fact everything we have seen indicates that Black and Puerto Rican children with heavy dialects and relatively poor articulation learn to read when they are taught without oral language development training.

Psycho Social Factors: Our own observations and studies do not show differences in emotional problems of retarded readers from middle class homes compared to lower class homes. The research in general does not indicate that a higher incidence of psychological problems exists in lower socioeconomic groups than in middle income groups. Certainly there are serious sociological differences. But nothing we have observed or measured indicates that lower class Black and Puerto Rican retarded readers are more or less emotionally disturbed than white middle class retarded readers. Furthermore, nothing we have observed or measured indicates that psychological or sociological problems are particularly difficult to overcome in the remedial process. The very basis of the clinical treatment and

the classroom curriculum is a therapeutic atmosphere, one in which the child feels safe enough to test new behaviors. Under these conditions, rare in most schools but necessary in all, most of these children learn to read and write adequately.

CONCLUSIONS:

As far as we can tell, two clinical factors seem to differentiate socially advantaged from disadvantaged retarded readers. One is the WISC finding of a higher Comprehension than Information score, suggesting the lower class child's maximal practical use of minimal information. The other is the higher incidence of severe visual perceptual dysfunctions in disadvantaged lower class children which appears to be a learning problem rather than an "organic" one. Except in severe cases, these perceptual dysfunctions have not precluded such children learning to read.

The major difference, then, between socially disadvantaged children and middle class children in America is the tremendous difference in the quantity of disabled learners. The conditions of disadvantage appear to breed not a different type of retarded learner than we have been used to, but a larger number of a very familiar breed. The two differentiating clinical factors and the problem of numbers do not present any unique impediment to solving the educational problem of disadvantaged underachievers, since we have been relatively successful in teaching retarded readers, for example, to read adequately. Why, then, haven't we solved the problem?

1. Americans have discovered their immorality, but most do not want to do anything about it. The elimination of poverty or the rise of non whites threatens too many power groups. This situation coincides with a unique form of international imperialism that keeps American energies concentrated on the Vietnams of the world rather than on the ghettos of its cities.

2. Educators are hiding behind glittering generalities about psychosocial causes rather than implementing 50 years of pedagogical know-how lying around the universities.

3. Most city school administrators will not even admit to themselves the enormity of the problem. They are too busy protecting their positions which are being threatened lately by non white community action groups. The fact is that most inner city slum children are severely retarded achievers. And most of America's inner cities are becoming slums.

4. Most educators do not believe that slum children are bright enough to learn to read well. These educators still cling to genotype theories of development and to the mystique of IQ. They still think that children with personal problems and weak family structures cannot learn to read and write adequately--an absurd conclusion to draw from innocent data.

5. Most attempts at compensatory education for socially disadvantaged retarded achievers consists of changes in quantity rather than quality. An extra hour of the same drudgery, or a smaller pupil teacher ratio with the teacher using the same old methods and materials will not make a difference.

7. The fact is that our projects from the university have been successful. In addition, as we go about the country, we see isolated schools or classrooms where socially disadvantaged children are learning to read and write adequately. These are the same types of children who are failing in other schools. The difference is the methods and materials and perhaps, the most important thing of all from which thorough teaching strategies evolve--the educator's attitude.

The summer riots will not cease and the pressures upon the schools will increase. Americans are plunging toward a moment of truth--very soon they will have to choose between gross immorality involving the violent suppression of part of its own people, or the commitment to putting its house properly in order. If it chooses the latter, educators currently in control of the schools will either act decisively, or they will be replaced by a cadre of young Turks who are already infiltrating the establishment.

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