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ABSTRACT

The author claims that the dignity and self-esteem of minority group children in particular are effectively destroyed in schools. Racial and ethnic prejudices create the vicious cycle of low expectations -- low achievement -- lower expectations. Abilities are further undermined by the emphasis in schools on verbal skills and reading as opposed to non-verbal skills. Ability tests, standardized with middle class white children and geared to their value system, are used to classify all children for the rest of their lives; however, most minority group members cannot do well because of the test's irrelevance or senselessness. Because these children's backgrounds and experiences are so diverse, standardized tests provide little help in achieving the goal of equal educational opportunity when used for grouping children. However, if they are used to develop recommendations for individualized instruction to provide experiences appropriate to the development of each child, they have value. Several examples of intelligent test items which are potentially unintelligible or likely to be misinterpreted, are cited. (KS)

TESTS AS A FORM OF REJECTION OF MINORITY GROUP CHILDREN

BY

ANITA GRIFFITHS

THE DESTRUCTION OF A CHILD'S DIGNITY AND SELF-ESTEEM IS A TERRIBLE ACT, BUT IT IS EFFECTIVELY CARRIED OUT DAILY IN OUR SCHOOLS. TEACHERS, COUNSELORS AND ADMINISTRATORS EFFICIENTLY STAMP OUT CREATIVITY, SPONTANEITY AND JOY OF LEARNING. NOWHERE IS THIS MORE STRIKING THAN IN OUR TEACHING OF MINORITY GROUP CHILDREN.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC PREJUDICES DO EXIST IN OUR SCHOOLS, AND THEY ARE THE CREATORS OF THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF LOW EXPECTATIONS - LOW ACHIEVEMENT - LOWER EXPECTATIONS. NOT ONE OF US CAN ACHIEVE OUR POTENTIAL BEST IN A CLIMATE OF CONTEMPT, AND CHILDREN WHO ARE DIFFERENT LIVE IN A STEADY FLOW OF SUBTLE OR NOT SO SUBTLE INSULTS. THE SCHOOL AND THE WORLD OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL REINFORCE EACH OTHER IN ESTABLISHING THE ATTITUDE THAT MINORITY CHILDREN ARE INFERIOR. THEY TEACH THAT THERE IS REALLY NO POINT IN TRYING FOR FAILURE IS EXPECTED. MOST OF US WOULD DROP OUT OF A CLIMATE WHICH CONSTANTLY HUMILIATED US, AND MANY OF THESE CHILDREN DO JUST THAT, AS SOON AS THEY CAN.

BLACK CHILDREN ARE NOT THE ONLY ONES WHO ARE HARMED BY PREJUDICE. IN THE SOUTHWESTERN PART OF THE UNITED STATE TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, SCHOOL BOARDS AND EVEN STATE LEGISLATORS SHOW THEIR CONTEMPT FOR MEXICAN - AMERICAN CHILDREN BY FORBIDDING THE USE OF SPANISH IN THE SCHOOLS. IN SOME SCHOOLS CHILDREN ARE FORCED TO KNEEL ON THE PLAYGROUND AND BEG FORGIVENESS IF CAUGHT CONVERSING IN SPANISH.

I CAN ONLY SPEAK FROM EXPERIENCE REGARDING THE UNITED STATES, BUT I HAVE HEARD THAT A DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF INDIAN CHILDREN DROP OUT OF SCHOOL HERE IN CANADA, AND THAT, LIKE THE REST OF US, CANADIANS HAVE THEIR GHETTOS OF HUNGARIANS, GREEKS AND ITALIANS. I AM TOLD THAT YOU, TOO, HAVE SCHOOLS WHICH VALUE VERBAL SKILLS OVER NON-VERBAL ONES, AND, OF COURSE, BEING VERBAL IN A LANGUAGE THE TEACHER

CANNOT UNDERSTAND DOES NOT COUNT! ALSO, WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT A CHILD WHO USES AND UNDERSTANDS THOUSANDS OF WORDS, BUT READS POORLY? MANY MINORITY GROUP CHILDREN ARE GIVEN CREDIT FOR "KNOWING" ONLY A FEW HUNDRED WORDS BECAUSE THEIR READING VOCABULARY IS POOR.

AS DESEGREGATION GATHERS MOMENTUM IN THE UNITED STATES, THOUSANDS OF BLACK CHILDREN ARE BEING TESTED WITH TESTS WHICH WERE STANDARDIZED WITH MIDDLE CLASS WHITE CHILDREN. THE RESULTS OF THESE TESTS ARE USED TO DETERMINE SUCH THINGS AS CLASS PLACEMENT, BUT THERE IS ANOTHER SUBTLE OUTCOME: THE TEST SCORES GO INTO THE CUMULATIVE FOLDER, AND SURELY, THE CUMULATIVE FOLDER SHALL FOLLOW YOU ALL THE DAYS OF YOUR LIFE. PSYCHOLOGISTS AND COUNSELORS AND EDUCATORS MAY WRITE LEARNED PAPERS BY THE TON ADMITTING THAT I. Q.'S ARE NOT STAMPED ON THE CHILD'S GENES AT THE TIME OF CONCEPTION, BUT LET US BE HONEST WITH OURSELVES AND ADMIT THAT WE HAVE ESTABLISHED A KIND OF SACRED AURA AROUND TEST SCORES WHICH PARENTS, TEACHERS, ADMISSION BOARDS, AND EVEN EMPLOYERS REGARD AS DEFINITIVE.

MANY ADAGES OR "FOLK SAYINGS" EXPRESS DEEP INSIGHT. OUR GRANDPARENTS KNEW WHAT THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT WHEN THEY SAID, "GIVE A DOG A BAD NAME AND HE'LL LIVE UP TO IT." WHEN WE CLASSIFY A BLACK CHILD AS A "SLOW LEARNER", OR AS "DULL NORMAL", OR AS "MENTALLY RETARDED" BECAUSE OF A WISC SCORE WE ARE OFTEN PRONOUNCING A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY. SURELY, EACH OF US CAN RECALL PEOPLE OR GROUPS OF PEOPLE WHO LOOKED AT US IN NEGATIVE WAYS, AND CAN REMEMBER OUR DEFENSIVENESS, OUR HOSTILITY, OUR "UNINTELLIGENT" RESULTANT BEHAVIOR, WHICH SIMPLY FULFILLED THE OTHER PERSON'S LOW OPINION OF OUR CHARACTER AND ABILITY.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE STORIES IS OF A TEACHER WHO WAS ISSUED AN ALPHABETIZED LIST OF THE NAMES OF THE CHILDREN IN HER NEW CLASS IN SEPTEMBER. OPPOSITE EACH NAME WAS AN I. Q. AT THE END OF THE TERM SHE COMPARED THE CHILDREN'S GRADE RANKINGS WITH THEIR I. Q. RANKINGS, AND WAS INTERESTED TO NOTE THAT THE I. Q.'S MATCHED GRADES, IN RANKING, ALMOST WITHOUT EXCEPTION. IMAGINE HER CHAGRIN WHEN SHE DISCOVERED THAT THE NUMBERS SHE HAD THOUGHT WERE I. Q.'S WERE ACTUALLY THE NUMBERS OF THE CHILDREN'S LOCKERS IN THE HALL!

AFTER YEARS OF COUNSELING AND TESTING CHILDREN FROM A VARIETY OF RACIAL BACKGROUNDS, I AM CONVINCED THAT BLACK CHILDREN ARE QUITE DIFFERENT FROM WHITE CHILDREN IN THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES. I DO NOT, HOWEVER, CONCEDE TO ANYONE THAT THEY ARE LESS OR MORE INTELLIGENT, WHATEVER THAT MAY MEAN. MOST PEOPLE WHO ADMINISTER TESTS KNOW THAT ALL INTELLIGENCE TESTS ARE, IN REALITY, ACHIEVEMENT TESTS. LET US GO A STEP FURTHER AND RECOGNIZE THAT THEY MEASURE AND PUT NUMERICAL SCORES UPON VALUE SYSTEMS. IS THERE ONE AMONG YOU WILLING TO SAY WITHOUT EQUIVOCATION THAT HE CAN SET UP A VALID VALUE SYSTEM FOR A MEMBER OF A MINORITY GROUP TO WHICH HE DOES NOT BELONG?

AN EXAMINATION OF CERTAIN ITEMS OF THE WISC AND THE STANFORD BINET WILL SERVE AS ILLUSTRATIONS. WHEN I ASK A BLACK CHILD IN A POLK COUNTY COMMUNITY WHAT HE WOULD DO IF HE WERE SENT TO THE STORE FOR BREAD AND THE STORE HAD NONE LEFT, HE ALMOST INVARIABLY ANSWERS THAT HE WOULD GO HOME. FOR THIS HE GETS A SCORE OF ZERO. BUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS TEST DID NOT CONTRIVE THIS QUESTION FOR A CHILD WHOSE PARENTS HAVE CREDIT AT ONLY ONE STORE. THIS ONE STORE CASHES THE WELFARE VOUCHER, EXTENDS JUDICIOUS CREDIT, EXPECTS TO BE PAID WHEN THE FATHER IS PICKING FRUIT, AND RECEIVES IN RETURN THE EXCLUSIVE PATRONAGE OF THE FAMILY. MR. ROGERS WHO HAS A GROCERY STORE IN A GHETTO AREA WOULD BE RIGHTEOUSLY INDIGNANT IF ONE OF HIS CUSTOMERS WENT TO ANOTHER STORE INSTEAD OF GOING HOME AND MIXING UP A BATCH OF CORNBREAD BECAUSE HE RAN OUT OF "LIGHT BREAD" ON SATURDAY EVENING. MR. ROGERS IS NOT A WEALTHY MAN, AND HE "CARRIES" MANY A CUSTOMER THAT HE KNOWS WILL NEVER PAY HIM; IN RETURN HE EXPECTS LOYALTY. WOULD YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE MARKING THIS CHILD'S ANSWER WRONG?

WHEN I ASK A TEN YEAR OLD BLACK BOY WHAT HE SHOULD DO IF A SMALLER BOY TRIED TO START A FIGHT WITH HIM, I OFTEN GET AN ANSWER SOMETHING LIKE THIS: "I'D BEAT HIM UP BUT NOT ENOUGH TO BREAK ANYTHING OR KILL HIM. I'D TEACH HIM NOT TO MESS WITH GUYS BIGGER'N HIM." IF YOU WERE FAMILIAR WITH THIS BOY'S BACKGROUND YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS A VERY-REALISTIC AND HUMANE ANSWER. INTELLIGENCE MUST INCORPORATE THE ABILITY TO SURVIVE IN ONE'S ENVIRONMENT. IF A SMALL BLACK BOY GOES

AROUND PICKING FIGHTS WITH LARGER ONES IN FLORIDA, HE IS LUCKY TO LEARN A LESSON FROM SOMEONE WHO IS INNATELY KIND ENOUGH NOT TO SEND HIM TO THE HOSPITAL EMERGENCY WARD. IF THE BIG BOY WALKS AWAY, THE NEXT ADVERSARY MAY NOT BE QUITE SO LENIENT.

WHEN A BLACK CHILD IS ASKED WHY THE GOVERNMENT GIVES EXAMINATIONS TO POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES, HE CERTAINLY DOESN'T EXPLAIN THE EVILS OF NEPOTISM AND GET A GOOD SCORE. HE USUALLY RESPONDS, "TO SEE IF YOU GOT THE DISEASE", OR, LESS ELEGANTLY, "THEY FIND OUT IF YOU GOT CRABS". EVERY BLACK PERSON WHO APPLIES FOR ANY JOB KNOWS WHY HE IS SENT TO THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT TO GIVE A BLOOD SAMPLE. A CAREFUL SCRUTINY OF THE REST OF THE COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS WILL REVEAL THE WHITE MAN'S CULTURE IN PRACTICALLY EVERY QUESTION. THIS IS THE TEST THAT WE SAY MEASURES "LOGICAL REASONING ABILITY".

LEAVING THE COMPREHENSION TEST, CONSIDER THE TEST OF INFORMATION, WHICH WE BLANDLY CONTEND MEASURES "RETENTION OF EVERYDAY TYPES OF INFORMATION". WHOSE "EVERYDAY" ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? WE ASK THESE CHILDREN WHO WROTE "ROMEO AND JULIET", WHEN THIS PIECE OF LITERATURE IS NOT EVEN IN THE CURRICULUM OF THE SCHOOLS THESE CHILDREN HAVE BEEN ATTENDING, AND SUCH INFORMATION IS NOT EXACTLY A COMMON TOPIC OF DISCUSSION AT THEIR FAMILY GATHERINGS. HOW CAN WE BELIEVE WE ARE MEASURING RETENTION OF INFORMATION WHEN THE INFORMATION HAS NOT BEEN RESENTED? PERHAPS YOU LEARNED THIS FROM BOUND VOLUMES IN THE FAMILY BOOKCASE. LET ME ASSURE YOU THAT NOT MANY BLACK FAMILIES IN THE SOUTH OWN A SET OF SHAKESPEARIAN PLAYS. HOW MANY OF YOU COULD ANSWER AN INTELLIGENCE TEST QUESTION SUCH AS, "WHAT WAS MALCOLM X'S LAST NAME?" I HAVE TRIED THIS QUESTION ON A NUMBER OF SO-CALLED UNINTELLIGENT BLACK CHILDREN, AND HAVE FOUND THAT THEIR "RETENTION OF EVERYDAY TYPES OF INFORMATION" IS QUITE GOOD. HOW IS YOURS? IF I ASK YOU WHAT WE CELEBRATE ON "JUNE TEENTH", CAN YOU TELL ME? AND WHEN IS WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY? BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, OF COURSE.

VOCABULARY IS ANOTHER AREA IN WHICH BLACK CHILDREN SHOW THEIR "INFERIORITY". IF A BLACK CHILD IS GIVEN THE WORD "FUR" TO DEFINE, AND SAYS IT MEANS "LIKE YOU GO A FUR PIECE UP THE ROAD", IS HE WRONG? IF I WERE TESTED ON MY PRONUNCIATION OF

"SCHEDULE" BY MY BRITISH FRIENDS, I WOULD MOST CERTAINLY BE TOLD THAT I PRONOUNCED THE WORD INCORRECTLY. BUT, ONE OF THE PURPOSES OF LANGUAGE IS TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR PEOPLE TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY, AND IF I INSISTED UPON GIVING THE WORDS "SCHEDULE" AND "LABORATORY" THE PRONUNCIATION FAVORED BY MY LONDON FRIENDS, I WOULD CAUSE BREAKS IN THE SMOOTHNESS OF THE RECEPTION OF MY MEANING AND THUS IMPEDE COMMUNICATION IN MY CIRCLES. BLACK CHILDREN MUST COMMUNICATE AS BEST THEY CAN, EVEN IF IT MEANS SOFTENING THE WORD "FAR" TO SOUND LIKE "FUF".

ANOTHER WORD IN THE VOCABULARY LIST WHICH MANY BLACK CHILDREN MISS IS THE WORD "SPADE". SOME SIMPLY REFUSE TO TRY TO DEFINE IT, FOR IT IS A DEROGATORY WORD FOR A BLACK MAN.

BLACK CHILDREN OFTEN DO POORLY ON THE OBJECT ASSEMBLY TEST. DOES THIS MEAN THEY ARE UNINTELLIGENT OR DOES IT MEAN THAT BLACK CULTURE HAS NEVER BEEN KNOWN FOR PURCHASING PLAYSCHOOL OR JUDY PUZZLES FOR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN OR FOR SITTING AROUND WORKING JIGSAW PUZZLES AS A PASTIME? IS PUZZLE WORKING A VITAL ASSET TO A CULTURE, OR IS THIS MERELY SOMETHING WHICH THE WHITE MAN HAS EDUCATED HIS CHILDREN TO ENJOY? I HAD AN INTERESTING EXPERIENCE WITH A GROUP OF BLACK BOYS WHO DO POOR ABSTRACT REASONING ON A MOTOR LEVEL AS MEASURED BY THE BLOCK DESIGN TEST. I LOCKED MY KEYS IN MY CAR ONE DAY, AND WAS TRYING TO DECIDE WHETHER IT WOULD BE CHEAPER TO BREAK A CAR WINDOW OR CALL A GARAGE FOR HELP. SOME OF THE BOYS NOTICED MY PLIGHT. WITHIN MINUTES THERE WAS A BOY ON EACH SIDE OF MY CAR WITH A STRAIGHTENED WIRE COAT HANGER, IN A CONTEST TO SEE WHO COULD OPEN MY CAR FIRST. THE WINNER TOOK EXACTLY 7 MINUTES TO INSERT THE WIRE WITH A SPECIAL KIND OF LOOP ON THE END AND PULL UP THE LOCK BUTTON ON MY CAR DOOR. I HAVE HAD SOME LAUGHS OVER THE WASTED TIME I HAVE SPENT LOCKING MY CAR WHEN A "DULL NORMAL" ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BOY COULD OPEN IT IN 7 MINUTES!

IF I APPEAR TO BE RIDICULING THE GREAT WORK OF THE GENIUSES WHO HAVE GIVEN US STANDARDIZED TESTS FOR TOOLS, I APOLOGIZE. BUT I AM MAKING A PLEA FOR THE CAREFUL SCRUTINY OF THE GOALS OF TESTING AND THE USE OF THESE SCORES. NONE OF US WOULD DO

WELL ON A TEST BASED ON WORDS AND VALUES WE DID NOT UNDERSTAND, YET THIS IS WHAT WE ARE FORCING UPON YOUNG CHILDREN. WHENEVER WE FIND POVERTY-STRICKEN, HOPELESS PEOPLE WE WILL FIND CHILDREN WHO HAVE LITTLE COMMUNICATION AND VERY LITTLE HERITAGE OF A REAL CULTURE OR TRADITION. THIS IS NOT LIMITED TO ANY ONE MINORITY GROUP. WE MUST NOT CONFUSE THIS PROBLEM WITH THE DIFFICULTY A BLACK CHILD HAS WHEN HE IS DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BECAUSE HE CANNOT DO WELL ON A TEST WHICH SEEMS IRRELEVANT OR SENSELESS TO HIM.

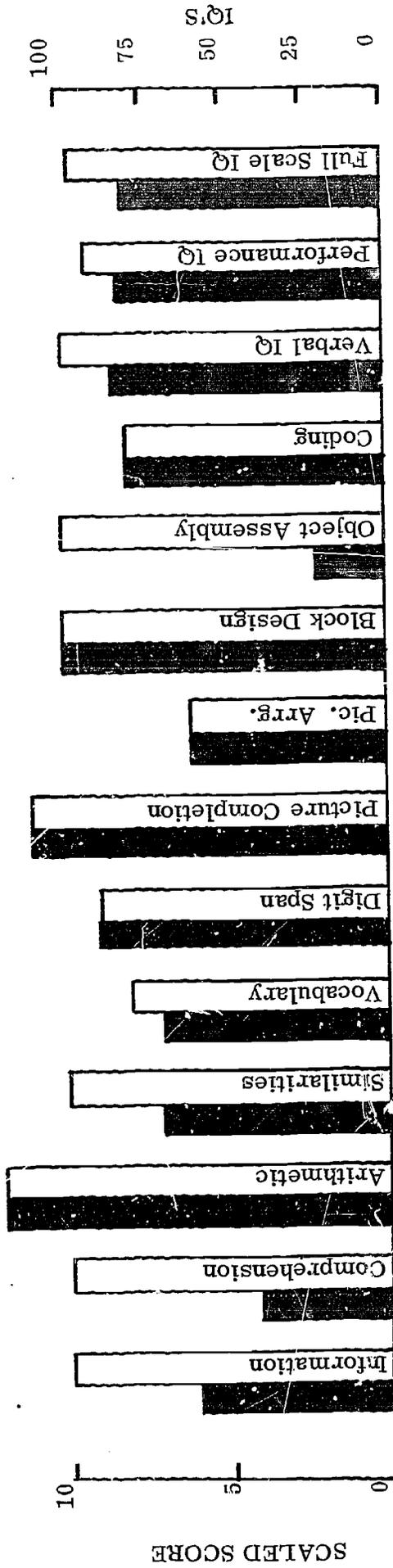
I HAVE PREPARED A CHART SHOWING, IN BLACK COLUMNS, THE SCORES ON A WISC MADE BY A NINE YEAR OLD BLACK BOY. THE WHITE COLUMNS BESIDE THE BLACK ONES SHOW THE SCORE THIS BOY WOULD HAVE MADE IF HE HAD GROWN UP IN A WHITE CULTURE WITH A SIMILAR ECONOMIC BACKGROUND. IN NO CASE DID HIS COLOR HELP HIM. THIS ALERT BOY WAS CLASSED AS DULL NORMAL BY HIS TEST SCORE, BUT HE WOULD HAVE BEEN AVERAGE IF HE HAD BEEN WHITE. THE WHITE COLUMNS ARE SUBJECTIVE, OF COURSE, FOR NO ONE CAN PREDICT SUCH THINGS PERFECTLY. HOWEVER, THEY ILLUSTRATE A PHENOMENON WHICH IS SEEN OVER AND OVER BY PEOPLE WHO TEST CHILDREN.

IT IS DEGRADING TO A NATION TO PLAY THE ETHNIC PREJUDICE GAME. ALL OUR CHILDREN GAMBLE WHEN THEY GO TO SCHOOL, BUT OUR MINORITY CHILDREN PLAY WITH A STACKED DECK. WE ALL KNOW A FEW WHO HAVE WON EVEN WITH THE ODDS AGAINST THEM, BUT THEY OFTEN LEAVE THE GAME WITH A BURNING ANGER AND HOSTILITY TOWARD THE SCHOOL. SOME SEARCH DILIGENTLY FOR WAYS TO STRIKE BACK.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO STAY IN THE GAME FOR A WHILE AND THEN DROP OUT? WE PERSUADE MANY OF THEM THAT LOSERS GET WHAT THEY DESERVE. IF YOU ARE WORTHLESS YOU DESERVE TO FAIL.

IN THE 1950'S OUR SCHOOLS STRESSED EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, AND STANDARDIZED TESTS WERE SUPPOSED TO HELP US ACHIEVE THIS GOAL. NOW WE KNOW THIS IS NOT ENOUGH. WHEN CHILDREN HAVE DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES, JUST OFFERING ALL OF THEM THE SAME OPPORTUNITY IS INADEQUATE. AND JUST GROUPING CHILDREN SO THAT EACH GROUP GETS THE SAME OPPORTUNITY WILL NOT SUFFICE, EITHER. WE MUST PROVIDE EXPERIENCES APPROPRIATE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF EACH CHILD.

EFFECT OF ETHNIC FACTORS ON WISC SCORES



CHILDREN NEED CERTAIN CONCEPTS AND SKILLS IF THEY ARE TO PROGRESS WELL IN SCHOOL. CHILDREN ARE NOT ALL EQUALLY WELL EQUIPPED WITH THESE TOOLS, ESPECIALLY IF THEIR HOMES ARE SEVERELY DEPRIVED. IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO USE STANDARDIZED TESTS TO GROUP CHILDREN.

WE MUST USE THEM TO DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION. AN ITEM ANALYSIS OF EACH TEST ITEM SHOULD BE MADE BY THE COUNSELOR, WITH EACH DEFICIT EXPLAINED SO THAT THE TEACHER CAN WORK OUT A SPECIFIC PLAN OF ACTION. WE NEED TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ANY RELEVANT EXPERIENCES A CHILD HAS HAD. A NINE YEAR OLD BLACK BOY WHO COULD NOT WORK A SINGLE PROBLEM IN THE STANDARDIZED ARITHMETIC TEST COULD FIGURE HIS WAGES FOR STACKING TOBACCO AT TWO BITS AN HOUR WITHOUT THE USE OF A PENCIL AND PAPER. WE NEED TO EXPLORE EACH CHILD'S STYLE OF LEARNING, WHICH IS AS INDIVIDUALIZED AS HIS LIFE STYLE.

I'D LIKE TO CLOSE WITH A POEM WHICH IS MEANINGFUL TO ME. IT IS BY COUNTEE CULLEN AND IS CALLED "INCIDENT".

ONCE RIDING IN OLD BALTIMORE
HEART-FILLED, HEAD-FILLED WITH GLEE
I SAW A BALTIMOREAN
KEEP LOOKING STRAIGHT AT ME.

NOW I WAS EIGHT AND VERY SMALL
AND HE WAS NO WHIT BIGGER
AND SO I SMILED, BUT HE POKED OUT
HIS TONGUE, AND CALLED ME, "NIGGER".

I SAW THE WHOLE OF BALTIMORE
FROM MAY UNTIL DECEMBER
OF ALL THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED THERE
THAT'S ALL THAT I REMEMBER.