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UNTAPPED RESOURCES OF NEGRO STUDENTS.

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WHAT NEGRO STUDENTS BRING, AS WELL AS WHAT THEY DO NOT BRING, TO THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE SHOULD BE OF CONCERN TO TEACHERS. INTONATION AND A NONSTANDARD VOCABULARY ARE TWO DEVICES WHICH ENABLE NEGROES TO MAKE SUBTLE LANGUAGE DISTINCTIONS WHICH TESTS DO NOT MEASURE OR SAMPLE. FURTHER LANGUAGE SUBTLETIES EXIST IN THE CONNOTATIONS OF MANY COMMON WORDS. THUS, NEGRO STUDENTS ARE CAPABLE OF MUCH GREATER SUBTLETY OF EXPRESSION THAN THEIR RELATIVELY SMALL NUMBER OF VOCABULARY WORDS IMPLIES. HAVING LEARNED EARLY TO WATCH EVERY GESTURE, EXPRESSION, AND POSTURE OF CAUCASIANS, THE NEGRO ACQUIRES AN ABILITY ESSENTIAL IN DRAMA, BOTH IN DETERMINING MEANING AND IN ACTING. HAVING LEARNED, ALSO, TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN REALITY AND WHAT IS SAID ABOUT DEMOCRACY, THE NEGRO DEVELOPS A FINE SENSE OF IRONY AND A DEEP SKEPTICISM WHICH CAN BE UTILIZED AS INVALUABLE CRITICAL TOOLS. EXPECTING NEGRO STUDENTS TO HAVE HAD SOCIAL EXPERIENCES ESSENTIAL TO INTERPRETING GIVEN LITERARY WORKS, TEACHERS TEND TO ASSUME POVERTY OF INTELLIGENCE IF THESE EXPERIENCES ARE LACKING, INSTEAD OF SUBSTITUTING BOOKS WHICH REQUIRE DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES. BECAUSE MOST NEGRO STUDENTS VIEW EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF ENTERING THE MAINSTREAM OF AMERICAN LIFE, THEY EAGERLY READ NOVELS AND PLAYS WHICH PRESENT THE AMERICAN SCENE FAIRLY AND CLEARLY. IN ADDITION, THERE IS AN INCREASINGLY AVAILABLE SUPPLY OF LITERATURE OF THE AFRICAN THEATER, IN WHICH NEGRO STUDENTS FIND SATISFACTION AND ABOUT WHICH ENGLISH TEACHERS HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO INFORM THEMSELVES AS PART OF THEIR RESPONSIBILITY IN INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO THE WORLD OF BOOKS. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "NEGRO AMERICAN LITERATURE FORUM," VOL. 1 (WINTER 1967), 15-17.) (RD)

UNTAPPED RESOURCES OF NEGRO STUDENTS*

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Any person who discusses racial problems today should guard his statements carefully. As preface, therefore, I must warn you that I do not present dramatic potentials, and that my statements lack the support of the statistical data so dear to American educators. Discrimination and deprivation, whether experienced by one or another group, are unlikely to produce striking genius characteristics, although there are, among young Negroes, individuals who are potential geniuses, just as there are those low on the intellectual scale. What I would discuss here, however, are certain characteristics, potentially useful, frequently hidden, resulting from the peculiar situations in which this particular minority has developed. My suggestions come from ten years of teaching pre-freshmen and college students, and from many discussions with both Negro and white instructors of those young people.

During the past fifty years of mental and educational testing, we have heard from both Negro educators and sympathetic Caucasians that standard tests are unfair to Negro youth, and that schools and tests fail to utilize the Negro culture. Since the Civil Rights Act and attempts at school integration, much has been made of what Negroes lack, and of the inabilities resulting from early and continued cultural deprivation. In both approaches the literature has dealt almost exclusively with what is missing, and most writers have attempted to excuse and then to suggest compensatory experience. I would be the last to minimize deprivations or to thwart any efforts to compensate. We are sufficiently rich in this country that we should guarantee a stimulating childhood to all children. But I find it difficult to believe that the only difference between

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the students I meet and those from more favored environments is a simple minus. Negroes in this country have not only survived, but step by step have gained in strength and self-reliance, until today they are able to protest actively and demand intellectual advantages. This could only have come about if there had been within the group something positive in the way of survival techniques, and a strong sense of solidarity. I think it obvious that we must assume, therefore, certain assets as well as deficiencies, and that we could well use some of these assets in our society. I am not suggesting any continuation of separateness but asking that we look again at our students to see what they bring as well as what they fail to offer.

The question is complicated by the fact that majority and minority cultures are not distinct. Common industrial concerns, domestic service, radio, television, shop windows, textbooks, and hundreds of other forces have given the minority group much understanding of the white culture (good and bad) and a predominant acceptance of a common way of living. But the forced cohesion of the Negro society has certainly resulted in qualities peculiar to that group, and understandings, skills, and attitudes which the school should both recognize and utilize.

A concern much discussed in today's educational literature, and one emphasized by scores which Negro students make on a variety of tests, is the matter of vocabulary and writing. These scores are low in general, though of course some Negro students do as well as any white peers. We tend to assume that the scores indicate a failure to sense the full role of communication, and a lack of that intellectual drive, ordinarily associated with superior vocabulary and reading success.

Psychologists generally agree that a factor in general intelligence, not always clearly defined, has to do with the urge of the individual to know, to organize experience, and to make meaningful adjustment to the scene in which he finds himself. Because language is an important element in this behavior, available to all, vocabulary size has been used as a measure of success and hence of intelligence; and since our education is largely conveyed through language, success in school work has also tended to correlate with extent of vocabulary. It should be noted, however, that this measure is accepted on the assumption that language opportunities are approximately equal for all. In the event of fewer words in the environment, the measure loses its validity as a test of drive or communication power. Shakespeare, for example, used in all his plays fewer words than you in this audience would show on a vocabulary test. We would, however, not question his mental powers or his skill with language. English of 1600 had far fewer words than it has today. Skill in the use of words distinguishes the bard.

We have as yet no objective measure of this skill in using words; our measures are quantitative, and somewhat crudely quantitative at that. (We measure gross number of words understood, for example; but not the number of uses for any given set of words). What I am getting at is that an untested ability is the ability to use words to convey feeling and thinking rather than the number of words used in that conveyance. This may be accomplished in many ways. For example, I know an individual who uses <u>good</u> much as I do; but her <u>GOOD-good</u> means something beyond good. Most of us would say <u>He is busy</u>, meaning that someone is working now. <u>He is a busy</u> man implies something more continued. A student working for me last year made the distinction by saying

He busy for the instructor in conference and He be busy for someone working steadily (employed and hence unlikely to take a new assignment).

At least two devices which we do not know how to measure enable Negroes to make subtle distinctions: intonation, and a non-standard vocabulary which our tests do not sample. There are also subtle differences in the connotations of many common words. Obviously, as devices for managing conventional school work, these are not adequate means; but they have validity as language skills and as evidence of understanding the role of language. We begin with students therefore, with the assumption that they know about communication, and that the problem is to translate experience into a new form. Being mute in the classroom does not indicate either failure to understand what language can do nor lack of something to say. I am not asking that you have your students write in their vernacular, though that often serves an important function if you can get them to do it; but I am asking that you utilize their basic understanding of the fact that, though there is always a gap between experience and its verbalization, subtle distinctions can be made through language. This your students do understand; this their experience has taught them.

May I suggest use of these learnings and skills? At Dillard University we attempt to do two things with the language our student brings. We first accept this as a legitimate attainment, but through our courses in writing, our speech laboratory, and our work in drama lead the young person to use both his sub-group dialect and standard forms. A recent drama written by one of our graduates, however, used chiefly the substandard language. The delight in our students, when they heard this language in a highly stylized performance, was enormous. A recent dramatic reading by Freshmen introduced speakers who used the most formal English (words of such stylists as Jefferson) along with

the language of ignorant persons, both Negro and white. Again we had enthusiastic response.

Intelligent reading of good literature is, as we all know, a complicated matter. Dictionary definitions of words and footnote references do not add up to understanding. The reader brings to the page his whole experience with life. A legitimate reading pleasure is recognition, with a related satisfaction when the author adds new dimensions to what has been experienced at first hand. We are aware of this when we scale literature in the elementary and high school years, saying that "they can't understand this yet," although the language itself may be sufficiently simple. Thus, although on a vocabulary scale Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn may be identical (as they are), on a social understanding scale they are at a distance. I recall a New York City class struggling helplessly with a relatively simple poem by Sandburg, "The Prairie." They found no feeling, no meaning in the poem. A childhood in Kansas, however, meant for me a quick recognition of the colors, sounds, and other sensations in the poem. For those New York students, Sandburg said to me, the attempt was "pure waste." In teaching, we middle class teachers tend to expect students to have certain social experiences essential to interpretation of the text. If these experiences are lacking, we assume poverty of intelligence and do not try out on our student books which assume or require a different set of life situations. One illustration may serve. Negro students will understand more readily what is being said in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man than will a comparable group of white students. The book is "easier" for the Negroes.

I might further elaborate this matter of personal background. Negro young people have seen a particular part of the world intimately and the rest

from a different angle. For the most, they have hoped for a changing society, one in which they might have recognition. This must be true for those high school and college students who have made progress through public schools. Their intended struggle for success differs from that of the Caucasian classmate. Arrowsmith, for example, deals with struggles and ideals within a professional group. The white student sees this from Arrowsmith's point of view. But the young Negro scientist sees the whole scientific community as something his effort it will be to enter. This difficulty he can sense with sympathy. Thus he can read Dostoevsky, Chekov, or Dickens with superior sensitivity. I find freshmen eagerly discussing these writers, while they often have difficulty with what most of us would consider less advanced reading.

A device which has enabled the Negro to survive has been his skill in watching his white associate closely and noting every indication of the latter's attitude. Thus almost from infancy the Negro learns to watch every gesture, the expression of mouth and eye, and the posture of the white with whom or for whom he works. Here is an ability invaluable in the field of drama, both in finding meaning and in acting itself. One example may serve. Some months ago I taught Chekhov's The Three Sisters to a class of freshman. As we discussed the outcome, I asked for discussion of the development of Natasha. Every member of the class knew that, when she first came into the household of the sisters, the latter had laughed at Natasha's bright sash. Repeatedly I have found this kind of awareness of detail a particular skill of the young Negro student. Our instructor in prefreshman dramatics has found that as soon as students begin to talk about how a given character should act, students become eager to discuss.

Although young Negroes, along with young white students often think of education as a means to vocational goals, Negroes have a tradition of using education for its own sake since until recently many a college graduate found himself working as a train porter or doing some similarly undemanding work. Today I believe most of our Negro students look upon education as a means for entering the main stream of American life. For that reason, they read with considerable eagerness those novels and plays which present fairly and clearly the American scene as it has developed. In our prefreshman program at Dillard we frequently meet students who have seldom if ever read an unassigned book, but who avidly explore the world of literature when given freedom. One of the most common questions I meet is wonder at the reason behind the white rejection of the Negro: Why do they fear integration? Why do they dislike or scorn us? Faulkner, with his confused whites, offers a good basis for discussion. Sometimes, if frankly presented, the simplicity of the old regime, where everyone "knew his place" makes for clarity. This may be achieved with such a book as Greene's Loving, where the reader may look at a class-structured society other than his own.

This urge to understand his growing world includes an interest in the Negro as a participant in American history (chiefly found in biographies), and in Africa, present and past. While I believe the majority of young Negroes do not think of themselves as other than Americans, they know that their ancestry was African. Curiosity about the peoples of that continent must consequently be strong and natural. There is a vigorous African theatre in which they find satisfaction and an increasingly available supply of fiction. As teachers we have an obligation to know this literature unless we think of ourselves as mere historians of the British-American tradition. If we consider

ourselves as having assumed responsibility for introducing the student to the world of books, there is work to be done in educating ourselves.

I might digress to say that, except for the student who has a strong urge for professional materials, offering the stream of British-American literature as "heritage" is likely to appear as absurd to the Negro student. I must confess also that save for some not too obvious language elements, Beowulf probably seems pretty remote to most students of Continental European extraction, and that they are likely to find much more that they recognize as their own in Greek, Roman, and Hebrew literature.

A literary skill of no mean quality is irony. It should be obvious that any group which for a hundred years has needed to distinguish between reality and what has been said about democracy, which has heard and memorized the words about equality--that such a group would understand irony without much teaching. A minority that has developed the expression "Mr. Charley" has an excellent illustration at hand.

Although he is often reluctant to express his feeling and to question, the Negro student brings to your class a deep questioning of what he reads. His tendency, a defensive skill, is to appear to accept what you say and what the author says. The contrast between textbook piety and out-of-school reality, however, has established a deep skepticism. This is invaluable if you can somehow discover and use this critical attitude.

Those who work with Negro young people have a strong sense of their strength as well as their needs. I have limited myself to those attributes which relate directly to our field of language. I have not talked about the urge to expression, the demand to be and to sense one's place in history and the present world, the common human desires for love, for light, color, and

all that makes life good. As you have probably decided, I am not discussing any great or dramatic abilities which the Negro student brings to your class. I am trying to say, however, that he has more ability, despite his lacks, and that he is a far more interesting person than our present educational literature may suggest. Our measurements are in terms of the purely objective elements in our present educational program--a not too stimulating affair at its best. In our teaching we consider the student as "understanding" if he understands the things we have had in our own experience, often ignoring other large areas of human life, perhaps closed to us, but within the first hand knowledge of others. It seems to me that we have overlooked much that is important through our concentration on society as it is and our curriculum as it has been. We talk at considerable length about this country as a melting pot, but too often seem to think that after the melting the mixture will show no effect of many of the ingredients. But after mixing there should be change. There is no reason why we should not enlarge the scope of both our tests and our teaching materials. We just might find ourselves with a far richer and far more interesting product.