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SPRINGBOARDS, TEXTS THE STUDENTS STEAL.
BY- HARRIS, CHARLES

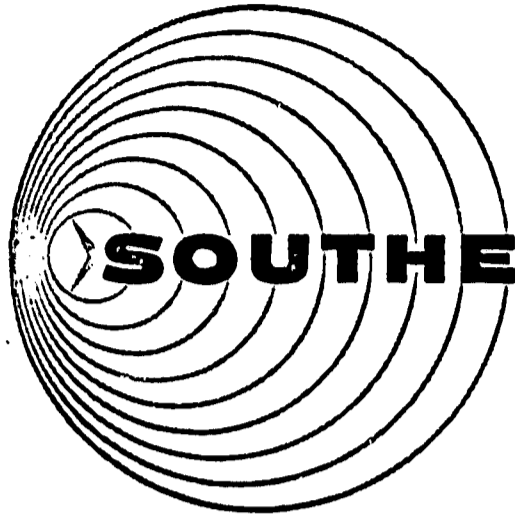
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ON THE PREMISE THAT GHETTO YOUTH ARE NONREADERS MAINLY BECAUSE MOST READING MATERIALS ARE UNINSPIRED, MIDDLE-CLASS, AND ANTISEPTIC, THE SPRINGBOARDS READING PROGRAM WAS DEVELOPED. PRESENTLY IMPLEMENTED IN HARLEM (NEW YORK CITY) "STREET ACADEMIES," THE PROGRAM UTILIZES A SERIES OF FOUR-PAGE BOOKLETS DESIGNED TO INTEREST DISADVANTAGED MALE DROPOUTS AND MOTIVATE THEM TO READ. THE VOCABULARY IS AT THE FOURTH- TO SIXTH-GRADE LEVEL. THE YOUTHS' SUGGESTIONS ARE USED IN CHOOSING READING TOPICS OF MAXIMUM INTEREST. AMONG THE TYPES OF STORIES MOST IN DEMAND ARE THOSE ABOUT JOB SITUATIONS, URBAN PROBLEMS, SPORTS, AND NEGRO LEADERS AND OTHER SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE. ACADEMIC SUBJECT MATTER IS INTEGRALLY WOVEN INTO THESE STORIES. IN A CONTROLLED CLASSROOM EXPERIMENT STUDENTS USING THIS MATERIAL SHOWED SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN READING. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 6, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1968. (DK)

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a magazine for decision-makers

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SPRINGBOARDS

Texts the Students Steal

BY CHARLES HARRIS

“THE PEOPLE DOWNTOWN don't want to publish anything about anybody unless he's willing to agree with the game that 'the man' wants to run down.”

A dozen other Negro boys stared at me to see how I would take this indictment of my profession, publishing. They were all school dropouts who had become “drop-ins” in one of the storefront schools called the Urban League Street Academy on 114th Street in Harlem. I had taken the A-train to Harlem to teach a class with our new *Springboards* because, like other publishers, we had come to realize that our audience—sensitive, nonreading, sometimes delinquent, usually alienated, urban, ghetto-bound adolescents and young adults—could teach us what we had to know before we could give them something to learn.

In a limited way, we knew this from the start of the *Springboards* Reading Program just four years ago. The four-page, letter-size *Springboards* were based on the premise that nonreaders were not reading mainly because they were not interested in the uninspired,


Charles Harris is vice president of Portal Press, a subsidiary of John Wiley & Sons. A graduate of Virginia State College in Petersburg, Va., he joined Doubleday & Company to become a pioneer Negro editor in book publishing. He began work with Wiley in 1965 and helped launch Springboards.

middle-class, antiseptic content found in most instructional materials. “Give them what they want,” said the developers of the program, all of us products of the various American ghettos and cultures—New York's lower East Side, Southern Negro, First Generation Irish-American—“and they'll be reading before you can say dropout.”

The only thing wrong with our idea is that, young as we all were, we were out-of-date. Despite our mostly poor childhoods, most of us had all grown up in an America where a hard-working, purposeful youngster could counteract everything with ambition. Obviously, a great deal of motivation was gained from the slogan “America is the Land of Opportunity.”

Today's young people are living proof that the legend has to be readjusted. Those 13 students in the Urban League Street Academy were helping wash my brain of some of the put-on they had had enough of. They had gone to public schools and it hadn't worked. They had gone out on the street and that hadn't worked either. Nobody wanted to hire them because they didn't know anything and they couldn't do anything.

It was for them that the New York Urban League, with the help of the Ford Foundation and the Neighborhood Youth Corps, had set up the six Street Academies in storefronts in Harlem. All applicants are accepted if there is space available. Most of the students



are boys, 16 to 18 years old; all of them are school dropouts. Each academy is supervised by a project director, who is a former student of the Urban League Street Academy.

According to Dean Boardman, director of experimental education for the New York Urban League and director of academy activities, the professional teachers work for the project director, not the other way around. Discipline is handled by the project director in a very flexible classroom situation. Everybody must listen when somebody else is talking. This rule is strictly enforced by the students.

Everyone enrolled works a few hours a day and is paid an hourly minimum wage. To earn it, the students take care of the cleaning, painting, putting out a school newspaper, or any other job which is defined by the project director, with the approval of the Urban League.

The fact that these dropouts can and do learn is what made me want to see what was happening in the Street Academy that hadn't happened in the traditional schools. The answer is awfully easy to say—"They're interested"—and awfully hard to convert into publishing practice.

The first thing we did in class that morning was take turns reading our *Springboards* about Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became a 19th-century leader of Afro-Americans. It was clear that the fourth-

to sixth-grade vocabulary of the *Springboards* was no handicap to these students who had been labeled "nonreaders." When they did not understand words, they guessed at the meaning and usually guessed right. The story carried them along and led to a lively discussion afterwards, which is the whole point of the *Springboards*. John Locke said it in a much loftier way: "Reading furnishes the mind only with materials for knowledge; it is thinking makes what we read ours." Finding out what these kids want to think about was what I was there to learn.

And it was while we were talking about what they wanted to read that the comment at the opening of this article was made. Someone had suggested that we do a *Springboard* on Malcolm X but the class was pretty sure "the man downtown" wouldn't consider publishing about a man who defies the white community. (The kids are wrong; we're going to do one on Malcolm X.)

They also told me that they wanted to read about rent strikes and boycotts and getting a job. They like the *Springboards* about people who had "made it" or seemed straightforward and honest—Presidents like Kennedy and Truman, sports heroes, Negro leaders, musicians. But they wanted it "straight," with none of the Washington-and-the-cherry-tree stuff.

We have stumbled on a way to tell a straight story about something these kids are interested in—sports—

SPRINGBOARDS

DRIVING FOR SPEED



The Bonneville Salt Flats

There is a stretch of land in the United States that is unlike any other spot on earth. When you're there, you expect a man from outer space to pop up at any moment. Unusual men do come here, fearless men, men who want to become speed kings of the world.

This land is a speedland. It's located in the northwest corner of Utah, about twelve miles to the east of the Nevada border. There is no speed limit here. A large sign announces it:

THIS IS THE WORLD'S FASTEST RACING COURSE
BONNEVILLE SALT FLATS
NO MAXIMUM SPEED LIMITS

You dare not enter without protection because you might get lost. Many years ago, a pioneer explorer

entered these flats on his way to California. The men lost their equipment, their animals, and their lives.

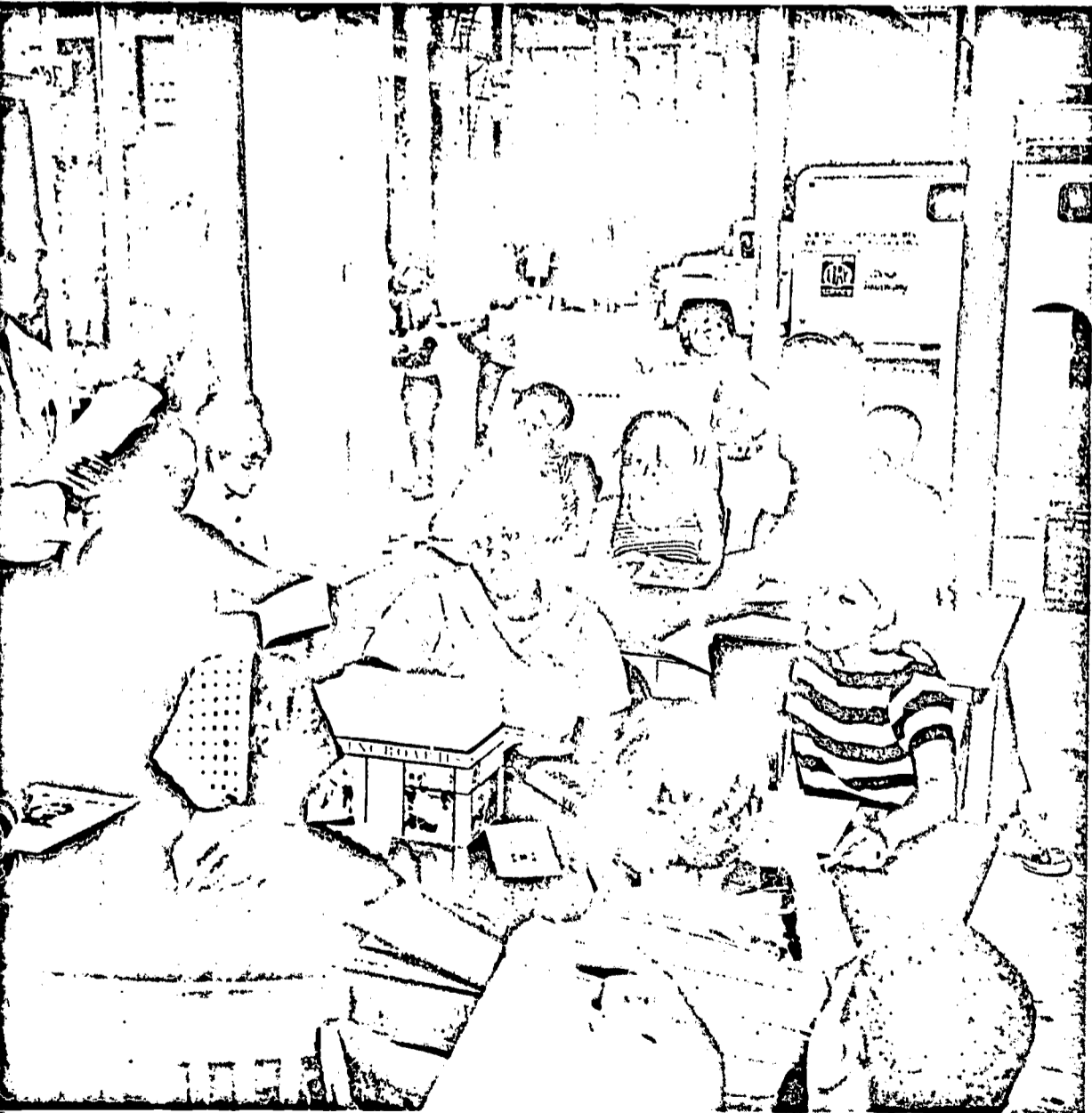
Bonneville is a scary place. You look out on a stretch of emptiness, and you feel extremely alone, as if you had just landed on the moon. You stand on a floor of hard salt.

This land is surrounded by mountains. For thousands of years, rain and snow have beaten against these mountains and dissolved the salts in them. Water runs down the mountainside and spills into the flat land below. Having nowhere to run off, it lies on the ground, so water down in the bottom of a stepped-up hillside. The hot summer heats down on the water and evaporates it, leaving the salt. Tens of thousands of years of this process have produced a solid surface of salt. It is so hard that trying to break through it costs an ordinary shovel or pick.

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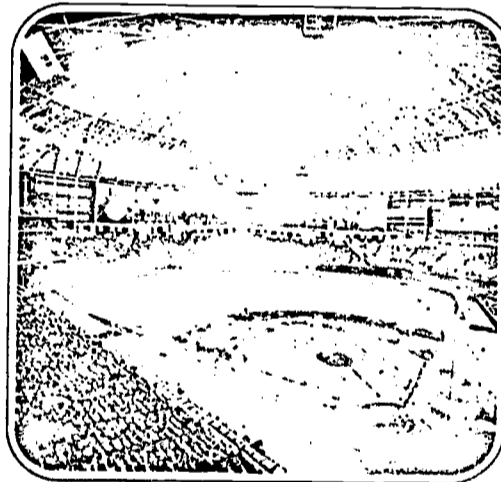
and still teach them something. Phil Gilman, a science teacher in Cleveland's East High, concluded that present materials were not "grabbing" most of his students, even though the wonders of science—heat, light, electricity, TV, radio, detergents, ice cubes, weather forecasts, record players, movies—were part of their lives. So he approached Hal Lebovitz, sports editor of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, who had once been a high-school chemistry teacher. For more than a year, they worked together and developed what is now the *Springboards Science* series.

One of the series is about Craig Breedlove, who broke the world's car-racing record on the Bonneville Salt Flats. While the student is reading about the record-shattering 600-m.p.h. ride, he's learning about jet propulsion, streamlining, friction, combustion, reflection, refraction, crystallization, the photoelectric cell, inertia and its relationship to seat belts, plus other scientific principles made fascinating through the thrilling sports story. Practical joker Casey Stengel's grapefruit gag supplies the background for a study of gravity and acceleration. Gertrude Ederle's feat becomes a chapter on buoyancy. The use of fake grass in the Houston Astrodome affords a practical approach to the phenomenon of photosynthesis. As Gilman puts it, "The student becomes so involved in



SPRINGBOARDS

BASEBALL GOES INDOORS



In the Astrodome

"The batter, Willie Mays." A hush falls over the crowd as the announcement comes over the loud speakers. Willie steps into the batter's box in the eighth inning. It is April 24, 1966.

Mays, the San Francisco Giants' star, ties in with his spikes. Jim Owens, pitcher for the Houston Astros, winds up. He pitches. Willie swings. *Crack!* The ball is going, going, gone. It goes 420 feet, landing deep in the left center field stands.

Even though the game is being played in Houston,

Texas, the crowd goes wild over the San Francisco team's homer. The \$2,000,000 scoreboard lights up spectacularly. Sounds of exploding firecrackers come through the boxes.

This was an unforgettable moment in baseball history. Mays had just hit the 311th home run, tying an all-time National League record.

"Willie," said Giants' manager Herman Franks proudly as he shook the slugger's hand. "you're amazing."

Just as amazing as Mays was the fact that the game could be played at all. It was raining hard. A strong wind was blowing. Yet so Willie trotted

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the story that the science sneaks up on him."

We knew another thing that kids are interested in—money—and so we bought some help for them. We went down to a Lower East Side ghetto neighborhood in New York and offered \$5 to any student who would tell us what's wrong with *Springboards*, what's right about them, and what else they wanted to read about. We found a surprising interest in philosophy, with the youngsters wanting to discuss such subjects as courage. We found they do want to read history, but not dates and battles; they want stories about the people and situations. The same is true in science—concentrate on the people and how they overcame odds to make their discoveries.

Since what the youngsters are telling us as we continue to use them as our major advisors is fairly obvious, perhaps we could have arrived at our content without moving out of the publishing house, but I doubt it. Our present plans even include a contest among disadvantaged urban students to write some of our *Springboards*.

The proof of the pudding, of course, is whether the material works. In a controlled experiment with tenth-graders reading below seventh-grade level in Cleveland, we found that students using *Springboards*

showed startling improvement. Eighty per cent of the experimental classes got passing marks in their regular English classes (which had not changed in any way) while only 40 per cent of the control classes passed. The thing we liked best about the experiment with these students, many of whom were reading only at the fourth-grade level when they started, was that they stole the *Springboards*! Fortunately, the inexpensiveness of the four-page "texts" can encourage this sort of academic theft.

It is really no surprise that this kind of reading material which faces into the reality of today's young, urban world is being used in Boston, New York, Washington, Richmond, Chicago, Los Angeles and other big cities. We are surprised at their use in suburban communities and in small towns. According to letters we get, teachers and students in those nonurban places are looking for reality, too.

Meanwhile, as publishers, we have found that for the adolescent nonreader, our best source of information is not to be found in the universities or among our editors but in places like the Urban League Street Academy. And it is quite possible that the lessons we are learning from those disadvantaged youngsters will help improve the instructional materials being written for the rest of young America.

TO THE EDITOR

Methodist Colleges

The article "Negro Colleges Have A Job" in the November issue of *SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT*, contains the statement:

In the case of The Methodist Church, which operates 10 colleges in the region, the institute would note that three of the colleges are unaccredited and all enroll fewer than 1,000 students.

Twelve institutions of collegiate level, situated within the states served by the Southern Regional Education Board, and predominantly Negro in enrollment, are related to The Methodist Church. Ten of them are senior colleges, one is a junior college, and one is Meharry Medical College. Two of the senior colleges, Dillard University and Huston-Tillotson College are sponsored jointly by The Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ, while Paine College is jointly sponsored by The Methodist Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

Only one of these 12 institutions is unaccredited, Rust College.

It is always hazardous to guess the source of information, but I have a strong feeling that the quoted statement is based upon material that appears in Appendix A of the McGrath Report, *The Predominantly Negro Colleges and Universities in Transition*. That lists 10 colleges as "Methodist," three of which are unaccredited, and all of which had enrollments under 1,000 at the time.

The McGrath list includes Lomax-Hannon College in Greenville, Alabama

and Clinton College in Rock Hill, South Carolina, both of which are unaccredited, as Methodist. Neither one is affiliated with The Methodist Church. They are under the auspices of The African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion. Incidentally, McGrath lists Paine College as sponsored by The Methodist Church and The African Methodist Episcopal Church. It is sponsored by The Methodist Church and The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

The enrollment statistics used in the McGrath Report were for the year 1963-64 and are now four years out-of-date. The above is not to suggest that we are quarrelling with the suggestion that there is room for improvement. Indeed, we are currently engaged in conversations that may lead to mergers, consortia, or other combined efforts.

RALPH W. DECKLE,
Director, Department of Educational
Institutions, Division of Higher
Education, Board of Education
The Methodist Church
Nashville, Tenn.

'It's Depressing . . .'

. . . It's depressing that even a relatively low-key statement of the facts about these [Negro] colleges [*Harvard Educational Review*, Winter, 1967] evokes such anger from the Negro community.

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