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Developing the Language of Young Disadvantaged Children.

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A modified approach to the development of verbal expression in young children is proposed as an alternative to either the prescriptive-instructional method or the developmental viewpoint which relies on self-initiated learning. The Bereiter-Engelmann method, the method based on operant conditioning, and the Montessori method are representative of the prescriptive-instructional theory which it is felt to inhibit expressive language. The developmental philosophy stresses a rich environment providing many varied opportunities from which a child selects his own activities. This method, however, does not stimulate his verbal expressive ability. The modified developmental approach which is discussed would encourage expressive language within a developmental context. The child's spontaneity, verbal responsiveness, and eagerness to be heard can be capitalized upon by adults who listen actively. Talk-oriented schools would foster learning that has intellectual, psychological, and social value. Some examples of classroom practice are included. (NH)

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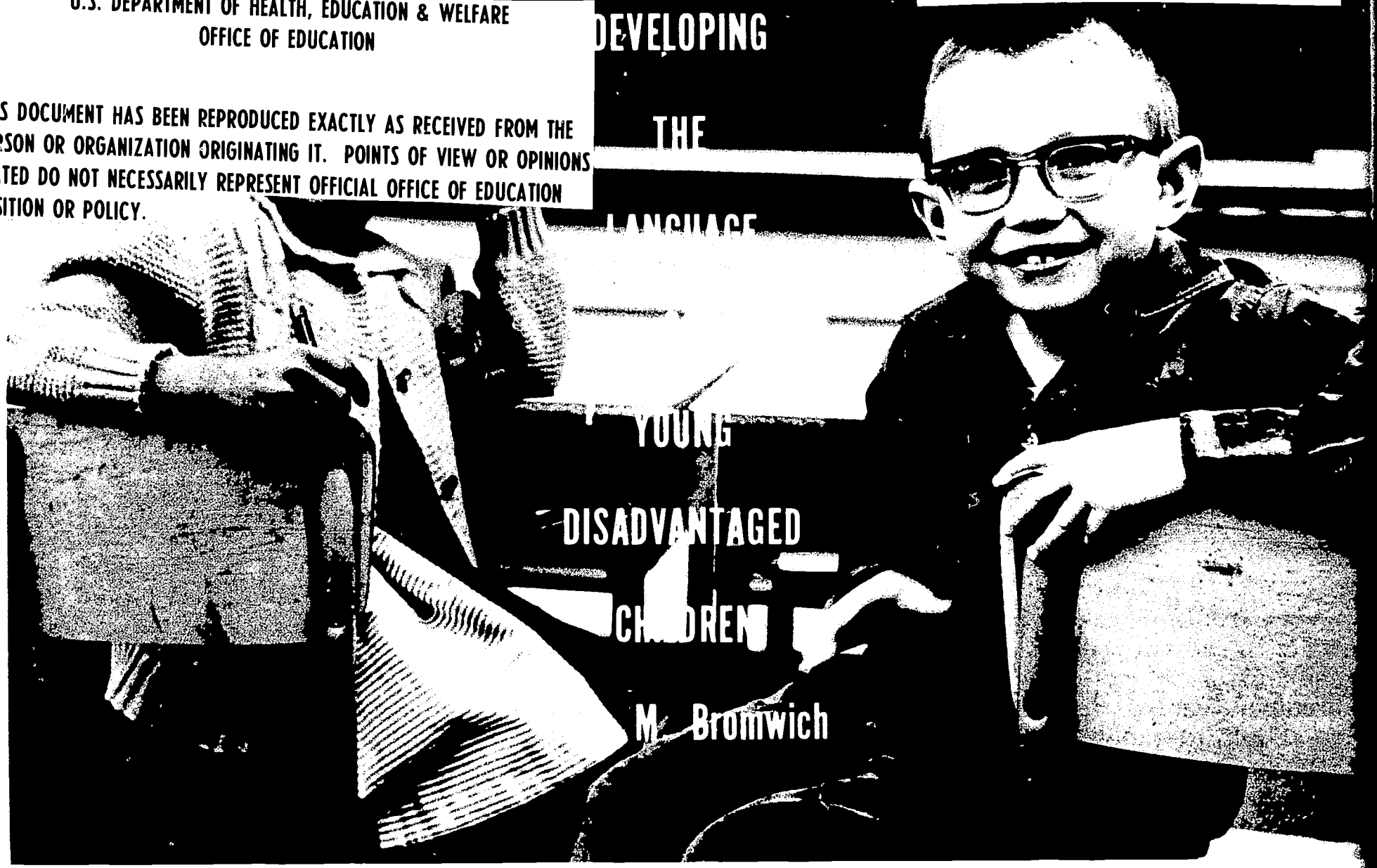
Recent research has shown consistently that verbal ability, the cornerstone of intellectual as well as academic progress, is a particular weakness of children from poverty areas. Various attempts have been made to develop and enhance verbal ability on the part of young children in Project Head Start and other, similar programs as well as in some compensatory education programs at the kindergarten and primary grade levels in public schools.

Two schools of thought or educational approaches are generally represented in practices at the early childhood level: the prescriptive-instructional approach (currently prevalent in experimental and research programs) and the developmental approach. The purpose of this leaflet is to describe these two approaches and propose a modified version of the latter approach.

The prescriptive-instructional approach includes three types of methods, two of which are particularly aimed at the language deficit of the disadvantaged child. The first of these, initiated at the University of Illinois, attempts to teach standard English to preschool children from poverty areas by a method similar to that used to teach foreign languages—stressing imitation, repetition, and practice. This methodology has gone beyond the experimental stage with the recent publication of the book Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool (Bereiter and Engelmann, 1966), which discusses the theoretical basis of this approach and is highly prescriptive in its discussion of methods.

DEVELOPING THE LANGUAGE OF YOUNG DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN



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The second prescriptive-instructional method is exemplified by a research project at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA Preschool Research Projects, directed by E. R. Keislar and C. Stern) and can be identified as programed learning. It is based on the learning theory of reinforcement and B. F. Skinner's principles of operant conditioning. Sequences of tasks are developed which can be administered without regard to the quality or professional preparation of teachers.

The third prescriptive-instructional method is a revival of the Montessori method, with its emphasis on sense training oriented toward the learning of the basic tool subjects. It resembles programed learning in that the materials used by the child rather than interpersonal aspects of the situation are focused upon and are believed to be the sources of learning. It differs from programed learning in that the child himself selects the materials he wants to use at any particular time, although the choices are limited; he, rather than the programer, determines the sequence of tasks. The materials used are those developed and prescribed by Maria Montessori and her followers. There is a minimum of interaction between the teacher (who assumes a supervisory role) and children as well as among children—each child works individually and silently with equipment related to the learning of basic skills.

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

The second major educational approach, based on the developmental point of view, embodies the idea that growth and development take place best when the child finds himself in a rich environment carefully planned to include many varied opportunities for development and learning as well as an atmosphere of friendliness and psychological safety. In this type of environment the child will be motivated to explore, discover, and acquire new knowledge about the world around him through his own initiative and will want to communicate verbally with interested adults as well as with his peers.

MODIFIED DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

A clear difference in basic philosophy exists between these two educational approaches. The prescriptive-instructional assumes that the educator or psychologist, as the case may be, knows what the child should learn, how he should learn it, and in what sequence. The developmental approach is based on the assumption that each child is a unique, growing organism who can be trusted to select experiences from which he will profit most at any particular time because these experiences meet his present needs most effectively and because he is ready to incorporate them intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

This writer does not subscribe to the prescriptive-instructional approach to improving the verbal ability of young disadvantaged children, but neither does she give full support to the developmental approach as described above.

The advantaged child, upon entering the preschool or school situation, has had much personal and verbal interaction with members of his family and has had ample opportunity to translate a wide variety of experiences into verbal meanings and concepts. He has thus developed a wealth of meanings applicable to the world around him which orient him to select experiences that will further widen his verbal and intellectual as well as individual and social horizons. The young disadvantaged child, on the other hand, who lacks similar opportunities to develop verbal meanings in the home, may need more guidance and individual adult attention in order to develop those meanings and attitudes which direct him to seek experiences that will expand knowledge and understanding of himself and the widening world in which he lives. Because he enters the preschool or school situation with a relative paucity of verbal meanings, it is unlikely that he will seek or select on his own those learning opportunities in the environment which would most enhance his growth in the cognitive area.

For these reasons I propose a third approach, in harmony with the developmental point of view, but emphasizing to a greater extent than the former the importance of helping the disadvantaged child develop expressive or spoken language in communication with others and in relation to his experiences throughout the day.

Supportive Research

Research has shown that verbal expression is essential in the development of language and thought of the child. John (1967) has stated that disadvantaged children gain little by only listening to spoken language (i.e., listening to radio or television) because there is no reciprocity—the child does not talk back. Bernstein (1964) has stated that the language of the lower class, or restricted code, in contrast to the elaborated code of the middle class, is not used to express thoughts or feelings. The elaborated code, furthermore, is basic to higher thought processes.

class child of the same age, these boys demonstrated that with stimulating materials relevant to their life experience and with a listening ear, they could feel motivated, express themselves verbally, and show interest and personal involvement in the content.

Basis of New Approach

The following propositions, derived from the widely recognized research and theory referred to above, constitute the basis of a new approach to early childhood education, within the context of the developmental point of view, with an emphasis on the development of expressive language of the disadvantaged child.

1. Beyond Piaget's sensory-motor stage of cognitive development (first two years), language is increasingly involved in the cognitive growth of the child.

2. The restricted language code of the lower class inhibits higher intellectual processes. Unless the function of language in the lower class child's everyday life is modified so as to play a more central role in ordering his environment and conceptualizing his world in verbal terms, his intellectual growth and capacity are inhibited.

3. Many young children from poverty areas are eager to be listened to, to communicate with interested adults who are often hard to find in their everyday environment outside of school. Not only are they eager for a listening ear, but many of them are quite spontaneous and become easily interested and personally involved with stimuli that are not too bland, stimuli that are likely to evoke some affect or relate to some personal experience.

4. These same children, although verbal (often not in standard English) and responsive in an open-ended situation in which whatever they say is accepted and important, generally do not relate themselves to the learning tasks in the classroom. In fact, they often become disturbing elements, as they are not in rapport with the teacher-directed activities.

5. Spontaneity, verbal responsiveness, and eagerness to be listened to can be capitalized upon before the child concludes that these traits must be suppressed if he is to succeed in school—or sees himself as an outsider who must either withdraw or call attention to himself by being disruptive in an attempt to maintain his self-respect.

6. Situations can be created in preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades that capture the child's interest and imagination, that get the child involved at a verbal level, and that allow the child to feel that what he has to say is of interest to others, that it is of worth, and that therefore he is of worth.

7. As the child increasingly uses language to communicate and relate with others, to express thoughts and feelings, and to order stimuli in his environment, he will find language a useful tool, one that helps him to gain (a) self-confidence, (b) social acceptance, (c) greater understanding of the world around him, and (d) increased competence in communicating with others and in dealing with physical as well as human aspects of his world.

Using the Modified Developmental Approach

Numerous situations can be created in school settings for young children in which children's verbal expression is sought and valued. Groups of children can become involved in discussing not only pictures that are dramatic, but various types of pictures that represent something within the child's realm of familiarity. Various kinds of language games and activities, including singing games, can be engaged in that relate to the children's life experiences in and out of school. Fantasy, especially when it originates from the child, should not be avoided—it should be welcome and recognized for what it is. Games can be invented which put a premium on the children's asking of questions. Asking questions and commenting on daily activities and experiences should be encouraged throughout the day. To encourage free flow of language, situations must be created where the child faces open-ended questions or verbal challenges rather than activities which lead him to respond in single, isolated words. Through interpersonal contact and friendly conversation, the setting should encourage the child to increasingly translate experiences and new discoveries into verbal concepts.

The verbal expression and thinking of children can be extended and stretched through the interest and willingness on the part of adults and other children who listen. Listening by the adult can grow into writing up the child's story, his story, or taping it and playing it back to him. The ex-

ercise of the child's verbal power is a most productive manner in which language and thought can be encouraged and enhanced. When the number of verbal adults can be increased—adults who listen actively—the children will have increased opportunities for language development through interpersonal interaction. Teachers aides or other volunteers could help immeasurably with this task. The ability on the part of the adult to listen actively and respond to the child is of prime importance in this type of setting.

The learning that is likely to take place in talk-oriented schools is of intellectual, psychological, and social value. The child is motivated to continue to relate to materials and people, to attend to tasks given him, and to learn, within an environment which is both gratifying and stimulating. He is encouraged in the use of language to communicate thoughts and feelings; he learns the value of conversation in human relations, the use of verbal expression as well as the value of listening (after having had ample experience of being listened to); he becomes aware of the process involved in a two-way communication; he learns new concepts and generally extends his verbal capacity; he gains satisfaction from the use of language in the service of developing gratifying relationships with adults and hopefully with peers (especially in an integrated situation); and he gains satisfaction from developing new levels of competence so essential to a feeling of self-worth.

The following example might illustrate how a teacher or assistant teacher might help initiate verbal activity on the part of a relatively non-verbal child in a situation with him alone or in a small group of children.

Teacher: Tell me anything you want about this picture. (pause) What story does it tell you?
Child: The boy is standing there.
Teacher: And . . . ? (This often encourages the child to continue.) (pause) Tell me more.
Child: (no response)
Teacher: Why do you think he is standing there?
Child: He is thinking.
Teacher: What do you think he might be thinking about?
Child: Where his mother might be.
Teacher: Oh, he is thinking about where his mother might be (corrective feedback plus reinforcement through picking up what child says—this often makes child feel important).

As the child continues to develop his own ideas, involving his own experience, the teacher moves along with the child's developing anecdote. The child's expressions are accepted by the teacher while she shows genuine interest and attempts to get the child to develop his story further. Casual corrective feedback (Brown and Bellugi, 1964) is easily introduced into this type of situation. Actual correction of the child's language should be avoided to prevent blocking the child's openness and freedom in using language. If there are other children in the group, some of them will begin to ask questions that will stimulate the storyteller to develop his thoughts further. With many children, the flow of ideas will be free from the start; with others, it will tend to become more free as they realize that their expressions are valued.

From this simple experience, countless opportunities for verbal learning can develop and can be utilized and built upon by resourceful and flexible teachers. The teacher, by carefully listening and responding to the child, has an opportunity to learn much about the child: his level of language functioning, the nature of his life experiences, his use of vocabulary, his response to being listened to, and his ability to develop thoughts and articulate them. Whereas in today's schools the role of listener is usually imposed upon the child while the teacher does the talking, the roles should be reversed to a large extent. The teacher should be a listener and reactor to the child.

SUMMARY

Many children who are perceived as uncooperative in the classroom have great difficulty orienting themselves to the rather impersonal curriculum and learning tasks on which they must focus in order to learn in today's schools. In poverty areas, these children are in much greater abundance than in middle class schools because their motivation to succeed academically as well as the primarily verbal prerequisites for school success are absent to a large extent (Deutsch, 1964). In the context of today's—which is often yesterday's—school curriculum, achievement motivation and a certain level of cognitive and verbal functioning are necessary if a child is to succeed. The disadvantaged child (who usually possesses neither of these) is destined to fail unless ways are found by which he can become intellectually and personally involved. A chain of experiences can be developed which utilize the child's natural urge to be listened to and to communicate in his mode. The child will find that what he has to say is of value and that therefore

Milner (1951) was one of the first to call attention to the difference in language patterns between middle and lower class families. She concluded from her findings that the lower class child lacks "an extensive opportunity to interact verbally with adults of high personal value to the child and who possess adequate speech patterns" (p. 111). In a study of mother-child interactions, Hess and Shipman (1965) found that middle class Negro mothers used twice as many words as did lower class Negro mothers in teaching prescribed tasks to their preschool-age children. Middle class mothers offer their children vast "opportunities for labeling, for identifying objects and feelings ... [as well as] adult models who can demonstrate the usefulness of language as a tool for dealing with interpersonal interaction and for ordering stimuli in the environment" (p. 875). Lower class mothers do not offer the same opportunities. "The picture that is beginning to emerge is that the meaning of deprivation is a deprivation of meaning" (p. 885).

Cazden (1966) stresses that the processes of generalization and discrimination involved in learning the meanings of abstract words do not occur simply by receptive exposure (hearing words) but through verbal interaction and active participation with those adults or children who function at a higher verbal level than the learner.

A recent study on Negro education in the United States (Coleman and others, 1966) concludes that verbal ability is the only single criterion by which academic success can be predicted reliably. The findings show that the presence of teachers as well as peers of high verbal ability tends to raise the academic performance of the lower class child more than any other factor. This report establishes a research basis for the integration of middle class white and Negro children with lower class Negro children in preschool and grade school settings. Once again the importance of verbal interaction is stressed, not only between teachers and children, but also between verbal and not-so-verbal children for the benefit of the latter and not at the expense of the former.

Implications

An atmosphere can and must be created in the preschool as well as in the beginning-school situation which communicates to the child that his verbal expressions of thought and feeling, his questions, and his comments relative to his everyday experiences are not only accepted but welcome. He must be helped to shift to what Bernstein (1962) calls the "elaborated linguistic code" before the "restrictive code" of his home environment becomes totally habitual—before he divorces the use of language from everyday experience and everyday relationships.

Although research emphasizes the importance of expressive language in the child's total cognitive development, in educational programs using the prescriptive-instructional approach, this area of activity is inhibited almost completely, as in the Montessori schools; limited to occasionally talking into a tape recorder, as in programed instruction; or restricted to academic-type instruction, as in the program initiated at the University of Illinois.

In a nursery school or Head Start program adhering to the developmental point of view, the child is usually left to select his own activities, which, without sufficient background of verbal meanings and verbal experience, will be of a type which does not add to the child's ability to express himself verbally.

The young child from poverty areas will learn to use language to express his thoughts and his feelings when he recognizes an atmosphere of receptivity for all his utterances, when he finds that his verbal expressions are sought and valued.

In public school kindergarten and primary classes the child's verbal expressions are often limited to single-word answers to specific rather than open-ended questions. Expressions of personal feelings or thoughts in response to areas of curriculum are often not encouraged or even welcome. Combs (1962) paraphrases a common classroom teacher's admonition to her pupil: "I am not interested in what you feel or in what you think about this, I want to know what the book says."

In a recent study by this writer (Bromwich, 1967), it was found that when kindergarten and first-grade Negro (mostly lower class) boys were asked to tell stories about pictures depicting familiar scenes, that were somewhat ambiguous in content and affect, many were open and responsive, quite communicative verbally, and, most importantly, gave verbal responses that showed personal involvement and interest. Many of those who told imaginative stories projecting their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings were judged by their teachers as performing poorly both academically and in terms of classroom behavior. Even though the levels of cognitive functioning and verbal ability of most of these boys were below those of the average middle

he is of value. Only in this manner can we preserve his humanity, his natural responsiveness and eagerness to participate and be heard. We must harness his interests, needs, and natural tendencies early in his life towards his optimal affective and cognitive growth.

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SPECIAL

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