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AUTHOR Ether, John A.
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ABSTRACT

A revised approach to teacher education is necessary for inner-city teachers, all of whom must cope with their own racism and prejudice, as well as the peculiar problems of the inner-city schools. The high school English teacher particularly needs special training to meet the unique demands made upon his skills in the urban setting. Intensive training in strategies and in materials for teaching remedial reading is essential. Background, for teachers, in black literature and literature dealing with urban development and current social problems should be stressed. Finally, teacher education curriculums should develop in teachers an understanding of issues relevant to urban youth, enabling teachers to provide meaningful classroom experiences. (MF)

PREPARING THE TEACHER OF ENGLISH FOR THE INNER CITY

John A. Ether

The preparation of teachers has never been an easy job, nor has it ever been really successful. Despite the flood of suggestions, the wide variety of experimental programs have produced little that is widely applicable. In education, hard data continues to be in short supply.

The rather sudden discovery of the cities in the United States has added a dimension to the problem. Not only must we now ask if teachers are being adequately prepared, but whether teachers for the cities are being adequately prepared. Introducing "English" in front of "teacher" in no way helps provide an answer, but does permit us to narrow our discussion to the special problems involved in the preparation of teachers of English.

The special problems are caused by the unique role of the English teacher in the totality of secondary education and by the unique content considered to be his domain.

It must be made immediately clear that there are many problems common to the preparation of all teachers for urban secondary schools. Indeed, the problems common to teaching in general override those unique to English. I shall, however, discuss only two problems common to teaching in general and three unique to English educationists.

The basis of the comments that follow is in part drawn from the literature, in part from my own experience and research, and in part from the results of a program at the State University of New York at Albany that is currently in its fifth year. Originally sponsored by the United States Office of Education and currently sponsored by the Urban Teacher Program of the New York State Education Department, this program has prepared or retrained over two hundred teachers. Approximately 25% of these have been teachers of English.

The problem obvious even to the casual observer is the inadequate preparation in the content of classroom instruction. English teachers are not aware, generally, of the contribution of Black authors to American Literature, they do not know the poetry, drama, and fiction dealing with urban development, and they do not know the poetry, drama, and fiction dealing with cur-

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John A. Ether, Professor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction at the State University of New York at Albany, has served as an elementary school and district principal. His most recent articles have appeared in "Today's Catholic Teacher" and the New York State Association of Elementary Principals "Bulletin."

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rent industrially-generated social problems. English teachers are not well trained in dialectology and in applied linguistics.

The reasons for these shortcomings in scholarship can be seen in the relative recency of linguistics in education and the sudden respectability of literary works by and about Blacks and other alienated people. One would assume that this would be the first correction made in the preparation of the teacher. We all agree that we know how to teach content. Yet, this doesn't seem to be happening. Most teacher preparation institutions offer but one course in "Negro Literature" and that is usually an elective. Quite clearly, the preparation of English teachers must include the language and literature of urban areas and the people who reside there.

An almost equally obvious problem in the preparation of secondary school English teachers is the development of specific skills and teaching strategies necessary and appropriate for teaching English in an urban school. Chief among these skills is the teaching of reading. Overwhelming evidence indicates that urban youth is not reading at an adequate level. Indeed, the reading level is generally of such a level that other learning is impossible. We have found that English teachers know next to nothing about reading problems, about strategies for teaching reading, or about materials. Until the English teacher is competent to function in this area everything else must wait.

A third problem to be faced by people and institutions preparing English teachers is the whole matter of relevance. All too often, when and if the teacher agrees to the need for relevance, he thinks in terms of ability to complete job applications, ability to read the baseball box scores, or the ability to write a simple letter. While these skills are important, they are not what I mean by relevance. The reference is to the study and analysis and discussion of the language and literature that speaks to the problems and issues of the late 1960's. We must be certain to distinguish here between the eyes and environment of a middle-aged, professionally-trained probably caucasian and a teen-aged, resentful and hostile Black or Puerto Rican or non-mobile white. Living-the-good-life or the struggle-in-the-face-of-adversity may be relevant to life as we see it, but it is not to urban youth. Living in a limited physical space, protecting one's self from the unlimited barrage of stimuli, understanding sex and sex roles, coping with personal and world-wide combat, living among the living dead, dealing with hypocrisy and injustice—these are but a few of the issues relevant to urban youth. The literature and the scholarship are available, yet we prepare English teachers who are either unfamiliar with such ideas or who place these far

down on the list. Such a position can only assure the teacher's continued defeat.

The three problems presented above—knowledge of instructional content, knowledge of the teaching of reading, and knowledge of relevance—are concerns of teachers of English. Each relates to the particular domain claimed by that discipline. Each must be faced by the English Educationist. I would like to continue by a short discussion of two extremely significant problems which must be faced by all professionals concerned with teacher preparation. The discussion must be short, although the problems are worthy of many volumes.

English teachers, like everyone else, are the products of their environment. In a society such as ours, one which has been so well documented to be racist and prejudiced, the product is predictable. The problem presented to the teacher preparation process is not only the fact of racism and prejudice, but of helping the teacher cope with it. Evidence from many sources indicate that part of the human coping mechanism is the discovery and recognition of the area of distress. Not until English teachers face the fact that they are indeed racist can they begin to cope with their racism and begin to develop rational procedures for teaching well in an inner-city school. Indeed, I am quite sure that most of the readers of these pages will deny the validity of the statement basic to this idea. Some may say that my contention is accurate, but *not of them*. Yet contrary evidence is overwhelming.

This is not an appropriate place to discuss the process or training procedure which will help students to cope with personal racism and prejudice. Such processes are fairly well known. Few programs preparing English teachers include such processes as a basic aspect of that training.

Finally, English teachers are not aware of the unique problems presented by teaching in urban schools. Preparation programs are usually aimed at the development of teachers for typical children learning typical things in typical schools. While I am not sure what "typical" is, I am sure that urban schools are not typical. The culture shock should be anticipated. Such matters as the monolithic bureaucracy and restrictive regulations, as the seeming callousness and indifference of the faculty, as the language and play-forms of the students are strange and foreign to new teachers. These are viewed by the neophyte as threats to the fundamental objectives of teaching. Unless a teacher is from such a school, the very size and noise of a six or eight thousand-pupil high school indicates hostile terri-

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PREPARING FOR THE INNER CITY—Concluded

tory. Short-skirted girls and black faces and the chatter of Spanish in the halls linked with memos from the assistant principal in charge of discipline on the third floor, suddenly angry parents, accusations of overt prejudice and inability to find the Men's Room combine to describe a strange and threatening environment. One cannot expect the English teachers to function in such a place without proper preparation.

Each of the problems I have presented is readily discernible in urban schools. Each is properly the concern of the people charged with the preparation and development of teachers of English. Each can be faced in an adequate program of teacher preparation.