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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that the language deficiency often attributed to disadvantaged children, especially disadvantaged black children, is not a language deficit so much as a difficulty in dialect switching. The disadvantaged child's language patterns are different from the language patterns of the child from the mainstream of American society. A child's language may vary from accepted school language in vocabulary, pronunciation, or the manner in which the child puts words together in sentences. Non-standard English-speaking children are as linguistically competent in their language as standard English-speaking children are in theirs, but important differences exist between them in the uses made of their language. Teachers of young disadvantaged children should accept the language they bring to school, respond to what they say without correcting them, and focus language teaching on extending their linguistic performance. Linguistic performance can be extended by conversing with the child, asking questions that encourage lengthy answers, and using classroom materials relevant to the disadvantaged child's subculture. Disadvantaged children need to be helped to use their language to label, describe, categorize, and generalize. Three aspects of children's verbal functioning that should be improved through a language program are: attention and auditory discrimination, explicit language use, and language structure and vocabulary. (KM)

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THE LANGUAGE OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD: A DEFICIENT LANGUAGE?

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When we say a child has a language disability, what do we really mean? I suspect too often we mean the child's language as measured by his verbal output score on a standardized test like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test or the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities or some intelligence test like the Stanford-Binet is less than the score expected or "normed" for a child his age. On the basis of such evidence, we label the child as possessing a language disability or a language deficiency. The question of direct concern this morning is: can we say the language of the disadvantaged child is deficient -or- does the disadvantaged child possess a language disability?

A brief examination of research literature would reveal numerous subcultural comparative studies on various aspects of children's language behavior. Scrutiny of the articles publication dates would reveal a most interesting phenomena. Most early studies (Irwin, 1948; McCarthy, 1954; Templin, 1957; Loban, 1963) would overwhelmingly suggest children of more economically advantaged environments, however defined, are significantly more advanced than disadvantaged children on the employed criterion measures. However, more recently published articles and research findings concerning disadvantaged children's language development would suggest the language deficiency often attributed to disadvantaged children, especially to disadvantaged Black children, is not a language deficit so much as a difficulty in dialect switching. Studies by people like Baratz (1969) suggest two distinct and different dialects are in use by middle income

children and low income children. Stewart (1970) lends further support to the difference hypothesis with his statement about the language patterns of the disadvantaged American Negro. He suggests these language patterns should be treated as what they are--"language patterns that have been in existence for generations and which their present users have acquired from parent and peer, through a perfectly normal kind of learning process." The disadvantaged child's resulting language patterns are different from the language patterns of the child from the mainstream of the American society.

How might the language the disadvantaged child brings to school vary from the language accepted for use in the school? Quisenberry (1972) has identified three general ways a child's language might vary from the accepted school language. First, the child's vocabulary might be different. A young child coming to your Eastern classroom after having been born and reared with the language of the Northern mid-west culture would group coke, seven-up, orange, and ginger-ale into a category called--POP. While, it seems, a child born and reared with the language of the Eastern culture would group seven-up, ginger-ale, coke and orange into a category called--SODA. Oreo to one child is a cookie--a cookie with two black sides separated by a layer of creamy white filling. To another child, oreo is a person--a Black person seeking the favors of white persons, a person Black on the outside, but white on the inside. Secondly, the child's pronunciation may be different. A child may be listening or talking or listenin' or talkin' He might "ask for something to write with" or "aks fo' somethin' to wri' wif." Thirdly, the manner in which the child puts words together in sentences

may vary. A child might say "I aks Stephanie do she wanna go to the store what be giv'n away free candy?" or Do'Leon like to play wif the boy what be sittin' next to him at school?" Obviously some of these differences do not concern us as teachers of young children. Some of the differences serve to add color and flavor to the child's language. However, some differences are significant variations from the accepted school language. The child who speaks the language which significantly varies from the accepted school language is labelled a "speaker of non-standard English."

What variations are sufficiently significantly different to merit labelling a child as a speaker of non-standard English? The more recent research and theoretical publications suggest to answer this question we must first subdivide children's language into two components. We must examine children's linguistic competence and linguistic performance. As defined by Cazden (1967), linguistic competence is the child's knowledge of his language-knowledge of the finite system of rules which enable him to comprehend and produce an infinite number of novel sentences. Linguistic performance is the child's perception of the function of speech in a given situation as this is affected both by aspects of the speech situation and by his individual history of being in speech situations, making responses, and receiving reinforcements. Overwhelmingly, the studies (Menyuk, 1968; Snow, 1963, Slobin, 1969; Werner and Kaplan, 1950) of children's linguistic competence suggest equality exists between children's underlying knowledge of their linguistic system. Non-standard English speaking children are as linguistically competent in their language as standard English speaking children are in

their language. Equally as overwhelmingly, the studies of children's linguistic performance suggest definite important differences do exist between more advantaged children and disadvantaged children in the uses made of their language (Bossard, 1954; Schatzman and Strauss, 1955; Williams and Naremore, 1969; Bernstein, 1971; John, 1963; John and Goldstein, 1967; Hess and Shipman, 1965). What differences in uses have been observed, recorded, and reported? 1) Disadvantaged children tend to participate relatively passively in an adult-centered interaction. They tend to fulfil the language demands of the interaction with minimal comments. 2) Disadvantaged children's use of language is self-focused. An event is typically reported in the first person perspective. 3) When reporting on a topic or event, disadvantaged children tend to describe the topic in a concrete and particularistic manner emphasizing isolated sequences of events. 4) The language of the disadvantaged child is context-centered as opposed to topic-centered. Typically the meaning is so closely tied to the context a listener can fully understand only if he has access to the context which originally generated the language. 5) The communication code of the disadvantaged child emphasizes the communal rather than the individual, the substance rather than the elaboration of processes, the here and now rather than the exploration of motives and intentions, and the positional or status rather than the personalized or person form of social control.

If we accept the found difference in use between the language of disadvantaged children and more advantaged children,

then what resulting changes might we expect in our behavior as teachers of language to young disadvantaged children?

1) Perhaps most important, we accept the language the disadvantaged child brings to school.

2) We respond to his language message--his communication. If a child should say, "I aks Suzie do she wanna go to the store wif me," then we might respond "Did Suzie want to go to the store with you?" Children do not learn language by being corrected. Studies have shown neither correction or immature forms nor reinforcement of mature forms occurs with sufficient frequency to be a potent force (Cazden, 1972). To be continuously asked to repeat the sentence, or any part of the sentence, in "proper English," will soon result in the child saying nothing.

3) The primary goal of our oral language program for young disadvantaged children should focus upon extending their linguistic performance. How can we achieve this goal? Many commercially prepared language programs have been prepared with the stated goal of further developing children's language. Teachers who accept the "difference in use hypothesis" will need to evaluate these prepared materials to determine the specific skills each program is attempting to teach. Does the program focus upon extending children's use of their language or does the program simply attack the surface grammatical speech of the children? An excellent recently published book to help you in your evaluation of commercially prepared language programs is Language in Early Childhood Education by Courtney Cazden. What kinds of other experiences can we provide for children to help extend their language use? One implication from children's language development

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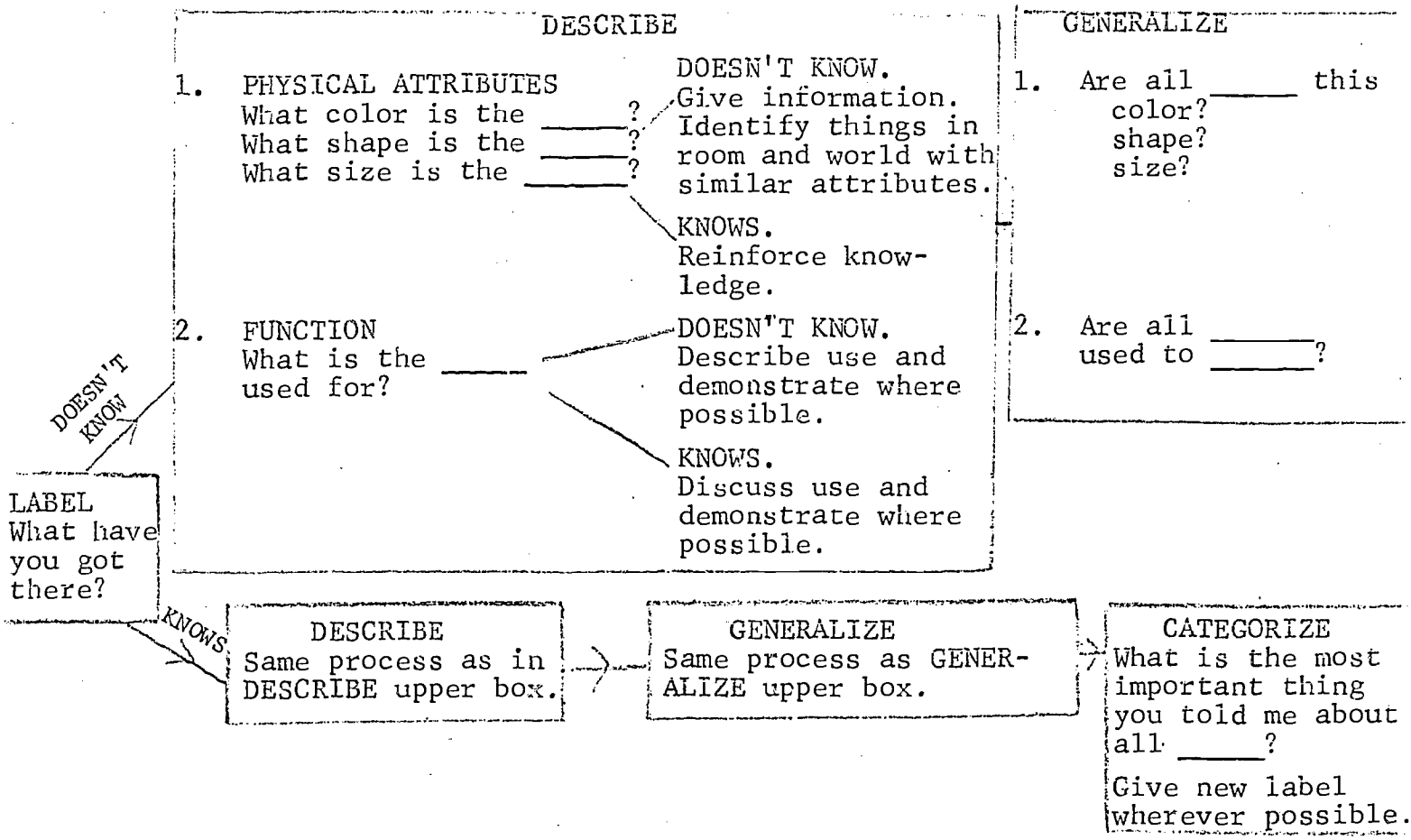
research suggests teachers should talk with children about topics of mutual interest and concern in the context of the children's work and play. This requires the teacher be alert to the possibilities for "informal nourishment" in the terms of the British Open Education people or the "teachable moment" in the terms of the Child-Centered United States people. Concepts are talked about with, not to, the child as he experiences them in his work and play. A teacher talks with a child about balance as the child builds in the block corner. When the child places one board perpendicular to another board and attempts to build a stable structure, the teacher can talk with the child about the concept he is observing and working to control. Secondly, we should recognize children do learn from each other. Hence, we should encourage peer group talk. Thirdly, let's examine the questions we ask children. If we ask "what is it?" then seemingly there is but one response or one proper answer. But if we use "tell me about it," or "why," or "how," or "what do you think," then children have a greater opportunity to use their own language. Fourthly, let's look for materials which we can add to the classroom from the disadvantaged children's subculture. That which a child knows nothing about, he cannot talk about. If the inner-city child has no previous concrete experience with farm animals like pigs, cows, and chickens, then he has little to say about them or to do with them in the classroom. What can we add to the dramatic play corner, or to the block corner, to make these corners culturally significant--instead of culturally neutral? What lotto games can we make which present concepts to the children through objects from their environment? Remember, children will use

language more fully if their is something of importance to them to communicate. Fifthly, we specifically want to help disadvantaged children use their language. For clarity, extention of the children's linguistic use might be divided into two subcategories. Firstly, we want to help disadvantaged children use their language to label, describe, and categorize the objects and experiences of their environment. The process described in table form below has been prescribed for mature speaker-disadvantaged child interaction.

TABLE I

DIAGRAMMATICAL PRESENTATION OF THE LANGUAGE PROCESS



Any object or experience can be labelled by the mature speaker questioning "What have you got there?" The child either responds with the proper label or doesn't know the label in which case the mature speaker can give the child the label name. Then through appropriate questioning, the mature speaker can help the child use his language to describe the physical and functional attributes of the object or experience. Further, by questioning the child about the most important attribute of the object or experience, the mature speaker can help the child use his language to generalize about the object or experience. And perhaps he can help the child use his language to categorize the object or experience into a new broader label. "Mature speaker" is used repeatedly here because this process has been successfully used by disadvantaged mothers to improve their Head Start children's linguistic performance or use (Vukelich, 1972). A teacher might use the process in her interaction with the children at school or the process might be used as the basis for a mother training program to supplement the school program. In addition to helping children use their language to label, describe and categorize concrete objects and experiences, research suggests we also want to help disadvantaged children use their language without the support of concrete context. To achieve this goal, we might plan discussions with children which center around describing the past or planning for the future. After a field trip, we might make arrangements for children or adults who have not visited the particular field trip site to visit the classroom. By helping the children tell these naive visitors about the trip, we are helping them use their language without the support of the concrete context. Basil Bernstein of London, England has further suggestions for

helping children use their language. Bernstein's language program consists of a variety of activities to improve three aspects of children's verbal functioning: 1) attention and auditory discrimination--for example, playing Simon Says, or recognizing voices while wearing masks which shut out visual distractions; 2) explicit language use--for example, by a communication tasks in which two children sit on opposite sides of a screen. Each child is given an identical set of materials which can be assembled. One child assembles his materials first. When he has completed his task, he has to verbally instruct his partner to produce an identical assembly. He is not allowed to show him. The other child can ask questions but must not look at his partner's assembly. When it is finished the two must compare to see whether the instructions have produced similar arrays. Another suggestion is for the teacher to present a situation and the children to invent the story and dialogue. Use of situations which deliberately involve role incongruity--e.g. "children are skipping in a road and an old lady takes the rope and joins in" prevents the children using the ready made cliches and phrases which they already associate with particular roles and which are, in any case, a formidable part of their language. A third suggestion might be--two cardboard "booths" with operating telephones would permit one child to describe an object to a second child who could not see the object or the first child's gestures. 3) language structure and vocabulary--such as starting with a sentence like Michael is going to the store and adapting it in time, last week, or conditions, if Michael had some money (Cazden, 1972).

In short, to answer the initially stated question: do disadvantaged children possess a language deficiency? our overwhelming response, supported by research, must be "NO!" What we observe in disadvantaged children is a difference in the uses these children can make of their language. We must accept the language of disadvantaged children and work to extend, through a variety of means, the uses these children can make of their language.

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