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Joseph B. Tremonti  
*Loyola University*

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# THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD AND HIS PROBLEMS WITH REGARD TO READING

Joseph B. Tremonti, C.S.V.

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

One of the most fashionable topics for discussion among educators today is the problem of the education of the culturally deprived child. The few people trying to understand this child have given him a name, not a satisfactory name, but a name; they call him "*culturally deprived*." What defines him is not an absence of money or nice clothes or good furniture or cars or food, although all these objects are usually lacking. These children suffer from poverty of experience. Perhaps their lives are rich with experience their teachers know nothing about. But they are growing up unequipped to live in an urban, primarily middle-class world of papers and pens, books and conversations, machines and desks and time clocks.

Their numbers are staggering. While in 1950, one child out of every ten in America's 14 largest cities was "*culturally deprived*," by 1960 the figure had become an alarming one out of three. This is an estimate made for the Ford Foundation by a group of big-city school boards organized as the Great Cities School Improvement Studies. By 1970, one of every two big-city children is expected to be "*culturally deprived*."

Some of these deprived children are the sons and daughters of coal miners and "branch water" farmers of the Southern Appalachian backwoods, driven to the cities when their land would no longer support an ever-growing population. Others are children of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and refugees from American Indian reservations.

Our first reaction to the term "*cultural deprivation*" should be one of skepticism bordering almost on rejection, knowing as we do that there is no such thing as "*cultural deprivation*." This is to say, every child has a culture; and, moreover, he takes unmistakable evidence of his culture along with him everywhere he goes, even to school. An anecdote about a first-grade teacher who was preparing her children to listen to a story illustrates this notion. Because the story had in it princesses and dragons and fairies, the teacher wanted to be sure that her first graders had adequate concepts of what those creatures are. Accordingly, she asked the class, "*Do you all know about fairies?*" Many of the first graders eagerly raised their hands and heartily chorused "*Yes*." One little boy with wildly waving arms

went even further to say: "*I know one. He lives right across the street from me.*" In this instance, I think we can say that the teacher was culturally deprived.

It is a psychological fact that mentally retarded children can learn. I assure you that the majority of the children you will help are not mentally retarded. If we can demonstrate that it is possible to teach organically defective children certain basic skills, we can surely demonstrate that it is possible to teach socially and economically denied children academic skills. The needs and capacities of any given child cannot be determined by an observation of the color or economic group to which he belongs.

Human intellectual potentials vary as widely in one group as they do in all other groups. There is a potential Einstein and Bunche among many groups of children in our society, save those who are clearly organically or functionally defective.

These deprived children are being systematically categorized, classified, and relegated to groups in terms of slow learners, Track A, Track B, but it all adds up to the fact that they are not being taught; and not being taught, they fail. They have a sense of personal humiliation and unworthiness. They react negatively, hostilely, and aggressively to the educational process. They hate teachers: they hate schools: they hate anything that seems to impose upon them this denigration, because they are not being respected as human beings, because their dignity and potential are being obscured and ignored in terms of educationally irrelevant factors, their manners, their speech patterns, their dress, or their apparent disinterest. The most insidious consequence of these assumptions is that they are self-fulfilling prophecies. The fallacy of the assumptions does not mean that they will not be demonstrated to be effective. Once one organizes an educational system wherein children are placed in tracks, or that certain judgments about their ability determine what is done for them or how much they are taught or not taught, the horror is that the results tend to justify such assumptions. However, they can learn if they are respected. They can learn if it is communicated to them that those who are responsible for teaching them believe they can learn. And above all, these children can learn if they are taught, and if they are taught with precisely the same standards and quality of instruction as are given to other, more privileged children; and if they are taught with whatever empirical evidence demonstrates what they need by way of extra attention or increased intensity in skill.

What we must realize is that there are many ways of learning.

Some people learn best by reading and writing, some people learn best from doing and acting, some from seeing. What emerges from this is that teaching must make available opportunities to learn in many ways, through many styles. But regardless of the person's style, whether it be a reading style or not, reading is obviously a fundamental requirement of our learning culture. Although it is possible for formal learning to occur without reading ability, it is generally much more difficult. While it is not necessary for one to be an excellent reader or a fast reader, at least minimum reading skill is necessary. Stating that reading is relatively necessary for learning is not to say, however, that the learner must possess or develop a reading style. Thus, an individual's basic learning style may be auditory, based on hearing, or it may be physical, based on manipulation. At the same time he has to know how to read. In teaching disadvantaged children to read we should not try to transform their style of learning into a reading style. Actually, their reading ability may be greatly enhanced only when they can see and manipulate the things they are reading about, thereby utilizing their visual and physical styles. In teaching reading, for example, you can use puppets or you can do it through reading aloud, or you can do it by acting out the story.

Research tells us there are learning styles among the low income groups that represent unique, untapped sources of learning. The following is a brief list of some of the major characteristics of the mental style of the low-income people:

1. Physical and visual rather than oral.
2. Problem-centered rather than abstract-centered.
3. Words in relation to action rather than word-bound (inventive word power and "hip" language.)

Extraordinary ingenuity is required if we are to produce strong motivation for learning in children who must look far away for models of success. We cannot depend on promises of greater opportunity to come after the struggle over equal education is won, to provide this motivation. (We cannot rely upon the standard white-oriented text material to convince these children that their people can lay claim to a significant place both in America's past and in its future.)<sup>1</sup>

Let us not denigrate the positive aspects of these deprived children. The strong points of the deprived arise out of their efforts at coping with an essentially negative environment. These efforts may in some cases lead to new difficulties, but it is important to view the behavior in terms of what the disadvantaged are trying to do rather than to

place, typically, one-sided emphasis on their failures and pathology. Nor should these efforts be compared to standard middle-class behavior as though the latter were likely alternatives for the deprived.

The positive aspects themselves are uneven and complex; often they are the reverse side of weaknesses. Thus the positive features found in the strong peer culture and the greater sibling interaction may arise from the limited time that the parents can spend with their children in large families; the greater freedom from intellectualization may stem from less access to intellectual occupations, and the maturity of the children may be related to the fact that the poor are less educated by parents and teachers and hence forced to develop their own resources at an early age.

There are a number of other sources for the strength of the poor which need only be mentioned.

1. The minority poor, mostly immigrants or a generation or two removed, often preserve their ethnic traditions more fully than their richer brethren, who often shed their old cultural ways as they adapt to American middle-class life. Thus, whatever strengths there are in the ethnic tradition probably remain with the poor.

2. Traditions of various groups of the poor often contain elements contributing to their strength. Negro history is important in this context as is Puerto Rican and Spanish tradition.

It is probably no accident that the Black Muslim Movement has had considerable appeal for the Negro poor, despite the fact that many dimensions of its program and psychology are deeply alien to Negro traditions. Its success, however, is rooted in its call to Negro traditions. It suggests that there is enormous moral integrity in a people who have not been guilty of enslaving others, and further that whatever is wrong, pathological, or evil in the black man has been imposed from without and is not intrinsic to his character, culture, or make-up. It says, instead, that what is internal to the people is strong, moral, and decent.

Regardless of whether this represents an oversimplification, it nonetheless provides a significant model for us to consider because it supplies a novel, action-attuned formulation of the relationship of assets and liabilities in a have-not population.

In his research on the disadvantaged child and the learning process, Deutsch confronts all public metropolitan school systems with this question: Why is it that slum children who are "*so curious and cute and affectionate and warm and independently dependent in kindergarten and the first grade,*" later soon become "*alienated, withdrawn,*

*angry, passive, apathetic, or just plain troublemakers?"* His study supports the thesis that slum children, whatever their backgrounds, enter our middle-class school system unprepared for its demands, find the system unprepared to cope with their problems, and leave it, not enriched and armed against the hostile and degenerative influences of their slum environment, but embittered by school failure and less able to cope with life than when they entered school.

Psychologists are beginning to discern that this child's inattention may be a highly developed skill, the result of intensive conditioning. When a child lives with 11 other people in three rooms, separated by thin walls from other households of 11 people in three other rooms, smelling their cooking, sharing their toilets, knowing when the man next door is drunk and the baby awakens downstairs, a child must *learn* to be inattentive to survive. His ears become skilled at not hearing, his eyes at not seeing.

There is the story of social misfit in a Harlem School. A school psychologist, moved to investigate, learned that the boy liked to lock himself in a closet. This had ominous Freudian implications, such as a need to withdraw to the dark comfort of the womb. To confuse the implications, however, the boy showed a predilection for a certain closet in which he could turn on an electric light. On investigating this deviation, the psychologist discovered that the boy, indeed a misfit among his peers, merely liked to read. He would go to all lengths to do so in quiet. This eccentricity had led his family and school to suspect that he was seriously out of his mind.

Most teachers hardly suspect other forms of the deprived child's poverty of, or indifferences in, experience. They have found that kindergarten children often have not learned to tell one color from another, except red and blue. No one has told them to wear the pink dress today or wondered aloud in their presence about the advisability of getting lavender draperies to go with the gray rug. They may be unaware of shapes, clocks, circles, squares, the idea of short or long. The teacher assumes a knowledge of these things. She often cannot conceive of a child's not knowing colors and shapes, except a very "*dumb*" child. One teacher, trying to teach reading through a story about a snowman, was baffled to learn that some children assumed a snowman is a man who shovels snow from city streets; they had seen one of those, but knew of no other kind. No one had ever told them otherwise.

Conversation is not a highly developed art in the families of slum children. Suddenly the child, accustomed to learning through his

senses, is obliged to sit still all day before a talkative teacher, she can talk for hours without stopping. Moreover, she seems to think the most important thing in the world is to make out printed words on a page. About half the children surveyed by Dr. Deutsch came from homes that did not possess a single book. Instead of bringing the middle-class teacher and the impoverished pupil closer together, words may help only to alienate them, underlining the distance between their worlds.

To these psychological factors which affect the slum child's will to learn may be added, as even more important, the effects of his impoverished environment on his capacity to learn. There is considerable evidence that lack of fostering experiences keeps the slum child from maturing in the areas of perception, language, cognition, and interpersonal skills. Thus, his impoverished physical surroundings handicap him. Scarcity of objects to manipulate, colors and forms to appreciate and discriminate may well retard his development of skill in organizing figure-ground relations in the visual field. His crowded, noisy environment tends to develop in him a defensive inattention which cuts down his responsiveness to school stimuli and inhibits his development of auditory discrimination. Both of these lacks handicap him severely in learning to read. It has been noted that non-industrial groups generally, mountain children, American Indians, children from slums, do not regulate their lives by arbitrarily defined time sequences, a factor which makes it difficult for them to adjust to the tempo of the classroom and to perform well on timed tests.

His economically and psychologically harassed parents fail him. In the development of memory, the child needs parents who will link past to present for him by shared experiences continuously. In learning to complete assigned tasks successfully, he needs parents who have the time and patience not only to assign tasks, but to see that they are completed and rewarded. In learning to use adults as sources of information, the child needs parents who have time to answer questions and do not fear questions because they may be embarrassed by their own ignorance.

Finally, the slum child is handicapped by a lack of information and awareness about any part of the world except his own immediate environment. In every area in which his functional intelligence will be compared with that of the middle-class child, he is likely to appear inferior and tends to further prejudice his teacher against him.

Some mention must be made of the texts and materials that we use with these children. In most of our readers today, life is fun,

filled almost exclusively with friendly, smiling people, all white, mostly blond and North European in origin. Parents are always gentle and understanding; there are doting grandparents, generous and cooperative neighbors and warmhearted strangers. In one reader, there is mention of Indians, but in such a manner as to indicate that they don't really belong except for exhibition purposes.

A little story will point up this concern with the mother of a six-year old Negro girl. The mother relates how the child brought home her first reader, turned the pages looking at the pictures in bewilderment and finally asked, "*Mother, where am I in this book?*" After receiving a feeble explanation from her mother the child took her crayon and made some of the faces brown.

Reading textbooks are prepared to help children learn to read; i.e., to build vocabulary, to see relationships between ideas, to understand structure and form of grammar, etc.

Only recently have we *really* begun to understand that learning is made more difficult for the "brown face" if the language and pictures in the books are all for the "*pink face*." Furthermore, we now understand that a reading book teaches more than just reading skills. A science book teaches more than just science, a geography book teaches more than just geography. *They all teach attitudes*, about others and about self.

According to a recent article in the *Saturday Review*, only one out of every 10 books in the current crop written for children contains any pictures of Negroes. For the Negro child, such books tell him: "*You have no image today and no future tomorrow.*"

Such images are crucial. If Negro children go on finding themselves excluded from textbooks, their motivation to learn may be damaged further. It is difficult enough for millions of them, coming often from overcrowded slum flats where a quiet corner to study is rare, to pay attention in their overcrowded classrooms; but books which appeal to them, which tell them an integrated society is in the making, which hold further promises of an equal chance for them to become doctors as well as ditchdiggers, such books sow the seeds of a new self-pride.

The place to tell the story is everywhere: in the home, the community, on radio, T.V., and in the schools. A Negro child who sees Willie Mays hitting home runs out of a ball park has gotten a message about integrated baseball. But can he become a fireman or a doctor or a businessman or a diplomat tomorrow? If there are a few of these people around him, the images on T.V., still feeble and one-sided, may



be regarded by him as sheer fantasy, like commercials. One way to reach this child is through books. He must see himself in books, as he is, as he can be. Macmillan Co.'s Bank Street readers attempt just this. Other publishing houses, such as Follett, Mc Graw-Hill and Doubleday have taken similar steps. But progress has lagged tragically.

In our interaction with these children we need not only understand what makes the child tick but what motivates us to do things that we do at any given time. We all experience a self-confrontation and it has its pleasant as well as unpleasant facets. The very nature of our culturally pluralistic society imposes on us the necessity of preparing ourselves to accept our responsibility for helping children become adults who are free of irrational prejudices. We must accept our responsibility for helping children become adults who are free of racial, religious, and social class biases. Until we are able to accept ourselves, we will be unable to achieve warm, positive relationships with children and colleagues who are different from us.

James Michener, writing in *THE FIRES OF SPRING*, makes the quest for finding one's identity vivid when he says:

*"For this is the journey that men make: to find themselves. If they fail in this, it doesn't matter much what else they find. Money, position, fame, many loves, revenge are all of little consequence, and when the tickets are collected at the end of the ride, they are tossed into a bin marked 'Failure.' But if a man happens to find himself—if he knows that he can be depended upon to do . . . the limits of his courage . . . the position from which he will no longer retreat . . . the secret reservoir of his determination . . . the extent of his dedication . . . the depth of his feeling for beauty . . . his honest and unpostured goals—then he has found a mansion which he can inhabit with dignity all the days of his life."*