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BRICKS FOR BUILDING THE SELF CONCEPT OF THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD

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Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, school dropouts, and the necessity for public welfare are not new social problems in our society. At the present time great national effort and much money are being spent to attack many social ills through antipoverty programs. These programs are receiving attention at this time because the increased industrialization and urbanization of today have widened the gap between our American ideals and practices. More people are aware of the resulting inequalities. And people are also aware that society has the power and ability to do something about it. Currently, one of the complex problems facing the United States is putting into practice the ideal of educating all of the children of all of the people. As a group the children of the poor have not profited from public school education. One effective method of attacking a social problem is through prevention. As a result of this knowledge great emphasis has been placed on improving the schools in the disadvantaged areas.

Who are the disadvantaged? Disadvantage is a relative term. The child who is disadvantaged has a disadvantage relative to another child. The socially disadvantaged child has a disadvantage for living competently in an urbanized, industrialized, democratic society. He is a child who has been denied "normal" experiences that other children have. The experiences that this child has in the home does not transmit the necessary cultural patterns for the type of learning that goes on in the schools or society in general. The experiences that the disadvantaged have in the home frequently contribute to the development of an inadequate self concept.

What does this have to do with school or reading? The child with a low self concept frequently has difficulty learning to read. Perhaps, if the teacher helps the child build a positive self concept, he will be able to learn to read—learn to learn.

There are many activities that go on in the early primary grades which can serve as bricks to construct an adequate self-concept house for the disadvantaged child. On the first day of school each child can have his own name card prepared beforehand. The fact that the name card is already there when he walks into the room lets the child know

that he was expected. The teacher is able to call him by name when the card is placed on top of his desk. The name cards can also serve as the basis for a game to help the children learn each other's names. Any child will feel important when his teacher and classmates remember him by name.

Early in the school year the teacher can take pictures of the children in the classroom or school situation. These pictures make an attractive bulletin board. What child's ego will not be inflated as each new visitor to the room goes over to look at his picture in living color? If their teacher were to ask the child to bring a picture from home, the child whose ego needs inflating the most might not have a picture to bring.

Often, primary children can be asked to illustrate their families. This art activity can serve as a foundation block in the self-concept house. The teacher must keep in mind the fact that frequently disadvantaged children come from extended families and "broken" homes. She must accept the family as illustrated by the child. She can also find stories that have children from "broken" homes and extended families with which the child can identify. These stories should bring out the positive aspects of their home life. The child should never be made to feel that something is wrong with his family situation.

The child should be given many opportunities to think and talk about himself. He could write an autobiography. The first time he does this the teacher might help him by giving him a general outline of things he could include. The child might want to make a self portrait to go along with his story. So that every child can tell his own life's story, the teacher might have to become the secretary and let the child be the boss who dictates the story. The "boss" might have the "secretary" read the story when it is time to share the finished product with the rest of the class. Sometimes as a variation on this activity, the child might write or illustrate what he would like to be.

Another way a child can become better acquainted with himself is to listen to his own voice on the tape recorder. He might just want to sing a song, say a nursery rhyme or poem, or read a selection. Of course, he will say his name first.

Frequently it is difficult to get the parents of the disadvantaged child to participate actively in the school's program. Reward the child with praise whenever his parent does something special for the class such as: 1) visiting the classroom, 2) making a cake, 3) going with the class on a trip, or 4) attending a P.T.A. meeting. This will make the child feel great.

Every child should have his own job. This builds responsibility and

the self concept too. He could be chairman, librarian, book monitor, or any one of the dozens of jobs familiar to all who are in school or have ever been to school.

While building the self-concept house, the child's birthday can serve as the cornerstone for his building. That is his day! The class should sing the birthday song to him. He might lead a march or game. He must do something special because it is his birthday.

The disadvantaged child, like all children, loves to give presents to his parents on special days like Christmas or Mother's Day. The teacher can lay another brick in the house by helping the child select projects that he can do by himself. Let the child decorate his own wrapping paper. It could be a fingerpaint or sponge design. He can also make the name tag and card to accompany the gift. The child feels very proud of himself when he takes a gift home that he, not the teacher, has made.

Because many disadvantaged children come from large families, it is a good idea to plan some activity or learning with which the child can impress his older sister or brother. The child's spirit can be crushed very easily if every time he takes something home or tells about an activity the older siblings can remark that they did that last year. The child should learn something really different. At Christmas time the early primary child gets a thrill out of singing a carol in a foreign language. Or the child could have an art project that has not been done before in the school. The teacher must not teach the same thing each year.

In every area of the curriculum the teacher must look for ways to build the child's self concept. In music the child, who wants to, can sing a solo. Every child should have an opportunity to play the musical instruments. They can all help with the orchestration of original pieces. Tape recording "their" song will make them feel important. When the children are learning to play the musical blocks, they can accompany the class as they sing. Teach everybody how to play at least one song. Watch the children's faces beam as they play and the class sings.

Another brick in the self-concept house can be laid through dramatizations. The disadvantaged child can begin by role playing. He can act out how to cross the street. He can act out many concepts he might not be able to verbalize easily. Later when the children are presenting songs and plays, encourage them to select a play where one-half or one-third of the class can be in the drama. The teacher should jot down the names of those in this informal production so that

the next cast will include the other children.

Children's self concepts can be enhanced when they do choral work too. The child who has a special part is thrilled. Selections should be chosen which will allow several individuals and small groups to have special parts.

If the school district is wealthy enough, the students can all be stars on television via the video tape machine. If you cannot afford the real thing, let the class construct a television set from grocery boxes. Each child can be a TV commentator.

The disadvantaged child has frequently not had an opportunity to go on a trip. It is during the planning of the trip when another self-concept brick can be laid. The trip can be in the building or the nearby neighborhood. It could be a trip to the store, zoo, museum, or bakery. As the child plans the trip, takes the trip, and participates in the follow-up activities he feels important.

The teacher must remember that the term disadvantaged cannot be equated with any group or religion. The disadvantaged group includes those living in the city and rural areas. Much attention has been called to the slum dwellers of the city because of their great numbers. Because of their special problems the children of the migrant workers, the Negroes, the Appalachian whites, and the Spanish speaking Mexicans and Puerto Ricans have received special attention. These facts must stay with the teacher. If she is working with any of these special groups, the children must be made to feel proud of their background. For example, if the school is located in a Negro neighborhood, the children must be aware of the history of the Negro in America. What Negro child would not beam with pride to know that the stoplight, that is such an integral part of his daily life, was invented by a Negro? He needs to know that the first heart specialist to do open heart surgery was a Negro. Even peanut butter was discovered by a Negro scientist. A study of the true history of our country which includes all of the contributions of the Negro would be a huge brick in the self-concept house for the child.

As the teacher selects materials for the school to buy, the background of the child should be kept in mind. The multi-ethnic materials now available are a boon in this area.

To culminate a unit of study, the teacher in the disadvantaged area could again bring her camera to record the activity. To make slides or to take a movie of the children at the end of some fascinating unit will make each child feel ten feet tall. The slides or movie could be the basis of sharing the unit with the parents or other children of

their grade level. This is just another way of telling the child that he is important.

While helping the children construct a positive self image, the teacher must not forget that the most important brick in the house is her attitude toward the child. If the teacher accepts and respects the child, the house is being built on a solid foundation. When the child understands and accepts himself, then he is ready to learn in school.

One ideal Americans advocate is the education of all of the children of all of the people. In the past, the child from the lower socio-economic level has too often been neglected by the public schools. Today, steps are being taken to educate effectively the disadvantaged child. The first step is to help the child develop a positive self image. The teacher must accept and respect the child. Through creative teaching, she can help him understand and accept himself. The survival of our democratic society is dependent upon providing in reality what the American dream promises—the opportunity for each individual to develop to the maximum of his potential.

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