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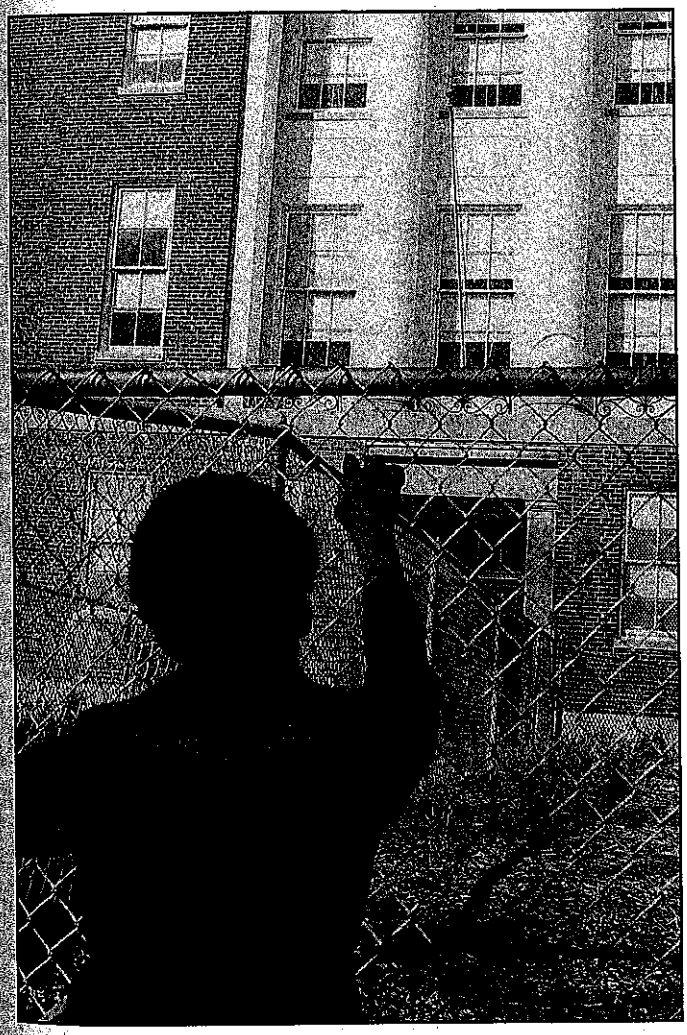
Barriers to Good Instruction

The ASCD Advisory Panel on Improving Student Achievement*



Good instruction is good instruction, regardless of students' racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. To a large extent, good teaching—teaching that is engaging, relevant, multicultural, and that appeals to a variety of modalities and learning styles—works well with all children. Unfortunately, numerous barriers can prevent poor and minority students from receiving good instruction. Some of these barriers are caused by educators' attitudes and beliefs; others are the result of institutional practices. This chapter presents a brief overview of both kinds of barriers. The intent of this chapter is not to provide a thorough cataloguing of every barrier to sound instruction, but rather to place educators on alert.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Racism and Prejudice

Despite much progress in U.S. society during the past few decades, racism and prejudice are still ugly realities in all sectors of American life, including education. Today, racism may be less overt and virulent than in the past, but its effects can still greatly harm minority students. In fact, subtle, insidious forms of racism may be even more harmful to young people than are more blatant forms.

Prejudice against the poor, of whatever race or ethnicity, is another force that works against the academic achievement of disadvantaged students. For example, some teachers of poor students don't let them take materials home, out of fear that the materials will never be returned. Yet these same students tend to be very proud of taking materials home and are generally exceedingly careful to return them.

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Obviously, teachers must avoid discriminating, consciously or unconsciously, against students because of their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Such discrimination can be as blatant as imposing harsher discipline on minority students or as subtle as lowering expectations for poor children because they have "difficult" home lives. Teachers must be aware that they see students' behavior through the lens of their *own* culture. They must carefully examine their own attitudes and behaviors to be sure that they are not imposing a double standard. Most important, they must believe sincerely and completely that *all children can learn.*

EXPECTATIONS

Educators must hold equally high expectations for affluent white students and poor and minority students—despite the disparity in students' backgrounds. Under the right conditions, low-income and minority students can learn just as well as any other children. One of these necessary conditions, of course, is that the teacher hold expectations of high performance for all students.

High or low expectations can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students must believe that they *can* achieve before they will risk trying; and young people are very astute at sensing whether their teachers believe they can be successful. By the same token, teachers must truly believe their students can achieve before they will put forth their best effort to teach them. The teacher's beliefs must be translated into instructional practices if students are to benefit: actions speak louder than attitudes.

Teachers must also be sensitive to the subtle ways in which they can convey low expectations. According to researcher Sandra Graham of the University of California-Los Angeles, when a teacher expresses sympathy over failure, students typically infer that the teacher thinks they are incapable of succeeding, not that they simply may not have tried hard enough. Similarly, when a teacher gives students lavish praise for completing a simple task or offers help before being asked for it, students infer that the teacher thinks they are stupid. In other words, holding high expectations is not simply a matter of cheerleading; it requires insight into how students interpret a teacher's words and behaviors.

Teachers must also resist the temptation to attribute student failure to lack of ability ("I've taught this concept and they didn't understand it; they must not be smart enough"). Failure to learn can stem from many other causes, such as inadequate prior knowledge, insufficient effort or motivation, lack of the right learning strategy, or inappropriate teaching. The bottom line is this: *If students are not learning, the teacher needs to change his or her approach to teaching them.*

Teachers are not the only ones who need to examine their expectations for students, however. Administrators who decide what courses their schools offer should ask themselves whether they are providing too few challenging courses. And counselors must consider whether they are steering students into undemanding courses because they are poor, minority, or female. (Institutional practices that communicate low expectations are discussed below.) The expectation that *all* students can achieve at high levels, under the right circumstances, should be the guiding principle of every school.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Teachers sometimes misinterpret the behaviors of poor and minority students because they do not understand the cultures they come from. White teachers can easily misread the behaviors of black students, for example. In *Black Students and School Failure*, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine writes:

> Because the culture of black children is different and often misunderstood, ignored, or discounted, black students are likely to experience cultural discontinuity in schools. . . . This lack of cultural sync becomes evident in instructional situations in which teachers misinterpret, denigrate, and dismiss black students' language, nonverbal cues, physical movements, learning styles, cognitive approaches, and worldview. When teachers and students are out of sync, they clash and confront each other, both consciously and unconsciously. . . . (Irvine 1990, p. xix)

Only when teachers understand the cultural backgrounds of their students can they avoid this kind of culture clash. In the meantime, the ways in which teachers comprehend and react to students' culture, language, and behaviors may create problems (Erickson 1987). In too many schools, students are, in effect, required to leave their family and cultural backgrounds at the schoolhouse door and live in a kind of "hybrid culture" composed of the community of fellow learners (Au and Kawakami 1991).

Especially in the early grades, teachers and students may differ in their expectations for the classroom setting; each may act in ways that the other misinterprets. In addition, those teachers (and they are legion) who insist on a

single pedagogical style, and who see other styles as being out of step, may be refusing to allow students to work to their strengths.

As Knapp and Shields (1990, p. 755) suggest, the so-called "deficit" or "disadvantage" model has two serious problems: (1) teachers are likely to set low standards for certain children "because their patterns of behavior, language use, and values do not match those required in the school setting"; and (2) over time a cycle of failure and despair is created that culminates "in students' turning their backs on school and dropping out . . . because teachers and administrators fail to adapt to and take advantage of the strengths that these students do possess."

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

In many schools, institutional practices prevent poor and minority students from receiving good instruction. These practices include tracking, inappropriate instruction, and lack of consequences (for teachers as well as students) for poor performance.

TRACKING

The most notorious of these harmful institutional practices is tracking, which dooms children in the low tracks to a second-rate education by failing to provide them with the support they need to move to a higher track. As a result, they fall further and further behind their peers. Students in the low tracks are stigmatized and lose self-esteem and motivation, while expectations for their performance plummet.

In her book *Keeping Track,* researcher Jeannie Oakes (1985) says "we can be quite certain that the deficiencies of slower students are *not* more easily remediated when they are grouped together." Yet the practice of tracking persists, despite the many negative effects on students documented by Oakes and many other researchers. Tracking is especially harmful to poor and minority students, because these students are more likely to end up in the low tracks.

Effective alternatives to tracking exist. Robert Slavin's Success for All program, for example, uses one-on-one tutoring to immediately help students when they start to fall behind in reading skills. Low achievers in the program have reportedly shown impressive gains. The Accelerated Schools Project, developed by Henry Levin of Stanford University, creates accelerated programs to bring at-risk students into the mainstream by the end of elementary school; students learn faster because they receive engaging, active, interdisciplinary instruction. The Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) program, developed by Stanley Pogrow of the University of Arizona-Tucson, enhances the general thinking skills of remedial students by showing them how to work with ideas. All of these programs and others, including the Carbo Recorded Book Method, are aimed at helping students get up to speed, rather than permanently segregating them and feeding them a dumbed-down curriculum, as is true of tracking.

LOW EXPECTATIONS

Many institutional practices convey low expectations to poor and minority students. Rhona Weinstein (1994) of the University of California at Berkeley has identified the following through interviews and questionnaires with elementary school children:

> These students often receive barren, remedial materials, which imply the belief that they are unable to grapple with higher-order ideas. In addition, the evaluation system, which typically conveys that intelligence is stable, global, and distributed on a bell curve, implies that some are permanently less intelligent than others and that there is only one kind of intelligence. Further, educators often rely on a system of rewards and punishments to motivate poor and minority students, instead of allowing them some leeway to pursue their own interests. Similarly, these students are typically allowed little input or self-direction; they are not allowed to take responsibility for their own learning. All of these practices reflect the low expectations educators as a group hold for these students.

INAPPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION

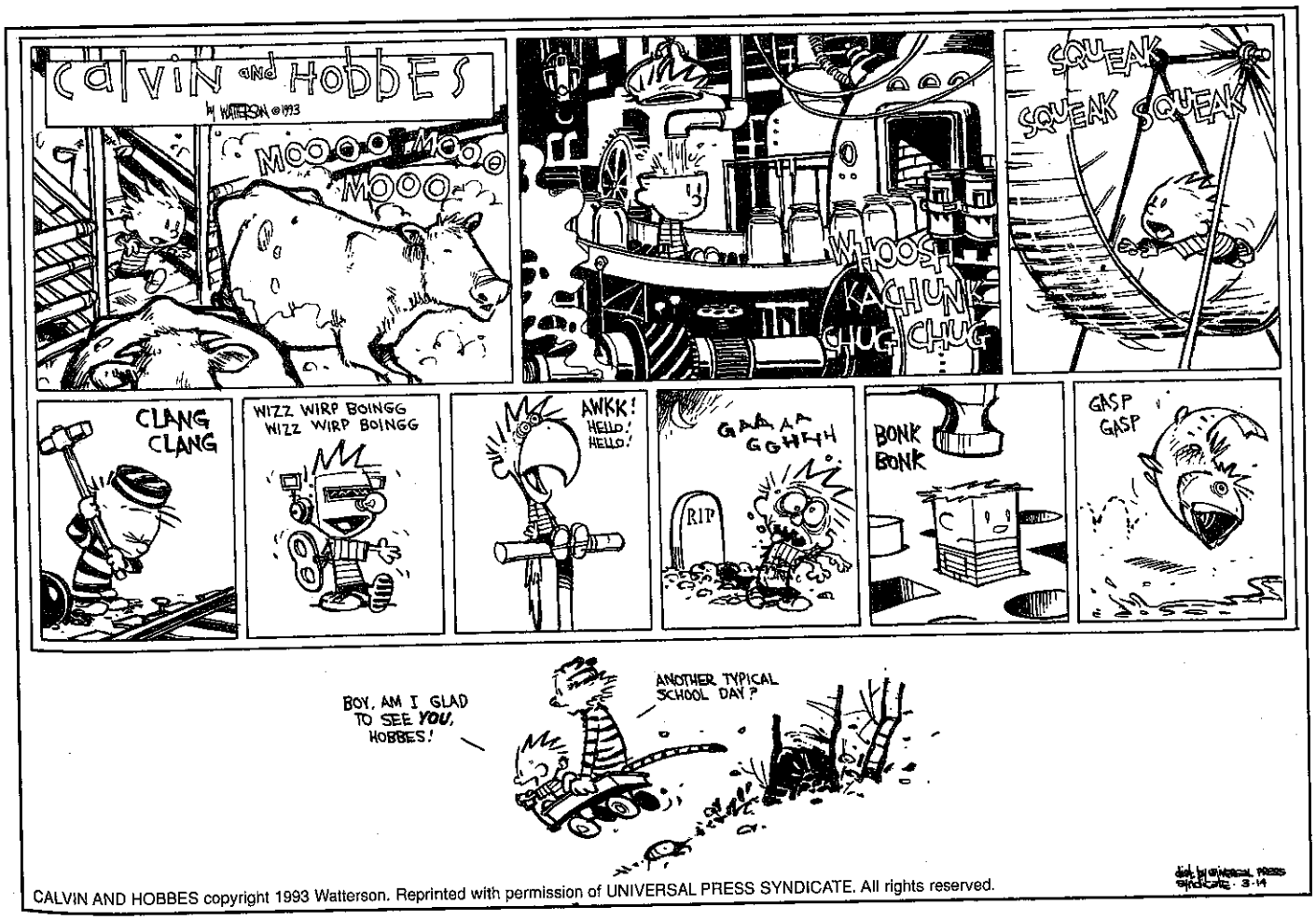
Inappropriate instruction harms many poor and minority students. Instead of being presented in a variety of modes, instruction in U.S. schools tends to be abstract, barren of application, overly sequential, and redundant. Bits of knowledge are emphasized, not the big picture, thus handicapping global thinkers. Moreover, the largely Eurocentric curriculum downplays the experiences and contributions of minorities.

Teachers of diverse students find it especially important to use a broad repertoire of strategies. Some children may be global thinkers; others, more analytical. Some children may learn best from lecture and reading; others

may learn best through manipulatives and other hands-on experiences. Some children may thrive on competition; others may achieve far more in cooperative groups. Clearly, a diverse array of teaching strategies best meets the needs of diverse students.

Beyond that, there are countless ways, limited only by the teacher's imagination, to tailor instruction to the specific needs of children from varied cultural groups:

- A teacher can make classwork more relevant for children by using illustrations and examples linked to their culture or race. One obvious example is Jaime Escalante's teaching his Hispanic students that the Mayans invented the concept of zero.
- Teachers can highlight role models—figures from history or visiting lecturers, for example—who belong to the same culture or race as students in the class.
- Au and Kawakami (1985, p. 406) describe "the use of a particular event called 'talk story,' found in [Hawaiian] children's home culture, that seemed pivotal in improving reading instruction." This form of participatory storytelling begins with a single storyteller but allows listeners to contribute their own extensions to the story, thus revealing their understanding of it. The use of talk story departs from conventional school practice in two ways: the first is "to focus reading instruction on comprehension or understanding of the text, rather than solely on word identification," and the second is "to conduct lessons using a culturally compatible . . . style of interaction."
- Dillon (1989, p. 227) describes the behaviors of a white male teacher who was particularly successful with low-income black students in a rural, secondary, low-track reading class. Dillon ascribes the teacher's success to his ability to do two things: (1) "create a culturally congruent



social organization in his classroom that accounted for the cultural backgrounds of his students," and (2) to "vary his teaching style to allow him to communicate effectively with his students during lesson interactions, resulting in increased opportunities for student learning and improved student attitudes toward learning and school in general."

Dillon's study, notes Hollins (1993, p. 95) "clearly points to teaching behaviors that have a positive impact on academic performance without changing the social class or ethnic orientation of the learners. These teaching behaviors can be understood and performed by others."

• Citing two other sources (Collins 1988 and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988) Hollins (1993, p. 95) notes: "Communication is even more effective when cultural meanings are shared. Speaking the same language does not necessarily mean sharing the same cultural understandings. Theoretically, two distinctly different cultural groups may share the same spoken language, but with varying degrees of comprehension due to differences in cultural meanings." Teachers thus need to adjust their "communicative strategies and modes of presentation," identifying those that "best facilitate learning in a particular situation."

In summary, Hollins (1993, p. 96) urges creation of a "social context within the classroom that is comfortable and supportive for every child regardless of background experiences (cultural, ethnic, social, religious, or economic) and social, emotional, psychological, or physical presence. Creating a supportive context for learning means developing friendly and collaborative relationships within the classroom. It has to do with getting children to like themselves and to take pride in their own accomplishments; getting children to be kind, helpful, and respectful toward each other; and building self-confidence and positive interpersonal relationships."

In addition, teachers must use those techniques that will work best with their own students. Competition will probably not motivate a class composed primarily of Native American children, for example, because their culture values cooperation.

Differential Access

Poor and minority students are often denied access to challenging coursework. Counselors place them in remedial or undemanding courses, and because more challenging courses often require students to have taken specific introductory courses, students can never switch to a more demanding track. Irvine cites data showing that "black students, particularly black male students, are three times as likely to be in a class for the educable mentally retarded as are white students, but only one-half as likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented" (Irvine 1990, p. xiv). In addition, the pull-out programs intended to help many of these students end up fragmenting their school day. And after pull-out programs end, students are given little support for reentering the regular classroom, so they tend to backslide when they rejoin their peers.

Lack of Consequences

Unfortunately, there are few consequences for students and teachers if poor and minority students do not learn very much. So long as students put in the required seat time, they will receive a diploma; so long as teachers go through the motions, they will have a job. In many cases, nobody—not the education establishment, not the parents or guardians, not the politicians—protests a status quo that is woefully deficient.

Schools that have had success in teaching poor and minority students do not keep ineffective teachers on the faculty; in these schools, teachers are held responsible if their students do not learn. These schools also collaborate with parents or guardians to ensure that students who come to school and strive to achieve are rewarded.

Disciplinary Practices

Teachers sometimes punish poor and minority children more harshly than they do other children for the same offenses. Moreover, suspension is often the punishment of choice, causing students to miss valuable class time. According to Irvine (1990, p. 16),"one factor related to the nonachievement of black students is the disproportionate use of severe disciplinary practices, which leads to black students' exclusion from classes, their perceptions of mistreatment, and feelings of alienation and rejection, which result ultimately in their misbehaving more and/or leaving school."

On the other hand, some teachers are more lenient with poor or minority students, because they believe these children have been socialized differently than mainstream children. For example, teachers might overlook boisterous or aggressive behavior among poor or minority students, while chastising mainstream students for similar behavior. Teachers need to set forth a clear, reasonable discipline policy and require all students to abide by it.

FIGURE 2.1
Factors Affecting Student Achievement

SCHOOL FACTORS

CURRICULUM

Goals/Standards

Content

Teaching

Assessment

LOW EXPECTATIONS

Cultural/Ethnic

Gender

Linguistic

Socioeconomic

SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

Administrative Structures
- Instructional grouping practices
- Retention/promotion policies
- Scheduling practices
- Schoolwide rules/policies/procedures

Administrative services
- Mental health and health services
- Work/career/technical skills training
- Adaptive life skills
- Professional/staff development

NONSCHOOL FACTORS

TEACHER PREPARATION/CERTIFICATION/LICENSING

Content and Teaching/Learning and Knowledge

SOCIAL/ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Socioeconomic
- Single-parent family
- Nondegreed parent
- Home alone more than three hours a day
- Dropout siblings
- Lack of/inadequate social support services
- Limited English proficiency
- Low socioeconomic status

Economic
- School finance (federal, state, local)

Resource Allocations (programs, services, facilities)

Program Regulations

GOAL: Grade-level performance in basic and advanced academic curricular content areas.

PHILOSOPHY: Prevention vs. Intervention
Proactive vs. Reactive

Hodges 1989

INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS OR GUARDIANS

Poor and minority parents or guardians too often have no opportunities to create an ongoing relationship with their children's schools; in fact, they often have no communication with the schools at all. In turn, schools tend to make few efforts to develop a relationship with poor and minority parents or guardians, who may be too intimidated or too hard-pressed to initiate contact themselves. For parents who don't speak English, the language barrier can pose another formidable obstacle.

James Comer of the Yale Child Study Center has developed a process to foster good relationships among children, teachers, and parents or guardians. Parents or guardians are encouraged to be an active presence in the school. Social activities bring families and school staff together, helping parents or guardians gain trust in the school. The program has reportedly helped to lower dropout rates, among other benefits.

MASKING THE PROBLEM

Schools sometimes avoid revealing how poorly they serve poor and minority children. They do this by refusing to disaggregate achievement data, for example, and by lowering standards so that students get inflated grades that lull parents or guardians into a false sense of security. It is important to know how well—or badly—poor and minority children are performing, so that necessary changes can be made. But such information should not be used to "blame the victim"—to support arguments that these children are less educable, for example.

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Unequal access to resources further reduces poor and minority students' chances of receiving equal opportunities to learn. Poor and minority students typically attend schools that receive less funding than those attended by mainstream students. As a result, they are taught with inferior materials and equipment and have fewer manipulatives, laboratories, and facilities. Teachers in such schools receive less staff development, must cope with larger classes, and have less free time.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF TESTING

Standardized tests can be seen as one way in which a meritocratic society reorders a widely disparate populace into hierarchies of abilities, achievement, and opportunity. Despite the fact that educators have never been fully at ease with the way in which students from different cultures become part of a uniform numerical hierarchy on standardized tests, the main strategy of the excellence movement of the 1980s was to legislate higher educational standards at the state level, most often through increased student testing (ETS Policy Information Center 1990).

Because school districts serving low-income, non-Anglo children were under particular pressure to raise lagging test scores, these districts began to conduct more testing and to link that testing to promotion and graduation (Bauer 1992). Instead of improving the curriculum and enriching learning in preparation for the test, however, the lack of resources in these districts led teachers to narrow the curriculum and to teach to the test through rote learning and drill work (Dorr-Bremme and Herman 1986). By the end of the 1980s, low-income, non-Anglo students were more at risk than ever of not having the higher order skills now deemed so essential (Ascher 1990).

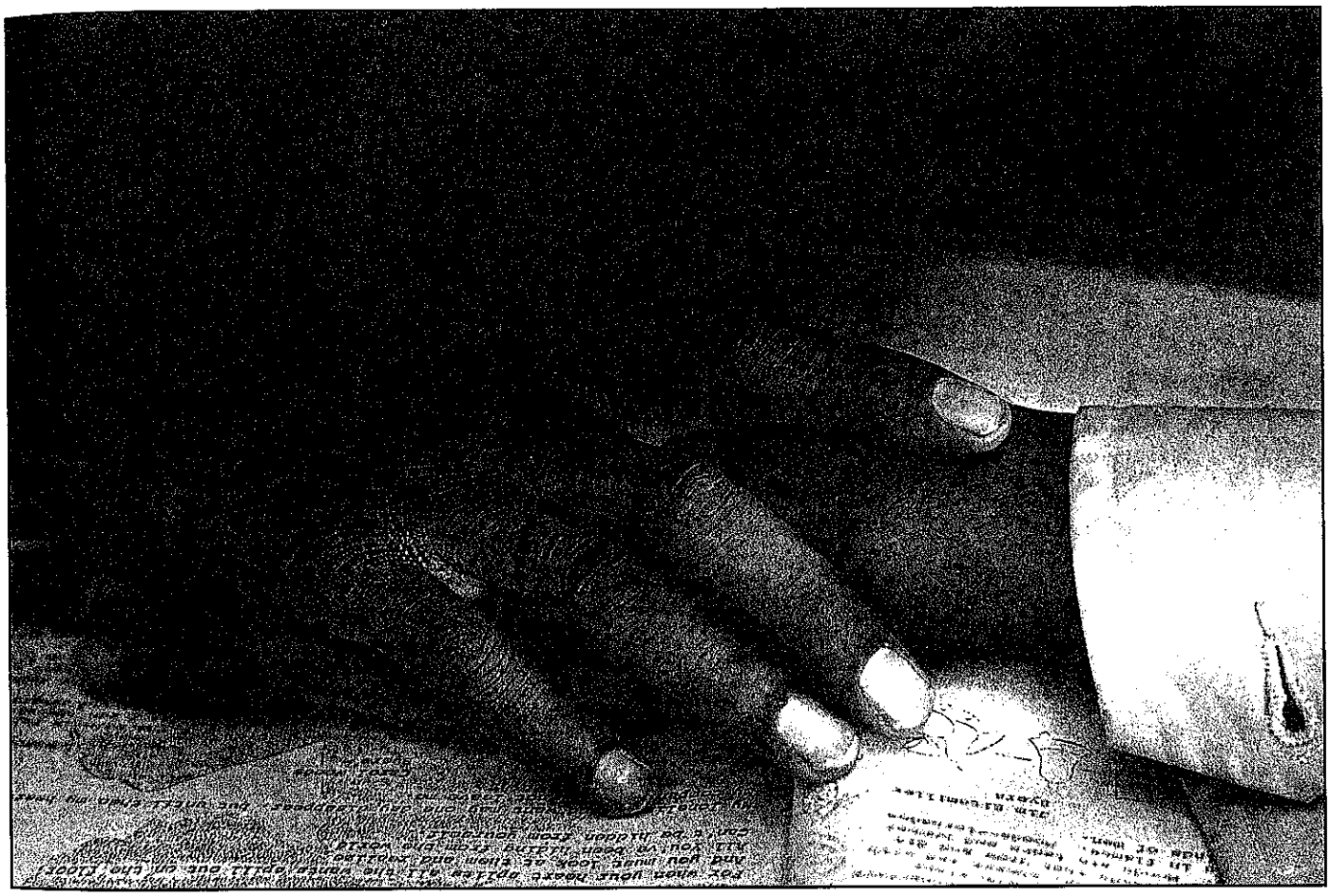
In fact, the power of tests to translate difference into disadvantage is felt at many points in the world of education, most notably in the decision to place low-income and language-minority students into compensatory or bilingual education classes, where a watered-down, fragmented, and rote curriculum reinforces the disadvantages presumably diagnosed by the tests. Ironically, one of the reasons now given for the lack of success in compensatory and bilingual education is that these movements have been based on a "fundamental misassumption about what was needed" (Fillmore and Meyer 1991, p. 629).

Multiple-choice tests are often used inappropriately as the ultimate measure of students' learning and capabilities. Decisions that significantly affect students' academic destinies are sometimes made on the basis of a single test score. Moreover, norm-referenced tests reinforce the attitude that some students should be expected to do poorly. To be fair to all students, assessment should be primarily criterion-referenced and, as far as possible, based on actual performances. Perhaps most important, a variety of measures should be used to assess student learning.

LACK OF BILINGUAL INSTRUCTION

Not surprisingly, many students who do not speak English fall behind in their studies early, because they are not taught content in their native language. When they eventually learn English, they have lost so much ground in their schoolwork that they find it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to catch up with their peers. In far too many cases, these students become discouraged and drop out of school.

Overall, there is the all-too-common problem of organizational inertia and resistance to change: reluctance to accept bilingual programs, to hire bilingual personnel, to upgrade the status of teachers of English as a second language (ESL), to support the acquisition and development of primary language materials, to monitor and assess the



progress of language-minority students, and to deal with the unique problems facing newcomers, including their needs for counseling.

The number of bilingual teachers in U.S. schools is woefully insufficient, and the use of existing bilingual teachers is far from satisfactory. Bilingual teachers are not used to the best advantage-that is, to take maximum advantage of their dual-language abilities. The training and staffing of ESL and "sheltered English" classes remain inadequate. Beyond staffing, there is a dearth of primary language materials, especially for languages other than Spanish, and bilingual educators regard even those materials as inadequate.

Students who speak a language other than English need to be taught content, for a time, in their native language, while they are also given intensive training in English. Then, when they eventually join their English-speaking peers, they will be up to speed in their studies.

A Beginning

Unfortunately, too many educators (and citizens in the larger school community) do not realize that they are guilty of prejudice; they do not realize that their expectations for some young people are lower than their expectations for others. Similarly, many educators fail to take advantage of the rich resources provided by the last two decades of research in education. They have somehow missed the fact that the practice of tracking, for example, has been thoroughly discredited (Oakes 1985).

But naming the barriers to the kind of schooling we want for all of our children is at least a beginning. Naming the problem allows the time-consuming process of treating it to begin. The strategies outlined in this book are intended to provide assistance in treatment.

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