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COUNSELING FOR LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE DISADVANTAGED ADULT: A REVIEW

ABSTRACT: This article provides an overview of research relevant to the disadvantaged adult. A majority of the disadvantaged are excluded from participation in educational programs because of the nature of current educational programs, e.g., prerequisites to training. Inadequate educational background is highly related to unemployment and low aspirational levels. Conversely, low income and a poverty level of life predisposes one to a negative view of education and self. A vicious cycle develops. The implications for education and counseling are explored in terms of (1) a basic education program and (2) life skills development. The thrust of both educator and counselor must be toward specific skill development rather than abstract learnings.

THE DISADVANTAGED ADULT AND EDUCATION

It is quite evident that in order to provide quality education and effective counseling for disadvantaged adults, counselors need to characterize the specific nature of their disadvantage. They need to know exactly how these adults differ from those with whom our traditional educational system has been successful; for even though the existence of academic deficiency among a high percentage of this population is well documented, the specific character of the deficiency is not (Gordon & Wilkerson, 1966, p. 11).

Disadvantaged adults can generally be identified among those who are "below average in school achievement as measured by

standardized tests," and who, in addition, have some combination of one or more of the following problems:

1. Economic deprivation attributable to an absent non-producing, or marginally producing breadwinner.
2. Social alienation caused by racial or ethnic discrimination with all its accompanying deprivations in housing, employment, and education, or by membership in a different or non-English speaking subculture group.
3. Geographic isolation because of transiency or residence in an area far removed from adequate educational facilities (Gordon & Wilkerson, 1966. p. 11).

Educational level, as measured by years of school completed, is a consistently significant variable related to occupation and income as well as to certain other social and psychological factors which may affect the level of living *(Profile of Poverty in Canada,* n.d.). In Canada in 1961, families in which the head had less than secondary education accounted for more than two-thirds of all low income families. Among the disadvantaged, educational level has been found to be consistently below that of the general population so that a major proportion of the disadvantaged are characterized by educational deficiency (Porter, 1965).

There are a disproportionate number of disadvantaged persons as complete or functional illiterates and none who can satisfy the grade-ten prerequisite for vocational training. Thus a majority of the disadvantaged, because they have not obtained grade nine or better, are excluded from participation in those educational programs that offer a potential escape from poverty. A 1960 survey in Canada found that about half of the unemployed had not finished primary school and over 90 percent had not completed high school. Among people who had not completed primary school, the unemployment rate was six times greater than that among high school graduates (*Profile of Poverty in Canada,* n.d.). The unemployment rate of school dropouts from 14 to 19 years old is twice the overall Canadian average (Robins, 1964, p. 5).

A low educational achievement results in unemployability for those in the poverty group (Laskin, 1964) and is, therefore, also related directly to income. An income level of $3,000 or less was associated with illiteracy (Jenness, 1965). In an evaluative study of adult basic education in a southern rural community, a participant generally had an annual family income of less than $1,000 and frequently had terminated his formal schooling at the 4th grade level (Aker, Johns, & Schroeder, 1968). In Canada, the average income of a family head reporting either no schooling or one to four years of schooling completed was $3,318 a year compared with an average of $4,985 for all family heads (Adamson, 1966, p. 115). Among Canadian males with only an elementary education 26 percent earned less than $2,000 annually, and 46 percent, less than $3,000.

Indeed, the effects of poverty, the slums in which one lives, the lack of a job, can counteract whatever educational effect the schools

might have. Ginzberg (1971), regarding the child of poverty, states, "It is difficult to foster a favorable attitude toward education on the part of the student in the face of adverse conditions in the home, in school, and in the community which tend to generate hopelessness, alienation, and lack of faith in oneself (p. 75)."

Goldstein (1967) provided a critical review of the literature on youth from low-income families and education. Following are some of the key findings:

1. ...children of low-income families do not do as well in school as children from more affluent ones (p. 31).
2. As a result of coming from an unstable family without a successful male model, living under marginal social and economic conditions, which include lack of privacy, limited opportunities to explore the outside world, a lack of pleasing surroundings, a scarcity of educational materials and toys and a lack of adult encouragement in their use, low income youth suffer from "stimulus" deprivation which contributes to a variety of skill handicaps (p. 34).
3. ...schools in low-income areas compare unfavorably with those in better areas (p. 39).
4. Children from low-income families receive less instruction in another sense — they tend to be absent more and to leave school sooner than other children (p. 39).
5. ...teachers perceive and treat children from low-income families differently from other children (p. 40).
6. ...social origin (in at least one community) is a powerful influence on friendship patterns at the equivalent of the junior high school level (p. 45).
7. ...large numbers of these youths do not value education as highly, nor do they aspire to as much education as youths from more fortunate backgrounds (p. 47).

EMPLOYMENT AND THE DISADVANTAGED ADULT

The disadvantaged generally suffer extended periods of unemployment. In a Hamilton Ontario Demonstration Project (1964), 160 employable families and 300 unemployable families had been without work for more than a year. Likewise, the employment history of 160 Minneapolis subjects showed that almost half the group (45 percent) had been out of work at least half the time during the preceding five years (Walker, 1965). A study of 52 "difficult-to-place" persons of a sheltered workshop in Montreal revealed that only two subjects had worked more than one hundred days out of a potential of 260 working days (Feintuch, 1954).

In general, the disadvantaged worker is employed less and working less than he wants usually in part-time or casual employment where productivity and income also are low. Hence, under-employment is a major factor in poverty, especially rural poverty. Jenness (1965) associated under-employment with certain occupations such as fishing, trapping, and some forestry operations in the eastern parts of Canada. The Chief of a Delaware settlement of over five hundred residents in Kent County estimated that 85 percent of the potential work force is either completely unemployed or underemployed for most of the year.

There are differences in achievement motivation among groups of different socio-economic status. Kolb (1965) stated that training in achievement motivation was less effective for lower socioeconomic class males than for their upper socioeconomic counterparts. Upper economic individuals do value education more. It could well be that potential under-achievers from higher socioeconomic groups are under pressure to achieve and do so eventually, while potential under-achievers from lower socioeconomic groups are not under such strong pressure and do not feel so out of place (Ringness, 1968, p. 176).

One of the major explanations for the lower level of school achievement among youth from low-income families, white and black, has been that of aspirations. Partly because of their family background and partly because of the way they are treated in school, it is said, large numbers of these youth do not value education as highly, nor do they aspire to as much education as youths from more fortunate backgrounds (Goldstein, 1967, p. 47). Support for such a contention is found in the conclusion of Wylie (1963) that more modest self estimates of school-work ability occur in girls rather than boys, blacks rather than whites, and low-status rather than higher-status children.

In discussing the relationship between level of aspiration and self concept, Wylie (1961) has concluded that self over-estimation is probably as common as self under-estimation. The effect on behavior, as McClelland (1953) has indicated, varies because setting goals and carrying through is markedly opposed to setting goals and not carrying them through. This phenomenon is characteristic of minority youth. They might often verbalize a desired goal but they will not take the intermediate steps necessary to achieve the desired goal because of a real lack of faith or belief that they can achieve (Leonard, 1968). Henderson (1966) describes this as the difference between real and ideal aspirations, with the ideal being what a person would like to achieve, and the real, what the person believes he will in fact achieve.

High aspirations are also related to "destiny control." Those people who feel they are in control of what is happening to them have higher aspirational levels than individuals who feel they are at the mercy of others.

Poverty can destroy aspiration, and in a most cruel manner, but then so can failure at any economic level. Failure in school can do the same. The child may withdraw, for to continue to participate will mean more failure. He might at best develop an aspirational level not compatible with either actual or demonstrated ability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

The socioeconomic characteristics of the disadvantaged suggest areas of program content which would be particularly useful. It would be a serious mistake, however, to regard any program area as prescriptive. At most, they are only suggestive because the disadvantaged themselves must be involved in developing programs which are relevant to their own needs (Anderson & Niemi, 1970).

The high proportion of illiterates and functional illiterates among the disadvantaged indicates a need for competence in the basic skills of reading, writing, and simple computation since these are prerequisite to most other areas of education. Many disadvantaged adults do not possess even the minimum level of education required to qualify them for entry into vocational or job-training programs.

Further, it has been shown that disadvantaged adults often lose jobs because of inadequate social or life skills. An educational program then should consist of two components (a) basic education which includes fundamental skills in mathematics and communication and (b) life skills which assist the individual to solve problems he encounters.

Basic Education

A basic Education Program should be designed to accommodate each student at his own level and rate of learning. It should have a "continuous intake" where students are enrolled and graduated on a varied individual basis. Each unit of work is broken into relevant groups of items of behavioral objectives of precisely stated learning tasks. Since the objectives are behavioral, a system of measurement can be devised to enable the instructor to link the learner's needs as he progresses through the program. Individual prescriptions of varied learning activities can be given to meet any specific set of objectives. Generally, the objectives of a basic education program can be summarized as follows:

1. To give students a truly individualized course by attending closely to individual learning difficulties and keeping a constant check on individual progress.
2. To give students greater responsibility for their own development by letting them know their weaknesses at every stage and letting them help to plan their own programs.
3. To use the most suitable methods, materials, and modes of learning for the students.

Life Skills

Adults frequently leave or lose their jobs for reasons other than lack of job skills. Others never get jobs even though they have certificates and skills to offer. Frequently, the real reasons for not getting or keeping jobs are that skills in solving problems are lacking. Through a planned sequence of experiences, adult students are encouraged and helped to implement a personal program of development in each of the following areas:

1. Developing oneself
2. Coping with home and family responsibilities
3. Using leisure time purposefully
4. Exercising rights and responsibilities in the community
5. Making responsible decisions for future work

The course provides a pre-planned set of experiences in which the students apply problem-solving techniques to the problems suggested by these five areas; however, the students also bring to the Life Skills groups an array of personal problems unique to them.

The consuming preoccupation with survival at the subsistence level by the disadvantaged adult clearly indicates that the content selected in the areas outlined above must be functional and immediately relevant to the problems of the individuals involved. Thus, educational and training programs conducted for disadvantaged adults must center on their needs rather than on content per se (Anderson & Niemi, 1970, p. 67).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING AND GUIDANCE

The counselor's involvement with the disadvantaged adult must include the acquisition of life skills in addition to therapeutic counseling. A mental health model of therapy is insufficient, for if applied in isolation, the counselor assumes that the disadvantaged person is either sick or dysfunctional. He would also assume that his client has acquired the necessary learnings and attitudes to perform in an educational setting. Both assumptions are questionable in light of the fact that the disadvantaged adult has not acquired basic life skills during related developmental periods. Thus, therapy and learning models must be integrated.

The counselor has to (1) aid in the acquisition of life skills and (2) change growth-inhibiting self-attitudes. First the counselor can aid in all five areas of life skills development, as well as act as a human development specialist to teachers in the basic education program. Specific skill learning must be emphasized. For example, problem-solving procedures should be taught and can then be implemented in all problem oriented situations. Human relations skills, such as those offered by Carkhuff (1972), can help in all interpersonal settings. Career development skills can be explored and nurtured.

Second, the counselor must help change self-defeating attitudes. Improved life skills will in and of itself lead to better attitudes about one's ability. Counseling can also change other negative self-percepts. Achievement motivation can be improved through insightful counseling which helps the counselee to assume responsibility for his own behavior and goal attainment. In essence, the combination of a basic educational program and a life skills program, complemented by a counselor who can also foster life skills in the guidance area and offer counseling help can provide a new life for previously "disadvantaged" adults.

RESUME: L'article présente une vue d'ensemble des recherches concernant les adultes désavantagés. Etant donné la nature des programmes d'études actuels, en particulier leurs conditions préalables d'admission, une majorité de ces adultes en sont exclus. Le chômage et un bas niveau d'aspiration sont très reliés à un bas niveau de scolarité. De même, un faible revenu et un niveau de vie inférieur prédisposent l'individu à une perception négative de lui-même et de l'éducation. Il en résulte un cercle vicieux. Dans

cet article on explore les implications de cette situation pour l'éducation et la consultation en termes de (1) la formulation d'un programme éducatif de base et (2) du développement d'habiletés essentielles pour vivre. Les efforts des éducateurs et des conseillers devraient être orientés vers le développement d'habiletés spécifiques plutôt que vers une connaissance abstraite des choses.

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