

The Continuing Appeal of Disadvantage as Deficit: A Canadian Study in a Rural Context

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Teachers in a rural Canadian setting were surveyed about their perceptions of the characteristics of disadvantage. While they correctly attributed disadvantage to features of varying home backgrounds, they also indicated an allegiance to an environmental-deficit philosophy which has been increasingly rejected in the literature. Teachers continued to see disadvantaged children as environmentally deficient children. Particular attention was paid here to language matters, since language has traditionally been a focal point for disadvantage. The implications of the teachers' views are discussed and some recommendations made for teacher training.

Des enseignants canadiens oeuvrant dans des milieux ruraux ont fait l'objet d'un sondage quant à leur perception des caractéristiques des individus défavorisés. S'ils rattachent très justement la situation de ces personnes à divers traits de leurs milieux familiaux, ils indiquent aussi qu'ils adhèrent à une philosophie axée sur la notion de milieu défavorisé, théorie de plus en plus contestée dans les écrits. Les enseignants continuent de voir les enfants défavorisés comme des enfants vivant dans un milieu défavorisé. Une certaine importance est accordée au langage puisque le langage a toujours été considéré comme un facteur clé dans la définition de la personne défavorisée. Les répercussions des points de vue des enseignants ont été analysées et certaines recommandations en regard de la formation des maîtres ont été formulées.

In the educational and psychological literature, the disadvantaged child is one whose personal characteristics and family background are such as to create difficulties at school (and afterwards). Very often the term *disadvantage* is applied to a child from a particular social class or ethnic group, a group possessing "knowledge, skills and attitudes which impede learning" (Passow, 1970, p. 16). In this sense, disadvantage can be seen as sociocultural in nature and certainly need not reflect either genetic or environmental deficiency (Edwards, 1979a, 1981). Thus, disadvantaged children are different children – different, that is, from their mainstream (and often middle-class) classmates. Perhaps the clearest, most visible, and most discussed feature of disadvantage is language difference. While the weight of recent evidence indicates that the speech styles of nonstandard

English speakers are linguistically different, and not deficient, variants, there is no doubt that such variants often become *social* deficits (Edwards, 1979a).

A great deal of work has gone into the elucidation of the actual characteristics which set disadvantaged children apart. These can be seen to fall into two categories. First, there are features of the home environment, including low socioeconomic status, large family size, incomplete or disorganized families, families of ethnic minority and/or immigrant origin, lack of value placed upon formal education, absence of books and other cultural or educational materials at home, and so on (see Edwards, 1979a; Gordon, 1965; Great Britain Department of Education and Science, 1967; Stodolsky & Lesser, 1967). Second, there are personal characteristics of the child itself, presumably deriving from the family lifestyle. Here one finds mention of poor conceptual ability, present-time orientation, poorly-developed "conscience," low self-esteem, poor academic motivation, and, of course, poor language ability (Deutsch, 1967; Edwards, 1979a; Gordon, 1968; Passow & Elliott, 1968).

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify what these characteristics signify. As noted above, disadvantage is best considered as difference rather than deficit. Therefore, the traits discussed should not be seen as "imputations of pathology" (Gordon, 1968, p. 70) but rather as descriptions reflecting alternate emphases, values, and life situations. This is particularly relevant since most workers who investigated characteristics of disadvantage did so from a position which assumed the correctness of middle-class norms, a position which is now seen as untenable (Edwards, 1979a). Of course, it is also essential to realize that differences can easily be translated into deficits if the appropriate social perceptions are operating. It makes perfectly good sense, for example, to see the poor, urban black child as disadvantaged: He or she *is* at a disadvantage when moving in a larger society whose standards, values, and speech styles are different and which deprecates the black variants. It is vital to understand that we can fairly employ the term *disadvantage* without casting the slightest aspersion upon a child's (or group's) lifestyle and culture. It is of course the case that *disadvantage*, in the minds of many, generally connotes an environmental-deficit stance. My point is simply that this useful and accurate term need not logically do so. Disadvantage is a product of social comparison, without which it would not exist in the sense discussed here; more specifically, it reflects an intra-societal comparison among groups unequal in power and status.

With this cautionary note, it is evident that, even accepting the different-but-not-deficient view of the disadvantaged child, it is important and interesting to discover the characteristics possessed which act as

markers of disadvantage. More properly, perhaps, we should emphasize people's *perceptions* of characteristics for, as in many other areas of social life, it is perceived reality which is important for understanding behaviour. It need hardly be said that, in this context, the views of teachers are of no small importance. This is because the comparison process which defines disadvantage is first set in train – for most children, at least – at school. The school is a powerful and highly visible mainstream institution; it is generally the child's first sustained break from home, and its influence begins early and extends over at least a decade. Teachers' perceptions are of intrinsic interest and, as well, may have very real significance in the lives of their charges (see, for example, the work on teacher expectations and pupil progress summarized by Dusek, 1975).

Some work has addressed, particularly, teachers' perceptions of disadvantage. There are two related purposes here. First, teachers are well placed to assess children and to note especially those characteristics which may set some apart from others. Teachers often form expectations and judgements (correctly or incorrectly) which may have important consequences in children's school careers. Second, it has been found that teachers' assessments of children, particularly in the early stages of school life, have some predictive accuracy and may thus provide diagnostic or screening devices for identifying children who are at risk. The use of these assessments has become more popular of late since formal testing is often difficult and unwieldy and may not give appreciably more information than that which teachers can supply. Thus, for instance, Feshbach, Adelman, and Fuller (1974) found that teachers' assessments of kindergarten children were as useful as formal tests in the prediction of elementary school achievement (see also Keogh & Smith, 1970; Kohn & Rosman, 1974; Stevenson, Parker, Wilkinson, Hegion, & Fish, 1976a; 1976b).

Two other relevant studies are those of Edwards (1974) and Archer and Edwards (1982). In the first, 19 Irish teachers provided information on 310 disadvantaged children, completing a 20-item questionnaire for each child. This was done four months after the children first came to school. Factor analysis revealed three major dimensions of importance: a *school* factor reflected teachers' concern with children's language, self-esteem, creativity, educational stimulation at home, and overall likely academic success; a second factor, *home-background*, comprised variables including family socioeconomic status, physical living conditions, and value placed upon formal education; the third factor dealt with children's perceived *emotional* difficulties, and various specific problems were noted by the teachers (withdrawal, unhappiness, aggression, etc.). Overall, this study showed that teachers' judgements of the characteristics of disadvantaged

children had considerable consistency and cohesion. As well, in a separate task in which teachers were asked to rank order a number of characteristics drawn from the literature in terms of descriptive importance, a high degree of agreement was reached, with rankings reinforcing the assessments made of the actual children known to the teachers. Poor living conditions, poor language ability, low socioeconomic status, and assorted emotional difficulties were seen as particularly important as general features associated with disadvantage.

The follow-up study (Archer & Edwards, 1982) then related the information provided by teachers to scores which the same children obtained three years later on standardized intelligence, mathematics, and English tests. It was found that performance at age 8 could be predicted with considerable accuracy from teachers' assessments made at age 5. In particular, teachers' judgements of children's personal characteristics (i.e., as opposed to those dealing with home variables) were found to be important, especially those relating to cognitive ability, emotionality, and language. While cognizant of a possible self-fulfilling prophecy in the predictive relationship, Archer and Edwards concluded that teachers' ratings of children were of diagnostic value in identifying children at risk of later educational difficulties. Indeed, it was recommended that a pilot screening device be constructed on the basis of information which teachers, for the most part, had little difficulty in supplying.

Generally, then, teachers' information and assessments of disadvantage can be both interesting and important. The studies mentioned above serve to confirm what traditionally has been understood, namely, that teachers' insights are valuable. They also indicate that tapping teachers' perceptions of disadvantage may reveal biases and inaccuracies which are themselves important to understand. It is in this sense that the possible presence of a self-fulfilling prophecy – in which teachers' expectations and judgements may actually influence children's progress and school achievement – can be profitably examined. Whether teachers' views are accurate or not (and linguistic evidence, for example, would suggest that perceptions of "poor language" are dangerously incorrect analyses of valid dialectal variation; see Edwards, 1979a), they remain important, and studies in this area can tell us about teachers as well as about children.

The present study attempts to extend the base of information. Specifically, it provides some data from a Canadian perspective, where much of the earlier work derives from European and American settings. Second, this study investigates a rural population; most work has focussed upon the urban context in which concentration makes disadvantage more salient. It may be that non-urban settings produce somewhat different patterns of perceived disadvantage; for example, the greater

homogeneity found in many rural areas might suggest that disadvantage (often linked to class and ethnicity differences) would take different forms. However, in the present study it also has been possible to include consideration of two small ethnic minority groups which *are* represented in the region, Blacks and Acadians. Finally here, but of special interest, this study presents some relatively informal teacher comments about disadvantage. As will be seen below, teachers responding to the standard questionnaire items were encouraged to add personal asides, observations, and qualifications. These can be quite illuminating, especially when considered in conjunction with more formal answers, and it is regrettable that, in much previous work, they have not been attended to. For, while they are subjective, and while injudicious selection may present an inaccurate picture, they may be no less objective than the seemingly more straightforward rating-scale information. While it is not possible to codify them numerically with any great success, teachers' general comments can be categorized, and examples can often be found which neatly capture broadly-held views.

METHOD

Subjects

Teachers from 10 schools (7 elementary and 3 secondary) in northeastern Nova Scotia were asked to participate in a survey of disadvantage. Of the 240 thus reached, 96 produced completed questionnaires (a return rate of 40%). The schools were selected because they served rural Black, White (English-speaking background), and Acadian populations.

Materials

A questionnaire was drawn up to elicit perceptions and assessments of disadvantage, based upon characteristics widely discussed in the literature. The first section asked for basic biographical information; it also asked teachers to say what *disadvantage* suggested to them generally, what characteristics it might possess, whether they had received any information about disadvantage during training, and whether they thought student teachers *should* get such information. Sections 2 and 3 presented 28 descriptive characteristics (see a complete list in Table 1), and teachers were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed that each was an important feature of disadvantage. Section 2 dealt with home background variables (9 items), and section 3 with personal characteristics of children (19 items). For each item, provision was made for teachers to

TABLE 1
Mean Ratings on 28 Home and Child Characteristics (over all teachers)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Mean Rating^a</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
1. Low value placed on education by the home	1.64	0.71
2. Children's curiosity undervalued or unsatisfied at home	1.82	0.75
3. Incomplete families (parental absence)	2.04	0.82
4. Children are poor readers	2.05	0.78
5. Lack of books in the home	2.06	0.96
6. Low family socioeconomic status	2.11	0.77
7. Children have low self-esteem	2.11	0.86
8. Children are easily distractable	2.18	0.73
9. Children have bad grammar	2.18	0.86
10. Children have poor vocabulary	2.19	0.86
11. Children are emotionally insecure	2.26	0.78
12. Children have a poor chance of success	2.36	0.92
13. Children are aggressive to other children	2.38	0.92
14. Children have emotional difficulties	2.39	0.76
15. Children are inarticulate	2.55	0.92
16. Children have little capacity for abstract thought	2.67	0.92
17. Children have poor attendance records	2.71	1.02
18. Family of ethnic minority status	2.76	0.94
19. Children are overactive in class	2.85	0.98
20. Home follows an "alternate lifestyle"	2.88	0.82
21. Children say little in class	2.90	0.95
22. Children are not creative or original	2.98	1.05
23. Children have little "conscience"	3.02	0.94
24. Immigrant family background	3.07	0.90
25. Children are aggressive to teachers	3.12	0.89
26. Children have dialects or accents	3.12	0.93
27. Large family size	3.41	0.99
28. Children have speech impediments	3.61	0.72

^aBased on a scale from 1 ("strongly agree that description is important in disadvantage") to 5 ("strongly disagree").

add comments, note related characteristics, modify their simple check-mark rating, and so on. The final part of the questionnaire directed teachers' attention to language matters. They were asked if language-related problems were important in the area and, if so, if these were found more among particular groups of children. Teachers were again

encouraged to provide additional comments on language and, indeed, on the whole topic of disadvantage generally.

Procedure

Questionnaires were delivered to the principals of the schools involved, all of whom had previously agreed to participate. They were told the purposes of the study and the importance of a good response from teachers. The questionnaires were fully discussed and any questions were answered. Principals were then asked to distribute the forms to all teachers in the school, explaining the study to them; all were most co-operative in seeing that each teacher received a questionnaire and in reminding teachers through memos and announcements about completion and return of the forms. A week after this initial distribution, questionnaires were picked up from the schools. After this, telephone calls were made to remind teachers of unreturned questionnaires, and two additional visits were made to each school to pick up late questionnaires. Given these efforts, it is regrettable that the return rate was no higher than 40%. However, there is no particular reason to think – based upon the pattern of replies received and their correlation with existing literature – that the non-responders would have altered things significantly.

RESULTS

General Information

Of the 96 teachers completing the questionnaire, 56% were male and 44% female. Nova Scotia-born teachers accounted for 90% of the sample, and teaching experience ranged from 1 to 35 years, with a mean of 11.9 years. About one-third of the teachers (36.6%) had received some information about disadvantage; the rest (63.4%) had received none at all. No relationship was found between years of teaching experience and knowledge of disadvantage. The overwhelming majority (98.9%) felt that information on the subject should routinely be provided to student teachers.

The term *disadvantage* suggested a range of things to the teachers (not surprisingly), but home background factors were widely mentioned. Even when personal pupil characteristics were specified, these were often perceived as dependent upon conditions at home. Several illustrative comments might be useful here; these have been chosen because they articulate quite well feelings expressed by many of the teachers. Thus:

Disadvantage suggests an informational and experiential inferiority ... an inability to make full use of novel information and, conversely, to call upon past experiences in novel situations (*Teacher A*)

[Disadvantaged children have] lack of experiences, poor language development ... usually disorganized. They usually are not motivated by long-term rewards. Goals must be short-term. These students generally come from lower economic levels, but not always. A further characteristic of [disadvantaged] families I would say is disorganization and a low priority placed on learning. (*Teacher B*)

The disadvantaged child has the cards stacked against him/her in one way or another. I have seen many children who do well in spite of circumstances, or who turn what many would consider a disadvantage into an advantage. I attended a one-room school (disadvantage?) but we were blessed with excellent teachers and a community generally supportive of education. The group which concerns me most are the Indians. We have had over the years several with promise, but few manage to do something with their lives. There is a disadvantage there – community lack of support that gradually erodes the stamina of fine young people until they give up their efforts to improve themselves, and slip into oblivion – and pass this attitude along to the next generation. (*Teacher C*)

[Disadvantage derives from] a home situation which is extremely lacking in morals, discipline, respect, controls of any nature. In school a child reflects the home life of parents. (*Teacher D*)

To me a disadvantaged student is one who has not had a home life conducive to developing positive attitudes towards school and education. During my years of teaching I have found that most of the disadvantaged students I have dealt with were made so in the home. (*Teacher E*)

The Rating-Scales

Each of the 28 characteristics presented to teachers was rated on a 5-point scale, where *strongly agree* (that the characteristic is important in disadvantage) was coded as 1, *agree* as 2, *uncertain* as 3, *disagree* as 4, and *strongly disagree* as 5. The mean ratings in order of importance, over all teachers, are set out in Table 1. It should be noted that separate tabulations were made for each of the 10 schools and for each of the two *types* of school (elementary and secondary); these are not reported since

the results thus broken down did not differ substantially from the overall ratings made by the entire group of 96 teachers.

A principal-components factor analysis was performed on the rating-scale data. Factors with *eigenvalues* equal to or greater than 1 were rotated to the 8-factor final solution shown here as Table 2. For ease of interpretation, factor loadings of less than 0.4 are not shown, and variables are listed in order of loading magnitude. The first six factors are the most interesting here, relating to three broad aspects of relevance to perceived disadvantage: school life, home background (three factors), and personal characteristics of children. The first factor might be termed the *school* one, with interrelationships among variables including vocabulary, reading, and grammar. The second factor relates to children's activity, aggression, and conscience, and might be styled the *emotional* factor. The third, fifth, and sixth factors are those of *home background*: the first of these reflects psychological features of home life; the second, educational features; and the third, family type (i.e., minority, immigrant, or poor). The fourth factor is a *language* dimension, with loadings on speech-related variables. Overall, the factor structure accounted for 65.6% of the total variance.

Teachers also made a number of comments relating to the rating-scale sections of the questionnaire. To the list of home-background characteristics provided in the questionnaire itself, the following items were added: poor child-parent rapport, little parental interest in children's school progress, alcohol abuse, parental violence, poor parental values, lack of community spirit, little regard for culture, serious parental illness. Most teachers pointed out that although low socioeconomic status is often a factor in disadvantage, a deprived home environment (lack of love, security, and discipline were often mentioned here) can occur among the more affluent as well. Teachers also specified further personal characteristics which they thought important: lack of interest, inattention, withdrawal, listlessness, poor motivation, poor social skills (especially in peer-group relations), frustration, lack of discipline, health problems (including poor diet, clothing, and hygiene), excessive television viewing, poor study habits, and lack of knowledge of current events or of the world at large.

Language-Related Matters

When asked whether or not they noticed any particular language problems among children, 62.5% of the teachers said yes. The specific areas mentioned were (in order of frequency of observation): inadequate vocabulary, inability to articulate thoughts and feelings, poor grammar,

difficulty in reading and writing, mispronunciation, regional dialects and accents, slang and foul language, and stammering.

Teachers were also asked to say if language problems affected some groups of children more than others. Here, 46.4% said that certain groups did indeed have more difficulties than others. In order of the greatest frequency of mention, these were: ethnic minority children, particularly Black and Acadian; children whose families placed little value on education and whose parents were poorly educated; children from low socioeconomic backgrounds; children whose homes contained few books or other educational or cultural materials; and children who did not participate much in conversation at home.

Some comments made by teachers serve to illustrate the main concerns here:

[Children often cannot] articulate their thoughts and feelings in such a way that they satisfy both themselves and their audience. (*Teacher F*)

The common element of experience among all disadvantaged children is infrequent interaction with adults in discovery activities where opinions and experiences can be shared. (*Teacher G*)

Both receptive and expressive skills seem to have low levels of value and priority when it comes to developing accuracy and fluency. (*Teacher H*)

I think Head Start programs and the like are excellent for these children, giving them experiences and lots of opportunity for expression. (*Teacher I*)

Blacks have a slang language all their own. They will not use proper English when opportunity arises. (*Teacher J*)

DISCUSSION

Perhaps the first thing to note here is the similarity between the present findings and those found elsewhere. This is particularly interesting since, as noted above, the context investigated here was rural and Canadian where other studies have focussed upon urban, non-Canadian settings. This suggests that, at a general level, the perceived features of disadvantage have rather widespread significance. Most of the characteristics presented to teachers in the rating scales (see Table 1), which were drawn from earlier work, were considered here to be important elements in disadvantage. In fact, 22 of the 28 descriptions were given an average

TABLE 2
Rotated Factor Matrix

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Factor Loadings</i>							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Vocabulary	.802							
2. Reading	.786							
3. Grammar	.713							
4. School success	.696							
5. Distractability	.671							
6. Abstract thought	.619						.496	
7. Articulation	.538						.447	
8. Aggression (to children)		.842						
9. Aggression (to teachers)		.784						
10. Overactivity		.708						
11. Emotional problems	.468	.479						
12. Conscience		.406						
13. Incomplete family			.786					
14. Alternate lifestyle			.697					
15. Insecurity			.529					

TABLE 2 (concluded)

Variables	Factor Loadings							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
16. Self-esteem	.423		.523					
17. Dialect/Accent				.710				
18. Speech impediments				.655				
19. Little to say in class				.431		.415		
20. Education undervalued					.823			
21. Lack of books in home					.649			
22. Unsatisfied curiosity					.603			
23. Ethnic minority						.761		
24. Immigrant						.656		
25. Low SES						.496		
26. Creativity							.718	.855
27. Large family								.509
28. Attendance								
Percentage of Total Variance	24.3	10.3	7.1	5.8	5.4	5.0	4.0	3.7
Percentage of Common Variance	36.9	15.7	10.9	8.8	8.2	7.7	6.2	5.6

rating of less than 3 – indicating agreement or strong agreement that they were important. As well, the additional features written in by the teachers do not reveal characteristics unique to the area studied here. Finally here, the results of the factor analysis – with its broad groupings of school, emotional and home-background variables – are very similar to results from other contexts, particularly the Irish one noted in the introductory section (see Edwards, 1974).

There are some interesting and noteworthy differences revealed in the present study however. Large family size, for example, is not considered a particularly salient factor in disadvantage; this may reflect the fact that in a rural and largely Catholic area families are typically bigger than those elsewhere. Indeed, several teachers noted that they had come from large families themselves and hardly thought of themselves as disadvantaged. There is also not much suggestion here that aggression towards teachers is of importance; again, one might consider the influence of a rural setting in which traditional values concerning authority figures remain of some importance. In this regard, too, one notes that lack of conscience (often referred to in earlier work as symptomatic of the disadvantaged child) was not seen as especially relevant. Immigrant and ethnic-minority origin was also found to be relatively unimportant in the present context; the area simply does not contain many immigrants, or at least many new immigrants. The Scottish settlers (and others of British provenance) are well-established and form, in fact, the mainstream. Others, particularly the Dutch farming community, are also well-assimilated and do not possess those visible marks of group difference which so often characterize the disadvantaged in other contexts. The rural Black community is relatively small and, although obviously a visible minority, is not a new infusion into the area. Finally, the Acadian French group is also a longstanding one and, except for one or two concentrated pockets, is well mixed with other groups. There are, as will be seen below, some further notes of interest concerning minority-group *language* matters, but immigrant or ethnic-minority origin *per se* does not seem to be the feature of disadvantage here which it so clearly is in larger and more heterogeneous settings.

It will be noted that, in both rating-scale responses and additional comments, teachers particularly stressed home background characteristics of disadvantage. If we look at the 10 most important features as shown by the rating-scale responses (Table 1), we see that 5 refer to home variables and 5 to children's personal characteristics. However, since there were only 9 of the former type presented to teachers, and 19 of the latter, we see that the emphasis is upon family factors. This is reinforced by teachers' comments. All of the first five of their comments reproduced

above refer to the importance of the home. In one sense, of course, this is scarcely to be wondered at; children must obviously reflect the homes from which they come. Nevertheless, teachers' attention to home variables might be thought encouraging in that it shows a willingness to look behind the actual pupil characteristics which present themselves in class and to consider underlying causal factors. It is also worth noting, in this connection that, although teachers agreed that home socioeconomic status was an important factor, many were at pains to point out that a simple association between poverty and disadvantage may not always be accurate. These are encouraging signs.

Less encouraging, though, is the manner in which home background (and other) variables are understood by teachers. As implied in the introduction, there are essentially three ways to account for educational disadvantage as a phenomenon affecting groups: genetic inferiority, environmental deficiency, and environmental or sociocultural difference. It was pointed out that the last of these is most likely; this means, in terms of home background variables, that *different* values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge are what contribute to disadvantage, rather than substantive deficiencies (excepting, of course, physical aspects of poverty which are clearly disadvantaging). The teachers in this study seem largely to accept the environmental-deficit position. The first two comments reproduced above, for example, show an acceptance of this viewpoint – indeed, Teacher A appears to have some familiarity with the very terms in which this viewpoint has been discussed in the literature (e.g., “disadvantage suggests an informational and experiential inferiority”). Teacher G alludes to “infrequent interaction with adults in discovery activities,” and Teacher I approves of Head Start programs as compensations for children's lack of experience. Certainly, not all teachers phrased their feelings in such terms, but the general tenor of opinion is captured well by these comments. And, to repeat, this view of disadvantage is one which, although once popular in the literature (e.g., Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Deutsch, 1967; Hess & Shipman, 1968a; 1968b), is now increasingly discredited largely on the grounds of its implicit and unwarranted acceptance of the correctness of middle-class norms and standards (and the consequent inferiority of others; see Edwards, 1979a).

In holding an environmental-deficit view, teachers are perhaps only reflecting widely-held social attitudes, for there is little evidence that more recent academic insights have made much impression here. Indeed, if we look at language in particular, we see that despite much linguistic and psychological evidence, many in education continue to view certain speech styles as deficient or substandard approximations to “proper” forms.² It is perhaps most distressing to consider the views of teachers

who, like Teacher A here, have obviously read or heard about disadvantage (as shown by the vocabulary used in the comment) but who have accepted a line of argument which should have been countered. This may indicate a major difficulty: it is common to hear calls for teacher training, in-service workshops, and the like to deal with the latest psychological developments of interest to teachers. However, teachers may not get a full or adequate presentation, and this may lead to a little knowledge becoming dangerous. As well, teachers may adapt new information to old viewpoints. This is a process well understood in a cognitive-dissonance framework, and, indeed, it makes sense enough for an individual within an existing belief system, but it hardly bodes well for the educational enterprise as a whole.

Finally here, we must refer the reader to the comment of Teacher D which, again, reflects views expressed by others in the sample. Here, the disadvantaged home is seen clearly in value terms; it lacks "morals, discipline, respect, controls of any nature." This may seem to some an old-fashioned and hide-bound approach; to others, perhaps, it might be seen to stem from a strong ethical and religious base which, indeed, is present in the area studied. In addition, however, it should be noted that this attitude is really what lies behind much of the academic writing on disadvantage as environmental deficit (Edwards, 1979a). For the latter is very value-laden, assuming as it does the correctness of middle-class standards and lifestyles, and the consequent deficiency of any which differ. In a sense, then, Teacher D is simply expressing more openly a view which has been often hidden behind a social-psychological facade.

Turning to consider reactions to language – as noted above, a particularly salient feature of disadvantage in many contexts – it can be seen that poor grammar, vocabulary, articulation, and reading are all considered important features here. This probably reflects, again, a general environmental-deficit viewpoint.³ The bulk of current linguistic evidence is that all normal children possess a well-formed language system by the time they come to school (e.g., Gumperz & Hernández-Chávez, 1972). Trudgill has gone further here, noting that "all normal adult native speakers know and therefore use their own dialect of English perfectly ... native speakers do not make mistakes" (1975, p. 45). This implies that children's language errors can only be seen as such if they represent incorrect or incomplete versions of the adult form appropriate to their own speech community, and this, quite simply, may not be that of the school. Teachers are correct enough when they point to grammar, vocabulary, and other differences, which may reflect this home-school discontinuity, as representing disadvantage in a school context. But do teachers go further than this? Do they see language differences as

language deficits? The evidence in the literature suggests that very often they do (Edwards, 1979a). In the present study, too, there are suggestions that – for language in particular, as for characteristics of disadvantage in general – teachers do see difference as evidence of underlying deficit. The comments of Teachers *F*, *G*, *H*, and *I*, reproduced above, strongly indicate this. Children are seen to be unable to communicate adequately, they lack the experiences and interactions which are necessary for developing good language skills, and, indeed, it is suggested that their “receptive and expressive” talents are not greatly valued anyway. This indicates support for the views expressed by deficit theorists in the 1960s (e.g., Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) which have been shown to be linguistically and psychologically untenable (Edwards, 1979a).

Teachers cannot be said to be unsympathetic to language “problems” and it is probably fair to say that there exists greater tolerance for language variation now than there once was. Still, although teachers view language differences as springing from varied home backgrounds (a claim which is true), they also see them as necessitating some sort of compensatory action (a claim which is dubious). Several teachers here commented extensively on the subject of “poor English” learned at home, and on the need to teach children “correct English.” This task, some felt, was analogous to teaching a new language altogether. Various programs and activities were suggested to help children, including oral fluency lessons, speech therapy, and, of course, the Head Start-type programs noted explicitly by Teacher *I* and referred to more obliquely by others. Again, this emphasis is redolent of the highly-structured compensatory language drills and programs so much advocated by deficit theorists – the underlying philosophy of which is of course undercut by rejection of the overall deficit approach to disadvantage.

Given that the area studied here is relatively homogeneous, it is not surprising that children’s possession of dialects or accents was seen to be fairly unimportant as a feature of disadvantage (see Table 1). It is worth pointing out though that, where teachers *were* in contact with numbers of minority-group children, the speech patterns of these were singled out for attention. Thus, many teachers put Black and Acadian children at the top of the list of groups having language problems. Teacher *J* reflects a fairly general view here. In fact, in the secondary school which had large numbers of Black students, 11 of the 22 teachers commented explicitly on Black children’s language difficulties (the comment of Teacher *J* being one of these statements). This seems only to illustrate, once again, the persistence of attitudes which misrepresent the capabilities of speakers of nonstandard English.

In summary, the present findings indicate a continued allegiance to

a deficit philosophy of disadvantage which inaccurately characterizes differences in linguistic and other behaviour. The similarity to results from other contexts far outweighs the relatively minor differences which the particular setting of this study appears to have produced. We thus have further evidence of the generalizability of our information about perceptions of disadvantage and of the need to better inform teachers of the latest psychological and linguistic insights. This is, admittedly, a difficult process. It may be, as suggested above, that teachers (like others) incorporate new information into existing belief structures; this makes real attitude change difficult. And, for new teachers, however well informed, the power of the context within which they will work may overwhelm their own views. This has been pointed out by Fuchs in her discussion of how deficit approaches to disadvantage are maintained. The teacher becomes "socialized by the attitudes of those around her ... she has learned to behave and think in a way that perpetuates a process by which disadvantaged children continue to be disadvantaged" (1973, p. 85).

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, we should seriously consider fuller and more extensive approaches to teacher training, especially concerning language attitudes. As has been suggested elsewhere (Edwards, 1979a), there already exists a great deal of easily accessible information on disadvantage in general, language disadvantage in particular, and, indeed, on the whole difference-deficit issue. Those charged with preparing new teachers, as well as those responsible for updating teachers' information, must pay more heed to this.

A greater awareness of the aetiology of disadvantage will not, of course, resolve the matter. Disadvantage ultimately rests upon social comparison, and whenever groups within society come into contact with one another the possibility of disadvantage arises. But it is presumably important to know just what disadvantage really represents. However well-intentioned, a teacher can surely do no good in the long term by perpetuating an inaccurate picture of the talents and potentials of certain groups. And, in the short term, there is abundant evidence that misperceptions can cause unnecessary distress to individual children (Edwards, 1979a). It may be that, in the larger scheme of things, schools and teachers alone can hardly expect to eradicate disadvantage. They can at least attempt not to exacerbate it.

NOTES

- ¹ This investigation, a section of a larger study, was supported in part by a grant to the first author from the Multiculturalism Directorate, Department of the Secretary of State, Ottawa.

- ² Indeed, there still exist academic treatments from a deficit viewpoint (see Honey, 1983 and, for a review of this work, Edwards, 1983).
- ³ See Edwards (1977; 1979b) for some data on speech perceptions and Edwards (in press-a; in press-b) for comments on the persistence of *language*-deficit views particularly, views which suggest a continuing influence by Bernstein and his notions of so-called *restricted* and *elaborated* speech codes (see Bernstein, 1971; 1973).

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Lehrer in einer ländlichen kanadischen Gegend wurden zu ihren Ansichten über Charakteristiken der Benachteiligung befragt. Obwohl sie korrekterweise eine Benachteiligung Aspekten der unterschiedlichen häuslichen Umstände zuschrieben, deuteten sie ebenso eine Neigung zur Umwelt-Deprivations-Philosophie an, die in der Literatur immer mehr abgelehnt wird. Lehrer sehen benachteiligte Kinder weiterhin als Kinder mit einer unzulänglichen Umwelt an. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit wurde hier Sprachfragen gewidmet, da Sprache traditionell ein Blickpunkt für Benachteiligung war. Die Auswirkungen der Standpunkte der Lehrer wurden diskutiert und einige Empfehlungen ausgesprochen hinsichtlich Lehrer-Fortbildung.

Se llevó a cabo una encuesta entre los maestros de un ambiente rural canadiense acerca de sus percepciones de las características de la desventaja. Mientras que atribuyeron correctamente la desventaja a rasgos de antecedentes familiares variables, los maestros también indicaron cierta lealtad hacia una filosofía de déficit del ambiente que cada vez más se está rechazando en la literatura especializada. Los maestros siguen considerando a los niños desventajados como niños cuyo ambiente es deficiente. Se dió cierta atención especial

al lenguaje, dado que el lenguaje ha sido tradicionalmente el enfoque principal de la desventaja. Se discuten las implicaciones de las opiniones de los docentes y se hacen recomendaciones para el adiestramiento de maestros.

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