



Critical Issues in Research Related to Disadvantaged Children

During recent years the national thrust against poverty and discrimination has changed markedly the roles of the researcher in child development and the evaluator in early childhood education. Current events and the phenomenon of large-scale programs of social change, funneled primarily through education, have grayed the lines between the developmental psychologist and the educational researcher and have placed both in the front lines of the political action.

No longer can the scholar pursue his interests in such topics as social class and ethnic differences in school achievement, in hunger and disease, in language learning, or patterns of intellectual abilities in an isolated manner divorced from the implications of his findings for the world around him. He now finds his advice sought in realms far beyond the academic community, on topics beyond the realm of his expertise, by persons less concerned with

scientific rigor than with immediate practical solutions to pressing problems. More importantly, what the researcher says often has an intimate involvement in the life-and-death decisions concerning large-scale, heavily funded social action and educational programs.

With research and evaluation findings becoming more and more potent instruments in public policy making, the researcher finds himself torn between the pursuit and dissemination of scientific information on the one hand, and his concerns for the welfare and best interests of his target population, disadvantaged children, on the other. This conflict is often intensified by the demand for rapid dissemination of research findings and their speedy translation into legislated programs. Further, the political climate has made research in this area good news copy. Newspapers, magazines, and TV audiences are provided with brief glimpses of the "research" evidence which may be mis-

construed, blown out of proportion, overgeneralized, or used without the cautions and reservations the researcher himself would impose.

Given this dilemma, it is vitally important that researchers direct their attention toward those factors which bear directly on the validity, generalizability, and dissemination of their research findings, before they find themselves in the position of losing their credibility as a source of useful information.

Accumulated evidence indicates the difficulty in interpreting the results of standardized tests with populations for which they were not designed and against which they have not been normed. Doubts have been raised concerning the applicability of many presently used psychometric procedures with particular subpopulations of children, especially with black urban and rural, American Indian, and Spanish-speaking Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican children. If these procedures are



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not valid as predictors of the abilities of these children, what shall be used in their place? Is it possible to draw valid conclusions from the years of research during which these instruments were used with disadvantaged children?

Relevant questions also are being asked about other biases that may be introduced where there are differences in ethnicity or cultural background between the researcher and his subjects. Do different results occur when the background of the researcher is varied? Are only selective results reported? These are questions so basic they cannot be neglected.

As the number of federally funded early intervention projects, designed to equalize the educational and social opportunities of the various elements of society, has been increased, there has been an increasing demand for evi-

dence of their effectiveness. The emphasis has focused upon cost-benefit analysis, observable behavioral change, and short-term performance, particularly in the educational realm. The choice of the criteria of effectiveness, the evaluational models used, and the instruments for obtaining the data have all become topics of lively debate. Some evaluators argue for a wider scope of possible outcomes to be investigated over a longer period of time. For others the processes of decision making are the primary concern of evaluation at this point in time. Some call for nationwide evaluations; others decry evaluation that separates itself from the unique characteristics of a particular program and locale. The one thing that is increasingly evident is that the decisions made by the researcher at these choice points will go a long way in determin-

ing the nature of his findings and the type of impact they will have on those individuals holding fiscal and political power.

These and other issues surrounding research relating to disadvantaged children will be discussed in a symposium to be held on 28 December 1970 at the AAAS meeting in Chicago. Particular attention will be given to (i) the implication of design selection in evaluation of programs for the disadvantaged; (ii) the construction and selection of measures; and (iii) ethnic and cultural biases in research with children.

The symposium is being co-sponsored by the Society for Research in Child Development.

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The Preliminary Program and registration forms for the Meeting and housing appear in the 25 September issue of Science. Reports of symposia appear in the following issues: 28 August, "Human Behavior and Its Control"; 4 September, "Land-Use Problems in Illinois"; 11 September, "Aleutian Ecosystem"; and 18 September, "Reducing the Environmental Impact of Population Growth."