

THE PREPARATION OF VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE
TEACHERS TO PLAN AND CONDUCT PROGRAMS FOR
DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

by

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Being in poverty is one of the handicaps which tends to place students in a disadvantageous position. It is by no means the only handicap. Poverty, however, is a factor which most seriously limits the contact of students with many of the cultural aspects of life and living. The lack of development, or environment, in contemporary cultural life places limitations on one's capacity to share in the benefits of academic opportunities which are apparently available. Because of the fact that these educational experiences have not had the meaning intended for some students, there are among our students those who can not read, write, spell, compute, and communicate at a level expected and necessary to make optimum progress in our various courses in vocational education as presently pursued. Thus, it becomes necessary for us to take this fact into account in making plans and structuring programs for disadvantaged youth.

There are several facts which should be understood when we engage in making plans for the disadvantaged. We should be careful to avoid making a baseless inference that disadvantaged youth are innately incompetent to learn because they are poor; to the contrary, many mental jewels will be found among youth who have been crippled by ineffective instruction. Socioeconomic and cultural handicaps refuse to respect artificial boundaries of geography and race. The South has a generous supply of disadvantaged youth. Northern ghettos have their share. Negro youth contributes disproportionately to both.

There are certain factors which tend to characterize youth which, according to commonly accepted standards, we tend to classify as disadvantaged. Generally, they entertain unrealistically high educational and occupational aspirations. These aspirations, many times, are not in tune with demonstrated capacity or with alternatives existing in the structure of the society. Many disadvantaged youth will be found in families whose incomes are below the poverty level. The parents of these youth usually have completed eight grades or less of formal schooling, but hold, for their children, extremely high aspirations. Likewise, they more frequently than not offer positive reinforcement toward upward occupational and educational mobility for their children. Regardless of ethnic group concerned, mothers more frequently are the most influential persons in their lives to learn, to do well, to achieve, to excel. Among those who have been exposed to it, vocational agriculture is the high school subject best liked. Likewise, rural youth tend to like vocational agriculture better than urban youth, probably for this reason. The

occupational choice process tends to be about equally distributed over the four high school years. There tends to be an aversion among these youth toward skilled and semiskilled occupations, most of which require about two years of post-secondary preparation. They tend to associate these occupations with clothes worn by people engaged in these occupations, the homes they live in, their status in life. There is a tendency to aspire to either a minimal education or "shoot for the stars." They are highly perceptive of cues to insincerity on the part of guidance counselors and teachers. Many youth possessing these characteristics are potential dropouts.

In planning and conducting educational programs for these youth, the implications are that we should take these characteristics into consideration. The instruction must be made relevant to the aspirations of the youth but must, at the same time, be commensurate with their learning capacity. They must be able to see from day to day that what is about to be learned has a definite relationship to an attainable goal of importance to them. Action-participation, with its many variants, is probably the most effective teaching procedure. Attention spans are short; variety should be a byword. We shall need to minimize verbosity and maximize action and participation.

We should remember that acts of reinforcement of learning, punishments and rewards, are interpreted differently by low ability and high ability students. A disproportionate number of disadvantaged youth tend to have low ability.

These youth require more personal counseling than youth who are more advantageously situated. Many of them are disadvantaged because they have not had counsel on the many personal problems which beset them. They need an opportunity to share significantly in leadership enterprises of social and academic importance. This includes the Future Farmers of America, on the local, state, and national levels.

Good and valid arguments could be waged for and against heterogeneous grouping of students. These debates have gone on for decades. It would appear, from this vantage point, that the stigma, the social implications of separating disadvantaged youth into a special camp would tend only to amplify disadvantages possessed by these youth. It seems that the lesser of the two evils would be to avoid structuring a hierarchy, and providing the special services needed by these disadvantaged students as unobtrusively as possible. True, this will require expert teachers. But, do we need any other kind in our classrooms? Inexpert teaching, coupled with inappropriate and misdirected stimulation of aspiration lie at the roots of the disadvantaged position in which many of our present-day students are found.

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