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# CHARACTERISTICS OF DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

J R Edwards*
*Educational Research Centre,*
*St Patrick's College, Dublin*

Information obtained from teachers on the characteristics of 310 Dublin children in infant classes in disadvantaged areas was factor analyzed, revealing important scholastic home background and emotional clusters of measures Among these measures, emotional and language problems were seen as particularly important In addition, data concerning teachers' perceptions of disadvantage were obtained and there was considerable agreement among them as to the relative importance of certain traits related to disadvantage

Disadvantaged children have been considered as those whose home background does not prepare them as well as other children for an education which largely reflects middle-class values (18, 25) For some (perhaps most) children, early education continues with the sorts of knowledge and skills acquired in preschool life For disadvantaged children, however, the early years of school may represent a rather sudden discontinuity with the values and lifestyle they have grown up with Some observers have viewed the differences between home and school as being so marked as to render the difficulty encountered by disadvantaged children one of acculturation (15)

Disadvantage is often associated with poverty and, indeed, one would expect to find a considerable number of disadvantaged children living in areas whose visible characteristics include poor housing, low income and high unemployment It is important to realize, however, that disadvantage is not inevitably associated with poverty, nor is it always absent in middle class surroundings (31, 35) Inadequate housing, income and employment, while useful gross indicators, may sometimes divert attention from other important factors contributing to disadvantage, some of which may be present in more affluent homes (19, 31, 34)

Typically, planning compensatory education for disadvantaged children has used a geographical approach – this is, children living in areas having the visible characteristics noted above have been selected as participants in compensatory education projects One can see at least three reasons why

* Requests for off prints should be sent to J R Edwards, Educational Research Centre, St Patrick s College Dublin 9

this should be so Such areas are relatively easily determined, it is probable that they do contain numbers of children who would benefit from some form of compensatory education and, although the traits of disadvantaged children have been studied (e g , 10, 11, 26), there has not been sufficient investigation, in many cases, to warrant a more individual approach to the problem

It is apparent that better knowledge of the characteristics of disadvantaged children would be useful (6, 9, 17, 29) Not only could compensatory education projects be improved by becoming more specifically attuned to the needs of the participants, but such knowledge could also be used in the construction of diagnostic instruments that could be employed in many different areas of the community There has already been some progress made in this direction For example, Ferguson, Davies, Evans and Williams (8) translated eight of the Plowden Report's criteria for the identification of educational priority areas into specific measures amenable to quantification and gathered data on their frequency of occurrence in schools serving different types of communities Evans (7) has described a process in which information about home and school characteristics related to disadvantage was collected at the time of school entry for a large sample of children Two years later, this information was related to the school achievement of these children in an attempt to discover the best early predictors of school progress This led to the construction of a screening profile useful in helping to identify children with potential school problems Drawing upon information from earlier work about characteristics associated with dis advantage, the present study was designed to supplement such work in an Irish context

## METHOD

### *Sample*

Teachers and pupils in this study were drawn from seven Dublin schools which were participating in an experimental curriculum for disadvantaged children at the infant level All the schools had been selected for that purpose on the basis of more or less visible characteristics of poverty and disadvantage Thus, the present study took as its starting point a population previously designated as disadvantaged by education authorities

In each school, head teachers had been asked to select 50 children whom they thought would benefit from the experimental curriculum The children thus chosen were distributed among 20 classes in the seven schools This potential population of 350 children for the present study was reduced by two factors information on one group of 19 children was not available

as the regular teacher had left and the new teacher did not know the children well enough to provide the information required for this study and, secondly, over the other classes in the seven schools, a total of 21 children either moved, were transferred, or were otherwise unavailable Thus, the number of children on whom data were obtained was 310 (148 boys and 162 girls) The mean age of the children was 4 98 years (SD 0 43 years) Nineteen teachers were involved, as well as the head teachers, in each of the schools

*Procedure*

*(a) Teacher Interview* Seventeen of the 19 teachers, and all seven head teachers were interviewed by the writer * During the course of this inter view, teachers were asked (i) their place of birth, (ii) the number of years they had been teaching, (iii) whether, as students, they had been given any information about disadvantaged children, (iv) if they thought that new teachers in training should be given information about disadvantaged children, (v) what they understood by the term 'disadvantage', and what pupil characteristics it suggested to them

*(b) Teachers' Ranking Task* Each of the 24 teachers interviewed was asked to rank ten traits, selected from previous literature concerning disadvantage, in order of their importance as useful and accurate discriptions of dis advantaged children (10, 11, 18) The teachers were asked to base their rankings upon their own teaching experience Some of the traits related to the child himself, and some to his home background Each was typed on a separate white filing card Before each presentation, the cards were shuffled and then given to the teacher who was asked to put them in order from most to least important The following are the ten traits as they appeared on the cards (i) low family socio-economic status, (ii) agression and/or hostility on the part of the child towards the teacher or towards other children, (iii) broken or incomplete families (for example, only one parent in the home due to marital problems, separation, desertion, etc ), (iv) emotional problems shown by the child, (v) poor or inadequate living conditions, (vi) large family size, (vii) poor attendance at, or truancy from, school, (viii) less regard for 'conscience' on the part of the child (for example, failing to understand or to obey simple examples of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour, lying, or cheating at school work), (ix) poor language ability

* Two teachers were not interviewed One had only one child in her class on whom information was collected *(Procedure, part c)*, and the other teacher had only two such children In addition neither of these two teachers participated in the ranking task *(Procedure, part b)*

of the child, (x) low self-esteem or feelings of self worth on the part of the child (for example, showing an 'inferiority complex' when confronted with school work, or in situations involving the participation of other children)

*(c) Pupil Questionnaire* All 19 classroom teachers completed a questionnaire for each child in the study in their class The completed questionnaires provided information on the following 20 measures For each, the coding procedure is indicated in those cases where a numerical translation is not immediately apparent Also indicated is supplementary information collected, but not coded for factor analysis (i) Age of the child (ii) Sex of the child (iii) Socio-economic status of the family This was determined by combining the teacher's estimate of the income level of the home on a four point scale from 'poor' to 'well-off', with the father's occupation, the combined information was expressed in terms of a six point scale, ranging from 'professional' to 'manual or unskilled worker' (iv) Number of children in the family (v) Ordinal position of the child in the family In line with the procedure used by Kellaghan and Macnamara (19), a numerical index of ordinal position was calculated which took into account the size of the family Each child's unmodified ordinal position was divided by the total number of children in the family Thus, a child who was second in a family of five would receive a rating of 40, while the second in a family of six would be rated 33 (vi) Whether or not the family received supplements of any kind (yes or no) In addition, note was taken of the type of supplement received, if any (vii) General physical living conditions at home ('poor', 'adequate', or 'good') (viii) Whether or not both parents were present in the home (yes or no) Note was made of which parent was absent, if any, and why (ix) General home atmosphere (a five point scale, ranging from 'poor' to 'excellent') In making this rating, teachers were told to bear in mind such factors as the capability of the mother to cope with domestic routine, the closeness of the family, whether other adults lived in the house, etc (x) An estimate of the value placed upon education by the child's parents, as gauged by parental visits to the school, encouragement of the child's school work, etc (a five point scale, from 'poor' to 'excellent') (xi) Whether or not books or other educational materials were available at home (yes or no) (xii) Whether or not poor attendance was a problem ('yes', 'sometimes', or 'never') (xiii) Whether or not the child showed any emotional difficulties (yes or no) In addition, information was collected about the type of problem reported, if any (xiv) Whether or not the child had any physical problems (yes or no) Note was made of the type of problem, if any (xv) Whether or not the child showed any

language related difficulties (yes or no) Note was taken of the nature of these, if any (xvi) An estimate of the child's ability in terms of abstract or imaginative thought (a five point scale, ranging from 'poor' to 'excellent') Teachers were told that in estimating this, they should consider the child's grasp of schoolwork, especially his ability to generalize from one situation to another (xvii) Whether or not the child exhibited feelings of low self esteem (a four point scale, from 'never' to 'often') Teachers were told here to be guided by, for example, whether or not the child seemed reticent when confronted with tasks that the teacher believed were within his capability (xviii) Whether or not the child showed creativity in his school work (a four point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'often') In estimating this, teachers were asked to bear in mind flair and imagination, willingness to experiment, etc (xix) A general prediction of the child's future progress in school (a five point scale, from 'poor' to 'excellent') (xx) The teacher's score for each child on the Rutter questionnaire (27) This scale, described as a 'screening instrument to select children likely to show some emotional or behavioural disorders' (p 9), contains 22 items, the score on which increases with the frequency of occurrence of such disorders Rutter originally developed the scale with 7 to 13 year old children, but it is useful for younger children as well, and has been so used before (e g , 7)

Most teachers were able to provide the information required in this questionnaire In those cases, however, where teachers had not visited the home, or had not been in contact with parents, the information was often available from head teachers, or from other teachers in the school

It should be pointed out that the three stages in the procedure, described above, were carried out in the order shown Thus, parts (a) and (b), dealing with teachers' opinions about disadvantage, and the ranking task, were completed before part (c) which, by its nature, drew teachers' attention to possibly salient characteristics of disadvantage to which they previously may not have given much thought

## RESULTS

*(a) Teacher Interview*

The number of years of teaching experience of the 24 teachers ranged from 1 to 44 (mean 14 3) Of all these teachers, only two were Dublin born, the majority of the rest (15 of 22) were from the west of Ireland Only six of the 24 teachers had had any experience of disadvantage, either through lectures or practice teaching, before starting their regular career All but four, however, felt that some information should be provided for future teachers The four who did not concur with this did not feel that

the subject was without importance, but that experience of it could only be gained once on the job

Not surprisingly, there were considerable differences in the teachers' conceptions of disadvantage Virtually all, however, pointed to conditions in the home and lack of parental attention as being of great importance Many mentioned the restlessness of the children at school, emotional problems of various kinds and difficulties with language, and tended to view these as consequences of the home environment

*(b) Teachers' Ranking Task*

Each of the 24 teachers ranked all the ten traits in order of descriptive importance Each ranking was assigned a number from one (most important) to ten (least important) To test whether the teachers tended to agree in the rankings they made, Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) was computed, yielding a value of 225 Testing this for significance produced a chi square value of 48 6 ($p< 001$) indicating a high degree of agreement among the teachers' judgements As Siegel (28) has pointed out, a significant coefficient of concordance indicates agreement among judges, and not necessarily that their ordering is correct in an objective sense The average ordering of the ten traits, from greatest to least importance, was as follows (i) poor living conditions, (ii) poor language ability, (iii) emotional problems, (iv) low socio-economic status, (v) broken or incomplete homes, (vi) low self-esteem, (vii) less regard for conscience, (viii) large family size, (ix) poor attendance or truancy and (x) aggression and /or hostility

*(c) Pupil Questionnaire*

A factor analysis of the information gathered on each child was performed, using an iterative principal factor solution (12), selecting factors with eigenvalues equal to, or greater than, one The resulting initial factors were then subjected to a varimax (orthogonal) rotation, producing six final factors The factor structure accounted for 50 3 per cent of the total variance *

In presenting the rotated factor matrix (Table 1), the variables are described in terms which make the positive or negative factor loadings more easily interpretable Loadings of 40 or greater are shown in italics

* The factor analysis programme used was PA2, part of the SPSS system See Nie N Bent D and Hull C *Statistical package for the social sciences* New York McGraw Hill 1970 Pp 208 244

TABLE 1

ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX

| Variables | Factor Loadings 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Age | 110 | 271 | 005 | 033 | 042 | 001 |
| 2 Sex | 015 | 004 | 080 | 227 | 146 | *429* |
| 3 Low socio-economic status | 215 | *505* | 029 | 238 | 008 | 055 |
| 4 Family size | 114 | 260 | 067 | 243 | *460* | 037 |
| 5 Position in family | 062 | 036 | 062 | 025 | *679* | 064 |
| 6 Absence of supplements | 182 | 244 | 158 | *667* | 014 | 134 |
| 7 Poor living conditions | 171 | *451* | 019 | *426* | 110 | 160 |
| 8 Parental absence | 024 | 025 | 041 | *498* | 097 | 023 |
| 9 Home atmosphere | 210 | *570* | *467* | 257 | 007 | 037 |
| 10 Value placed on education | 345 | *656* | 357 | 173 | 042 | 369 |
| 11 Absence of books in home | *435* | *610* | 298 | 278 | 097 | 242 |
| 12 Good attendance | 159 | 371 | *408* | 012 | 157 | 089 |
| 13 Absence of emotional problems | 267 | 155 | *667* | 097 | 112 | 128 |
| 14 Absence of physical problems | 065 | 037 | 094 | 122 | 047 | 362 |
| 15 Absence of language problems | *404* | 233 | 181 | 039 | 125 | 213 |
| 16 Abstract thought | *847* | 158 | 111 | 011 | 010 | 046 |
| 17 Low self-esteem | *657* | 043 | 377 | 131 | 002 | 037 |
| 18 Creativity | *864* | 025 | 111 | 141 | 044 | 051 |
| 19 Progress estimate | *707* | 172 | 341 | 043 | 028 | 020 |
| 20 Rutter score | *436* | 045 | *700* | 149 | 102 | 036 |
| Percentage of common variance | 58 0 | 16 1 | 8 5 | 6 2 | 5 7 | 5 4 |

Of the 20 variables included in the factor analysis, all are represented in the six factor structure except age of the child, and physical problems of the child The first factor shows that the measures of creativity, abstract thought, teacher's estimate of future school progress and the presence of books in the home are all interrelated In addition, they are all related to a lack of low self-esteem, to a low score on the Rutter scale, and to the relative absence of language problems This cluster could be considered as that group of variables most closely connected with scholastic progress Since home variables, apart from the presence or absence of books at home, do not figure importantly in the cluster, it might be termed the *school factor*

The second factor could be called the *home background factor* It has high loadings on the variables concerning the value placed upon education, the presence of books in the home, the general home atmosphere, socio economic status of the family and physical living conditions

The third factor could be described as the *emotional factor* It indicates a relationship among general home atmosphere, the teacher's estimate of

the child's emotional problems, scores on the Rutter scale and attendance

The fourth factor shows a relationship between those homes in which one of the parents is absent and those in receipt of some form of state supplement Poor living conditions also loads highly on this factor The fifth factor has high loadings on family size and the child's position in the family, and the final factor has only one loading above 40, on the variable —sex of the child

TABLE 2

INSTANCES AND TYPE OF SUPPLEMENTS AND PARENTAL ABSENCE

| Variables | Instances Reported | Type | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family supplements | 35 (11 3% of 310) | Unspecified | 22 9 |
| | | Deserted wife allowance | 17 1 |
| | | Assistance from voluntary organizations | 11 4 |
| | | Unemployment benefits | 48 6 |
| Parental absence | 15 (4 8% of 310) | Unspecified | 6 7 |
| | | Mother dead | 26 7 |
| | | Father dead | 6 7 |
| | | Father not at home | 60 0 |

For five of the variables included in the factor analysis, more information was gathered than just their presence or absence The variables loading most highly on Factor 4, parental absence and whether or not the family was in receipt of state assistance, are two of these Table 2 shows the number of reported instances and the type of supplements and parental absence

The three other variables on which further information was collected were the emotional, physical and language problems (if any) shown by the child and reported by the teacher Table 3 shows the number and type of each of these The descriptions reported by the teachers were categorized into the types listed in Table 3 and, especially with regard to emotional problems, no claim is made for clinical accuracy – the types reported simply represent teachers' responses summarized in common terminology

TABLE 3

INSTANCES AND TYPE OF LANGUAGE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

| Variables | Instances Reported | Type | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Language problems | 86 (27 7% of 310) | Unspecified | 2 3 |
| | | Indistinct and /or hesitant | 20 9 |
| | | Poor vocabulary | 52 3 |
| | | Indistinct *and* poor vocabulary | 11 6 |
| | | Poor self expression | 12 8 |
| Physical problems | 41 (13 2% of 310) | Unspecified | 2 4 |
| | | Poor coordination | 9 8 |
| | | Susceptibility to illness | 12 2 |
| | | Eyesight | 12 2 |
| | | Hearing | 7 3 |
| | | Stammer stutter | 26 8 |
| | | Enuresis | 29 3 |
| Emotional problems | 106 (34 2% of 310) | Unspecified | 0 9 |
| | | Withdrawn | 31 1 |
| | | Unhappy | 22 6 |
| | | Overactive | 2 8 |
| | | Nervous/worrisome | 22 6 |
| | | Aggressive | 19 8 |

## DISCUSSION

Looking first at the teacher interview, it can be seen that only two teachers were born in Dublin That many teachers in Dublin schools are not from Dublin themselves has been noted before (21) Although not directly related to this study, this fact poses interesting questions which may be of some importance in education

The provision of more information about the problems of disadvantaged children was generally regarded as useful by teachers, few of whom had any preparation for teaching such children (on this point, see Kellaghan and Ó hUallachain, 20) In discussing the concept of disadvantage, most teachers referred to the home background as being of great importance This attitude was reflected in the ranking task, in which the most important variable was seen to be poor living conditions at home Poor language ability and emotional problems were also ranked highly The fact that socio-economic status was ranked fourth may be taken as some indication that a simple correspondence between disadvantage and poverty is not perceived by these teachers The traits relating to low self-esteem,

lack of conscience and aggression are all ranked rather low in importance, and it is interesting to compare these Irish teachers' views with the fact that Gordon (10) reported these characteristics as frequently associated with disadvantage in American adolescents It is true that the Irish and American situations differ in many ways, not the least of which is the relationship in America between race and disadvantage It is precisely for this reason, however, that information from different contexts is important, especially as much of the published literature, and therefore much of our data about disadvantage, stem from American findings

Turning to the factor analysis, it was seen that three factors accounted for 82 6 per cent of the common variance (see Table 1) The first of these, the *school* factor, consists mainly of measures perceived to be of direct relevance to school performance The second, *home background,* factor presents a cluster of measures whose importance for scholastic progress arises from relevant factors in the child's home life Here it is worthy of note that the highest loadings are associated not with physical conditions, nor with overall socio-economic status, but with the value parents place upon education, the presence of books at home and the home atmosphere Given that visible characteristics of poverty do not necessarily involve disadvantage, more subtle home factors may assume greater importance (33, 34) The third major factor in the analysis generally points to the importance of *emotional* variables for school performance Further discussion of these variables will be found below

Following the important clusters of variables revealed by the factor analysis – scholastic, home and emotional – Tables 2 and 3 provide some more detailed information Table 2 shows that, among those families reported as receiving some kind of assistance, the majority are in receipt of unemployment benefits There are relatively few one parent families in the sample, and most of those are in this category because of absence of the father –often due to desertion or separation

Table 3 shows that teachers in this study reported 27 7 per cent of the children as having some form of language problem Such problems, and especially social class differences in language usage, have provided the focus for many compensatory education projects (e g , 1, 2) Current opinion that social class speech variations are different from rather than different forms of more standard usage (16, 22) does not alter the fact that the users may find their speech a social liability (4) At school, this may manifest itself in teachers' difficulty in understanding children, or in their holding low expectations for the children's performance based on speech considered by the teacher to be substandard (e g , 5, 13) Most (84 8 per cent) of the difficulties reported by the teachers in the present

study were of indistinct speech and poor vocabulary It will also be re called that, in the ranking task, teachers perceived language problems as common among disadvantaged children It would appear that language is an important variable in the present context, as it has been found to be in others Closer investigation of the types and effects of language differences in the school setting is certainly warranted

Although physical problems were not importantly related to other variables in the factor structure, and although their degree of occurrence is not great, it can be seen from Table 3 that 51 6 per cent of problems in this category are of a type often associated with emotional disturbances – stammering and enuresis

The frequency of emotional problems reported by teachers was 34 2 per cent Related to this is the information contained in the Rutter quest ionnaire Scores on this latter variable were seen to load highly on both the school and emotional factors Describing the development of the scale, Rutter (27) designated children with a score of nine or more as showing some disorder In the present study, 140 children (45 2 per cent of the total) scored at or above this level In Rutter's study, 7 4 per cent of a general population of 286 children scored nine or more, while 73 6 per cent of a clinical population of 193 children reached this level Comparison of the percentages with a score of nine or greater on the Rutter scale shows that the children in this study, while not reaching this level to the same extent as Rutter's clinical sample, do score nine or more with much greater frequency than his general group As mentioned previously, Rutter developed his scale with 7 to 13 year old children, one might expect that scores would be higher for the younger children of this study since the scale includes some items relating to tearfulness and restlessness which are more common, perhaps, among younger children Nevertheless, the magnitude of the differences in percentages between Rutter's general sample and the children in this study, in combination with the emotional problems reported by teachers (Table 3) and the high importance accorded to emotional disturbances by teachers in the ranking task, all would suggest that the emotional factor is a relevant one Further support is found in Carney's (3) study of disadvantaged children Using the Bristol Social Adjustment Guide (30), Carney found that the mean score obtained by his sample of 164 children was 18 3, just below the score of 20 commonly employed as the operational definition of maladjustment in studies using the instrument

In conclusion, the home, school and emotional clusters of variables found in the factor analysis in the present study lend support to earlier work concerned with problems in the education of disadvantaged children (e g , 14, 23, 24, 32) These findings are supplemented by information

about teachers' views of disadvantage, while difficulties in home background as well as language and emotional problems are also reported by teachers To determine the extent to which the factors identified in this study are important correlates of later scholastic achievement, further research is necessary It is possible that characteristics which were not included in the present study are also important However, it is unlikely that home variables will not be found to play an important role in scholastic progress, while language and emotional factors must surely be of central importance as long as the role of communication in all its forms is seen as vital in education

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