

Speaker called racist over published article

By ED PIWOWARCZYK

When Carl Bereiter came to York Thursday, he was scheduled to give a talk on scholastic skill training but instead found himself responding to charges that he was a racist.

Bereiter, a professor of applied psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, was confronted with a leaflet distributed by the York Students for a Democratic Society charging him with promoting a racist language deprivation theory in an article entitled "An academic oriented pre-school for culturally deprived children." The article appeared in *Pre-school Education Today*.

"It's been ten years since I started working in pre-school education," said Bereiter. "Such allegations have always been made behind my back, but this is the first time it's been brought out into the open."

"The leaflet states, 'Certainly Bereiter's approach will help to further, not challenge, the poor facilities and systematic streaming into two and four year programs which face immigrant and working class children in Toronto's downtown schools.'

"I feel that my approach is one of the few real challenges to such streaming."

Bereiter described the experimental programme designed to improve teaching to disadvantaged children. Researchers worked with four-year-olds from a ghetto area in Urbana, Illinois in a programme later expanded to encompass various regions of the United States. They found the children were "making astonishing progress in arithmetic and some progress in reading, and developing a precise rather than expressive language."

The average IQ of those in the program rose from 96 to 120.

Once the children returned from the controlled school environment to the regular school system, the gains and achievements they had made tended to taper off. A follow-up program was designed but has not appeared to be as successful.

"Our efforts were legitimate. They were not based on a thorough understanding of all the problems. I have probably said some dumb things, but I feel that we've got something that shows some promise."

"Language looked like an area that needed work at the time. We may have exaggerated its importance. If there were any racist overtones, it was not something that was intended."

"People were not making as many distinctions then. Lower class referred to an income level, not to black or white or any other cultural or ethnic group."

Asked to explain a line in the leaflet about the "inability of lower class

mothers to teach," Bereiter replied, "If there is any difference between standard English and dialect, it is in the precision of language."

"There is an initial problem of learning if one comes from a non-bookish family. Until recently 95 per cent of the people had to learn the bookish language at school."

"Ten years ago we didn't appreciate the fact that ethnic and cultural background made a difference. We've got to recognize the differences in parent motivations and in other areas."

"We want to improve the child's ability to communicate in academic matters, not to change his everyday language."

"The education programmes that screw up the relationship between parent and child are those designed to provide a whole education. We don't want to upset the values of that more intimate type of communication."

Bereiter felt the schools are not getting rid of racism as there is "nothing

much they can do."

After the confrontation, only a handful of students remained to hear him speak on his original topic.

Bereiter said, "Skilled training is the best way to avoid imposing our wills on others, a way to move towards a less authoritarian kind of education. It offers more options to the children to do more things as whatever kind of people they are."

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People's law course gives free classes

VANCOUVER (CUP) — In an attempt to demystify the law, activist lawyers and law students here have established a people's law school offering free weekly classes.

"Once the public has educated itself about the concepts of law making, the prudence of our law makers is bound to increase," said Patti Pearcey, one of the school's organizers. "It is ludicrous to have participatory government and not be given the knowledge to participate effectively," she said.

"We want people to voice their opinions," she added. "We're remaining completely apolitical — we help them interpret the laws and hope they will instigate action themselves. We don't want to do it for them."