

Paper to be read on Friday afternoon, 26th April.

## The Organisation of Classes for Retarded Children

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The Chief Medical Officer of the Board of Education in his Annual Report published in 1927 makes the following statement:—

“ In my report last year, I discussed somewhat fully both the principles and methods of dealing with children who are mentally retarded or feeble-minded. It was shown that for practical purposes they fall into three groups:—(a) those who are dull (mental impairment) or backward (their normal development hindered by untoward circumstances); (b) the mentally defective who are in some measure educable; and (c) the mentally defective who are ineducable or anti-social. The changes in the educational outlook in regard to these three groups were reviewed, and it was, I hope, made clear that the old hard and fast lines of definition and treatment could not wisely be maintained, and that in fact we must look to new ways of helping these children to the forms of industry and citizenship of which they are capable. It is obvious that these groups are not “water-tight.” They overlap in differentiation and treatment. Group (a) seems to need special consideration in association with the ordinary education of the normal child; group (b) needs special school treatment; and group (c) custodial care and control under favourable conditions. All of them, whatever be the primary provision made, need careful after-care and supervision. It is true to say that very much the larger group is that of the Dull and Backward, who constitute not less than 10 per cent. of all the children of school age, as compared with about 1 per cent. of mentally defective children. Further, it seems clear that the Dull and Backward group provides one of our great social problems. It is from this group that we get most of our neuropathics, delinquents, unemployables and criminals. To reduce the group, or train it, is to turn off the tap of the supply of incapable and non-contributory citizens.”

Later the report discusses the formation of special classes as a method of dealing with these children.

We are told that in one area the organisers of the classes began by asking themselves three questions:—

1. Where is the retarded child in its ordinary class, and what is it doing?
2. What *could* it be doing if other methods of education were tried?
3. What changes are needed in educational methods to meet such children?

After enumerating some of the experiments which are being carried out in various parts of the country, the report concludes by saying:—

“All these test and trial inquiries and the subsequent experiments in practical teaching methods are of great importance and it is hoped will be copied in many other areas. They not only have an immediately practical benefit to the children themselves, but they lead us to new methods of ascertainment and differentiation of retarded and deficient children of the highest value.”

In this connection I am going to tell you how we are trying to meet the needs of the Dull and Backward children in Nottingham—and first of all something of the history of the growth of the work.

In 1921 we realised that there was something very faulty in the means by which the Mentally Defective child was detected, for the Special Schools were not full, and there were many mentally defective children in the ordinary Elementary Schools.

In that year there were 8 special classes in the city, with approximately 240 children on the rolls and three schools for Mentally Defective children, with approximately 180 on the rolls; at the present date there are 34 special classes with approximately 1,028 children on the rolls, while in the schools for Mentally Defective children there are 320 on the rolls, and the probability of a waiting list in the near future.

In 1922, as the result of many conferences between the various officials of the Local Education Authority, a scheme was adopted by the Education Committee by which every child on reaching 7 years of age is given a simple mental test, in order to classify him according to his mental rather than his chronological age. Consequently, there should be no child in the standards who has not had this preliminary examination.

- Class A. Normal or above.  
 Class B. Sub-normal.  
 Class C. Possible mental defectives.

Here are some of the statistics relating to the results of the testing at 7 years of age:—

	No. of children tested	No. of children classified		
		A	B	C
1925	3050	2593	358	99
1926	4443	3856	457	130
1927	5256	4681	438	137

The names of all children placed in Classes B and C are sent to the Senior Medical Officer as well as to the Inspector who is in charge of the organisation of the classes. These children are tested in greater detail by a specially trained assistant from the Medical Department and on this second report the Senior Medical Officer decides whether the child is suitable for a special class, and whether further examination for physical or mental weakness is necessary. In the latter case, after a detailed report from the Head Teacher of the school at which the child is in attendance, a very exhaustive physical or mental examination is made by the Senior Medical Officer, and the child is transferred to an Open-Air Recovery School or to a Special Class for a period of probation if this is considered advisable, or direct to a Special School for Mentally Defective children.

A child who through extreme nervousness, backwardness or ill-health has failed to make any progress in a class of 60 children of approximately the same age as himself, in many cases becomes a new creature in a small special class in which the children are taught individually or in groups.

There is no fixed time for transferring children to and from these classes, for at any date in the term a new admission may be found to be backward or a child who has been excluded for illness may return in a nervous condition. If these children are put into a normal class of 50 or 60, for unfortunately classes of this size still exist, they may be utterly lost. The work of the class is in no wise interfered with by these transfers in and out of the class as all the work is conducted on individual and group lines. The new entrant does not feel to be behind hand, for his work is not constantly compared with that of others; he is encouraged, not to do better than others, but to do his best. When a child is considered to be ready for transfer to a normal class again, the Inspector is notified and the child is examined and transferred as soon

as possible. It is found to be of little use to remove a child from the Dull and Backward Class until he can read a Std. I or Std. II book fairly easily. Marked improvement may result in some cases in transferment from the Special Class to the class to which the child should belong by age, in other cases the child's mental age may be a year below the average and he is then transferred to the class for which he is best suited. From the Junior Dull and Backward Classes children are usually transferred to Stds. I or II and occasionally to Std. III.

If the class is composed of children who come from outside schools there are difficulties of transit to be met. Arrangements are made to place each child at the nearest suitable school to his home, and if necessary car fares are paid by the Local Authority. At the present time the schools at which it is possible to form these Special Classes are those in which the number on the roll is less than the accommodation of the school, as only in those buildings is it possible to give up a large room for 30 children. In these circumstances some of the children have to come distances which can only be covered by car; this of course is a very undesirable state of affairs. I hope we shall not feel satisfied until every large department has its Special Class in its own building. That the number of "retarded" children is far in excess of the number for which any provision has been made we know, and until these children are taught as they should be, we are not only wasting their very limited mental power, but also the ability of the children who, classified with them, could, if separated from them, progress at a greater rate.

The special classes, which in Nottingham are called Practical Classes, must not be confused with the Special Schools for mentally defective children. The classes for Dull and Backward children are as much a part of the school to which they belong as any other class in that school. Some of these classes are attached to Infants' Schools, some to Mixed Departments, and others to Boys' and Girls' Departments. The classes, which are attended by children between 7 and 10 years of age in the case of girls, and between 7 and 9 years of age in the case of boys, are attached to Infants' Schools or Junior Departments.

It is advisable that the older girls and boys should attend a class which is part of a Senior Department. In the playground they mix with others of their own age, and in school work they can, if necessary and desirable, be grouped with other classes for such subjects as singing, needlework and drawing. The other children can be taught to look upon them as members of a small class not in any sense as being members of a "silly" class, which is a term that is often attached to children who attend a Special School. The attitude of the rest of the

school towards these children depends, as you will all realise, upon the attitude of the staff towards it.

The parents of the children who are recommended to attend these classes often object, on the ground that the class is for defectives. These objections are overcome by explaining that the class is in an ordinary elementary school, but that it is half the size of the other classes—about 30 on register—in order to give children who are backward in any way much more individual help. A visit by the parent to the class sets her mind (for it is usually the mother who calls about these matters) completely at rest.

If the class is attached to a Senior Department, there is nothing derogatory to an older child in being put into it. It is advisable that the class should rank with the middle or Senior School Stds. IV or Lower V, rather than with the Junior Department, as it will be composed of children of 10 years of age and upwards.

The classes may be formed in two ways. They may be composed entirely of children who are in attendance at the school at which the class is held, or they may be composed largely of children who have been in attendance at other schools in the neighbourhood.

In addition to the testing and examining which is taking place throughout the year, an annual examination of all the children in the practical classes is made by the Senior Medical Officer during June and July, before the annual promotions take place, so that the children who are to be transferred, may after the summer holidays, go to normal classes, senior practical classes or special schools, as the case may be.

It has been possible to arrange classes in neighbouring schools so as to ensure the gradual promotion of the pupils as they grow older. In one area there are 9 classes:—

3 for pupils of from	...	...	7—9 years.
1 for Junior Boys	...	...	8—10 „
1 for Junior Girls	...	...	8—10 „
2 for Inter. Girls	...	...	10—12 „
1 for Inter. and Senior Boys	...	...	10—14 „
1 for Senior Girls	...	...	12—14 „

The Classes are in Infants' Departments, Mixed Departments and Senior Girls' and Boys' Departments, according to the age of the pupils attending them.

A special report form asking for information is filled in by the Head Teacher of the School at which the Dull and Backward pupil is in attendance, and sent to the Head Teacher of the School in which

the practical class is held, and to which the pupil is transferred. This information is of great value to the Head Teacher.

Twice a year a return which gives details of the testing is sent in to the Office.

By using all these means the Dull and Backward pupil is discovered at an early age, and placed as far as possible in a suitable class, and kept under closer observation than would be possible had he remained in a normal class containing 50 to 60 children.

A record of each child is kept from the time he is admitted to the class. Particulars are forwarded on the special Report Form drawn up for the purpose. This Form gives as accurately as possible the number of attendances the child has made up to the time of his admission to the Special Class, the number of schools he has been in, and his mental and physical characteristics. The detailed progress which the child makes in each subject, together with records of physical and moral development, are also entered. Marked ability in any direction is encouraged. At the present time a boy of 12 who will probably remain in a Special Class until he leaves school is attending the School of Art two afternoons a week, and not long ago one very gifted boy attended the School of Art every afternoon.

The number of children who return to normal classes varies, it may be about 10 per cent.; in some areas the percentage is much lower than in others.

During 3 years. Example I.

In one Junior Class.

5	children	have	been	transferred	to	normal	classes.			
27	"	"	"	"	"	Senior	Practical	Classes.		
6	"	"	"	"	"	Special	Schools	for	Mental	Defectives.

During 1 year. Example 2.

In three classes, Junior, Intermediate and Senior Girls.

12	children	have	been	transferred	to	normal	classes.			
20	"	"	"	"	"	Senior	Practical	Classes.		
8	"	"	"	"	"	Special	Schools	for	Mental	Defectives.
2	"	"	"	"	"	Open-Air	Recovery	Schools.		

A child may be as short a time as three months in a Practical Class, or he may remain in one until he leaves school. The following are records of the time spent in some of these classes by different types of children,

	No. of children	Time in Class	
School A	1	5 years	3 years absent through ringworm on scalp. During the whole period made 365 attendances.
	1	3½ years	A very dull boy.
	1	3 years	A very dull boy.
	2	2½ years	One, a very intelligent boy, but found it most difficult to learn to read.
	8	2 years	
	4	1½ years	
	4	1 year	
	3	6 months	
School B	7	1 year	
	12	2 years	
	2	2½ years	

It has been found that the children are much happier in these classes than in those which are composed of children of their own physical age, but whose mental attainments are normal. In these classes children of from 7-10 years of age work together, thus avoiding the necessity of placing them with children of their mental age who may have reached their 6th or 7th year only. In a slum school this is an important factor, as these backward children are often developed in advance of their years in other directions.

By organising classes of this type the children associate with others of their own age in a way in which it would be impossible for them to do had they remained in a normal class. With skilful teaching they are also able to get a longer time among senior scholars than they would otherwise have done.

Previous to the formation of these classes it was not an unknown occurrence for children in the slum districts to leave school never having reached the 3rd standard, and being quite unable to read or write with any facility. The work of these classes is in an experimental stage. Specially trained teachers are required for them as much as for work in the recognised Schools for Defectives.

The classes are helping to deal more satisfactorily with these retarded children, but the problem will remain a large and difficult one until it has been brought to bear upon the half-million children of this type to which the Medical Officer of the Board of Education refers in his report.