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Special Education for Retarded Children ✓

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In the early part of 1935 I had the privilege of visiting various Local Education Authorities in England and Scotland to learn of the provision made for the special education of backward children. During the summer months I was helping to arrange three courses for teachers of retarded and defective children, and more recently I have been engaged in investigating in detail the problem presented by the backward child in the elementary schools of an urban area with a school population of about 10,000.

It was suggested in the October issue of *Mental Welfare* that I might, therefore, contribute some information on the work now in progress on behalf of retarded children in the elementary schools.

I.—ADMINISTRATIVE ASPECTS

Under this heading it will be possible only to indicate the steps that are being taken (1) to ascertain the number of children who are sufficiently retarded to require special attention, and (2) to describe some methods that have been adopted whereby this necessary attention is given.

It is desirable to state specifically at this point what is meant by a

“backward” child and a “retarded” child. In practice the term “backward” is used of all children who fail in their school work whether by reason of

- (1) Inferior intellectual capacity.
- (2) Emotional difficulties—constitutional or environmental, or
- (3) Extraneous circumstances, e.g., poor physical health, frequent change of school, etc.

The failure of backward children in their work is judged from the average attainment of children of the same chronological age.*

When it is found that, on intelligence tests, a child has a mental age markedly below his chronological age, whether he is backward in his school work (as is usual) or not, he is described as a *retarded* child. With a slight degree of retardation a child may be said to fall within normal limits for intelligence, but if at the age of 5 years he is retarded 9 months or more, at 8 years 15 months or more, at 11 years 20 months or more, and so on proportionately, then a special approach to the education of that child is necessary. In many areas it is to this problem—the education of the retarded child—that administrators address themselves, and the backward child who is of average or superior intelligence receives no extraordinary consideration.

Ascertainment

We may scan first of all the methods now in use for ascertaining the number of children in an area who are in need of special education.

(1) By far the commonest is what may be called the “teacher’s opinion” method. Head teacher and class teacher confer and, in the light of the child’s progress in relation to the opportunity he has had for learning and his social behaviour, judge whether he is a suitable candidate for the particular form of special provision that is available. If there is reason to suppose that a child is mentally defective, he is, of course, referred to the School Medical Officer for examination.

(2) Not infrequently this selection by teachers is a preliminary step, and further investigation is made of the cases they send forward. For instance, in Oxford, Head Teachers are asked to report any child 7 years old or over who is a problem, educationally, or on account of difficult behaviour. These cases are then investigated along Child Guidance lines. In Leicester children selected by teachers are given an intelligence test by trained workers, and cases of personality problems and delinquency are further investigated by the Psychologist to the Local Education Authority.

(3) In some areas there is a systematic use of standardised tests for all school children as they reach a given age. Standardised tests of educational attainment may be used to select cases for individual investigation. Thus, in Nottingham City, Head Teachers are asked to test all children in reading, addition and subtraction (on Dr. Ballard’s one minute tests) as they reach their

*“Backwardness” is an educational term. Although it is commonly used as stated, in scientific terminology the word has a more limited meaning. It is to be borne in mind that if a child’s attainments in school work are on a level with his “mental age” (however retarded he may be), he is not technically “backward.”

seventh birthday, and if the ratio between chronological age and educational age (an average of the three test results) is less than .9 the children are given an individual test of intelligence.

In other places standardised tests of intelligence are used on the whole school population. In Dumbartonshire all children are tested with standardised group tests as they enter the Junior School. Individual cases that need further investigation are tested by the Psychologist, and, if queried mentally defective, referred to the School Medical Officer.

There is a growing tendency for both intelligence and attainment tests to be used and the results considered in conjunction with one another. The system that is being developed in Kent is that, in time, there shall be on the staff of each Infants' School two teachers trained in mental testing. Each child will be tested individually as soon as it has settled down in school. In addition, tests of attainment in reading and number are to be given annually to all children of 8 years old and over, and at the age of 11+ there is to be a supplementary group intelligence test. From these results a graphic record can be made for each child, and from this record it can be readily seen whether or not a child is in need of special education.

(4) The methods so far described appear practicable for urban areas or for large schools in county areas, but they leave out of account the small one or two teacher schools of rural areas.

In some rural areas the Local Education Authorities employ a peripatetic teacher whose function it is to test individually all the children who fail to make progress in their school work, and to advise as to suitable methods for teaching those children who must, perforce, be left in the ordinary class. If there is any question of the child being defective he is, of course, seen by the School Medical Officer and, if necessary, certified; but unless he is excluded from school, or sent to a residential school for mentally defective children, the problem of his education is left to the class teacher, and help and suggestions may be sought from the specially qualified peripatetic teacher.

Above are indicated the chief ways of ascertaining the number of retarded children in a given area. There are, of course, many individual variations with regard to the tests used and the training of the people who administer them. Comparatively little experiment has been carried out so far, and until there is evolved some method, or methods, practicable from every point of view and demonstrably superior to those now in use criticism is abortive; methods that have been found useful must continue to serve.

However, I should like to venture on a personal opinion on one or two points. I prefer the use of standardised tests to the "teacher's opinion" method, based as it is on inspection of a progress record and the observation of behaviour. This latter method necessitates a fairly intimate knowledge on the part of the inspector or organiser who arranges the work for retarded children, of the people whose opinions are to guide him in his selection and classification of such children; otherwise he will not be able to interpret these opinions or to put them on a comparable basis. (He will probably be dealing

with 20 or more Head Teachers contemporaneously.) Moreover, teachers have not always at their disposal accurate information on a child's school attendance and past history, and without this information their opinion may be invalid. Sometimes a child who works well with an age group younger than his own is not regarded as backward, and again, teachers will occasionally fail to report children who are complacent and studious although backward and making effort out of all proportion to their progress. It is exceedingly difficult to judge solely from observation under school conditions whether a child is unintelligent, or backward and inhibited, and therefore the standard conditions of an intelligence test are an exceedingly valuable additional help.

In the matter of ranking children according to innate ability it is, I suggest, a good plan to include the whole school population and not only the backward children. It seems to me useful to give a group intelligence test to all children of a certain age. This test will doubtless reveal a number of cases that should be investigated further—on account of suspiciously low marks, or discrepancy between test score and teacher's estimate, or test score and standard of work. For this further investigation, individual tests must be used. Among these special cases all the "problem children" as judged by other standards will be found, and possibly a few others who would otherwise have been overlooked.

The group test is easily obtained at a reasonable price (about 17/6 per hundred copies). There is a variety of well standardised tests on the market, and belonging to each is an explanatory booklet with explicit instructions, that should be rigidly adhered to, and a table of norms. The results should prove useful in checking teachers' estimates, indicating cases for further investigation and as an additional aid in cases that are difficult to classify.

I would, however, like to point out here, the inadequacy of using a group test *alone* for assessing the ability of retarded children. (Or, for that matter, of classifying normal children.) To begin with, most group tests are largely verbal and they set too high a premium on the child's ability to read. Therefore the numerical result is vitiated in the case of backward children. But further, a group test cannot, under any circumstances, yield the useful information of a child's psychology that can be gleaned from a carefully administered individual test.

Standardised Tests of Attainment in school work have, I think, an important rôle to play *after* the child's intelligence has been assessed. Given suitable opportunity it is in relation to his intelligence that an emotionally well-adjusted child achieves and progresses. Therefore, if we know a child's mental age and as a result of an attainment test his reading level and his arithmetic level we can state whether or not he is working to capacity and making satisfactory progress. If he is not we must, if possible, discover the cause and remedy the defect.

If these tests are used at definite intervals (say 12 months) an unbiased estimate of the child's progress can be given, and lastly (and this holds good whether the child's mental age is known or not), an analysis of the results

of these Attainment Tests indicates the point at which remedial teaching should begin and, not infrequently, the course it should follow.

I would offer one last comment on the personnel responsible for testing. I think it is impossible to over-emphasise the necessity of both a sound psychological background and a thorough training in the technique of mental testing for all those who are to give individual intelligence tests.

The question is often raised as to whether teachers should test individually the children in their class or school. If a teacher has had suitable training I see no reason why he should not do so, but I think that if he tests children who know him well (whether as an object of love or fear!), he is forfeiting one of the essentials of a psychological examination, i.e., standard conditions, and by so doing he is influencing his results to an unknown and unequal extent. Finally, if it is expected of a teacher that he should do individual testing, he must be granted the necessary facilities which include a separate room and freedom from interruptions. And, of course, this work will necessitate his absence from his class to the extent of about half an hour per child.

II.—PROVISION

When the children who would benefit by special education have been ascertained by one of the above or similar methods, a decision must be arrived at as to how they are to be classified and taught.

If a child is retarded by more than two and a half years at the age of 8, he is usually referred to the School Medical Officer (if this has not been done previously). He is re-examined and possibly certified as mentally defective. If he is an educable feeble-minded child he is transferred to a Special School for Mental Defectives, should such exist in that area. The remaining retarded children (and the educable defectives if no other provision is available) may be taught:—

- (1) In the lowest stream (D or E) of their age group in large schools.
- (2) In a special class in their elementary school, if the school is large enough to support one or more classes.
- (3) In a regional special class, probably in a neighbouring school. Such a class will be in an elementary school but will serve two or three neighbouring schools.
- (4) Partly in class with their age group and partly in small groups with children of similar attainment. These latter groups may be taken by the Head Teacher, a visiting teacher or a floating teacher.
- (5) As individuals in a class. This is the only way in small all-standard schools.

It may be thought that there is little or no difference between a "D" stream in a large school and a special class for retarded children. The distinction that I wish to draw is this. A "D" class in all probability is reckoned as a 40 class for staffing purposes and, although it may be possible to keep the roll down to 35 for part of the year, that is still too large a class for the teacher to undertake the amount of individual and practical work

that is necessary for retarded children. In addition there are very few schools that are large enough to carry a "D" stream of purely retarded children and the consequence is that retarded and backward children, who want different treatment, are taught together.

A special class is usually small enough (roll 25 or 30), for a competent teacher to plan absolutely individual work at least for the fundamental subjects, and it is recognised as a small class for purposes of staffing.

The systems now working in Leicester City and Dumbartonshire may be quoted by way of illustration. In Dumbartonshire mentally defective children are transferred to Special Schools at the age of 8. Permanently retarded children are concentrated in tutorial classes in the Junior School. These are small classes (roll 25) and the work is individual. In one class there may be children of the whole Junior School age range. Temporarily retarded children (those backward in school work, but not unintelligent) are also grouped in other small tutorial classes but the object of these classes is to coach children in the subject, or subjects, in which they have failed, and pass them back as soon as possible into the normal school stream. In smaller schools there are found tutorial classes of mixed type. There is at present no special provision for retarded children in the Senior Department.

In Leicester City the educable low-grade feeble-minded children are in a Special School, but the higher grade feeble-minded and some of the permanently retarded children are in special classes in the elementary schools. These special classes are found in all departments, but not in every school. For the purpose of elementary education the city is divided into regions and in each region there are classes to serve that area. In this way it will be seen that some children who are found to need special education have to change school. The child who is normal or superior in intelligence but has difficulty in one or more of the school subjects is (with his parent's permission) transferred for a period to an Experimental School where it is possible to dispense with the usual class room discipline and to have an elasticity of timetable; this is designed to enable a child to pick up his work at the stage where he can achieve success and do it at his own rate until he can be transferred back to his own age group to work there without undue strain and with satisfaction to himself. Also at the Experimental School are children who are mal-adjusted emotionally, and some delinquents.

In both Dumbartonshire and Leicester City the special classes are recognised as such for purposes of staffing. The selection of the children is in the hands of an Educational Psychologist in Dumbartonshire and of trained workers under the direction of the Psychologist to the Education Committee in Leicester.

Mention has already been made of the peripatetic teacher, as a form of provision for retarded children. In rural areas where most of the schools are small the formation of special classes is out of the question and the only way of arranging special work for retarded children is by having a teacher who has specially studied and qualified to teach difficult children, to visit

the school in a consultative capacity. He will examine the child, diagnose the difficulty and suggest to the class teacher ways of treating and teaching each case. This, in broad outline, is the experiment now in progress in Westmorland and Leicestershire. If occasion demands, the peripatetic teacher will himself visit a school daily to get a group working or to demonstrate to an inexperienced teacher methods that are particularly useful with retarded children.

There is at least one urban Authority that is experimenting with a visiting teacher. I refer to Nottingham City where there is already established a comprehensive system of practical classes for retarded children. The visiting teacher deals not with retarded but with backward children, and teaches only reading and number. She visits selected schools in different areas of the city and children attend at that school for short lessons. Each child receives the equivalent of three half hours tuition a week, and may attend alone or with a small group. The teacher has special qualifications and experience and her equipment for the work includes a knowledge of child psychology and training in remedial teaching.

Under Local Education Authorities where there is no organised provision for retarded children there are often found excellent classes in individual schools, but it is difficult to arrange any continuity of work, and sometimes, owing to the exigencies of staffing, such classes are short lived. Similarly, at the beginning of the school year there may be a floating teacher who can take groups of backward or retarded children for special tuition. But by Christmas or Easter the number of children on roll may have decreased and the supernumerary may be withdrawn. If such is the case, it is almost inevitable that this valuable group work will come to an end, and, of course, in fairness to the staff and to the other pupils classes should not be made abnormally large in order that tutorial groups may be continued.

I have met and corresponded with scores of teachers who are in charge of these isolated classes. I have also visited many such classes, and without a doubt very valuable work is being carried out in many of them. The teacher in charge has usually volunteered for the task and has a very real interest in it, besides possessing originality and ingenuity, a good capacity for hard work and, in many cases a lively understanding of what is suitable and necessary in the education of retarded children. These individual experiments are much to be appreciated and admired although it is deplorable that much of this useful work is wasted, for indeed the time and energy of both teacher and pupils *is*, in part, wasted if a promising experiment is arbitrarily discontinued because the school numbers go down, or if it is stifled almost out of existence because of the influx to the class of some 10 or 15 extra children. The value of special class work may be reduced if there is a break in its continuity either in the way indicated above or on account of there being no other special class in the department from which, or to which, the child is moving.

Another way in which a great part of the value of this work may be lost is through the lack of adequate record keeping. One hears sometimes, by word

of mouth, of interesting educational experiments that have bearing on the retarded child. One day there comes an opportunity of visiting the school where such an experiment is being tried, but on arrival there is nothing to be seen of it because Mr. or Miss X has left, and the scheme has been dropped or the class disbanded because nobody else had the knowledge or enthusiasm to carry it on. Such an occurrence is not uncommon and it shows how much is left to the initiative of individual teachers.

This absence of records implies no criticism of the teacher. In all probability he has had his time fully occupied without thought of record keeping. And often these teachers are modest people who under-estimate the value of their own experiments. It is, however, an indication that administrators and organisers of elementary education are not yet fully cognisant of the necessity for intensive research before the most suitable methods and curricula for retarded children can be discovered.

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

I. *Curricula for Retarded Children*

Personal experience, together with discussion and correspondence with many teachers, has revealed the fact that, where the organisation of special classes for retarded children is impracticable, effort is, in many places, being made to draw up for the "C" or "D" stream curricula that are suited to the needs of children with inferior intelligence.

The recommendations summarised below may be regarded as embodying the suggestions of those who are actually engaged in teaching retarded children:—

(1) That the attainment in English and Arithmetic expected from a retarded Senior on leaving school should be limited to the level reached by an average child in Standard III or IV (10 year level).

(2) That a great part of the skill in Reading and Number should be acquired during the Junior School period, thus allowing for a late beginning, and leaving for the Senior School period the applications and uses of these skills that require more mature reasoning. (Some of the more elementary applications will, of course, be used in the Junior School for practical purposes.)

(3) That History and Geography should not be included in the time-table as such, but suitable facts under the heading of General Knowledge, should be introduced through conversations and lessons on topical events and everyday science. The subjects would then be dealt with as they come within the purview of the child's experience. They thus become more meaningful to the child and easier to understand.

(4) That every effort should be made, and every means at the command of the teacher used, to increase the responsiveness of retarded children and to stimulate their interest in their own surroundings and experience.

(5) That plenty of time should be allotted to expressive work and as much freedom as possible allowed in the choice of media of expression.

(6) That the amount of written work should be drastically reduced, and that the children should spend much time in doing things and making things.

I do not think that it is possible to be dogmatic about the detail of curricula for retarded children. There is urgent need for further experiment.

II. *Method*

I do not propose here to discuss specific methods, but rather to give a few general suggestions that have proved helpful. First, the child's own emotional attitude to his work is of far greater importance than particular methods of approach. We hear frequently nowadays about a "sense of failure," and I have found it real enough to be observed in a large number of retarded children who have been trying to make their way in a class of children their own age. The teacher of a special class or of any retarded child should try to appreciate the psychological significance of this "sense of failure," and modify his teaching so that it would be better named "remedial treatment." He must find out *exactly* what the child can do and ensure that he succeeds in it; the time given to lessons must at first be arranged so that the child stops while he is still succeeding and wanting to do more, and a careful eye must be kept on the grading of all work so as to avoid introducing a sudden difficulty, and so on.

When this all-important step of gaining the child's co-operation has been achieved, then we can consider "methods." This matter, too, I have discussed with many teachers, and the following points summarise their joint findings.

(a) Methods of teaching should be practical. For instance, in the teaching of Arithmetic, concrete aids must be retained until the child himself relinquishes them. There must be ample demonstration, and application and practice of every item learned.

(b) There should be, as far as possible, continuity of method. For example, avoid teaching a child subtraction by equal additions when he has half mastered decomposition. Change in teaching method is a serious matter for a normally intelligent child and may be the cause of a long period of backwardness. In the case of the retarded child it can give rise to even greater difficulty.

(c) The lesson period should be short at first, because retarded children often lack concentration and frequent change helps to hold their interest and to encourage renewed effort and, thereby, to develop concentration.

CONCLUSIONS

I was particularly asked to include some recommendations in this article, but I think that any recommendations I could make are included in the conclusions which may be drawn from the practical experience of many able workers.

There is evidence to show that the experience of teachers working under different conditions leads to some concurrence of opinion on the following points:—

(1) That the provision of special work for retarded children must be recognised by the Local Education Authority before adequate and efficient work can be carried out in the schools.

Many Head Teachers complain that they have not sufficient staff to afford a class solely for retarded children, since this must be a small class, or they say that their numbers make it impossible to devote one room to a small class. On account of the difficulties of this kind in the way of forming special classes Head Teachers concentrate rather on modifying the curriculum of the "C" or "D" stream which includes the retarded children.

(2) That it is useful to investigate as early and as fully as possible the case of every child who is a problem at school, but that it is also necessary to make a systematic survey of all children of an age level (not before they are 8 years old and preferably before they are 11) by means of intelligence tests and attainment tests.

(3) That the distinction made in some areas between backward and retarded children is useful, but difficult from the point of view of organisation.

The child of average or superior intelligence who is backward in school work, but offers no other problem, may, and probably will, do well after a period in an adjustment class. There will only be sufficient children in one school to justify the formation of a class solely for such cases in certain areas, e.g., new building estates where children have been 3 or 6 months out of school because of lack of school buildings, or where children are drawn from many different areas and have been subjected to different methods, or where there is a migratory population, etc.

(4) That there should be more definite appreciation of the fact that special education for retarded children does not aim at bringing up their level of achievement to what is normal or average for their chronological age, but rather at providing means through which each child's personality will be developed to its fullest extent.

(5) That with regard to the modifications needed in the organisation of the various departments, in the *Infants' Department* where individual methods are used, little modification should be made. Individual methods, if intelligently used, are suitable for educating practically every retarded child who can be retained in the elementary school system, i.e., the backward, dull and educable feeble-minded. Special investigation should, however, be made into the cases of children whom the teacher reports as being conspicuously slower than the others in progress. This investigation could best be carried out by an Educational Psychologist who would subsequently refer to the Notifying Officer any child whose exclusion from school was considered desirable.

(6) In *Junior Schools* in all urban and thickly populated rural areas provision can be made for special classes for retarded children if there is a roll of 250 or over. These classes should be small with a maximum of 25 on the roll. Wherever possible, the class should be in charge of a specially trained teacher having, in addition to a suitable personality,

knowledge of individual methods of teaching and ability to adapt her curricula and teaching to the needs of retarded children.

If the numbers of children and the geographical position of the schools allow it, such classes can be made up of children from several schools; thus finer classification according to the child's capacity for learning can be secured. The children to be drafted to these classes must be selected objectively, by a properly qualified person.

(7) In *Senior Schools* small classes can be established as in the Junior Schools, but the area from which children might be drawn could be wider in the case of Seniors, if some form of transport were provided.

Inevitably an article of this kind raises many issues and some queries, especially at the present time when, in the field of Education, work with retarded children is rapidly becoming more widespread, and more popular with the teaching profession. May I say in conclusion that it is only intended to be a summary and a basis of discussion and that it is fully recognised to be incomplete.

A Plea for the "Borderline" Child

In a survey of the mental condition of 703 children reported by head teachers as being very markedly retarded in their school work, the Fifeshire County Deputy Medical Officer to Schools Sub-Committee (Dr. R. A. Krause), refers to the important problem presented by the "borderline" child:—

"It is with these cases," he says, "that most trouble is found socially. These cases often seem to be like ordinary children and are treated not infrequently as if they were normal. It is from them that so many of our social misfits are recruited, and this is becoming more and more evident as the result of inquiries, and the increasing difficulties in the labour market."

"Is it wise that a boy or girl with a three-quarter brain or less should be held as fully responsible as the ordinary average individual? The non-recognition of his retarded mental condition, and the lack of education and training appropriate for his mental development, may lead to the branding of such a case as criminal, and doing him a grave injustice. Quite apart from the social aspect, it is of the utmost importance that these borderline cases should be early recognised and not allowed to drift on, or develop into an 'I don't care' attitude to school matters."

"Because of the large number of such cases and their proximity to the dull child, it will be obvious that these require a more careful and detailed examination than is necessary with low-grade mental defectives, the more so, as we must satisfy the parents who very often see nothing wrong with their children, except that they are not very good at their lessons. . . . If we are to possess that knowledge of the very backward child that is educationally demanded nowadays, a much increased amount of time will be necessary than has been given to this in the past."