

PUBLIC DAY SCHOOLS FOR BACKWARD CHILDREN.

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At the termination of two years' experience in teaching a class of backward children in one of the Philadelphia Special Schools, I find myself convinced that the results of the work might be greatly increased by the adoption of three new measures. The attempt to train backward and defective children in day schools is a very recent movement in this country, and only gradually, through repeated efforts to solve the many problems involved, will effective methods of training these children be developed. In Philadelphia, as in many other cities, teachers and the school authorities are beginning to appreciate the necessity of making some effort to solve these problems, but they find the conditions so complicated that, lacking the necessary training, they feel powerless to cope with them. At the present time the problem is really in the stage of initial consideration. One cannot expect an adequate system to be organized for some years to come. With the purpose of calling attention to three conditions which seriously interfere with the effectiveness of the work now being done in the Philadelphia schools, I present this paper.

The first condition of which I wish to speak is the close relation existing between the classes for backward children and the classes for truants and incorrigibles. In Philadelphia the backward classes are always placed in the special schools, which are primarily intended for the training of truants and disciplinary cases. In fact, in many of these schools the backward children are placed in the same classes with the disciplinary cases. They mingle freely with the incorrigible boys at recess and at the noon hour, and are thus subjected to contaminating influences. The backward child is one who has not had force enough to hold his own under ordinary school conditions. How much worse is it, then, to subject him to the influence of an environment such as this!

Moreover, the methods of discipline in a special school are necessarily severe and strictly enforced, and it is not possible to exempt one class from the regular requirements without creating

the feeling that injustice is being done, and thus jeopardizing the general discipline of the school.

One example will serve to illustrate how this condition of affairs hampers the teacher in her training of the backward child. The retardation of one of my boys was due chiefly, if not entirely, to a very pronounced speech defect,—so pronounced that most of his talk was unintelligible. I was giving him individual training in articulation, for which I could spare but a brief period each day, and when one day's lesson was omitted the effect was evident. This boy soon became friendly with some truants, and with them absented himself from school. The following day the boys were all punished alike, for they had all committed the same offense. The result was that my boy's indignant mother kept him from school for an entire week,—in fact until I had paid a visit to his home,—and much valuable time was lost. This boy was very suggestible; he was ready to follow the lead of other boys into any kind of mischief; and he was constantly among boys who did not fail to urge him on. Had he associated with ordinarily well-behaved boys, no such trouble would have arisen.

It is true that many boys who are mentally retarded are at the same time fit subjects for the disciplinary classes. The unruliness is in many instances the direct result of keeping the child in a class of normal boys. His mind, being utterly unable to grasp the class work, is left idle and wanders off to the most enticing mischief at hand. Placed in a class where he is kept constantly employed with work adapted to his abilities, the mischievous tendencies of such a boy soon disappear.

The first and most crying need, then, of these backward classes appears to be entire separation from the disciplinary schools. This could most readily be accomplished by establishing such classes in the regular schools. In the majority of graded schools there are sufficient backward children to form a class, which, for effective work, should not number more than twelve or fifteen children. In schools where the number of backward children is not so large, one class might suffice to accommodate the children from two neighboring schools. Unfortunately this change would mean, under the present régime, a deprivation of the sloyd training which, when guided by an efficient teacher, is well adapted to the needs of a backward child. This loss, however, could be largely made up by additional handwork of other kinds, such as basketry, raffia work, and hammock making. The loss of the sloyd period would, I am confident, be far outweighed by the gain from the improved environmental conditions.

The second point to which I wish to call attention is the badly nourished and underfed condition of these boys, and the impossibility of training any children, even exceptionally endowed ones, under such conditions.

An experienced social worker tells me it is a difficult and almost impossible task to find out the nature of a child's diet from a visit to his home. Questions are answered evasively, and the reported bill of fare is usually the recollection of a holiday feast, not an everyday meal.

The special schools furnish an exceptional opportunity for discovering the nature of a child's diet. The session is from nine until two, with a noon recess for lunch, which the boys are supposed to bring with them. Many of my boys brought none at all. Others brought such a lunch that none at all might have been less harmful. Rank coffee proved to be the chief staple. This they brought in little bottles and placed around the stove to heat. Upon questioning them, I found that the breakfast of many consisted of a cup of coffee and some bread. Boys but feebly endowed in the first place, and fed on such food, we expect to sit quietly through a long school session and put forth something in the way of mental effort! It is most unreasonable and even cruel to expect it.

Such boys are listless and inert, and, though often most willing, have not the vital energy to accomplish anything. Their written work bears striking testimony to this fact. The first problem in an arithmetic paper will be neatly and correctly solved, while the last problems will be so illegible as to render examination impossible. In physical exercise the same condition is manifested. The first movements will be executed with some degree of force and precision, but before the end of the series the muscles grow lax and the movements lifeless.

Unquestionably, many of our pedagogical failures may be traced directly to the feeble physical condition of the boys.

During the second winter, I prohibited coffee and substituted hot soup. This was gladly welcomed by the boys, and doubtless did some good, though it was far from supplying the three good meals a day, to which every growing boy is entitled.

Mr. Luther Burbank is of the opinion that he can apply to the subject of child training the conclusions at which he has arrived through the cultivation of plants. He believes that three things are absolutely essential for the training of plant life and human life as well,—sunshine, good air, and nourishing food.

He would not attempt to cultivate a plant without these three aids; and why, he asks, should more care be lavished on an orchid than on a child? He further expresses himself strongly to the effect that not only the children of the well-to-do should have these three necessities of normal growth,—sunshine, good air, and nourishing food,—but that every child of the nation, the poor as well as the rich, is entitled to its share, and failure to furnish it will affect not only the child, but the welfare of the nation itself. “To the extent that any portion of the people is physically unfit, to that extent the nation is weakened. To the extent that we leave the children of the poor to themselves, and their evil surroundings, to that extent we breed peril for ourselves. The only way to obviate this is absolutely to cut loose from all precedent and begin systematic state and national aid, not next year, or a decade from now, but to-day.”

We are still a young country, and fortunately economic conditions have not yet forced us to face these facts as the older nations have been compelled to do. Our compulsory education laws, however, are already informing the public of the existence of the evil. If action is taken at once to improve these conditions, the widespread degeneracy now prevailing in England as the result of underfeeding need never exist in this country. The people of the working class in England are noticeably inferior to those of the wealthier class both in height and general physique. Mr. Rowntree states that a comparative study made in the town of York of the height and weight of boys of thirteen years of age belonging to the well-to-do working classes and those of the same age belonging to the poorer working classes, revealed a difference in average height of three and one-half inches, and in average weight of eleven pounds. This physical degeneracy has reached such a point that in one year 54,000 of 92,000 applicants failed to meet the physical requirements for army service.

This alarming condition of affairs has led to several governmental investigations into the probable cause of such physical degeneracy. The reports of four of these investigations agree that underfeeding is the chief cause of both physical and mental degeneration among the poorer classes. Dr. Alfred Eichholz has expressed the opinion that insufficient food is at the bottom of all the evils of child degeneracy, and that if the children were properly fed the evil would rapidly disappear. He reports that sixteen per cent of the children of the London elementary schools are underfed.

Dr. Collie, a London medical inspector of schools, also believes that underfeeding is a direct cause of mental defectiveness. He calls such children *functionally defective* and attributes their condition to a starved brain. He thinks that many children who are judged to be dull or slow are really suffering from this functional defectiveness. A number of my boys, I feel sure, belonged to this class of defectives. In one of them I could discover no special defect of any kind to account for his apparent inability to progress. I therefore took him to the clinic in child psychology at the University of Pennsylvania for examination by Professor Witmer. He considered the case a physical one, and sent the boy to Dr. Burr, who attributed the condition to improper feeding, and prescribed a special diet. Fortunately the mother of this boy was able to follow the physician's directions, and there was a marked improvement in a very short period of time. This was a case of malnutrition and mental enfeeblement due to improper feeding, and hence more easily overcome than cases due to underfeeding, where poverty often raises an insurmountable barrier.

The English authorities agree in the belief that the condition of such children is rapidly improved by nourishing food. During a Parliamentary debate on free meals, March, 1905, it was stated that the children in the day industrial schools, where three meals a day are furnished, grow bright and intelligent and develop rapidly. In our own country the experiment has not been tried in day schools, but the results of the experiment in the Chicago Hospital School are equally convincing, and the experiment made on the prisoners at the New York State Reformatory at Elmira seems to prove beyond a doubt the dependence of both intellectual and moral development on physical health.

Mr. Z. R. Brockway, then superintendent of the Elmira Reformatory, established in 1886 "an experimental class in physical culture." Twelve criminals, none of whom had made any progress in school work for periods varying from one to two years and all of whom seemed quite incapable of it, were made the subjects of this experiment. They had all committed grave crimes and all presented marked stigmata of degeneracy. A special dietary was substituted for the prison fare, and massage, physical training, and baths were given regularly, while the school work was increased in amount and changed in character so as to call forth greater mental effort. At the end of five months of this régime, says the report, "the aimless, shuffling gait gave way to a carriage inspired by elastic muscles and supple joints. The faces

parted with the dull and stolid look they had in the beginning, assuming a brighter and more intelligent expression." A decided mental awakening was evidenced by an increased interest in study, and an earnest effort to progress, which resulted in an average mark for the five months of 74.16—a great increase over the 45.25, the average for the previous five months.

When such wonderful results as these have actually been attained with this apparently hopeless set of matured degenerates, what could not be accomplished with children taken before the slothful or evil tendencies have settled into fixed habits?

Recognizing the relation between underfeeding and physical deterioration, and between malnutrition and mental and moral degeneracy, it is but a step to the conclusion that many of our underfed children will find their way to the special and backward classes.

The teachers in the special schools recognize the deplorable physical condition of many of the children, and often try to add a little to their noon-day meal. Such efforts, however, are entirely inadequate and pecuniarily wasteful. A concerted effort to supply for these classes a good, hot dinner every day would be a much more intelligent and satisfactory method of meeting the situation. It would result, undoubtedly, in a higher grade of school work, and in the development of young men better able physically, mentally and morally to take their places as useful citizens.

Many persons oppose the feeding of hungry children, feeling that by so doing we are perpetrating a wrong against the parents. They believe that by relieving the poor of the absolute necessity of feeding their children, we are depriving them of the greatest of all spurs to industry. From a humane standpoint, it seems hardly fair that for such a negative good to the present generation we should blight physically, mentally and morally the future generation. From an economic standpoint, all experience points to the fact that results attending efforts directed toward the training of children for efficient manhood are infinitely greater than the results obtained by attempts at adult reformation.

While the parents are left unassisted to provide for their hungry children, these same children will necessarily develop into another generation of incapable parents, and a similar tragedy will be enacted in the lives of their children and their children's children, until the evil reaches such vast proportions that it becomes a menace to the nation.

On the other hand, if the present generation of children is,

by proper food and training, brought to a healthy, normal manhood, it will undoubtedly provide for its own children. The evil will gradually dwindle away, and in each succeeding generation the community will be called upon to provide for a smaller number of little ones.

With our backward children placed in a suitable environment and properly fed, the more subtle question of awakening their intelligence could be approached with far greater chance of success. The mode of attacking this problem is the third point on which I wish to speak. The only practical way of approaching it is by a thorough examination of each individual child. In even a small class of backward children, the most varied forms of mental deviation reveal themselves, and the peculiar defect of each child must be discovered before any intelligent attempt can be made to educate it. In many cases defective eyesight and hearing are among the chief causes of mental retardation; in others, the children are necessarily handicapped by the presence of adenoids; while in still others, stuttering or stammering so pronounced as to make the speech unintelligible is the evident cause of the backwardness. More profound mental defects of the will or attention are also frequent.

The average teacher has neither the training nor the time to make such a thorough examination of her pupils. The average physician, experience has proved, is no better able to cope with the problem. The trained psychologist is, at the present day, the one person properly qualified to make such a diagnosis. He can, in many cases, point out the only avenue through which education would prove effective. He can often determine the defect which is the cause of the difficulty, while the educator can see only the difficulty. He can further suggest certain lines of training designed to remove special defects, and by following these suggestions results may be obtained in a short time which would never be reached without such initial expert diagnosis and advice.

In my class were four cases of speech defect; in two of these I look upon the defect as the main cause of a marked mental retardation. There were two cases in which the chief defect was a volitional one,—possibly a form of abulia. These boys were willing and able to do anything habitual, anything that needed no mental effort, but any attempt to force them on to an untried field of mental action caused sullen opposition. With two others the mentality was quite normal with the exception of an excessive

slowness in every sort of reaction, which made it impossible for them to do any but individual work. With several the trouble seemed to be centered in an inability to concentrate their minds on anything for more than a few moments; they were typical examples of aprosexia.

Each one of these defects must be reached by different methods, and if the root of the evil is discovered early, the progress made will be incalculably greater.

How much can be done for certain forms of speech defect by articulation training, was illustrated by the case of infantile stammer, reported in the March number of *The Psychological Clinic*. Such cases emphasize the importance of basing the instruction of backward children on a thorough psychological examination of each individual child. The education of such children is a difficult pedagogical problem, and its only chance of solution lies in the discovery and adoption of the particular method especially adapted to the needs of each individual child.

When our school environment is improved, our children well fed, and the instruction given to each child is based upon a thorough psychological examination of that child, we will find our measure of success growing larger, and our schools for defective children more nearly approaching that ideal towards which we are striving.