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EDUCATING THE MENTALLY RETARDED CHILD

by

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EDUCATING THE MENTALLY RETARDED CHILD

"Exceptional children have been defined as those children who deviate from average children in mental, physical, and/or social characteristics to such an extent that they require a modification of school practices or services in order to develop their maximum abilities."⁵ This definition thus would include not only the retarded child, but also the gifted child.

The prevalence of exceptional children has been estimated conservatively as about "12.5 per cent"⁵ of the school population. "Approximately one and one-fourth million"³ children are being offered special education in public and private schools and in residential institutions. It has also been estimated that approximately "one out of every four"⁵ exceptional children in the United States is being offered special educational opportunities.

The whole field of educational theory and practice has changed considerably in the past fifty years or so and educational thinking about mentally retarded children has reflected these changes. Programs in institutions have probably lagged behind public school programs because institutions have been somewhat secluded from the active flow of social change.

The principles of learning are essentially the same for the mentally retarded child as for the average child, but there are degrees and varieties of application.

"The psychological basis for the selection and organization of

a curriculum for the retarded child must be found in the trails themselves."² The state, the doctor, or the teacher may set forth certain goals, but such goals must be defined in terms of different levels of ability. However, if knowledge and skills are to have any functional value for the exceptional children, they must be presented in a manner sufficiently to meet their needs.

Among the general educational principles which have pertinence for the mentally retarded child, a major one is that learning by "doing"⁵ is important. The use of concrete materials and related actual experiences are significant and meaningful, especially for young children.

Other generally accepted principles applying specifically to the exceptional child are that the motives of the child must be specific and definite. Academic subjects must be presented to the limit of the child's capacity to learn and make use of them. Learning units should be shortened and more closely related to his immediate environment and past experiences. For the retarded child, greater emphasis should be put on "practical"⁵ types of subject matter—manual skills, home economics, crafts and the like. The retarded child interprets what he meets in terms of specific experiences rather than in generalizations. As for the gifted child, he should be encouraged with more difficult work that would further his interests in a particular subject or subjects.

A sound educational plan for the educatable retarded provides for more attention to physical health, good grooming, socializing experiences and a number of other learning situations of a concrete sort. "Usually there is a delay in introducing the formal academic

work until the child has reached an appropriate mental age and hence developed a 'readiness' level for this work."⁴ Such a plan would also help in developing group participation, favorable attitudes, good work habits and desirable personality and character traits.

It is hard to carry out any plan perfectly. There are too many situational factors that are hard to control and many practical problems that are difficult to solve. The special class curriculum in action has frequently turned out to be a slowed-up, watered-down version of the regular subject matter, partially because the general interpretation of a mentally retarded child has been that he is just like any other child, only slower. At best, this is a very limited view of the facts, and at worse, a view that protects adequate meeting of his individual needs. Also, because teachers of mentally retarded children have not always been properly trained, (and those that have are hard to find) they have had no idea of how to set up a program with adequate or suitable material. They have not been taught appropriate methods of presenting the material. They may have had only limited opportunities to appreciate the emotional and personality aspects of the mentally retarded child. Even in a special class, with children of seven to twelve years of age, "the assumption has often been that academic subjects should take first place and that especially work on reading should have priority, and that rote learning is better than not learning at all in the reading area."⁵ Retarded children can make heavy demands on a teacher as far as program planning is concerned in their need for sheer numbers of activities. Their short interest span plus the fact that what teachers often think is important for them to learn may not be at all possible

for the retarded children to understand makes the task of curriculum planning and development a very difficult one.

"The term 'special education' has been used to denote those aspects of education which are applied to handicapped and gifted children but not usually used with the majority of average children."⁵ It should be understood that special education is not a total program, complete in itself, which is different from the education of the ordinary child. It refers only to those aspects of education which are completely unique and/or in addition to the regular program for all children. It is a program designed to assist the child in the development of his potentialities and/or in the amelioration of his disabilities. The ordinary child does not receive this additional help because he does not need it.

The educational facilities developed and provided for the mentally retarded children include itinerant personnel, special classes and resource rooms, and special schools.

Speech correctionists, social workers, school psychologists, remedial reading teachers and other special education personnel may work with the mentally retarded on an itinerant basis. They may serve many schools and travel over a wide area visiting the retarded child and his parents or teacher at regular intervals or whenever necessary. Thus the child spends a major portion of his time in the regular classroom and is out of the room only for short periods of time. For example, the remedial reading teachers may work with a child or a small group several times a week for short periods. In this case, the primary responsibility for the general education of the retarded child rests with the regular classroom teacher.

The itinerant special-teacher type of program is particularly valuable in rural areas where mentally retarded children are few and scattered over a wide area. Thus one teacher could serve many schools. Often, one of the itinerant teacher's primary roles will be that of a consultant, advisor or resource person for the regular classroom teacher.

Classrooms for mentally retarded, gifted, blind, deaf, or crippled children may be organized within the school system. "If the retarded child is enrolled in such a class with a specially trained teacher and spends most of the day there, it is usually referred to as a special class. If, on the otherhand, the child is enrolled in the regular classroom and goes to the special room only for specialized instruction, it is usually called a resource room."⁵

There may be many gradations of these two programs, the difference in terminology usually being dependent upon the amount of time spent in the special room. The mentally retarded children, for example, may spend nearly half of the time with the ordinary children in physical education, art, music, homemaking and so forth, and still be a member of a special class. A program for the gifted, however, may be organized so that the gifted child spends a half-day in the regular classroom and the other half-day in a special room.

The special classroom teacher or resource teacher is properly trained in methods not used by the regular teacher. She also has access to the use of special equipment which is not available to the regular classroom teacher.

Advantages of the special class or resource room over residential schools or special day schools include "the fact that the youngster

remains in his own community and in close association with normal children and yet has the benefits of individualized and specialized training."¹

Disadvantages frequently pointed out include the possibility of a youngster having to travel a considerable distance to school which houses the special class. This may separate him from his own neighborhood environment and friends. It is also possible that, although a special class is physically integrated in a school system, it may at the same time be socially isolated and so unduly emphasize the retarded child's deviation.

Some school systems have organized and developed special schools for retarded children. In general, "there is a trend toward organizing special class programs within neighborhood schools and a decrease in special school organization, at least for certain types of handicapping conditions."³ Mentally retarded children, for example, can make a certain amount of adjustment with normal children.

The need for special education can be recognized in the problem faced by a regular teacher. In many schools, a teacher has a class of thirty-five children, one of whom is gifted and one who is mentally retarded. She also has one child who stutters and one who is a behavior problem. Asked to organize an educational program for a fifth grade class, she must adapt instruction for the mentally retarded child who reads barely at the second grade level; for the gifted child who reads at nearly the eighth grade level; for the speech defective, for the problem child, and for the other thirty-one children in her class, who also deviate, but not to the extent of those mentioned. Because of the difficulty of this task, special

educational programs have evolved in a large number of school systems. They are designed not only to help the retarded child but also to help the regular class teacher with her responsibility, so that she can devote most of the class time to a more homogeneous group of children. The organization of special education benefits the average child in the regular grade as well as the retarded child.

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