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Special Education

One of the foundations of our present educational system in the United States is that of providing an education for all children. This principle has led to the concept of special education, a program of instruction specifically designed for special children--usually children who deviate from the normal to such an extent that a regular education program would be impracticable and/or impossible.

School programs of education for special children are receiving increased emphasis. The special education programs in most states have doubled or redoubled in the past two decades. The basic, goading force behind recent developments has been the insistent parents of exceptional children. Also, new technological developments and the assistance of volunteers and teachers' aides have brought changes and improvements.

The development of new concepts and material for the diagnosis and instruction of exceptional children is a main factor in the success of the program. A clear trend now is to separate the handicapped child as little as possible from normal school, home, and community life. Some children may need to spend only part

of the day in special education classes. School rules in regard to the age for school entrance and leaving and to educability requirements are waived for special students. Psychologists, social workers, physicians, and other specialists often consult with and aid teachers of special education classes.

Special education in the public schools consists primarily of programs for physically, emotionally, and/or mentally handicapped children.

Physically handicapped children may have muscular and/or skeletal difficulties which result in obvious motor disabilities (impaired movement, hand use, speech) or may have impairments not immediately apparent such as chronic or special health conditions. Children with either type of physical handicap have significant problems in school learning and adjustment.

The teachers of such children can usually do a great deal not only to educate them but also to promote their acceptance and to foster their general welfare.

There is a wide range of individual differences in the physically handicapped, so there is no universal characteristic of these children as a group which provides a meaningful guide to understanding the individual child who is handicapped.

Experiential deprivation may accompany physical impairment if parents and teachers are overly protective.

All the child's potential needs to be exploited so that the child is able to become involved in important childhood learning experiences.

In the educational management of children with physical impairments, one of the major problems is setting realistic goals. Either too much or too little is expected from such children. The best objective for the teacher would seem to be to arrange assignments of just manageable difficulty. The goal should be ever increasing independence in functioning through success experiences.

Physically handicapped children should be provided with special education but they should not be separated from the regular classroom all of the time. They could attend each class three hours each day.

Several suggestions for the classroom teacher with physically impaired students are as follows:

1. Be guided by behavioral and functional evidence of abilities and disabilities instead of making educational decisions solely in terms of medical diagnoses or stereotyped thinking about categories of physical impairment.

2. View the physical impairment as only one of many important attributes of the child rather than as if it were his most significant characteristic.

3. Provide a setting for, and expect achievement

of the pupil in terms of his aptitudes, abilities, and other attributes, not in terms of his physical impairment alone. Differentiate the effects of physical limitations from the effects that have their source in other environmental causes, such as experiential deprivation, educational retardation, and attitudes.

4. Obtain assistance in the form of constructive consultation and specialized equipment or materials from those who assume special responsibilities for children with physical impairments. However, consider the child as one of your students rather than as one of the consultant's.

5. Remember that the child with physical impairment probably needs as many firsthand experiences as possible. Help the child develop concepts meaningful to him and in line with his own reality. Do not impose upon him artificial concepts he cannot understand or appreciate because of his lack of mobility or experience.

6. Do not thoughtlessly exploit the child with a physical handicap by showing him off to other children, to teachers, or to visitors.

The teacher's objectives in working with emotionally disturbed children in a special education class should be (a) the reconditioning of deviate, nonintegrative classroom behavior, (b) the attainment of academic achievement commensurate with abilities, and (c) the

eventual return to the regular classroom with adequate behavioral and academic functioning. As in other fields of special education there is much individualized instruction and parents are involved as much as possible in the therapy.

It used to be thought that what a mentally handicapped child could learn was dictated by his intelligence which was fixed at birth. A teacher working with a retarded child could therefore expect to accomplish very little. We now know that intelligence is extremely sensitive to the environment. Psychologists have also shown that learning, like intelligence, develops as a result of environmental intervention--particularly human intervention.

In the past, mentally handicapped children were allowed to fail several years in a regular class before special provisions were made for them. In some schools no provisions were made for them and they were allowed to "sit" in classes, repeat grades at the lower elementary level, and were generally tolerated until they could be passed on to another teacher or until they quit school. Studies show that even in the early grades mentally handicapped children are not accepted in a regular classroom by the other children. All of the above are reasons why the mentally handicapped need to be placed in special classes (and why the special

education curriculum needs to be planned and coordinated on a six year basis allowing no aspect of the program to be over-emphasized or under-emphasized). Children become retarded because they are unable to learn in a normal manner instead of their failing to learn because they are retarded; therefore, a child who is "tolerated" in a regular class for even a year when he should be in a special class is denied a year's learning.

Special education classes for the mentally handicapped should begin in the first grade. The purpose of primary classes is to assist the children in adjusting to a schoolroom organization in a successful way, to prepare them by means of a readiness program for the work that will follow in other classes for the mentally handicapped, and to develop their habits and attitudes to the point where they will overcome the frustrations which they have experienced.

The primary class for mentally handicapped children is usually designed to educate children of ages six to ten, whose mental level is six or below, and who are unable to cope with the curriculum of the first or second grades of the regular public classes. The goals of the primary class are: 1) to establish the confidence of the child in his own abilities by giving particular attention to mental and emotional factors in development; 2) to develop habits of physical health and safety

according to the needs of such children; 3) to provide parent education so that parents will accept the limitations of the child in academic achievement, and accept the child for his abilities and his worth-whileness; 4) to emphasize the importance of social adjustment and social participation; 5) to develop language ability, quantitative concepts at the pre-arithmetical level, better thinking ability, visual perception and auditory abilities as a preparation for reading activities; and 6) to develop the control of their muscles for better motor coordination.

The intermediate class for mentally handicapped children is the one most commonly found in school systems, since communities large enough to have special classes for the mentally handicapped usually establish the intermediate class first. The intermediate class is designed for children who have the mental ages of approximately six and one-half to eight and chronological ages of about ten to thirteen, who are ready to learn to read, and who are ready to learn some of the elements of other tool subjects such as writing, spelling, and arithmetic. The two major areas considered in structuring the curriculum of the intermediate class are the development of skills in the tool subjects and experiences in the areas of living. The actual teaching is done through a combination of specific periods devoted

to the logical development of the academic skills and units of experience. The units of experience are devoted to those areas which assist the child in adjusting to his physical environment, his social environment, and his personal environment.

In organizing classes for the mentally handicapped certain principals should be applied. 1) The younger the children, the smaller the class. 2) The more homogeneous the class the larger it can be, and vice versa. 3) Special classes for mentally handicapped children should be organized within the elementary and secondary schools. 4) The teacher selected for the organization and education of these children should be thoroughly trained in the education of the mentally handicapped. 5) Adequate diagnosis of the children should be made before they are referred to the special class. 6) Cooperation of the parents should be solicited before a child is assigned to a special class. 7) The initial organization of a class should be accomplished gradually. 8) The teacher of the special class should be given freedom in organizing the curriculum according to the needs and abilities of the children assigned to his class within the over-all program of the school.

Despite the great strides that have been made in the area of special education in the last few years, only about 35% of children needing special services receive

them. With more and more schools receiving funds for developing special education programs, it is an area wide open for qualified teachers. A person with a BSE in Elementary Education can become qualified to teach handicapped children after about a semester of graduate work in special education.

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