THE SCHOOL TRAINING OF BACKWARD CHILDREN IN THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS.*

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I should like to state at the beginning of my paper that I have no official connection with the public schools of New York; but I have been requested to interest you if possible in a department of the schools with which many of you may not be familiar; a department which is of practical interest to us all as physicians and guardians of the public health. I refer to the so called ungraded classes for the special instruction of those children who are weeded out of the normal classes for reasons of mental disability, and who are taught separately by specially selected teachers under the supervision of a special inspector. Special schools have been found useful in Germany and England for a number of years, and schools for idiots and the feeble minded have existed in France for sixty years or longer, since the time of the elder Seguin, whose classic writings on the subject form the foundation of much that has been done in this direction since. The unexcelled work of Bourneville, at the Bicêtre in Paris, also furnishes an example of what may be accomplished by the application of simple scientific principles in the proper training of even extreme conditions of brain defect.

In the United States there are nearly 2,000,000 defectives. Of these over 100,000 are feeble minded.

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i.e., in contradistinction to idiotic, imbecile, or insane. These feeble minded are increasing at the rate of more than 2,000 per annum. The percentage of these cases is greater in the United States than it is in France, England, Germany, Italy, or Austria. The proportion of these cases in New York city as a port of entry is far greater than elsewhere in the United States for reasons which it is not the province of the paper to discuss.

In Germany, under special management, in fifty-two auxiliary schools and twelve institutions, 75 per cent. of the feeble minded have become self-supporting.

In this country we have institutions and colonies for the training of the lower grades of mental defectives; but in our public school ungraded classes we are supposed to teach and train only the backward and atypical cases and the higher grade of defectives.

The first ungraded class in New York was established in Public School No. 1, at Henry and Oliver Streets, in 1900. In 1903, similar classes were organized in Public School No. 77, at First Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street, and in Public School No. 110 on Broome Street. In 1905, many other schools were provided with ungraded classes; and last year, 1906, a pioneer teacher of these classes in New York (Miss Elizabeth Farrell), who had previously been sent abroad to study English systems of instruction, was made inspector. The ungraded classes were from the first subdivided, for pedagogic purposes, into (1) bright truants; (2) normal children with sensory defects; and (3) children truly mentally defective. The truants, who are not defective, have been placed mostly in the truant schools of Manhattan and Brooklyn; and pupils with sensory defects are being sent to dispensaries or to family physicians for treatment. The physically defective cases after appropriate treatment gradually get back to the higher grades. The remaining children, who are mentally backward on account of inherently defective conditions of brain, continue to be separately instructed, unless they are of too low mental grade, in which case removal to institutions is lately being urged. In accomplishing such removal to institutions the school authorities are greatly hampered by the ignorance and often superstition of the parents, and not infrequently also by some of the family physicians, especially of the lower East Side, who fail to recognize the true condition and mislead the parents by telling them that the child will outgrow his disability in the proverbial seven years, or at puberty.

The population of the greater city of New York is over 4,000,000; the number of public schools, over 500; the school enrollment about 700,000, and the number of pupils considered suitable for the ungraded classes form at least 1 per cent. of these, or 7,000 children. Nearly all of these 7,000 children are foreign born, and the few who are native born are of foreign parentage. For present purposes those for whom classes have been provided are classified into low, medium, and high grade. In these classes special training, special coaching, or special discipline is required, according to grade; in the lowest grade the children are taught largely objectively, and "learn by doing," in the other grades are pupils able to learn if given individual instruction. The total number of classes thus far is thirty-four. Public School No. 110, corner Broome and Cannon Streets, with 2,500 pupils, contains six classes, and the remaining twenty-eight classes are divided among as many different schools.
pupils are in the same school building with the other pupils, under the same principal, attend the same general assemblies, have the same play ground, gymnasium, and general supervision, and are taught separately for their own special needs. There is one teacher for each class averaging fifteen pupils. She is paid more than the other teachers, and must have many "all round" qualifications, both of mind and heart, for the work. These teachers are excused three months of each year for self-instruction in institutions which have schools for defectives. There are conferences of teachers each month to compare notes and to indicate the best lines of teaching as found by experience. Outsiders come in at times on invitation to the conferences, and lecture on special topics, e.g., habits, sense training phases, motor training phases, etc. There is a nucleus of a library where the meetings are held; and at the School Board a museum of things made by pupils is being established. Photographs of pupils, front and side view, are being made by some of the teachers.

Teachers for the difficult and taxing work of dealing with the backward children are selected by the inspector for natural aptitude, and the children who form the ungraded classes are those who have been observed by their teachers for a considerable time in the normal classes and in their home environment, and are finally passed upon by the inspector and a medical member of the physical training staff. The various reports are all a matter of record.

In one school visited (Public School No. 110), eight backward children were on the waiting list for the lowest grade, and six of these had landed within a year. In one of the lowest grade classes, four of the pupils seen were deaf and had to be taught to speak; one was blind, one rhachitic, and one was a cretin type of idiot. Ages ranged from seven to fifteen years.

The teachers keep full card records of each case in the ungraded classes of this school, comprising what the child can do at the beginning, what its apparent needs then are and the progress that is made, if any, from time to time. Some of the low grade pupils have been tried for petty offenses in the courts.

One of the best conducted of the ungraded classes which I visited was in Public School No. 18, on East Fifty-first Street. This was presided over by a teacher who has had the advantage of training in an excellent private school for the feeble minded. The children are of the lowest grade. The day's programme arranged by this teacher, subject to great variation, is somewhat as follows: From 9 to 11:45 a.m. and from 1 to 3 p.m., with appropriate intermissions, the children pursue various tasks calculated to train the senses and to develop them on the motor side. They dust and arrange the room; name objects in picture books, and learn about their attributes; sing songs; listen to a story concerning which they may make observations; study Nature by means of a little garden, where potatoes, peas, lettuce, onions, etc., are planted by the pupils themselves in a rough box; carve simple shapes in wood; select out and match colors; have simple gymnastics; test their smelling and tasting; pursue various games under instruction to aid in selfcontrol and improve in precision of hand, eye, and ear; then there are exercises in drawing on the blackboard, counting with money, brush work with colors, modeling in clay, word pictures, Indian club and dumbbell exercises, etc., the whole concluding with dancing and marching with piano accompaniment, special attention being given to the attitude, rhythmic body movements, and mannerly deportment.

The ungraded classes of all the schools make occasional visits to museums, the aquarium, and zoological garden for objective teaching; and to Forest
Hills and Bronx Park for field work. Materials from some of the museums are also loaned, so that the objects themselves may be seen and studied.

Public School No. 120, on Broome Street, is a school entirely for incorrigible boys. Many are on parole from the courts in care of the principal, and others are sent by principals of other schools as incorrigibles, who would otherwise be either suspended or sent to the Truant School. They are incorrigible on account of either faulty home conditions or defective mentality. In the first class visited there were fifteen; one boy seen had two brothers who are professional thieves; one was defective and degenerate, sixteen years old, with mentality of six. They were mostly street boys with, as the principal expressed it, a superficial brightness. In this class the teacher selects some subject which becomes a centre of interest. At the time of my visit the subject was The Farm, and everything that could be drawn on the board, thought of, made, etc., pertaining to a farm, was brought up for discussion and treatment and at once awakened marked interest. Several were cutting out birds from paper; one was weaving a basket in the shape of a bird’s nest. Another had three baskets already made, etc. There is a gymnasium and also a bath in this school, as in the regular public schools. In one class two boys were working in leather. In the shop the lowest grade boys were doing wood carving and carpentry.

There are nine classes in the school. Most of the pupils have no sense of right and wrong at the start. One, e.g., before coming, had been learning to steal for a living and thought it no harm. Ages run from ten to fifteen years. Punishment is only by deprivation. Pupils have to earn their privileges by good behavior. The boys are of suitable age for the grammar grades, but are only able to do the lowest primary work. Some learn to count by simple methods. Others put sentences together with separate printed words, each pupil being given a picture as topic.

This school has been open two years. There are one hundred and thirty-five pupils, drawn mostly from two school districts of the down town East Side, representing ten schools, each of at least 2,000 pupils. Ten or eleven parochial schools send a few, and some boys are picked off the streets. A great many of these incorrigible boys are here fitted for remunerative employment outside. Fifty-one out of a total of about 350 (or one seventh) have been sent out; all but six have been heard from and are doing well at unskilled labor, e.g., as messenger boys, telegraph boys, and various employments in department stores and down town business places.

In certain classes of the older boys court is held and offences tried, as in the Junior Republic.

There are the same school hours for the incorrigible boys as in the regular public schools, and the curriculum is carried out as far as possible. The boys know they are under punishment, however, and are encouraged to try to regain favor.

As yet the physicians’ examinations for the ungraded classes, while admirable, no doubt, for physical defects, are lacking occasionally in accuracy respecting mental states. Where there is any conflict of opinion respecting the degree of mental disability, it is found most practicable at present to rely on the prolonged observation of the pupils by the teachers of the normal classes (at least for the temporary placing of the pupil in an ungraded class) rather than on the brief mental examination by physicians who have not had the advantages of special training in this direction. Among the children are many who are really only suitable for institution or colony care and treatment. The inspector informs me that these cases of obvious defect are retained in the ungraded classes temporarily, with
the hope of interesting the parents in their proper disposal. One pupil of this sort was a girl who had never been out of doors before; one boy had been often turned out of a normal school; several are manifest idiots; three of the latter type came from one family and were subsequently sent to an institution.

The higher grades of the feeble minded, however, form the majority of the pupils of the so-called ungraded classes of the city public schools. Such cases are peculiarly likely to deteriorate unless special efforts are made to save them. Their mental processes show diminished reaction time, which is especially noticeable during stress, such as in illness or under excitement. If neglected they form an easy prey to designing street comrades and grow up to be "undesirable citizens." Their limited capacity is always shown in competition with the normal individual; but they may, by appropriate exercises and training, be made often to approach very nearly to the normal standard.

Ideal conditions do not, of course, exist as yet in the ungraded classes of the public schools. The number of pupils to each teacher is too great; equipment is inadequate; it is difficult to get suitable teachers; occasional supervision by qualified neurologists and alienists is apparently needed, etc.; but on the whole, the work done under enthusiastic teachers who have their heart in their work is simply inspiring. One can scarcely realize at first, except for a few obvious cases in each class, that one is in the presence of defectives. The conduct is so good. The attention is occupied and not distracted by the visitor. There is an eagerness to help the teacher and to participate in all exercises. Articles made are exhibited with pride, and many of the children who could not even walk or talk as they should, have learned to accomplish both to a degree at little variance with the normal.

The correction of slight deafness, near sight, anemia, and malnutrition, and the removal of adenoids and hypertrophied tonsils have done much to increase the efficiency of many apparently backward children, but it requires more than this for the proper strengthening and development of abnormal physiological functions of the brain itself, when they exist, and it is here especially that the ungraded classes have their special function.

It is suggested that doubtful cases might be sent to neurological and psychiatric clinics for diagnosis and suggestions as to the disposition and method or line of work most advantageous to individual cases; and where the colony or institution rather than the ungraded class seemed to the clinician a necessity, such a statement in writing, with the indorsement of the school authorities might be used in compelling the parents to pursue the necessary course to bring this about. In this way the classes would surely be rid of an unsuitable element and the pupils themselves most benefited.

From a medical and especially a psychiatric standpoint, however, the subject of instruction of the defectives in the ungraded classes of the city public schools, while organization is still in its infancy, might possibly be placed on a more secure footing if a system of regrading and classification were made periodically and with sharper lines. The organization and scope of the work should be carefully mapped out and the personnel of teachers carefully inquired into.

It is suggested that the School Board, if so disposed, might possibly derive some assistance from the cooperation of a committee from the County Medical Society, or from the Neurological Society, acting in conjunction with one or two heads of institutions, in solving some of the problems of the ungraded classes during the formative stage of this important branch of instruction; and such coopera-
tion would meet, I am sure, with the cordial support of those who are now intrusted with the work. In any event, I strongly recommend New York physicians to visit the special classes of the New York public schools, which are, all things considered, the best in the land, and study them carefully. You will be abundantly rewarded yourselves and perhaps in some way be of assistance to the noble women who are devoting the best part of their lives, in a most practical way, towards the prevention of pauperism and crime.

14 East Sixtieth Street.

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4 It was voted that a committee be appointed by the president of the society to inquire of the School Board whether they wished cooperation.