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### The Backward Class versus The Special School.

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**M**ORE than twenty years have now passed since local education authorities were enabled by statute to supply a special type of education for certain children, who failed to profit by the ordinary routine of primary education. The Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act, 1899, adoptive and permissive though it was, like the compulsory education of the blind and deaf, was the logical outcome of the national educational system inaugurated in 1870. But during the present century, a profound change has taken place in our outlook, and the time is ripe for a re-survey of the whole problem of the education of mentally abnormal children.

In this connection, it is an interesting study to contrast the different method of approach to the problem, which was followed at the outset in England and France respectively, for it shews how great an influence on current thought may be exercised by the chance use of a particular terminology.

In England, when in 1896 a Departmental Committee was appointed, one of the terms of reference thereto was "to report particularly upon the best practical means for discriminating between the educable and non-educable classes of feeble-minded and defective children."

Now, as the members of that committee point out in their report, "the word 'feeble-minded' has presumably been adopted in the terms of reference to us in consequence of its having been used in the report of the Royal Commission on the Blind, the Deaf and the Dumb, etc. That Commission appears to have taken the use of the word from the Royal Commission in the Education Acts."

As a matter of fact it is difficult to trace how and when this word "feeble-minded" acquired its present connotation. It does not occur, for instance, in the Report of the Commission on Criminal Lunacy, 1882, which deals very largely with that class of defective delinquent now known as "feeble-minded" under the general term "weak-minded." The word "imbecile" is, however, frequently used to denote the same type of mentally-deficient person. In fact, the two terms appear to be used quite interchangeably, a

usage in full accordance with various Acts of Parliament dealing with criminal lunatics. Thus Dr. Mitchell, writes :—\*

“As ordinarily understood, an imbecile is a person labouring under any degree of mental imperfection, originating congenitally, or in very early life, which unfits him for the full performance of his duties in the position in which he is placed. The nature and degree of such imperfections are infinitely various.”

Yet when the Royal Commission was appointed in 1904, it received the general title of “The Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the *Feeble-minded*.” The word is thus used, as it is in America to-day, as a general term to cover the whole gamut of mental defect. On the other hand this same Commission in its report once more restricted the use of the word to one particular sub-division of mental inefficiency.

The word “feeble-minded” has thus crept into use without any clear definition or understanding of its connotation. Its use in the terms of Reference to the Departmental Committee inevitably centred attention upon one particular portion of the field of intellectual inefficiency which has continued to engross our attention, somewhat to the exclusion of other portions.

That this danger was recognised by the Committee may be inferred from the following statement (p. 3) in their report :—

“From the normal child down to the lowest idiot, there are all degrees of deficiency in mental power ; and it is only a difference of degree which distinguishes the feeble-minded children, referred to in our enquiry, on the one side from the backward children who are found in every ordinary school, and on the other hand from the children who are too deficient to receive proper benefit from any teaching which the School Authorities can give.”

But the Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act, 1899, which was the outcome of the report of this Committee, failed to compass the same width of view, and attempted to draw a clear and definite line between the dull and backward on the one hand and the imbecile on the other. The result has been that the children of the lower grades of educational capacity have received a preponderating share of attention while the dull and backward have been left very largely to shift for themselves.

In France, however, a different evolutionary process is to be observed. There, as in England, the problem of the child of abnormal mentality attracted the notice of psychologists, educationalists and physicians, but

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\* (Appendix to Report, p. 166).

it seems to have been backwardness and dullness in educational capacity rather than the more pronounced types of defect which attracted attention. The terms still in use: Arriérés, Débiles, Retardataires, to describe the same type of children known in England as feeble-minded, are proof of this tendency. Thus Boncour (*L'éducation des anormaux*, 1910, p. 5), writes:—

“On relève du déficit intellectuel et les écoliers sont dit atteints d'arriération, de débilité. On les appelle aussi retardataires. Ces dénominations sont équivalentes. Dans l'échelle des anomalies mentales par défaut nous distinguons trois degrés: l'idiotie, l'imbécillité, l'arriération.” \*

That this point of view was general can further be gathered from the fact that, in 1904, the Minister of Public Instruction nominated as a member of a Commission appointed to organise classes for sub-normal children in the primary schools of Paris, Professor Binet, who for years had been studying the problem of mental development. It was under such circumstances that Binet, in collaboration with Simon, produced his scales of intelligence, which have revolutionised our conception of mental capacity and educational progress.

A word which frequently appears in the volume of evidence before the above-mentioned Committee is “feebly-gifted.” This term, extensively used in Scandinavia and Germany, has unfortunately completely dropped out of use. It has, however, much to recommend it for it tends to emphasise the educational incapacity and is free from the stigma which unfortunately has come to be attached to the word “feeble-minded.” Moreover, experience has taught us that it is the retarded, feebly-gifted children who form our real educational problem. The problem of the feeble-minded is in reality social rather than educational, and it can only be effectively dealt with by sociological methods. This differentiation between the educational and sociological points of view is of the greatest practical importance.

How important is the retardation problem may be gauged from the fact that from 10 to 15 per cent. of the children in our Elementary Schools are too dull and backward to gain full advantage from the education offered to them at such an enormous cost to the community. If education is to be the solution of our social difficulties, then it is imperative that we should make a beginning to deal with the question. Until some system of grading other than the rule-of-thumb method of promotion from class to class in

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\* This is equally true of German nomenclature, viz.:—Idiotie, Imbezillität, Debilität. (Bosbauer, p. 14.)

accordance with chronological age had been devised, it was quite impossible to ascertain what proportion of children in any group were being taught in accordance with their ability to learn. While the mental laggards have failed to assimilate the teaching provided for them, the natural intellectual progress of the quicker-witted and more intelligent children has been retarded. Thus the loss, due to the failure to secure classes or standards of homogeneous mental ability, is a two-fold one.

Terman,\* speaking of certain American schools, in which a careful investigation had been made, writes as follows :—

“ Notwithstanding the sifting which takes place at the end of each school year, the resulting classification of children has been so far from successful that, generally speaking, the lowest 25 per cent. of pupils in any grade belong mentally to a lower grade and the highest 25 per cent. to a higher grade. Only the middle half are classified approximately where they should be. Usually more than 15 per cent. are at least two grades removed from the one to which they belong by mental age.”

The researches of Burt in the Elementary Schools of a representative Borough of London teach the same lesson. By a careful estimation of the ability of children in the Elementary Schools, he found that about one tenth of all the children between 5 and 10 years exhibited two years retardation. In addition, 25·6 per cent. (*i.e.*, more than a quarter) were one year behind their actual age, and only 46·4 per cent. were assigned to a grade or standard assumed to be normal for their age. Moreover, of the children over 9 years of age, 4·2 per cent. appeared backward by 3 years or more. Examining the same figures from another point of view, Burt came to the conclusion that, “ in round numbers over 2,000 children in this borough—at the very least 10 per cent. of the senior school population—are definitely backward.”

Further, between the “ normals ” and the “ defectives ” there was a distinct overlap—one group merging continuously into the other. There is no gap between them :—

“ The children in ordinary schools who were backward by four or five tenths of their age might well have been admitted at an earlier age to a special school. The defectives who were backward by only one or two tenths of their age might well be returned to the ordinary schools. The mixed group who were backward by 25 to 35 per cent. of their age are borderland cases, some of whom have been sent to special schools and the rest left in

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*The \* Intelligence of School Children, p. 27.*

ordinary schools, in virtue of the various ways in which their condition was interpreted or overlooked."

A more recent investigation has been carried out by Burt in eight representative Birmingham schools (1920). In this investigation all children whose mental ratio (*i.e.*, mental age to chronological age) was below 85 per cent. were categorised as backward, while all whose mental ratio was below 70 per cent. were considered to belong to the group of the feeble-minded.

Among 1,751 children, the following results were found :—

				<i>per cent.</i>	
Retarded but normal	...	...	...	5.2	} increase 10.2
Backward in reading	...	...	...	1.2	
Backward in arithmetic	...	...	...	3.8	
Dull and backward	...	...	...	11.1	} 12.3
Borderline cases	...	...	...	1.2	
Feeble-minded	...	...	...		.3

Thus 22.5 per cent. were behind the average and were thus unable to keep the pace of their fellows, and of these 12.3 per cent. belonged to the dull and backward group. The percentage of those who marked out as feeble-minded has, of course, been influenced by the existence of Special Schools to which a certain number of children from this sample school population have been admitted.

The secret of success in dealing with this question lies in a recognition of the fact that the distribution of human intelligence is of that type which is known to mathematicians as a normal curve of frequency. A distribution of this kind is always the result of the action and interaction of a very large number of causes working independently. The distribution of the height of the members of a community follows the same type of curve. This is equally true of educational ability as distinct from general intelligence. In other words, educational variability appears to be of much the same order as physical variability. Such a distribution of intelligence, if governed solely by mathematical principles would make the low grade idiot as rare as the genius. Unfortunately, however, this is not our experience, and it is clear that whatever the distribution of the higher ranges of intellectual capacity and genius may be, there are certain factors which markedly upset the normal distribution as we descend the lower rungs of the mental stairway, and lead to a much larger number of mentally incapables than would be predicted by mathematical computation alone.

When we have grasped this fact, we realise that the practical problem assumes the two aspects already mentioned in this paper, *viz.* : the social and the educational or psychological. The social aspect of the problem

will include the attempt to discover those factors which disturb the normal distribution of mental capacity and to reduce their range of action by sociological, eugenic or other appropriate measures.

The second or psychological, aspect of the problem will be how to secure, by a recognition of the infinite grades of mental capacity, the best and fullest measure of activity of which each individual mind is capable. This is the question which concerns us most at the present moment.

Judged by numbers alone, the problem of the backward child looms much larger than that of the feeble-minded. The Departmental Committee estimated 1 per cent. of all Elementary School children as feeble-minded.\* The Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded, placed the percentage at 0.79.† We have already said that the number of backward or retarded children who need special provision reaches 10 per cent. or even 15 per cent. of the whole school population.

What then is the remedy ?

The first point must be to secure homogeneity in general educational ability of the children in each class, with a flexible system of promotion from class to class, standard to standard. As, however, has been shown by Burt in his Birmingham investigation, ability in different school subjects, varies within wide limits and with but little strict correlation to each other there must be cross-classification for different subjects. Next, there must be "Repeater classes" for those children who drop behind their fellows and are not ready for promotion at the end of the school year.

This is no new proposal, for it is an integral part of various Continental educational systems. But a complete solution of the question will not be found in a haphazard formation of backward classes, unless their establishment is associated with an organised system of mental testing whereby the educational needs of the individual children may be gauged from time to time.

There still remains the problem of the super-intelligent children, to whose educational progress the presence of their duller classmates acts as an effective brake. To quote Burt again :—\*

"If the child population and the community at large have profited by the establishment of special schools and classes for the educationally incompetent, much more would they profit by refining the procedures for discovering and training those who are the most efficient of their age."

With such a system the overlapping between the "ordinary" and the "special schools" would tend to disappear and the latter would with a

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\* Report, p. 6.

† Vol. I., p. 9.

slight change of character and curriculum fall into their proper place in an organised educational scheme. Without attempting the futile Sysiphean task of inculcating a formal education which the enfeebled mind fails to grasp, they will serve a more useful purpose in giving an effective practical education to those who must earn a living with their hands rather than with their heads. They will serve, moreover, as ante-rooms for the colonies which will come into being for those whose conduct has proved that they are unable "to manage themselves and their affairs with ordinary prudence."

In the State of Massachusetts, legislative action has now been taken on these lines. By Chapter 222, General Acts of 1919, it is enacted that every city and town shall annually ascertain the number of children three years or more retarded in mental development who are in attendance at the public schools, and that there shall be in each town, where there are ten or more children so retarded, special classes to give instruction adapted to their mental attainments.

As Dr. Fernald writes in his report for 1919 :—

"Defectives so trained are very likely to become industrious and well behaved adults . . . Much of the necessary rough work of the world is performed by people who could not pass the modern mental tests. . . . Many defectives have innate character defects and need the institution—the well-behaved and industrious defectives should be allowed their liberty, and should not take the places in the institutions of those unsuitable for community life." (p. 21).

It is in this direction that the Special Schools will be likely to play the principal part in the future.

Hitherto we have been too much obsessed with the educational aspect of feeble-mindedness, and have laid too great a stress upon its importance. We have spent our energies in an attempt to educate those who cannot learn, who cannot compete in the race of life, rather than in an attempt to afford help to the backward child, who, slow and dull though he may be, may yet win a prize in the race, even though it may be only a consolation prize. Even if he should fall short of success yet at least he has the capacity to appreciate "the rapture of pursuing," which is not the guerdon of the vanquished alone.

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\* "Distribution of Ability," p. 44.