EDUCATION OF THE FEEBLEMINDED.*

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Every public institution for the feebleminded in the United States was started by urging the plea to the legislatures that such an institution would educate the mental defective out of his deficiency and make him a self-supporting and productive citizen, and it was years before the fact was recognized that mental deficiency is a condition and not a disease like insanity, and the only help possible is an alleviation of the amount of defect by education. We can relieve and improve the defective, but we can never cure him.

Now opinions differ as to just how far it is well to educate these individuals in a literary sense. My own personal belief after twelve years of experience in caring for and training these people is that we all teach far too much along literary lines and far too little along vocational lines. Practically every child so defective as to go to a public institution for feebleminded to get its training should remain in the care of that institution for the rest of its life; and, as a matter of fact, the greater part of them do so. Now the demands of a feebleminded person living in an institution for anything of a literary character are exceedingly small. Very few of the older and brighter inmates of a home for the feebleminded read the newspapers, and those

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who do love most the murder trials and police court records, but give mighty little attention to current events. They are fond of love stories and detective stories, but seldom or never read poetry, history or biography. In fact, any reading, unless carefully watched and cultivated, is extremely desultory and only occasionally indulged in. Of arithmetic they need only so much as will enable them to do the simple tasks assigned them in the institution.

It is astonishing how few of our inmates keep track even of the day of the month and the year. They have very little money to contend with, so why attempt to teach them to compute interest? Weights and measures would be of more value to them were they able to estimate relative values. As a matter of experience, we found that we can trust but few of our inmates, however bright, to weigh or measure anything with accuracy.

One powerful reason for a certain amount of literary training of the defective lies in the desire of the fathers and mothers, friends and relatives of these people that they have schooling, demanding that they be at least tried in school; and I believe a reasonable amount of satisfaction is due these parents and friends.

It is still unfortunately true that the family doctor will persuade a mother or father to send a defective child to the institution on the false statement that the institution will “cure” the defect after a few years of education. These people must themselves be educated to the fact that there is hope only of relief. But meanwhile they demand, and if they are to leave the child where it belongs, must have, literary training for that child.

Writing and spelling sufficient to write home should be given, but beyond these elementary things I do not believe literary training for the feebleminded should be carried. But when we come to consider the vocational features of educational training we have quite a different field. And by vocational training I do not mean at all the sort of vocational training that would be given to grammar or high school boys and girls, but the sort of manual training that will fit the feebleminded boy or girl to take his or her place in the community life of the institution. The boys should be trained in paper cutting and sloyd because proficiency in those things makes them better helpers in the shops, gardens, and on the farm. The girls should be trained in dishwashing, sewing, laundry and general housekeeping because here is the field of their future industry. I believe also in a certain amount of fancy work and lace making because these furnish amusement to these non-reading girls and women, but I do not believe in the fancy work training carried to the extent it sometimes is in institutions to the exclusion of education along practical and useful lines.

The uselessness of spending time to teach a very defective child along literary lines was shown by a girl, or woman, rather, living yet, I believe, in the large institution at Waverley, Mass.; this woman would test, I am sure, about five or six years old and could, when I was there in the institution, spell readily probably over a hundred words, which she had been slowly and laboriously taught many years ago, but the curi-
ous part of it was that she could as readily spell every one of those words backward. She was quite unable to define any of them; that is, the words meant to her only an assemblage of sounds, and not ideas at all. It is only fair to Dr. Fernald to say that no such effort as teaching a low grade imbecile to spell is attempted there today. This same woman had been taught to do certain elementary household tasks quite well under the supervision given her in the school.

The one fact to remember is that all the training we can give, whether literary or manual, can only help the defective to do some things better than he will without such training, and that all the training that can possibly be given will not furnish him with judgment, self-control, or sufficient common sense, to take his place in life as a responsible human being. His only chance of becoming at all self-supporting is in an institution, under trained supervision and careful oversight, where sufficient allowance is made for his short-comings, and sufficient direction and help given him to enable him to perform his tasks well.

I believe that the farm colony plan is the very best proposition known for providing practical employment for the feebleminded boy and man, and perhaps for the girl and woman.

Provide one good educational institution in each state and then send these people, when they have been trained, out on a farm where they can live in health and usefulness, the only life for which the feebleminded are fitted.

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DISCUSSION

Dr. Sawyer: Dr. Bliss has brought out two great truths in his paper. One is that you cannot cure the feebleminded. You are spending a great deal of energy in trying to get them well. As I said a couple of years ago: You must consider these people against the normal. The normal people have twenty-six letters in their alphabet, whereas the feebleminded have five or ten and they can only make that many combinations. The next point, that their training must be vocational. These people are going to be the drawers of water; you cannot change them; they never will be the time-keepers and it is useless to make them such. You must teach them things that they can do so that they can make themselves of as much value as possible. In a great many instances it will be very little. If they can become "one per cent" or "five per cent" people you have helped them a little bit.

Dr. Bliss (closing): About one per cent of the children who enter school are able to go to college, and yet every bit of our system of public school education, until within a few years, has been on the assumption that every child that entered school would enter college. I think 90 per cent of the children who leave grammar school leave with what literary work they can get, what work in numbers they can get, but with not one lesson of the practical things of every-day life. They are absolutely untrained so far as their ability to do things is concerned. I believe that is one of the most primary faults of our educational system today, and it is rather remarkable that for a great many years before any movement was made toward vocational education of children in public schools the institutions for the feebleminded had found that they had to train these children in their own work, and so the institutions for the feebleminded have been teaching vocational training and they have been better taught than anywhere else and this is a fact that is not generally understood or recognized.