THE PRESENT STATUS of the SUBNORMAL CLASS

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Authorized by the State Council of Education of the State of New Jersey.

October 1918
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Adapted from an address before The Council of Education of the State of New Jersey at Montclair, October 25th, 1918.

The enforcement of compulsory education laws has laid a burden upon the public schools of the United States which involves many difficult problems. The public school system has been developed under a spirit of democracy which has not only demanded equal opportunity in free education for all children but in its earlier development assumed that the type of education offered to all should be the same. There was little differentiation in the curriculum as to content or method.

Recent years have seen a good degree of differentiation in secondary schools. Some distinction has been made in the elementary school between the needs of rural and urban populations. Much less thought has been given to the varying needs of different children in any one school jurisdiction. Children who will leave school at fourteen are in most cases given the same course of study as those who will go on to the high or the vocational school. Pupils who did not possess intelligence or capability for mastering the subjects of this academic course of study have been allowed to drop behind their fellows and to repeat what has been for them a treadmill routine, an uninteresting grind, which has left them ill prepared for any vocation or even for vocational training. This has been an expensive process and the presence of these repeaters has not only added to the financial burden of the taxpayer but has seriously decreased the effectiveness of the elementary grade teacher in her work with the other children.

The establishment of special classes for these subnormal children has been an important step in a much needed differentiation of the elementary school system. The present New Jersey law has assigned specially trained teachers to classes for children “three years below normal” and has limited the enrollment to fifteen. This has involved a considerable increase, usually about three-fold, in the expense per pupil. What has been the justification for this expense?

In the first place the warrant for the establishment of such classes lies in the fact that by this means the regular grade teacher has been relieved of the burden which the presence of these children involved and her effectiveness with the normal children under her care has been appreciably increased.

The second reason for their establishment is not so clearly recognized by school men. It lies in the opportunity which they offer as experiment stations in differentiated educational practice. Here we see a frank attempt to adapt the course of study to the needs of the individual pupil. This experiment should lead to still further differentiation in the elementary grades to meet the needs of the congenital illiterate, the so-called manual minded children, as well as to offer prevocational opportunity for those who leave school at fourteen. All special classes, those for the deaf, the blind, for recently arrived immigrants, etc., as well as those for the feebleminded, mark progress in this direction.

Lastly, since all subnormal children cannot be cared for in institutions at the present time, these classes offer them an educational opportunity. This is the least important of the three reasons though it is at times the first one mentioned. Alone it would not be sufficient warrant for expensive instruction under trained teachers.

In its earlier development the special class for subnormal children was usually organized in a graded elementary school. In many cases the room used differed little in arrangement and equipment from any other room in the
The children assigned to this class were placed in it because they were "backward," "overage," "retarded," or even in some cases because they were difficult to discipline in the regular class, the so-called incorrigible type. This miscellaneous group was put in charge of some regular grade teacher. No definite determination of mental ability or prognosis of future progress was made. To prevent objection on the part of the parents it was called merely a backward or ungraded class and emphasis was placed on the opportunity for special teaching. Its enrollment was usually smaller than that of the regular grades. The methods followed resembled those of the ungraded country school.

The problem presented by such a class has been studied by educators and much progress has been made. Different types of backward children have been recognized and when possible have been separated. Those whose retardation was due to remediable causes,—physical defects, irregular attendance, a foreign language difficulty, and the like,—but whose native ability or intelligence compared favorably with that of children in regular classes, were placed in "restoration" classes. Teaching in these classes was planned to restore pupils to their rightful grades, their assignment for special class teaching being only temporary. The personnel of such a class changes from time to time as this restoration is effected and new transfers are made. The disciplinary cases are assigned to special classes of their own.

This leaves two main classes of backward pupils, the congenital illiterates, to whom I have referred, and the feebleminded or mentally deficient. The improvement in methods of clinical psychology and the development of mental tests has made it possible for us to define the latter class of pupils more clearly. As a result of this development we now find a new situation in a well organized class for mental defectives. The teacher is trained for this work and uses the methods which have been found effective in institutions for the feebleminded; special equipment is used and the class room presents a picture quite different from that of the ordinary grade room; the curriculum has been modified to meet the needs of these pupils as individuals and as a class. Less emphasis is placed on formal school work,—reading, writing, arithmetic, etc. and more on manual occupations, preparation for home life, and self-help generally.

Development has progressed further in those communities where the classes have been brought together into schools for mental defectives, and in this development the city of Newark holds front rank. In coming into contact with the work which has developed in Newark under the supervision of Miss Anderson, I have been particularly impressed with the decided advantages a school for mental defectives presents as opposed to scattered classes.

Among them we may note: better grading and organization; the introduction of departmental work; closer supervision and a better opportunity to train new and less experienced teachers in this work; and an opportunity for the wide-awake school superintendent to carry on a profitable experiment in educational differentiation. There is less feeling of exclusion on the part of the pupils and the development of a school spirit among the teachers and pupils becomes possible.

In some school districts there are practical difficulties in the way of such an organization owing to the small number of children, the problem of transportation, etc., as well as lack of building and equipment. These may be met by bringing the pupils together, as is done in rural centers, in a single school which can be established in a dwelling house rented and adapted to this purpose.

It has been urged that these children gain something from association with normal children, but it should be remembered that on the ordinary school playground mental
defectives are by the very nature of their handicaps segregated from the others or, at best, associate in their play, games, etc. with those younger than themselves.

Parental objection to a school of this type is probably stronger at first than to a class for mental defectives but this feeling tends to disappear with the growing appreciation of the work of such schools. Hardly a month passes in Newark without at least one application for admission from the parents of a normal but backward child.

A working plan for such a school is already available in Miss Anderson’s “Education of defectives in the Public Schools.” With its aid the supervisor or principal can work out experimentally, unhampered by academic tradition, an educational scheme with a view to preparation for life, through prevocational training, for the children of higher grade. These should have some formal school work but hand work should predominate. For children of the lower grades of intelligence no formal school work is given but they are trained in self-help and the simpler household tasks.*

Since the New Jersey law contemplated a heterogeneous class including all grades of mental defect, it very wisely limited the enrollment of the special classes to fifteen. Under a school organization with better grading and departmental work this number can be slightly increased. The attendance for such classes is probably about 85 to 87 per cent. It would seem wise to base the legal restriction on the size of the class on average attendance rather than on enrollment. When schools for mental defectives are organized, this figure might be put as an average monthly enrollment of twenty or an average attendance of eighteen.

Although some lack natural qualifications for the work the present standards for the teachers of such classes are good. The morale is excellent and ideals of service high. These high standards for teaching the children of higher mental level should probably be maintained, but for the children of lowest mental level, the imbecile group, it would seem advisable to follow Dr. Mitchell who, in his report in the Cleveland survey, suggested that the children be in the care of such a matron as would be employed in a day-nursery, and that no teaching should be done. This would amount to custodial care during school hours. The matron would be assisted by some of the older girls of the moron group, acting in rotation, who would thus get training in caring for younger children under her direction.

Thus far I have had in mind the instruction of the mentally defective child, i.e., the problem of his education and training during school hours from the time he becomes of school age until he is sixteen years old. This is only part of the large social problem involved in feeblemindedness.

As New Jersey has taken the lead in provision for classes for mentally defective children it should also keep before itself the problem of their lives after they reach sixteen years of age.

It is all very well to say that we believe in segregating the feebleminded in institutions and colonies but to keep saying this is rather futile unless we do more. What can we schoolmen do?

1. Arouse public opinion to the need of more adequate provision for segregation.
2. Keep the department of Charities and Corrections informed in regard to this need in our different localities. Make returns each year on the basis of the school census, etc.

*1917. World Book Company, Yonkers-on-Hudson, N. Y.
*See Commissioner Kendall’s Bulletin on “The Teaching of Children Mentally Three Years or More Below Normal,” N. J. Department of Public Instruction, April 1918.
3. Afford valuable assistance to this department in urging for immediate admission to institutions or colonies those cases most likely to become public charges or to become in some other way socially undesirable or dangerous. There is a great difference in the social competence of feebleminded individuals of the same mental level. We have the stable or benign type, usually docile and easily influenced, that gets along fairly well in a favorable environment. On the other hand we have the excitable, unstable type, often psychopathic or suffering from a genuine psychosis, that is fairly certain to become a social menace even under favorable circumstances. In some cases parents are so irresponsible or the environment is so undesirable that even the stable type of mental defective becomes either a social menace or at best a social burden. When special class teachers have had these cases under observation they can afford valuable assistance in pointing out those for whom institutional care and restraint is most urgent.

All these purposes can be effected with our present machinery. There should be a further provision and the school authorities might be called upon to make it, though in all but the smaller districts it would be necessary to appoint some officer to carry it out.

This is the provision for the registration and regular reporting, as under a probation system, of all mentally defective children from the time they leave school. The objects of this system would be:

(a) To emphasize to the parents the need for particularly careful oversight in these cases; a responsibility continuing beyond the age period where such responsibility is felt in the case of normal children.

(To secure employment, to direct expenditure, to prevent marriage.)

(b) To allow the question of institutional care to be taken up at any time, as in the case of a suspended court sentence, when social incompetency in the near future seems likely. (Death of parents; tendency to delinquency or crime; exploitation, as in prostitution, etc.)

(c) To check up earlier diagnoses and to furnish scientific data for future diagnoses, and to determine educational method in similar cases. This procedure should be supported by new legislation in regard to commitment of those cases where parental responsibility is insufficient to insure the proper protection of society or of the individual case. Such commitment should be for life, release being granted only on review of the case and decision by the same authority who made the original commitment. In cases of the stable type if parents are dead or are irresponsible, guardianship might be assumed by child welfare organizations.

In other words, we, as schoolmen, are interested in the broad social problem of the mental deviate—the insane, the psychopathic, the feebleminded, the moral imbecile, the delinquent, and the criminal. Of this problem their education during school age is only a part. We believe in segregation in colonies and institutions, but the institutional capacity is inadequate. We have our part in getting the rest of the community to see this need as we see it. We are in a position to assist in reducing the amount of poverty, delinquency, and crime caused by the presence of those mental deviates in society, by keeping track of them and urging commitment on a selective and intelligent basis.

To summarize:

I have urged the claims of the school for mental defectives over the separate classes.

I have tried to point out the gap between these classes and the regular grades which should be filled by a similarly organized school for the congenitally illiterate.

I have suggested that we enroll twenty pupils per
teacher in classes for defectives or at least have an average attendance of eighteen per teacher except when the class is ungraded.

I have urged that the lowest grade of mentally defective children should be treated custodially and cared for by a practical matron rather than taught by a trained teacher.

I have suggested that it is not enough for the school authorities to care for these children up to sixteen and then lose track of them. We or some other state or municipal authority should follow them up and secure their commitment to institutions or colonies before they become socially dangerous or a public charge. Meanwhile we should do our part in educating public opinion to recognize the need for institutional provision more nearly adequate to the requirements of the situation.

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Newark, N. J. Nov. 30, 1918