

Proceedings of the Minnesota Educational Association (1915)

THE LARGER ASPECTS OF THE SPECIAL CLASS

by Fred Kuhlmann

Director, Division of Research

Minnesota State Department of Public Institutions

The ultimate objective of the special class for subnormals is to make them as useful members of society as possible by special curricula and methods of teaching adapted to their peculiarities. Incidental to this should be an educative process for society, informing it who the subnormals are, and what are their requirements after the public schools get through with them. With the latter problem the special class teacher seldom comes into direct contact. Her immediate concerns are those of curricula and methods of teaching. I have chosen this topic, first, because of the ever-present danger of losing ourselves among the concrete details of teaching and managing individual children in the class room, and thereby losing sight of what it is all about and what we are driving at, and, secondly, because it is with these larger and sociological aspects of the subnormal that I have made my chief contact, and on which the accumulated data of my department may be able to contribute some useful information.

Let us remember that the subnormal children in the schools today, though their number is relatively small, will give rise to half of the social troubles caused by the the misfits of tomorrow. With them is associated most of our economic inefficiency, unemployment, domestic problems, poor homes, neglected children, immorality, and most of the other forms of misbehavior. Organized charity spends half its time and means in their behalf. Private charity from relatives and friends exceeds this many times. Without the subnormals, slum areas would all but vanish from our cities. Our corrective and penal institution population would be reduced to just one half of its present size. And much of our judicial machinery would no longer be needed. Let us remember also that there is today no more indication than there was at any other time in our history that state control will eventually solve all the problems subnormals give rise to. Even were such an

Achievement possible, the wisdom of so much governmental paternalism would be highly questionable. The main source of aid, guidance, and support that the subnormals require and will receive must come voluntarily from private citizen, relatives, and other close associates. The state may assist; especially in the most outstanding cases it may point the way, but it will never do the whole job. The voters won't let it.

This situation brings to light the larger significance of the special class. For each community to minister wisely to the needs of its own subnormals requires much more information and a better understanding than the average citizen today possesses. That information and understanding must be concrete and personal, for no amount of abstract knowledge about the subject in general can motivate them into action. To furnish this should be one of the general functions of the special class.

The first step is identification. The community must know who needs help before it can give help. There is enough humanitarianism in human nature everywhere to take care of the subnormal. But it is not functioning, because the necessary information is lacking, or misunderstanding blocks the way. In fact, it is misunderstanding that prevents a large number of subnormals from receiving state care and guardianship, when nothing else can be adequate. In commitment hearings the community finds the subnormal not to be subnormal through lack of information, and consequent misdirected sympathy.

The most important and fundamental issue about the subnormal is marriage. All legislative efforts up to date to prevent or control in any direct way the mating and reproduction of subnormals have been practically a failure. We are not likely to succeed in the near future with these methods. Our best hope is to make a little progress here and there. One of the worst features about marriage of subnormals is not that they marry, but that they so often marry relatively normal people. This keeps subnormality diffuse in the race. If subnormals married only subnormals the progeny would no doubt be of lower grade on the whole than when subnormal marries normal. But it would tend to limit their relative numbers in several different ways. First, no normals would give us subnormal descendants because of mating with subnormals. Second, a larger number of subnormals would not mate at all, because they would not happen to come into association with other subnormals. Third, the lower the grade of subnormality, the smaller the chance of leaving

any progeny behind in any case. If all subnormals could be suddenly converted into idiot or low imbecile grade and kept there, this phase of the problem would be almost completely solved at once. We get relatively few descendents from these lower grades, though they are capable of reproducing. If you make subnormality bad enough, society *does* forbid effectively.

Now the point I wish to make in this connection, is, first, that society would also forbid effectively in case of the higher grades of subnormality if it had full information and the proper understanding of the situation, and secondly, that the special class is the chief instrument through which this information and understanding must come. The special class identifies the subnormal in each community. Identification gives an opportunity to observe. Observation of the subnormal throughout his school career from childhood to maturity will do the rest.

This phase of the general problem of the subnormal shifts the need of emphasis in our endeavors into another direction. Proper curricula, improvement in teaching technique, and skill of teachers now may become secondary to the simpler question of how many of the subnormal we reach with the special class. Our management of the special class may be perfect, but this perfection will not accomplish much, if only a negligible number of our subnormals get the benefit of it. Let us therefore turn to the consideration of this question.

The Research Division of the Minnesota Board of Control has done the selecting and examining of special class children for the State Department of Education for the past fifteen years, throughout the State, except for the Twin Cities and Duluth. During this time there has accumulated a large mass of data, from which we have a few tabulations. I shall consider, first, the number of children in the State that are eligible for special classes; second, the number that were in special classes during the school year of 1927—28; and third, selective factors at work in placing children in special classes.

In a number of towns we have given group intelligence tests to all the children in the school, or to all in certain of the school grades. Those doing poorly on the group tests were given an individual examination, the object being to find all that would meet the IQ rule governing the special class, according to which only those with an IQ of 50 to 80 may enter. Other considerations are taken into account to determine whether a case near 50 or 80 shall enter. These other considerations will be neglected

in our tables. Table I gives some results of group test surveys and individual examinations in a number of towns. It includes all school grades from I to XII, and involves 11,783 children.

Table I

IQ	50-59	60-69	70-79	Total
Number	21	140	523	684
Per cent	.17	1.2	4.4	5.8

These figures show that 5.8 per cent of the total school enrollment in these grades have IQ's of 50 to 79. Roughly four fifths of these belong in the upper of the three classes, having IQ's of 70 to 79, inclusive. If we assumed that 5.8 per cent of all the school children in grades I to XII in the State had IQ's from 50 to 79 it would make a total of over 32,000 eligible for special classes at present. Since this percentage is based on surveys in towns, and since rural children seem, on the whole, to rank slightly lower than urban, it would seem safe to conclude that the 32,000 is more likely an under- than an over-estimation.

Since the subnormals are not distributed equally through the grades from I to XII, the percentages in Table I are, of course, affected by the grades we have included. It will be of further interest, therefore, to see how they are distributed through the grades. Figures on this are given in Table II. This gives the percentages of the total grade population (not of the total school population) that have IQ's from 50 to 79, separately for each grade from I to VIII, and together for grades IX to XII. For example, 133 subnormals were found among first grade pupils, which is 6.3 per cent of the total number of first grade pupils.

Table II

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	LX-XII
Number									
subnormal	133	61	82	118	100	109	25	28	346
Per cent	6.3	3.7	5.2	7.2	7.5	8.5	5.3	5.2	2.5

The largest accumulation of subnormals is seen to occur in grade VI. Theoretically, this is the limit of capacity of children with an IQ of 80 at the age of sixteen, when the mental age would be 12.8 years. But the sudden drop in the per cent of subnormals after the sixth grade is probably due mostly to the legal permission to drop out of school entirely at the age of sixteen,

which age many anticipate by one or two years. A more detailed analysis of our data shows that pupils with IQ's in the sixties occasionally get into the high school, while the presence of these in the eighth grade is not unusual.

I had always believed that a considerable number of subnormals dropped out of school at various age and grade levels before they reached the age of sixteen, because of their inability to make good. Accordingly, the lower IQ's would drop out soon, while the higher grade of subnormals would stay longer. But our data did not give such indication. Apparently, the subnormals practically all continue in the regular grades up to a certain age, many of them long after the age of sixteen. The only exception seems to be with those of imbecile and idiot grade, with IQ's below 50. These, with rare exception, do not get into the public schools at all. If those of moron grade drop out of school at different ages or school grades, more than do normals, the per cent of all pupils at each chronological age that are subnormal would decrease. We may compute the per cent of all six-year-olds, of all seven-year-olds, etc., in the whole school system that are subnormal to determine this. This was done for our results from four towns where a complete group test survey was made of the whole school enrollment. The figures are given in Table III.

Table III

Age	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Number	141	418	389	437	421	426	405
50-79	3.5	3.4	3.8	5.0	7.4	9.4	11.3
Per cent							
80-89	17.1	15.3	13.6	15.8	15.4	18.0	13.3
Per cent							
90-99	25.5	21.9	21.7	22.8	20.2	20.2	22.0

There were 141 six-year-olds in the schools of these **four** towns, and 3.5 per cent of these had an IQ of 50 to 79. It is seen that these percentages increase instead of decrease from the ages of six to twelve. The figures for ages above twelve would not have been comparable with the present figures, because beyond the age of twelve some of the normals drop out of school entirely, on account of having finished the eighth grade. This increase in the percentage that are subnormal according to the figures does not mean that more children really become subnormal as they grow older. It is due to the general tendency of all

IQ's below 100 to drop a little more each year. For IQ's in the eighties this annual drop is between two and three points. Consequently, in our classification that draws the line as 80 for all ages, a few more cases will at each higher age drop below the 80 mark from among those just above 80. This interpretation is further verified by the figures in this table. There is no such evidence of an increase in the percentages from lower to higher ages for those with IQ's of 80 to 89, or again for those with IQ's from 90 to 99. For in these two instances about as many drop out of the group at the lower end, because of the lowering of the IQ, as enter the group at the upper end. Let us not, however, lose sight of the main conclusion from Table III. This is that the* subnormals who enter the public schools apparently all stay there till the age of twelve. We shall see later in another connection that soon after twelve they begin to drop out very rapidly.

Remembering that there are roughly 32,000 children in the state who are eligible for special classes, let us see now how many were in special classes during the school year of 1927--1928. The total number in special classes with IQ's from 50 to 79, inclusive, was a little over 2,900, making, roughly, not quite ten per cent of the number eligible. The per cent of the eligible number found in special classes in different towns varies from nearly 100 per cent to much less than ten. This is determined mostly by the size of the school enrollment. The small schools having barely enough subnormals to fill a special class will have practically all those eligible in it. The larger towns are likely to fail most seriously in this respect. Practically no towns have established a special class that did not have the maximum number of fifteen pupils for it. This makes it obvious, of course, that the towns that do not have special classes have on the whole much more than ten per cent of their eligibles in them. Last year there were 49 towns with special classes. These had a total enrollment of 131,400. Assuming that 5.8 per cent of these were eligible for special classes, it appears that 38 per cent of the eligibles were in special classes in the towns that had a special class. Seventy-six per cent, however, of the state's total school population were in the rural schools and towns without special classes. In a word, three-fourths of the school population was not reached by the special class. For the other one-fourth, 38 per cent of those eligible were actually in special classes last year.

A question of further interest is how the ten per cent of the eligibles that were in special classes were selected, with reference to sex, age, and grade of intelligence. On the whole, we would probably agree that from the standpoint assumed in this paper, it is more important to select girls than boys, the younger rather than the older, and the higher grades of subnormals rather than the lower. If this is correct, we are doing the wrong thing on all three counts.

Sixty-seven per cent of the children in special classes last year were boys. There is an educational as well as sociological reason for selecting girls rather than boys. The basic educational need of the subnormals is vocational training in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. It is much easier for the schools to furnish this for the boys. The reason for the great preponderance of boys in the special classes is not at all clear. The percentage of boys that are subnormal is not materially higher than it is for girls.

The tendency to select the older rather than the younger subnormals for special classes is not so marked, although distinctly noticeable. The next table compares the per cent of eligibles existing at each age with the per cent of eligibles found in special classes at each age. The per cents in this table are per cents of the total number of subnormals.

Table IV

Age	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Eligible	1.8	4.9	5.3	7.7	10.9	14.0	14.4	17.2	15.1	6.3	2.1	.4	
In Sp. Cl.	.6	2.3	4.2	6.6	8.3	9.6	14.0	14.5	16.8	15.7	6.8	1.5	12
Ratio	.33	.47	.79	.86	.76	.69	.97	.84	1.12	2.48	2.75	3.75	

These figures mean that, for example, 1.8 per cent of all eligibles in the towns surveyed were six-year-olds in September of that year. The table shows in a more pronounced way than does Table III that the number whose IQ's fall between 50 and 79 increases from younger to older. The sudden sharp drop in the per cent of eligibles after the school age of fourteen shows that, although the subnormals remain in the schools up to at least the age of twelve, as was seen in Table III, a large portion of them leave the public schools a year or two before the legal age of sixteen. It is from these higher ages, especially from fourteen to seventeen, that the special class selects the largest proportion of existing eligible cases. It selects the smallest proportion from the six- and seven-year-olds. This is seen best at the bottom line

of figures, which gives the ratios of per cent in special class to per cent eligible. The selection of the older rather than the younger children for special classes is due mostly to the fact that school retardation is made the criterion by which the schools select candidates to be examined for special classes. This allows all the six-year-olds, most of the seven-year-olds, and many of the eight-, nine-, and ten-year-old subnormals to escape. Under existing conditions the fault is not serious, but on the whole, is surely not the best policy. The amount of school retardation is a distorted measure of maladjustment. The subnormal in the first grade, with no school retardation, is just as poorly adjusted from the educational standpoint as is the subnormal in the higher grades with two or three years of school retardation. Both are advanced beyond their abilities. Behavior and other problems arise largely from leaving them so long in grades where they cannot do the work. They should be put in the special class before these problems arise, as well as in order to prevent waste of time, money, and effort on the part of both children and school.

The third question is that of grade of subnormality selected for the special class. Since the lower grades of subnormals are retarded most in school they naturally are chosen for the special class in preference to the higher grades. In Table V a comparison is made between the per cent existing for each of three grades of intelligence and the per cent in the special classes last year that fell under each of these three grades.

Table V

IQ	50-59	60-69	70-79
Existing	3.1	20.5	76.6
In special class	9.4	32.2	58.4
Ratio	3.00	1.57	.76

These figures mean, for example, that of all cases in the towns surveyed with an IQ of 50 to 79, 3.1 per cent had IQ's of 50-59, and that of all cases in special classes last year with IQ's of 50—79, 9.4 per cent had IQ's of 50—59. The bottom row of figures gives the ratios of the percentages in the second row to the percentages in the first row. A very strong tendency to select the lower rather than the higher grades of subnormals is evident in these figures. From the school's standpoint this is, of course, the logical thing to do. But from the sociological standpoint, and

with reference to these cases after they leave school, it is not the best thing- to do. The higher the grade of subnormality the greater the chances of the community over-looking their needs, and the more likely is it that serious social problems will arise. It is the higher grade of subnormals especially that the special class should identify, and it is these especially for whom the schools can have the greatest hope of making them into economic assets for society instead of liabilities.