

THE SCHOOL'S PART IN THE MANAGEMENT OF  
THE PROBLEM OF MENTAL DEFECTIVENESS

By

S. Alan Challman, M.D., Director  
Child Study Department, Board of Education  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

MINNESOTA  
SOCIAL SECURITY BOARD  
LIBRARY

Two small bits of philosophy, i.e., "That all men are created equal" and that "education should lead to culture" are responsible in part for the lethargy of the school in meeting the educational requirements of the mentally defective. "That all men are created equal" is set forth in the preamble to no less a document than the United States Constitution and has become a cliché so widely quoted that few would dare to question openly its truth. Yet beyond a doubt there are great variations in individuals even at the moment of creation. The mental defective is often created deficient in the very things that make educability possible. If he is expected to compete equally with his normal neighbor, his education not only contributes less than it should to his development, but actually handicaps him further through creating bad habits and attitudes.

"That education should lead to culture" has been so long accepted that we are now hardly conscious of its influence on our thinking. The goal of education through the past centuries can be likened to the present goal of pure science, in that they both strove for ever more knowledge irregardless of any practical value that it might have. Pure science as a by-product of its ethereal pursuits has now and again made many a contribution to practical living and in a like fashion a classical education has frequently led to advances in actual living in the individual and in the race. And if education is thinking yet in terms of developing only leaders, if it thinks only of the relatively few who can leap the hurdles, and reach that finish which is mis-called commencement, it is right and proper to keep it in the mold into which it has set.

If, however, educational goals can be conceived in terms of individual or personal needs -first- with the realization that if those are cared for, social and racial goals will simultaneously be improved, it will have made its greatest advance since the initiation of the public school.

The mental defective defies those two underlying principles (or should we say sentiments) of education. He can not justly be treated as equal to those more capable than he, nor can he be expected to wear becomingly the formal attire of "culture". He is in need of an education which defers to his own needs and rate of growth. Ordinarily the home and the school share the responsibility for a child's education, each doing the part that it can do best and aiding the other agency in its major efforts. Those children come in a large percentage of cases from the underprivileged homes and their parents, through actual mental deficiency or mental dullness, are least able to supplement the education given in the school. For those reasons the school must bear almost alone the responsibility of preparing them for life. What can the school do in discharging this responsibility,

The first thing the school can and should do is to select out all who are mentally defective. There is an unequalled opportunity for a complete survey of the population. For this purpose the intelligence test can best be used. It takes only one half hour to give a good individual test to a young child at the beginning of his school career. The individual test is much more accurate than the group test and especially so in the younger years. The time taken to give it can be saved many times over by the school during

the child's later school life, through the simple device of teaching the child no more than his mental age would indicate he is ready to learn. Many hours are wasted by teacher attempting to teach dull and defective pupils reading before they have sufficient mental organization to learn it. The various school grades are so arranged in content and difficulty that it ordinarily requires a certain mental age to master the work. Much of the time that is spent by a child with a mental age of 8 in the fourth grade is utterly wasted or worse than wasted for the experience of continual failure in the face of best effort may discourage the child beyond remedy. By giving an individual intelligence test to all children at the beginning of their school career, those children who are mental defectives could be selected out, those who are sufficiently superior to warrant special attention would become known, all those who fell in between these two extremes (and yet who vary greatly in school ability) might be understood and planned for.

From the standpoint of locating mental defectives there is no time like the school age for making the determination for it is at this age that best cooperation can be obtained and, more important, test results are more accurate then. There are many ways in which a program of mental testing could be put into the entire school system of the state and I shall not enlarge on that point here. Suffice it to say that such a program is being instituted in the Minneapolis Public Schools this spring and will operate so that all children entering the school system in the first grade after September 1935 will have had mental measurements.

When a school system has selected out its mental defectives, the next problem that confronts it is "Should these children be separated from the others and placed in special class, or should they be given special instruction in the regular grades?" One may argue that if segregation in special classes is used, the child will be stigmatized as dull and consequently will have to bear the brunt of teasing and unkind remarks from other children. Some parents also criticize special classes because there the children do not make as rapid progress in academic subjects as in the regular grades, or because there is a larger proportion of handwork in the special rooms. Those who are better informed may criticize the special classes because in them it costs approximately three times as much to educate a child as in the regular grades.

In answer to these criticisms those who favor the use of special class method of instruction point out that a dull child is stigmatized as being dull no matter where he is placed. If he remains in the regular grades and fails to do satisfactory work there, or is given assignments which differ from those of his classmates, no one can prevent it from becoming known that he is "dumb" as the children say. There is as much teasing of defective children when they are in the regular grades as when they are in special class. Nature or disease has stigmatized those children and placement in special class does no more than to give the dullness an official stamp which is no more conspicuous than the unofficial designation. In answer to the arguments of parents to the effect that children do not learn as rapidly in special class, one needs only to point out that their learning rate is in proportion to their intellectual growth. Scholastic achievement can come nearer to expectations in the special class on the average than in comparable cases in the regular grades. The criticism of the high cost of education in special classes is more difficult to settle. If the mentally defective child is more difficult to educate than the normal or superior child, then the added expense would be warranted. The higher cost cannot be justified in terms of the contribution that the defective individual makes to society as compared to the contribution made by the normal child. It might be shown (but has not) that the cost of individualized education given is justifiable in terms of prevention of dependency and delinquency. The present high cost of education for the

mentally defective arises out of the small size of the special classes. Fifteen pupils to the teacher and room is the limit whereas in the regular grades, three times this number are often found in a class. If the size of special classes could be increased, then the cost of instruction could be decreased. The classes are now small in size because the children are difficult to manage and because they vary tremendously in age, interest and scholastic achievement. If more easily manageable, more homogeneous groups can be gathered, the size of the class can be increased without diminishing the effectiveness of the instruction. This, I believe, can be done for, with an adequate mental testing program at the beginning of the school life, all mental defectives could be selected out. This would result first in increasing the number of children in the special classes in each school, town and city so that there would be an opportunity to form more homogeneous groups from the larger number. Thus in Minneapolis, for example, 4250 children (according to Dr. Kuhlmann's figures) would be available for sorting into homogeneous groups rather than 800 as are now being cared for in special classes. A town of 5000 population according to the same computation would have approximately 50 candidates for special class. Through this procedure greater homogeneity could be attained and consequently less expenditure for the individual child.

A second result of such a testing program would be the improvement in the manageability of the mentally defective in school. In my opinion a large part of the difficulty experienced in teaching the dull child arises out of the negativistic attitude he has adopted toward school as a result of the many humiliations and failures he has experienced there. A child who has experienced many rebuffs and disappointments when he has done his best to learn soon gives up trying to cooperate and spends his time in retaliating against the institution he feels is punishing him. These failures, rebuffs and humiliations can be avoided if the fact of mental deficiency is established when a child first enters school and if he can then have work given to him which he can be successful in learning. Immediate placement in special class with early recognition of retardation in intellectual development will do much to increase the size of special classes, decrease the cost of special education, to say nothing of the saving to society in preventing the formation of inferiority feelings and disgruntled, antisocial (through retaliation), lazy personality developments. These conditions arise at the present time because in the present system a child usually spends three to eight years attempting to compete with a superior group before he is recognized as a candidate for special class. It is not necessary, in the present state of affairs, to wait until a child has experienced many failures before sending him into special class any more than it is necessary to wait for a pulmonary hemorrhage before a person goes to a sanitarium for tuberculosis or for a period of coma before diabetes is treated. Intelligence tests are reliable to such a high degree in predicting school failure that special class can be resorted to early.

Special classes would be found to be necessary and possible not only in the larger cities where they are now used almost exclusively, but also in smaller towns and areas. Wherever you find a town or territory where 1700 people live, there should be on the average, according to Dr. Kuhlmann's figures for Minnesota, 15 school children who are candidates for a special class. The matter of transportation by bus to a special class in the rural areas might not be such a formidable undertaking if all of those who need special class teaching could be located.

When the proper children are selected out and placed in special classes, the next problem of the school becomes one of providing them with the education they should have and can profit by. This becomes a matter of determining the proper curriculum and utilizing the correct techniques. I can not speak with any authority on adequate techniques for the education of mental defectives, but much has been written on the subject stressing the importance of patience, repetition, explicit direction, concreteness and the use of visual education and actual experiences which the children can live through, and the like.

The proper curriculum for mental defectives is not known today in any certain terms. A great stride will have been made when all those who are defective can be known. At the present time our reasoning and observations about the adjustment and potentialities of defectives may be faulty because we are so apt to recognize only those who fail in life and cause society trouble thereby. It seems to me likely that when a system of ascertaining and following all those who are defective can be instituted that we may be surprised to see what a large proportion are really self-supporting and law abiding. Until we have a true cross-section of mental defectives who can be studied and observed for what they are doing and can do with their lives, we can hardly say what the content of the curriculum of special classes should be. If the school were to be led only by what it can see in the mental defectives who are clients of social agencies or charged with offenses in the courts, there would seem to be little justification for an intensive, expensive education. At the present time the curriculum for special classes is made up too largely of material borrowed from orthodox, progressive, and institutional educational practices. A rational curriculum for these people can be constructed only when it is known what a mental defective individual can do in life and what life society is going to require him to lead. The curriculum in special class certainly should not be high school or college preparatory in its direction. It should not attempt to prepare for skilled trades either, except where there is a special ability which rises above the general level of defectiveness. In general it should not be pointed toward fitting for special occupations, for the work that mental defectives do is seldom complicated enough (according to our best present knowledge which may be inadequate) to warrant a formal training period away from the actual job itself.

There are several things then that the school can do in combating the consequences of mental defectiveness, i.e., it can select out all those who should be so classified; it can determine the proper techniques for teaching them; it can (when a fair sample of this group is known) prepare a curriculum which will truly develop the potentialities of the individual within modifiable limitations to meet actual life experiences; and it can avoid developing or increasing antisocial trends and inferiority feelings which serve as a further handicap.

The school cannot, however, be expected to bring these handicapped individuals to a level of performance which will allow them to compete on equal terms and in all cases with normal people. Nor, as has been suggested, can the school follow in a social service sense, individual mental defectives after they have left school. The school's function is and probably will remain education, and social service support involves much more than the word education would imply. The school can and should, however, observe enough of this group after school years and up to the time of death

so that it might know what it was attempting to prepare the individual to do and be. Last of all the school cannot be expected to substitute entirely for the home training which is in many cases sorely lacking. Certain relationships and experiences essential to child training can not be provided in the school but must come in the family life of the individual.