

Compliments of A. C. Rogers

FUNCTIONS OF A SCHOOL FOR FEEBLE-MINDED.

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In approaching the subject indicated by this title, we have no theories to propose, no hobbies to ride. With those who are in earnest to find the right, we stand, not as a teacher, but as a pupil, listening to the histories of the past, reading as well as we may their lessons, and hoping therefrom to obtain some indication of what the future may expect. Whatever of suggestion there may be in these few paragraphs has come to us by natural deductions from the actual experience through which the work for the feeble-minded has passed, and is passing to-day, and assumes nothing original or fanciful. We have employed the word "feeble-minded" in a general sense, the words "imbecility" and "idiocy" indicating specifically the extreme degrees of mental weakness. As we are led to conceive of it, then, the institution for feeble-minded should perform for the public certain definite functions, the most important of which are:—

1. To make imbeciles, so far as possible, respectable, self-supporting members of society.
2. To improve and render efficient as helpers those who cannot be made self-supporting.
3. To place and retain under proper guardianship the latter, and those who cannot be improved, thereby relieving our American homes of the demoralizing influence of their presence, and limiting the reproduction of inherited idiocy.
4. To investigate the nature, distinctive characteristics, and etiology of feeble-mindedness.
5. To accomplish the purposes of these propositions under influences insuring a maximum degree of comfort and happiness and in connection with efforts toward a moral development of the wards commensurate with the efforts for their general improvement.

In considering the first proposition, the question arises as to what per cent. of persons can be expected to become self-supporting. This depends upon two things, the degree of mental and physical feebleness and the practical nature of the methods employed in training. All of our schools for the feeble-minded have succeeded in sending

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out a goodly number of persons who are bearing bravely their share of the burden of life; but no comparative mathematical statement of results is available, the circumstances of classification and training having been quite diverse in the different places. Scores of feeble-minded persons are to-day performing the work of regular employees in public institutions, and might under favorable circumstances earn a livelihood outside. But this is a busy, practical, money-getting age, when the satisfactory placing of children of normal faculties is no easy task, and only under favorable circumstances to be advised. This being true of normal persons, how small the field for those lacking in judgment and the higher qualifications for success!

Seguin, Wilbur, and others long ago proved to the world that idiocy was not an absence of intellectual possibilities, but an absence of intellectual development; and, having successfully applied the means for development, and transmitted the art to their followers and the world, they have for all time placed all degrees of uncomplicated mental feebleness, from that of the lowest idiot to that of the dullard who vainly attends our public schools, within the legitimate province of educational training. With this fact the members of this body are familiar. The schools in Germany and America have also demonstrated that our pupils are capable of accomplishing a large amount of work in the line of manual industries. The manufacture of boots and shoes, clothing, brooms, mats, baskets and brushes of all sorts, carpentering, farming, gardening, and stock-raising have been carried on very successfully, and even profitably, where any effort has been made toward this end. The boys of the Kentucky School for the Feeble-minded last year made over two thousand pairs of boots and shoes, besides other kinds of work which cannot be so definitely specified. The work is done, too, by spending only half of the time in this way, the other half being spent in the school-room. From the reports from Kentucky, it would seem that about nineteen per cent. of those who receive a course of training are discharged absolutely self-supporting, while about thirty-nine per cent. in addition to this are markedly improved. It is true that in Kentucky none but the brightest-minded are supposed to be in the school department, the idiots being "farmed out" under that most pernicious system which pays a premium upon this kind of misfortune. In fact, however, a large number of the eleven hundred children that are taken care of in families under State pay in Kentucky are comparatively bright cases, and capable of making records with the best in the training-school; while, on the other hand, from communities where the "Idiot Law" has less influence,

many children are received into the school who are found to be unimprovable, and this affects the published result. We can fairly ~~assure~~ ^{show} ~~them~~ that the class of children in the Kentucky school is about the same as would be found in the regular school and training departments where strict classification is maintained, and the results in the latter about the same, though taking a different form, as already indicated.

The ~~problem~~ ^{serious} fact, however, remains: that idiots and idio-imbeciles will never, as a rule, and very seldom, as an exception, be sufficiently developed, under any system of training which can ever come into general application, to be safely trusted, either for their own good or the good of society, out from under strict and judicious surveillance.

The question of unimprovability then being once established, the only practicable thing to do is to furnish a home where, amid cheerful surroundings, in accordance with the state of our Christian civilization, and in a manner consistent with an age of practical economy, the mediocre imbecile may lead a happy, harmless, and measurably useful life in assisting to care for his fellows.

The question of relieving our homes of helpless idiots needs only to be mentioned to be universally approved by philanthropy and public policy alike. To take them from the families of paupers is only to transfer the application of public aid and administer it under more favorable circumstances. To take them from the family of the wage-worker or small property holder is generally to restore at least one person, and sometimes more, from bondage to freedom,— a bondage it is true often mellowed by the tenderest of maternal or filial love and affection, but none the less inexorable and blighting. The homes that have been rendered desolate by the presence of idiocy are innumerable, and their sad stories would fill whole volumes.

The frequent occurrence of childbirth among unprotected idiotic women has already been forcibly referred to before this body, and needs no further attention in papers of this nature.

Some of our institutions have been able to do some work in the way of collecting data for the study of the etiology of idiocy. While too much care cannot be exercised in drawing conclusions from such data, we believe this field a useful one, and destined to throw valuable light upon this very obscure subject. Its cultivation certainly should be considered one of the functions of the institution.

Now let us notice three principles which are the foundation of our work, and which must shape its organizations:—

First, classification of imbecile and idiotic persons should be strictly

and carefully maintained in such a way as to minimize the effect of all injurious influences and maximize the effect of beneficial ones. This does not necessarily indicate that only children of the same mental power should associate, for the mutual influence of those characterized by very different types of mental ailment is often the best. The sparkling activity of the bright, nervous child is a powerful stimulant to the weaker one; and it is wonderful how one feeble child can sometimes reach the soul of another, where a teacher or an attendant cannot.

Again, it can be stated as a matter of frequent observation that the birth of manliness and independence begins with a realization on the part of an imbecile child that there are other beings that know less than he does, especially if he has been the victim of ridicule or mistreatment on the part of brighter children.

Second, in the location of institutions, the construction and arrangement of buildings, the employment of service, and the adaptation of training and treatment, the best interests of the class for which they are intended, and the best interests of society with reference to this class, should govern every action. This principle is, of course, axiomatic, yet, we are sorry to note, not always observed.

The third principle is not so evident at first thought, but has been the outgrowth of experience, approved by philanthropy, and demanded by public policy. The idea of the principle involved may roughly be expressed by saying that our institutions for the feeble-minded should be open to *all* feeble-minded (using the term in its generic sense), including those cases complicated with epilepsy. To study the development of this idea is simply to study the history of every one of our schools, whether public or private.

In every one, it matters not how persistently the managers may have insisted upon classification and clung to the educational feature, they have been compelled to carry along a group of persons of variable numbers, composed of idiots and epileptics, and, in some cases, adult imbeciles. In theory, the differences between these classes are marked and distinct, and their mutual association very undesirable; while, in practice, the lines of separation are entirely indefinite, and the interchange of members between the several groups of frequent occurrence. The position of the managers has been an anomalous one and difficult of solution. Forced to admit incompatible elements, how to classify them and build to meet the requirements of all has been the question.

The first solution proposed was the entire isolation of these various groups; but this has never met with general favor, for reasons that are not far to seek. First, these groups do not develop with equal rapidity,

and some two or more must for a long time be under our administration for the sake of economy. Second, the attractive centre would naturally be the school, and only the most profound idiots and hopeless epileptics would seek their proper places at once; for many most hopeless idiots possess bright, attractive faces, and are all right in the minds of their friends. Nor would expert examination be satisfactory, for their assignment would be based largely upon prognosis; and as to this, in a large number of cases, the most proficient expert will scarcely venture a committal until a course of training is tried. Third, depending upon this last fact, many will drift into these secondary groups from the school, and the influences which characterize the school are needed in them, and hence the two departments should be in proximity. The colony plan seems to be the only practical solution of the problem; for it meets all the indications without the objections, and is growing in favor generally.

This plan would make the school and training department the centre and essential feature of the institution. It would admit those who would properly come from the other groups, and as soon as possible give them separate quarters, under a simple submanagement, the distance from the parent department depending upon the nature of the colony. For example, low-grade idiots can be cared for in some pleasant location on the same grounds. Adult boys can operate a farm under a simple management at whatever distance the farm can most conveniently be obtained. Boys skilled in handicraft or girls in domestic work can have their respective colonies near the parent school, where their supervision will be easy, and their work most advantageous to the general institution.

These are suggestions only, but we believe they are in harmony with the spirit of a progressive age and a Christian philanthropy. We contend only for the principles, not for the details. We care not whether the enterprise is conducted by public or private capital, or whether managed by State or county; and to those who fear the growth of large and unwieldy institutions we only say that matters of that kind must be settled by the communities which are responsible for them. If this danger appears, stop the growth and build another institution, but do not warp the usefulness of any by a narrow comprehension of its functions.