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FEEBLEMINDEDNESS AS A PUBLIC SCHOOL PROBLEM

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I should like to discuss briefly some phases of the problem of feeblemindedness from the point of view of the public schools. It is difficult to draw any hard and fast line between feeblemindedness and normality. Since feeble-mindedness is essentially a social problem, a good definition should probably be based upon social criteria. A definition commonly accepted is one which uses dependency and delinquency as the chief criteria. However, the ability to support oneself, and to behave in such a manner as not to transgress the various restrictions set up by society, depends a great deal on the nature of the social group in which one lives. From the sociological view point, a person might be regarded as feeble-minded in one set of circumstances who would be considered normal if he lived in a different environment.

A more technical definition of feeble-mindedness involves the use of the Intelligence Quotient obtained by the use of one or more intelligence tests. In spite of its obvious defects, due partly to the inadequacy of the measuring instruments, this means of definition has been used a great deal by psychologists and by educators because of its convenience and because the I. Q. has been found to have a high correlation with ability to do school work. Many state laws, relating to the education of mentally deficient children, use the I. Q. as a means of classification. Terman classifies children with an I. Q. below 70 as definitely feeble-minded and those between 70 and 80 as borderline cases who are often feeble-minded. About 1 per cent of our school population would probably be found to have an I. Q. of 70 or less and more than 5 per cent less than 80. This means that in Minneapolis, for example, we have about 700 children under sixteen who might be classed as feeble-minded and nearly 3,000 more borderline cases. The state law provides that children with I. Q.'s less than 50 may be excluded from school. Pupils between 50 and 80 may be placed in special classes which are subsidized by the state.

The special class method is widely used in public schools in the education of subnormals. Children of low intelligence are selected from their various grades and grouped together. They usually have special equipment and are taught a curriculum which is modified, more or less, from the standard one and taught by a teacher who has had special training for this work. The group is usually small, and pupils receive a great deal of individual instruction. About 210 such classes are organized in the state with some 3,400 pupils enrolled. Minneapolis has 56 classes with about 800 pupils, most of them in the high moron or borderline group. It is apparent from these figures that only a small part of the children of low intelligence throughout the state are served by these classes. Practically none of the rural districts and very few of the small towns have special class facilities available. Even in Minneapolis, the number of pupils in these classes is only about 2 per cent of the elementary school enrollment.

Aside from intelligence, the two factors which most frequently determine the selection of a child for placement in a special class are school achievement and behavior. The first is a legitimate basis for selection; the second is not. The pupils with very poor achievement come to the attention of teachers and principals and are tested and probably sent to special classes if eligible. Behavior problems likewise demand attention from teachers and principals. They are often poor achievers themselves, and are also a source of disturbance to the rest of the class. Many of them find their way into the special class. However, if too many behavior problems are concentrated in one place, it complicates the problem of instruction and puts the class in bad repute with teachers, pupils and parents.

The special class method has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are rather obvious and I will state some of them without elaboration:

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1. It shows a consciousness of the problem and a desire to do something about it. This attitude is necessary in the solution of any problem.

2. The groups being small, more individual attention can be given to the pupils. Special likes and dislikes, aptitudes, and disabilities are more easily discovered and can be used as a basis for instruction.

3. As a result of this individualized instruction, many pupils do better in their school work after being transferred to a special class.

In this connection, I might cite briefly the results of a study on the achievement of mentally retarded pupils which was made in Minneapolis about a year ago. Pupils whose I. Q. was 80 or less were found in the regular grades and were paired on the basis of sex, mental age and chronological age with pupils in a special class. They were given the Stanford Schievement Test and were rated on two behavior rating scales. The results of the achievement tests showed that in every subject the pupils selected from the regular grades did better than those from the special classes. In the three basic subjects, reading, spelling and arithmetic, their average score was 20 per cent higher. I do not cite this evidence as conclusive. In the first place, the Stanford Achievement Test is strictly a test of academic accomplishment. It may be that other values have been stressed more in the special class. In the second place, the factor of selection undoubtedly entered into the picture, since pupils who are poor achievers are most likely to be sent to the special class. It may be that the pupils who were in the special class actually did better than they would have done had they remained in the regular grades. In individual cases, it is known that achievement has improved a great deal after transfer to a special class. More evidence is needed on this point.

There are some phases of the special class method of dealing with subnormals which are not entirely satisfactory:

1. Segregation of pupils who are below par mentally serves to emphasize their abnormality and to remove them from a normal environment. The classes are usually small with a wide range in intelligence and in maturity. The same class frequently has children who are borderline cases, who are in most respects normal, and others who are low grade morons. The children range in age from eight or nine years to sixteen or more. The result is a limited social contact with pupils of their own state of development. In recognition of this weakness, many principals and teachers try to have members of the special class take part in general school activities; and in some cases pupils are taught some of their subjects in the regular classes of the school.

2. The classes are expensive. I do not mean necessarily that they are too expensive. It is difficult to put a dollars and cents value on this or any other part of the educational program. Due to the small size of the class and to the special equipment, the cost per pupil runs from two to three times the cost in the regular elementary class. The question has been raised whether the results have been commensurate with the expenditures. At the present time, when education is being curtailed everywhere because of the lack of funds, in fairness to the normal pupil, the cost of special classes should be considered.

3. The special class method reaches only a small proportion of the pupils who need help. The enrollment in special classes in Minnesota is less than one per cent of the enrollment in the elementary grades. In Minneapolis, it is less than two per cent. At least five per cent of elementary school pupils are below 80 I.Q., and hence eligible to the classes according to law. Furthermore, there are many children between 80 and 90 I. Q. not eligible for special class but who need some kind of special help if they are to meet with any degree of success in their school work. Evidence of this need is found in the large number of overage children who have failed to make their grades and have become retarded. Approximately twenty per cent of the pupils in the elementary grades are overage. Last September in Minneapolis 1,170 children, or more than two per cent of the total in grades 1-8, were two years or more overage. These were all outside of the special class. It is obvious that the special class reaches only a part of the children with low mentality.

It is probably impossible to say at this time just what part the schools should play in a program which may be set up to meet the problem of feeble-mindedness. I am of the opinion that they should and could do more than they are doing. The widespread facilities of the public schools through which most of these children pass are available and should be of material assistance in the registration, testing and training of mentally defective children.

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