

A Summary

Educability, Human Policy, and the Future for People
With Special Needs

Burton Blatt

The primary objective of this Paper is to illuminate the hypothesis that, on the one hand, development is a function of practice and training -- e.g. intelligence is educable -- and, on the other, we organize programs for the so-called mentally retarded, and set priorities, in ways to illustrate that people do not change, that alternatives to segregated settings are not necessary, that special classes and institutions serve mankind well. It is hoped that program participants will consider the possibility that there is a very strong mental health-mental retardation monolith that exerts enormous influence insofar as the education, training, and treatment of disabled people are concerned. However, the monolith is not the special class, the institution, or other special settings. Rather, the monolith has been created, and perseveres, because of the unavailability of alternatives for clients, families, and others concerned with the education and treatment of people with special needs. The monolith is a creation of the single way, no-option, ideological block of granite that we call "institutions" and "special classes."

Obtained during the course of my research and clinical activities, the following summarizes major considerations suggested for discussion:

1. Although there is little scientific evidence that permits definitive answers to the so-called nature-nurture question, there is enormous clinical

evidence that man can change, that intelligence is educable. The Wild Boy of Aveyron, The Autobiography of Helen Keller, the work of May Seago, and our experiences are but a few of the many examples that lend cogent testimony in support of this hypothesis. However, evidence aside, for reasons dealing with the mission of teachers and others in the helping professions, the aforementioned is the only defensible hypothesis.

2. As human beings, all people are equally valuable. Nirje's "Normalization" theory, the religious and ethical teachings and behavior of thousands of others since the beginnings of our civilization provide Man with, at least, a glimmer of hope that we will one day take this concept more seriously than heretofore.

3. Man has a penchant to segregate, to separate, to stigmatize, to make pariahs out of other human beings and, unfortunately, more than ever before, we seem to be engrossed in such activities. One of the very key statements obtaining from the so-called Partlow decision in Alabama was the court's decision that people have the right to the "least restricted setting necessary for habilitation." It is not enough for government to offer services. Those services must not unnecessarily segregate or restrict.

4. Possibly, for the first time in our American experience, the myth of such terms as "Mental Retardation" appears to be partially understood. The efficacy studies, our nomenclature changes, the Black Revolution, and other scientific and social movements have led us to a better comprehension of what must be considered no more than an administrative rather than scientific term.

5. The work of Lindsley, most recent in a long line of pioneering educational psychologists, cause us now to tentatively consider the possibility that the child in school knows what's best for him, and curricula should be designed and implemented around that concept.

6. As John Dewey said many years ago, teachers own the schools as much as children, principals, and parents. It appears that only in the University, and sometimes not even there, do we take this important notion seriously.

7. The more things change, the more they remain the same. In our special field, we have confused activity, laws, buildings, new money, new converts as evidence that we have progressed, that the world for the so-called mentally retarded is better.

8. The problems we are facing in this field are very complex, as are the solutions. Possibly, our research has suffered from the inappropriate assignment of independent and dependent variables. Possibly, as Illich once said, the world is opaque, mysterious and secret, and the most important problems facing mankind are those that have been most effectively concealed from public observation and consideration.

9. We must return some responsibility, some authority, some decision making, some priority setting to the consumers of services. As has been said in other contexts about other matters, education is too important to be given entirely to professionals and their interests. It isn't that professionals are less able or less trustworthy than consumers. They are different, with different agendas and priorities.

Throughout my career, I have been engaged in but one work. I have written books and monographs, studied and interacted with children and their families; the nature of that work concerns concepts of educability, plasticity of development, the potentials human beings have for changing. Essentially, I have learned that: intelligence, all development, is educable. Therefore, for many of the reasons discussed here and others that each of us may personally adhere to, all human beings are valuable. The rest is merely commentary about that conviction.