Positive Approach Needed

BURTON BLATT, Ed. D.

The crucial factor involved in habilitating the mentally retarded, or other individuals, for productive employment is not, as is often erroneously assumed, the decision concerning the vocation that the client may succeed in, but the position that is taken concerning this unique person. In this regard, an analysis of the habilitation process indicates that at each decision-making point a position is taken affecting the client.

That decision has traditionally been negative. In fact, when the evidence available is overwhelmingly positive, insofar as a particular individual is concerned, the initial professional reaction is usually one of disbelief, sometimes subconscious or conscious anger ("He shouldn't be earning a living; he's trainable!"), and confusion—ultimately accepting the irrefutable, positive evidence when other attempts at understanding fail, with the useful ace in the hole, "the original diagnosis was erroneous."

As a result of this common modus operandi, work in habilitation of the mentally retarded is severely hampered by a proliferation and veneration of persistently recurring assumptions, all attributable to the inability of professionals to take positive approaches in evaluating, planning with, training, and placing the client.

Let us analyze several of these assumptions:

1. Mental deficiency is basically a physical or constitutional defect, existing from birth or early age, and is incurable and irremediable.

Recent investigations have cast considerable doubt on the merits of this conventional statement. Even when it is admitted that a large number of retarded show normal neurological functioning, there are constant hints that more effective instruments might demonstrate pathology. There is impressive evidence that numerous children, presently classified as mentally subnormal, acquired this "subnormality" after a normal early life. Equally impressive is the increasing evidence that numerous subnormal children cannot be so classified on later evaluation.

Failure to give proper recognition to studies that negate pat ways of regarding the mentally subnormal is a serious block in the path of workers in this field. We are restricted in our attempts to widen the possibilities open to the retarded in ed-

Dr. Blatt is chairman, Special Education Department, Southern Connecticut State College.
The Mentally Retarded

ucation and in employment, we are discouraged from seeking to prevent retardation, and we may fail to take vigorous steps to reverse earlier classifications.

The positive alternative requires evidence of constitutionality to consider the person so affected; it does not preclude the possibility of reversing the defect, especially if the individual is young and has no demonstrable organicity; it considers the assumption that at least some of the individuals have conditions that did not exist at birth and may have been prevented.

The effects of the negative alternative upon the individual are clear. All children diagnosed as mentally retarded are constitutionally incapable of ever achieving typical intellectual, psychological, and social functioning; therefore, no effort need be exerted in this direction.

II. There is a strong correlation between school problem-solving behavior and nonschool problem-solving behavior.

The amazing degree to which this assumption is relied upon by many professionals as a method for predicting vocational success seems, at best, naive and, in the extreme, vicious. One can fairly assume that schools and rehabilitation agencies often predict the vocational potential of the individual on the basis of psychological examinations. Clients may be deemed feasible for employment on an IQ-score criterion. While in school, such terms as "educable" and "trainable" delimit the curriculum route that the child will take and often serve as the basis for predicting his vocational and social placement.

When the child reaches adulthood, the terms "feasible" and "not feasible" predetermine whether he is sufficiently bright to profit from rehabilitation services and eventual placement. These decisions often appear to be capricious, predicated on the fallacious, unreliable assumption that psychological and other school tests of problem-solving behavior correlate highly with away-from-school vocational and social performance.

If one accepts the false assumption, it is understandable that the trainable child is not prepared for occupational responsibilities and is not deemed feasible for rehabilitation services after completion of his formal schooling. It is equally understandable when the counselor advises the educable child and his family to envision only the grossest unskilled placement as the terminal vocational goal. These kinds of negative counseling certainly have a degree of practicality, especially when the family and child appear to be entirely unrealistic in equating probable potential with the job requirement; the danger here is obvious. However, equally obvious is the greater danger of unnecessarily limiting the horizon of a human being.

Mentally retarded individuals are rarely given the benefit of the doubt insofar as vocational placement is concerned. They actually achieve much greater vocational, as well as social, success than is expected of them. Trainable children, usually described as being in need of complete supervision throughout their lives, may have potentials much higher than commonly believed. It is possible that the sheltered workshop, where these people are usually assigned, may be necessary for permanent placement for only a portion of this group. Two recent studies found a surprising number of these individuals adjusting fairly adequately at home and in the community. Many had jobs and were earning at least partial livelihoods. It would be well to consider the successes these youngsters might achieve if classes for the trainable were less vestibules for State institutions and more training centers for productive community participation; less busy centers and more business centers; and less hopeless and more hopeful.

Normal Lives

As a rule, educable mentally retarded adults marry, find jobs with or without the benefit of special help, solve practical problems of life on a typical level, and can be described as normal citizens of their communities. A study of the research literature is initially disconcerting in view of the discrepancy between popular negative assumptions and scholarly positive findings. From the literature, we can fairly conclude that:

1. The great majority of the educable mentally retarded are capable of handling substantial occupations.
2. These individuals are capable of finding jobs in an economy geared to employ all those employable.
3. Many of these people find and hold jobs above the unskilled level.
4. Educable mentally retarded individuals generally achieve social, as well as economic, stability, happiness, and independence.
5. The educable mentally retarded are reliable, willing, and energetic workers, self-
respecting and able to contribute to society when given the opportunity.

The assumption that school tests of problem-solving ability measure nonschool problem-solving behavior leads to practices limiting eventual employability and social placement for the mentally retarded. If the worker does poorly on the job, it is simple to explain the failure in terms of an IQ variation or some classification system. This arbitrary method of understanding performance precludes, for the professional, a need to think. It also provides him with an excuse for breastbeating and more subtle types of self-praise. "After all," he says, "these people are mentally retarded; you can't expect to place them all; we're doing a good job in habilitating and placing the ones we have; look at their IQ's."

In fact, no one has ever explained anything significant about a person's behavior with the term "mental retardation." For each job failure, there are many others with the same or lower IQ's who are not failing. If the counselor reviewed the folders of 50 clients, all with the same IQ and classification, he would mostly likely find 50 different levels of functioning, 50 different degrees of success and failure, and 50 entirely different human beings. For the physician, the thermometer is used to describe a symptom of a particular condition. The intelligence test, not nearly as accurate as the thermometer, and the term "mental retardation" are valid only as they describe symptoms of particular conditions, some permanent, some that are possibly temporary, some severely limiting vocational potential, others not. Certainly, the group known as mentally retarded has demonstrated a far greater degree of out-of-school success, both socially and vocationally, as compared with performance in school and predictions based upon psychological tests.

III. Professionals working with the mentally retarded, in both schools and habilitation agencies, generally take a positive position concerning the nature and needs of these individuals.

A review of assumptions I and II leaves one with the impression that from the initial diagnosis to the final placement decision, negative philosophy, theory, and practice characterize services for the mentally retarded. Although there is a mountain of reports settling the issue (if any issue in this field is ever really settled) concerning integration of the retarded population into society, the impression continues to exist that these people will always be, in all activities, on the wrong side of minus-one sigma.

Through little fault of their own, habilitation counselors do not seem to help the situation much. It is possible that they view retardation in a distorted fashion because of the unrepresentativeness of the retarded group they serve. The great majority of the mentally retarded never receive formal habilitation services nor do they appear to need it any more than other people do. The minority who require these services cannot be considered typical of the group. Small wonder that counselors view optimistic reports concerning the employability of the retarded with a skeptical eye.

Special-Class Teachers

Clinical impressions indicate that special-class teachers assume a more positive attitude than other professionals working in the helping fields. This is, in no small way, due to the considerable abilities they find among many of their pupils, especially in those areas not requiring academic skills. In addition, they do not view retardation as an organic problem, as do physicians; or as a habilitation problem, as do counselors. They have taught enough retarded children to realize that many do not have organic problems nor do they need rehabilitation services. However, examples of negative practice are not uncommon in education. M. L. Steckel's study, "A Followup of Mentally Defective Girls," Journal of Social Psychology, 5: 112-115, 1934, is a classic illustration. Steckel followed the subsequent activities of 100 girls excluded from the special class upon reaching the age of 16. At the time of the study, the girls were between 16 and 26 years old and had been excluded from school from 1 to 10 years. The author found that only nine girls had, at any time, been employed outside their homes. Twenty-two had been before probation officers. Nine had illegitimate children. Five had married and divorced.

These findings are not very encouraging and certainly refute any positive position recommended. However, an analysis of Steckel's paper reveals some possible reasons for the unusually poor adjustment these girls made:

1. Steckel apparently expected these girls to become delinquents. She used the term "delinquent" when acknowledging the girls regardless of whether they were delinquent or not. She states: "In fact, so generally does the mentally defective girl drift into sex delinquencies that unless placed under special supervision, every mentally defective
The Mentally Retarded

girl when she reaches adolescence may be considered a potential prostitute."

2. She recommends automatic exclusion of the girls from school at age 16 because "This exclusion is necessary in order to keep such a special school a school rather than a detention institution."

3. She describes the special-class curriculum as giving each pupil as much academic work as her ability permitted and a great deal of manual work, mainly sewing and cooking.

One has the impression that Steckel’s study is a perfect summarization of the bitter results of negativism with the mentally retarded. These girls were prejudged as delinquent, inferior humans. Then it appears as if those who prejudged them set out to prove that they were correct. Not wanting to let their teachers down, the girls lived up to each prediction made.

Thus, the importance of position in habilitating the mentally retarded for productive employment. The degree to which we will positively evaluate and plan for these individuals will correlate highly to the degree to which we will effectively help them; in the final analysis, the help we are able to offer the student, the client, or the patient is the one irrefutable criterion of success in the helping professions.