

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF THE CONNECTICUT CHILD WHO IS MENTALLY HANDICAPPED  
HIS PAST, HIS PRESENT, HIS FUTURE

by

Burton Blatt, Sally Dean, Nancy Giard<sup>1</sup>

Special Education for the Mentally Handicapped had its American birth in the State of Connecticut at the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb in the year 1818. The first public school special class was established in Bridgeport in October 1910. In May, 1942, the Connecticut State Department of Education published a survey of handicapped children in Connecticut. It was found that, during the school year 1940-1941, 38 towns maintained 164 special classes and these classes enrolled 2,926 children. The survey reported that handicapped youngsters over 16 years of age were not encouraged to stay in school due to a lack of facilities for these pupils. The only facilities reported for trainable children (those children who, at maturity, cannot be expected to reach a mental age of more than seven years) were the "institutional classes" in Bridgeport and New Haven. A study of Connecticut Statutes disclosed that they were rigid and made no provision for the trainable child - either philosophically or materially through State aid.

What provisions are in evidence today? How many children are in special classes? What facilities are available for the education of teachers of the mentally handicapped? Most importantly, what is the future of the mentally handicapped child in Connecticut?

---

1.

When I decided to submit a paper to the Teacher Education Quarterly, I thought this was a rare opportunity to solicit student co-authorship. Remembering my personal enthusiasm in embracing a philosophy of special education when the problems implicit in this area were first unfolded before me, I find a need to bring educators the refreshing viewpoint of students unaffected by the prejudices of dogma and the "unalterable truth based on experience".

Burton Blatt  
Co-ordinator of Special Education  
New Haven State Teachers College

In 1956, Evans and Castricone, senior special education majors at New Haven State Teachers College, surveyed the status of special classes for the mentally handicapped in Connecticut. They found 181 classes for the mentally handicapped with a student population of 2,424. Their survey disclosed the existence of over 40 classes for the trainable child and 10 high school educable classes. Although a comparison of the number of classes in 1940 and today leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that progress is always slow and painful, today's State Statutes and actual facilities provide for inclusion of trainable children in public schools and offers far more liberal reimbursement rates for both trainable and educable classes. More older retarded children are in school today and indications are that greater attention is given to placement and follow-up.

What teacher-education opportunities are available in the State? Both the University of Connecticut and New Haven State Teachers College offer approved programs in the preparation of teachers of the mentally handicapped. The University's program is on the graduate level while New Haven offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees in this area. In order to give insight into why students enter this area and what they find there, the comments of two senior students may prove valuable.

"Students, majoring in Special Education, have entered this field for many reasons, personal satisfaction being the most widely stated one. Some people feel that teaching these children is discouraging because progress is not readily shown. Although there are many discouraging moments, these do not outweigh the satisfaction to the child and teacher when the pupil does accomplish a task.

Some of us have developed a personal interest in this program through first-hand experiences with a mentally retarded child in the home or neighborhood. Interest is usually increased by our association with experienced individuals who have chosen to work with the mentally handicapped.

Students in the Special Education Program at New Haven State Teachers College will, upon graduation, be certified to teach elementary grades as well as special classes. All of us plan to teach in a special class, either in an elementary, junior or senior high school. At the present time, there are 28 senior and 26 junior majors enrolled in this program.

In addition to the elementary education courses that we take plus the 18 credits in psychology, curriculum, guidance, methods, and industrial arts for the mentally handicapped, we are required to spend a total of eighteen weeks in a student teaching situation. Students in Special Education spend twelve weeks student teaching in a special class and six weeks in a typical class. The student may choose his own training situation provided it is approved by the college. We have opportunities to teach in institutions for the mentally handicapped or in a special class in an elementary or secondary school. Through the constant help and guidance of these experienced teachers, the student develops a fuller understanding of his vocation and the confidence he needs to teach".

What is the future of the mentally handicapped child in Connecticut?

Discussions with professionals and parents in this State, reports from other states, and extensive observations of programs presently being conducted in Connecticut, leads the observer to make the following predictions:

Legislation - A mandatory act will be passed within a few years. At the present time, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Kentucky have such acts. The anticipated need for double the number of teachers and facilities by 1960 will become much greater if this act should pass the Connecticut Legislature.

Curriculum - Greater emphasis will be placed on the content of the program. A program, in and of itself, will not be enough; it must have meaning and direction. There will be a grass-roots movement of special class teachers throughout the State for curriculum study; they will want to know the purposes of the special class and how they can be best achieved.

Research - There will be an increase in theoretical as well as practical research. More knowledge will be available in such little known areas as: the nature of intelligence, motivation, methods of teaching, prevention, and prognosis. The Government, both Federal and State, as well as private foundations will aid in these projects.

Teacher Education - Colleges will begin to establish clinically orientated programs in the education of teachers of the mentally handicapped. The belief that dynamic learning takes place when theory is brought to life by the actual experience, when theory is learned to bring meaning and order to the complexities of a real dilemma, will gain acceptance in other areas of teacher-education as well as in special education. The future college department of special education will provide a clinical setting for professional theory courses; as our students learn how to group children for reading, they will observe a skilled teacher involved in this process and they will be given numerous opportunities to participate as well. Such newer resources as educational T.V., one-way vision observation rooms, and sound films will aid in the development of these programs. Learning on the teacher-education level will cease to be unidimensional.

Parent-Groups - Parent groups will continue to grow and influence the establishment of pilot programs for the mentally handicapped. This year's parent-financed services such as sheltered workshops, day-care classes, teacher scholarships, speech therapy groups, recreational clubs and kindergarten classes may eventually be wholly or partly sponsored by civic and/or

municipal organizations. In fact, as this is being written, the writer is involved in a parent-sponsored kindergarten project for trainable children in New Haven and in a parent-sponsored teacher scholarship project in Hartford. As local communities assume more responsibility for the education of children who are mentally handicapped, parent groups will be able to continue to focus attention upon those aspects of a total program for the mentally handicapped that are being neglected.

The right to prognosticate carries with it responsibility, especially when the available evidence is tenuous. However, if we are to progress we must plan and make immediate decisions based upon that planning. For our colleagues who discern other implications of the Status of the mentally handicapped child and what we may envisage his future to be, permit this essay to close with a quotation from Richard Evans.

"Men after all are men. Some are wiser than others, some more able, some more informal, but we cannot expect omniscience or perfection of any of them."

10/10/56