
Title	Utilisation of local resources to meet the training needs of the handicapped
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Utilisation of Local Resources to meet
the Training Needs of the Handicapped

In the historical perspective, persons with pronounced physical disabilities were looked upon as objects of the divine curse or the evil eye. Scant attention was paid to them. In the more civilised society of today, the cause of the physically handicapped has gained some ground but, perhaps, with lip-service doing most of the acknowledgment, and some pity thrown in for good measure.

Such a situation with respect to the handicapped in general is still unsatisfactory.

First, the public conscience is yet to be fully awakened. In many countries work for and among the handicapped remains the responsibility of volunteers. On their goodwill depends the development of educational and vocational opportunities for the disabled. The element of ad hocism with respect to financial resources, specialist personnel and facilities makes it difficult to ensure the realisation of the concept, so aptly phrased by Keppel⁽¹⁾, "... no child within our society is either unteachable or unreachable...".

Secondly, the term "handicapped" needs more careful definition and amplification. Our efforts to provide universal education have highlighted some rather dismal failures on our part. The average school system does not seem to meet the needs of at least 20 to 25 per cent of each fresh cohort of pupils. There are those with obvious inadequacies; they drop out. The resources of the ordinary school do not benefit them. Others are made inadequate, because of the measures we take: they are pushed out of the system, after a manner of speaking.

For, in making good the egalitarian ideal, we forget that we are admitting into our school system a more normally heterogeneous mix, representative of every stratum in society. Some among the children suffer

(1) Francis Keppel, one-time Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and U.S. Commission of Education.

from environmental disunity or cultural deprivation. The environment in which the school functions is completely alien to that to which these children are born. The school's instructional approaches and content do not match or relate to their experiences; on this account they may develop learning difficulties and even emotional disorders.

Children, born with normal or superior intellectual capacity, may have emotional problems due to organic, environmental or intellectual pressures. These problems limit their capacity to organise and profit from through functional experiences provided for them. Sometimes, due to a combination of emotional and social factors, children develop in a way which causes them to reject influences outside themselves, except where they perceive these as of immediate benefit to themselves. They alternately accept and reject the experiences provided by the school. They face intellectual chaos within themselves and are unable to develop a satisfactory rationale for conduct. They become disruptive of school routine and eventually leave.

In the light of these facts, merely to regard the physically disabled as handicapped is too limiting in a practical sense. Obviously, in addition to the physically handicapped, there are the psychologically handicapped with problems of emotional and/or social maladjustment. The problems soon become manifest in a behaviour which is characteristic of emotional maladjustment -- an inadequate self-image, chronic fear of failure, introversion, anti-social tendencies, irresponsibility, etc.

There are also the environmentally and socially handicapped: malnutrition, poor general health due to economic disadvantages, lack of environmental stimulation, instructional inadequacies at home and school, and so on. All these constitute forms of handicap to the persons they affect.

The distinction between the obvious handicaps and the less discernible ones too is artificial. It is known that brain damage may cause cerebral palsy -- a condition familiar to most. Less known is the fact that there are children who suffer minimal cerebral damage without manifesting the usual clinical symptoms. Their problems only surface when they develop learning difficulties. The subject of cerebral dysfunction as a correlate of learning disability is presently receiving more attention than previously.

The recognition of the full range of disabilities, and of the need to deal with them, irrespective of degree of severity, will help to improve the measures which are necessary for the training of the handicapped,

because the more we know of their difficulties, the better will we be able to prepare them to fit into society and enhance their potential for making a positive contribution to the community of which they have as much a part as the non-handicapped.

The third argument in favour of a change in thinking about the handicapped is a derivative of the second given above. If the system, as it stands, seems to be propagating numbers of potential psychopathic, sociopathic and psychopathological youths and adolescents, what is more urgent than to give recognition to the wider meaning of "handicapped" and to devise measures for the prevention of further increases in the number of misfits in society. Prevention is better than cure. To accept this, society has first to accept the fact that many of the handicapping constraints that presently exist are more than physical and should be recognised as such.

In the preamble of the final statement of the WCOTP Seminar on the Education of Handicapped Children held in Dublin (1974), the rights of such children are unequivocally stated in the following words:

"1 Every individual has the right to education: health, work and a family and social life, including the right to initial and continuing professional and vocational training. This requires that society accept its full responsibility in regard to handicapped children, every child being educable to a certain level.

2 'Education provided by groups working together within the framework of the overall conception of education and of the school, should be designed to ensure the most complete possible fulfilment of each child as well as his independences to the largest possible degree'.

On the one hand, this statement seems ambitious; on the other, it is undeniably imperative. It stresses the equality between handicapped and normal children. Society comprises all individuals, not just select ones. It sets as the objective the optimum development of each individual. It suggests, as method, the diversification of educational approaches to meet individual need.

How can local resources be marshalled to meet these terms? Action will certainly have to be taken with the assistance of as many as need to be concerned with the education of the handicapped.

Training of such children begins in the home. Their parents and particularly mothers, have the first responsibility in helping the child

towards self-confidence and independence, in speech development and behaviour organisation. In a very real sense, the problem of the handicapped child is very much a problem for his own family, whose members will themselves have to learn how to relate properly to the handicapped person so that the extremes of overprotection and neglect will be avoided. Parents should not consider that, once the child has been admitted to a special school or allowed to participate in a special project, their part in training ceases. Training in the home continues and the home support alongside what the school provides is valuable.

There is room too for the provision of interdisciplinary collaboration in this work. Handicapped children, unlike normal ones, need more than the classroom teacher to help them; they not only require a teacher with specialist basic knowledge of their handicap and their personal problems, but also special help from doctors, social workers, psychologists should their disability be such as to necessitate therapeutic action. In this respect, it is better to have such services linked to one or two specialist institutions rather than have them distributed to every school where the handicapped are to be found because handicapped persons vary in their demands for therapeutic services or consultant advice. Besides, local resources tend to be thin in this respect.

Work with and for the handicapped may well be regarded as the responsibility not only of interested private individuals but also of the government. Formal assistance and regular resource support from the government can give the required degree of stability to a programme which tends to entail a high cost factor. Where, owing to financial constraints, resources are difficult to muster, a good form of collaboration would be one where the government provides the basic resources in terms of specialist teachers and facilities, while volunteer services continue to afford the specialist consultant or therapeutic assistance. Even then, what therapeutic assistance may be required in a group basis, should merit some consideration as a regular service to be offered through established facilities and hired specialists.

Where handicapped children are integrated with other children in regular schools, occasion may arise, depending on the nature of the disability, for persons with specialist knowledge of such children to be around. At the very least, all teachers need to be given some specialist knowledge, in their pre-service training course, about types of behaviour problems and the learning difficulties of the handicapped. They should be made aware of the need to identify these through simple methods of observation,

quite readily available to them in their daily contact with children. Detection of visual-perceptual difficulties, auditory or speech defects, hyperactivity or sluggishness, poor motor coordination and lack of proper attention span, loss of weight, fatigue, irritability, listlessness – this, and more, an alert teacher should be able to do. Teachers should be told where referral of children with such problem can be made. The earlier the detection, the easier it is to remediate and to take preventive action against the uninhibited growth of emotional problems attendant on learning disabilities which are often concomitant with biologically or socially-based handicaps. The correlation between emotional problems or social maladjustment and learning disabilities is well established, but which causes which is a moot question. Suffice it to recognise that the presence of one normally signals the existence of the other.

In the modern classroom with 40 children or more, the tendency is for a teacher to ignore the child with a problem. More particularly is this so when the approach to teaching is a lockstep one with no variation to suit the needs of individual learners. With the announcement of the introduction of a new structure of education in Singapore in November 1974 and its subsequent implementation in January 1975, the emphasis in education moves from the group to the individual child. The expressed aim of the restructure is to allow for the progress of each child at his own pace. Interpreted in the best professional sense, this means helping the child to develop his full potential to meet realistic expectations. This carries implications both for the form of education to be provided and for classroom practice. Vocational training may well be further diversified to meet the varying abilities of individuals and this includes vocationally trainable handicapped children.

For the first time, teachers are given special courses on how to identify their children's needs through evaluation and observation techniques and taught basic guidance skills. More than ever, the teacher is the key agent in the educational process. The new skills and techniques imparted to teachers should help to improve the lot of the handicapped.

There is also in Singapore the beginning of a happy collaboration between the Child Psychiatric Clinic of the Ministry of Health, the Special Education Unit of the Ministry of Education and the Remedial Reading and Guidance/Counselling Clinics of the Institute of Education in the attempt, not only to provide the necessary services to take care of the more common problems to be found in the schools, but also to gather data on the basis of which more informed approaches to the problems of the

handicapped may be devised. It is suspected that at least 16 to 20 per cent of the children in regular schools may be suffering from social environmental handicaps and/or emotional problems, which are due to or with themselves cause learning disabilities .. Small though local efforts may be, there is a purposeful move towards improving the organisation of remedial and preventive measures to eliminate what our Deputy Prime Minister has referred to as the thousand million-dollar drop-out problem.

I have spoken at some length on problems of the handicapped likely to be endemic within the regular school system. This is where preventive measures can best be taken in the early years. In Singapore, early identification stops at the primary school stage. Many who are interested in special education are of the opinion that the earlier the detection of the handicap, the better for the child. Hence, the effort to help the handicapped should be made both at the kindergarten level and in the earlier pre-school years. This is where the mass media can play a part in bringing the message to the home. Within the context of Singapore, enrichment programmes for environmentally handicapped young children and infants may well be based at the Community Centres, accessible as they are to both parents and children.

So for I have not referred to the training of those with very pronounced physical or other handicaps. Locally, attention has been frequently drawn of late to the need for everyone to assist in the training and rehabilitation of such handicapped persons. Unless community demonstrates a will to assist, the lot of the handicapped will continue to lack assurance of personal worth and the necessary degree of independence for personal initiative. Again, here and there, a case of the best of the handicapped surfaces. Last year, a blind girl graduated from the Institute of Education as fully trained teacher of the blind. This year, a blind girl obtained her first degree with outstanding success. In every way, the handicapped, but for the disadvantages from which they suffer, have proved that they can live up to the expectations imposed by society, if they are given the opportunity for professional or vocational training. Training within industry is a new concept. Is there any any way for the handicapped to graduate, like others, from the training in school to training within a firm? For those less able, a careful study of the sort of tasks, which the handicapped can undertake, should be made from time to time so that the training given may be relevant both to their skills and to the needs of society. Sunday's Asia magazine carried an article of handicapped persons in Thailand engaged in the making of umbrellas. This suggests that the handicapped can participate quite successfully in certain types of cottage industry.

Except for the very few, who may be so disabled as to remain forever dependent on others, most handicapped persons are capable of undergoing training for a role in society. Like the normal people, they need a general training in the skills and attitudes, which will help to maintain them through the variegated experiences of life, as well as the specific vocational training which will make them functionally independent and economically viable as adults.

Human ingenuity as a local resource has yet to be tapped. Much has still to be done to improve the lot of the handicapped through inventions and the applications of modern technology which can help to diversify approaches to training.

As Dr Meinhardt⁽²⁾ said, "Let us make the handicapped and their schooling a daily and, in fact, an everyday task, so that thinking of them becomes a part of our daily mental processes." With such an attitude there can be no place for the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

(2) Dr J Meinhardt, "Special Education for Handicapped Children in Normal Classes and Schools or in Special Classes and Schools", Report on the WCOTP Seminar on the Education of Handicapped Children, April 1974., p.31.