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BOOKS

THE CHILD WHO IS NOT VERY BRIGHT

EDUCATING BACKWARD CHILDREN IN NEW ZEALAND. By Ralph Winterbourn. New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1944.

(Reviewed by L. G. Anderson)

IF, Mr. and Mrs. Parent, you think that the position of the dull or backward child presents a problem only remotely interesting to you, reflect on these figures of Dr. Winterbourn's. Roughly 50 per cent. of the school population are of average general intelligence, 25 per cent. are above average, and 25 per cent. below average. Therefore your child has one chance in four of being below average. But of the 250 who are below average in every 1,000 children, probably 127 will be dull and 21 will be feeble-minded. This does not take account of those children who are idiots and imbeciles, not educable, suitable only for commitment to a Mental Hospital, and not within the scope of the book. Neither does it take account of the few low-grade feeble-minded children attending New Zealand's three occupation centres, which are described in the book. Of the 148 children dull or feeble-minded, specific provision in 1941 had been made for six—of whom four were attending special classes and two were in residence at the Templeton Farm School controlled by the Mental Hospitals Department. If this figure of 148 per 1,000 were reduced to the very conservative estimate of 80 per 1,000 this still means that 74 children per 1,000 are not receiving the special type of education they require. Your child may be one of that 74 in every 1,000, he may be one of the six specially catered for, or if not in those two categories, he will be one of the remaining 920 whose education is being handicapped or hindered in some way by the inclusion of the 74 in the ordinary school classes. Even if your child is not one of the 80 dull and feeble-minded children, he or she may be one of the 60 or 70 who, although of normal general intelligence, are seriously retarded in one or more of the skill subjects, reading, spelling and arithmetic.

Incidentally your child, if dull, is more likely, in the ratio of two to one, to be a boy than a girl, and he or she is more likely to be living in a rural community than in an urban one. In case this latter point seems puzzling, I quote from a school inspector's letter cited in the book:

In many cases, children come to school without the vocabulary or speech experience and equipment which we presuppose in the normal youngster starting school. Much of this is due to the inability of some farm parents to spare the time to talk to their children. The mother goes to the cowshed early in the mornings and again late in the evenings. There is very little time for her to talk with her children who, through living on the farms, have little intercourse with others who would encourage them to talk. In some cases the parents themselves are the victims of the same circumstances and use a poor form of speech when they do try to express themselves.

The above figures give some indication why every parent should be interested in the problem of educating

backward children. They might lead one to wonder why more has not been done in the past, but as Dr. Winterbourn says: "As yet no country can be said to have developed a thorough-going system of providing for backward children in the ordinary schools."

Although one would expect teachers to hold a more enlightened view than the general public does on these matters, yet I know one head-teacher of an urban primary school who makes no secret of his opinion that too much is done for backward children and that, in any case, education is wasted on them. I hope his is an exceptional attitude and I think it is. Teachers generally would welcome better provision for backward children, including adequate expert training for the special class teachers, and general training for the ordinary teachers in the early recognition of backward types so that special education, starting at a younger age than is generally the case at present, could minimise the acquisition of undesirable habits and attitudes and give better chances of success.

Techniques now in use by special class teachers come in for some criticism by Dr. Winterbourn, although he makes it clear that he is criticising the system and not the teachers, who, he recognises, are doing their best under numerous disadvantages. Apropos of teaching techniques and difficulties, I like the story he quotes from an English journal. An inspector, visiting a class for dull and backward children who were engaged on various occupations, said to one boy, "What are you doing?" The boy replied: "I'm doing me 'obby and I 'ates it!"

It is to be hoped that Dr. Winterbourn's comprehensive survey of the present position and his recommendations for the future will serve to lay the foundations for a wider educational programme for the backward child, as war conditions permit of more adequate staffing, accommodation, and equipment.

SCIENCE IN THE SOUTH SEAS

ISLANDS OF DANGER. By Ernest Beaglehole. Progressive Publishing Society, Wellington.

MOST students of the past culture of the South Sea islanders have wondered, with Dr. Beaglehole, whether the spirit of the island life was half as well portrayed in the stodgy prose of their own scientific monographs as in the vivid pen pictures of masters of words, Robert Louis Stevenson or Herman Melville, say. As Dr. Beaglehole's private scientific interest is not so much ethnology, as defined above, but rather social anthropology, he can afford to be more outspoken than most, and he roundly condemns the ethnologist who is "trained" to dissect ethnological skeletons "and can rarely tell us something of the people he has studied, something of the life that gives flesh and blood to the skeleton he describes."

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