BACKWARDNESS IN THE BASIC SUBJECTS

BY

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PREFACE

THE last two decades have produced striking improvement in the amount and quality of the consideration given to children who fail to make normal progress in school. There have been numerous studies of the characteristics and requirements of backward children both as individuals and as units in an educational system. A recent example of the former is Professor C. Burt's excellent volume, *The Backward Child*; while a scientific study of the latter kind is Miss M. E. Hill's *The Education of Backward Children*. In general, most of these studies have dealt with children whose educational deficiencies are sufficiently serious to warrant the organisation of special classes and the development of special methods covering the entire elementary school curriculum. Continuous testing and careful recording reveal that from 65 to 80 per cent. of the pupils in these classes are innately dull; they are, in other words, debarred from achieving scholastic standards commensurate with their chronological age because of inborn intellectual deficiency.

In addition, however, to this section of permanently handicapped backward children, there are two groups whose scholastic disabilities are largely of a remediable kind. There are, firstly, the children who make up the remaining 20 to 35 per cent. of pupils in "C," "D," or special classes for the dull and backward, but who are not innately dull; their educational difficulties in the main derive from various combinations of extrinsic conditions. Secondly, there are those children, found sometimes in special classes but more often in the ordinary classes of the elementary school, who, normal or above normal in general intelligence, are specifically baekward, that is considerably below level, in one, two, or perhaps three allied subjects. The necessary emotional adjustment together with the

removal of the backwardness disability can be effected in most children in these two groups by the employment of appropriate diagnostic and remedial measures.

Generally backward children, including both dull and not dull, form roughly 10 per cent. of the school population of Britain, although this figure varies from 5 per cent. in some areas to 27 per cent. in others. Specific backwardness, as I show in the body of the text (Chapter IV), varies from 2·0 per cent. of disability in spelling amongst girls in "good" areas to 7·3 per cent. of boys specifically backward in written English in "poor" areas, and within this range the percentages fluctuate according to the school subject, the sex of the children, and the economic and cultural conditions of the district. The average amount of backwardness, both general and specific, within the schools is approximately 15 per cent. Clinical studies of this 15 per cent. of handicapped children, modifications in educational organisation for them, and empirically determined teaching methods of a general kind have to date been adequate. For teachers, psychologists, and parents the techniques that need augmenting most are, first, the practical means of diagnosing the causes and characteristics of their children's difficulties in each of the basic subjects and, second, the provision of appropriate methods and suitably graded material for remedying the particular weaknesses revealed by the diagnosis. This I have already attempted to do for pupils backward in arithmetic in *The Diagnosis of Individual Difficulties in Arithmetic* which is concerned with the causes of disability in arithmetic, with scientifically constructed diagnostic arithmetic tests, and with the use of suitable remedial material in card and book form.

The present volume deals with disabilities in reading, spelling, oral and written English. Its material is based on the results of active research spread over a period of eight years in both primary and post-primary schools. The cases of backwardness on which studies of causation, diagnosis, and remedial methods were based were repre-

sentative of a school population of approximately 15,000 pupils mainly in London schools, but also in schools of contiguous authorities, and more recently in schools in and around Nottingham.

Examination of the problems connected with disability in reading, spelling and English was conducted with reference mainly to backward children of average or above-average intelligence. Although the survey did include a few dull children, the aim was to select cases of specific backwardness in as pure a form as possible (unobscured, that is, by the additional intellectual and emotional handicaps of innate dullness), and so ensure the utmost validity in the findings. The diagnostic tests and remedial methods employed apply, however, with but slight modification equally well to backward children of both normal and subnormal intelligence.

Throughout the text the emphasis is laid on practical procedures. In other words, I have tried to provide methods of helping children who may be backward in those subjects so essential to later school progress and to efficiency in everyday life. At the same time the material is conditioned by scientific considerations, and the student of psychology should find in many of the sections of the book much that will interest him in regard to the mental processes of elementary-school children. Statistical methods, though used extensively throughout the active investigation, have been sparingly introduced into the text. Whenever possible, case studies have been included to clarify characteristics either of concrete types or of individual difficulties.

The first two chapters, on individual difficulties and their relation to backwardness, are essential to an understanding of the whole problem. It is necessary to have a clear conception of the forces that go to the moulding of personality and of the various factors that condition progress in school work before attempting to plan case studies of, apply diagnostic tests to, or institute courses of remedial teaching for, children endowed with widely differing intellectual equipment and revealing varying emotional

reactions. Indeed, scholastic disability in too many cases can be ascribed to the failure to grasp the far-reaching importance of the interaction of physical conditions, intellectual abilities, emotional attitudes and environmental influences. I make no apology, therefore, for the long introduction with which I have prefaced the actual study of backwardness, but rather urge all who are not conversant with a modern interpretation of the psychology of individual differences to devote some care to this part of the book.

I have thought it proper to give throughout the book extensive evidence of the intimate connection between emotional attitudes and scholastic disabilities. Continuous reference is made also to the deterioration of personality adjustment in backward children and conversely to the rapid development of personality as progress is made in school subjects. This was particularly noticeable in regard to disability in reading, which in time might produce loss of confidence, apathy, a sense of frustration and an anxiety so intense as to colour the whole of a child's attitude towards school and school work in general. The close connection between progress in school subjects and the mental health of children is apparent. Adequate treatment of backwardness particularly amongst pupils of normal intelligence would do much to eradicate the minor neuroses and unhappiness such backward children commonly exhibit.

Of equal social significance is the relationship between backwardness and undesirable behaviour. The backward children investigated yielded more than their share of cases of disorderly conduct, lying, cheating, truancy and exaggerated forms of self-display. While average figures from other areas reveal that over 60 per cent. of young delinquents are backward, many of them to the point of complete illiteracy, yet only 30 to 40 per cent. of them are below average intelligence. The fact that almost 6 out of every 10 delinquents are so backward in reading as to be deprived both of the means of making progress in school

and of a vital leisure activity indicates one worth-while direction from which this problem of delinquency might be attacked.

I could not have brought the results of this extensive research to published form without placing myself under heavy debts which it is a pleasure to acknowledge. There has been the continued stimulus of my first teacher in psychology, Professor Cyril Burt. In the early stages of my work I received kindly help from Miss G. Hume, M.A. and Miss E. Wheeler, M.A. on points concerning educational disabilities. To the many teachers who experimented with tests and remedial methods and to my students who helped with test results I am particularly grateful. My thanks are due also to Professor H. R. Hamley, Dr C. M. Fleming and Dr M. M. Lewis for reading the book in typescript and at various stages of its preparation, and to Dr B. Brooks for reading the Sections on English, Chapters XVI-XIX.

I wish to thank the Editor and publishers of the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* for allowing me to reprint selected parts of articles I have published in various numbers of that journal. I am grateful to Dr H. G. Stead for providing the blocks for the illustrations of Brambling House Children's Centre.

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Finally, I owe the greatest debt to my wife, but for whose constant encouragement, pertinent advice on psychological problems, and indefatigable assistance with marking and with calculations it is unlikely that I should now thus happily be approaching the conclusion of my task.

F. J. S.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Individual Differences and their Bearing on Backwardness

The problem of backwardness in school, whatever its type or degree, is now recognised as part of the larger problem of individual differences among children. Inability to progress normally in school work was formerly attributed to laziness or lack of intelligence. Recent research and records from class teaching indicate, however, that its explanation is more likely to be found in a study of the pupil's entire personality.[1] The failure to maintain a standard of scholastic progress compatible with intellectual capacity is associated with factors intellectual and emotional, physical and environmental.

Psychological studies have, in recent years, revealed innumerable instances of the interdependence and interrelation of these four fundamentals in the formation of personality.

The principal force in child development is now realised to be a purposive striving for expression and power in physical, emotional and intellectual realms.

Security, social contact, and a measure of success are the usual nutritives for normal growth of this expressional life, but the particular nature of the dynamic urge differs with the individual's inborn equipment, and differing personal attitudes are developed towards life's activities. These reactions have, in turn, a vital influence on the

[1] The word "personality" is here used in the psychological sense and is taken to mean that complex integrated resultant of innate equipment and environmental influences attained by an individual in the course of his development. It is built up from intellectual abilities, temperamental traits, motor capacities, sentiments, complexes, habits, and physical characteristics, which, through a variety of experiences, are moulded into a personal pattern which distinguishes one individual from another.

elements of personality already formed, and as a consequence a child's personality presents, not only a picture of inherited tendencies but, in addition, a mirror of the conditioned states produced by the environment.

In the field of education one is made acutely aware of this psychological interplay of inherited characteristics and acquired attitudes, so that all concerned in the teaching of children are constrained to remember that progress in school is dependent not only on intellectual abilities but also upon emotional stability, interests, physical fitness and the nature of personal contacts in home, school and society.

Equally important is the recognition of the inter-dependence of these factors. Favourable influences, advantage or success in one direction bring, in most cases, increased efficiency and invigoration in other directions, while unfavourable conditions, defect or failure in one sphere can produce lessened effectiveness in several other spheres. If, for example, a pupil is especially interested in school handwork his output of intellectual energy in that subject is increased by virtue of the emotional incentive ; he thinks more clearly and quickly because his power of application and his speed of reaction have been temporarily raised to a maximum. In the physical realm the onset of fatigue is postponed and more lasting general effect may be obtained because his school work and out-of-school activities are linked together in a natural way and his leisure time and every-day contacts in that field are enriched and made more pleasurable. Similarly, if a pupil is failing in a school subject, the all-pervading influence of failure not only in itself reduces efficiency in the particular academic tasks, but also often affects unfavourably the emotional and intellectual accompaniments of associated activities.

Scholastic failure must be regarded then as psychological failure. To consider a single intellectual factor or an isolated experience in the child's life as the sole causal factor in backwardness is totally unsatisfactory. Just as