


Mental retardation

SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

A photograph of a person standing in a field next to a rustic wooden fence, looking towards a distant hill. The person is wearing a light-colored shirt and dark pants. The fence is made of weathered wooden posts and wire. The background shows a grassy hill and a line of trees under a clear sky.

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FOREWORD

The temptation is to write about the compelling issues in this collection. Also, I think it would be enjoyable to write about the authors, several of whom I know, and of the others whose works I know. I must still those motivations, because if I don't there may be the pull to write about myself, and that would surely be immodest and probably uninteresting. Besides, the editors write very effectively about the issues and the authors in their succinct section introductions. Why repeat needlessly?

Therefore, I have decided to concentrate on two themes: what I seek in a book, any book; and why I conclude that this book deserves the attention of people concerned with the so-called mentally retarded.

As in any other situation, a person must always deal with limited resources. The university has limited resources; the public school has limited resources; the individual has limited resources. And for so many of us, aside from the seemingly perennial grind of trying to make ends meet in a world seemingly gone haywire, time itself is among the scarcest commodities—in spite of my observation elsewhere that too many people appear to have very little to do. So we must select our books with care, not an easy decision given the flood of paper that assaults us in this era of “publish or perish,” “read or be labeled ignorant” (even if thinking itself is suspect in certain quarters). Then why this book? That's a question whose answer, at least my answer, comes later.

I look for a book that will teach me not only about the technical aspects of a problem

but the reason for its importance. Certainly, elementary teachers must read books about the teaching of reading. Yet in some sense, those books must also be connected with what someone should read as well as how someone reads.

I look for commitment of the authors when I peruse a book. I remember that Socrates was put to death because of his alleged corruption of youth. He was killed because the people didn't like what he taught. Teaching once held this importance, and I expect books about teaching to have a seriousness of purpose that can overcome different values and opinions between the author and the reader, or even an author's “mistakes.”

I look for maturity in those who would have the courage to write books. Don't misunderstand, and that usually is an invitation to misunderstand, but I think there may be something “wrong” with the role-models that teachers and professors present to their students. This is my way of suggesting that students sometimes gain the impression that their teachers have little to do except to play with or entertain students. There is the suggestion here that people who don't *have* to teach may be the ones who should be encouraged to teach. And I feel somewhat the same way about writers. That is, writers should be competent to do something else, such as carpentry, fishing, farming, working with children, advocacy—you name it, but something else. And their books and papers should reflect those outside lives. At least I'd appreciate that.

Last, my kind of book is one that attempts to enlarge our lives, not in the physical or materialistic sense but in spiritual and personal ways. So many of the things that are made supposedly for people that are huckstered in our open markets accomplish little more than to make people useless. The electric can opener and pencil sharpener don't do the job better than the old-fashioned tools, while they make the human being stand around and wait for the can or pencil to drop. We have too many rowing machines that don't move and bicycles that go nowhere and television sets that destroy conversation. Let a book bring us closer together or let it bring a human being together inside.

I now return to the earlier question: Why this book? The issues in this book are clearly

laid out, and those are the important issues in our field: the family, evaluation, social issues, legal issues, the curriculum, the teacher, vocations, and physical education. There appears to be a thoughtful order to the sections, the chapters, and the discussion questions. It is good that Clif Drew, Mike Hardman, and Harry Bluhm began with attitudes and perspectives from those who really know, the brothers, sisters, and families of the so-called mentally retarded. This is an honest book, each chapter chosen with apparent care, not a book to salve the temporary irritation or to pander to the immediate fad but more so a volume to have and to return to.

There it is, what I like to have in books that I read and why I found that this measures well.

Burton Blatt

PREFACE

Mental retardation has been an area of interest to many for a considerable length of time. Even disregarding very early recorded descriptions (dating several hundred years B.C.), mental retardation has a history that predates many of the current areas of concern in special education. In spite of this long record of attention, it is only in relatively recent times that serious consideration has been given to the broader perspectives of this complex problem. The realization that social and educational influences are vitally intertwined has emphasized the fact that no single perspective or facet of the problem is pure. It is virtually impossible, and certainly imprecise, to view a given behavioral phenomenon in a simplistic, single-focus manner. This is certainly the case with mental retardation, a phenomenon that has a dramatic impact on and is affected by all of society from nearly every vantage point.

The purpose of the present volume is to examine the social and educational perspectives of mental retardation, the impact of societal and educational institutions upon the mentally retarded individual, and, in turn, the impact of mental retardation on these institutions.

The book consists of two major parts, Social Issues and Educational and Vocational Issues. The first part is divided into four sections that address different but related social aspects of the mental retardation prob-

lem: family relationships, assessment, clinical-societal issues, and legal issues. Part Two, Educational and Vocational Issues, also contains four sections. These sections examine delivery patterns and instruction, implications for teacher preparation, vocational considerations, and physical and recreational education. Each of these areas could easily constitute an entire volume by itself and, in some cases, has. In many cases, however, these topics are only emerging as serious foci of attention.

We have drawn on the most recent literature in an attempt to present the current issues relating to social and educational perspectives of mental retardation. A conscious effort has been made to select articles that present the intended message in highly readable form. In many cases the message is controversial. This too is intentional since the problems of mental retardation are themselves embroiled in controversy. It is hoped that the reader will find this volume thought provoking and will be inclined to ponder the many complexities of mental retardation. The most serious attention and best thinking possible must be brought to bear if effective solutions are to be found for the problem of mental retardation.

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PART I

SOCIAL ISSUES

SECTION ONE

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND RETARDATION

Nowhere is the impact of mental retardation in the form of trauma, shame, distress, frustration, anger, and fatigue so keenly felt as in the family. These terms and numerous others are used in attempts to describe the experience of having a mentally retarded child in the family, yet no words can capture the complete essence of mental retardation. Words are inadequate in breadth and intensity to fully portray the problems involved. Language remains, however, the primary means of communicating or obtaining knowledge, and in the articles in this section various dimensions of family issues as they are influenced by the presence of a mentally retarded individual in the family are explored. Attitudes of significant others play an important role in many aspects of behavior. Consequently, it is necessary to have some idea concerning attitudes toward mental retardation in order to better understand the problem fully. Robert Harth's article provides an interesting overview of what the literature has to say about the attitudes of four groups concerning mental retardation—professionals, institutional employees, parents of retarded children, and retarded children themselves. This is followed by an article by Kathryn A. Gorham, with a more direct focus on parents of the retarded. This article discusses in a uniquely objective and yet



empathetic manner the frustrations of being a parent of a mentally retarded child, based on 13 years of experience. This perspective, which is difficult to achieve, is presented with a delicate balance of parental emotion and insightful advice to professionals. The articles by Matilda F. de Boor and Bobby G. Greer, which follow, represent brief vignettes of family perspectives with different but powerful messages; these are statements that must be read, pondered, and digested. Their depth is deceptive and emphasizes the viewpoint that length does not necessarily connote substance.

The impact of a retarded child on siblings has often been discussed informally but has been rarely journalized in any systematic fashion. The article by Frances Kaplan Grossman presents some fascinating insights into the world of brothers and sisters of retarded children. The techniques used for data collection are comprehensive, the questions asked are penetrating, and the results complex. This article serves to reemphasize the multifaceted nature of mental retardation, particularly when viewed in a societal context. The societal context would not be complete without a discussion of an institution of longstanding influence, religion. Harold W. Stubblefield's article on religion, parents, and mental retardation addresses this important area from a number of standpoints.

Families of retarded children can and should become more than reactors to their environment. This has become increasingly evident as knowledge and practice have progressed over the years. However, the nature and success of family involvement has varied greatly throughout the country. The final article in this section, by Merle B. Karnes, R. Reid Zehrbach, and James A. Teska, presents an exciting model for parental involvement. This model is particularly refreshing because it provides a much needed conceptualization of a highly complex area.