1943

Teaching the mentally retarded

Eleanor Patterson Rowlett

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TEACHING THE MENTALLY RETARDED

BY

ELEANOR PATTERSON ROWLETT

A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION

1943
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education. It was written under the guidance of Dr. Merton E. Carver of the faculty of the University of Richmond. To him, for his unfailing patience and advice, and to Dr. Benjamin C. Holtzclaw, whose encouragement stimulated my lagging effort, sincere appreciation is hereby expressed. Thanks are due Mr. Daniel Ellis who read the thesis and gave helpful suggestions for its improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that about two per cent of the school population of the United States are mentally handicapped. In the old days these children seldom progressed beyond the third grade and, after repeated failures, finally dropped out of school. Some found work as unskilled laborers; some became the dependent "queer" members of their families; some became public charges, either paupers or criminals. In most states today the compulsory school laws force these pupils to remain in school until they reach the age of fifteen or sixteen. But since they are unable to follow the regular academic courses of study, they become educational and social misfits unless some special arrangement is made for them. Many leave school as soon as they have passed the compulsory school attendance age. Yet they have not achieved even the minimum of academic learning expected of pupils their age. If they have acquired the homely virtues of obedience, honesty, loyalty, ability to work peaceably with others, a sense of responsibility for doing one's best on a job, a degree of self-control and dependability they
will make good in the unskilled and semi-skilled positions into which they will drift. It is too much to hope that these virtues, however, will be acquired by exposure to academic subject-matter which is far beyond their limited comprehension. The school has a definite responsibility for the training of these backward pupils in habits of thought and work which will instill in them the vocational and social skills they will need to become self-supporting citizens. This objective cannot be accomplished through printed symbols which have no real meaning to their unimaginative minds. They, perhaps more than any other school group, must learn to do by doing.

In the elementary schools of most cities special classes for the mentally handicapped are caring for the educational needs of the younger pupils. A few cities have made provisions for the older mentally retarded in the secondary schools, but there is still need for further consideration of the problem of the teen-aged mentally handicapped. They should not be kept with the younger children, not only for their own good, but for the sake of the younger pupils whose welfare is often menaced by the presence and example of the mentally deficient adolescent. The need is great for a better understanding and a more workable solution of this problem. This paper is a response to that need.

In this paper, the terms mentally retarded, slow learning, and mentally deficient are used interchangeably,
in referring to pupils in the public schools whose I.Q. is not below 68 or 70, and who are not classified as institutional cases.

Purpose

This investigation has a three-fold purpose:

(1) to study the handling of retarded and mentally handicapped pupils in the Richmond Public Schools from 1912 through 1941, (2) to determine current practices followed in the school systems of other large cities, and (3) to summarize and appraise the various methods suggested for dealing with mentally handicapped pupils who have reached age twelve or beyond.

Sources

The following sources of information have been utilized in making this study:

1. The annual reports of the Superintendent of Schools of Richmond from 1912 to 1941.

2. Interviews with teachers of special classes for the mentally handicapped.

3. Interviews with principals of schools in which these classes are placed.

4. A study of printed bulletins on the education of the mentally handicapped in various public school systems of the United States.

5. Analysis of the answers to a questionnaire sent by the writer to school superintendents in fifty cities with a population of 100,000 or more.
6. Reading books by authorities on the subject of education for the mentally handicapped as shown in the attached bibliography.

7. Case studies of pupils under the direct supervision of the writer during fifteen years of work with special classes in the Richmond Public Schools.
CHAPTER I

SPECIAL CLASSES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

The first special class for subnormal children in the Richmond Public Schools was established at Powhatan School in September, 1911. The purpose and methods adopted in this program are summarized by Assistant Superintendent Hoke as follows:

"Into this class were admitted children who could not profit by the instruction of the grade teacher. During the year twenty pupils attended this class. Of this number five have returned to grade work and are doing well, seven have gone to work, and the remaining eight are still in this class.

"The instruction in this school did not follow that of any grade. The sole aim was to arouse the interest of the children and to make them happy. To do this it was necessary to depart greatly from the old lines of instruction. Manual work occupied at least half of each day . . . . . . .

"In grammar grades special classes in shop work were formed for boys who were repeating, and for over-aged boys so that some of them received as much as three periods a week in this particular subject. This plan has reached the interest of the boys and held them in school when every other effort failed."

In September, 1912, the second special class for mentally deficient pupils was opened at Bellevue School. Here, again, as in the previous year, some pupils classed as mentally deficient were found to be retarded from causes other than hereditary, and under careful individual instruction were able to return to the regular grades. Since, in these days, criteria and tests for mental deficiency were very crude, it is not surprising that such errors in placement were made.

A study of the retardation of pupils in the Richmond schools revealed the need for special classes whose progress through the grades was slow but who were not regarded as feeble-minded. The Superintendent's report of this study concludes that

"One great educational need of Richmond is a number of classes for retarded pupils — children who are "slow" but not mentally deficient, and for children whose mental test is good, but who have been retarded by absence, sickness, or late entry." 1

Apparently impressed with the urgency of the situation the City Council voted an appropriation for five special classes with the understanding that unusual care would be exercised in selecting pupils for these classes. Thus the superintendent of that day goes on to say:

1. 44th Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools of the City of Richmond, Virginia, 1913, p. 23.
"When the teachers of these classes are selected, one should be chosen who shall devote her time to mental tests in order that we may have a clearer understanding of the mentality of our pupils and may be in better position to study the causes of retardation."  

During the next six years the interest in special classes for mentally handicapped and retarded pupils increased greatly. By 1919, there were twenty-two classes for these pupils in the Richmond schools. In the year 1920, however, one class was suspended and each year thereafter the number of classes dwindled until, in 1929, only thirteen remained. At this time, also, special classes for retarded, but not mentally deficient, children were discontinued.

In 1934, an upward turn began but it was not permanent. The session of 1936 counted sixteen special classes. By 1941, only eight of these were still in existence.

Perhaps the greatest single item responsible for the sagging support in this work was the increased expense. The cost of special classes had risen from $51.20 per capita in 1915 to $69.72 in 1920, and $101.28 in 1925. Some of this increase was due to the rise in price of handwork materials. It costs more to equip and to maintain a special class than it does to operate a regular one, and school people were

1. Ibid, p. 23.
2. Annual Reports of the Superintendent of the Public Schools of Richmond, Virginia, for the years 1915, 1920, and 1925.
questioning the wisdom of spending more money to educate the uneducable than was being spent on the pupil with better mental endowment. This argument apparently carried more weight than the fact that it costs society more to care for these weak individuals in penal institutions or in public almshouses than it does to train them to be self-supporting members of the community.

During these years the influence of "Progressive Education" was beginning to be felt. Segregated grouping was not on its approved list of school practices. But promotion in the elementary schools based on effort rather than actual achievement was. This reduced the per cent of retardation reported but did not solve the problem of the mentally handicapped pupil.

In 1914 the percentages of accelerated, normal and retarded pupils were as follows:

| Accelerated | 4.4% |
| Normals     | 36.3 |
| 1/2 year retarded | 24.8 |
| 1           | 15.5 |
| 1-1/2       | 7.2  |
| 2           | 5.4  |
| 2-1/2       | 3.1  |
| 3           | 3.3  |
| Total       | 100.0% |

In recent years enriched courses of study have replaced the practice of skipping grades for the brightest

1. 45th Annual Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools of the City of Richmond, Virginia, 1914, p. 23.
pupils. The percentage of acceleration has probably been reduced by this change. The belief that failure in school work produces inferiority complexes or other undesirable emotional disturbances has resulted in wholesale promotion of pupils, especially in the elementary grades. The percentage of pupils making normal progress through the grades probably has increased with a corresponding decrease in the percentage of retardation. This cannot be taken as indicating that the intelligence of pupils in recent years is higher than in 1914. Many teachers believe that the academic standards have been gradually lowered. Others maintain that the schools are doing a better job. One man suavely side-stepped by saying, "We did not lower the standards; we have met the situation." In one elementary school in Richmond, during the sessions between 1935 and 1940, pupils were placed in grades according to their chronological age regardless of mental ability, previous school experience, or academic achievement. No failures were possible in such an organization. This illustrates an extreme interpretation of chronological age, or social adaptation, as the only criterion for grade placement. This appears to have been an experiment which failed and hence was discontinued.

The realization of the fact that very retarded children do become social misfits if kept too long in elementary schools led to the establishment of special classes in junior high schools. The first of these classes was opened at
Chandler Junior High School in 1937. Each of the five junior high schools now has a special class for mentally retarded pupils. Thus, we see that while the number of special classes declined in the elementary schools, it increased in the junior high schools.

It is very doubtful if these classes really meet our problem adequately. We seem to face an ever-growing number of pupils who are incapable of following the usual academic course of study with any degree of satisfaction or success. This is the argument used by some critics of the secondary schools who claim that the high school courses of study are solely college preparatory. Trade schools are suggested as a solution of the problem of the maladjusted high school pupil, and Richmond may soon have the opportunity of testing their value.

Prior to 1930, all of the classes for mentally retarded pupils were in white schools. During the three years from 1930 to 1932, inclusive, two such classes were organized in the Negro schools. In 1933, there was only one special class for Negroes and after that none was listed.

It has been estimated that about two per cent of an unselected school population have an intelligent quotient of 78 or less. 1 In Table I it will be noted that at no time did

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TABLE NO. I. SHOWING THE ENROLMENT IN SPECIAL CLASSES IN THE PUBLIC
SCHOOLS OF RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, COVERING THE YEARS 1912 THROUGH 1941.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Retarded (White)</th>
<th>Mentally Deficient (White)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number Classes</td>
<td>Number Pupils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>110</td>
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<td>1917</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>135</td>
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<td>1918</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>110</td>
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<td>1919</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>176</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>194</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>233</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>289</td>
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<td>1925</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1927</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1928</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>243</td>
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<td>1929</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>335</td>
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TABLE NO. 1. CONTINUED

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number Classes</th>
<th>Number Pupils</th>
<th>% of Roll</th>
<th>Number Classes</th>
<th>Total Number Pupils</th>
<th>% of Roll</th>
<th>Number Classes</th>
<th>Number Pupils</th>
<th>% of Roll</th>
<th>Total Number Pupils</th>
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<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>145</td>
<td></td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>183</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>158</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>149</td>
<td></td>
<td>307</td>
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</table>
the number of pupils in special classes in the Richmond schools exceed 1.61 per cent of the enrollment. This fact may have no important significance. It may be noted, however, that during the time of largest school enrollment the number of special classes decreased. This probably indicates a decrease in pupil retardation which might be explained by the swing away from the mastery of subject-matter as the sole basis of promotion.

All of the senior and junior high schools of Richmond utilize some method of grouping the pupils according to their ability. Mentally retarded children, because of their poor intellectual equipment, cannot cope with the usual requirements of regular grades even though "watered courses" are given. They can work more successfully with concrete objects and materials than with words and numbers. In the mastery of symbols they cannot develop much beyond their indicated mental age level.

Organizing a special class in the high school presents a greater problem than it does in the elementary school. Departmentalized work is not readily adapted to the needs of these pupils. It is difficult to arrange suitable concrete work for them. The differences between the special class and the regular classes are more marked in the high school than in the elementary school, and the pupils are more likely to resent being segregated.

Richmond tried out the plan of equipping a building
as a "center" for subnormal pupils in charge of teachers trained for this work but it was not successful. Transportation of pupils from various parts of the city to the center was a difficult problem which, today, might be solved by providing a school bus for this purpose. The school, unfortunately, became stigmatized as a "dummy school" and many parents were unwilling to send their children to such a school. It was not known or regarded as a high school. A special high school might not involve the transportation difficulty and might avoid the odium attached to a special class in a regular high school. Rochester, New York, and Detroit, Michigan, have successfully maintained high schools for the backward pupils.

Looking back over the years from 1912 to the present we have to conclude that the problem of the mentally handicapped pupils of secondary school age has not yet been solved in the city of Richmond. Too often have the misfit pupils been put out of school with no future in sight beyond street corner loafing. Surely this is a problem which demands most serious consideration and which challenges the best possible thinking and planning on the part of the educators of Richmond.
CHAPTER II

PRESENT DAY PRACTICES IN FORTY-FIVE LARGE CITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to secure first-hand information concerning the present practices in dealing with the mentally retarded pupils in the public school systems of our country, questionnaires (see page 15) were sent to fifty city superintendents selected from a list of ninety-two cities of over 100,000 population. Replies were received from forty-five of these cities. The tabulation of these replies affords some conception of what is being done in this particular field of public school work. Certain inaccuracies are undoubtedly present because of varying interpretations of terms. The comments on the questionnaires and the extra printed materials sent by some superintendents have been of inestimable value in keeping these errors at a minimum. The results of this questionnaire are summarized in Table II, page 16.

It will be seen from Table II that more has been done in the elementary schools for the mentally handicapped pupils than in the junior and senior high schools. Of the
QUESTIONNAIRE ON SPECIAL CLASSES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF: __________________________

I. Do you have special classes for retarded pupils

In Elementary Schools? Yes □ No □
In Junior High Schools? Yes □ No □
In Senior High Schools? Yes □ No □

II. On what bases are the pupils selected for special classes?

(a) I. Q. □
(b) Failure in class work (academic) □
(c) Inability to sit into regular group (Social Maladjustment) □
(d) Behavior problems (incorrigibility) □
(e) Promoted from elementary special classes to junior high or senior high school □

III. Is class size limited? Yes □ No □
How Many? ______________________

IV. What types curriculum are used?

(a) Activity program □
(b) "Watered" regular Course? □
(c) Individual instruction in fundamentals □
(d) Pre-Vocational □

(f)

V. Are these pupils successful in regular vocational Schools Yes □ No □

VI. Have you ever tried a colony plan similar to the C.C.C. for these pupils? Yes □ No □
If so, was it satisfactory? Yes □ No □
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number having special classes for mentally retarded pupils</th>
<th>Number not having such special classes</th>
<th>Number not having Junior High Schools</th>
<th>Number having &quot;centers&quot; for such pupils</th>
<th>Number having special vocational schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In elementary schools</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In junior high schools</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In senior high schools</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Number having &quot;centers&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Number having Special Vocational Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not asked on questionnaire - figures from statements added.
forty-five cities replying to the questionnaire only Denver reported no special classes for retarded children in the elementary schools. Provision is made in the Denver schools, however, for retarded pupils in junior and senior high schools. This seems to be a peculiar situation and may be due to the misinterpretation of terms previously mentioned. Denver is at the present time (1942) conducting a study of the slow-learner in her city schools.

It will be noted that twenty-seven of the forty-five cities reporting have special classes in the junior high schools. Fifteen have not made this provision for mentally handicapped pupils. Three of the cities do not have junior high schools. In thirteen cities special classes are provided for the mentally retarded in the senior high schools. Atlanta senior high schools have special classes in remedial reading, primarily in place of regular English. They report:

"Feeble-minded pupils are promoted from junior high to N.Y.A. center or vocational school." ²

Cincinnati reports on special classes in senior high - "not as such but in option." Further comment indicates

1. Comment on bottom of questionnaire sent to Mr. C. E. Green, Superintendent of Schools, Denver, Colorado, June 1, 1942.
2. Comment on questionnaire sent June 1, 1942, made by H. H. Bixler of Atlanta, Georgia Schools.
3. Reply to questionnaire sent C. V. Courter, Superintendent of Schools, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 1, 1942.
social disapproval of the special school for feeble-minded in Cincinnati and perhaps explains why enrolment in special classes in senior high schools is not pressed.

Rochester reports "one unit for girls of seventh and eighth grade level and a pre-vocational junior high school for boys." This work is adapted to the slow learner and "cares for about 700 boys."

Boston has "one high school which receives boys and girls unable to profit by regular high school instruction, also special class centers for older pupils who come from all parts of the city and follow a specialized curriculum adapted to their needs, such as shopwork, cooking, etc."

Detroit has done an excellent job of caring for the handicapped child, whatever the disability. They have Braille and sight-saving classes; they care for the crippled, the deaf, the epileptic, the tubercular, pupils with cardiac weaknesses and those with speech defects. The Department of Special Education also supervises a summer camp for boys. These developments are, of course, interesting and commendable, but our attention must be confined to the special classes for slow-learning pupils. Here, too, Detroit is doing outstandingly successful work. A bulletin prepared by the

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1. Comments on reply to questionnaire, June 1, 1942, by A. Lula Martin, Director Child Study Department, Public Schools of Rochester, New York.
2. Ibid.
3. Reply to questionnaire sent June 1, 1942, to Mr. A. L. Gould, Superintendent of Schools, Boston, Massachusetts.
Department of Special Education describes this work in detail.

Detroit maintains sixty-five classes for mentally retarded pupils under thirteen years of age. Two modern buildings and three old buildings are especially equipped for the use of the older retarded pupils. Boys and girls are placed in separate buildings. The special schools have their own principals and teachers who have been especially trained for work in this field. Detroit also provides twelve "Special Preparatory Classes" which train the slow pupils for entrance into a vocational school.

Baltimore has made similar provision for variously handicapped pupils. The system of promotion for the mentally handicapped from special classes to other schools is of interest and will be discussed later in this report.

Twenty cities reported that some selected pupils were successful in regular vocational schools. In three cities the mentally handicapped are not admitted to the vocational schools. Sixteen cities found this group incapable of success in regular vocational schools. Five did not check this question and it is presumed that these cities do not have vocational schools.

As shown in Table III, page 20, the curriculum

1. Education of the Handicapped in Detroit Public Schools, Department of Special Education, Board of Education, City of Detroit, 1937, pp. 53-55.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity program</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Watered&quot; regular course</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual instruction in fundamentals</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-vocational</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Units determined by needs of pupils</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remedial work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE III. TYPES OF CURRICULUMS USED IN FORTY-FIVE SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN CITIES WITH A POPULATION OF 100,000 OR BEYOND.
followed in most places is some type of activity program. Individual instruction in the fundamentals was checked next often. A large number definitely use a pre-vocational type of curriculum. A few confessed to a "watered" regular course, which means, if interpreted as intended, a strictly academic course of study made easy by omitting the difficult parts. Most of the cities use a combination of activity program and individual instruction adapted to the needs of the pupil.

The size of the class for the mentally retarded is limited in forty-one of the forty-five cities questioned. The average number of pupils permitted in these classes is twenty-two.

Failure in academic work in regular classes is an indication of some weakness. Sometimes it may be a physical defect such as deafness, poor vision, malnutrition, and the like. Continued inability to master the work of the lower grades is usually a sign of mental deficiency. As shown by Table IV, page 22, practically all of the cities questioned require a mental test of each pupil before placing him in a special class. Social maladjustment was given as a basis for selecting pupils for special classes in eighteen of the cities. This may indicate that pupils are retained in the regular class until they are very much over-age and have

1. New York has a State Law which prescribes limits within which the I.Q. and M.A. must fall before the child can be placed in a special class.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Q.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure in academic work</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social maladjustment in regular class</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrigibility</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoted from special classes in elementary school to special classes in junior high school</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
outgrown the other members of the class. It was gratifying to note that so few consider incorrigibility a reason for placing a pupil in the special class. The special class should never be made a "dumping ground" for the "bad" boys and girls of the school.

Seventeen cities have a system of promotion from elementary special classes to special classes in the secondary schools. This practice will aid in decreasing the social maladjustment of mentally retarded pupils. In Baltimore opportunity classes are provided for pupils with intelligence quotients of .65 - .85. The chronological age range in primary opportunity classes is from six to twelve and for the intermediate opportunity classes from twelve to fourteen. Beyond this are shop centers for pupils from fourteen to sixteen whose intelligence quotients are .50 - .85. Baltimore also maintains special center classes for pupils with intelligence quotients .50 - .65. Pupils are promoted from grade to grade within the opportunity classes without change of room. But a very satisfactory system of promotion on a two year basis is followed from primary to intermediate, and thence to the shop centers. Pupils who reach the 5A achievement level and who have developed the necessary habits of punctuality, regular attendance, and satisfactory conduct are recommended for the Occupational School.

1. Mimeographed material sent in answer to questionnaire, June, 1942, by Division of Special Education, Department of Education, Baltimore, Maryland.
CHAPTER III

OPINIONS OF AUTHORITIES ON THE
EDUCATION OF THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED

I. Characteristics of the Dull Pupil

It is not difficult to locate the maladjusted pupil, since he usually makes himself known in one way or another by his inability to work with the normal group. Sometimes his inability to perform the tasks, which the others find easy, drives him to misbehave. In some instances "the backward, in their desire to attract attention may resort to a crude form of exhibitionism" while in others the sense of failure builds up various tensions that may erupt into serious misbehavior or delinquency.

The slow learner "differs from the normal not in kind but in degree." The greatest divergence is in intellectual ability. His reasoning power is weak. In other respects, physical, emotional, and social, he more nearly
approaches the normal. The outstanding defects in the mental ability of the dull learner is summed up by Schorling as follows:

1. The mental age is less than the C. A.
2. The lack of system in dull minds limits the amount of transfer of learning.
3. He is weak in forming association of words and ideas.
4. He is low in imagination; cannot project himself into a situation not experienced.
5. He has an inadequate memory.
6. He has difficulty in generalizing.
7. He is weak in evaluating the products of his own efforts.
8. He is mentally immature.
9. He has a short span of attention.
10. His responses are less reliable; he guesses more.
11. Reading ability is low.

Hollingworth, C. Burt, and B. S. Morgan are in essential accord with the above statements.

The slow learner insists on quick results and tends to lose interest if returns are delayed. As he grows older, he often becomes more suggestible than the average or brighter pupil and, lacking judgment, often plunges into ill-considered action. He resents being different, frequently imitates others, and is easily led. This makes him the dupe of unscrupulous leaders who may entice him into crime.

There are some current common superstitions in regard to pupils of low mental ability which investigation has disproved. One is the belief that dull mentality is compensated for by strength of body. "Weak in head but strong in back," and "Beautiful but dumb." Both expressions are fallacious. Also untrue is the idea that the slow learner excels the more intelligent in manual dexterity. The actual facts of the case are the weak-minded can learn to do things with their hands better than they can learn reading, arithmetic, and other things requiring high mental development, but this does not mean they excel the more intellectually gifted in manual activities. Of course, there are some dull pupils who show a high degree of manual skill, but these are exceptions and not averages, the result of individual variance in ability and skill, and not the rule. Hollingworth says:

"Mentally retarded children on the whole show more unevenness in ability than do normal children." 1

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II. Segregation

It is generally agreed that the best method of meeting the educational needs of mentally handicapped pupils is the provision of special classes or special schools for them. Free public schools necessitated mass education which, in turn, produced the "lock-step" system of grading. The recognition of individual differences in pupils and the endeavor to meet them gave rise to the grouping of pupils according to their ability in school subjects.

This has been a rather recent development. According to Billet, who has compiled a thorough bibliography of educational literature on homogeneous ability grouping, only one article on the subject dated as far back as 1910. Gossard, however, found segregation tried in two cities as early as 1870. The more usual situation before 1910 was one of rigid grading systems and inflexible standards of attainment resulting in great retardation, wholesale withdrawal of discouraged pupils, and a large amount of truancy and incorrigibility. Not many schoolmen of that day recognized the implications of this state of affairs. Gossard writes:

"Many school people, failing to understand the significance of individual differences, felt that a child's failure to profit from instruction was due either to deliberate perversity and laziness, or to inefficiency on the part of the teacher. Many believed that by inflicting upon a dull child some type of punishment, such as wearing a dunce-cap, his intellectual reform might be brought about. It was difficult to convince these people that a group of retarded children did not reflect on the school's efficiency, and that it was important to provide educational opportunities adapted to the needs and abilities of the retarded child." 1

In the early days, as at the present time, inadequate financial support was the greatest single drawback to the adaptation of education to meet the individual needs of pupils. Money matters have a way of making us socially and educationally myopic.

There were other objections as well. One of these noted by Gossard may be found in the Annual Report of the Superintendent of Schools of Boston in 1929. It goes as follows:

"Sectioning by rank involves certain difficulties of organization, difficulties that increased with successive classes; but the great objection to it was the general conviction, after several years of trial, that boys are better educated for life in a democracy by intimate association with comrades of various tastes and powers; learning that weakness in one direction is often compensated

2. Ibid., p. 15.
by strength in another; avoiding on the one hand, the unwholesome stimulation, rivalry, and snobbishness that come from putting thirty or forty boys of brilliant intellect into a room together, and, on the other hand, the complacent dullness which menaces the group of thirty or forty boys at the other extreme." 1

A more modern expression of this same point of view is given by Saucier:

"Progress is made toward satisfactory provision for individual differences by increasing use of pupil problems or activities in instruction. These are illustrated in extra-curricular activities and the individual and group problems, or projects, of a socialized classroom procedure. In these pupil activities, children of all levels of intelligence work together. In such pursuits involving common interests, each child voluntarily, or at the suggestion of the group, fills the position for which he is fitted physically, temperamentally and socially." 2

He says further:

"When we give attention to the whole child, including his past and present environment, the impossibility of actual, complete homogeneous grouping is revealed." 3

We will agree that there is no "complete" homogeneity, but there are differences in rate and speed as well as in capacity for learning fundamental things. A slow learning child is happier and more successful in a group which approximates

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his own ability. His deficiencies are less conspicuous; his capabilities are more emphasized; his chances of successfully completing the tasks assigned to him are greater than when attempting to work in regular classes. Martens, B. B. Greenberg, and Ingram are in accord with this statement. The Education Policies Commission of the National Association Education/sums up the matter as follows:

"Provision is commonly made for children of very low ability in special classes. This is desirable adjustment and is made necessary both by the specialized curriculum and the special equipment needed, and by the fact that these children work together more satisfactorily if they are not grouped with children of higher mental ability."

Early sponsorship of this proposition is found in the 1899 report of the Superintendent of Schools of New York City:

"What is needed is a system by which the bright child shall receive instruction according to his brightness, and the slow child according to his slowness and that

no child shall be dishoarfened and dull by needless repetition of grade work."

Featherstone says that segregation without reconstructing the curriculum will accomplish little beyond easing the teacher's work and aiding the remaining pupils. It will not make the slow-learning pupils' lives easier. Nor will non-segregation prevent feelings of inadequacy on the part of slow pupils. For the very defective type of pupil, however, segregation is indicated for the good of the handicapped pupil himself as well as for the other pupils in the grade.

Ingram believes that children of similar ages, ability, and interests must be grouped together, insofar as possible, so that the program in any one class can be suited to the physical maturity and the mental and social development of the individuals in the group, with the possibility of adjustment from year to year as they attain certain stages of maturity and development.

Martens says:

"Even at its best, the class program which must provide for the mentally deficient child in the same group with the mentally superior child is not the most desirable

plan for either pupils or teacher. Much more satisfactory conditions may obtain if seriously retarded children can be gathered together into a separate class assigned to an understanding teacher."

The Education Policies Commission sums up the argument for segregation of mentally retarded pupils by stating that this practice has resulted in more efficient school service.

III. Selection of Pupils for Special Classes

No greater injustice could be done a child than to place him in a special class without first giving him the benefit of careful individual study by thoroughly competent, well-trained persons. Before classifying a pupil as mentally deficient, the school should be sure he is not the victim of some physical handicap, such as deafness, partial blindness, malnutrition, or the like. Such physical defects greatly hinder a child's ability to concentrate, to comprehend and to co-operate. Emotional instability and its causes should be located and a remedial program provided. An emotionally upset child sometimes appears indifferent and incapable, if not incorrigible. Failure in school work may

be the result of physical or emotional disturbances or a combination of the two when no mental deficiency exists.

Teacher judgment is not a sufficiently accurate measure of the intelligence of a pupil. Standardized intelligence tests, achievement and aptitude tests, while not infallible, are the most scientific measures of a pupil's intellectual strength so far devised. No child should be judged mentally deficient unless he has been subjected to a battery of such tests. Featherstone deplores the practice of judging a child feeble-minded just because he is a trouble-maker.

One objection to special classes raised by patrons as well as teachers of such classes is the tendency to place any or all unadjusted pupils in the special class. This practice should be carefully guarded against.

The special class is not a "dumping ground for all the misfits in the school." It is a specially equipped laboratory in which pupils with slowly functioning mentality may work happily and successfully together. There is no place in such a classroom for the bad, but highly intelligent, pupil, nor for a high-strung, excitable, undisciplined genius.

Some other more suitable arrangement must be made for such
types of maladjustment.

Gossard found that, before the advent of intelligence testing, admission to special classes was a haphazard
affair based upon the judgment of principal and teachers,
backed at most by the opinion of a medical doctor.

Most individuals are uneven in their development
and mentally handicapped pupils are not exceptions to the
rule. They may be more uneven than normal individuals.
Standardized intelligence tests determine the I. Q. but
aptitude and appreciation tests are needed to detect special
ability or absence of it. Featherstone says:

"Grouping or classification based on
intelligence tests - and other measures
of verbal ability will not automatically
place pupils in satisfactory groups for
art, or music, or shop-work." 2

This fact is supported by the writer's own experi­
ence with a very unevenly developed pupil. Charles was
one of the first pupils placed in a newly organized special
class. He had been pushed along to the third grade without
having learned to read or to spell. He remained in the
special class until he reached the age of sixteen without

1. Gossard, A. P., Superior and Backward Pupils in Public
Schools, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois,
1940, p. 85.
2. Featherstone, M. B., Teaching the Slow-Learner, Bureau of
Publications, Teachers' College, Columbia University,
New York, 1941, p. 3.
acquiring any usable reading or spelling skill. Every known method and device had been tried in the effort to form some association between the word symbol and the idea but none was successful. On a spelling test he might have every word correctly written somewhere on the page, but it was mere chance if any word was in its proper place as called. The handwriting was good but the words had no meaning to him. They were only well-mirrored pictures reproduced.

Charles was, however, very talented in drawing and in shopwork. He could reproduce, enlarge, or reduce a picture almost as perfectly as might be done by photography. When he was promoted to a special class in the junior high school, he became an excellent lathe operator and performed well in other exacting handcraft and machine work.

Obviously the placement of this boy should not have been based upon the results of intelligence or academic achievement tests.
IV. The Mentally Retarded Adolescent

As the mentally retarded child grows older it becomes increasingly difficult to meet his educational needs. The advance of his mental capacity does not keep pace with his physical growth and his maturing social interests. Subject matter materials which are on his intellectual level are too infantile to attract his attention or hold his interest. Learning situations must be grown up and dignified in their appeal and appropriate to his physiological and social development, but must keep within the range of his intellectual ability. Martens devotes much space to cases in which school work was adapted to the needs of the retarded adolescent.

In respect to physical development there is little noticeable difference between the normal and the mentally handicapped child. Their accomplishments in physical activities compare favorably with the normal child. Though their mental growth is retarded, health and strength of body may not be lacking. The school should, therefore, make provision for the participation of these pupils along with the others in physical fitness programs. Writers seem to agree

that the junior high school "adjustment classes" offer the
best opportunity for the mentally retarded adolescent, not
only in the adaptation to their capacity of academic work,
but in providing suitable outlets for their physical energy
and social yearnings.

V. The Curriculum for the Mentally Retarded

Content

The mentally retarded child requires a course of
study adapted to his capacity and needs. He is more nearly
normal in "sensory acuity and motor ability" than in "more
definitely intellectual processes." He is undoubtedly
destined to find his place in some unskilled or semi-skilled
job in industry, if he works at all. Intellectual pursuits
are not his goal. For him, therefore, the curriculum should
be based upon practical utility subjects and manipulative
skills. A recent study made by L. W. Drayton and W. A.
McGhee supports this conclusion.

A certain degree of ability in reading, language
and numbers is essential for successful living. The activity

1. Gossard, A. P., Superior and Backward Pupils in Public
Schools, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois,
1940, p. 99.
2. Ingram, Christine P., Education of the Slow-learning Child,
3. Ingram, Christine P., Education of the Slow-Learning Child,
World Book Company, New York, 1935, p. 34.
4. Ibid.
5. Drayton, Lewis W. and McGhee, William, "A Comparison of the
Interests of Kentally Superior and Retarded Children", 
School and Society, Vol. 52, #1354, December 7, 1940,
pp. 599-600.
program which is advocated by most authorities and which is most widely used at the present in special classes is not intended to be a substitute for these tool subjects. It is, on the contrary, a means whereby the mastery of the fundamentals of learning is made significant to these pupils of limited intelligence.

Schorling does not believe that the recent tendency to center the curriculum around social studies is a sound educational procedure. He says:

"The chances are that we shall five years hence look back with chagrin at our naive faith in a curriculum with a social studies core as a cure all for our troubles." 1

Because of their limited reading ability this type of book-centered curriculum is not productive of needed results with dull children. The 19th Year Book of the Department of Elementary Principals of the National Education Association states:

"Curriculum enrichment is needed as much for these children as for their more capable fellows. For little emphasis has been placed on practical activities which challenge a slow child's interest." 2

Another important phase of the training of these slow pupils is in citizenship. In this field the junior

high school offers to these adolescents an opportunity which they do not get in the elementary school. Classroom organization, representation on the student council, and participation in school elections are real life situations in which these children may take part.

It is the general agreement that the curriculum for the mentally retarded should offer to each pupil the opportunity to master as much as he is able of the essentials of learning, "the three R's". It should develop his manipulative skill as far as feasible with an eye to his future vocation and cultivate in him the habits and attitudes of good citizenship. As Douglas sums it up:

"The purpose of instruction is to develop individuals along lines of vocational and social efficiency." 1

VI. Procedure, Method and Equipment

The process of learning is the same in all pupils whether dull or bright. It differs in the quality, amount, and rapidity of the learning. Dull children require more concrete work, more frequent explanation in more specific detail. Since the backward pupil is "quite uncritical of his own work", the teacher must "make sure the pupil is

forming habits of correct response and is not drilling
upon errors."  2
Schorling suggests the following guide to teaching
procedure with a backward group:

1. Avoid conventional classification of
subject matter; books should be ungraded
and unlabeled.

2. Give special attention to reading; avoid
"wordy" books in all subjects.

3. Make class period a laboratory period.
   a. Emphasis placed not on "3 R's"
      but on "3 H's" - hand, heart,
      head.
   b. Use supervised study with teacher
      doing much elbow work with indi-
      vidual pupil.
   c. Set up definite goals vs. vague
      intentions.
   d. Use concrete things - dramatics,
      excursions, visual aids.

4. Place emphasis on appreciation and under-
standing of concepts rather than on skills.

5. Organize material so that each step is
small.

6. Have variety.

7. Use many illustrations and have much
repetition.

8. Units of subject matter should be simple
and brief.

9. Fear of failure should be kept out of the
picture.

1. Ibid.
2. Schorling, Raleigh, Needed Research on the Problem of the
   Slow-learning Pupil, Edwards Bros., Inc. Ann Arbor, Michigan,
   1933, pp. 10-11.
With these rules of procedure in teaching retarded pupils most writers agree. Ingram points out that normal children acquire incidentally much information and many habits that must be taught specifically to this group.

VII. Teachers of the Mentally Handicapped

The selection and training of teachers for the mentally handicapped is extremely important. Teachers whose temperament will allow them to accept nothing but perfection from their pupils are ill-fitted to deal with the efforts of dull minds. Patience is a necessary virtue in this work. Teachers who are possessed of sufficient amount of missionary spirit to do full justice to the pupils of special classes are rare indeed. Martens says:

"The teacher's attitude sets the example for pupils - encouragement vs. condescension and ridicule." 3

Special training is also necessary. Some cities have established regular schools to train teachers for special classes. Quoting from the reports of many school superintendents, Gossard emphasizes the need of securing the best fitted

and most adequately trained teachers that can be found for handling special classes. The Fifteenth Year Book of the Mathematics Teachers' Association agrees with this statement.

Martens gives the following suggestions for the teacher who deals with the mentally retarded pupils:

1. Be interested in him.
2. Know him.
3. Like him.
4. Find something worthy of appreciation.
5. Have a genuine eagerness to help.
6. Find out what he can do, and what he likes to do.
7. Know his home life, companions, play, feelings, thoughts.
8. Let him feel you are his friend not his critic and oppressor.

This procedure is important for all teachers but becomes essential when working with pupils of retarded intellectual development.

The 19th Year Book of the Department of Elementary Principals sets up a standard for teachers of the mentally retarded in the following paragraph:

"Securing adequate teaching personnel for these classes has been one of the greatest

difficulties. Teachers must be able and willing to learn the remedial reading and arithmetic technics that are part of the work in these classes. They must have a broad background enabling them to carry on a modified activity program. At the same time they must be familiar and sympathetic with the principles of mental hygiene; otherwise they cannot cope with the apathy or truculence evidenced by many of the children who are placed in these classrooms. In addition, the teachers must be able to justify their work to parents who are suspicious of any departure from normal classroom situations. In other words, the program calls for superior teachers. More willingness to undertake the special teaching is not sufficient; it must be accompanied by the proper emotional attitudes and by the intellectual and artistic gifts necessary for conducting work of this type. 1

To meet these requirements a teacher must be specifically trained and must possess teaching ability of a high order.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

For mental deficiency, whether it is the result of accident, disease, or hereditary endowment, no hopeful cure has been found. Information can be supplied and understanding can be directed, but, without the ability to comprehend, assimilate, and retain, progress in intellectual pursuits is nullified. What then is the best procedure for all these children of low mentality? This question has puzzled educators ever since the fact of individual differences became the foundation of educational practice and procedure. Previously, a slow-learning pupil was punished for laziness. Now, we know he is usually doing the best he can with material beyond his ability to comprehend and with tasks too difficult for him to perform.

It is the task of the school to meet the needs of these unfortunate, mentally handicapped pupils. Diluted regular courses of study and handicraft of the "busy-work" type will not suffice. The weaknesses and strength of each child's mental, social and manual abilities should be planned
for by providing work which has practical meaning and which will develop and train whatever abilities he may possess. It is a fallacy to think that pupils of low mentality can do better handwork than their more intelligent schoolmates. The law of compensation does not work in that fashion. It is true, however, that some mentally handicapped children are gifted with manipulative or artistic skill. So are pupils of normal or superior mental ability. It is true also that most mentally deficient pupils can be taught to use their hands in some useful occupation. For this reason handcrafts are an important part of the curriculum for special classes.

The most important lessons for these pupils have to do with the training of character and the building of good citizenship. By providing work in such practical classes as handcraft, gardening, shop, sewing, cooking, homemaking and child care, and by giving them opportunity for public service, such as helping in the cafeteria and serving as messengers, the schools can develop in the retarded pupils a willingness to undertake a job, a responsibility for seeing it through to completion, a sense of justice and fair-play, honesty and truthfulness, and the ability to get along peaceably with other people.

Success in this endeavor is made much simpler if the slow child is found early and placed promptly in a position where his needs can be cared for. This brings us to the
question of how the mentally retarded may be found and upon what basis he may be segregated. The first is very simple. As a rule the mentally deficient does not wait to be found; he very soon introduces himself. Casual observation, however, is not to be depended upon solely, for shyness, home spoiling, deafness and other physical or emotional upsets sometimes cause a child to appear dull. For this reason most schools refrain from placing a very young child in a special class.

The practice of maintaining a two year primary period, including kindergarten and first grade, during which children are given ample opportunity to prove their readiness or unreadiness for academic training is a very good one. Such procedure serves as a sifting process providing it does not degenerate into the same old lock-step grading system, and providing the pupils are really made to grow according to their ability and not just allowed to "play" the time away. In a program like this the pupils may be transferred from group to group at any time their development indicates that a change would be beneficial. This procedure allows the child to develop at its own rate and prevents wasteful repetition of skills already mastered. In large schools this primary period may require several teachers working together with different groups. In smaller schools one teacher would have the more difficult task of working with all the groups.
By the end of the two year period, the pupils should be very well grouped as to ability and progress. This procedure segregates the backward without the stigma of failure and without the undesirable attitudes fostered by failure. During this period all necessary mental and physical tests can be given and curable defects remedied. The parents' understanding can be secured and the child's education can be planned intelligently with the elimination of home pressure for impossible achievement. This method of determining the educability of children is not infallible, but it is more scientific and far less disastrous than permitting continuous failure in the first grade. This is no argument for "one hundred per cent promotions" when pupils are given "courtesy cards" to the next grade. Where pupils of ability do not work up to their capacity, they should be made to complete the work of the grade, repeating, if necessary, to accomplish the task. For the mentally retarded there should be no grade demarcation and changes from group to group should carry no sense of failure.

If some such method for locating the mentally handicapped is followed, the next step would be a special class for them. No child should be so placed without first being given a reliable mental test or battery of tests as well as a thorough physical examination. In some cases it is important that the pupil be examined by a psychiatrist. A complete investigation of home conditions should be made
and a sympathetic, forthright explanation should be given to the parents.

These pupils should be promoted to special classes in junior and senior high schools or to a special high school where the work is related to their needs and abilities. For these pupils grade placement should be based on chronological age, social maturity, and physical development since they have little intellectual capacity.

Appraising the progress of these pupils at the end of their high school career might present a problem. However, if the parents clearly understand that the work is by no means regular high school work and that no diploma of graduation can be given the problem will not be too difficult. Some certificate showing time spent in school and work accomplished might be awarded at the close of the high school career.

Some of our Richmond principals approve the segregation of the mentally deficient solely for the good of the other pupils. They do not feel that much can be done for the retarded pupils themselves. They believe it is poor policy to place a number of subnormals with a group of normal and superior pupils for the standard of class work would be lowered thereby. Moreover, not being able to understand or participate in the class work, the dull pupils would likely create disturbances.

Many school people object to the high cost of
maintaining special classes. Yet statistical research tells us that a large number of our young delinquents come from the mentally defective group. The cost to society of juvenile delinquency and crime is far greater than the cost of special schools.

Another difficulty in establishing special schools, which, so far as I can see, might be called insurmountable, is that of the stigma attached to all special classes. That is a matter of public attitude which time and propaganda may change. The only sensible solution is to face the fact that mental handicaps exist and then set about providing for the handicapped a period of practical training which will, whenever possible, enable them to earn a living, to become honest, law-abiding citizens, and to follow the rules of healthy living.

The practice of dismissing from school large numbers of dull pupils who cannot profit from academic study without giving them some vocational training is reprehensible. It turns loose upon society a veritable "school for crime." The schools must meet this challenge and provide an adequate program for the education of the mentally retarded pupils.
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