

Profoundly Mentally Handicapped Young People - Why Educate Them?

Is not care rather than education more appropriate for the needs of children with profound mental handicap? Taking the philosophy of our common shared humanity as the basis for our work, five positive concepts are proposed which offer a rationale in support of education rather than care.

WILFRED K. BRENNAN OBE is the author of many books on Special Education. He was former head of special education in the Inner London Education Authority.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE SCEPTICS

“Look, after a difficult and expensive education these young people are still almost totally dependent on other people - so why bother? Why not just care for them in a civilized and humane manner? Wouldn't that reduce the stress on those who care for them? And don't the mentally handicapped find the learning involved in education stressful? So why subject them to it for gains so small? Look after them, ensure that they are made comfortable and happy at their own level, make life easier for them as well as for those who care for them, and in the process save large amounts of tax-payers' money”.

This is by no means a facetious challenge and should lead us to formulate for ourselves the question: Why do we educate profoundly mentally handicapped children? In attempting to answer the question we may well shape a rational justification for our work.

WHY DO WE EDUCATE THEM?

There is a religious belief (not confined to Christians) that sees in each human person a spark of the Divine Being (God), or at least ascribes to each person a special and unique relationship with that Being. For those who so believe, the relationship

embraces the mentally handicapped and that alone is sufficient to justify all that can be done for them. Christianity also accords a special place to Charity (things done for others out of love) and this gives special meaning to work for the handicapped which can be highly motivating and rewarding for the believer. But for those without such faith the justification for educating the profoundly mentally handicapped must be stated in more exclusively human terms.

The humanist seeks, even in the most profoundly mentally handicapped person, a common, shared humanity which demands for that pathetic, inept, even vicious handicapped person all that the humanist would claim, for self or for the family. Many humanists claim that the handicapped deserve more from us, not because they have greater rights, for these are the same for all humans, but because they have more or greater needs than the rest of us. Surely no higher demand can be made on us as individuals than that we should strive to meet each other's needs and design our institutions and society to serve the same purpose. What is proposed here is the concept of 'Common Shared Humanity' as the basis for our work. Its application to education is seen in five common positive concepts now to be described.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMON POSITIVE HUMANITY

This concept requires that we attribute to others a potential for the very best that we are aware of in ourselves, irrespective of whether or not they communicate it to us or display it in their behaviour. Appearance, physical performance, intelligence or knowledge are not important here - for these things do not define humanity. It is the 'inner life' that is of importance, sensitivity, sympathy, fellowship - love even; that empathy that allows persons to relate to each other. We can never truly know the inner life of another person, for it is displayed only through that person's language or behaviour. It is the language and behaviour that we interpret and that only on the basis of what we know of our own inner life. But where language is inept or non-existent or behaviour immature or inconsistent (as in many of our pupils) how can we know that inner life at all? The more reason, therefore, to attribute to them the potential for the best that we know in ourselves. But the disabilities of the mentally handicapped form a serious blockage which may prevent the attributed potential from emerging in their behaviour. Consequently we must do all we can to bring it to fruition in the life of each pupil. That is the justification for education: it is the task for which education exists.

But our common positive humanity has another important consequence. It is the basis for a deep and lasting respect that we must cherish for the personality, privacy,

feelings and rights of each and every pupil - as we cherish our own. It is this empathy that should sustain our work and make all that we do educative.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMON POSITIVE NEED

It is now acknowledged that the growth and development of an individual is not determined only by the genetic make-up inherited at conception. For optimum development the individual requires sensory and emotional stimulation from the natural and social environments. The richer the environmental stimulation, the nearer the individual may approach the maximum potential of genetic endowment. This remains true however poor the genetic endowment, or however extensive the insult or injury sustained at conception, during gestation or at birth. What each human person needs, therefore, is the richest possible environment in which to develop - naturally, socially, emotionally, aesthetically and intellectually. This is the common positive need.

The more limited the genetic inheritance the more important the environment if limited potential is to be fully realised. From this it follows that for our pupils their environment may be a more important contributor to development than for their normal peers, and this considerably enhances the importance of their education. Is there a better justification for their education?

THE CONCEPT OF A COMMON POSITIVE RESPONSE

It is a feature of human behaviour that we all respond to our environment, sometimes with awareness but at other times with stimulus-response reactions that do not reach the level of consciousness. Indeed, so intimate is the relationship between the individual and the environment that some biologists now think of the individual as continuous *with* the environment. This is what constitutes the common positive response. And our pupils are not fundamentally different. True, they are lacking in awareness of their environment, not because they lack the common response, but because their disabilities restrict their awareness and also the range of their responses. Some of the reasons for their disability appear in the next section; here it is sufficient to note that our task is to enrich their awareness and extend their responses to the environment. How shall we do that?

It is almost impossible to answer the above question without outlining in broad terms what would be appropriate education for our young people. Why? Because education is the most powerful instrument we have for achieving the objectives.

Education that is appropriate and effective will not necessarily result in totally normal responses from our pupils. But it will enable them to share the common response to the furthest extent possible for each of them. This is part of the process of 'normalization' for young people with mental handicaps.

THE CONCEPT OF THE IMPORTANCE OF PERCEPTION

How is the individual in contact with the environment? The answer is through sensory receptors and the central nervous system, a process very simply explained as follows.

Energy from the environment (light, sound, etc.) registers on sensory receptors (eyes, ears, etc.) where nerve impulses are generated and pass along nerve pathways of the peripheral nervous system. Some impulses are 'dropped off' on the way, but others reach the central nervous system (brain) where they register as *percepts* the basis of *perception*. Percepts are sorted and stored in the brain and may be recalled (memory), not as single percepts, for in the brain they have been associated and classified into *concepts*, which in simple terms may be regarded as generalizations or ideas. This is the learning process through which knowledge, understanding, insight and skill are established, and the main features hold good for all humans, including our mentally handicapped pupils.

Through the above process we each acquire an internal mental model of the outside world (the environment) that reflects at any point the totality of our life experience. Furthermore, new, incoming sensory information is interpreted and classified consistent with the existing internal model, which is also the source of outgoing nerve impulses that form the basis of our behaviour. If the internal model is accurate and adequate, then behaviour based upon it will be appropriate and effective where the individual interacts with the environment. But where the model is inaccurate or inadequate behaviour based on it will be inappropriate or ineffective in relation to the environment. In the same way concepts may be immature, fragmented, illogically distorted or notable for their absence. But the internal model is entirely dependent on sensory information reaching the brain as percepts, that is upon perception. What is not perceived cannot be learned, hence the central importance of perception in education.

How does all this affect our mentally handicapped young people? Well, for many reasons that cannot be set out here, the percepts they register are limited, partial or inaccurate with the above adverse effect on internal models. But those inadequate

models are the ones that influence the learning and behaviour of our pupils. That is why they behave in maladaptive or inappropriate ways. So here is the task for education: organise sensory input to shape accurate percepts and concepts and design broad experience to extend and enrich both. To do that the absolute necessity is good, effective teaching.

THE CONCEPT OF COMMON HUMAN MOTIVATION

Consistent with what is written above about need and response, humans are highly motivated to seek a balance in their lives between the need for security and the need to achieve. The two are not separate, for security is the necessary platform from which individuals strive to achieve. But the balance is a delicate thing, a passing equilibrium between two needs in tension. There is no reason to believe that our pupils differ from the rest of us in this essentially human situation. But there is reason to believe that they find the situation confusing, upsetting, frustrating and tension generating to a degree rarely experienced by the rest of us. This is because their internal mental model is out of phase with the reality of their environment. Yet it is within the inadequate model that they seek their equilibrium and the more successful they are the more their divergence from reality is reinforced - perhaps made permanent. So if we are to assist our young people we must help them to improve their perceptions so that internal models approach as near as possible to external reality. In this way they should become more secure, more ready to achieve and better able to handle the tension between these needs.

SO HAVE WE A BASIS FOR OUR WORK?

Well, we have acknowledged the power and appropriateness of religious belief and made some attempt to state a humanist position. We have also examined five concepts that have running through them the idea of the common humanity that we share with our young people and the importance of education if 'normalization' is to become a reality in their lives. Beyond that the answer to the question must remain with the reader.