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THE PROBLEM OF BACKWARDNESS IN PUERTO RICO AND ITS EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

BACKWARDNESS¹ is one of the most important problems confronting our present-day educators; nevertheless, in Puerto Rico, this problem has yet to receive the attention it deserves. For, to this writer's knowledge, no Island wide or local program has been planned to obviate or at least mitigate the condition of backwardness which is found in varying degrees and proportions at all levels of education. This term backwardness is too frequently used by teachers and parents alike, on referring to a child who has not produced the desired academic work, without either the teacher or the parent having a clear idea of the full meaning of the word. This confusion and lack of a precise definition for educational backwardness are not, however, limited to teachers and parents, but, unfortunately, exist even among authorities in education and psychology. Thus, one finds that backwardness is often used synonymously and interchangeably with mental deficiency, mental retardation, and mental subnor-

¹ Throughout this article the term backwardness refers, exclusively, to educational backwardness.

mality. And, the backward child, who in far too many cases is one of average or above average intelligence, is commonly referred to by his teacher as a "niño morón", "imbécil", or even "idiota". Not too infrequently, parents of such children, needlessly suffer the disparagement, anxiety and guilt feelings which regretfully accompany the labelling of deviate children. When such labels have even a tinge of suggesting some mental abnormality these feelings become seriously aggravated and unduly magnified. Also, one finds that in those countries where special facilities are available for exceptional children, the backward 'normal' child is frequently grouped with, and receives the educational methods designed for, mentally subnormal children.

It is indeed true, however, that many children of limited mental capacity are backward, but the pedagogical techniques used with them are not necessarily suitable for normal children who are backward, but in no respect mentally subnormal. The placing together of these two groups will only lead to the denial of proper education techniques for the backward 'normal' child. These are the children who can profit from the time and money invested in special curricula, classes and teaching techniques. A child of limited intelligence may possibly not be backward, providing he is working up to his mental capacity. We shall discuss this point in more detail elsewhere.

Thus, it is obvious that a universally accepted definition of backwardness which embraces a more global concept is needed before educators can design an effective program for ascertaining the incidence and the causes of this condition, in order to determine the optimum pedagogical methods for dealing with it. Such a definition must supplant the popular one, too long held, which defines backwardness as simply the disparity between a child's school attainments and those expected of his grade-peers. Neither should the one which implies that backwardness is synonymous with mental subnormality remain unchallenged.

This latter definition has led to a sincere, but erroneous conviction, held by many teachers, that the backward child is a product exclusive of and peculiar to the public school. Con-

sequently, they find it incredible that backward children may be found in as equal or greater proportion in the best of private schools.

Thus, backwardness in its more precise and inclusive meaning implies a discrepancy between a child's mental capacity,—as this is measured by a reliable and valid verbally-loaded intelligence test—and his academic attainments, as there are compared with those of children of similar mental capacity: it is, therefore, a relation between a child's mental potential and his academic achievement. Obviously this is a wider and more meaningful concept of backwardness, and clearly demonstrates how children of all levels of intelligence can justifiably be classified as backward.

That is, under this broad heading we may, for further clarity, subsume three distinct categories or types of backwardness, i. e.

1) *The technically backward.* This group would include those children of all mental levels—supernormal, normal and sub-normal—whose academic attainments are below their mental capacities, regardless of whether their classroom work is equal or even superior to that of their group-peers. For example, a child aged 10, with an IQ of 120, obtained on a valid verbally-loaded intelligence test, whose class work is essentially that of the average of his group-peers (also ten year olds), could quite possibly be doing work in many areas equal to that done by the 'average' child of twelve. Such a child is technically backward.

2) *The all-round backward,* or those children whose scholastic work is consistently one year or more below that of the 'average' child of the same class, but whose condition of backwardness is obviously due, in the case of children of average or above average intelligence, to factors other than inferior general ability. And, in the case of mentally defective or mentally retarded children, their backwardness may be due to causes over and above their inferior general mental ability. In the former case, for example, a child aged 10, with an IQ of 100, whose scholastic attainments are consistently one or more years

below those of his group-peers (also ten year olds) would then be considered all-round backward. In the latter case, for example, a child aged 10 with an IQ of 80, grouped with 8 year old children of average intelligence, who is consistently one or more years behind the group in his scholastic achievements, is both mentally retarded and all-round backward: if his academic attainments equated his mental capacity, he should not be classified as backward.

And, 3) *The specific backward*, or children whose general school work is at the level of their classmates but who fall behind in one or more academic subjects: e. g. the child who excels in science or math but who, nevertheless, appears hopeless in English or history, etc.

It cannot be over emphasized, however, that before a final diagnosis of backwardness is made, a careful scrutiny of the type of test e. g. verbal, non-verbal, group or individual, the test items passed, etc. is essential. And, that in some isolated cases, due to various factors, i. e. severe emotional disturbances, gross physical handicaps, etc., some children, regardless of the remedial treatment given will not be expected to work consistently up to their mental ages. However, this writer feels that any time a child consistently functions one year or more below the academic level of his mental age peer-group, when this academic achievement has been satisfactorily measured by reliable and valid attainment tests, then this is a symptom which should be immediately investigated and remedied.

Thus, we see that backwardness can be a problem affecting the mentally defective and genius alike. And contrary to most opinions it is usually the child of superior intelligence, not the defective, who is, according to our definition the most seriously affected. For the mental defective who is working up to his full mental capacity, although his attainments are lower than those of his classmates, is not, in our opinion, technically backward. The educational implications here are obvious: the time and energy expended in a futile attempt to bring the defective child up to the academic level of the normal child could be more wisely spent in offering special remedial techniques to the back-

ward child of average or superior intelligence. Until this fact is realized and remedied, a wealth of undeveloped intellectual talent will continue to be unnecessarily wasted in our classrooms.

The problem of backwardness in our schools extends beyond that of definition of terms, but rather indicates a pressing need for a re-examination of our present day philosophy of education as regards school organization and curriculum. It also shows the long felt need for island-wide norms for each subject at each grade-level, and for reliable mental tests, both intelligence and achievement, in order to ascertain the mental potential of our school children. All these factors must be considered before planning a program designed to obviate or mitigate the condition of backwardness in our school system.