

SECTION 6.—STUDY OF FEEBLE-MINDED AND DELINQUENT CHILDREN.

Methods employed in other Countries.

In many parts of America and in some European countries the problem of the mentally backward and feeble-minded child receives close attention. The juvenile delinquent is also carefully studied. For children who fail to make good in school, or who are guilty of frequent misdemeanours, a system of intelligence testing and psychological analysis is carried out. A study is also made of family history and environmental influences. Children who are "maladjusted to their environment" are kept under survey with a view to finding what is the difficulty and how it can be overcome. To quote from the "Mental Hygiene Bulletin," published by the National Committee for Mental Hygiene for the United States of America: "Children showing definite problems are selected for more intensive study and treatment. The grossly mentally handicapped child, who is likely to become a social problem if not properly dealt with in childhood; the psychopathic and mentally maladjusted child, who later in life may develop mental disease; the child manifesting conduct disorders which may be the beginning of a delinquent or criminal career; the retarded child; the epileptic; the child with speech-defect or with some physical disability; the child with gross personality difficulties; the exceptionally brilliant child—all present problems that demand attention during the child's school life. Such children are given a thorough physical examination, a careful psychiatric study, and an individual psychological examination, including a variety of psychological tests, not only to determine the child's intelligence rating, but, in so far as possible, his special abilities and disabilities. A social study is made of the child's home, school, and other environments to determine what factors may have unfavourably influenced the development of the child, and what forces may be utilized in securing the child's adjustments. The results of all these studies are given to the school authorities with recommendations relative to the needed adjustments."

In New Zealand there is need of increased facilities for the study of the individual child, and the services of psychological experts should be available in order to group children according to their mental equipment and special requirements. Only those fully qualified to estimate accurately all the evidence available are fitted to decide the destiny of children.

Herein lies the danger of relying exclusively upon the use of mental tests.

Mental tests are of definite value in enabling the observer to arrive at a conclusion regarding the general mental development of the subject, or to investigate some particular psychological function. A too exclusive dependence upon the result of the application of these tests, especially by a layman, would invariably lead to error. A comprehensive survey is necessary, taking into consideration such factors as family history, environment, physical condition, behaviour, temperament, &c. The observation, possibly for a considerable period of time, of an expert psychiatrist or psychologist may be necessary in order to arrive at an accurate estimate of the mental ability of the subject.

In this regard we quote from Tredgold, "Mental Deficiency": "There are, however, very many exceptions, particularly when we are dealing with the milder grades of deficiency, so that if serial tests are depended upon for the diagnosis of these cases they may be, and often are, very fallacious. I may say here that although it would, of course, be extremely valuable if we could devise tests which would accurately measure mental capacity, particularly that capacity and those qualities which are needed for social adaptation and maintenance, we have not yet succeeded in doing so. The mental factors which may be involved in this capacity for social adaptation, and which render the individual in need of care, supervision, or control, are many and varied, and there is even some danger that too much reliance upon serial tests may distract from the adequate investigation of these qualities and defects and lead to totally erroneous conclusions."

There is no doubt, however, that in the hands of competent observers properly applied tests afford information of great value in assessing mental and moral capacity, but the observer must be competent.

SECTION 7.—METHOD OF DEALING WITH MENTAL DEFECTIVES IN NEW ZEALAND.

Present Legal Provision for Notification and Education of Feeble-minded Children, and for Care of Custodial Feeble-minded Adults and Children.

The Education Act, 1914, contains provision (see section 127) for the establishment of special schools for the education and training of afflicted children (deaf, blind, feeble-minded, and epileptic) between the ages of six and twenty-one years, with provision in the case of inmates of special schools for extension of the period of detention where it is considered necessary in the public interest. For the purposes of this Act,—

"'Feeble-minded child' means a child who, not being an idiot or imbecile or otherwise a proper person to be sent to an institution under the control of the Mental Hospitals Department, and not being merely backward, is by reason of mental or physical defect incapable of receiving proper benefit from instruction in an ordinary school, but is not incapable by reason of such defect of receiving benefit from instruction in a special school."

"'Epileptic child' means an epileptic child who is unfit by reason of severe or frequent epilepsy to attend an ordinary school, but is not idiot or imbecile or otherwise a proper person to be sent to an institution under the control of the Mental Hospitals Department."

Section 127: "(2.) It shall be the duty of the parent of any . . . feeble-minded or epileptic child to provide efficient and suitable education for such child."

"(3.) If the parent of such child fails to provide such education for such child, or is deemed by the Minister to be unable to provide such education, the Minister may direct that such child be sent to such special school or other institution for the education of feeble-minded or epileptic children as he thinks fit."