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EDITORIAL

Visiting institutions, training centres, hostels, group-homes etc. in Great Britain and Europe leads to the depressing impression that — compared with the situation some 20-25 years ago — there has indeed been progress everywhere (despite some archaic concepts and dogmatic personalities dominating local scenes) but consolidation phases are taking place prematurely and little further advance can be seen. This may seem too bleak a view and will hotly be disputed by many who operationally and financially contribute substantially to the improvements observed everywhere. Indeed this could be considered an extremely unfair blow under the belt by all those who attempt to overcome gradually the barriers set by prejudice and disinterest, by financial and legislative restrictions, by the absence of trained new assistants and the presence of untrained old assistants, etc. The battles which are fought on all these fronts are mostly successful and result in more and better living accommodation, in better support of the parents, in providing some sort of placement for a greater number of m.h. people, in obtaining increased financial rewards and wages, in arranging participation in local community activities, in enrolling m.h. people in evening institutes, in recruiting voluntary workers, in obtaining assistance from industry, in promoting regular holidays — often abroad, and many, many more activities which had not even been thought of not all that many years ago. Indeed looking through the various journals published by organisations working on behalf of the mentally handicapped, one cannot help being a little overwhelmed by the unanimity of reports on successes and breakthroughs which testify to much busyness in what used to be a vast sea of stagnant placidity.

This is progress indeed and having holidays for more, better finances for more, comfortable lodgings for more, work opportunities for more where there were none before, is success which must not be belittled and which takes up — one knows this only too well — an inordinate amount of energy and devotion. All this is needed and much more in addition, but, all the same, it represents a consolidation of success where the impact derives from multiplying the existing good achievements rather than advancing into more challenging areas, e.g. personality development.

One can, of course, argue that all these new factors in the life of the M.H. will create new conditions for him to develop a higher level of competence, but there is little or no evidence that those conditions, *by themselves*, will contribute substantially to his advance. The depressing impression remains, that all these material improvements are not accompanied by a general improvement in treatment, training and education. These should be equally proudly reported in those periodicals as are outings, visits by celebrities, fund-gathering successes, openings of homes, etc. Indeed the absence of reports on the progress of m.h. people themselves is very conspicuous and no one can make out whether Mary or John have benefitted significantly by having had all those extras added to their lives. Glossy and well taken pictures of how they work, play, enjoy themselves cannot provide evidence that we do now more, under better conditions, than what well-meaning and well-disposed

people were able to do in the past under far less favourable circumstances. There is, as has been said before in this place¹⁾ much evidence that we, as a community, are succeeding in satisfying our desire to do more for the M.H. than past generations did, yet there is no satisfactory confirmation that thereby we have helped him to do more for himself.

This is, after all, the real criterion of adequate assistance whether applied to populations of the third world or to the population of mentally handicapped people — not only to give charity resulting in better living conditions now, but to give the means for developing their own resources more adequately for tomorrow. Applying this principle as a yardstick for measuring the, if you like, self-realization of the mentally handicapped we found, on our wanderings through the various adult 'developmental centers', no evidence of a thought out, consistent and effective approach which reflected a developmental philosophy. True enough, every management stressed the time and resources set aside for Further Education and Training, which were inevitably taken up with recreational activities, such as swimming, playing football or visits to museums, or academic classes, which were mostly copying school activities boringly. No doubt, the opportunities of experiencing other situations than the daily work routine, represent valuable influences in the development of the mentally handicapped but unless more constructive use is made of these occurrences — which are well liked by staff and trainees, being pleasant interruptions of monotonous work routines — one must seriously question their impact. Staff show ingenuity and thoughtfulness when dealing with the concrete problems of helping mentally handicapped people to tackle awkward work demands, but this type of step-by-step assistance is entirely missing when difficulties of daily living are to be overcome by adequate preparation. Competence in swimming, football, visiting parks and museums will be of little use in basic life situations.

This neglect of a vital aspect which furthers the m.h. person's competence outside the work situation has its roots in a deep-seated pessimism regarding the m.h.'s capacity to grow with the demands made on him. The untrained, but 'experienced' established old staff are usually quite outspoken in their opinions — 'they can't learn this' — and many of the trained, but less experienced staff are inclined to believe the same, even though they know that this must not be said publicly. They, therefore, channel their enthusiasm thankfully in 'further education' recreational activities which present them with results of some kind in an appreciably short time.

The leading article in this issue discusses the achievements of teachers with different attitudes to their pupils. One group of teachers aims at helping the MH by protecting him from a too demanding environment with which he cannot cope, as they assume. The other group of teachers demands more because they believe that much more can be achieved. The pupils' achievements reflect these expectations. This intriguing working hypothesis suggests that educators of children and adults must be convinced that their pupils have abilities which can be developed and that set objectives can be attained. This conviction must be an indispensable ingredient of their educational work. Only this will provide that extra drive which overcomes the traditionalists' pessimism and scepticism and the pupils' lukewarm responsiveness.

The depressing impression one gains, however, everywhere is that the levels of expectation are far too low, that, if goals are set at all, they are pursued unimaginatively, that many of the activities are irrelevant though often eye-catching, and that precious time is frittered away by the absence of a guiding philosophy of development. Only when senior *and* junior staff realize that success does not entirely depend on their pupils' abilities, nor on the construction of programmes or on facilities available, but, to a great extent, on their own *directed* enthusiasm will there be the necessary impetus for expanding the m.h. person's abilities further.

1) Editorial, June 1984