

DEVELOPING READINESS IN THE MENTALLY RETARDED FOR A LIFE OF QUALITY THROUGH GROUP RELATIONS — THE EXAMPLE OF "EVEN HEN", ISRAEL

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INTRODUCTION

This study was carried out in a residential school for children and young adults with moderate mental retardation — "Even Hen". The aim of the study was to conduct a longitudinal followup of the development of residents in academic and social skills.

"Even Hen" was chosen for its special philosophical orientation which emphasizes the development of readiness for a life of quality for its pupils. This is based on several principles: 1) a developmental orientation towards children with mental retardation; 2) respect for each child irrespective of level of disability; 3) a belief in the educative role of the group as a vehicle for the internalization of values.

The developmental orientation towards the mentally retarded is still a controversial issue. It is argued, by some experts (Zigler et al, 1984), that there are two distinct categories among the mentally retarded: the larger group whose etiology is unknown are the "Familial" mentally retarded, while the smaller group of persons who have a definite neurological disability, are the "Organic" mentally retarded. They tend to show an intelligence quotient of less than 50 points.

The "Familial" group exhibits a slower, but normal development; the "Organic" group does not show such a trend. Though the "Difference" theory has a scientific rationale (Zigler and Balla, 1982), there are several drawbacks when we try to apply it in practice. We lack assessment instruments that will enable us without any doubt to categorize children with mental retardation into the two sub-groups. Furthermore, the above classification has direct implications to two different practices: training versus education.

Since the "Organic" group is different and shows deeper levels of disability, they are regarded as trainable only, while the "Familial" group is also considered educable. Thus the "Organic" group will be provided with a lot of mechanical teaching based on many repetitions of overly simple tasks, rote memory and learning by imitation.

The second group is educated by methods based on discovery, the teaching of more complex tasks, an emphasis on generalizations and concepts, and the development of creativity and imagination (Iano, 1971).

It is argued that we should adopt a developmental approach to all children with mental retardation, at least until the time we have more scientifically based assessment instruments.

The contribution of a developmental orientation towards the education of the mentally retarded is diverse. The model is based on the principle that growth is the outcome of both maturation and environmental forces. This can explain the large individual differences between children with mental retardation, even between children who show similar intelligence quotients. For educational purposes children should be grouped according to "developmental age" rather than their IQ or their chronological ages.

In order to find out the developmental age of each child, use can be made of the variety of assessment instruments derived from developmental psychology. For example, clinical tests of personality and self concept (Rosen and Weisz, 1983), mental functioning scales derived from Piaget (Wachs, 1973; Affleck, 1977; Hayes and Hayes, 1987), social competency scales and tests of adaptive behaviour (Spreat et al, 1983).

A developmental orientation emphasizes processes as being no less important than achievements. Developmental tasks can then become important guidelines for the educator (Maier, 1987). The child is the centre of the curriculum, not as an object to be taught certain overt behaviours, but as a subject that can and should express his/her wishes, inclinations, needs (Morse, 1979). The developmental model is based on respect for each child as a developing person.

"EVEN HEN"

In "Even Hen" all children are regarded as educable, and the aim of education is the development of readiness for a life of quality. This is based on the educational philosophy and the corollary practices of Janusz Korszalk (1878 – 1943). In operational terms this means the development of personal initiative, the ability to choose between alternatives and independence based on interpersonal meaningful relationships (Reiter et al, in press).

"Even Hen" was opened in 1973 as a residential special school for children with moderate mental retardation. Nowadays there are 55 pupils who attend the school and 18 graduates who live in three apartments in the city of Netanya. In 1986, a group of 50 children with severe and profound mental retardation was added from an institution that had to be closed down. They are undergoing at present a special programme with the aim of preparing them to join the main school.

The aim of "Even Hen" is to prepare its pupils to live in the community. This is done by educating them in social norms and social mores. The assumption is that the residential school can provide a unique and unified environment for children with mental retardation.

At home, they are required to respond differently to three social milieus: the home, the school and the neighbourhood. This task is sometimes too complicated for the young child with mental retardation. The result can be a feeling of helplessness, of failure and frustration, and above all a sense of lack of control over life events and consequently over dependency and passivity.

In the residential school, the home, the school and the neighbourhood, all three represent similar demands for proper behaviour and similar criteria for rewards. This makes it easier for the child with mental retardation to progress through developmental tasks and make use of individual potentials for growth and learning.

In the day school all children are grouped into home-classes of 8 – 12 pupils. There are currently 9 morning classes and 7 afternoon classes. Teaching is based

on a central subject around which academic and daily living skills are taught. For example, one such subject is "our neighbourhood". In addition, there are 17 centres for maths, reading, speech therapy, occupational therapy, handicraft, music, physiotherapy, sport, and psychological counselling. In the centres, the emphasis is on individual instruction. Every morning the children in the home-classes are divided into two groups of approximately 5 pupils each. One group remains in the classroom, the remaining pupils attend different centres according to individual program plans. This procedure is repeated the next day with the first group joining different centres and the other remaining with their teacher in the classroom. On Fridays, the whole class meets for a joint activity.

The long term goals of the education in "Even Hen" are to enhance self respect and respect of others in the pupils and develop their personal autonomy. There is a strong emphasis on developing in children a clear value system based on co-operation with others, assisting others and at the same time being content with oneself, being happy and optimistic.

The curriculum is based on teaching "normal" and independent behaviour: appropriate and respectable personal appearance, adequate verbal interpersonal communication and socially acceptable behaviour towards peers, teachers, strangers. This is achieved by teaching habits for: precision in keeping time, in output and in records; clarity of thinking and talking; polite behaviour. The outside reality of life in the community is the source for the teaching syllabus.

In the school's courtyard a special area has been allocated as the "children's street". This is the area of the children's "apartments". In a row of sectioned-off stalls, individual children, or two friends, create their own little homes. The "apartments" are furnished with odds and ends like a used mattress, an old washing machine, plants, brooms and other bric-a-brac picked up by the children from a storeroom of discarded furnishings. They each differ from each other, reflecting the personalities of their tenants'. Names of 'tenants' are written on signs hanging on a tree branch or on the frames which separate the cubicles. The "children's street" offers pupils the chance to have a private place of their own. It enhances self expression and creativity without outside control or criteria of 'right or wrong'.

The major instrument of change is group cohesion and group dynamics. Once a week all the children are assembled for a special social exercise called "The House of the Good Children". During these sessions children are encouraged to describe good things they did, mainly how they helped others. They also tell of moments of weakness in which "the bad angel" made them do "sad" things. It is emphasized that everyone is basically "good" and wants to do good deeds and help others. There are no bad deeds, but rather sad behaviours.

The message to the children is that since each is respected as basically "good", every child is responsible for his/her behaviour. All the children's names are written on a board representing a house which has a ladder painted on it from the ground to the roof. An especially good child "climbs" up the ladder. For sad deeds one remains in the same place, or even goes down a step. It is the children, with adult guidance, that decide together with the child in question whether he/she will "go up" the ladder, remain in place or "go down".

The ultimate reward for going up the ladder is the "right to work", or the right to be given a responsibility in "Even Hen". In this way work becomes a special value and it is associated with social acceptance and with respect.

ASSESSMENTS

In order to monitor children's progress, all pupils are assessed on the "Even Hen" scales. The objectives of the assessments are: to find out baseline competencies and knowledge; to assist in setting educational goals for individual children and groups; to pinpoint deficiencies and barriers; to serve as an accountability measure for use by teachers and administration; and to provide longitudinal data on the development of children with mental retardation.

The "Even Hen" scales were constructed on the basis of three sources: the Progress Assessment Charts of social development (Gunzburg, 1968, 1974); suggestions made by the staff and suggestions made by expert professionals. Several validity measures were considered. Following an initial assessment of all children, on a long list of items ($N = 150$) statistical analyses were done (factor analysis) to reduce the number of items into several distinct categories.

The current scales include: **Self Help Skills** (table manners, personal hygiene, health and safety, care of clothes); **Social Knowledge** (domestic skills, adjustment to the community, use of telephone); **Academic Achievements** (reading, writing, mathematics, verbal communication, time concepts and money); **Work and Social Behaviour** (vocational skills, social behaviour, leisure time).

Reliability analyses (The Cronbach Reliability Coefficient and Test-Retest Pearson Correlation Analysis) proved the scales to be highly reliable, as follows: **Self Help** - Alpha = .91, $R = .94$; **Social Knowledge** - Alpha = .88, $R = .94$; **Academic** - Alpha = .96, $R = .99$; **Work** - Alpha = .91, $R = .90$.

The aims of the present investigation were to find out patterns of development and study the extent to which the school's emphasis on enhancing readiness for a life of quality is expressed in the pupils' achievements.

METHOD

All the pupils were assessed three times on the "Even Hen" scales: at the end of 1986, beginning and end of 1987. Table I presents background details of the school's population according to age, sex, and level of functioning, for the general population and divided into three grade levels - high, middle and low.

From Table I we see that most pupils are moderately mentally retarded with a few severely retarded and about one fourth - mildly retarded. Only one third ($N = 21$) of the pupils had IQ points in their files. However, the school psychologist interviews every newcomer and gives an evaluation of his/her level of mental functioning. Correlation (Pearson) coefficients between pupils' IQ and the school psychologist's assessments were very high ($R = .621$, $P < .001$). We therefore used his evaluations in the present study.

As can be seen from Table I, the pupils are divided into grades according to two criteria: level of functioning and age. Indeed, the grouping of pupils into grade levels is demonstrated in terms of developmental age as expressed by the scores obtained by them on the "Even Hen" scales. Pupils' scores (means and standard deviations) obtained in the third period of assessment (end of 1987) for each grade are presented in Table II, and significant differences in performance (MANOVA) are indicated.

From Table II we see that there are consistent differences in the performance of the three levels with the higher grade showing higher marks on all items, the middle grade, medium scores, and the lower grade shows the least achievements. The most significant differences between grades were exhibited in the areas of

reading, writing and maths. These are positively related to mental functioning level. Other significant differences were found in the areas of domestic skills and leisure time activities which are related to age differences. Thus, developmental age seems to include the two variables of mental functioning and age.

TABLE I
Background Data: Distribution of "Even Hen" Pupils on Sex, Age and Mental Functioning (means, standard deviations and percentages) for All and According to Grade Level

No. of pupils	Sex		Age				Level of Mental Functioning						
	M		F		\bar{x} (S.D.)	range	Mild		Moderate		Severe		
	N	%	N	%			N	%	N	%	N	%	
Total N = 55	29	52.7	26	47.3	17	3.5	11-26	21	38.2	31	56.4	3	5.4
High Grade N = 21	10	47.6	11	52.4	19	2.5	15-25	16	76.2	4	19.0	1	4.8
Middle Grade N = 16	10	62.5	6	37.5	17	3.3	12-22	3	18.8	13	81.2	—	—
Lower Grade N = 18	9	50	9	50	15	3.8	11-26	2	11.1	14	77.8	2	11.1

The area in which the lower group achieved the highest scores was "Behaviour". This category includes items such as: co-operation with peers and adults, responsibility for own and public property, adequate expression of emotions, and proper behaviour with visitors and strangers. It should be noted also that the high and middle groups obtained high scores in this area, also. Since this category, more than others, expresses the school's emphasis on interpersonal relationships, sensitivity to others, self expression and self respect, we were interested in finding out pupils' specific achievements.

We therefore compared the mean scores obtained by each group during the three assessment periods. Test of significance (MANOVA) was also done on the scores obtained by the three grades in the last assessment. Table III represents pupils' scores on "Behaviour" according to grade level during the three assessment periods.

From Table III it appears that all three grades showed significant improvements in this area. Furthermore, the lower grade achieved, in the third assessment, as high scores as the middle grade in the second assessment. Thus, in spite of differences in mental functioning and in age, we find that following an intensive programme, even the lower functioning pupils can become competent in the skills and competencies taught.

We continued to check pupils' advancements during the three assessment periods. First we compared (t-tests) all the pupils' scores during one school year

(end of 1986, beginning of 1987). Significant gains in scores were found in the areas of: social knowledge ($p < .02$), academic studies ($p < .0001$) and work ($p < .02$). No significant differences were found in the area of self help.

TABLE II
Scores* Obtained on the "Even Hen" Scales in the Third Assessment Period (1987)
According to Grades; Means, Standard Deviations and
Significance Levels (MANOVA)

"Even Hen" Scale Areas	High Grade N = 2		Middle Grade N = 16		Lower Grade N = 18		F	p**
	\bar{x}	S.D.	\bar{x}	S.D.	\bar{x}	S.D.		
Self Help								
Table Manners	2.5	(.6)	2.0	(.4)	1.7	(.6)	9.9	xxx
Hygiene	3.3	(.7)	2.5	(.5)	2.1	(.8)	10.8	xxx
Health	1.7	(.4)	1.5	(.3)	1.2	(.1)	12.3	xxx
Clothes/Dressing	2.9	(.5)	2.4	(.4)	1.8	(.7)	14.4	xxxx
Social Knowledge								
Domestic Skills	1.4	(.4)	1.0	(.1)	1.0	(.2)	6.6	xx
Food Preparation	1.8	(.7)	1.3	(.4)	1.3	(.6)	3.1	x
Orientation in the neighbourhood	2.7	(.8)	2.2	(.7)	1.8	(.5)	7.7	xx
Use of the Telephone	3.5	(.8)	2.5	(.5)	2.0	(.4)	27.3	xxxx
Academic Studies								
Reading and Writing	3.6	(.9)	2.1	(.5)	1.1	(.1)	62.7	xxxx
Mathematics	3.5	(1.1)	2.2	(.6)	1.1	(.2)	44.2	xxxx
Words and Concepts	4.3	(.5)	3.6	(.7)	2.3	(.6)	58.4	xxxx
Time Concepts	3.6	(.7)	3.6	(.8)	1.7	(.6)	82.0	xxxx
Money	2.3	(.9)	1.1	(1.1)	1.0	(-)	31.9	xxxx
Work and Leisure								
Vocational Skills	2.3	(.7)	1.5	(.5)	1.2	(.3)	19.9	xxxx
Behaviour	4.2	(.4)	3.6	(.5)	3.2	(.7)	14.5	xxxx
Leisure activities	2.0	(.3)	1.6	(.3)	1.3	(.4)	14.9	xxxx
Hobbies	2.0	(.4)	1.7	(.2)	1.3	(.2)	24.8	xxxx

* Scores were given on a 5-point range from: "completely competent", a score of 5, to "does not know at all", a score of 1.

** xxxx p \leq .00001
xxx p \leq .0001/2/3
xx p \leq .001/2/3
x p \leq .05

Looking at each grade separately, it becomes apparent that most of the advancements were due to the scores achieved by the high grade which showed significant gains in social knowledge ($p < .03$), academic studies ($p < .001$) and work ($p < .04$). The middle grade showed advances in work only ($p < .009$) and the lower grade did not show any significant advances.

We can summarize the above findings as indicating that during one school year, one third of the pupils, mainly from the high grade, and some from the middle grade, improve significantly in their skills and competences as measured on the Even Hen scales.

TABLE III
Mean Scores Obtained by Grade Levels on "Behaviour" in the
Three Assessments and Significance Levels (MANOVA)

Grade Level	Assessment Period						F	p*
	First		Second		Third			
	\bar{x}	S.D.	\bar{x}	S.D.	\bar{x}	S.D.		
High Grade N = 21	3.8	(.4)	3.9	(.4)	4.2	(.3)	15.6	xxxx
Middle Grade N = 16	2.9	(.7)	3.1	(.7)	3.6	(.5)	14.6	xxx
Lower Grade N = 18	2.9	(1.1)	2.8	(1.0)	3.2	(.7)	5.3	x
F	5.9		7.8		14.5			
P	xx		xx		xxxx			

* xxxx p \geq .00001
xxx p \geq .0001
xx p \geq .001
x p \geq .01

Next we checked for differences between two school years. Comparing pupils' scores over a twelve month period between the beginning of 1986 and the beginning of 1987, it was found that the high grade improved significantly in social knowledge ($p < .02$), academic studies ($p < .001$) and work ($p < .02$). The middle grade improved significantly in social knowledge ($p < .0001$), academic studies ($p < .03$) and work ($p < .02$). The lower grade improved in social knowledge ($p < .03$).

In the light of these findings, we were interested to find out to what extent other variables like sex, age and level of mental functioning, could account for the changes we found in pupils' scores during one school year and from one year to the other. Comparisons (t-tests) between male and female pupils on the scores they obtained on the "Even Hen" scales, yielded no significant differences between them.

The next variable we checked was "Age". Significant correlations (Pearson) were found between "Age" and scores obtained by the pupils on all areas of the "Even Hen" scales as follows: Self Help ($R = .592$, $p < .0001$), Social Knowledge ($R = .413$, $p < .001$), Academic Studies ($R = .431$, $p < .001$) and Work ($R = .449$, $p < .0001$). Thus, the older the child gets, the more competent and more knowledgeable he becomes. It is interesting to note, that in the one area where no significant advancements were demonstrated in any of the grades, not even the higher one, the area of self help, age does seem to correlate with change. It seems that age and maturation are significant intervening variables in the development of children and young adults with mild, moderate and severe mental retardation.

We continued to check for possible correlations between achievements and the variable of level of mental functioning. Significant correlations were found between the latter and Social Knowledge ($R = .298, p < .02$), and Academic Studies ($R = .423, p < .002$). It could be argued here that these two areas are closely related to intelligence (Spreat et al, 1983).

We were interested in finding out to what extent a uniformity could be found in the scores obtained by children in the different areas assessed. Correlation analysis (Pearson) of scores obtained in the last assessment, revealed that indeed, positive and significant correlations exist between all areas of the "Even Hen" scales as demonstrated in Table IV.

TABLE IV
Correlation Coefficients (Pearson) on Scores Obtained on the Third Assessment on the "Even Hen" Scales: Self Help, Social Knowledge, Academic Studies and Work

	Self Help	Social Knowledge	Academic Studies
Social Knowledge	$r = .789$ $p \leq .0001$		
Academic Studies	$r = .551$ $p \leq .0001$	$r = .732$ $p \leq .0001$	
Work	$r = .727$ $p \leq .0001$	$r = .710$ $p \leq .0001$	$r = .699$ $p \leq .0001$

Several conclusions can be drawn from the above highly significant correlations between achievements on the different areas of "Even Hen" scales. It could be argued that a "Hello" effect affects teachers' assessments of the children in different areas. Thus teachers tend to evaluate the "good" pupil as being very good in all areas and the less successful one as not being very good in all scale areas. However, it should be noted that the "Even Hen" scales were filled up not only by the teachers but also by their residential home supervisors. Thus, we can cautiously conclude that like non-handicapped children, pupils in "Even Hen" show quite a unitary level of development in the different areas: social, academic, personal independence and work.

We can summarise our findings at "Even Hen" as follows:

- Rate of development seems to be faster the higher the level of functioning.
- Significant gains in social and academic achievements are more apparent over a whole calendar year than during one school year for the lower grades.
- At all levels of functioning there is some advancement in knowledge and competencies.
- "Age" is a highly significant variable in the development of children with severe, moderate and mild mental retardation.
- No differences were found between sexes in rates of development and levels of competencies.

- There is a high degree of uniformity in individual achievements in the different areas: social, academic, self help, work.
- Education at "Even Hen" is based on group cohesion and individual enrichment – this approach seems to enhance development with the moderately and mildly mentally retarded as well as with the severely mentally retarded.
- Education based on consistent demands and systematic teachings contributes to the development of children at all levels of mental retardation.

CONCLUSIONS

In the present study we conducted a systematic follow up of the entire population (N = 55) of a special residential school for children with mild, moderate and severe mental retardation. The purpose of the study was to find out patterns of development and the effectiveness of an educational approach which emphasizes mutual and meaningful interrelationships between the individual and his group.

A specially designed social and academic scale – the "Even Hen" scales, was constructed to serve as the assessment instrument. The "Even Hen" scales were found to be valid and reliable instruments for assessing social and academic competencies of "Even Hen" pupils.

Several conclusions can be drawn regarding children's patterns of development based on the analysis of the data gathered during the three assessment periods. From comparisons made between three levels of functioning: high, moderate and low, over time, it appears that the lower the level, the slower is the rate of development. Thus, while all children, those with mild, moderate and severe mental retardation learn and advance and develop, the higher functioning individuals will learn faster.

Level of mental functioning was found to be related mostly with social academic studies and much less with interpersonal behaviour. On the other hand, age was found to be an important intervening variable affecting development in social and interpersonal behaviour. It is our contention that not enough attention is being paid to this important aspect affecting the ultimate achievements of persons with mental retardation. One often hears even from professionals rather pessimistic and negative diagnosis regarding future functioning of individuals with mental retardation. From the highly significant correlations between achievements and "Age", one should adopt a positive rather than negative outlook towards the final functioning of individuals with mental retardation.

The most important contribution though, of the present study is the demonstration of the effectiveness of an educational programme based on the group as the basic vehicle for change. Through group life and an emphasis on the belonging of the individual to the group and his/her responsibility for the group, the individual child internalizes a set of values. This includes: respect for others, co-operation with others, consideration for others. At the same time staff fosters in each child a sense of self worth and self respect, autonomy, initiative and the ability to choose between alternatives. Finally and on the basis of that, "Work" is presented as the outmost reward for "Good" behaviour. In work one helps others, one contributes to the group. In this way work becomes important for the individual. It has both a personal value as a reward and as a symbol of achievement of good behaviour and a social value in terms of social recognition and respect.

The model which can describe best the processes that take place at "Even Hen" is the "Values Clarification" Theory (Simon et al, 1979). The model is based on

the theories of John Dewey and Carl Rogers. Translating the theory of values clarification into a practical model, Schur and Milasincic (1978) suggest the following basic components of the process: Feeling – being aware of a feeling about something, telling another; Choosing – from alternatives, freely, after consideration of the consequences; Acting – doing something about it, acting with repetition. The "Values Clarification" Theory emphasizes the importance of the group and interpersonal relationships among group members. It also provides guidelines for creating the proper environment for the process to take place (Glashagel et al, 1978). The whole environment should be geared towards values education by providing an exciting and supportive atmosphere. Certain "House Rules" should be shared by staff and children. Rules suggested by the authors (ibid.) seem to describe well those adhered to at "Even Hen". For example, "Speak for yourself . . . not for anybody else!" Each person has the right to say what they feel and think, and to do it for themselves (p. 153); or, another "house rule" suggested: "Show respect . . . every person is important" (p. 154).

The orientation towards the group and the emphasis on enhancing readiness for leading a life of quality, defined in terms of individuals' group and community belonging, gets special attention nowadays regarding the education of children with mental retardation. It has become an important issue to be considered along with discussions concerning "Normalization", "Mainstreaming" and "Integration" (Schalock and Lilley, 1986). For this reason it seems to us that the example of a successful programme based on enhancing not only competencies in children with mental retardation but rather the internalization of a set of values is of paramount importance.

In the present study it was shown that when an experiential education (Morse, 1979) is applied in a consistent manner and systematically with children and young adults with mental retardation the outcomes are positive. All participants learn and develop irrespective of level of retardation.

The importance of systematic education was shown in the low achievements gained by pupils in the area of self help. This area of functioning is mainly the responsibility of the direct care staff in the dormitories. Direct care staff are under conflicting demands: they have to get the children ready for school at a certain time and teaching a child to dress, eat and wash takes time which they do not always have.

To summarize our major findings: the longitudinal data gathered in this study lends support to a developmental approach to children and young adults with mental retardation. The study also demonstrates the effectiveness of an experiential group approach to the education of children and young adults with mental retardation. The programme is based on the philosophy that education should aim at the internalization of values and the development of readiness for leading a "life of quality".

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