

The Case Against Special Schooling

(Excerpt from chapter 'The process of Reconstruction.' (Gerv Leyden)
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'The line between educational failure and social or cultural factors had been well established as far back as Gordon's studies of can boat children in the 1920's and had been freshly emphasised by the Newsom and Plowden reports and by research studies into the effectiveness of compensatory programmes. Evaluation studies of special schools proved disturbing. Williams and Gruber (1967) classified the environmental handicaps suffered by children in ESN schools and found reduced infant schooling (as with summer born children) to be an important school variable associated with educational failure. Certainly no evidence emerged that the children attending ESN school were a homogenous group, but in fact encompassed a broad range of social handicap and learning difficulties. The grouping was primarily administrative and gave no indication of need nor did it prescribe programmes or methods of teaching.

In view of the diversity of 'diagnosis' it is not surprising to find that research evidence of the value of special schools is, at best, inconclusive. Tizard (1966), while acknowledging the limitations of most of the evaluation studies, was only able to identify one such investigation which indicated clear cut gains by children receiving special schooling - and this was in a special class. Numerous other studies found no actual gains, and evidence that some children did less well. More recent reviews of evaluation research on special schooling (Presland, 1979; Mosely, 1975; Morgan, 1977; Ghodsian and Calman, 1977) have not been able to present conclusive evidence of its effectiveness on the criteria studied, although it is possible there may be improved personal and social adjustment within the school in some cases. However, there is a strong risk that the children may have a difficulty in integrating within the community and in adjusting to an adult role and job. Many of the studies can be criticised precisely on the ground that these sort of difficulties led to the original placement in a special school, but this does answer the criticism that there seems to be little positive evidence that schools have been successful in helping children to overcome their difficulties.

That so little evidence exists, and so much of it inconclusive ... is a further sad demonstration that as educational psychologists we have tended to accept assumptions without testing them, and have not rigorously scrutinised our own work. The hours spent in 'routine ascertainment' were in inverse proportion to the fleeting evaluation of the merit of what was being done.'