

THE RECENT MENTAL RETARDATION SITUATION IN SINGAPORE

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Brief History

Prior to the formation of the Singapore Association for Retarded Children in 1962, mentally retarded children were cared for by the doctors of the Paediatric Unit and the Medical Social Workers of the General Hospital. The Social Welfare Department provided them with institutional care. However, the emphasis began to change from custodial care in hospitals and welfare homes to more supportive help for parents through the provision of financial, emotional and social relief. There was still, however, a large group of retarded children who did not need institutional care but needed some form of day care and training. At this stage, the Singapore Children's Society, which was formed in 1952, set up a sub-committee to consider the feasibility of extending its services to the mentally retarded. After due consideration, a day training centre was started as a pilot project. This eventually led to the formation of the Singapore Association for Retarded Children in 1962 to provide retarded children with the benefits of care and training appropriate to their ability.

Training Centres

From a modest beginning at its Towner Road centre in 1962, the Association now runs 5 training-cum-care centres which are strategically situated in residential and industrial areas. A Residential Home was established at Tampines to provide for a special group of children and a few adults who need medical and nursing care. Retarded children are registered with the Association throughout the year. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to cater for all of them because of the lack of finances and limited building space. The number of cases registered at the Association for 1980 was 151, between the ages of 3 and 18 years.

### Aim of the Association

The aim of the Association is to promote training, education and welfare of retarded children in the Republic. As the main defect in the retarded is brain damage, his intelligence is naturally limited. However, with whatever ability he may have, it is necessary to develop it by constant training and continuous drilling. The following are some of the skills which our training centres try to impart to retarded children:

- 1) The basic skills to help pupils to be independent, able to dress themselves, look after themselves and fend for themselves.
- 2) Some basic social skills - to train pupils to acquire socially acceptable behaviour.
- 3) Hand skills - enable retarded children to earn a living and to be of some use to others.

### Sheltered Workshop

Our sheltered workshops provide for job training for about 93 young adults. Contract jobs such as assembly of ball-point pens, umbrellas, plastic flowers and cardboard cartons were obtained from the factories near the Jurong Centre. One biscuit factory has established a sheltered workshop on their premises. Varta battery factory also provides some assembly work for the retardates at the Geylang Centre, besides employing about 10 of them to work in the factory. The retarded in Lee Kong Chian's sheltered workshop are occupied with contract work such as packing straws, layering of labels for packaged tea leaves and fixing of wheels for toy cars. It is gratifying to be able to record continued support from the industries and the general public. The industries give help in several ways, some are constantly farming out simple contract jobs to the sheltered workshops, thus keeping the retardates there gainfully occupied, others help by offering employment to them. Orders from the public for various types of cookies, for example, have kept the Geylang Centre Sheltered Workshop busy.

We appreciate the interest shown in the welfare of the retardates. The shortage of labour in Singapore has its advantage in that it creates more job opportunities for our retardates, who are very conscientious and hardworking. The future of the adult retardates or the 'over-sixteen' hinges mainly on the support that can be mustered from the industries, science clubs and the general public.

### Social Workers

The Social Work Section handles all referrals to the Association. Referrals are usually received from hospitals or School Health Services if they are in school. Before a child can be registered with the Association, he/she has to be medically certified as mentally retarded of the severe or moderate degree. Certification can be arranged through the medical social worker or social worker of any agency. Three Social Workers are available to look into the welfare of both the registered retardates as well as their families.

Other areas of work involving social workers in a one-to-one working relationship with individual families include:

- a) Home-visits to foster better understanding in the home situation and to help the family taking care of the retarded child.
- b) Liaison with the training centres' supervisors/principals to discuss problems and difficulties encountered in the training of the child.
- c) Liaison with other agencies to look into the other aspects of the child - medical, psychological as well as the general welfare of his family including financial assistance, help in applying for a hawker stall, etc.
- d) Recruiting, training and maintaining the interests of volunteers who are concerned with the general welfare of the retardates.
- e) Sitting on committees, be it within the Association or without, to discuss broad policies that will improve services to the retardates and their families.

### Projects in 1980

The 2 projects launched in 1980 are interesting in that they involve the use of volunteers in direct service.

#### 1) Programme Alpha

This is a programme planned to prepare some retarded boys for training in the sheltered workshops. Alpha, in Greek, means the beginning, and for these boys, it was hoped that when they were selected to attend the workshop, they would begin a new life. The programme aimed at training the retardates in self-help skills, facilities their socialisation into society and provide basic knowledge to prepare them for the sheltered workshop. Socially, all have benefitted.

#### 2) Travel Training Programme

In Mar 80, the social workers held a training programme for members of the Youth Group and other persons interested in giving direct service. The course aimed at giving volunteers some knowledge of mental retardation, a better understanding of some retarded persons, and the practical aspects of travel training. At the end of the course 6 persons offered their services as travel-trainers. They were matched with 6 retardates attending workshops who had been chosen on account of their readiness for travel training. Workers felt that the programme was fairly successful. It was one valuable service that volunteers could render.

### 1981 Projects

This year for the first time, social workers, at the request of centre heads, started being based at the centre they were covering, once a week. It was felt that this would enable social workers to be in closer contact with families and children attending the centres as well as with centre supervisors/principals.

Toa Payoh Centre also started a Saturday class for children on the waiting list. One of the social workers was involved in making the initial contact with the families and providing guidance to the student-volunteers from the Singapore Poly Welfare Service Club.

A Home-Training Team has been organised. It consists of 2 American home-trainers, one holding a Masters in Social Work and the other a Degree in Special Education, a teacher attached to one of the centres, a voluntary teacher, a parent and a social worker. The objective is to train the parents of children below 6 years of age (those on the waiting list) how to teach their children some self-help skills.

#### Teacher Training

At the moment there are no training facilities in Singapore to train teachers in the field of special education. It is the Association's fervent hope that the Ministry of Education, in the not too distant future, will establish special courses of training for all teachers before they are posted to the schools for the handicapped. Special provision should also be made for the extension of training, where necessary, to all teachers of handicapped children. It is our belief that all educational services for handicapped children should be carried out by specially trained teachers, assisted by trained aides and other professional and non-teaching staff as and when necessary. All this will be looked into by the Ministry of Education in due course.

#### Government Involvement

Falling short of taking over full responsibility of running the various schools for the handicapped in Singapore, the Government has in fact been giving much financial assistance to us. It has allocated us land and buildings at nominal rentals, increased the number of seconded teachers from 4 to 14 and a steady allocation of grants. Plans to reduce the shortage of trained teachers and facilities for handicapped children were implemented. Teachers from the schools of

the handicapped were able to apply for scholarships for specialised training awards. So far, among the teachers of the mentally retarded, 2 teachers have been awarded the scholarship to do a Diploma Course in UK, 1 in Tasmania and 2 in Japan (one at Shiyo Gakuen in Japan under a scholarship sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia, while the other attended the Group Training Course in Mental Retardation). In addition, the Association receives professional help from the Paediatricians, Psychologists, Psychiatrists and Teachers in the form of direct service, or representation from the Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and Education.