

2. MENTAL RETARDATION IN COLOMBIA

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It has been the subject of great concern and analysis in Colombia the care of the mentally retarded, looking at all times to provide the special education they need to allow for the maximum possible development of their educational potential, so that they become self supporting and self sufficient.

The first educational institutions for mentally retarded were established in the 60's, as a result of the action of a group of parents seeking special attention for family members with this condition. Among these institutions we have today ACONIR (Colombian association for the mentally retarded children) in Bogotá, the Association for Subnormal children (Tobias Emanuel Institute) in Cali, and some other smaller centers in other cities of the country.

The birth of these institutions showed the need for human resources trained for this field. The efforts of the private sector were not enough to cover the needs of the existing centers, in spite of the support provided by professionals (Eloisa Echegoyen de Lorenzo), who lent all the possible time to the needed training.

This also moved higher education centers, such as the Universidad Nacional de Colombia and the Universidad del Valle, in their position as semi-government educational centers to cooperate in the solution of the problems, developing the initial training courses for specialists in the education of the mentally retarded and later in organizing the First National Seminary on Mental Retardation Education at the Universidad del Valle.

The Division of Special Education, a section of the Ministry of Education, was created during this period, by Decree 3157, 1968. It has now become a law, Law 43 of 1975, and the Regulatory Decree No. 088, of January 22, 1976, issued when the high need for training teachers for the education of mentally retarded children. At the same time, the Pedagogic University, following the Agreement 09 of April 2, 1968 created the First Course for Technical and Pedagogical Education of Retarded Children, at their Laboratory School.

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The activities of the two government agencies, in charge of training educators (The Ministry of National Education, Division of Special education, and the National Pedagogic University) resulted in the creation of the first Official Program for the Training of Educators in the country for the exclusive teaching of mentally retarded children, which started operations the first semester of 1970. The program contemplated the formation of experts (2 year course) and in 1981

the course was raised to the Licencee level (4 year course) following the obvious need for a more solid structure of the teachers working in this field.

As a result, the centers have been favored with the formation of specialized inter-disciplinary teams (doctors, psicbologists, physical therapists, language therapists, and specialized teachers). Together they have been highly successfull in their actions.

In spite of the specialized action of the multi-profession teams the conditions and numbers of mentally retarded children in the country have not allowed the Special Education Centers to count with enough personnel to guarantee the successfull education of the mentally retarded.

As a result of their experience in treating the "so called" mentally retarded children, it has become the concern of the specialized teams to try to find measures to exactly define what a "mentally retarded child" is. This was initially trusted to the medical-psychological teams, and it has now reached the stage where a valid diagnosis must meet the following parameters :

- A marked reduction in the intelectual capacity (at least two standard deviations below the middle level)
- A similar reduction of adaptation to the environment

- The two above definitions occurring simultaneously.
- The conditions having been detected before the individual reached mental maturity, that is the age of 17.

Based on the above criteria, the work levels of the Special Education of the Mentally Retarded, are as follows :

Integration : Aimed at the normalizing principles, which maintain that the mentally retarded is a human being and a citizen, as well as an individual who should be developed and adapted. This offers the affected individual the same norms and conditions for daily living as any other human being.

For that reason, there are a number of integrated classrooms in Colombia, operating under a special curricula, to cover the needs and interests of the members attending the program.

These classrooms are constantly given the assistance of the multi-specialized teams working at the Secretary of Education of the different Departments (States) in which the country is divided.

Segregation : This classification corresponds to the operation of Specialized Centers for Mentally Retarded with low development, needing constant care of the Specialized Teams, as well as exercises for physical activities (Social and Educational Prevention, Detection, Evalua-

tion and Production of programs for individual development, and Follow-up).

In view of the many aspects of the problems of education of the mentally retarded it is necessary to coordinate the actions of the various government agencies contributing to the efforts of Education of the Mentally Retarded (Agencies are Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Semi-Public Institutes, and the Colombian Institute of Family Wellfare).

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