

BRAM outlines problems

Treatment of blind medieval

The problems with which blind people are faced are numerous. They fall into these three basic categories:

- Limited employment opportunities.
- Limited educational scope and effectiveness relative to the demands of society and the individual's potential and requirements.
- Limited public understanding of blindness and a limited willingness to make a place in society in which the blind can contribute rather than depend on welfare assistance.

These limitations exist as a result of a number of causes:

- Legislation which tends to view the problem of blindness as an intellectual handicap rather than as a visual handicap.
- An education system which suffers from severe financial and physical limitations which stifles educational, social, physical, and intellectual development of the blind person.

System limits opportunities

Members of BRAM stress the fact that while many blind students pass through the education system, only a very few - the very exceptional - are able to fulfill their full potentialities and obtain training in professional or semi-professional skills; skills with which they can earn good living wages. To describe the limited range of employment available, members of BRAM refer to this statement by a recent graduate of the Halifax School for the Blind: "I had two choices. I could go to university, or work in a CNIB canteen." BRAM feels that blind people - given the opportunity - are capable of working productively in many fields that to date have not been explored by many Maritime educators.

The responsibility for the education of the blind falls solely to the Halifax School for the Blind. This school is supported jointly by the four Atlantic provinces, and also from other sources of finances. Unfortunately, the environment at the school seems unable to provide more than basic educational facilities to the majority of students rather than a healthy environment where they can arm themselves with an education that will be of benefit to themselves and society in later years. This problem is a direct result of a lack of public awareness and financial resources.

The problem of limited facilities exists to the extent that the school has had to turn away some eligible students, says BRAM. This problem is further compounded by the fact that the school must further strain these limited facilities by attempting to educate and house visually handicapped children who have additional problems, such as retardation or emotional disturbances. These students are given the same basic curriculum as normal students.

The curriculum at the school is perhaps the greatest and most serious shortcoming. It is limited, it falls into four categories; literary, music, tuning, and manual training.

"Overall, it is our belief that these limitations which exist at the school are a result of the insufficient financial support which the school receives, and the lack of adequate research into vocational fields for which the blind can be trained", said BRAM.

The following material, outlining some of the serious problems facing the blind in the Atlantic provinces, and in particular, the Halifax School for the Blind, was prepared by the Blind Rights Action Movement and submitted to the teaching staff and administration of the Halifax School for the Blind. The brief was prepared because BRAM believes that the hundreds of people suffering from blindness - many of them small children - are entitled to an equal opportunity to achieve a self-satisfying place in Canadian society. Members of BRAM further believe that at the present time these people are unable to fully take advantage of this opportunity. The brief is a statement of the reasons for this and an attempt to describe in full the problems with which blind people are faced.

The brief submitted by BRAM considers the school environment a serious problem for the young developing blind student.

The physical condition of the school does not provide a good environment for learning. The central core of the school is more than 100 years old. What is now the girl's residence was built in 1891, while the boy's residence was built in 1897.

Students are housed in dreary, depressing dormitories with from six to ten beds in each room. They have little privacy, and washroom facilities are inadequate and do not meet modern ordinance standards. Sometimes as many as 14 small children live in a dormitory. Neither residence is equipped with adequate fire escapes. In fact, there are no indoor or outdoor fire escapes in either residence. The serious fire hazard exists because the main building is made of wood, and in case of fire, students would be severely endangered because of their visual

"Students are housed in dreary, depressing dormitories with from six to ten beds in each room. They have little privacy and washroom facilities are inadequate and do not meet modern ordinance standards...Neither residence is equipped with adequate fire escapes."

handicap. This applies even more to those students with mental handicaps as well.

The last addition to the school was made in 1939 - more than thirty years ago - and since then the school has not been provided with additional rooms to house an ever-increasing number of students. Classroom space is inadequate to the point that sometimes more than 15 mentally handicapped children must be supervised in a small and cramped room.

The lack of living and classroom space has been so serious that eligible students have been turned away from the school in recent years. This situation is deplorable and should not be allowed to continue, points out BRAM in their brief.

These problems with regard to the physical structure of the building severely affects the social environment at the school. The school is attempting to deal with a fair proportion of multi-handicapped children. These children in addition to a visual handicap also suffer from emotional disturbance, emotional deprivation, emotional over-protection, complete mental retardation, or functional mental retardation. A report submitted by the Maritime School of Social Work describes the seriousness of the situation at the Halifax School for the Blind. To date neither the school nor the government has shown any concern.

The school uses a system of house-parents to supervise the children during non-class hours. There are not

enough of these house-parents so each one finds himself having to cope with too many children. This results in a general lack of communication on an individual basis between house-parents and students; no strong emotional or social bonds can be made between individual students and the house-parent who must cope with and understand his individual problem.

BRAM's impression is that though the house-parents perform their duties as well as possible within the limitations imposed upon them, few, if any, are trained in child psychology or special counselling techniques which would fit them to perform a more meaningful role as guardian of the children away from home. Furthermore, many students become helplessly dependent upon the daily routine at the school. This sort of institutionalization has great disadvantages in later years, because when the students leave the school they are seriously impaired in providing for themselves and coping with the pace of non-institutional life.

The pressures on the house-parents are further shown by the fact that 'multi-problem' children must, of necessity, function and cope with their environment in the same way as the normal student. Special facilities are just not available to them, and neither are specially trained staff.

A final problem at the school is the lack of a social worker, a medical doctor and a psychiatrist. Members of BRAM feel that the social worker could assume responsibility for the assessment of the students, while a doctor could be present on individual case discussions, as could the psychiatrist. These types of services are essential to the understanding and treatment of the blind students and especially the emotionally disturbed children. Both the school and its students could benefit from such services.

The brief goes on to say that once a blind person is in the job market, his chances of obtaining good employment is low because of the attitudes of an uninformed public towards visually handicapped people. It is of little use for a blind person to get a good education if some members of society can discriminate against him on the ground of his handicap. Blind people, for their part, are willing and determined to improve their own conditions, but they must have the assurance of the government that they are protected under the same labour and civil rights laws as are other small minority groups in society.

Must enter 20th century

In their brief, members of BRAM make it perfectly clear that the education departments of the four Atlantic provinces must wake up to the fact that their policies of herding blind people into a 19th century asylum, and paying little attention to them thereafter, is a gross violation of the rights of Canadian children to

proper education opportunities. The Department of Education for Nova Scotia must assume full responsibility for the education of blind people in this province. It is not enough to smugly hand over an insufficient grant to a private institution for the education of a child, and then wash its hands of the matter thereafter. The administration of the Halifax School for the Blind is in no way financially equipped to provide the necessary services to the blind students. These services are, however, provided to students in the luxurious modern new schools that the Department of Education is so proud of.

The Board of Directors at the school is in favour of government's full responsibility for the education of the blind. The Board has been negotiating with the governments concerning the possible construction of new facilities and the allocation of additional funds.

The education departments of the four Atlantic provinces must wake up to the fact that their policies of herding blind people into a 19th century asylum, and paying little attention to them thereafter is a gross violation of the rights of Canadian children to proper education opportunities.

At the present time, because the four Atlantic provinces do not fully support the school, it is forced to turn to other sources to obtain additional funds. However, even with these additional funds, in 1969, the school operated with a deficit of approximately \$29,000.00. Why, ask members of BRAM, in this age of free education, will these governments not support the school 100 percent financially? It is our opinion that the school cannot maintain its present programs, never mind bring about much needed improvements.

N.S. Government must act

BRAM concludes: "We find that the treatment of the blind by the governments of the four Atlantic provinces to be barbaric, neglectful, and unworthy of a modern society."

"At this time, we ask the department of education of Nova Scotia to spell out very clearly its future plans for the education of the blind in this province, with or without the support of the other three governments involved.

"We strongly recommend that the government assume full responsibility for the education of the blind for the school term (of 1971-1972). This would require new facilities to be constructed and allocation of sufficient funds to employ additional qualified staff-facilities and staff which are sorely needed and that are not available at this time.

"The Nova Scotia government should deal with this matter independently of any decisions made by other three provincial governments, should they continue their immoral and medieval attitudes toward the education of the blind.

"The government must show commitment to improve the condition of the circumstances in which the blind find themselves in Nova Scotia. Anything short of major changes within the next year would continue the criminal treatment of the blind that has existed in the past."