

# THE BACKWARD CHILD

BY L. E. FRITH

"Every child has a right to an education fitted to his capacity and his need."

The backward child has long been a problem in the educational world. Many have been the controversies on the best method of dealing with this problem and we feel that they have not been waged in vain—that we are at least nearer than ever before to a solution of it.

The question naturally arises, "What is a backward child?" and we feel that according to the popular idea of today "A backward child is one who fails to fit into and benefit by our general scheme of education." That education might be fitted to the child is an idea that is only very lately gaining a foothold.

Next some one will ask, "Why is a child backward?" This question is not easily or simply answered. A lack of opportunity accounts for a certain number of these children. But this disadvantage—if it is the only one the child is suffering under—is easily overcome by individual help and instruction.

Another large number are handicapped by physical disabilities. In many cases these may be overcome by medical attention. Thus we find some children, after having adenoids or tonsils removed, or after reaching their normal weight, rapidly catching up to their proper grades in school.

But the above are those whose cases are comparatively simple to deal with. With their particular stumbling blocks removed, they are able to keep step with their class mates.

We have many others however, who cannot be so fitted into the routine of the ordinary class room—who will never be able to compete on equal terms with their fellows. Among these are children with permanent physical disabilities, such as the blind, the deaf or the lame. These must be given very special training in order to minimize these disabilities as far as possible.

But we have another large group who also need special training and help. These are the ones whose mental development is slower than is that of the average child. If the physically handicapped are deserving of patient understanding treatment in our schools, even so are the mentally handicapped. Many a young life has been made miserable from the inability to keep step with his more gifted school mates.

The teacher who has charge of these children must be content to make very slow progress. Any attempt to hurry them ends only in confusion. All work must be as concrete as possible and many different lines and methods must be followed. The probable position that each child will in future hold must be kept in mind and his training prepare him as far as possible to fill it to the best of his ability. If this aim is kept in view many tragic failures in life may be averted and much waste in our economic system prevented.

"But," says someone, "why is there so much more talk about the backward child today than there was a generation ago?" In answer to this one might say that the people are gradually awaking to the importance of this social and economic problem. This is true, but further we may say that universal and compulsory education in our land has put a new aspect on the case. In the days when the clergymen alone were educated, and later on, when those who wished to enter the professions were the only ones seeking an education, comparatively few entered the school-room who were not students, by nature and by choice. In those days too, education was far from being as broad as it is today.

Now the state insists, and rightly insists, that all children shall attend our schools for a few years at least. Some of them are not adapted to get very much out of our educa-

tion curriculum as it is followed in the ordinary school-room. Many of them will make little use of what they do get. For these children special plans must be made and followed. This will take a great deal of time and work but it is surely worth the best effort of our most prominent educationalists, and citizens. For we maintain, and may the time speedily come when all of our people will agree, that—"Every child has a right to an education fitted to his capacity and his need."

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