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## Editorial.

### METHODS OF TEACHING THE MENTALLY DEFECTIVE.

One of the most interesting sessions of the Conference of Teachers arranged by the London County Council, and held last week at Birkbeck College, was that on "Methods of Teaching in Schools for the Mentally Defective," at which Mrs. Wilton Phipps presided. The first special school for children of this class was founded in 1890, and now there are no less than 87 in London, with a staff of 307 teachers and instructors, in which the scholars number 6,836. These numbers show not only the extent to which mental deficiency is present in the rising generation of London children, but the absolute necessity for special teaching and training, which will enable as large a proportion of them as possible to earn their own living, so that they may not become chargeable to the community. The Chairman expressed the opinion that, while the education of these children must not be neglected, the question of manual training was one which would have to be increasingly considered in these schools. The two things must be complementary if good results were to be obtained.

The classification now inaugurated in the schools of the London County Council shows how in former days many children must have suffered from lack of such a method. The mentally defective are, for instance, easily influenced by some slight change in the weather, as Miss Desbery, a speaker at the Conference pointed out, in speaking on "Advanced Occupations for Mentally Defective Girls." Nothing could have happened, so far as a teacher could tell, but she was often amazed at the freakishness and variability exhibited even by the most adaptable and trustworthy of the girls. Dulness would replace alacrity, and stubbornness genuine willingness, for no apparent reason.

Now that these characteristics are recognised as evidence of mental deficiency, the wise teacher will be careful to eliminate the possibility of this element before attributing them to "naughtiness" and punishing a child for exhibiting them; but in the days when children were little understood and treated far more sternly than at present, they must have suffered pitifully from lack of discrimination in this respect. Dulness and stubbornness are not qualities with which the average teacher has much patience, and, until their real import was realised, children must often have been punished quite unjustly.

The Superintendent of Schools for Physically and Mentally Defective Children of the London County Council, in opening a discussion at the above Conference, said that the difficulty they had to face was to get people to help these least efficient of the children. They were really the sick children of the country, and were bound to cost more than the healthy ones at first, though perhaps not eventually, unless they were neglected. It was a curious fact that many of the children in the special schools wrote beautifully, and both fluently and with expression. She pleaded for a closer contact between parent, child and teacher in the case of the mentally defective. If this could be achieved many of the difficulties with which they were now confronted could be lessened.

There is nothing very attractive about work for the mentally deficient; nevertheless it is of great value not only to individual children, but also to the community. An uneducated and uncontrolled man or woman who is mentally deficient is not only, as a rule, incapable of self-support, but is inimical to the public welfare in several ways. Teachers and nurses who bend all their energies to the training and care of this class of children are therefore doing work of national value.

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