

The Education of Exceptional Children in Montreal¹

The Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education (Parent Commission) defines "exceptional children" as

all children whose physical, intellectual, emotional or social development does not follow the normal pace, and who, for this reason, cannot take full advantage of the regular academic programme and of the ordinary forms of education.²

It goes on to draw attention to the needs for special programs, special services, special methods, and special equipment for such children.

For many years the responsibility of school boards in the Province of Quebec has been limited to providing an educational program based on the course of study as issued by the appropriate committee or department in Quebec. Those pupils who could not meet the required academic level for promotion would be allowed, if not compelled, to repeat the grade, or would be given a "social promotion" to the next higher grade although they were obviously unprepared for the more advanced work.

In certain cases, pupils who had severe learning problems would be kept out of school, either by mutual agreement between the parents and the principal, or by a decision of the school authorities. In this way severely mentally retarded or severely physically handicapped children did not usually form a part of a school's active enrolment.

More recently, the government passed enabling legislation stating that school boards

may establish and carry on in any of their school buildings special classes for retarded children or those

who are unable to profit from the instruction given in the classes corresponding to their age, or who, from physical or other causes, require special attention.³

Indeed, the establishment of such classes was encouraged through the provision of extra grants.⁴ It should be pointed out, however, that the School Boards Grants Act (1962) clearly stated that the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, (PSBGM), along with certain other boards, would not receive these extra grants.

In 1964, the Parent Commission Report included a number of recommendations related to the education of exceptional children. Of prime importance is recommendation 183 which states:

We recommend that the regional school commissions be obliged to provide the education of exceptional children in their areas as far as the end of secondary school, either in institutions dependent upon these commissions, or, after an agreement has been reached, in the institutions of another regional school commission, in private institutions, or in institutions dependent directly upon the state.

Although the legislation implementing this recommendation has not yet been introduced, the Department of Education has encouraged school boards to expand their facilities for exceptional children. Department officials played an important role in the negotiations that led to the present arrangements under which the John F. Kennedy School for Retarded Children in Beaconsfield is operated jointly by the local Roman Catholic and Protestant School Boards.

Notwithstanding the lack of either legal obligation or special financial assistance, the PSBGM has long acted on the principle that it has a responsibility for the education of all non-Roman Catholic children in its district. It has been the policy of the Board to retain as many children as possible in regular classes making individual adjustments necessary to the work required of them. When a pupil's problems have proven to be too great to permit his remaining in a regular class, other measures have been taken. Placement in a special class has been made where possible. In some instance the child's difficulties have been such that adequate provision could not be made in a regular school at all. In other cases it has not been possible to provide the necessary form of special class required by a particular type of exceptional child. In both these cases the PSBGM has paid subsidies to private schools in the community that have offered the suitable programs and facilities.

Development of Public Special Education Programs

The concern of the PSBGM goes back at least as far as 1922 when the Montreal Protestant Board of that time co-operated with a research team from the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in conducting a survey to determine the incidence of mental deficiency in certain schools. The findings of this survey indicated the seriousness of the situation in that approximately 3% of the pupils examined were classified as mentally deficient. Identification of this problem eventually led to the introduction of a new class structure with an adjusted curriculum for such children. The first four special classes were formed in 1931. In later years, programs were also introduced for other types of exceptional children. By 1956 there were twenty-four full time special classes. This number was increased to forty-one by 1961 and to sixty-three by 1966. The Special Education program has been closely integrated with the rest of the educational structure. This is different from the arrangement found in some other large school systems where Special Education has been set up as a separate, independent division.

The Special Services Committee of the Curriculum Council has over the past ten years played an important role in the development of the Special Education program. Through its sub-committees, (composed of teachers, principals, consultants, and other administrators) studies have been made of the needs of various kinds of exceptional children. Existing programs in the schools have been evaluated and recommendations for improvements made to the Board's officers. For the past two years, the Board itself has had a sub-committee on Exceptional Children. This group of Board members has been examining the relationship of the Board to private schools caring for exceptional children in the Montreal area.

The selection of pupils for placement in Special Education classes is in general the responsibility of the principal. Both the Curriculum Co-ordinator of Guidance and Educational Services and a Visiting Teacher are available as advisors in difficult or complicated cases. Usually the first identification is made by a class teacher who will discuss the situation with the principal. In most cases, one of the guidance consultants will be asked to see the child and to make recommendations. The school social workers play an important part in many of these cases. Frequently a child is referred to one of the Board's medical consultants in psychiatry, ophthalmology, or otolaryngology. In many instances, and particularly in the more serious cases, the parents have themselves become aware of the child's difficulties and have consulted medical or

psychological specialists. As often as possible, the results of these consultations are obtained by the school in order to add to the information upon which a pedagogic decision will be made. A very close relationship has developed between school personnel and hospital staff that has made this form of liaison quick and profitable.

For certain of the special classes, transportation is provided for those pupils living outside of the school district. The usual situation, however, is for pupils to be assigned to classes in schools close enough to their homes to permit them to use private or public transportation without undue hardship.

Teachers and Curriculum

Teachers assigned to special education classes have in almost all cases volunteered for this work. Most of these teachers remain in these assignments for many years and seem to derive special satisfactions from this type of teaching. A small salary bonus is given to the teachers of most of the categories of special classes.

The expansion of the program has been hindered by the great difficulty in getting enough teachers with specialized training. Occasionally a teacher from the U.S. or the U.K. will move to Montreal after having received special training. More usually, the problem can only be resolved by encouraging a regular class teacher to accept a special education appointment and to then arrange for her to take additional training.

For this reason the Board has established a generous summer bursary program. Many teachers have in this way been able to attend courses in Syracuse, Toronto, or New York. More recently most of the teachers have elected to attend the summer courses provided by the Department of Education and the Faculty of Education of McGill University. A number of them have been able to qualify for a specialists' certificate. The in-service education program has served as an important supplement to the summer courses. Evening seminars, lectures by visiting educators, and workshops have been provided for a number of years in several different aspects of special education teaching.

As far as possible, the curriculum for exceptional children is similar to the regular school curriculum. However, in most instances the teaching methods and the expected rate of progress are of necessity altered. Considerable independence is given to the class teacher in the development of a program suitable to the needs of her children. Assistance is given to the teacher by the principal and the Visiting Teacher.

One of the weaknesses of the curriculum that has long been felt is the lack of suitable vocational training. This kind of program is of special importance for children with mental or physical handicaps. Apart from some craft work, nothing of this nature is yet available. However, the needs of these children have been considered by those planning the new technical and vocational program for the high school and it is believed that many of the Special Education students will be able to fit into the courses to be given at the Occupational Level.

Further weaknesses have been identified in the lack of counselling, placement, and follow-up services. Some class teachers and principals have done excellent work with some of the pupils. This has been on their own initiative. There is need for a guidance program designed especially for exceptional children and for counsellor education in this aspect of guidance work. Some functions of a placement and follow-up service probably go beyond the responsibilities of a school board. Close liaison will have to be established with the appropriate government and community agencies.

Classifications of Exceptional Pupils

The provisions for exceptional children in the schools of the PSBGM include both part-time special programs for regular class pupils and full-time programs in special classes. Pupils in part-time programs are regular or special class pupils who are released from their home classes for from one to ten periods each week in order to receive assistance from a specialist attached to their own school on either a permanent, temporary or itinerant basis. Included in this grouping are part-time classes for speech therapy, remedial reading, and training in skills of perception. Pupils in special classes are placed there for an indefinite period and follow a developmental course of a special nature. There are five types of exceptional children for whom special classes are provided⁵:

Educable mentally retarded and slow learning pupils are in the IQ range 50-80 and have been unable to master the regular curriculum. Classes are provided at both the elementary and high school levels. The course of study emphasizes social and personal development but includes considerable work on the basic skill subjects.

Hard-of-hearing pupils have uncorrected hearing loss so great that they are handicapped in a regular class. They follow the normal elementary school curriculum in an ungraded class. Con-

siderable attention is given to the development of good speech. By means of spending an increasing number of periods per day in one of the regular classes in the school, they are gradually prepared for placement in a normal school environment.

Aphasic pupils have serious communication problems. They all have difficulty in expressing their thoughts and many have difficulty in understanding what other people say. They are not, however, considered to be deaf. The development of communication skills dominates this program.

Low-visioned pupils have serious vision problems that cannot be satisfactorily compensated for in a regular class even with the use of large print materials. This special class follows the normal curriculum and pupils move into ordinary classes in the high school. Much use is made of magnification aids and of tape recorders.

Emotionally disturbed pupils have difficulties of behaviour that are so severe that their progress and/or the progress of other students is severely restricted. In the special class they follow an academic program suitable to their learning abilities. The main purpose of the class is the social and emotional rehabilitation of the pupils. Transfer out of the class is made when the child has made a good adjustment to school routines or when the therapeutic values of the class seem to have been exhausted. In this latter case, a pupil would probably have to be refused admittance to any regular school.

The table below shows the number of full-time special classes provided by the PSBGM during the 1966-67 school year:

CLASSES FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN 1966-1967	
Educable mentally retarded and slow learners	54
Hard-of-hearing	2
Aphasic	1
Low Vision	1
Emotionally Disturbed	2

In addition to the full-time classes there were part-time programs provided by thirty-five remedial reading teachers and three speech therapists. Twelve schools had one or more teachers spending part of each day working with children having serious weaknesses in the skills of perception.

Relationship with the Community

School programs for exceptional children cannot be examined in isolation. Recognition must be given to the important role of parents, associations, and community agencies. Unfortunately, great difficulty has been experienced by principals and teachers in establishing close relationships with individual parents. In general, these parents do not participate in the usual Home and School activities. Nor do they often contact the principal and teacher at other times. The reasons are complex but probably include embarrassment over their child's difficulties, distance from the school, and a distrust in any form of bureaucracy gained through many years on the health-welfare-education merry-go-round in search of diagnosis, placement and treatment for their child.

However, in those cases where the school personnel have made special efforts, considerable success has been experienced. Parent-teacher meetings for the parents of special classes held at a different time from the regular Home and School meetings, interviews at the end of each term, and afternoon teas for the mothers have all been successful. There is probably no place where a teacher will get a greater return for an investment of time than in the area of parent-teacher communication.

The unfulfilled needs of exceptional children have often led to the formation of special interest organizations. These groups are made up of varying combinations of parents, friends, interested citizens, and professionals from the educational, medical, and paramedical fields. They have helped parents by providing information and counselling; tried to educate the public concerning the characteristics, treatment and prevention of certain physical, intellectual, emotional, or social conditions; and pressured government, medical and educational authorities to introduce additional programs.

Sometimes when the school board has been unable to establish special programs, interested community groups have attempted to satisfy the need. Some of these efforts have been modest experimental projects such as those sponsored by the Neighbourhood House (YMHA), the Miriam Home, and the Association for Aphasic Children. Other groups have developed full-scale school operations with the organization, administration and curriculum somewhat similar to that of a regular school system. Among these are Montreal Association for Retarded Children (Peter Hall School), the Montreal Oral School for the Deaf, the Dickan-wize School for Special Education, the Montreal Children's Hos-

pital (Psychiatric Annex), the Douglas Hospital, the Montreal School for the Blind, the Mackay Centre for Deaf and Crippled Children, the Girls' Cottage School, and the Shawbridge Boys' Farm and Training School. Organizations such as the Society for Emotionally Disturbed Children, the Quebec Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, the Quebec Aid to the Partially Sighted, and the Quebec Epileptic Association have provided assistance to parents, teachers, and pupils in the form of special materials and bursaries. Many of these groups have also organized conferences. Attention should be drawn to the excellent work being done by the Jewish Vocational Service in its Work Adjustment Training Centre and by the Montreal Association for Retarded Children in their Adult Training Unit.

The relationship of the PSBGM and the above associations, agencies, and schools has been a good one. Effective liaison has been maintained between Board and non-Board personnel. This has been of special value in matters of curriculum and placement. For example, the cases of boys returning from the Shawbridge Boys' Farm are first considered by the agency and school social workers. Information is then provided to the principal and teacher in order to help them prepare for the child's placement and re-adjustment in the regular school. Of great importance to the financing of these organizations is the per pupil grant that the PSBGM has seen fit to give each year.

Mention should also be made of the programs established by certain hospitals for children with serious learning problems. These programs not only provide treatment for selected children but also are useful in developing diagnostic and teaching techniques. Many of their staff members have participated as lecturers in in-service education programs sponsored by the Board for its teachers. At the same time opportunities have been made to permit hospital staff members to visit the schools in order to learn more about the structure, curriculum and teaching techniques found in a public school system.

The first of the Learning Centres was established by the Montreal Children's Hospital and the Board has attached two teachers to the Centre to assist in this program. In addition, other teachers have been attached to the summer staff of the Learning Centre in order to gain further experience with the special methodology being used by the hospital personnel. Other hospitals with somewhat similar centres are the Queen Elizabeth, the Jewish General, St. Justine's, and the Lakeshore General.

This review of the opportunities for exceptional children in Montreal has stressed that special educational facilities have in

almost all cases been the result of voluntary actions of either the PSBGM or of special interest organizations. The latter have in all cases received financial assistance from the Board. This combination of Board and non-Board schools makes a total educational environment that provides a suitable program for almost all kinds of exceptional children. It fails, however, to be completely satisfactory since there are not a sufficient number of special classes; since not all projects are publicly financed; and since vocational training, placement, and follow-up are not provided. While there has been a definite expression by the provincial authorities of greater interest in exceptional children, it remains to be seen how quickly the necessary legislation and financial aid will be introduced to remove these programs from the realm of voluntary services to that of essential, compulsory activities.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This paper discusses the opportunities and facilities available to non-Roman Catholic exceptional children in the districts administered by the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. Somewhat similar services are provided by the Montreal Catholic School Commission. The facilities of the non-school board organizations described are, of course, available to all children regardless of their religion.
2. *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education, Part 2, Volume I, Department of Education, Quebec, 1964, p. 337.*
3. *Education Act (Quebec) s. 576.*
4. *School Boards Grants Act, s. 8, 14.*
5. There are two additional types of classes representing somewhat different aspects of the total range of exceptionality. These are the classes for intellectually gifted children provided in a few elementary schools and the Practical classes for non-academic pupils organized in most high schools.