

# Education

*Edna Nash*

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We invite teachers, administrators and educators to submit cases, techniques, procedures, approaches, research and articles for this regular opportunity to share effective approaches and to help further the application of democratic and Adlerian principles in school settings. Please send to: Edna Nash, 302-2020 Bellevue Ave., West Vancouver, B.C. Canada V7V 1B8.

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## **Trainable Mentally Retarded Adolescents and the Democratic Model: A Pilot Program**

### **Background**

I met my new group of students and their parents in September 1977. These young people were between the ages of 12 and 14 years, and had been transferred from other elementary and secondary schools to make a new class in Shaughnessy Elementary School. This group was to be known as the senior Oakridge off-campus class; Oakridge being the separate school for the mentally retarded.

The common denominator was mental retardation, and parents who wanted the least restrictive educational environment for their youngsters. These young people were well on their way to becoming too physically mature for an elementary setting, but functioned on a social and emotional level far below their age grade to be placed in a secondary school setting. Our goal was to keep the class in elementary school for another year or two, and prepare them as much as possible for the transition to a secondary school. This class was to become the first group of trainable level students to go into a regular secondary school in the Vancouver, British Columbia area.

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Shaughnessy Elementary is a school with a population of approximately 400 students from kindergarten to grade 7. The school has a reputation for academic excellence, as well as outstanding programs in art, music, physical education, and French. There is a high level of parent involvement and participation, as well as an active parent-staff consultative committee. We were fortunate in having an administrator who was actively supportive of our group, and genuine in his concern for all young people. We were an unknown quantity to many of the teaching staff, aides, parents, and students.

## **Getting Started**

Orientation for staff and students concerning our group took the form of slides and discussion for grades 3 to 7. The younger children, kindergarten to grade 2, listened to a story about a retarded child and could relate to the ways in which they were alike. All of the children were encouraged to make suggestions as to how they could help students new to the school, and they were invited to come and share games in our classroom. With few exceptions I have found that regular students and adults are supportive of a special program if they understand the goals of the program and are shown how to help. Open communication with the staff at Shaughnessy enabled us to solve problems before they became a major concern.

The basis for success for teacher and students in a classroom is an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect. This atmosphere can take some time to achieve, particularly with adolescents, and it never happens by example only. These young people were no exception. They had all been well trained, but as with most individuals raised in the authoritarian tradition, they had also perfected negative behaviors, designed to beat the system. Our class meeting on the first day of school is an example. No one said anything to the group but me. When I asked a question several students nodded their heads, one sat with his head in his hands, our only girl cried, two were concerned only with bickering between themselves, and one lad emitted belches of magnificent proportions. I answered my own questions, and we had another meeting the next day, and the day after that. I cut the agenda to one item only—"Good things that happened today." I became very creative in finding good things to talk about, for myself and everyone else. Very gradually I began to hear some response, usually a repeat of something mentioned earlier, but at least the students were beginning to talk. Over the next six months we continued to add items until we were using a full agenda. The agenda covered six specific areas:

1. Good things that happened today (this week, over the week end, on holidays, in the library, etc.).
2. Something to work on (social skills).

3. Sharing jobs.
4. Problems we need help with (personal).
5. "What if . . ." stories.
6. Plans for next week.

The class meeting became the foundation of our classroom structure. The group gradually learned to work and play together as self-reliance replaced dependency, and consequences replaced punishment. For many of these young people some control over decisions affecting them was in their hands for the first time, and they were learning to take the responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Growth was slow; specific individual counseling and problem solving took extra time, but the students were responding. As they realized that they could decide the order in which daily tasks were completed enthusiasm grew and work habits improved. One colleague said that he had never seen kids who enjoyed school as much as this class obviously did.

The second item on the agenda was aimed at improving social skills. These students lacked confidence in peer and adult relationships. Many of them had speech and language handicaps, and they also looked "different." Our first attempt to communicate outside of the class room was deceptively simple. I told them that a smile was a secret weapon, that I wanted them to look at everyone they met before lunch, smile at them, and see what happened. They were delighted with the results. From that decisive step "hello" was added to the smile and they were on their way.

"Sharing jobs" is one of the easiest items on which to build and is very meaningful to the class. It makes the classroom the students' special place, not just the teacher's. Every student has a job to be done every day. When the jobs are stated the students teach each other how they are to be handled. I listed jobs I needed help with if we were to have time for field trips, films, and other extras. The students added things that must be done if their room was to be kept clean and comfortable. The janitor had nothing to do in our room. At first he complained a little but soon joined in the spirit of things and found us an old vacuum cleaner and washed the windows. One of our pampered young men refused to do a job—dishes and plants and dusting were "women's work." I did his jobs cheerfully and willingly, but it took me a long time and I made a lot of noise. We didn't go on a field trip that week because I had no time to plan. Peer pressure took care of the problem.

Specific problem solving was the last item to be introduced, but general problems were discussed and resolved. The young man with the belches had to be silenced before we could have a meeting, so we discussed it as a group and decided he was a very accomplished burper. We sat in a circle and in-

vited him to burp for us while he had our total attention. He couldn't, and I never heard him burp again.

The "what if . . ." stories were useful for training purposes, and also for increasing social awareness. For example, "What if you were coming to school on a city bus and lost your transfer, what would you do?" These stories were often reinforced by role playing to develop understanding, confidence and language. The students learned acceptable means of handling their own problems, and insight into the motivation of others.

You can't learn to swim unless you get in the water, and we joined the main stream at Shaughnessy. My students learned to use the library independently, took part in a musical play, sports day, and a Christmas concert. The school held a spelling marathon to raise money, and some of our group learned to spell sixty words correctly. They were expected to follow the same rules as the rest of the school, and failure to comply resulted in a consequence unanimously agreed upon in advance. We attended a gross motor program designed and run by the parents of regular students. We shared celebrations and activities with other grades, and eventually joined grades 5 and 6 for physical education and music. Suspension from these classes for inappropriate behavior or non-participation sometimes resulted in consequences applied by the offender's classmates. The consequences were often more severe than I would have suggested, but seldom were they punitive. Their attitudes had evolved to encompass the welfare of the whole group.

Adult aides in the student lunchroom had a difficult time with some of the students. They only saw them at lunch hour and were prone to feel sorry for them and reinforced destructive behavior. The aides babied and cajoled. It was important to follow through with the set structure in a pleasant and consistent manner which made me appear hard-hearted at times. One lad was quite capable of eating in a neat and pleasing way, but he often chose to tear at his food, let it hang half-eaten from his mouth, or smear it around on the table. His agreed upon consequence was that he would leave the lunchroom for a specified time, eat alone in the classroom, and then try again. At one time when he had been quite smug about eating in the lunchroom, I found that an aide had been sitting and feeding him. It was almost a year before this boy learned to handle himself in this situation.

## **Moving Along**

The students lived by many self-defeating behaviors and mistaken goals. Their life-styles and values were firmly established, and unless their behaviors became constructive, they would become totally dependent and discouraged adults. Growth was sporadic, but enthusiasm was constant as we concentrated on individual areas one at a time. Encouragement became the main ingredient of the style of our classroom. I encouraged constantly, any gain, no

matter how small. The students encouraged each other, and their delight in their accomplishments encouraged me. One stalwart lad, who understood responsibility, forgot to ask his parents for bus fare before he went to bed. Instead of waking them in the morning he walked to school by following the bus route—four miles on a sleety January day. We made hot chocolate for him and appreciated his courage. He had recognized his problem and he had solved it himself. Needless to say in the future he didn't forget to arrange for bus money.

All of the students were able to contribute to the class in their own way, and through the group developed a keener sense of personal worth, cooperation and accomplishment. These attitudes are pre-requisite to academic success and were reflected in student achievement. Responsibility for finishing tasks belonged to the student, not to me. They were all quite capable of keeping me busy with them all day leaving me tired and frustrated at 3 o'clock. Certain tasks had to be finished before lunch. Failure to complete tasks resulted in the whole group losing their swimming time so the student could "catch up." What one person did reflected on the whole group, and we didn't miss swimming very often. Our only girl used a display of inadequacy, and often resorted to "water power." Her sobs and tears were designed to melt the hardest heart, but time has shown that she is a very capable girl. At the end of our second year at Shaughnessy results indicated that every student was working up to or exceeding their academic and social potential.

## **The Parents**

The parents of the students in this class are a supportive and courageous group, who subscribe to the principles of normalization. Their goal is to establish this class as part of the regular school system in spite of opposition, skepticism and apprehension. Most of the parents are well-informed and realistic concerning the implications of mental retardation, and the preparation necessary to insure a full and independent future for their child. While this is generally true a few parents are ambivalent, while others foster dependence. Many parents have volunteered hours of their time as drivers, swimming instructors, and cheerleaders. Education must encompass all aspects of a young person's growth, shared expertise between parent and teacher, and an atmosphere of trust and cooperation.

Written reports to parents are required by school law three times a year, but reports are the least important means of communication. More meaningful information is exchanged over a cup of coffee, through a home call, or in a group meeting. Parents are welcome in the classroom, or they may arrange a private interview, but group meetings have become the most productive choice.

We first met as a group in the latter half of the first year at Shaughnessy, when I found that I had information, questions, and concerns that had to be discussed with all the parents. I had also noticed in private interviews that parents asked questions that should be shared with the whole group. Through the use of democratic principles we learned together and we soon found that major issues could be discussed and resolved. The meeting date is selected well in advance, all parents are expected to attend, and usually do unless their absence is unavoidable. I print the agenda so everyone has a copy and parents may add anything else they wish to discuss. We have discussed topics from sex to lunch boxes to curriculum. I started one meeting by asking each parent to tell one positive thing their child had done in the past week. One father summed up the general feeling when he said "I can think of a dozen things he's done wrong!" Positive thinking must be nurtured and reinforced in all of us. The students are aware of the meeting, bake goodies at school, and remind their parents of the time and date. As well as being productive, group meetings are fun. It was the parents' unanimous decision to continue them.

### **Moving Up**

In September 1979 we moved as a class into a regular secondary school. Our parting gift from staff and students at Shaughnessy was a plaque inscribed "As you learned, so did we." We were confident that with this achievement we could face the unknown once again. At Lord Byng secondary there were over 800 regular students in grades 8 to 12. Initially, the great numbers of students and the huge buildings were overwhelming to our class of ten students. The room to which we were assigned was on the second floor at the opposite end of the school from the general office, nurse, library and cafeteria. The nature of our program was briefly explained at a staff meeting, and arrangements were made for me to give orientation to the regular classes.

I took hour long orientation sessions, class by class, at the beginning of October. The regular students had by then seen us around the school for a month, long enough to provide a basis for discussion. I showed slides of my students in activities and with their families. I also had portrait sized photographs of each student so we could refer to them by name. The regular students' response was gratifying. The questions they asked were pertinent and intelligent. We discussed retardation causes, cures, kinds, and characteristics. We compared ages and learning styles. We discussed goals, independence, future plans, and interests. I asked for their cooperation and support, invited them to come to visit our room, and told them specifically how they could help with the program.

By Christmas we had eighteen students from all grades coming in as often as their schedules permitted, and by June we had twenty-six on a regular basis. The grade 12's were the only students who had a spare period, but others came as part of their Community Recreation or Family Studies

courses. Many students shared their fun and talents at lunch hour. We had baton lessons, disco, crafts, games, square dancing, table tennis, and much needed practice at "small talk." Some students helped with the swimming program, others joined us on field trips, swim meets, and a week-end track meet. A group of grade twelve boys came every Tuesday morning to take our class to the gym for an hour. Anyone who was in the room at class meeting time joined in our discussions, and some added items of their own to the agenda.

My students responded happily and soon counted many of the student assistants among their friends. By the time we had been at Byng two weeks everyone in the class was going to the cafeteria for lunch on their own. Soon they were checking books out of the library, delivering messages, taking phone calls on the room phone, picking up films from the audiovisual department in another building, and generally feeling that they belonged.

Increased confidence and social interest were apparent. The seven original members of the group supported and trained new classmates without being asked to help. They obviously liked their class style and wanted to keep it that way. The students' attendance was exceptional; no one wanted to miss school. Some of our group were now traveling to school independently on the city buses, and one lad had to also decide when to leave to be at school on time. He was often late but that was not considered a problem in our room; he could finish his day after the rest of the class had left. We sometimes had our cooking sessions first thing in the morning too and he missed those several times. He soon stopped blaming the alarm clock and the slow buses. He came on time because it was more profitable for him, and because it was his choice, without threats or power struggles.

Some of the regular students worked with us on special projects. One colleague who taught a grade 10 enriched English class brought her whole group over to our room and organized the baking of gingerbread houses. All of the students worked in groups, with the grade 10's helping my students with measuring, mixing, and cutting. They were able to get to know each other while involved in a worthwhile activity. The grade 12 Family Studies class and their counselor joined us for films on "Good Manners" and "Eating Out." All of the students discussed the films in small groups, and it was relevant to all of them.

All young people equate money with independence, and this group was no exception; but their experiences had been inconsistent and they were vague about its worth. The students were often permitted to buy lunch, so the cafeteria menu became the basis for learning money skills. We raised class money by making cutting boards and selling them to staff and students. In a class meeting the group decided to buy school T-shirts and gym socks with the profits. For decision making of this kind the class was encouraged to reach

consensus. Two of the boys had paper routes with their brothers after school, one boy earned money by doing regular jobs at home, and one of the girls helped at a day care center two afternoons a week. Future goals include in-school and community work experiences as a part of the curriculum.

This year we entered six students in a British Columbia swim meet. Last year only two could swim. One girl had used much of her swim practice time posing and giggling and only swimming when she was coached by the instructor. Natural consequences followed when she wasn't able to swim strongly enough to make the qualifying times. She understood perfectly and her classmates were kind and encouraging. We also went to "operation track-shoes" for the third time. This track meet is a three day annual event for the mentally retarded in British Columbia. There were over 700 competitors, and events include participation and competition from wheel chair races to the pentathlon. When we first attended three years ago some of the class had never been away over night before. In spite of very long days, intense excitement and unfamiliar food and surroundings, the group stood out as young people who were both courteous and independent. They deserved the sportsmanship trophy that they received for the second time.

We've finished our first year in secondary school, and we're looking forward to the next year with confidence.