A Selective Comparison of Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Academic Factors among Emotionally Disturbed Children in Three Treatment Settings

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ABSTRACT: This study was undertaken to determine whether there were significant differences among three groups of emotionally disturbed children in Massachusetts: children in private residential schools; children in private day schools; and children in special classes for the emotionally disturbed in public schools. The subjects involved in the study consisted of three groups of children who were evaluated as being emotionally disturbed and whose initial enrollments in the respective programs were accomplished during the 1972-1973 school year. This represented 129 children enrolled in private day schools, 72 children enrolled in private residential schools, and 309 children enrolled in public school special classes for the emotionally disturbed. Data for these populations were obtained from the records for each of the children on file at the Massachusetts Department of Education, Division of Special Education. This included data on psychiatric diagnosis, IQ, parental separation, geographical location, family income, family social position, and assessment of the child’s physical well-being. In addition, two tests were administered to all subjects: The Rutter Child Behavior Scale was completed by each child’s classroom teacher, and the Wide Range Achievement Test was administered by the professional having the responsibility for psychometric testing in the respective school.

Massachusetts has been in the forefront during the past 150 years in programming for most of its handicapped children. It was the first state to establish a state school for the mentally retarded (1846), a public day program for the deaf (1869), in Boston, and with New York the first schools for the blind. It was the third state to enact...
mandatory laws establishing educational programs for handicapped children (1920).

Appropriate educational programs for emotionally disturbed children are a recent phenomenon. Reacting to the demand for services for emotionally disturbed children, the Great and General Court enacted Chapter 750 of the Acts of 1960, which authorized support for private residential schools, private day schools, and public school special classes for these children. During the ten-year period from 1962 to 1972, the Commonwealth assumed greater fiscal responsibility for the placement of more children in private residential schools and private day schools than any other state in the nation. Nevertheless, since its inception in 1962, the Chapter 750 program has been exposed to limited scrutiny.

Conners [1] found a high correlation between the establishment of special education programs for emotionally disturbed children in public school systems and those communities where either the per capita income was high or there existed a community- and/or state-sponsored mental health center. In a follow-up study of children discharged from private day and residential schools, Hoffman [2] found significant deficiencies in organization and coordination of services during placement; in aftercare services; and in communication among public schools, parents, state agencies, and special schools. Yet, 84% of parents reported a positive effect on the children from this educational experience. Hoffman called for more systematic review and evaluation of the program.

Blatt [3] found that the greater reimbursement for costs of private school placement (100%) versus public school programs (50%) created an incentive for the community to place "problem" children outside the boundaries or responsibilities of the community.

Stotsky et al. [4, 5, 6] in a follow-up study of 573 children discharged from private day and residential schools found a predominance of males, overrepresentation of suburbs around Boston, diagnoses not consistent with observed behavior, and a marked tendency for public schools to send older children manifesting antisocial behavior and poor impulse control to residential schools, while day schools were more often treating younger children with psychoses and/or with more severe intellectual deficits. Although the majority of children benefited from private special schooling, a substantial minority did not.

The studies briefly summarized above were limited in scope and did not characterize the entire population of children participating in these programs.

The study reported here attempted to characterize the population