

Opportunity Classes

By Allison Hart

Editor's Note: Educational help for the handicapped child is now one of the Ontario Institutes' special interests. In the field of auxiliary classes or remedial education, an Institute woman, Mrs. D. H. (Allison) Hart is well known as one of the leaders in the province, and her branch Institute, Woodstock North, did some important pioneer work as is reported here. Readers interested in remedial education for their schools might like to keep the article for reference against the time when the question comes up for discussion with school boards and others in the community.

AUXILIARY TRAINING was the phrase we heard over and over again,—and that was back in 1951 when a resolution was passed in our Branch, Woodstock North, accepting the responsibility of contacting the local school boards to discuss the need to institute special education for the slow learners in our rural schools. Dr. C. E. Stothers, at that time Inspector of Auxiliary Training for the Province of Ontario, had visited us on the invitation of the convener of Citizenship and Education. In his address, illustrated with audio-visual records, Dr. Stothers gave a clear idea of the additional needs of many children in our society, and he pointed out that many of these needs can be effectively dealt with by specially trained teachers. In his great concern for the handicapped, the speaker opened our eyes and our hearts to the plight of these children and left us with a feeling of obligation toward them.

Were there many such children in our own schools, we wondered. We were soon to learn that the answer was yes, for a survey of one school area in our district had indicated that at least thirty pupils would profit from the services of an auxiliary teacher. That the school board was interested in providing special training there was no doubt, but efforts in the matter had been greatly hampered by parents who feared the stigma attached to a child who was officially dubbed backward or retarded, and so no action was taken.

Back in 1914 Women's Institutes of Ontario had used their influence to have the Auxiliary Classes Act passed. The Act stated that school boards "may provide auxiliary training for those children who require it." Now someone came forward with the suggestion that the Act be amended so that the word **may** would be replaced by **must**. Could we not force school boards to accept this obvious responsibility? Another and even colder suggestion was that children who were below normal were not very good prospects for the educationalists anyway and why should we bother.

Creating Public Opinion

About this time the Association for Retarded Children began its wonderful work for the extremely handicapped both physically and mentally, and many people were amazed to learn what love and kindness could do for children even when intellectual ability was meagre. "When a child is retarded," said one speaker, "he does not cease to have all the needs of other children—needs for affection and security, for play and worship, for education and training. The retarded child is exceptional only in that he has additional needs."

There seemed little wisdom in trying to force school boards to force parents to accept an idea that was distasteful to them—there must be a way to help the whole community to accept the auxiliary or remedial training of children as a responsibility and blessing.

Since Auxiliary Training had been in practice in some parts of the Province since 1914, some Women's Institute members began a study of the efforts made on behalf of children attending urban schools. It was found that there had been opposition on the part of some parents when the Auxiliary or Opportunity Classes were first introduced, but once they were established, the advantage to the children was plain to be seen. Special education was able to provide for the backward child a better total life in exchange for the school hours spent away from play. It was accepted as a good service.

One interested group, including Vicki Fremlin of the Farmer's Advocate made a trip to Guelph to meet Inspector McVittie of Wellington County where an area school board had pioneered to employ an itinerant remedial teacher for isolated rural schools. When the group was introduced to Mr. Hincks, the teacher (or Remedy Man, as he was affectionately known in the schools he visited), they found a man willing to bet his life, that children need not grow up to be "failures" if they are understood and wisely trained according to their individual abilities. The group was interested to see Mr. Hincks at work, to meet some of the teachers into whose rooms he made his way two or three times each month, and to hear the Inspector's favourable appraisal of this experiment in educational methods. There was merit, they were told, in visiting the retarded child in his own school rather than removing him from his social group into a special auxiliary class.

We are grateful to Vicki Fremlin for her excellent articles that have appeared from