

# Services to the Handicapped in Latin America

Professional training and state certification are not the answers to improved services for the handicapped, either in Latin America or the United States.

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LEWIS APTEKAR

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I have been in Latin America four times this past year, representing the United Nations for the International Year of the Disabled. A description of my experiences in Ecuador will illustrate how services to the handicapped can be improved without additional capital outlay or increased reliance on professionals. This is an important point to be made to Latin American countries just beginning to provide services to the handicapped; they often look toward North American or European models without reflecting sufficiently on differing cultural conditions. Given the economic forecast of the 1980s, my examples will also be helpful to North

American policymakers faced with restricted budgets for human service programs.

My first experience was in a private school for the mentally retarded. This school functions on the typical North American model, which relies heavily on professionals teaching academic skills. Some children from this school with IQs between 60 and 70 are able, after a few years of instruction, to capture the rudiments of the three Rs. One mentally retarded boy, however, after learning to read, returned to his family and found himself in an ironic situation: he was transformed from being considered retarded in a special school into being a scribe for his illiterate family.

Without belittling the advancement of these children, their accomplishments

have to be put in perspective of the total population. In a country that has a 70 percent drop out rate by the sixth grade, and where the vast majority is illiterate, is it appropriate to teach mentally retarded children to read? Channeling resources into this type of school serves only a small percentage of the population. The majority of the unserved mentally retarded are absorbed into their local communities, finding meager but rewarding acceptance in the pecuniary world and fulfilling their emotional needs by the same free interchange of friendships as the non-handicapped.

I also worked in a state-supported reform school for 100 incarcerated adolescents. All the professional employees are educated and certified by the state. Each person is employed for a specific job which, as it worked out, prevented the staff from sharing the workload. When the 100 boys were in school, five teachers were teaching while the other employees were off. When the boys were in vocational classes, another five professionals were working while the others congregated—frequently to talk about their lack of resources or the excessive demands of their jobs.

One day I observed a solitary boy sitting on a stump, his forehead propped up by his hands, his mouth drooling saliva and blood, the result of an epileptic seizure. From the viewpoint of his teacher, the boy had been unable to function in class so was excused. The designated helper, the psychologist, was unavailable. Many adults walked past the child without offering assistance. When asked why they didn't talk to the boy, their answers indicated they had changed the human problem into a psychological one and thus no longer felt competent to handle the situation.

While I was recording my impressions of this event, as chance would have it, the director's servant began to play an Inca tune on his guitar. This melody brought to my consciousness the irony of the situation. In the eyes of the director and his superiors, the institution's major needs were increased professional service and capital outlay. But how many talents were hidden or unused? The guitarist, because of his social class, could not be a teacher, and the custodians, because of their lack of certification, could not be counselors. The final arbiter of human interaction is less a matter of free human interchange

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*Lewis Aptekar is Assistant Professor, Educational Psychology, University of Texas at El Paso.*

than of the fixed social arrangements of society and the professionalized ethos resulting from state schooling and certification.

In a third institution, a privately-endowed orphanage for adolescent boys, I had to reexamine my notions of the value of professional preparation and traditional investment policy.

Although the home was primitive, with no running water and a single gas burner for cooking, the benefactor chose to invest in the services of a certified social worker as director and in a new North American pickup truck for transportation.

The woman director came from a higher social class and mixed her religious convictions with her professional duties. The boys loved her for her interest in them, but they knew what they could and couldn't say to her and were aware of the limitations of their relationship.

One adult lived in the house, a young man of about 22 from the lower social class, unschooled but interested in learning about the boys. He had lived with them for five years and they had come to peace with one another under his tutelage, a fact that I easily observed as they cooked and ate communally.

The other adult working in the orphanage was a Belgian doctor who practiced medicine on the orphans only and spent the rest of his time as their loving spiritual and intellectual leader. One day, I overheard a rich intellectual discussion between the doctor and a boy that struck me by its contrast to the poverty of the boy and his home.

The character of these relationships had much more to do with personalities and individual commitment than with professional training. I question the assumption that professional coursework leading to certification in a helping profession is worth the capital investment. To spend money retraining the director would be wasteful because her limitations are based on personality. To spend capital certifying the doctor would be absurd; his commitment and intellect are already sufficient. Finally, to train the young man for state certification would be wasteful because he has already demonstrated his competence and commitment.

In the special education school, based on the North American approach, trained professionals provide good services to a few children. But, is this the best way to serve the total needy population? At the state institution for delin-

quents, the power of professional certification and the social caste system (in part based on the level of schooling) retards rather than augments services. And, in the orphanage, the importance of personality rather than formal schooling in therapeutic relationships is apparent.

The lessons from all three institutions lead me to believe that the problems of providing human services in Latin America (and by implication in the United States) are less the result of lack of money than of the inability to use existing human resources wisely.

Rather than continue to invest in training professionals to teach a few students in classrooms, it might be better to train professionals to discover and use natural support systems by working and living in places where the supervision of the handicapped does not depend on large amounts of capital or professional assistance.

At the heart of these types of endeavors would be the promotion of a competitive marketplace for services to the handicapped. This would put services less under the control of state regulation and certification, and would result in a system more localized and deprofessionalized. ■



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