

THE ATTITUDE OF PARENTS TOWARDS SCHOOLS FOR MENTALLY RETARDED CHILDREN IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICT OF LOWER FRANCONIA

ERWIN BREITENBACH • HARALD EBERT

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Parents whose children attend a school for the mentally retarded in the Administrative District of Lower Franconia were surveyed about their attitude towards these institutions, and their satisfaction with them, their demands for and expectations about integration and cooperation in school and school life. The parents think highly of this type of school, but they also have constructive ideas and desires regarding further development of schools for the mentally retarded. The variables sex, age, occupation, degree of handicap of their children, and the duration of attending the school influence and moderate this parents' attitudes decisively.

Key words: parents' attitudes, mental retardation, tretman

INTRODUCTION

The attitude of parents with children attending a school for the mentally retarded towards this institution, and their demands and expectations towards it are an important aspect of an ongoing discussion about the "crisis of special education for the retarded" in general, and the "crisis of schools for the mentally retarded" in particular. Handicapped people, particularly those who are mentally retarded, are faced with social prejudice. Many specialists, parents, and persons affected regard educational integration as a chance for reducing the social separation of these handicapped people. With a view to nationwide endeavors for educational integration within the Federal Republic of Germany, Heinz Mühl (1994) asked about the future of schools for the mentally retarded. The parents' loss of image through this type of school seems to be considerable. Parents are, according to Mühl, afraid of a limiting "handicapped" career for their

children (Mühl, 1994). The concept of practical education (oriented toward the practical things in life) is doubted, and abilities of reading, writing, and arithmetic should increasingly determine school life.

Mühl considers the future of the school for the mentally retarded as an optional school offered in addition to integrated forms of teaching. Wocken (1995) calls for subsidiary special education for the retarded. Eberwein (1995) states in summary that the "system of special education for the handicapped and the retarded, has failed: it can no longer be supported in terms of scientific-theory in practical teaching" (Eberwein, 1995).

An adequate opening for integrative efforts of Bavarian schools giving special support to their pupils, which has been

Erwin Breitenbach, Ph.D., Harald Ebert, Ph.D., SoL Universität
Würzburg

Correspondence to: SoL Universität Würzburg Lehrstuhl
Sonderpädagogik I Wittelsbacherplatz 1 D - 97074 Würzburg

demanded by parental initiatives, is being considered by the school administration in forms of educational cooperation of standard and supportive schools by maintaining the appropriate specific educational channel.

For the "Bavarian way" of integration - i.e. "cooperation" - the question of parental acceptance of the educational institutions for the mentally retarded plays a decisive roll. For Bavarian school politics, Stuffer (1993) put the theses mentioned above in functional terms and hypothesized that parental dissatisfaction with the school for the mentally retarded (in Bavaria) is due to

- developments in the framework of diagnosis and support classes (Diagnose- und Förderklassen), as well as in the support center which led to a loss of differentiation for institutions for the mentally retarded when compared with other types of special education for the handicapped and
- the criticism of practice at schools for mentally retarded, based on
- insufficient support in the fields of reading, writing and arithmetic,
- the lack of followthrough of successful early intervention
- the compulsory attendance of daycare centers,
- the name "school for the mentally retarded",
- and the lack of permeability.

Based on these assumptions, the present profile of schools for the mentally retarded is under question. It is time for a scientific investigation of the above theses in order to, if necessary, consider theory-conducted changes in the school.

This necessitates looking into both scientific studies and variables influencing the parental attitudes towards support institutions for the mentally retarded population. They should be included in both the investigations and the research designs to make possible quantitative and qualitative statements by the affected parents with regard to their acceptance of the school

for the mentally retarded (and other institutions).

A study presented by Pettinger (1989) in Munich was based on the assumption of high acceptance of such institutions, combined with the desire of shifting the target to the whole society. Schneider (1994) cites a high-ranking representative of the school administration who refers to 90 percent of parents being satisfied. The Bavarian seminar group (Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft Bayern) "Living and learning together" (Gemeinsam leben - gemeinsam lernen e.V.) (1994) differentiates between the generation of parents who built up the group "Aid for life" (Lebenshilfe), and the parent generation, at least half of whom desire a different, i.e. an inclusive form of schooling. A (non-representative) survey (1994) of the state parents' committee, taken at schools for the mentally retarded, found that the attitude of parents towards educational integration depends on the severity of their child's handicap, or rather on the individual needs of their children: Parents of children with so-called "severe handicaps" indicated their satisfaction with existing institutions, while parents of children with less severe handicaps recommended integrated education for their children. This is true despite the fact that the latter would have to depend on adapted teaching and learning conditions in the standard schools. In Berlin, approximately 50 percent of parents whose children had to undergo special education and teaching for the retarded chose - subsequent to the appropriate legal changes (see also Schöler, 1993) - an integrative education.

Based on the fact that the parents' criticism of educational institutions for mentally retarded people is aimed at their practice, and that changes in practice can contribute to a safeguarding of acceptance, inter alia, Stuffer (1993), suggested that the structural presumptions of the school for the mentally retarded are focused as important variables: a changed group of pupils (open for severe handicaps), a changed number of

pupils, the practice of licensing only a limited number of teachers combined with a changed structure in teachers' age (loss of innovation potential), as well as the actual working conditions (e.g., an increase in the required number of hours teaching). In addition, there are important didactic and methodical questions e.g., about one's conception of self combined with the aim of practical education, the value of reading, writing, and arithmetic lessons, the significance of open forms of teaching, the differentiation and individualization and, if necessary, new orientation. Beyond Stuffer, both the nexus between the individual and familiar assimilation of the "handicap" crisis, and the change in acceptance of educational institutions for the retarded while the child is attending one of them must be simultaneously investigated; in addition, the acceptance of the fact that the school for the mentally retarded is positioned at the "very bottom" of the structured educational system must be researched. Lauth (1986) limits this by stating that no empirical proof is available for the acceptance of crisis assimilation processes.

Furthermore, parental criticism of schools for the mentally retarded could simply be understood as a renunciation of the special education system. The growing importance of parental initiative groups within the context of the integration movement are an indication of this. Finally, the changed social framework (changed social effort within the families, unemployment, etc.), and the increased importance of postmaterialistic orientation in our society could favor the demand for a general school reform (see also Hentig 1993). This could also hold true for parents of mentally retarded children, and the educational support institutions could be understood as functionalized because they stabilize a one-sided achievement-oriented educational system.

The deliberations to date show that a corresponding differentiated investigation is urgently needed to continue this discussion.

METHOD

Research questions

- To what degree is the school for the mentally retarded affirmed and accepted in its present form by parents and pupils (acceptance)?
- Are these parents satisfied with the forms and extent of parental cooperation, or do they desire changes (participation)?
- How great is the parental desire for various types of inclusive teaching of children with and without handicaps (integration)?
- To what degree are the parents' responses influenced by the variables as sex, age, occupation, place of living, degree of the child's handicap, attendance of an institution before starting school, and period of school attendance? Down's syndrome as a variable will be investigated in a separate publication.

Population

All parents whose children currently attend a school for the mentally retarded in Lower Franconia were surveyed. For this purpose, one questionnaire was distributed to each father and each mother for a total of 849 sets of parents. Of these 1698 questionnaires, 818 were returned which equals a response rate of 48.17 percent. The population investigated consisted of 54 percent fathers and 46 percent mothers. The age of those questioned ranged from 24 to 72 years, although, 71 percent belonged to the 31-45 year-old age group. Twenty-four percent of the parents questioned named an occupation without a degree; 67 percent had a job requiring a final examination (e.g. after an apprenticeship), and less than 10 percent have a university or college education. Seventeen percent of the parents live in an administrative town with no county area of its own (Würzburg, Aschaffenburg, Schweinfurt, Kitzingen), 19 percent in a town within an administrative district, and the by far largest number of the questioned persons - 64 percent - live in rural areas.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire we constructed is divided into three sections. In the first one, questions are asked about the father or the mother (age, job, residence), and in the third about the child (sex, age, degree of handicap, diagnosis, siblings, institutions attended to date, years of schooling, support to date). The second and middle section contains questions about the three central research questions; acceptance, participation and integration.

The first form of the questionnaire was evaluated by expert rating. The experts were four sets of parents with children attending a school for the mentally retarded, five special education teachers from schools for the mentally retarded, four university lecturers working in the field of special education for the retarded, and one school inspector. The final version took the experts' opinions into consideration. With the written approval of the Government of Lower Franconia, the questionnaires were distributed to the appropriate schools. From there, they were given to the parents by the teachers; the parents could send them back in an attached postage-paid envelope. The survey was carried out between mid-October, 1995 and the end of January, 1996.

The data obtained were evaluated and analyzed employing inferential-statistical procedures, e.g. chi-square test, T-test, U-test of Mann and Whitney or the Kruskal-WallisTest. These procedures do not presuppose any certain forms of distribution; they can be performed with data at the ordinal or nominal scale level.

RESULTS

Acceptance

Questions regarding the acceptance of schools for the mentally retarded and satisfaction with this form of school were responded to in the following way:

These frequency distributions indicate that the school for the mentally retarded is

well accepted among the people questioned. Solely the question of whether the lessons at the school for the mentally retarded reflect the children's needs varies from this tendency. Not quite 15 percent of the parents responded to this question with "no"; however, nearly 49 percent of the parents questioned answered this question with "yes" without any restrictions.

In two further questions concerning acceptance, the parents were asked to express their satisfaction with specific fields of care and support, and what additional ideas they had about the school their children were attending.

Considering the answers to these questions, the consent is not quite that definite and universal anymore. Rather, a considerable number of parents questioned expressed their dissatisfaction with certain fields of support and care for their children. Nearly 30 percent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic. With regard to additional possibilities of therapy offered, 44 percent expressed their dissatisfaction.

It is remarkable that 22 percent, nearly one fourth of the parents questioned, have no further request with reference to the school. First on the list is clearly the desire for smaller classes and groups. The other demands, however, follow closely, more childcare and teaching personnel, as well as better equipment of the institutions and must be considered as serious as the former.

Integration

Among the questions concerning the integrative teaching of children with and without handicaps, some focused first on the parents' demands for contacts between their children and those without handicaps, as well as social integration.

The overwhelming majority of the parents questioned (80 percent) desire, within the scope of the institution their handicapped child is attending, more contact with non-handicapped children. Seventy percent

Table 1. Frequency distribution of responses to acceptance questions

Possible answers	Number questioned	Percent	Amount answered	% - amount
Question: The school for the mentally retarded prepares children for their future life. Is this statement correct?				
incorrect	15	1.86	15	1.86
mainly incorrect	64	7.93	79	9.79
mainly correct	246	30.84	325	40.27
correct	482	59.73	807	100.00
no answer	11	1.43		
Question: Are you under the impression that your child likes to attend school?				
no	12	1.47	12	1.47
more no	48	5.88	60	7.43
more yes	168	20.56	228	27.91
yes	589	72.09	817	100.00
no answers	1	0.12		
Question: Do the lessons in the school for the mentally retarded meet the needs of your child?				
no	27	3.33	27	3.33
more no	90	11.10	117	14.43
more yes	300	36.99	417	51.42
yes	394	48.58	811	100.00
no answers	7	0.86		
Question: The school for the mentally retarded is a necessary and meaningful institution. Its equipment and specially trained personnel enable it to support mentally handicapped children, allowing them to grow up in a protected way. Is this statement correct?				
no	23	2.83	23	2.93
more no	79	9.71	102	12.53
more yes	224	27.52	326	40.05
yes	488	59.95	814	100.00
no answers	4	0.49		
Question: The school for the mentally retarded is necessary. It is a protective sphere for (severely) handicapped children, allowing them to grow up in a protectef way. Is this statement correct?				
no	32	3.98	32	3.98
more no	64	7.95	96	11.93
more yes	228	28.32	324	40.25
yes	481	59.75	805	100.00
no answers	13	1.59		

Table 2. Frequency distribution of responses to "satisfaction"

Possible answers	Number questioned	Percent	Amount answered	% - amount
Question: How satisfied are you with teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic?				
very dissatisfied	58	7.95	58	7.95
dissatisfied	157	21.54	215	29.49
satisfied	402	55.14	617	84.64
very satisfied	112	15.36	729	100.00
no answers	89	10.88		
Question: How satisfied are you with the additional possibilities of therapy offered?				
very dissatisfied	112	14.79	112	14.79
dissatisfied	222	29.25	334	44.01
satisfied	357	47.04	691	91.04
very satisfied	68	8.96	759	100.00
no answers	59	7.2		
Question: How satisfied are you with the nursing (and medical) care?				
very dissatisfied	15	1.99	15	1.99
dissatisfied	87	11.54	102	13.53
satisfied	521	69.10	623	82.63
very satisfied	131	17.37	754	100.00
no answers	64	7.82		
Question: How satisfied are you with the teaching of practical skills?				
very dissatisfied	15	1.93	15	1.93
dissatisfied	65	8.38	80	10.31
satisfied	472	60.82	552	71.13
very satisfied	224	28.87	776	100.00
no answers	42	5.13		
Question: How satisfied are you with the cooperation between the school/daycare center and your home?				
very dissatisfied	17	2.13	17	2.13
dissatisfied	117	14.66	134	16.79
satisfied	480	60.15	614	76.94
very satisfied	184	23.06	798	100.00
no answers	20	2.24		
Question: How satisfied are you with the qualifications of the childcare personnel and the teachers?				
very dissatisfied	10	1.26	10	1.26
dissatisfied	61	7.66	71	8.92
satisfied	515	64.70	586	73.62
very satisfied	210	26.69	796	100.00
no answers	22	2.69		

of those questioned fear, due to the present structure of schools for the mentally retarded, a setback in contacts to the non-handicapped. Fortyfive percent of the parents are convinced that, at present, the school for the mentally retarded does not meet the goal of social integration of handicapped people anyway.

Of the 80 percent of the parents questioned who asked for increased contact of their children with non-handicapped ones within the school, less than 11 percent can imagine this contact in the form of continual integrated learning at school. For the majority, integrated teaching of individual subjects or lessons, or jointly making decisions about school life, is the desired form of their choice at present.

When confronted with the arguments taken from the current discussion (pros and cons of integrative teaching) parents replied as follows:

Only 40 percent of the parents questioned believe joint teaching of handicapped and non-handicapped children would not result in any disadvantages whatsoever for the handicapped. Approximately 43 percent

worry that their children will enjoy learning at school less and 30 percent are afraid that they may become outsiders within the class. A total of 14 percent believe that it will lead to mental stress and decreased achievement in their handicapped children.

These disadvantages are, however, according to the questioned parents, balanced by distinct advantages (see table 4).

Participation

In two questions regarding participation, the parents were asked to describe the extent to which they were satisfied with the cooperation between school and home. An overwhelming majority experience cooperation with the school as altogether meaningful and helpful on the whole. In their opinion, primarily individual talks, casual meetings (meeting regularly in a pub, common parties, etc.), and evening meetings for parents should be arranged more frequently. At a slight interval, home visits are mentioned, recreation activities for families, and educational measures for parents.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of responses to "social integration"

Possible answers	Number questioned	Percent	Amount answered	% - amount
Question: Mentally retarded children lose contact with non-handicapped children by attending the school for the mentally retarded. Thus, they are increasing isolated in our society. Is this statement correct?				
yes	340	41.92	340	41.92
mainly yes	231	28.48	571	70.41
mainly no	106	13.07	677	83.48
no	134	16.52	811	100.00
no answers	7	0.86		
Question: One goal of the school for mentally retarded is the integration of handicapped into society. Do you believe that this is being met?				
no	91	11.29	91	11.29
mainly no	269	33.37	360	44.67
mainly yes	285	35.36	645	80.02
yes	161	19.91	806	100.00
no answers	12	1.47		

Table 4. Frequency distribution of responses to "advantages of integrative learning at school"

Possible answers	Number	Percent
Question: What advantages does integrated learning of handicapped and nonhandicapped children for the handicapped in your opinion? (N=815)		
It is easier for the children to develop friendships outside of school	489	60.07
The children stimulate each other by their different standards	253	31.08
The handicapped children learn to live with non-handicapped	486	59.71
The handicapped children can learn from non-handicapped	581	71.38
The children have less traveling time	148	18.18
The non- handicapped children can learn from the handicapped children	448	55.04
none	56	6.88

Table 5. Frequency distribution regarding "cooperation between school and children's home"

Possible answers	Number	Percent
Question: Would you like more intensive cooperation with your child's school? If yes, what should happen more frequently? (N=506)		
Individual talks	260	51.38
casual meetings (round table in a pub, etc.)	190	37.55
parents' meetings in the evening	186	36.76
one or several day family outings	126	24.90
home visits	123	24.31
one or several day educational measures	117	23.12
Question: What do you expect from the cooperation with the school your child is attending? (N=814)		
Information on the development of your child	589	72.36
Information on further treatment and support possibilities	578	71.01
Information on the lessons at school	498	61.18
Information on financial and legal possibilities	342	42.01
Personal advice and aid in dealing with educational problems	236	28.99
Personal advice and aid in dealing with the handicap	221	27.15
Opportunities to express one's opinion	201	24.69
Opportunities for parental cooperation	175	21.53
Periods for cooperation should be coordinated better with the parents' schedules	123	15.11

In addition to the desired forms of parental activities, the parents were surveyed with regard to the contents of their wishes. Foremost, parents replied that they expect information on the development of their child, information about additional treatment and nurturance possibilities as well as about teaching, and financial and legal possibilities. The provision of information on facts is considered more meaningful and helpful by the parents, and less the psychological therapeutical type of advice offered in difficult life and educational situations caused by the handicapped child (see table 5).

DISCUSSION

Parents' sex

The parents' sex does not seem to have played a decisive roll in the responses to questions. In comparing the males with the females, no significant differences in the answers to the questions of integration and participation are shown ($p > 0.05$; U-test of Man-Whitney and Chi-Quadrate-Test). A considerable difference is only found in the question complex of 'acceptance', i.e. when satisfaction with mediation of practical skills is surveyed. Mothers are more satisfied than fathers ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Parents' age

The following age groups of parents surveyed were considered together:

- younger than 36 years,
- from 36 up to and including 40-year-olds,
- from 41 up to and including 45-year-olds, and
- older than 45 years.

When these age groups are compared with each other, with regard to questions about acceptance, the group of 36 - 40-year-olds is particularly noticeable. This group of parents reacts to the question of whether the school for the mentally retarded prepares their children for life with greater

approval than the 41 - 45 year-old parents. The same age group is, compared with older fathers and mothers, more satisfied with the training of the childcare personnel, and with the teaching of practical skills ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

With increasing age, the parents more often respond that their mentally retarded children are losing contact with non-handicapped children when attending the school for mentally retarded, and thus will be increasingly isolated in our society. Above all, parents in the age group between 41 and 45 call for significantly more frequent contact between children with and without handicaps in school and daycare centers. The younger and older parent groups did not emphasize this demand much ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Comparing the age groups, there are no significant differences ($p > 0.05$; U-test) detectable when parents are asked whether they experience the present cooperation with the school their child attends as meaningful and helpful. On the contrary, younger parents, when compared with the older ones, more frequently respond that they would like an increased intensity of cooperation, although they indicate high levels of satisfaction ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Parents' occupation

Parents' occupations have been divided into the following three categories:

- no job training,
- occupations without university degree, and
- professions with university degree.

A clear correspondance can be found here regarding acceptance. The parents' group without job training seems to be the one with the highest level of acceptance. The parents with the highest degree of education are the least satisfied ($p < 0.05$, U-test). With reference to the cooperation between school and home or daycare center, the group of parents with university degrees can

be differentiated from the other two groups by their greater dissatisfaction. The parents with university degrees express also more dissatisfaction with the childcare and teaching personnel's training ($p < 0.05$, U-test). The parents' educational level has almost no influence on their attitudes about integration in general and academic integration in particular ($p > 0.05$; U-test and chi-square test). One exception to this is the question of whether parents believe that the school for the mentally retarded will achieve its goal of social integration. The achievement of this goal is more distinctly doubted in the occupational groups with higher levels of education ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

The parent groups with different levels of education do not differ in their desire for more intensive cooperation between school and home ($p > 0.05$; U-test). However, when asked if the present cooperation between school and home is considered to be meaningful and helpful, the number of positive answers decreases significantly with a rise in level of education ($p < 0.05$, U-test). No significant differences between the occupational groups can be detected with reference to parents' requests and ideas regarding content of parental activities ($p > 0.05$; chi-square-test).

Parents' place of residence

Living in a town constituting an administrative district of its own (Würzburg, Schweinfurt, Aschaffenburg), in a town subordinate to a county seat, or in a rural district has almost no impact on the parents' answers to the questions of acceptance and integration ($p > 0.05$; U-test). Only their satisfaction with the therapy offered significantly decreases between the towns in an administrative district and the rural areas ($p > 0.05$; U-test). When asked if the present cooperation with the school for the mentally retarded is experienced as meaningful and helpful, urban parents' answers were similar to those living in rural areas ($p > 0.05$; U-test). Also when asked if the

present cooperation with the school for the mentally retarded is experienced as meaningful and helpful, the parents living in towns replied in a similar manner to those living in rural areas ($p > 0.05$; U-test).

Sex of pupils

The parental responses to questions about acceptance, integration, and participation ($p > 0.05$; U-test) were independent of the sex of their handicapped child. The only exception was the question of whether the children like to attend school. Parents with a handicapped daughter are more likely to reply that the child likes to attend school than those with a handicapped son ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Age of pupils

The children were grouped according to the following ages:

- younger than 8 years
- 8 up to and including 12-year-olds
- 13 up to and including 16-year-olds, and
- older than 16 years.

Parental differentiation in satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the school for the mentally retarded, depending on the children's age, first becomes obvious with questions referring to the nursing-medical care, the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, additional possibilities of therapy offered, and the training of the childcare and teaching personnel. The parents' dissatisfaction with the school for the mentally retarded increases with the increasing age of the children until above the age of 16, after which the parents' acceptance of the school increases again significantly ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

The responses to the questions about the attitude towards integration again depend distinctly on the children's age. Only in the group of parents whose children are younger than 8 years does a majority still believe that the school for the mentally

retarded will meet its goal of social integration. Parents whose children are older are more skeptical with regard to the chances of achieving this goal. The parents of younger children indicated a significantly greater desire for more intensive contact with non-handicapped children in the school and daycare center than the parents whose children are older than 16 years ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Considering the answers with view to participation, it was again the parents of children younger than 8 years who differ distinctly from those whose children are older. The parents with children below 8 years of age particularly consider cooperation with the school meaningful and helpful. Parents with older children no longer express this in such a pronounced way ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Severity of handicap

In the third part of the questionnaire, the parents were asked to rate the severity of their child's handicap. They could rate it according to the following categories:

- severely handicapped
- moderately handicapped
- mildly handicapped

Parents who evaluating their child's handicap as severe are significantly more satisfied with the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic than those parents who consider their child to be only slightly handicapped. But they express much more dissatisfaction with the additional possibilities of therapy offered, and with the training of the childcare and teaching personnel. When comparing the parents' group who rated their children as having moderate handicap with those who think their child is only slightly handicapped, significant differences also become apparent. The former expresses a greater degree of dissatisfaction with the additional possibilities of therapy offered, as well as with the training of childcare and teaching

personnel. It would seem that parents considering their child to be only slightly handicapped are more dissatisfied with the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

The parents' position on questions of integration is also closely related to their evaluation of the degree of their children's handicap. Parents whose children are severely handicapped according to their own evaluation less often express a desire for more frequent contacts between their handicapped children and non-handicapped ones than all other parents questioned. Parents who consider their children to be slightly handicapped answer the question regarding whether the school for is attaining its goal of integrating handicapped people in our society less skeptically than those who think they have a severely handicapped child ($p < 0.05$, U-test). The response to questions with respect to participation by the parents is not influenced by their evaluation of the degree of their child's handicap their child has ($p > 0.05$, U-test).

Years of school attendance

Since older pupils also attend correspondingly higher grades, and thus the years of school attendance increase, a comparable result can be expected here as with the variable 'age of children'.

Attending a standard kindergarten

Of the parents questioned, 340 responded that their child had attended a standard kindergarten for some length of time. Since fathers and mothers were questioned separately, it can be assumed that this is true - considering single parents - for more than 170 of the handicapped children. If the group of parents whose children attended a standard kindergarten is compared with the group whose children did not attend a standard kindergarten, the following image results with respect to acceptance:

Parents whose children attended a standard kindergarten all express a lower acceptance of the school for the mentally retarded than those parents whose children never attended a standard kindergarten. They agree significantly less to the statements: the school prepares the children for their future life; the lessons meet the needs of their children; the school is a necessary and meaningful institution; their children are encouraged in an optimal way; and the school provides an appropriate protecting environment. These parents are also distinctly less satisfied with the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, with the additional possibilities of therapy offered, and with the nursing and medical care of their children. Furthermore, the parents whose children attended a standard kindergarten distinctly express more frequently the opinion that their children are losing contact with non-handicapped children by attending a school for the mentally retarded, and thus are increasingly isolated in our society. They more frequently desire contact between their handicapped child and non-handicapped children in the school and during the time spent in the daycare center ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

The parents whose children have attended a standard kindergarten more frequently desire more intensive cooperation with their child's school ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Attending an integrative kindergarten

70 parents stated that their handicapped child had attended an integrative kindergarten for some time. This fact does not play a decisive roll when questions about acceptance and participation are concerned ($p > 0.05$; U-test). However, when questions about integration are concerned, this changes. Here, parents whose children had attended an integrative kindergarten significantly showed a more frequent desire for contact with non-handicapped children in the school than those whose children had never attended an integrative kindergarten ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Attending schools for learning disabilities

Approximately 80 children of the parents surveyed - before attending the school for the mentally retarded - attended a school for the learning disabled. These children's parents significantly more often agree to the statement that the school for the mentally retarded is a necessary protective sphere for their children ($p < 0.05$, U-test), and that their children increasingly lose contact with non-handicapped children by attending this school, and are becoming increasingly socially isolated ($p < 0.05$, U-test). No group differences were found in answers to the questions with view to participation ($p < 0.05$, U-test).

Attending no institution

According to their parents' statement, approximately 150 children did not attend any other institution before starting at the school for the mentally retarded. These parents respond significantly less often with a desire for contact between their children and non-handicapped ones in school and during daycare, and they also less frequently report intensive cooperation with the school ($p > 0.05$, U-test). No significant group differences could be observed with questions of acceptance ($p > 0.05$, U-test).

CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the results from the survey of parents' attitudes towards the school for the mentally retarded can be summarized as follows:

1. The parents surveyed show a high level of basic acceptance of the school for the mentally retarded. This global affirmation is, however, connected to a differentiated critique. A smaller, but still considerable number of parents would like to see a series of improvements with regard to school administration questions.
2. An overwhelmingly large part of the parents want greater social integration for their children. Despite this, a considerable

- number of parents responded that the school for the mentally retarded is not contributing its share here, but is making the children more isolated.
3. Only a few parents can imagine continuous integrated learning of handicapped and non-handicapped children at school. The available results cannot be simply interpreted as a definite NO towards an integrative school. If the parents are, for example, confronted with possible disadvantages and advantages of such a school form, a minority of parents expects negative consequences for their handicapped child from integrative learning, and the majority shares the arguments of the integration proponents. Thus, in our opinion, the results must be interpreted with care. A lack of experience with and little knowledge about integrative school experiments could also be a reason for so few parents' being able to imagine continuous integrated learning. A survey of parents in Hamburg or Berlin about integrated learning probably would have provided the opposite image.
 4. Cooperation between school and home is basically considered meaningful and helpful by a majority of those questioned. Activity with parents should, according to the majority of parents' opinions, should include more factual information, and less psychotherapeutically-oriented advice in difficult situations of life and education faced by the handicapped child.
 5. The parents' acceptance of the school for the mentally retarded seems to relate to particular - biographically significant - turning points in their children's lives. Parents between 36 and 40 years of age have a strong trust - after their children have started at the school for the mentally retarded - in the good preparation of their children for future life, and the school's success in social integration. The desire of younger parents to cooperate more intensively with the school can be interpreted as a legitimate endeavor of these parents to make use of all opportunities for support for their children. With increasing age, the abilities of one's own child on the one hand, and the nurturing possibilities of the school for the mentally retarded, on the other hand, are seen more critically, possibly more realistically. Simultaneously, the social isolation caused by the children's attending the school for the mentally retarded is experienced in a more pronounced way. In addition to the individualized support, social integration seems to be a perspective of great importance to the parents. An increased contact with non-handicapped children is of greater importance for parents whose children are under the age of 16. In the phase of job preparation, and the subsequent graduation from the school for the mentally retarded, the reverse picture is found: the acceptance of the school for the mentally retarded by the parents increases again distinctly, and the desire that their children meet non-handicapped children seems less pronounced. The linear coherence assumed by Schneider (1994), between parents' criticism of the school for the mentally retarded "independent of its image" and the assimilation of the crisis "handicap", is not confirmed by the available study. At the time of their children's academic start, the parents do not accept the school for the mentally retarded less, and its "acceptance does not increase very quickly" (Schneider, 1994, p. 266) for those parents during the course of school attendance. But, the parents feel that the school for the mentally retarded meets their needs more or less well the real-life situations. Situational-individual crises and those within the family are expressed by these specific needs of the parents, but they do by no means explain parents critical statements towards the school for the mentally retarded.
 6. The wish for more participation in the school for the mentally retarded is expressed by all parents. The parents with a higher degree of education experience the present cooperation as less meanin-

gful and helpful. This group of parents is altogether more dissatisfied with the school for the mentally retarded. For them, a more differentiated image of education, as well as a higher degree of knowledge and reflection on the institution school can be hypothesized, on the one hand, and a more difficult individual and familiar assimilation of the "crisis handicap" (even more complicated by their own demands) on the other.

7. Acceptance of the school for the mentally retarded essentially depends on the prior experiences parents have had at other institutions. Previous attendance of a standard kindergarten strengthens the parents' critical sensitivity toward the school, their desire for more intensive cooperation and the contact with non-handicapped children.

The further development of the school for the mentally retarded is supported by a basically high level of parental acceptance. If the crisis of the school for the mentally retarded is linearly related to the "criticism of the school for the mentally retarded from the parents' side" (comp. Stuffer, 1994), Möckel's advice should be followed: "stop criticizing (the special education for the retarded), and work on concepts and relevant subjects, listen to parents, to those who are affected, and to all those who have to tell us something relevant, and discuss the

best practical ways and theoretical reasons" (Möckel, 1996). The parents' experience, their statements, as well as their situative needs, can be regarded as a conceptional opportunity for the further development of the school for the mentally retarded. Differentiated criticism should by no means be interpreted as an aspect of an acceptance process of the crisis. The demands of many parents for more intensive participation enriches the school for the mentally retarded. Particularly the critical parents with a higher degree of education consider a qualified education of the teachers for pupils with severe handicaps essential, in addition to an improvement in the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic. A higher regard for the parents' needs must be reflected in the present discussion with reference to the possibilities of therapy offered. In addition to the methodological-didactic transformation of the goal of "self-realization", the goal of "social integration" within the school, in school life, and leisure should be more pronounced in the future. The school for the mentally retarded and the attached daycare centers must acknowledge that many parents cannot recognize their contribution to social integration, or if they do, only in an insufficient way.

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Supplement

Questionnaire

The following questions were used to obtain information on the parents' acceptance of the schools for the mentally retarded.

- The school for the mentally retarded prepares children for their future life. Is this statement correct?
- Are you under the impression that your child likes to attend school?
- Do the lessons teaching in the school for the mentally retarded meet the needs of your child?
- The school for the mentally retarded is a necessary and meaningful institution. Its equipment and specially trained personnel enable it to optimally support mentally handicapped children. Is this statement correct?
- The school for the mentally retarded is necessary. It provides a protective sphere for (severely) handicapped children, allowing them to grow up in a protected way. Is this statement correct?

How satisfied are you

- with the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic,
- with the additional possibilities of therapy offered (e.g. physical therapy, speech therapy treatment, etc.),
- with the nursing (and medical) care,
- with the teaching of practical skills (e.g. personal hygiene, dressing oneself without aid, etc.)
- with the cooperation between the school/daycare center and your home,
- with the qualifications of the available childcare personnel and the teachers?

A four-point scale was provided for answering the questions, or (dis)agreeing with the statements made.

In an additional question about acceptance, the parents were questioned about their wishes regarding their child's school. They could choose from five proposals, and supplement this list with their own proposals. The answers that were provided were:

- reduction of the number of pupils per class or group,
- increase in the number of teachers in the class,
- improved equipment (rooms, support materials, etc.),
- more childcare personnel,
- no wishes.

The following questions were formulated to determine parental cooperation or participation:

Do you experience the present cooperation between you and the school your child is attending as meaningful and helpful? Here too, the parents could express their opinion on a four-point scale.

Would you like to cooperate more intensively with your child's school? If so, what should happen more frequently?

The parents could choose from: parent evenings, individual talks, casual meetings, home visits, one- or several-day family retreats, educational measures on the weekend.

What do you want from the cooperation with your child's school?

Possible answers were: Information on schooling, on the child's development, on further treatment and support measures, or on financial and legal possibilities, opportunities for parental cooperation, opportunities of discussing issues, personal counseling and help in coping with the child's handicap or with educational problems, periods for cooperation coordinated to the parents' schedules.

The attitudes towards integrated teaching of children with and without handicaps were to be reflected in the way the parents responded to the following questions:

- Mentally retarded children lose contact with non-handicapped children by attending the school for mentally retarded. Thus, they are increasingly isolated in our society.
Is this statement correct?
- Do you want your handicapped child to have more frequent contact with non-handicapped children during their time at the institution?

Both questions could again be answered on a four-point scale.

- Do you want your retarded child to have more frequent contact with non-retarded children within the school? If yes, in which form?

- continual integrated lessons
- integrated teaching in individual subjects or lessons,
- joint decisions about aspects of school life (parties, excursions).
- In your opinion, what advantages does integrated teaching of handicapped and non-handicapped children provide for the retarded ones?

The choices provided were taken from reports of successful integration trials.

They are:

- It is easier for the children to develop friendships outside of the school.
- The children stimulate each other by their different standarts.
- The handicapped children learn to live with non-handicapped.
- The handicapped children can learn from the non-handicapped.
- The children have less traveling time.
- The non-handicapped can learn from the handicapped children.
- None
- If you could start your child at school once again, and had a free selection, which school would you send your children to? The choices given were: a school for mentally retarded, a school for the learning disabled, a normal state school, and a private school.