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## **How does a trainer working with the mentally disabled differ from any other teacher or trainer?**

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## 12. How does a trainer working with the mentally disabled differ from any other teacher or trainer?

*Hans-Jürgen Pitsch* <sup>(32)</sup>

### 12.1. Target group

Before we start talking about the teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled, we should first of all agree on which group of the mentally disabled we mean. We are not talking about people with profound mental disabilities who, as a rule, cannot be trained to the level of doing a job, and we are also not talking about the group with mild mental disabilities who, in Germany for instance, are grouped with the so-called slow learners. If we base our discussion on the classification of the American Association on Mental Deficiency (AAMD), then what we are discussing today are the two groups with moderate and severe mental disabilities who are shown in the shaded section of Table 1.

Table 1: AAMD classification according to IQ values

Levels of mental disability	Standard deviations	Theoretical IQ	Stanford-Binet IQ
Borderline	- 1 to - 2	70 – 85	
Mild	- 2 to - 3	55 – 70	67 – 52
Moderate	- 3 to - 4	40 – 55	51 – 36
Severe	- 4 to - 5	25 – 40	35 – 20
Profound	- 5 and below	< 25	< 20

Source: SPECK 1993, 49; additions by H.J.P

### 12.2. Ability to act

Even though this classification by the AAMD uses the very controversial criterion of intelligence, this intelligence criterion can help us to reach a rough understanding of the

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- (a) the highest level, the intellectual level of control, at which plans, complex actions and longer-term strategies are conceived, reviewed and modified;
- (b) the intermediate level, the perceptive-conceptual level of control, at which simple actions are adapted flexibly to changing situations;
- (c) the lowest level, the sensory-motor level of control, which is characterised by the fact that relatively uniform demands are met with automated action processes or operations.

The mentally disabled generally act at the level of perceptual-conceptual control. They:

- (a) process signals containing information;
- (b) can assign their perceptions and ideas to acquired concepts;
- (c) and thus react to verbal communication;
- (d) have general action schemas at hand;
- (e) which they can distinguish in terms of individual situations;
- (f) can acquire basic forms of action;
- (g) which they can put together into simple actions;
- (h) and construct their action plans according to what they are capable of doing.

Furthermore, like people with severe mental disabilities, they may act at the level of sensory-motor control. At this level of action:

- (a) sensory-motor skills are important;
- (b) these can be taught through training;
- (c) repeated stereotype sequences can be mastered;
- (d) these are composed of individually designed movements and sub-programmes;
- (e) they are based on observed movements and sequences of movement; and
- (f) their success can be measured through stereotypical test programmes which can also be acquired through training.

## **12.4. Implications of the control of action**

Teachers and trainers must see to it that the signals from the environment which a mentally disabled person has to receive and process have some significance for that person and an individual meaning. Teachers and trainers must therefore shape the environment of the mentally disabled in such a way that the meaningful signals are clearly perceptible and are not obscured by a multitude of meaningless signals. This means that, for teachers and trainers, the task of shaping an appropriate environment for the mentally disabled is as important as the task of directly leading or guiding them (on this see Pfeffer, 1984).

The mentally disabled must be able to associate perceptions with concepts in order to process them and react to them. Teachers and trainers must, together with the mentally disabled, turn these concepts into conscious actions which are derived from a need and lead to a goal (cf. Probst, 1981). The formulation of these concepts must be directly connected with spoken language (cf. Galperin, 1972), so that the activity can gradually become the substance of thought via the medium of language. Only if this process is successful is it possible for the mentally disabled person to react to verbal communication and follow verbal instructions.

In those cases where communication through spoken language remains problematic, it is possible to use models, pictures, drawings and pictograms. But such aids are seldom ready-made or readily available, which means that teachers and trainers have to produce many simple and easily understandable drawings themselves. A drawing course would be of greater importance in the training of teachers for the mentally disabled than some of the theoretical instruction that they now receive.

When concepts are acquired in the form of conscious action, the sequence of the activity is also taught at the same time. Teachers and trainers must analyse this activity in precise detail beforehand and determine which unit of movement (an operation in Leontjew's definition) has to precede which other, which unit has to follow the other, and how these individual operations can be assembled to form a closed sequence of actions. This means that teachers and trainers has to have distinctive analytical and synthesising skills.

If the mentally disabled are to absorb such sequences of actions, they need clear and distinct action models which they can copy and which should be shown to them step by step. What is even better than making the mentally disabled copy movements, is directly to steer their physical movements (cf. Ackermann, 2001; Affolter, 1990). This speaker believes that this method of directly steering physical movements is the best way of imparting action schemas to persons with mental disabilities. Teachers and trainers should not be reluctant to touch disabled people, to take their hands and move them; they should not feel distaste for the disabled. Anyone who is afraid of physical contact is not suited for this work.

In some circumstances, such guided action sequences have to be repeated many times, until the mentally disabled person has learned them and can perform them on his or her own. Numerous repetitions require a great deal of patience. Quick success cannot be expected. This means that the teacher or trainer of the mentally disabled has to be an extremely patient person who does not expect quick success and who is also able to discern tiny steps of progress and to encourage them – for instance, through praise.

Basically, praise is immensely important for people who seldom experience much success in their activities. Success, in this case, can result from a small effort, or a small improvement in movement, or the transition from one operation to the next. The teacher or trainer of the mentally disabled must have the faculty of noticing the smallest or tiniest change and encouraging it, in other words, he or she must be able to observe small developments with a great deal of sensitivity.

## **12.5. Learning characteristics of the mentally disabled**

The mentally disabled learn less through listening, writing down, reading and understanding than through watching and imitating, or having their movements physically guided by the teacher or trainer or steered through demonstration. The German Conference of Ministers of Education and Culture (KMK) describes the learning process of the mentally disabled (1998) as follows, stating that it is characterised by:

- (a) orientation to situations and factors which are important for the individual;
- (b) diminished ability independently to divide a task into its component parts;
- (c) diminished ability to plan more complex actions;
- (d) little independence in executing actions;
- (e) slower speed of learning;
- (f) less staying power,
- (g) difficult memory retention, and also
- (h) difficult memory recall;
- (i) greater difficulty in communicating because of problems of hearing, understanding and formulating language and gestures;
- (j) difficulties in adapting quickly to changed requirements;
- (k) low level of creativity, and in association with this
- (l) the tendency to take on patterns of action observed in others;
- (m) personal insecurity and lack of ability to assert oneself;
- (n) lack of evident self-control;
- (o) unreasonable assessment of their own abilities
- (p) and low level of self-confidence.

All these characteristics have an influence on how teachers and trainers should approach the mentally disabled.

## **12.6. Implications of the learning characteristics of the mentally disabled**

Teachers and trainers need to be aware of the factors and situations which are or may become subjectively important to mentally disabled people. They must therefore know the mentally disabled person well, observe him or her in various situations and over a long period of time, and then deduce his or her interests and motives from these observations. Precise observation can be learned.

Observation will also show teachers and trainers that the mentally disabled find it difficult or impossible on their own to break down complex tasks into their component parts. This subdivision has to be done by teachers and trainers, which means that they also need to have analytical skills. Methods of analysing work procedures can also be learned.

However, it should be kept in mind that it is not enough for the mentally disabled just to grasp the single components of a task. These alone seldom provide motivation for action. The mentally disabled must at the very least be able to imagine the final result so that they know what their work is leading to. It is also helpful for the mentally disabled always to have the single steps leading to their goal in front of them. Teachers and trainers can offer guidance by, for instance, providing a sequence of photographs or drawings which clearly show which work steps have already been completed, which step a mentally disabled person is working on at the moment, and which steps will be needed to continue the work. Flow charts with diagrams can be used to make the interrelation of the different steps clear to the mentally disabled (cf. Pitsch, 1999, Chapter 18, pp. 371-381). Teachers and trainers must be able to produce these sequences of pictures or flow charts with diagrams themselves.

If such a sequence of pictures of the task to be done is kept in front of mentally disabled, they will also have a ready-made work plan which they cannot produce themselves because of their lack of analytical ability. Mentally disabled people need such external action plans for more comprehensive tasks. The performance of a single motor-related task can also be done by following an internal work plan which is stored as an algorithm in the motor memory. Such algorithms or clear, simple instructions for action, have to be taught by the teacher or trainer through constant and patient exercise in the course of which mistakes should be corrected immediately. This means that, in addition to precise observation, patience is also required – an infinite amount of patience.

Even if mentally disabled people are able to read a pictorial plan of action, and even if they can perform the individual steps as motor-related algorithms, they will still falter now and then, will not know how to continue, and will give up. The teacher or trainer must then keep providing encouragement and motivation, explaining what to do, or pointing to the next step in the diagram. The mentally disabled person's lack of autonomy is transformed into the need for guiding action on the part of the teacher or trainer.

Even when teachers and trainers give detailed individual instructions for simple tasks, they should not expect these to be carried out immediately and quickly. People with Downs syndrome in particular are sometimes very slow in their reactions (cf. Jantzen, 1998), and this can sometimes be interpreted too hastily as refusal or resistance. Teachers and trainers must learn to wait for such delayed reactions, they must be prepared to take enough time themselves and give the mentally disabled person enough time to perform the task.

If people need a large amount of time for a task, they cannot accomplish as much work in the same time as the non-disabled. Teachers and trainers should adjust to this reduced amount of work and also remember that the mentally disabled have less stamina than they themselves have. Sometimes a break has to be taken after just ten minutes of effort. Teachers and trainers

of the mentally disabled have to include these necessary breaks in their work plans right from the beginning. They should not take their own capacity as the standard.

Just as manual tasks are accomplished slowly, and are interrupted by many breaks, the process of learning also follows the same pattern in the case of mentally disabled people. Learning too can only proceed in small steps, with many breaks and repetitions and exercises. In the learning process too, small mistakes should be corrected at once and even the tiniest success should be praised and emphasised immediately. Teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled need a vast repertoire of words and gestures of praise.

What the mentally disabled learn is not always easily stored in their memories. Teachers and trainers also have to help them in various ways to build up their memories. Teachers and trainers can use the following methods:

- (a) use several sensory perceptions at the same time: simultaneously see, touch and move something;
- (b) accompany the activity with words;
- (c) show the activity in pictures;
- (d) express these pictures in words even if these are simple names or keywords. A sequence of verbal names can also be stored in the memory and used later for the planned activity.

If, with these aids, learning content has been anchored in the memory of the mentally disabled person, the same aids can be used to retrieve this learning content from the memory, and to make the person aware of it so that it can then serve to guide an action.

Models, pictures and drawings are more suitable aids than the spoken word to reinforce the storage of learning in the memory and to retrieve it later for a certain action or for work, as mentally disabled people have considerable problems with speech. For teachers and trainers this means that:

- (a) they must speak clearly and distinctly;
- (b) they must use straightforward or explicit terms and give each object just one name;
- (c) the sentences that they make must be short and concise and not long and complicated;
- (d) they must, as far as possible, speak in the indicative and avoid the subjunctive;
- (e) they must use concrete and not abstract terms;
- (f) they must add gestures to stress what they say; and
- (g) they must teach the mentally disabled to use gestures to explain themselves.

Just as complex and complicated tasks and complex language are difficult for mentally disabled people, all complex and not clearly comprehensible situations also create problems for them. They have learned to do something in a certain way in a certain situation. If the situation changes, the algorithms they have learned will no longer function. In a changed



situation, what has been grasped earlier may sometimes have to be learned again. Such re-learning under changed conditions will be easier and faster than the first learning process, but the teacher or trainer has to keep this in mind and plan it ahead. Once again, this means that the teacher or trainer has to analyse situations very carefully, identify changes and react accordingly.

The diminished capacity of mentally disabled people to adapt flexibly to new situations is closely associated with their difficulty in retrieving the single skills they have learned from their memories and in re-combining them for a specific new situation. This re-combining requires imagination, a flexible mode of thinking and projection into the future, something we call 'creativity'. Teachers and trainers should not take this creativity for granted in the case of the mentally disabled, but must teach it each time. This can be done in the form of a game, or a testing of new actions in 'experimental' situations, but without the pressure of having to achieve a goal or manufacture a product.

This semi-experimental testing of creativity can also, under favourable conditions, counteract the inclination of mentally disabled people simply to copy all the patterns of behaviour that they have observed in other people. But it is precisely this ability to imitate the behaviour of others which is a good way of learning. Teachers and trainers can offer the mentally disabled important models for action by acting themselves in a clear and unambiguous manner, by doing things slowly so that they can be observed, and by always accompanying their actions with clear and dependable verbal explanations. It is also important that they should always do the same thing in the same situation, not act once in one way and another time in a different way, that is, their actions must always remain constant over time.

In order to demonstrate this model behaviour, teachers and trainers will sometimes have to overcome their own resistance and exercise their will. If they clearly show their own difficulties and how they are overcoming them, if they explain this in words, they become a model for the assertion of will, a model which will benefit mentally disabled people, who are characterised by a lack of capacity to assert themselves. They too have to learn to overcome uncertainties and difficulties, to activate their wills and to assert themselves.

When mentally disabled people try to assert themselves, their actions are often aggressive and inconsiderate, oriented towards their own aims but not towards the needs and interests of others. It is up to teachers and trainers to build up balanced control, primarily through example but also by giving everyone in the group the opportunity of expressing their needs and interests and coordinating them. For this the most suitable method is situations in which the aim is not to manufacture a product but to plan an emotionally pleasant event; role-playing and simulation games are also suitable, which means that teachers and trainers have to know how to handle them. Even with all this, they will still find it necessary to intervene from outside to direct the behaviour of the mentally disabled.

The low level of self-control goes hand in hand with an impaired ability to estimate their own abilities. Some mentally disabled people think that they can do everything, and others feel that they can do nothing at all. It is up to teachers and trainers to teach them to arrive at a

reasonable assessment of their own abilities. To achieve this they must grade tasks in such a way that:

- (a) these can sometimes be accomplished easily, which will build up self-confidence;
- (b) at other times they can only be mastered with effort, which will clearly demonstrate the limitations of each individual's potential.

If the teacher or trainer succeeds, in one way or another, in making mentally disabled people aware of what they are able to accomplish, this will create confidence in their own abilities. But I also think it is as important for them to realise the limits of their abilities, and especially to be aware of situations in which they should not get involved. This means that the necessary self-confidence is founded on self-assurance, on the certainty of what they are able to achieve, but also on caution which tells them what they should not let themselves into. Building up this kind of self-confidence is fraught with conflict. Teachers and trainers should not only be unafraid of such conflicts, they must also be able to cope with them and handle them with great competence.

## **12.7. Non-disabled people's perceptions of the mentally disabled**

The work of teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled will be heavily influenced by their perception of these persons, by the attitudes emerging from this perception, and whether and how they are able to change unsuitable attitudes. These phenomena have up to now – at least in the German-speaking regions – only been examined from the standpoint of prejudice in the general population, but not from the angle of the attitudes created in teachers and trainers. Surveys conducted by the author on the first impressions gained by students from Luxembourg and by trainees and youngsters doing one year of social work instead of military service in Germany, in their contacts with mentally disabled persons, resulted in the following preliminary findings (cf. Pitsch, 1996, pp. 1-7).

In their initial contacts with the mentally disabled what struck them most was:

- (a) their use of stereotyped language,
- (b) deficiencies in spoken language,
- (c) lack of social restraint,
- (d) aggression vis-à-vis persons and objects,
- (e) motor-related stereotypes,
- (f) limited understanding of the spoken word,
- (g) limited understanding of facts and circumstances,
- (h) limited ability to think.

Their reactions to this unusual behaviour were described by the young people as follows:

- (a) apprehension,
- (b) a feeling of revulsion,
- (c) fear,
- (d) uncertainty and awkwardness,
- (e) a spontaneous and unconsidered wish to help,
- (f) the wish to look after them and take care of them.

## **12.8. Implications of the perceptions of the mentally disabled**

The reactions of the non-disabled described above can be dangerous for mentally disabled people if they become rigid and unchanging and influence the actions of non-disabled persons such as teachers and trainers. Teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled can consciously avoid these dangers if they build up their attitudes in a planned and very deliberate manner.

The necessary attitudes are that:

- (a) people with mental disabilities are not ‘different’ people, not ‘strangers’ but merely simple human beings like them;
- (b) despite their odd behaviour they should be accepted as human beings, just as they are;
- (c) their odd and sometimes repellent behaviour makes sense to them and helps them to cope with parts of their lives;
- (d) such undesirable patterns of behaviour can gradually be changed;
- (e) the fears of the non-disabled are the result of a lack of understanding;
- (f) teachers and trainers must learn to understand the mentally disabled by trying to gain an intuitive understanding and putting themselves in their place;
- (g) uncertainty in the behaviour of teachers and trainers will disappear when they set long-term teaching goals and pursue them consistently and with patience;
- (h) in doing this, teachers and trainers should not be discouraged by setbacks or failures; they must always keep their long-term goals in mind;
- (i) in the event of failure or setback, the teacher or trainer should not immediately try to take over the task of the mentally disabled person, nor try to help him or her all the time;
- (j) it is more important to show the mentally disabled how they can ask for help on their own;
- (k) mentally disabled people become aware of the necessity of asking for help only in those situations which they cannot cope with by themselves;

- (l) however, mentally disabled people have a chance to do this only if they are encouraged to act on their own – over-protection and the constant removal of difficulties prevent insight into their own limitations;
- (m) the knowledge of their own limitations should also be taught in the field of social contacts – however much we non-disabled are attracted (or repelled) by the spontaneous hug, we have to teach the mentally disabled in which situations this is allowed or even desirable and in which it is not;
- (n) until this learning process is completed, we have to put up with the behaviour of the mentally disabled.

## **12.9. Summary: demands on teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled**

In conclusion, we should like to compile a keyword list of the above-mentioned demands placed on teacher and trainers of the mentally disabled and then see whether there are any differences between these and the demands placed on other teachers and trainers, and if so, which.

We expect teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled:

- to shape the environment with distinct and meaningful signals;
- to teach those concepts (thought schemas) which enable the meanings of signals to be grasped;
- to support and, if necessary, replace the spoken word by models, pictures, drawings and pictograms;
- to teach concepts (thought schemas) in the form of conscious, target-oriented, planned and controlled concrete action;
- to analyse actions and synthesise partial actions;
- to demonstrate clear models of action which can be imitated;
- to give direct physical guidance to the mentally disabled;
- to be willing to keep repeating, and have the patience needed for this;
- to be willing and able to notice even minimal signs of progress and encourage them;
- to have a vast repertoire of ways of expressing praise;
- to be able and willing to undertake differentiated observation;
- to be able to make the disabled aware of goals and connections even in the smallest tasks;
- to be able to visualise;
- to be able to present complete plans for action as algorithms;

- to give constant encouragement/reassurance/motivation;
- to be able to wait and see, and to allow sufficient time;
- to be able to accept breaks in the performance of tasks;
- to be able immediately to notice even the smallest mistakes and to correct them;
- to learn to organise and combine several modes of sensory perception;
- to be able constantly and directly to accompany action with the spoken word;
- to speak clearly and distinctly;
- to use straightforward concrete terms;
- to form short, concise sentences;
- to avoid the subjunctive wherever possible;
- to accompany the spoken word with gestures;
- to be able to re-organise what has already been learned as new learning material if the situation changes;
- to encourage free, playful application of what has already been learned;
- to be consistent and dependable in their own actions;
- to demonstrate examples of resistance, effort and the application of will;
- to teach controlled and directed application of will;
- if necessary, to intervene from outside to guide the behaviour of the disabled person;
- to impart self-assurance and self-confidence;
- to show the limitations of the mentally disabled person's own abilities;
- to accept the mentally disabled as fully valuable human beings;
- to understand odd and undesirable behaviour as being meaningful in subjective terms;
- to build up useful and desirable behaviour;
- to be able to put themselves in the position of the mentally disabled;
- to set clear, unambiguous long-term goals;
- to continue to pursue these goals even in the event of failure or setback;
- to avoid unnecessary assistance;
- to teach the mentally disabled to ask for help themselves;
- to accept momentary periods of strain;
- to keep over-protection and removal of obstacles within limits;
- to teach patterns of behaviour in different situations;
- to put up with things which may be disturbing, unreasonable or undesirable.

Through these expectations we are not really describing the teachers and trainers of mentally disabled people but the teachers and trainers that we would have wished for ourselves, in other words, the 'ideal' teacher. But each one of our teachers only fulfilled this ideal to a certain extent. Are we not asking too much when we expect the teacher or trainer of mentally disabled persons to comply with all these requirements? I know of no person – including myself – who could have fulfilled all these demands. So let us be modest and be satisfied with the most essential requirements. But let us also be pragmatic and give the teachers and trainers of the mentally disabled all the assistance that they need.

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