

17-9-82

ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF MENTALLY RETARDED PERSONS  
WITHIN EDUCATION AND ACTIVITY SETTINGS

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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January, 1982

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT	(xvi)
STATEMENT	(xxi)
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	(xxii)
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR	1
1.1. BACKGROUND	1
(a) Special Education	2
(b) Activity Therapy Centres	6
1.2. THE CONCEPT OF ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR IN MENTAL RETARDATION	8
1.3. THE MEASUREMENT OF ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR	13
(a) The AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale	19
(b) Reliability of the AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale	28
(c) Construct Validity of the AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale	30
(d) Practical Usefulness of the AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale	38
(e) Modifications to the AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale	46
(f) Cross-Cultural Use of the AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale	49
1.4. AIMS OF RESEARCH	50
CHAPTER 2 A: A STUDY OF THE ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF MENTALLY RETARDED ADOLESCENTS ATTENDING SPECIAL SCHOOLS	55
2.1. INTRODUCTION	55
2.2. METHOD	56
2.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	66
(a) Applicability of AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale to Special Schools	66
(b) Reliability of AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale with Special School Students	68

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 2 (continued)	
2.3. (continued)	
(c) Validity of AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale with Special School Students	70
(d) AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale Norms for Special Schools	75
(e) Adaptive Behaviour of Special School Students	75
(f) Maladaptive Behaviour of Special School Students	98
B: A ONE YEAR FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF THE ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF MENTALLY RETARDED ADOLESCENTS ATTENDING SPECIAL SCHOOLS	124
2.1. INTRODUCTION	124
2.2. METHOD	126
2.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	128
C: A TWO YEAR FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF THE ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF MENTALLY RETARDED ADOLESCENTS ATTENDING SPECIAL SCHOOLS	135
2.1. INTRODUCTION	135
2.2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	137
CHAPTER 3	
A: A STUDY OF THE ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF MENTALLY RETARDED ADULTS ATTENDING ACTIVITY THERAPY CENTRES	144
3.1. INTRODUCTION	144
3.2. METHOD	145
3.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	151
(a) Applicability of AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale to Activity Therapy Centres	151
(b) Reliability of AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale with Activity Therapy Centre Trainees	154

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 3 (continued)	
3.3. (continued)	
(c) Validity of AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale with Activity Therapy Centre Trainees	156
(d) AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale Norms for Activity Therapy Centres	160
(e) Adaptive Behaviour of Activity Therapy Centre Trainees	161
(f) Maladaptive Behaviour of Activity Therapy Centre Trainees	180
B: COMPARISON OF THE ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR OF SPECIAL SCHOOL STUDENTS AND ACTIVITY THERAPY CENTRE TRAINEES	196
3.1. INTRODUCTION	196
3.2. METHOD	198
3.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	200
(a) Comparison of the Behavioural Functioning of Special School Students and Activity Therapy Centre Trainees	200
(b) Are Special School Students Adequately Prepared to Meet the Behavioural Standards of Activity Therapy Centres?	219
CHAPTER 4 THE FACTORIAL DIMENSIONS OF ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOUR IN NONINSTITUTIONALIZED SPECIAL SCHOOL STUDENTS AND ACTIVITY THERAPY CENTRE TRAINEES	226
4.1. INTRODUCTION	226
4.2. METHOD	230
4.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	233
(a) Factor Analysis of ABS Part I and II Domains	234

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 4 (continued)	
4.3. (continued)	
(b) Factor Analysis of ABS Part I Subdomains	243
CHAPTER 5	
A: THE PERFORMANCE OF MENTALLY RETARDED PERSONS IN MATHEMATICS	251
5.1. INTRODUCTION	251
5.2. LITERATURE REVIEW	253
5.3. DEVELOPMENT OF A FUNCTIONAL MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM	268
B: THE PERFORMANCE OF ADOLESCENT MENTALLY RETARDED STUDENTS AFTER TWELVE WEEKS ON A STRUCTURED MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM	273
5.1. INTRODUCTION	273
5.2. METHOD	275
5.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	278
C: A ONE YEAR FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF THE ADOLESCENT MENTALLY RETARDED STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE TWELVE WEEK FMC TRAINING PROGRAMME	289
5.1. INTRODUCTION	289
5.2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	291
D: THE PERFORMANCE OF ADOLESCENT MENTALLY RETARDED STUDENTS AFTER TWELVE MONTHS ON A STRUCTURED MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM	296
5.1. INTRODUCTION	296
5.2. METHOD	298
5.3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	300

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	310
6.1. SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND ACTIVITY THERAPY CENTRES	310
6.2. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS	331
6.3. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	334
6.4. A MODEL FOR THE TRANSITION OF MENTALLY RETARDED INDIVIDUALS FROM SPECIAL SCHOOL TO ACTIVITY THERAPY CENTRE	340
 LIST OF APPENDICES	 347
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 396

## ABSTRACT

The general aim of the research was to investigate problems facing mentally retarded persons in their transition from school to a work setting. Since most retarded individuals in South Australia "graduate" from Special Schools (SSs) to Activity Therapy Centres (ATCs), the research sought to identify behavioural strengths and weaknesses among SS students (aged from 13 to 20 years) and ATC trainees (aged 19 years and above), particularly in areas important to employment. A review of rating scales assessing adaptive behaviour suggested the AAMD Adaptive Behaviour Scale (ABS) to be the best instrument available for the measurement of adaptive and maladaptive behaviours among the two populations being studied. ABS Part I and II data were collected from 550 students and 370 trainees.

Initially, the scale's general applicability, reliability and validity were assessed with SS students and ATC trainees, since the ABS includes some items relevant to the home environment which it was thought could be difficult for teachers and supervisors to rate. The applicability of the ABS was established by showing that it can discriminate significantly between individuals attending school and work settings in terms of a number of factors representing personal characteristics; in particular Age, Sex, IQ Level, Etiology, Place of Living, Mobility Handicaps and Use of Medications. The interrater reliability of the scale was assessed for 98 students and 63 trainees, yielding Part I and II reliability coefficients comparable to those in the ABS Manual. The validity of the ABS was determined by testing the relationship between the ABS Part I and II domains and a

four-level AB classification judged by teachers and supervisors. The results showed that all ABS Part I domains and some Part II domains were uniquely associated with these AB Levels, verifying the criterion validity of the ABS with SS students and ATC trainees. It was concluded, therefore, that the ABS was a suitable, reliable and valid instrument for use in South Australian SSs and ATCs. To facilitate its subsequent use in these settings, norms were developed from the survey data for four age groups of SS students (13-14 years, 15-16 years, 17-18 years, 19-20 years) and three age groups of ATC trainees (19-29 years, 30-39 years, 40 years and above).

The adaptive and maladaptive behaviours of all students and trainees participating in the research were then examined in terms of the seven factors referred to above, thereby providing specific information on the behavioural abilities and disabilities among SS students and ATC trainees. The study of student behaviours suggested a trend for adaptive behaviour, as measured by Part I of the ABS, to increase during adolescence. Since this developmental trend was based on cross-sectional observations of the SS population which may have been confounded by cohort effects, a one year follow-up of 30 students who had participated in the main school study was carried out. The aim was to determine if the increase in ABS Part I scores could be attributed to a genuine age effect. In addition, Part II scores were examined to ascertain whether SSs reduce the maladaptive behaviour of their students. The results of this study were inconclusive, and so the ABS data of another group of 44 students were re-examined after the passage of two years. These data provided strong evidence that increases in adaptive behaviour could be inter-



preted as a function of age alone, and supportive evidence that SSSs reduce maladaptive behaviours.

Subsequently, a comparison of the ABS scores of students and trainees was undertaken, to establish where differences existed between the two groups, and to determine if students are adequately prepared to meet the behavioural standards of ATCs. Trainees were found to have a higher adaptive behaviour profile, generally scoring between 10 and 25 percent more than students on each Part I domain. It was also found that adaptive behaviour increased with age during adolescence and early adulthood, and remained relatively stable thereafter. Further analyses revealed that 75 percent of the students were adequately prepared to meet the behavioural standards of ATCs, the remaining 25 percent of such cases varying from 20 to 40 percent below an empirically established minimum level. Comparison of the Part II results for students and trainees did not indicate any general differences in the type and prevalence of maladaptive behaviour exhibited; students scored higher on Stereotyped Behaviour and Odd Mannerisms, and trainees on Unacceptable Vocal Habits and Hyperactive Tendencies. In addition, maladaptive behaviour was generally found to be independent of the age of the students and trainees.

Two types of factor analyses were conducted on the ABS data from noninstitutionalized SS students and ATC trainees; an orthogonal rotation of the Part I and II domains, and an oblique rotation of the Part I subdomains. The first factor analysis produced three mutually independent factors - Personal Independence, Social Maladaptation and Personal Maladaptation - while the second analysis partitioned Personal Independence into four subfactors - Personal

Self-Sufficiency, Community Self-Sufficiency, Personal-Social Responsibility and Domestic Self-Sufficiency.

One of the aims of the research was to develop programmes aimed at overcoming the problems presently faced by retarded adolescents in their transition from a school environment to an activity centre environment. The adaptive behaviour studies conducted revealed a general weakness in the ABS domains of Economic Activity and Numbers and Time for both students and trainees, while the factor analyses highlighted the importance of developing mathematical skills in mentally retarded persons in order to enhance their prospects of successfully adapting within the community. Consequently, a Functional Mathematics Curriculum was developed to overcome deficiencies in the number, money, time, measurement and calendar skills of retarded persons.

The curriculum was piloted with 55 students in a twelve week programme, and shown to be effective in developing the mathematics skills of six mildly and six moderately retarded adolescents. Its effects were also found to be long-lasting as indicated by a one year follow-up of those subjects. A further study was conducted in order to overcome some of the organizational and methodological problems encountered during the initial study, the curriculum being incorporated into the total programme of a group of ten students for a twelve month period. It was concluded that the rate at which retarded individuals learn mathematical skills and concepts can be increased if such persons are provided with systematic training on a hierarchically structured curriculum, developed on the basis of task analysis.

In the concluding chapter several implications of the findings for SSs, ATCs, and for future research have been drawn. In addition, a model for the transition of mentally retarded individuals from SS to ATC has been proposed.