

'Their enormous need'

By I. ROBERT FINKELSTEIN

"Their enormous need. . . I remember the children running to me and grabbing me. . . it was gratifying to see their need for acceptance and love."

A former resident psychiatrist at Willowbrook State School and director now of the as yet unbuilt Bronx State School, Dr. Bernard Tesse was reminiscing about the first day he worked with mentally retarded children in 1950.

Born in 1910 in Poland and trained as a physician in Prague, Dr. Tesse came to the United States in 1950 and began working at Willowbrook just three weeks after entering

this country.

A committed, quiet man, Dr. Tesse spoke English with a slight accent and slowly but his steady clear speech often revealed deliberation and thought. Asked whether one particular case or patient evoked special pride in him, he remarked that "pride is an emotion only young men feel."

Dr. Tesse's maturity has replaced pride with a steady hard-working commitment to his life's work: the treatment and training of mentally retarded children.

As director of Bronx State School, one of his tasks, will be "to translate the needs of the mentally retarded into a physical structure." One guiding principle is to make the state school "a comfortable place, comfortable as a family setting."



DR. BERNARD TESSE

So there will be no large wards. The basic unit of planning is something like a suite, with two four-patient rooms adjoining a common play area and living-room.

Each bed is arranged with its own arm chair, desk, chest and lamp, "much as you'd find in a college dormitory," Tesse explained. It is considered essential that no more than eight patients share a common living area, for the family style comfort would be destroyed by greater numbers. Simply "to get together" is enjoyable and therapeutic.

Dr. Tesse has been in overall charge of the architectural plans for the school and many special features will be incorporated into the building. A relatively minor detail, the doors in all hallways must be wider than conventional size to accommodate the unfocused, wandering movement of spastic patients, while patients being treated with drugs compel a more complex architectural solution.

Patients treated with drugs must be protected from too much direct sunlight. Otherwise they will suffer serious

"glaucoma" or eye-damage. To determine the exact sunlight intensity and the proportion of sun and shadow in each room, Dr. Tesse conducted architectural "sun studies" and then recommended the correct window sizes, ceiling heights and decor necessary for cutting direct sunlight to a safe minimum.

Bronx State School will accommodate some 960 patients, ranging from the mildly and moderately retarded to the profoundly retarded. This last group "shows no interest in their surroundings and are unable to communicate or accept communication."

In most cases they are bedridden ("non-ambulatory") and not toilet trained. Progress is measured in the acquisition of daily life skills such as feeding oneself or toilet training, and occupational therapists might work closely with pediatricians in the treatment.

In less severely retarded cases, treatment may include psychoanalysis, especially where motivation problems are encountered.

Dr. Tesse conceives of all treatment of the mentally retarded as a team endeavor, and in addition to working closely with architects to create the best functional institution, he has developed close liaison with Albert Einstein Medical School and Yeshiva University "not only to provide the best services for the mentally retarded, but also to open new paths for training personnel and performing research."

A third major part of Dr. Tesse's time is taken up with "developing very close associations and modes of cooperation with parents' groups and community agencies," he said.

"My great need is to help those children," Dr. Tesse remarked. "I feel like a fellow who joined the Peace Corps and went to some backward country to try to bring in some light."