

# History of Education

## Journal of the History of Education Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713599897>

### Disability, Education and Social Change in England since 1960

Felicity Armstrong

Online Publication Date: 01 July 2007

To cite this Article: Armstrong, Felicity (2007) 'Disability, Education and Social Change in England since 1960', *History of Education*, 36:4, 551 - 568

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/00467600701496849

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00467600701496849>

### Disability, Education and Social Change in England since 1960

Disability and disabled people are under-represented in the history of education. The exclusion of disabled children from ordinary schools which occurred routinely until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, is mirrored in the way disability and difference have been largely ignored in formal historical work.<sup>1</sup> Richard Altenbaugh has argued that disability has not been treated in the same way as social categories such as race, class and gender and historians have 'generally neglected disability itself as a mark of inequality'.<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that this neglect is underpinned by an understanding of impairment as being a *natural* or implicitly justifiable reason for marginalisation, in contrast to inequalities experienced by other social categories.

The history of the relationship between education and disability in England in recent years has been marked by struggles over participation, social attitudes and rights within a period of rapid social and economic change. Dominant assumptions about impairment, the experience of disabled people and their social roles have been increasingly challenged by the Disability movement and Disability scholars, and within human rights debates and organisations. Legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) have attempted to remove some of the barriers to access and participation in education, the environment, employment and ordinary social life, marking an apparent cultural shift in official assumptions, expectations and opportunities.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, In *A History of English Education from 1760*<sup>1</sup>, first published in 1947, with a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 1966, Barnard devoted approximately 3 pages out of 334, to special education. See Barnard, H.C. *A History of English Education from 1760*. London: University of London Press, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Altenbaugh, Richard J. "Where are the disabled in the History of Education? The Impact of Polio on Sites of Learning". *History of Education* 35 no. 6 (2006) 705-730.

However, the effects of discriminatory structures, attitudes and practices are still deeply rooted as evidenced, for example, by the numbers of children identified as having ‘special educational needs’ attending segregated schools or units in England<sup>3</sup>, the economic status of disabled people and the low levels of participation by disabled people in Higher Education and employment.

The aim of the first half of this paper is to outline some of the key developments which have taken place in the field of education and disability, particularly since 1944 with some reference to changes in social and intellectual context since 1960. These changes have included a critical re-evaluation of existing historical work and the emergence of new approaches which recognise subjectivity, multiple levels of experience, the micro-politics of power, and the centrality of discourse in the study of social relationships. The second half of the paper is concerned with the historiography of education and disability and considers some of the different approaches which have been adopted to historical analysis in the field in the recent period.

**“Education and the Handicapped, 1760-1960” – on the cusp of change.**

D.G.Pritchard’s major work<sup>4</sup> *Education and the Handicapped, 1760-1960*, published in 1963, marks a transition stage in terms of historical enquiry in the field of disability and education. It provides a useful starting point for a discussion of some subsequent and contrasting developments, both in the history of education and provision for disabled students, and the ways these have been researched and written about.

Pritchard’s work is an example of a ‘modernist’ approach in which historians engage in a ‘quest for revealed truth’ involving the ‘discovery, identification of hidden structures, and the ‘digging up of clues’<sup>5</sup>. The challenge to historians of the period was not to explore different ‘realities’ or ‘interpretations’ of the world from different perspectives, in which the ‘voices’ of insiders are regarded as key in constructing

---

<sup>3</sup> *Segregation trends – LEAs in England 2002-2004* (Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2005); Department for Education and Skills First Release. *Special Educational Needs in England, January 2006*. Department for Education and Skills, National Statistics, SFR 23/2006.

<sup>4</sup> Pritchard, D. *Education and the Handicapped 1760-1960*. London: Routledge & KeganPaul, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> McCulloch, G. and W. Richardson. *Historical Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000: 30

different narratives, but a rational and empirical search for ‘truths’ in a knowable, researchable world. The modernist tradition was ‘part of a conservative commitment to realism that theory is unnecessary, epistemology and methodology being largely a matter of common-sense.’<sup>6</sup> It is this ‘common-sense’ tradition which has been challenged, if not trounced, by new, fundamentally different approaches to historical enquiry which reflect the changing cultural understandings and socio-political struggles over the past forty-five years.

The material in Pritchard’s book provides a detailed account of structures, pedagogies and practices in the education of disabled children over a period of 200 years. The author’s sources were extensive and included legislation, official reports, conference proceedings, books and articles. It is an example, perhaps, of what Foucault referred to as ‘history as that which transforms documents into monuments’<sup>7</sup>. I will return to Pritchard’s work in the second half of the paper.

The work of Foucault, also referred to later in this paper, made a key contribution in refocusing attention away from ‘grand narratives’ featuring prominent historical figures, legislation, and notions of “evolution and recurrence” which were part of the dominant social-historical paradigms.<sup>8</sup> Foucault’s ‘genealogical’ approach recognised ‘...the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories, and unpalatable defeats - the basis for all beginnings, atavisms, and heredities.’ O’Brien describes this approach as appearing

...deceptively simple: recognizing and juxtaposing differences in search of the manifestation of power that permeates all social relations. Power is a complex phenomenon that challenges positivist assumptions. Foucault’s method allows us to perceive how societies function. Studying power through discourse allows us to perceive the moment when new technologies of power are introduced.<sup>9</sup>

This understanding, which is in profound contrast with Pritchard’s approach, is relevant to some of the work which has been carried out in recent years in the field of

---

<sup>6</sup> Parker, C. *The English Historical Tradition since 1850*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990: 199-200, cited in McCulloch and Richardson *ibid*:

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, M *Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock, 1972

<sup>8</sup> O’Brien, P. “Michel Foucault’s History of Culture.” In *The New Cultural History* edited by Lynn Hunt. California: University of California Press, 1989

<sup>9</sup> O’Brien, P. *Ibid*, 38.

disability which critically explores the role of professionals and the discourses and power relations invested in their 'expertise' and involves systems of categorisation and labelling,<sup>10</sup> or 'regimes of truth'.

Another important influence on the way history has been re-conceptualised in seeking to understand social and historical change, relates to the cultural explorations of social historians such as E.P Thompson and Natalie Davis in the early nineteen seventies which sought to 'give voice and life to the peasants, workers, and artisans they studied.'<sup>11</sup> The emergence of this kind of work reflects the political and social 'egalitarian' upheavals of the nineteen sixties and a growing awareness of social inequalities. It challenged the historical silencing of working class people, and of marginalised groups, and opened up new ways of exploring social history and legitimated new kinds of material. This is also relevant to some of the more recent work in the history of education and disabled people which focuses on the importance of 'voice' and narrative histories and will be returned to.

In tracing an outline of some of the key developments which have taken place in the field of education and disability, I adopt an economical and linear approach in providing some key features and facts rather, than a more textured, critical and analytical account. It is precisely this kind of teleological 'writing of history' which is critiqued in the second part this paper, and which is now regarded as very limited in terms of understanding historical and social change. However, some kind of 'historical background' is required and it is not possible, in the space available, to cover such a large period and complex subject matter in a way which recognises subjectivity, contradiction, multiplicity and the richness and diversity of human experience. The account in the next section is, therefore, only a bare skeletal, surface account of the development of education and disability, and gives no insight into the social and cultural relations and struggles which underpin it. In the second part of this paper, I will discuss some alternative approaches to exploring the historical development of education and disability.

---

<sup>10</sup> Billington, T. *Separating, Losing and Excluding Children: Narratives of Difference*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Desan, S. "Crowds, Community, and Ritual in the work of E.P.Thompson and Natalie Davis". In *The New Cultural History* edited by Lynn Hunt. California: University of California Press, 1989

## **Disabled children, education and legislation - a 'linear' account**

The setting up of educational structures for children with impairments can be traced back to the eighteenth century in England, although there were many earlier examples of institutions established by religious orders, and later examples set up by lay voluntary associations funded by charities<sup>12</sup> and philanthropists. Prior to the 1870s, many disabled children from poorer families were sent to workhouses, reformatory or industrial schools<sup>13</sup> where they sometimes received basic education and training. There were also the lunatic asylums where children and adults diagnosed as insane or 'mentally defective' were placed, and where they sometimes received education and training,<sup>14</sup> but the residential special schools, which were located in asylums controlled by doctors, psychiatrists and philanthropists, were detached from the education sector and the influence of educationists.<sup>15</sup> The dominance of the early history of special education by medicine and psychiatry has had a profound and long-lasting influence on perceptions of disabled children and the kind of provision made for them which has been characterised by care, control, therapy and remediation.

Formal education structures designated for disabled children began to develop following the introduction of elementary education through the education acts of 1870, 1876 and 1880. The *Report of the Royal Commission on the Blind, the Deaf, the Dumb and Others of the United Kingdom* (The Egerton Report) published in 1889<sup>16</sup>, was underpinned by a pragmatic and moral commitment to providing elementary technical education for blind people rather than 'support them through a life of

---

<sup>12</sup> Sutherland, G. 'The origins of special education.' In *The Practice of Special Education*, edited by Will Swann. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 94.

<sup>13</sup> Hurt, J.S. *Outside the Mainstream: A History of Special Education*. London: Batsford, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> One example of this was the Starcross asylum near Exeter which was later developed as a residential special school. See Dale, P. 'Tension in the voluntary-statutory alliance: "Lay professionals" and the planning and delivery of mental deficiency services, 1917-1945.'" In *Mental Illness and Learning Disability since 1850: Finding a place for mental disorder in the United Kingdom* edited by Dale, P. and J. Melling. London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Dale, P. "Special Education at Starcross before 1948." *History of Education*, 36, no 1 (2007): 17-44

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on the Blind, the Deaf, the Dumb and Others of the United Kingdom* (The Egerton Report). London: HMSO. (1889)

idleness'.<sup>17</sup> These twin projects – that of economic rationalism and the moral imperative of productive labour – have dominated the history of responses to disability and the provision of education and training in England.

The burgeoning of the medical and therapeutic professions<sup>18</sup>, the interest in eugenics<sup>19</sup> and the refining of categorisations of defects and deficiency, as well as the increasing involvement of the state in social welfare and education since the late nineteenth century, fostered the growth in special education. It was also influenced by a number of other, sometimes conflicting, factors, including contemporary humanitarian values, a growing societal commitment to formal education, the need for a literate and manageable workforce, and the development and strengthening of local education authorities. These all played a part in the development of the network of structures which made up the special education system that developed during the first half of the twentieth century.

The 1944 Education Act (UK) introduced eleven 'categories of handicap' and guidance concerning provision for each category and degree of impairment. It widened access to formal state education by drawing large numbers of disabled children into the education system for the first time and gave Local Education Authorities responsibility for their education. Significantly, the 1944 Education Act decreed that all children, with the exception of those deemed to be 'uneducable', should receive 'efficient full-time education suitable to his age, aptitude and ability either by regular attendance at schools or otherwise'.

Subsequently, the Education (Handicapped Children) Act (1970) made local education authorities responsible for the education of *all* children, bringing every child into the education system, regardless of impairment or learning difficulty.

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Tomlinson, S. *A Sociology of Special Education*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982: 13.

<sup>18</sup> Potts, P. "Medicine, Morals and Mental Deficiency: the contribution of doctors to the development of special education in England." *Oxford Review of Education* 9, no 3 (1983): 181-196

<sup>19</sup> Barker, D. "How to Curb the Fertility of the Unfit: the feeble-minded in Edwardian Britain." *Oxford Review of Education* 9, no 3 (1983): 197-211

The Warnock Report (1978)<sup>20</sup> challenged dominant assumptions that there were ‘two types of children, the handicapped and the non-handicapped’ and that the categorisation of impairment was a justification for ‘special’ provision. It argued that the term ‘handicapped’ provided no information about *educational* need, marking an important change of emphasis. Disabled children were not to be seen as the recipients of therapy and care, but as learners with an entitlement to education. The 1981 Education Act which followed enshrined the term ‘special educational needs’ in legislation, ostensibly replacing the categories of impairment encoded by the 1944 Education Act. Provision was made for the introduction of statutory assessment of learning difficulties to establish whether a child had special educational needs, introducing the new label ‘SEN’, and what these needs were. ‘Statements’ of special educational needs, stipulating the nature of the ‘needs’, how they should be met, and the resources required, were drawn up for some children as an outcome of multi-professional assessment procedures. These procedures themselves had important implications in terms of educational provision and resources and engendered a massive rise in the number of professional assessments carried out. Paradoxically, although the term special educational needs focused on educational needs rather than individual impairments, it became a globalising category denoting difference or learning difficulty which co-existed with the established categories of impairment, and alongside new ones.

More recently legislation such as the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) adopted a change of emphasis in establishing a duty to educate children with special educational needs in mainstream schools, but this duty remains contingent and provisional as it applies only if ‘...it is compatible with the wishes of the parent and the ‘provision of efficient education for other children’. These are some of the ‘bare bones’ of key legislative changes in the development of special education in England. They say little about the wider social contexts in which they occurred and nothing about the experiences of disabled children.

---

<sup>20</sup> Department of Education and Science. *Special Educational Needs. Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the education of handicapped children and young people*(Warnock Report). London: HMSO. 1978

## Special education and social change

Special education, its structures, practices and purposes, are embedded in wider cultural values and social change. For example, the collusion of eugenics with humanitarianism and the growth in the power of the state at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were the architects of the growth and character of special education and these influences were played out in debates and policy developments throughout the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

Changes in social life brought about by war have also influenced perceptions about impairment and disabled people and, in turn, have influenced the development of special education. During the Second World War the infrastructures of ordinary schooling, special education and residential institutions were profoundly affected by the blitz, the evacuation of children from the cities, the widespread disruption in education services and a massive reduction in human resources and basic amenities. In 1941, for example, the number of disabled children attending special schools in London was reduced by 50% and many attended ordinary schools. These changes prepared and the growing belief that special schools should be brought into the general education system paved the way for the 1944 Education Act. The post-war

---

<sup>21</sup> This is well expressed in C.W.Hutt's *Crowley's Hygiene of School Life*, (London: Methuen, 1910:16-17). "The newer views and outlook upon life which this opening century has brought, the increased development of social consciousness and of communal responsibility, together with the publication of the results of investigations by various observers, have (...) served to arouse and even alarm the public. In addition, the great fact is steadily becoming admitted that these conditions of defective physique are the results of causes (...) capable of removal and therefore to be removed". Insight into the eugenicist thinking of the time can be found in C.W.Saleeby's book *The Progress of Eugenics* (London: Cassell, 1914: 208-209). "For the greater number of cases where the principle of negative eugenics apply, permanent care or segregation of the individual is the remedy, if only because the individual would require such treatment even were he sterile, or were his defect not hereditary. No problem arises, therefore, except to silence stupid legislators. Nor does the question of possible sterilisation arise, for there is no such need where the individual will be permanently cared for. But the case is entirely different when we consider (a) the "impure dominant" and (b) the "recessive," whose defect, such as deafness, does not need segregation on individual grounds, and whole segregation on eugenic grounds cannot be seriously contemplated. In some types of case, if sterilisation without mutilation or personal injury be found perfectly feasible, the choice between segregation and such sterilisation – a far more humane and less severe measure – might conceivably be offered to the individual. But I should be inclined to rely far more upon the spread of eugenic knowledge, upon the creation of a eugenic conscience, and upon the self-control which we might hope such individuals would exercise."

period marked a shift in emphasis in terms of the power and responsibility of different agencies in the governance of social life. Thus, since the post-war period medical officers have no longer been the designated decision makers regarding diagnosis and educational placement. The local education authorities took on the role of co-ordinating the assessment process and making the final decision about special education placements, although medical professionals have continued to play an important role in assessment procedures and outcomes.

The growth of the welfare state during the post-war period, with the provision of services which were seen as a common *social good* – rather than a national economic drain on resources signalling economic and social dependency – also marked changes in perceptions about disability. As in the cases of illness, poverty and housing, rather than being a purely private and personal problem, impairment and disability came, to some extent, to be regarded as a *social* issue legitimately requiring state support and intervention. At the same time, the legacy and continual refinement of systems and procedures concerning the diagnosis, categorisation and medicalisation of impairment and the important role played by professionals in these processes, lead to a continued pathologising and othering of disabled children in the education system. It is against this background that changes in special education and educational responses to disability need to be understood.

The 1960s were characterised by a spirit of optimism and openness in terms of social values and the need to address social inequalities in education. The Newsom Report (1963)<sup>22</sup> was indicative of this mood, in revealing vast differences in the quality of education received by children, according to class and social location. It recommended the raising of the school leaving age from 15 to 16, calling for action to address inadequacies of the system such as overcrowding and poor facilities, and for research into teaching methods to overcome environmental and linguistic deficiencies. However, the vision underpinning the Newsom Report did little to challenge educational divisions based on the outcomes of education, as it was primarily concerned with providing education which would prepare children and young people

---

<sup>22</sup> Report of the Minister of Education's central Advisory Council *Half Our Future* (The Newsom Report). 1963

for their future roles in society which were largely defined by class and existing perceptions of ability.<sup>23</sup>

The Labour government Circular 10/65 (1965) invited all un-reorganised LEAs to submit plans for the introduction of comprehensive schools and an end to selection at the age of 11, but did not make this obligatory. The 1944 Education Acts, the Newsom Report, the development of comprehensive education, and the implementation of the 1970 (Handicapped Children) Act were all precursors to debates on integration of disabled children into ordinary schools. Other changes were taking place in society during the 1960 and 1970s. For example, the numbers of children with conditions such as congenital heart disease, tuberculosis of the joints, rheumatic fever, spina bifida and cerebral palsy had decreased dramatically over the past twenty years. Advances in medical knowledge and surgical techniques, made more children less dependent on care and management, and more likely candidates for 'education'.<sup>24</sup>

There were a number of key factors which influenced developments in special education during the period between the 1970s and early 1980s, including the growth in self-advocacy groups and parent pressure groups.<sup>25</sup> Research began to raise questions about the quality of education provided by special schools and there emerged a critical debate about the categorisation and 'labelling' of children.<sup>26</sup> The development of 'resource bases' attached to mainstream schools lead to a gradual blurring of the boundaries between some mainstream and special schools, and the presence of children identified as having special educational needs or a disability became increasingly 'natural'. These factors, and the emergence of a 'critical literature' in sociology of education, which developed a critique of the notion of 'special needs' and special education signalled a widespread re-evaluation of the principles of segregated special education. In many respects, these issues reflected

---

<sup>23</sup> McCulloch, G. *Failing the Ordinary Child? The theory and practice of working-class secondary education*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998

<sup>24</sup> Hurt Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, Neville J. "Policy Change and Innovation for Special Needs in Oxfordshire." *Oxford Review of Education* 9 no 3 (1983): 241-254.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Swann, W. *The Practice of Special Education*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell/Open University Press, 1981.

wider social change and social movements in support of civil rights, participation and political struggles around identity and self-realisation.

However, the global movements of the 1960s and 1970s which claimed civil rights and equality of treatment focussed in particular on inequalities based on class, opportunity and discrimination on the grounds of race, gender and sexuality. During the social changes and political and cultural upheaval which occurred in the 1960s disabled people remained on the outside in terms of recognition. Tom Shakespeare<sup>27</sup> links the liberation struggles of the 1960s to the politicisation and growth of the disability movement, but as Karen Hirsch observes in relation to the USA, compared to the impact on historical studies of the Black freedom movement and the women's movement (...) the disability rights movement has had little effect on historical scholarship.<sup>28</sup>

The development of the Disability movement, and its fight to make visible the oppression of disabled people and campaign for the full participation of disabled children in mainstream education, have been crucial in the ways in which perceptions about disability and rights have been transformed. At the forefront of these struggles in England have been disabled people's organisations such as the Integration Alliance and Young and Powerful and others such as the centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE), all of which have campaigned for the recognition of the rights of disabled children and for their 'voices to be heard'. At the same time, theorisations around the role of the 'experiential' and the notion of voice have become increasingly important in research literature, particularly in support of a human and civil rights agenda.<sup>29</sup>

### *Education, disabilities and social change*

---

<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, T "Disabled people's self-organisation: A new social movement?" In *Overcoming disabling barriers: 18 years of Disability and Society*, edited by L.Barton. London: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, K. "Culture and Disability: the role of oral history." In *The Oral History Reader*, edited by R.Perks and A.Thomson. London: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Moore, M., S. Beazley, J.Maelzer. *Researching Disability Issues*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998; Shakespeare, T. "Rules of engagement: doing disability research", *Disability and Society* 11 no 1 (1996): 115-119

Debates about whether ‘history’ is concerned with constructing accounts of ‘what happened’ through the collection of ‘facts’, or whether history can only be understood as an infinite array of multiple experiences and perspectives, rest on differences which are both theoretical and political. As Mary Fuller observes in the Preface to her book on Historical Theory:

...all history writing inevitably entails taking a stand on key theoretical issues, whether or not the historian is aware of these – and many practising historians are not. There is no escape from having a theoretical position, whether explicit or implicit.<sup>30</sup>

Such debates open up useful routes into approaches to the history of education and disability developed over the past 40 years. Differences in theoretical approaches in this field are closely linked to contrasting positions on the way the notion of disability has been theorised and represented. The embracing of the Social Model of disability,<sup>31</sup> regardless of which particular interpretation is adopted, has profound implications for the way the purposes of education are understood, and the way histories are written.

The traditional divide between sociology and history has, until recently, been largely followed in Disability Studies – heavily weighted in favour of the sociologists – and ‘education’ has not been the first concern of academics in the field. Articles on issues related to education and disability appear relatively rarely in the sociological journal *Disability and Society* and, although more general historical articles are published fairly frequently, these rarely explore *educational* histories. Anne Borsay notes that ‘history is a missing piece of the jigsaw in disability studies’<sup>32</sup>, and she explains this in terms of the ‘formative influence’ of sociology in disability studies and the ‘alien nature’ of historical methodology to social scientists. Furthermore, the ‘late arrival of social history as a specialism within historical scholarship’ and, she argues, the reproduction of the social discrimination experienced by disabled people in academic discourse, have also contributed to the scarcity of historical work in Disability

---

<sup>30</sup> Fuller, M. *Historical Theory*. London: Routledge, 2002, ix.

<sup>31</sup> The ‘social model’ of disability stresses the social construction of disability in contrast to the ‘medical model’ which focuses on individual impairment. See Hahn, H. “Adjudication or empowerment: contrasting experiences with a social model of disability.” In *Disability, Politics and the Struggle for Change*, edited by L. Barton. London: David Fulton, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Borsay, A. “History, Power and Identity.” In *Disability Studies Today*, edited by C. Barnes, M. Oliver and L. Barton. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002

Studies. However, increasing numbers of researchers in disability and education have turned to historical texts and engaged in historical enquiry and critique of their own as a prerequisite to an exploration of current themes.<sup>33</sup> Patricia Potts, for example, has explored the categorisation of children and the way their needs are defined by professionals on the basis of perceived impairment, through a historical study of the involvement of doctors in special education and their role in diagnosis and labelling.<sup>34</sup> Jane Read and Jan Walmsley have explored documentary evidence from the public and private domains in an attempt to reinterpret historical accounts of special education. They were particularly interested in uncovering the ‘authentic voice of disabled children and parents in the past’, but observed that they were unable to find the ‘voices of recipients of early forms of special education. The historical record is documented only in the professional voice.’<sup>35</sup>

There have been many approaches to describing and analysing history in relation to policy, experience and marginalised groups in education over the past 40 years. For example, Kevin Myers and Anna Brown have explored the historiography of mental deficiency in relation to special school leavers in Birmingham in the first part of the twentieth century<sup>36</sup>. They identify three broad categories of historical studies of special education. The first adopts:

...the perspective of the policy maker and the administrator (...) as problems emerge and solutions develop. Individuals feature prominently and, in the older histories in particular, are lauded for the warmth of their humanity and the wisdom of their vision. Progress follows from the noble and benevolent intentions of voluntary effort...

---

<sup>33</sup> See Hall, J.T. *Social Devaluation and Special Education: The Right to Full Mainstream Inclusion and an Honest Statement*. London: Jessica Kinglsey, 1997; Copeland, I. *The Making of the Backward Pupil in Education in England*. London: Woburn Press, 1999; Race, D.G., ed. *Learning Disability – A Social Approach*. London: Routledge, 2002; Armstrong, D. *Experiences of Special Education: Re-evaluating policy and practice through life stories*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003; Armstrong, F. *Spaced Out: Policy, Difference and the Challenge of Inclusive Education*. London: Kluwer, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Potts, P. “Medicine, Morals and mental deficiency: the contribution of doctors to the development of special education in England.” In *Oxford Review of Education*, 9 no. 3 (1983): 181-196

<sup>35</sup> Read, J. and J.Walmsley. “Historical Perspectives on Special Education, 1890-1970.” *Disability and Society*, 21 no.5 (2006): 455-469

<sup>36</sup> Myers, K. and A. Brown. “Mental Deficiency: The Diagnosis and After-Care of Special School Leavers in early twentieth Century Birmingham (UK).” *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 18 nos 1/2 (2005) 72-98

Myers and Brown critique this approach on the grounds that it has

... little or no conception of the structural relations that impact upon the perception and resolution of particular educational “problems”. It effectively silences the voices of the people deemed mentally deficient or in need of special schooling.<sup>37</sup>

Their second broad category of historiography in relation to special schooling is ‘sociologically and analytically based’, and focuses on ‘production’ and the way in which historically special schooling (and in particular the category of ‘mental deficiency’) legitimated and reproduced ‘a given social order’. While, in general, this approach adopted a ‘macro level of analysis’, Myers and Brown recognise the permeability of the macro and micro levels at which structures and social practices merge, citing Foucault’s ‘micro-physics of power’ which is embedded in ‘local conditions and practices.’ They critique this approach on the grounds that, it rendered children and their families entirely passive. They appeared rarely and only as problems – educational, medical or administrative – to be solved or as objects to be disciplined.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, their third category of the historical study of ‘the national system of schools to accommodate the newly identified deficient’ focuses on the local context and the micro-politics of mental deficiency, and the effects which policies and practices had on individuals and families.

The first category maps on to other ways of describing historical approaches such as the ‘modernist’ approach in which development and change are located in ‘facts’ such as social and economic change, legislation, the ideas of reformers and developments in scientific knowledge. The second can be interpreted as relating to a number of different strands, including Marxist approaches. The third approach, which is concerned with micro-politics and lived experience relates to ‘micro-history’ and

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 73

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 73

owes much to oral history, anthropology and an exploration of local culture and experience<sup>39</sup>.

Foucauldian analyses have strands which connect to both ‘social production’ models and to approaches rooted in explorations of power relations, cultures, discursive practices and the management of difference.<sup>40</sup> The following sections focus on five distinctive historical approaches to the history of disability and education: the ‘modernist’ tradition, the ‘functionalist’, the ‘Marxist’, the ‘Foucauldian’ and ‘oral history’. Such broad categorisations should not be taken to mean that these represent unitary concepts.

### *Disability, education and the writing of history*

D.G.Pritchard’s book *Education and the Handicapped 1760-1960* is, as we saw earlier, fundamentally modernist and teleological in approach, and might be categorised as contributing to the ‘grand narrative’ of an increasingly humane and progressive world. Nevertheless, the detailed material it contains throws light on the unpredictable nature of developments in education, as well as providing a coherent account of their history. It also allows us to challenge later assumptions embedded in education policy. A study of this text reveals, for example, that the idea that children identified as having special educational needs should attend their local schools was not an ‘invention’ of the 1981 Education Act or the Warnock Report (1978)<sup>41</sup> on which it was based, as is often assumed, but was included in the 1944 Education Act. The Education Act of 1921 had provided education for disabled pupils only in special schools or ‘certified special classes’ but the 1944 Act instructed LEAs to

...provide for the education of pupils in whose case the disability is serious in special schools appropriate for that category, but where that is impracticable, or where the disability is not serious, the arrangement may provide for the giving such education in any school maintained or assisted by the local education authority.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Burke, P. *What is Cultural History?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Copeland, I. *The Making of the Backward Pupil in Education in England*. London: Woburn Press, 1999; Armstrong, F. *Spaced Out: Policy, Difference and the Challenge of Inclusive Education*. London: Kluwer, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People, *Special Educational Needs* (Warnock Report), London: HMSO, 1979)

<sup>42</sup> Pritchard, op.cit., 209

Pritchard commented:

..unfortunately the wording of the Act allows authorities to evade their responsibilities. The evasion, in so far as it exists, is not so much in the provision of special schools, as in the lack of provision of special educational facilities in the ordinary schools.<sup>43</sup>

Rather than writing a purely descriptive account of the unfolding of legislation and the construction of systems, Pritchard provides a commentary and critique of policy, which challenges suggestions that history is concerned only with ‘the facts’ or that the subject matter should be treated in a clinical, deterministic way. In this sense, although the ‘voice’ of the author is obscured, the ‘analytical self’ is not entirely absent.

In Pritchard’s book, little attention is paid to the lived experience of disabled children. At the time such an approach would be seen as ‘subjective’ and not, therefore, a legitimate source of information. While it was recognised that history is complex and uneven, the idea that there could be ‘multiple’ histories, rather than one unfolding narrative, was not considered. This mirrors the historical dominance of positivist research at the time in which ‘facts’, and observable, measurable data were privileged over qualitative approaches to educational research. It is important, therefore, to avoid critiquing the work of historians such as Pritchard from the vantage point of the more recent intellectual context in which the values and insights and constructions of historical knowledge are very different from those which framed historical work half a century ago.

#### *“Functionalist” History*

The ‘functionalist’ perspective<sup>44</sup> is based on the premise that disabled children have particular needs as a result of their impairments which require specialist provision, often including separate structures and the involvement of specialist professionals. The response to impairment is understood in terms of the policies and adaptations put in place which are seen as being necessitated by the impairments and difficulties of

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 209

<sup>44</sup> Barnes, C., G. Mercer, G. and T. Shakespeare, T. *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999

the individual child. The roots of the ‘functionalist’ approach are diverse, with branches arising from the proliferation of medical and technical responses to impairment and the emergence of powerful groups of professionals with their particular interests in and perspectives on the needs and requirements of disabled children – a process which began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and gained momentum so that by the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century diagnosis and treatment was a massive industry. This can be seen as part of a wider project in the increasing management and control of the population – linked to the growth of interest in eugenics and the humanitarian concerns of social welfare.

The underpinning assumption of functionalist approaches is that an impairment is something that is ‘wrong’ with the child and which needs fixing or ameliorating; efforts are made to introduce techniques, equipment and teaching strategies tailored to the particular impairment to offset its effects. It is essentially a normalisation project in which the ‘problem’ to be addressed is seen as situated within the child. Since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly since the 1960s, there has been a massive growth in literature with a functionalist orientation intended to provide solutions to or offset the detrimental effects of impairment – especially in relation to what is described as ‘the autistic spectrum’ – and related areas such as ‘Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder’ and ‘Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties’. Work derived from the activities of the Peto Institute in Hungary is an example of a functionalist approach to impairment, popular in the 1980s, which sought to teach children with physical impairments to stand upright and walk, through a strict regime of physical exercise and therapy. In general, such functional accounts of impairment are based on a traditional ‘deficit’ gaze which has “concentrated upon individual limitations as the principle cause of the multiple difficulties experienced by disabled people”<sup>45</sup>. Again, the experiences of children themselves are absent.

There are some very different examples of work which adopts a functionalist perspective. The Open University textbook *The Disabled Schoolchild*<sup>46</sup> by Anderson, first published in 1973, is concerned with the integration of ‘physically handicapped’

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, E.M. *The Disabled Schoolchild: A Study of Integration in primary Schools*. London: Methuen, 1973.

children in ordinary schools, the possible educational and social problems which may arise, and how these may be managed. Although the book is conceptualised around the notion of ‘handicap’, the book was radical at the time in advocating ‘integration’ in situations where the child can be ‘satisfactorily educated in an ordinary school’. *Mental Subnormality*<sup>47</sup> by Heaton-Ward, published in 1975, focuses on the diagnosis, typology, grading, treatment and management of ‘mental subnormality’ with an emphasis on training rather than education. In contrast, Cole’s book, *Apart or A Part? Integration and the Growth of Special Education*<sup>48</sup>, published in 1989, constructs the history of special education in terms of a humanitarian response to individual deficits and impairments.

#### *‘Marxist’ historical analysis and disability and education*

Ideological struggle and power relations are largely missing from discussion in both modernist and functionalist historical accounts.

In contrast ‘neo-Marxist’ interpretations see the history of responses to disability, and the development of special education, as part of a wider system of oppressive social control informed by dominant ideologies and values (e.g. Tomlinson, 1982)<sup>49</sup>.

Finkelstein<sup>50</sup> was among the first to analyse the relationship between disability and society from a historical materialist perspective. For Finkelstein – and other Marxists – the problems created by impairment relate to questions of usefulness and productivity and the ability to compete in the labour market and contribute to the creation of surplus value. Just as production became industrialised, so did the management and containment of disabled people in institutions. Scull’s historical study of the growth and role of asylums, *Museums of Madness*,<sup>51</sup> shows how their development mirrored the growth and scale of capitalist modes and structures of production with institutions for the old, insane, disabled or destitute similar in size and assembly-line organisation to the vast factories which emerged during the same

---

<sup>47</sup> Heaton-Ward, W.A. *Mental Subnormality*. Bristol: John Wright and Sons, 1975.

<sup>48</sup> Cole, T. *Apart or a Part? Integration and the growth of British Special Education* Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989.

<sup>49</sup> Tomlinson, S. *A Sociology of Special Education*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1982.

<sup>50</sup> Finkelstein, V. *Attitudes and Disabled People*. New York: World Rehabilitation Fund, 1980.

<sup>51</sup> Scull, A.T. *Museums of Madness: The Social organization of Insanity in Nineteenth Century England*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.

period. Marxist approaches, provided by sociologists and historians, are well represented in Disability Studies. In his analysis of the history of “integration” and education, Oliver argues

The production of disability in one sense (...) is nothing more nor less than a set of activities specifically geared towards producing a good – the category disability – supported by a range of political actions which create the conditions to allow these productive activities to take place and underpinned by a discourse which gives legitimacy to the whole enterprise.<sup>52</sup>

Historically, therefore, schools have been, and continue to be, part of the capitalist ‘means of production’ which (re)produce the social groups through processes of categorisation and labelling, and the necessary labour force, to support the continuation of the capitalist system. The placement of disabled children in segregated schools, prepared them for a life of marginalisation and inactivity. In the broader education system curricula, systems of assessment and pedagogy are all harnessed to the reproductive task.

### *The influence of Foucault*

There is a close relationship between traditional approaches to historical research and writing on the history of education, ‘special educational needs’ and disability, and the embeddedness and persistent use of medicalised language and categories to refer to particular impairments and to disabled people themselves.

There has recently been a strong critique in the literature of social practices which are underpinned by categorisation, labelling and impairment-led language, from a range of theoretical or value-based positions. In particular, the history of disability has been critically examined through various Foucauldian analyses in which categorisation and the ‘language of special needs’ are seen as conduits for the exercise of power which merge the ‘pastoral’ with the ‘disciplinary’<sup>53</sup>. Others have developed a critique of labelling as power embedded in professional knowledge and discourses<sup>54</sup> or have drawn on Foucault’s concept of “traditional” and “effective” history, in challenging

---

<sup>52</sup> Oliver, M. *Understanding Disability from Theory to Practice*. London: Macmillan Press, 1996. 127

<sup>53</sup> Peim, N. “The history of the present: towards a contemporary phenomenology of the school.” *History of Education*, 30 no. 2 (2001): 177-90

<sup>54</sup> Corbett, J. *Bad Mouthing*. London: Falmer Press, 1996.

traditional, linear accounts of educational responses to disability and learning difficulty.<sup>55</sup>

Drawing on narrative documentary material, Derrick Armstrong has explored the methodological implications for historians of accepting Foucault's analysis of knowledge as 'social practice' and the 'de-centring of the individual as a 'historical agent',<sup>56</sup> He argues:

When considering the history of education it is important that we ask the question: 'Whose history is being talked about?' If we ask 'whose history?' we start to realise that history is not simply a set of facts about the world but is rather a set of contested perspectives, Secondly, it becomes apparent that some of those perspectives or voices are left out of official or dominant representations of the study altogether.

Questions concerning power and voice have become increasingly central in the way the histories of marginalised groups are conceptualised

#### *Oral history, autobiography and the question of 'voice'*

The politicisation of impairment, the increasing strength of the Disability movement, the radicalising effects of the implications of the Social Model, and the influence of theorisations and debates arising out of the women's movement, have revealed different perspectives and new sociological questions about disability, framed by Carol Thomas, for example, as: "How can this social phenomenon be theorized? What is its social history?"<sup>57</sup> Such questions have opened up debate, raising, in particular, questions about the role of the experiential in theorising impairment and disability, and the championing of 'emancipatory research' in which the experiences and voices of disabled people, and children in particular, were drawn into the centre. Much of the work which includes oral accounts of the experiences of disabled children has not

---

<sup>55</sup> Copeland, I. *The Making of the Backward Pupil in Education in England*. London: Woburn Press, 1999; Armstrong, F. "The historical development of special education: humanitarian rationality or 'wild profusion of entangled events'?" *History of Education*, 31, no 5 (2002) 437-456

<sup>56</sup> Armstrong, D. *Experience of Special Education: Re-evaluating policy and practice through life stories*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003: 23

<sup>57</sup> Thomas, C. "Disability Theory: Key Ideas, Issues and Thinkers." In *Disability Studies Today* edited by In Barnes, C., M.Oliver and L.Barton. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002. 38-57.

been written by ‘mainstream’ historians<sup>58</sup>. For example, Wilmot and Saul, family and ‘local’ historians, have carried out work on the history of Open-Air schools in Birmingham<sup>59</sup> and draw extensively on reports and other archive material, much of which is based on narrative documentary evidence of ‘insiders’. In his work on self-advocacy, Goodley<sup>60</sup>, a Disability theorist, draws extensively on the narrative documentary accounts of people labelled as having learning difficulties, to explore the impact of self-advocacy. Murray and Penman<sup>61</sup>, Disability activists and parents of disabled children, have gathered together narrative accounts of the experiences of families ‘living with and learning about’ impairment which includes narratives of the experience of education.

Oral history is an approach associated with local and anthropological historical research, and nurtured the kind of cultural history which flourished in the History Workshops, founded by Raphael Samuel, in the 1960s in which ‘history’ was made ‘from below’. There are close links here with the development of what was referred to as a “new genre” – that of ‘micro-history’ which Peter Burke describes as offering ‘an attractive alternative to the telescope, allowing concrete individual or local experience to re-enter history’. Micro-history

...was a response to a growing disillusionment with the so-called ‘grand narrative’ of progress’ (which) ‘...passed over the achievements and contributions of many other cultures, not to mention (the) social groups in the West...’<sup>62</sup>

Micro-history allows in personal accounts as valued material through which to understand social relationships and social change.

The relatively recent interest in the ‘voices’ of disabled people in disability research and in the construction of histories of the experiences of disabled people, is therefore

---

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Booth, T. and Booth, W. *Growing up with parents who have learning difficulties*. London: Routledge, 1998, and Goodley, D. *Self-advocacy in the Lives of People with Learning Difficulties*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.

<sup>59</sup> Wilmot, F. and P.Saul. *A Breath of Fresh Air: Birmingham's Open-Air Schools 1911-1970*. Chichester: Phillimore, 1998.

<sup>60</sup> Goodley, Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Murray, P. and J.Penman. *Telling Our Own Stories: Reflection on family life in a disabling world*. Sheffield: Parents With Attitude, 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Burke, P. *What is Cultural History?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. 43-44

both part of a wider tradition in historical and cultural studies, and part of a contemporary movement in historical research which links directly to recent developments in Disability studies and activism. The contribution from feminists working in the field of disability studies has been particularly important in stressing the importance of the experiential in analysing and understanding social and historical processes<sup>63</sup>. The accounts of individuals are seen as making a major contribution in terms of understanding the relationship between the individual experience of impairment and the social conditions which create disabling barriers.

## **Conclusion**

Carol Thomas, a researcher, feminist, and activist, who has developed a ‘social narrative’ approach to exploring issues of disability, gender and power, reminds us of the importance of developing counter-narratives, and for others to take notice of them.

Perhaps the key point is that without the counter-narratives of others who challenge social ‘norms’ we, as isolated individuals, are trapped within the story-lines of the prevailing narratives. If we do re-write our own identities then we strengthen the counter-narrative, and the dominant and oppressive narratives begin to crumble.<sup>64</sup>

These counter-narratives represent a struggle against hegemonic accounts of the history of education and disabled people which focus on the legislative and technical responses to impairment. In some important respects the approaches to historical enquiry relating to disability and education have reflected changes in social values, policy and practices. The different kinds of historical work which has been carried out can be linked to differences in the way the identity and interests of disabled children have been conceptualised. It is particularly significant that historical work on education has routinely ignored disability and special education systems, or treated them as of minor, peripheral importance. History works, therefore, in hegemonic

---

<sup>63</sup> For example, Morris, J. *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability*. London: The Women’s Press, 1996.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas, C. ‘Narrative Identity in the disabled self’ in *Disability Discourse*, edited by Corker, M and S.French. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999. 55

ways, implicitly sustaining the exclusion of disabled people, but history is also a ‘site of contestation and conflict’<sup>65</sup> which reflects wider struggles in the social world.

In reflecting on the different approaches adopted in historical research in the field of education and disability, the absence of the experiential and narrative documentary evidence<sup>66</sup> in mainstream historical accounts is evident. Existing work undertaken in other disciplines such as Disability studies and critical policy studies, and less orthodox historical research such as narrative and ‘insider perspective’ research, provide fresh starting points for future research in the history of disability and education. There is an urgent need to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach to research which both complements and challenges dominant historical accounts, many of which serve to legitimate the exclusion of the historical and analytical knowledge of disabled people.

*The author wishes to acknowledge the detailed and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper by reviewers and members of the editorial board of History of Education*

---

<sup>65</sup> Popkewitz, T. B.M. Franklin and M.A.Pereyra (eds) *Cultural History and Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001. 11

<sup>66</sup> Goodley, Ibid

