

Historiographies of Education, Disability and Social Justice

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This paper explores some issues relating to representations of disability embodied in historiographies of the history of education and the implications of these for questions of social justice. Apart from some references to Foucault, the material in the paper refers primarily to the UK and to North America – although the arguments put forward are not envisaged as being uniquely applicable to those contexts.

The selections of material and *ways of telling* construct particular meanings in relation to historical events and the positioning and identity of different actors. As Stiker (1999) observes

Social constructions are as important as effective practices in representing a society. Even more: these representations of a phenomenon are just as much a part of reality as “what happens”. (Stiker, : 1999: 72)

Methodology is inextricably implicated in the process of construction, and methodological choices reflect profoundly different assumptions, values and *ways of seeing*.

The absence of Disability and disabled people from historical work on education is well documented (e.g. Hirsch, 1998, Copeland, 2002, Armstrong, D. 2003, Altenbaugh, 2006, Armstrong, F. 2007). In the western world, the segregation of disabled children from other children in the education system occurred routinely until the latter part of the last century, mirroring the way disability and difference have been invisible in formal historical work. Richard Altenbaugh observes 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’(Altenbaugh, 2006), a hegemony founded on an understanding of impairment as being a *natural* and unproblematic justification for marginalisation. This contrasts with the relatively greater attention given to other social categories who experienced discrimination since the 1960s. The global movements of the 1960s and 1970s in support of civil rights and equality focussed primarily on inequalities and discrimination based on class, race, gender and sexuality. During the social-

political changes cultural upheavals which took place in the 1960s, the position and struggles of disabled people remained unrecognised. While the liberation struggles of the 1960s contributed to the politicisation and growth of the disability movement (Shakespeare, 2006), the disability rights movement has had, according to Hirsch(1998), little effect on historical scholarship in comparison with the impact on historical studies of the Black civil rights movement and the women's movement (Hirsch, 1998). Indeed, the lives and experiences of disabled children were rarely documented until very recently. For example, in his book *Hooligans or rebels? An oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1989-1939*, Humphries (1981) makes no mention of disabled children or young people. It is as if they were – quite literally and metaphorically, 'out of sight'.

Representation and disability

It is not only in written historical accounts that 'disability' is absent - disabled people are also missing from historical material presented in exhibitions in museums and art galleries. For example, researchers involved in the project *Buried in the Footnotes: the Representation of Disabled People in Museum and Gallery Collections* found that while there was a considerable body of such material *held* by museums, it is rarely displayed, observing

...Its link to disability is seldom made explicit or is poorly interpreted and, in only a few noteworthy cases, does the interpretation resist stereotypical and reductive representations of disabled people which are commonplace in other media. A range of factors – practical, resource-based and personal ones as well as more generic societal influences – conspire to contribute to the cultural invisibility of disabled people.

(Dodd et al, 2004)

In the large body of existing material relating to different aspects of education - including historical work, policy studies, text books, programmes and articles on education in the media, disability is grossly under-represented. Thus the historical marginalisation of disabled children and young people in education systems is echoed and reproduced symbolically by their invisibility in the methodologies and outputs of artistic and creative projects as well as research. Just as museums are reproductive of dominant societal values, written texts usually reiterate dominant perceptions and assumptions of the period in which they were produced, rather than challenging them. Examples of this are not difficult to find. Thus, in *A History of English Education*

from 1760, first published in 1947, with a 2nd edition in 1966, *Barnard* devoted approximately 3 pages to special education in a book numbering 334 pages. The categorisation, stigmatisation and segregation of disabled children from ordinary schools is reproduced in historical work. Barnard makes an interesting distinction based on the perceived *origins* of children's difficulties:

The mentally defective child and the blind or deaf-mute are so conspicuous and so difficult to deal with educationally that they have formed classes apart and have called for special treatment. But there remains the case of the child who can attend the ordinary school, but who is handicapped by bad health, neglect, lack of proper nourishment, poor physique, defective teeth or eye-sight.(p 224)

The humanitarian concern for those whose difficulties were engendered by social conditions (rather than being located *within* the child) is evident. In contrast, intellectual and sensory impairments were seen as necessarily engendering such difficulties as to require specialist, segregated provision.

Barnard's distinction reflects the social welfare concerns of the time in relation to deprivation, and the medicalisation of impairment within the education system. This is an interesting distinction in terms of later work carried out by disabled, and non-disabled, sociologists and activists in critiquing the Medical Model in which impairments are presented as deficits *belonging to* the individual. This critique underpins the development of the Social Model in which difficulties are seen as being created by social conditions and circumstances *outside* the individual (Barnes, 1997). Politically, the position of Barnard and the different theorisations of Disability by 'engaged' theorists (frequently disabled scholars), are fundamentally opposed.

One major debate within Disability Studies concerns the role of the experiential and the personal – a role which has been argued and theorised by feminists, and others, in which the accounts of individuals are seen as having a central contribution to make to understanding impairment and the social processes which create disability. This position is relevant to the concerns of this paper as it emphasises the importance of autobiography and voice in understanding social and historical processes. Feminists have contributed an important body of work in which the voices and experiences of education of disabled people are fore-grounded (e.g. Thomas, 2002, 1999, Morris, 1996, Walmsley, 1998), but this work is located mainly outside the discipline of 'history', in the fields of sociology, Disability Studies and feminist theory. The

emergence of the Social Model as a critical tool in Disability research, and the growing interest in oral and life history research, have fostered the emergence of new historiographies. Already two points are emerging:

- 1) social and political movements (e.g. feminism and the struggles of women for liberation, and the Disability movement) are potentially powerful in influencing theory and research methodologies and
- 2) any appraisal of the history of education and the experiences of disabled people, must look beyond disciplinary boundaries to work undertaken in other areas.

Indeed, work in disciplines other than history (such as architecture, social geography, policy making, sociology, art criticism) can be powerful in illuminating the historical experiences of a group which has been systematically marginalised in the historiographies of education. The rare examples of the portrayal of disabled people in art are particularly illuminating. The extraordinary picture *Sad Inheritance* by the Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, painted in 1899) shows a large group of children who have different impairments, naked, exposed and shivering, standing or crouching on a beach under the gaze of the powerful and stern figure of a priest, clad in black, towering over their bent and twisted bodies. This picture provides both historical information in the form of the segregated and institutional lives of disabled children during that period, and in the stark uncovering the power relations embedded in contemporary practices. In their introduction to *Cultural History and Education: critical Essays on Knowledge and Schooling*, Popkewitz et al (2001) observe that

The history of the present, as Walter Benjamin (1955/1985) suggests, is where each generation encounters the past in a new way through a critical encounter in which the fragments of the past meet the present. (p 4)

The painting *Sad Inheritance* provides a disturbing ‘fragment from the past’ as a fresh lens through which to consider questions of social justice and segregation in terms of present-day treatment of disabled children. The challenge, of course, is to find ways of interrogating this kind of material in ways which are meaningful, rather than fanciful, because, as the Brazilian historian Bernuzzi de Sant’ Anna (1995) reminds us, “ the body does not cease to be (re) fabricated over time”.

Historiographies

There are many different possible ways of describing existing historiographies of the disability and education. For the purposes of this paper I draw on the three main

strands identified by Myers and Brown (2005) which they use to describe historiographies of 'mental deficiency' in relation to special school leavers in Birmingham in the first part of the twentieth century. These three 'strands' should not be seen as discrete categories, but as approximations which in many instances overlap. The first strand relates to modernist approaches which describe historical developments 'from the perspective of the policy maker and the administrator. 'Individuals feature prominently (Myers and Brown, 2005) Progress follows from the noble and benevolent intentions of voluntary effort..' This approach, which is characterised by linear descriptions of historical change allows for the development of the 'grand narrative' often at the expense of engaging with complexity and contradictions of structural, social and political relations and struggles. This is the kind of historiography critiqued by Foucault as 'teleological' in which 'events' are presented as rational sequences of causation and outcomes, in contrast to his cultural explorations of discourse and technologies of power, eschewing the search for 'evolution or recurrence' (O'Brien, 1989)

The approach is not concerned with the experiences, perspectives and critiques of 'insiders'. As Myers and Brown observe, "it effectively silenced the voices of the people deemed mentally deficient or in need of special schooling". This is also generally the case for the second broad historical approach which can be summarised as 'sociologically and analytically based'; it draws on and explores the contexts, processes and relationships primarily at the macro level of social life, which produce and legitimize categories and marginalisation. More recent historical work and enquiry in fields such as policy studies and sociology which undertake historical enquiry would fit into this very broad schema, including Foucauldian approaches (e.g. Copeland, 1999, Armstrong, F. 2002, Armstrong, D. 2003) and Marxist Disability analyses (Oliver, 1996, Barnes(1997). Myers and Brown critique this approach on the grounds that it tends to situate disabled people as 'passive'. Finally, their third strand of historiography explores the micro-politics and 'lived experience' of Disability opening up very different *ways of seeing* and *ways of telling* in which the 'voices' of disabled people can be heard. However, any claim that a piece of work raises questions of rights and social justice merely because it includes the 'voices' of marginalised people, is unsustainable. The use of life history material is critical in terms of the accounts developed by the historian (or sociologist), and the way they position their 'subjects'. 'Voices' can be manipulated – just as the ventriloquist

manipulates the puppet – so that they lend authenticity to historical accounts which support the perspective and analysis of the researcher. There is always the risk of ‘fetishizing’ the notion of voice as a marker of ‘the real’ in ways which effectively ‘steal’ the voices of insiders and allow historians and other to reconfigure their messages.

Much of the work which includes oral accounts of the experiences of disabled people has not been written by historians (e.g. Goodley, 2000). Oral history has its roots in many traditions including those of local and anthropological historical research, and nurtured the kind of cultural history in which ‘history’ was made ‘from below’. This “new genre” is related to that of ‘micro-history’ which Peter Burke describes as providing a space “for culture, for freedom from economic determinism and for individuals, faces in the crowd. The microscope offered an attractive alternative to the telescope, allowing concrete individual or local experience to re-enter history.” (Burke, 2005: 43). The relatively recent interest in the ‘voices’ of disabled people in disability and historical research and in the construction of histories of the experiences of disabled people is both part of a wider tradition in historical and cultural studies, and part of a contemporary movement in historical research which links directly to with recent developments in disability studies and activism.

There are already some powerful examples in which the oral or written accounts of insiders are part of a wider and deeper historical enquiry in which the macro- and micro levels of social life are treated as inextricable and permeable, allowing the historian to use life history accounts to illuminate and interrogate the structural and social relations and inequalities of the ‘bigger picture’. Susan Burch’s study of American Deaf culture (whose themes include a detailed study of educational experiences of Deaf students) reveals the struggles of Deaf people’s organizations to promote Deaf culture and independence in the face of systematic discrimination in all areas of public, social life and employment - and this was particularly the case during periods of economic uncertainty. Burch draws out the complex relationships between different forms of discrimination, showing how some Deaf people were subject to additional discriminations on the grounds of race or other impairments such as intellectual disability, finding themselves the possible subjects of particularly dehumanizing treatment such as, segregation, incarceration and sterilization.

The study reveals the complexities involved in the relationships between Deaf citizens and the wider society and the constant struggles and conflicts over values, culture and citizenship and the right to recognition as a member of both the Deaf community and of mainstream society. It charts the struggles involved in Deaf people's self-advocacy as they sought to resist assimilationist "Americanization" campaigns and discriminatory regulations and practices which served to oppress and discredit Deaf culture while, in some contexts, they were coerced into adopting the appearance of 'normality' in order to resist discrimination.

Most importantly, Burch places the voices of Deaf people at the centre of their history by drawing on sources such as Deaf newspapers, "...memoirs, films and "oral history" interviews (in sign language)", which are absent from dominant historical accounts.

Discussion

It is important to note the close relationship between traditional approaches to historical research and writing on the history of education and Disability, and the embeddedness and persistent use of medicalised language and categories to refer to particular impairments and to disabled people themselves and their management (for example 'the autistic child'). There has recently been a strong critique in the literature of social practices in which the power of labels and impairment-led language from a range of theoretical or value-based positions. 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' (Dussel, 2001)). Others have developed a critique of labelling as investing power in professional knowledge and discourses (Tomlinson 1982, Billington, 2000, Armstrong, D., 2003) or have drawn on Foucault's concept of "traditional" and "effective" history, in challenging traditional, linear accounts of educational responses to disability and learning difficulty (Armstrong, F. 2003). Foucault's 'genealogical' approach recognised '...the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories, and unpalatable defeats...' (Foucault, 1977, cited in O'Brien, 1989:37) and the exercise of power through discourse. 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' He argues that we have to ask the

question “Whose history is being talked about?” and that one of the implications of asking this question is that we have to acknowledge that “history is not simply a set of facts about the world but is rather a set of contested perspectives” in which questions of equity and social justice are pervasive.

References

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Sad Inheritance Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, painted in 1899