The History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration

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From Isolation To Integration

Margret A. Winzer

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CONTENTS

List of Tables vii
List of Boxes viii
Preface xi

Part 1
Lessons of a Dark Past

Introduction 3

Chapter 1
Disability and Society before the Eighteenth Century: Dread and Despair 6

Chapter 2
Education and Enlightenment: New Views and New Methods 38

Part 2
Into the Light of a More Modern World

Introduction 77

Chapter 3
The Rise of Institutions, Asylums, and Public Charities 82

Chapter 4
Education for Exceptional Students in North America after 1850 121

Chapter 5
Physicians, Pedagogues, and Pupils: Defining the Institutional Population 145

Chapter 6
More Than Three Rs: Life in Nineteenth-Century Institutions 170

Chapter 7
Teaching Exceptional Students in the Nineteenth Century 225
Part 3
Into the New Century

Introduction 251

Chapter 8
Measures and Mismeasures: The IQ Myth 254

Chapter 9
The "Threat of the Feebleminded" 279

Chapter 10
From Isolation to Segregation: The Emergence of Special Classes 312

Chapter 11
New Categories, New Labels 337

Part 4
Segregation to Integration

Introduction 363

Chapter 12
Approaching Integration 366

Bibliography 386

Index 441
LIST OF TABLES

3-1. The Typical Progression of Special Education 84

3-2. The Spread of Schools for Deaf and Blind Students in North America 103

3-3. The Spread of Schools for Blind Students in North America 109

3-4. The Spread of Institutions for Mentally Retarded Persons in North America 115

4-1. The Costs of Attendance and the Number of State-Supported Students at Selected Schools for Deaf Persons, 1866 136

5-1. Etiologies of Deafness for Selected Years among Students at the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and the Dumb 153

6-1. Types of Occupations Held by Late Nineteenth-Century Graduates of North American Institutions for Deaf Persons 183

6-2. Communication Modes Used with Deaf Students 203

6-3. Reading Systems Used with Blind Students 208

7-1. The Distribution of Men and Women on the Faculties of Schools for Deaf Students, by Instructional Method, 1890 242

7-2. The Gender and Hearing Status of Teachers of Deaf Students, 1851-1920 246

9-1. Results of Fernald's Study of Discharged Mentally Retarded Adults 310

10-1. Founding Dates of a Sampling of Early Segregated Day Classes 321

10-2. Early Special Education Legislation: A Sampling 324
## LIST OF BOXES

1-1. Literary Sources  
1-2. Gironimo Cardano  
2-1. Abbé Michel Charles de l'Épée  
2-2. The Development of Manual Systems  
3-1. Francis Green  
3-2. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet  
4-1. Caroline Ardelia Yale  
5-1. Alexander Graham Bell, Scientist  
6-1. Alexander Graham Bell, Educator  
8-1. Models of Human Learning  
8-2. Lewis Madison Terman  
9-1. Henry Herbert Goddard  
9-2. Marriages of Deaf Persons  
9-3. John Broadus Watson  
10-1. J.E. Wallace Wallin  
11-1. Leta Stelter Hollingworth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-1</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-1</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-1</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-2</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-1</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-2</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-3</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-1</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-1</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For my family
PREFACE

The way that children are trained and schooled is a crucial demonstration of the way that they are perceived and treated in a given society. Many complex threads—social, political, economic, and even religious—must interweave to create a propitious climate that respects the rights of all individuals in a certain society. Hence, the changing nature of the social climate and its manifestations in the treatment of, attitudes toward, and schooling provided for exceptional individuals is the essential story of the development of special education.

This text is wedded to the notion that economic and social conditions both define and drive educational arrangements and possibilities. A history of the development of special education, then, must attempt to answer certain questions. These concern the various ways in which societies responded to handicaps and deviance. Discovering who was taught, and when and how, is related far more to the social, political, legislative, economic, and religious forces at work in a society than it is to the unique social and educational needs of disabled persons. At the same time, this history mirrors our progress toward appreciating the basic humanity of all people.

The legacy of philosophers, philanthropists, evangelicals, and reformers (and not a few reprobates) who founded institutions, developed innovative instructional methodologies, and generally directed attention toward groups traditionally considered as objects of charity and unworthy recipients of education must also be considered. The most important questions revolve around the disabled children for whom the enterprise was undertaken, their parents, and the teachers who worked in the classrooms.

It is important to know if exceptional pupils enjoyed and appreciated their schooling and how their education differed from that provided to other youngsters. Additionally, we should know who taught in the special schools, how the parents reacted to sending a small child off to an institution for ten months of the year or to losing an older child who may well have been an important source of economic contributions to the family, what the prospects were for disabled adults in society and whether schooling provided them with the skills to successfully negotiate the adult world. Did their schooling prepare them for adult
life and allow them to reach their full potential, or did it serve as a structure to train young handicapped people for societal and occupational positions deemed consonant with their handicap and social class? If disabled people married and had children, we know they did given the railing against hereditary disabilities that runs like a red thread through special education—how did they meet their spouses? When did they marry, and how did they achieve the economic stability necessary for marriage?

Many of these questions are difficult to answer. Unlike the reformers who initiated and guided the venture, exceptional people failed to put their thoughts and feelings on paper. We must rely on the occasional comments of observers and the retrospective writings of educational chroniclers to gloss over the mute evidence. Those educators and reformers who contributed their time and talents to the enterprise offer the most comprehensive body of evidence. Little is available from disabled persons themselves or from contemporaries not directly involved in education. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the plight of disabled children and adults drew meager public attention.

This is an introductory history and, like many introductory and comprehensive histories, it is vulnerable in many areas. In the enormous body of data pertaining to the history of disability and of special education not every area can be addressed or every theme pursued. Inescapable limitations are imposed, sometimes by the sheer weight of the evidence and just as often by the paucity of data. Special education development in Canada, for example, remains a relatively unexplored area, as does the contribution of women to the enterprise in North America.

This book is written by a special educator for special educators. Historical writing inevitably mirrors the concerns of the present; any historian is apt to use his or her own perspective. Hence, in this attempt to resurrect and interpret the past for the present, my overriding objective is to detail some of the major issues in our field in the belief that an intimate knowledge of special education in its historical context can enhance and enrich our efforts today.

Many of the issues and problems that beset contemporary special education have their roots in the past; other issues were confronted by our forebears. Today's special educators grapple with many questions, among them the educational placement and instruction of exceptional students, unbiased and non-discriminatory identification procedures, labeling and generic approaches for children with mild disabilities, teacher training, the Regular Education Initiative and inclusive schooling, identification and intervention in early childhood, program eligibility, support for families with disabled members, transition programs for adolescents, the relative impact of nature and nurture on development, institutionalization, sterilization, and life management strategies for mentally handicapped persons. Many of these cogent and controversial issues are not new to the field; pioneer special educators also dealt with them. The way these dilemmas were handled lends at least some light to current solutions. With so much of today's special education determined and shaped by historical imperatives and precedents, close scrutiny can only serve to aid special educators in forming a balanced understanding and evaluation of our profession.
A number of people contributed significantly to the background research for this book. Special appreciation is extended to my graduate assistants, Patti Tudor and John Russel for their invaluable assistance, their patience, and their good humor. Helen Ford's assistance is also appreciated. Ivey Pittle Wallace of Gallaudet University Press lent assistance, guidance, and encouragement for which I am most grateful.