

College of Human and Health Sciences
Coleg y Gwyddorau Dynol ac Iechyd



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe





Disabled Children and Special Education, 1945-1981

Professor Anne Borsay

Introduction

- 1944 Education Act and the expansion of special schools
- Segregation and the experiences of disabled children
- Implications for contemporary policy and practice

Origins (1)

- Post-1760: charitable institutions for blind, deaf and learning disabled children
- 1867: Metropolitan Poor Law Act > central board with common fund to build separate asylums for London

Origins (2)

- Late 19th Century: compulsory schooling and contemporary assessment
- By 1918 LEAs required to grant-aid charitable schools or develop their own provision for blind and deaf, epileptic, and mentally and physically disabled children

Origins (3)

- 1916: 179 schools for 'feeble-minded' children with c.14,000 pupils
- 1918: 60 day schools and 35 residential schools for physically 'defective' children

1944 Education Act (1)

- Schooling according to ‘age, aptitude and ability’
- Disabled children in mainstream education (where possible)
- 1945 Handicapped Pupils and Medical Services Regulations
 - additional teacher attention
 - ‘favourable position in the classroom’
 - special furniture, aids and equipment
 - tuition in lip reading for partially deaf children

1944 Education Act (2)

- 'Mental deficiency' > 'educational subnormality'

BUT

- Children in special schools increased:
 - 1945 = 38,499
 - 1972 = 106,367

Special Schools and Professional Power

- State education and doctors in the assessment, management and treatment of disabled children
- Doctor-led assessment after 1944, despite increased involvement of psychologists
- IQ tests = unreliable:
 - influenced by sensory impairments
 - quantified ‘deviance’
 - affected by social background

Teacher, Rottenrow Special School, Glasgow

‘It was a special needs school, girls only when I arrived and these girls were classified as mildly mentally handicapped, but in fact most of them weren’t ... Most of them came from the east end schemes and they just needed [to be] nurtured.’

Special Schools and Pupil Regulation

- Means of excluding children who obstructed the smooth running of 'normal' schools
- Educationalists thinking outside the box
- Parental struggles for integration

Elizabeth, thalidomider

'... I think from the point of view of the school I was trying to leave not letting me escape and from the school she was trying to get me into being quite reluctant to take me and actually when I did eventually move schools to that school one teacher didn't want me in her class ... as a result of that I joined the class above me where there was one of my friends ... who was assigned to help me if I needed help to go to the toilet or what have you.'

Segregation Evaluated

- Special education and the Deaf community
- Learning difficulty and the long-stay hospital
- Mabel Cooper:

‘I moved to St Lawrence’s when I was seven, because they only took children what went to school in this home. And I never when to school, so I had to move. ...

There used to be children, there used to be two wards of children. One for little boys and one for girls. There was no school there, they only let you use your hands by making baskets and doing that sort of thing. ...’

Educational Case for Special Schools

- Expertise and material resources to deliver appropriate curricula

BUT

- Budgets squeezed
- Expectations low

Educational Experiences

- Helen, thalidomider: the 'education was absolutely appalling because they didn't just have kids with physical problems, they also had kids with severe learning difficulties and they seemed to educate us all to the lowest denominator which meant that I became very good at jigsaws but not a lot else'
- Glasgow boy with a learning difficulty at a special school comparing his education with that of his brothers at the local primary school: 'they had reading and writing where we had things like plastersine'.

Employment Prospects

- 22% assessed as handicapped under the 1944 Act took an unskilled first job c.f. 9% of all 15-24 year olds
- Two-thirds of the handicapped group had been unemployed: twice as many as the non-disabled group

Social Case for Special Schools (1)

- Sympathetic environment in which to acquire interpersonal skills for the non-disabled adult world

BUT

- Trauma of separation: Valerie Lang, cerebral palsy - 'my only memory is of being taken to the school, and that awful business of parents disappearing, and I can still get upset, when I think of them, leaving me at the beginning of each term, you know. They explained to me so carefully that this was, it was important for me to go to school, and it didn't mean they didn't love me, but, you know, going to boarding school at that age is not easy, and it was in Croydon and home was in Manchester'

Social Case for Special Schools (2)

- Psychological ‘punishment’: Peter, thalidomider – ‘Oh, you know, that kind of belittling kids that can’t do things or that can’t tie their shoelaces or that can’t manage to do something. You know, making derogatory comments about one’s parents and, of course, you’re separated from them so you’re kind of feeling anxious already. So it’s not difficult to reduce a child to tears if someone says, “Your mum and dad obviously don’t love you if that’s the way you behave now” and all that kind of ... it was physical and mental abuse to be honest. You know, it was quite shocking really when I think back to it.’

Family and Community

- Distant schools
- Infrequent contact
- Difficulty re-engaging with relatives and friends
- Stigma of difference

Learning from prejudice

Alan Counsell, cerebral palsy:

‘there was a few people who were unkind and, awful, but, they don’t matter: and then maybe, it’s good to meet that kind of kid ... because I learned a lot from them. I learned how to cope with them: awkward, grotty adults, because of the people I met as a child.’

Conclusion

- Special education: medicine, professional manoeuvring and classroom regulation
- Special schools: poor educational and social skills
- Changing context > 1981 Education Act
- Lessons for policy and practice:
 - legacy of special schools
 - parents and individual budgets
 - external assessment of needs
 - professional interaction
 - educational performance and social background
 - financial retrenchment