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The History of Special Education: Lessons from the Past, Implications for the Future

Lucinda S. Spaulding, Ph.D.

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Early 1970s

- 1.75 million or 80% of American children with disabilities did not have access to educational services
- Over 400,000 people were living in American institutions in 1970
- Children (less than 19 years old) made up 45% of the resident populations in institutions

Special Education Reform

- *President's Panel on Mental Retardation (1961)*
- *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)*





Laws Upholding Rights

- *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, Public Law 94-142, 1975, now IDEA)*
- *The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, Public Law 101-336, 1990)*

Significant reform...

... but is it unprecedented?



Brief Survey

- Did your foundations of special education course in your teacher preparation program review the history of special education?
- If so, can you recall any significant events prior to the 1960s and 1970s?



Three Distinct Eras in the History

Era 1: Early Reform (1800 – 1870)

Era 2: Stagnation and Regression (1870-1950)

Era 3: Contemporary Reform (1950 – present)



Four Themes in the History

1. The treatment of people with disabilities follows societal and cultural trends
2. Changing conceptions of disability as a *qualitative* or *quantitative* phenomenon
3. Shifting emphases on *nature* and *nurture*
4. New paradigms are not necessarily better than the old

Historical Views Toward People with Disabilities (Pre 1800s)

- Viewed as less-than-human
- Disability equated to deviance
- *Qualitatively* different:
 - The view that people with disabilities are “different and deviant - they learn, perceive, and think in ways that are unlike the normal” (Winzer, 1993, p. 380).

Historical Treatment

- ❑ Aristotle forbid children born with disabilities to live
- ❑ Romans trained boys who were blind to become beggars, and girls to become prostitutes
- ❑ Christians saw disability as “Divine Punishment” in retaliation for the sins of the parents
- ❑ Treated as non-citizens (denied civic rights)
- ❑ Isolated from society
- ❑ No emphasis on *nurture*

Era 1: Early Reform

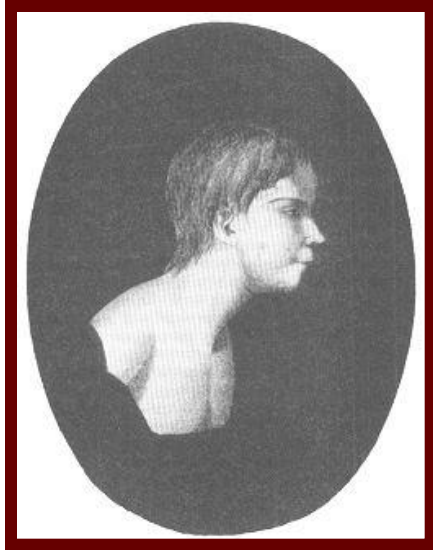
(1800 – 1870)



Societal Trends

- Initiated by French Enlightenment
Philosophes (Locke & Condillac)
- Inquiry about the development of human intellect and language
- Began to study people with sensory disabilities, starting with those who were deaf

Philosophy Meets Empiricism



- Physicians were the first to systematically attempt to educate people with disabilities
- Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and Victor, the “Wild Boy of Aveyron”
- Demonstrated that improvement could be made with training
- Eduoard Seguin followed, publishing the first standard book for treatment and training

Dorothea Lynde Dix (1802-1887)



- March, 1841: Taught a Sunday School lesson in a jail in Cambridge, MA
- Observed appalling conditions
- Launched an attack on the government



The Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts

- Dix (1843) challenged:
 - The conception that people with disabilities could not feel heat or cold
 - That people were incurable or incapable of learning
 - They needed to be caged and chained with iron collars around necks and limbs

Excerpt:

- *“Has fancy realized this to you? It may be the state of some of those you cherish! Who shall be sure his own hearthstone shall not be so desolate? Nay, who shall say his own mountain stands strong, his lamp of reason shall not go out in darkness! To how many has this become a heart-rending reality. If for selfish ends only, should not effectual legislation here interpose?”* (Dix, 1843, p. 8)

The Result?

- Massachusetts legislature began revising laws and standards, with other states soon following
- Hospitals, schools, and training facilities were developed
- Shift from *qualitative* to *quantitative* change
- *Nurture* over *nature*



Emphasis on Nurture

- Thomas Gallaudet (1787-1851)
- Samuel Gridley Howe (1801-1867)
- Interventions for training and teaching:
 - Repetition
 - Sensory stimulation
 - Scaffolding
 - Early intervention



Characteristics of the Era of Early Reform

- Emphasis on nurture and training
- Focus on family-like atmospheres in institutions
- Emphasis was to prepare people to participate in society
- Difference by degree (quantitative), not kind (qualitative)

Era 2: Stagnation & Regression

(1870-1950)

Swift Regression

Populations rapidly increased



Resident labor began to be used to offset costs



Increased emphasis on skills and trade preparation



Decreased emphasis on intellectual development



Return to the “factory model”



Institutions reverted to life-long, custodial care facilities



Societal Trends

- At the end of the 19th century, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration began to burden the economy and social services
- Social theorists began to find ways to “stem the problems”

The Rise of Eugenic Theory

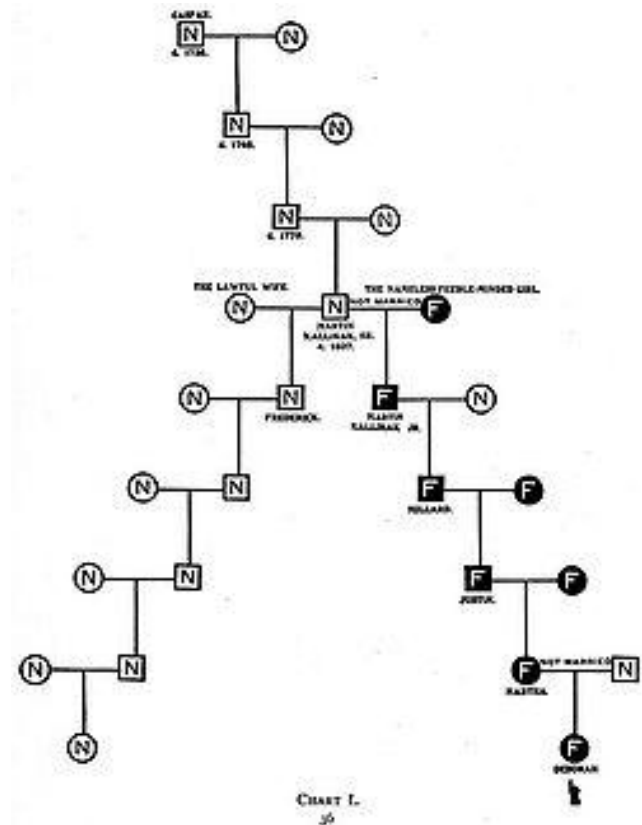
- 1872: Charles Darwin published his 6th edition of *On the Origin of the Species*
- Darwin's biological theory of *survival of the fittest* and *natural selection* was soon applied to human society:



Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism

- Both biological and social characteristics are inherited
- Reliance on pedigree charts and genealogy studies
 - The Kallikak Study (Goddard, 1912)



Eugenics (Francis Galton)

- Derived from the word *eugenes* (“good in stock”)
- *Positive Eugenics*
 - Purposeful reproduction of “good stock”
- *Negative Eugenics*
 - Restriction of the “unfit” from reproducing



Influences of Eugenics

- ❑ Merged disability and deviance in the public mind
- ❑ Re-cultivated the perception of *qualitative* difference
- ❑ Transformed intelligence tests into tools for categorizing and labeling the “fit” from the “unfit”



Report of the Committee on Eugenics (Davenport, 1910)

- “We shall also learn whence come our 300,000 insane and feeble-minded, our 160,000 blind or deaf, the 2,000,000 that are annually cared for by our hospitals and homes, our 80,000 prisoners and the thousands of criminals that are not in prison, and our 100,000 paupers in almshouses and out. This 3 or 4 per cent of our population is a fearful drag on our civilization. Shall we as intelligent people, proud of our control of nature in other respects, do nothing but vote more taxes or be satisfied with the great gifts and bequests that philanthropists have made for the support of the delinquent, defective and dependent classes? Shall we not rather take the steps that scientific study dictates as necessary to dry up the springs that feed the torrent of defective and degenerate protoplasm?” (pp. 127, 128)

Influences of Eugenics (cont.)

- Increased institutionalization
 - To isolate from society
- Eliminated emphasis on *nurture*
 - Emphasis on heredity, fixed intelligence
- Enacted marriage restriction laws
- Legislated sterilization laws

Buck v. Bell (1927)

- Judgment of the case: Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.
 - “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind . . . three generations of imbeciles is enough” (Three Generations, 1927, p. 495)

Resulted in more than 60,000 operations in more than 30 American states



Consequences of Eugenics

- Provided the precedent for over 400,000 sterilizations in Nazi Germany
- Served as a model and justification for the health and public policy adopted in Germany that propagated the mass murder of people with disabilities (i.e., “useless eaters”)

Characteristics of the Era of Stagnation and Regression

- Nature over nurture
- Disability as qualitative rather than quantitative difference
- Emphasis on economics
- The merging of deviance and disability



Role of Special Educators

- Both Samuel Howe and Alexander Graham Bell assumed influential positions in the eugenics movement
- Evidence that Helen Keller supported eugenics



Era 3: Contemporary Reform

(1950 – present)

Societal Trends

- Strong American desire to distance from Nazi Germany's applications of eugenics
- Increased societal sensitivity due to war effort involvement of people with disabilities
- New developmental theories emphasizing environment (nurture):
 - *Behaviorism* (Skinner, 1953)
 - *Social Learning Theory* (Bandura, 1977)



Medical & Scientific Breakthroughs

- ❑ Effects of early nutrition
- ❑ Dilatin (controlled epilepsy)
- ❑ Antibiotics controlled disabling childhood diseases (i.e., whooping cough & diphtheria)
- ❑ Smaller and more effective hearing aids
- ❑ Use of guide dogs



The Civil Rights Movement

- *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)
 - The Supreme Court ruled that state-sanctioned segregation based solely on a person's unalterable characteristics (i.e., race, gender, disability) was unconstitutional

- Provided a legal precedent for advocates for people with disabilities

Gunnar Dybwad (1909-2001)



- Emphasized *nurture* over *nature*:
 - The problem was not that people with disabilities could not learn, but rather, educators did not yet know how to teach them (Dybwad, 1960)



Gunnar Dybwad (1909-2001)

- Every human being has the *ability* to learn
- Every human being has the *right* to learn

“Prejudice is so frequently a weapon disguised as benevolence” (Dybwad, 1968, p. 1)

Gunnar Dybwad (1909-2001)

- Emphasized *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* difference:
 - People with intellectual disabilities “are not a species set apart, but are human beings like you and I, human beings with a handicap to be sure, but entitled within the limitations of their handicap to live like other human beings” (Dybwad, 1966, p. 1)
 - Growth from *Brown v. Board of Education* (*unalterable* versus *limitations*)



PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)

- Dybwad was the lead attorney
- The Court ruled in favor of the PARC
- Judgment: Illegal to exclude children with disabilities from public schools

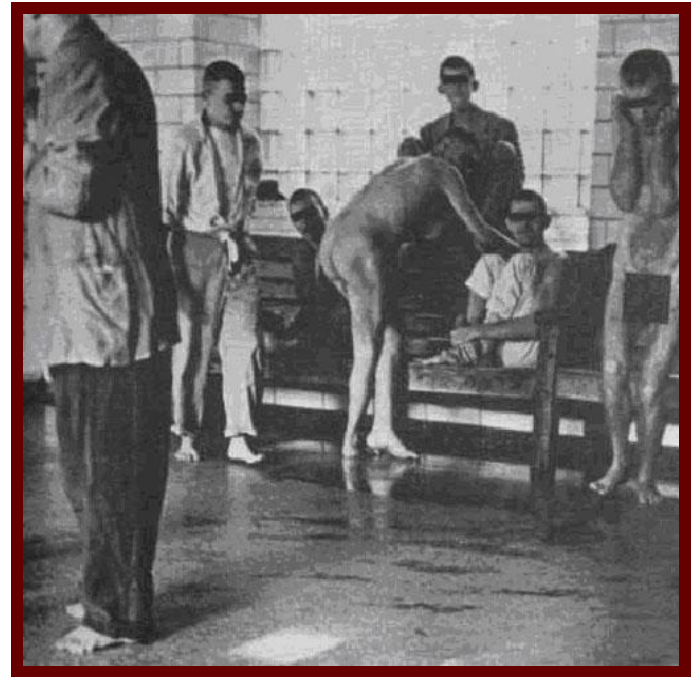
Provided the groundwork for the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* of 1975
(Public Law 94-142, now IDEA)

Christmas in Purgatory (1974)

- ❑ Blatt (Author/Educator) & Kaplan (Photographer)
- ❑ Photographic essay depicting the conditions of people with mental disabilities in American institutions in the 1960s
- ❑ Focused the country's attention on the plight of people with disabilities



Images from *Christmas in Purgatory*





Normalization

- Emphasized mainstreaming people with disabilities into society, offering “normal life routine, normal developmental experiences, independent choices, and the right to live, work, and play in normal surroundings” (Winzer, 1993, p. 381).



Deinstitutionalization

- An effort to move people from large institutions into community-based living arrangements in smaller, residential homes
- Wolf Wolfensberger heavily promoted both movements in the United States



Characteristics of the Era of Contemporary Reform

- Emphasis on nature *and* nurture
- Quantitative versus qualitative difference
- People with disabilities are more “included” in society than ever before
- Many people with severe disabilities living in community-based facilities

Parallels Between Eras

Early Reform and Contemporary Reform



Early and Contemporary Reformers

- ❑ Exposed the conditions PWD were experiencing
- ❑ Framed disability as an issue of human and civil rights rather than a charitable cause
- ❑ Fought to change legislation
- ❑ Emphasized the importance of care & training (nurture)
- ❑ Demonstrated difference by degree (quantitative) not kind (qualitative)

Dix (1847) or Blatt (1974)?

Conditions

“Dirt and filth, odors, naked patients groveling in their own feces, children in locked cells, horribly crowded dormitories, and understaffed and wrongly staffed facilities”(p. v)

Dix (1847) or Blatt (1974)?

Conditions

“There she stood, clinging to or beating upon the bars of her caged apartment, the contracted size of which afforded space only for increasing accumulations of filth, a foul spectacle. There she stood with naked arms and disheveled hair, the unwashed frame invested with fragments of unclean garments, the air so extremely offensive, though ventilation was afforded on all sides save one, that it was not possible to remain beyond a few moments without retreating for recovery to the outward air” (p. 3)



Dix (1847) or Blatt (1974)?

Children

“Neglected children, old and young, each and all, witness this lowest, foulest state of miserable humanity” (p. 3)

Dix (1847) or Blatt (1974)?

Children

Rooms with “groups of 20 and 30 very young children lying, rocking, sleeping, sitting – alone. Each of these rooms were without toys or adult human contact, although each had desperate looking adult attendants ‘standing by’” (p. 34)

Dix (1847) or Blatt (1974)?

Dignity of Human Life

The “inmates” were “less regarded than the lowest brutes” (p. 4)

Human beings “being treated less humanely, with less care, and under more deplorable conditions than animals” (p. v)



More Parallels

Dix: “It is *defective legislation* which perpetuates and multiplies these abuses” (p. 2)

“Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands (p. 13)

Blatt: “We challenge every institution in America to look at itself now. . . . We challenge every institution – and *every governor and every legislator* – to justify its personnel and their practices, its size and development, and its budget” (p. 109)

The New Paradigm is Not Necessarily Better than the Old

- Institutions initially designed for nurture and training turned into life-long custodial care facilities
- IQ tests used to assess cognitive *ability* were soon used to categorize and identify *inability*
- Deinstitutionalization resulted in many people with disabilities becoming homeless or profoundly neglected



Cautionary Markers

- ❑ Dehumanization based on disability
- ❑ Eugenic practices aimed to eliminate people with disabilities
- ❑ Quality of life arguments motivated by economics
- ❑ Conclusive decisions despite inconclusive data



Conclusion

- “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

~ Santayana, 1905, p. 290



Applications

- In partners or small groups, discuss how you can intentionally and systematically integrate historical perspectives into your teacher preparation programs and courses.

Additional Resources

- Blatt, B. & Kaplan, F. (1974). *Christmas in purgatory: A photographic essay on mental retardation*. Syracuse, NY: Human Policy Press.
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- Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd Ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
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- Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and Human Behavior*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Winzer, M. A. (1993). *The history of special education: From isolation to integration*. Washington, DC: Gaulladet University Press.



Interactive/Multi-Media Websites

- The Disability History Museum

- <http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/>

- Useless Eaters

- <http://www.regent.edu/acad/schedu/uselesseaters/>



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