

Introduction

A history of special education and a history of exceptionality are not the same. One deals with educational and institutional arrangements first formally established in the eighteenth century, the other, with people who have been present in society since its beginnings. Nevertheless, the two histories are inextricably meshed, and the essential theme of both is the varying treatment afforded the disabled population.

A society's treatment of those who are weak and dependent is one critical indicator of its social progress. Social attitudes concerning the education and care of exceptional individuals reflect general cultural attitudes concerning the obligations of a society to its individual citizens. Every society recognizes certain extreme forms of human difference as abnormality. Along the range of human behavior from normal to abnormal there is some point at which a social judgment is made and an individual comes to be regarded as exceptional, disabled, different, or deviant. To what extent a society can accept such differences and how to deal with them are perennial problems. History reveals many solutions to these problems.

In any society attitudes and values are fashioned by the prevailing culture, religion, government, and economic conditions. As societies change, so do their values. Classical Greece heaped honors on the philosopher and the teacher; Rome lauded the statesman, the orator, and the soldier. With the Middle Ages, and later the Renaissance, the craftsman and the artist assumed prominence and were highly valued. By the same token, the treatment of disabled people varied, as prevailing political, social, economic, and religious pressures changed.

Throughout the long, dark centuries before about 1700 individual deviation, whether social, political, religious, intellectual, or physical, was rarely tolerated. Those who differed from, or differed with, what a society deemed appropriate and normal were subject to abuse, condemnation, or destruction. With rare exceptions, disabled persons were regarded with aversion and subjected to astounding cruelty; in most cultures they were scorned as inferior beings and were deprived of rights and privileges. Their afflictions were misunderstood, frequently looked upon as having supernatural causes and therefore being unnameable to human treatment. Legal mandates denied them basic civil rights; theological canons excluded them from church membership; and philosophy pronounced them incapable of mental or moral improvement (Hodgson, [1952] 1973; H. P. Peet, 1851; W. W. Turner, 1858).

The great waves of change that swept across Europe after the fall of Rome caught disabled persons in their net. The carnage of the perpetual wars and the incursions of invading tribes that ravaged Europe for centuries, leaving death, destruction, and famine in their wake, must have been even more devastating for those who could not fight and protect themselves. Plagues and epidemics decimated populations and recast large numbers of survivors into the role of handicapped people. When witch hunters roamed Europe seeking the deviant and the heretical, disabled people were singularly suspect but scarcely able to mount a cohesive defense.

During this dark and troubled period there are isolated references to aid, education, and cures for handicapped individuals. Much of the early evidence is surrounded by an aura of magic, however, and it was only at the close of the fifteenth century that the recitation of miracle and legend receded and more stable compilation of authenticated records arose. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a scattered handful of disabled persons were educated, chiefly in pursuit of philosophical knowledge. But still the vast majority were rarely looked upon with humane concern.

Much of the early history of exceptionality is speculative. Historians bothered to record little about the deviant and the different, and disabled people left no records of their own pertaining to their daily lives. The contradictory nature of the evidence we have leaves us with only a dim outline. Very few mentions are made of exceptional persons in the extant literature of early societies; it was not until about the 1600s that authentic data began to lend details to the picture. Pioneer special educators wrote tantalizing but incomplete accounts of their students, their approaches, and their successes.

In the middle of the eighteenth century Britain and Europe turned, for the first time, to the systematic instruction of disabled people. France was the crucial place; there, the broad intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment stimulated rational modes of thought and enhanced novel perceptions of handicapped individuals. Under *l'esprit philosophique*, as preached by Jean Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, and many others, people from all strata of society were stirred as never before on social questions. Philanthropy became a sort of fashion, and the movement for the elevation of individual independence, self-respect, and dignity became common enterprises.

Enlightenment ideas were germane to the development of special education; early special education had a sociopolitical base, conditioned especially by

the philosophical views of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Diderot, and Rousseau. The phenomenal growth of special education in the latter half of the eighteenth century was part of the wider movement that involved the abolition of social classes, the establishment of a just society, and the accession to full human rights of all members of that society. Educational pioneers adopted the essential tenets of *l'esprit philosophique*, illuminating it with specific techniques and methods for training and education (Winzer, 1986a).

By the close of the eighteenth century special education was accepted as a branch of education, although often charity, not education, served as the underlying motive. Schooling did not become a social norm for exceptional youngsters any more than it did for other children of the period, but the advances resulted in wide-ranging pedagogical experimentation, broadly based educational enterprises, the establishment of charitable foundations and state-administered schools, and the emergence of professional teachers.