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**The Politics of Special Educational Needs**

*Len Barton*

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**TAKING SIDES**

In what has now become a classic article entitled: `Whose side are you on?', Howard Becker argues that in their research, sociologists can never avoid taking sides [1]. For those of us who are now devoting our attention to the issues of disability and handicap, it is essential that we make our own value positions clear.

My reasons for working in this area are threefold. First, because as a result of my own school experience I know what it is to be a constant failure. I left school without a single academic qualification. My memories are quite vivid of some of those numerous occasions within school, when I experienced public degradation ceremonies in which I was explicitly told that I was `thick', `stupid', or `a hopeless problem child'. The realities of a secondary modern school, with large classes, poor buildings, few resources and a high staff turnover, also combined to establish a sense of inferiority or second-class citizenship. I therefore feel a very strong affinity towards those pupils who are now described as `children with special educational needs' which in the vast majority of cases, is a euphemism for failure. Secondly, from my own experience of working with young people, many of whom were categorised as `severely' mentally handicapped, I became aware of the significance of social factors in the construction of handicap. Despite good intentions and a great deal of effort, the contradictory nature of the work context, the assessment procedures used, combined to restrict the nature of our knowledge to a rather surface and mechanical level of appreciation. We did not know them as people, in a deeply profound sense, but rather, saw their disabilities as the all enveloping factor. Because we did not really understand them, we often underestimated there. From my understanding of work within special education today, this is still a key issue that needs to be addressed. Finally, my motivation for working in this field of study is influenced by a belief that we can develop a more adequate understanding of the nature of society by examining the ways in which disadvantaged groups are dealt with. The

importance of this perspective is illustrated in a recent analysis by Booth (1985a) of children with Down's syndrome. He maintains that:

> ...the extent to which their physiognomy, or physical impairment, or incompetence is a handicap *depends* on the way they are treated, the attitudes shown towards them, the provision made for them and the opportunities they are permitted. (p. 22, my emphasis.)

As a sociologist, I feel that sociology has a contribution to make towards a more adequate understanding of some of these issues by, for example, illuminating taken-for-granted assumptions, the disjuncture between rhetoric and practice, the influence of economic ,and political forces on definitions and decisions and the way labels are constructed and responded to in given social contexts.

Sociologists are interested in the social construction of categories, how they are created, ascribed, received and changed. Part of this interest is directed towards attempting to identify the relationship(s) between specific types of categories and the dominant ideologies of the wider social order. Within our own society, various categories have been used to describe the handicapped. These include: `mad', `lunatic', `insane', `idiot', `feeble-minded' and `severely sub-normal'. An adequate analysis of the generation of these categories, the purposes they served and the assumptions they involve, must include a consideration of the interplay of historical, political and institutional forces [2].

Sociologists maintain that the educational system is one of the most important means by which societies reproduce themselves. From this perspective, school is viewed as a socialising agency. It is involved in the shaping of identities, in the distribution of particular forms of knowledge and skills, as well as the transmission of dominant values and beliefs. School contributes to the creation of differential forms of consciousness and outcomes, which themselves sustain fundamental divisions in the wider society (Hall, 1977; Apple, 1980; Weis, 1986).

This is a complex, uneven and contradictory process, in which schools are both constrained and constrain. Whilst earlier sociological interest focused on the centrality of class-relations, more recent work attempts to examine the interplay of class, gender and race (Davies, 1985; Weis, 1985). Critical of the over-determinism of much previous analyses, this research is concerned with the dynamic relationship between structural forces and lived-culture. Thus, it

is not a question of mechanical imposition but rather, as Apple (1985) so forcefully reminds us,

> ... that rather than being places where culture and ideologies are imposed on students, schools are the sites where these things are produced. And like the workplace, they are produced in ways that are filled with contradiction and by a process that is itself based on contestation and struggle. (p. 26)

The sociological imagination is thus concerned with bringing `news' about the nature of constraint and control (Bernstein, 1975). It is interested in demystifying the social world, and attempting to establish connections between, for example, institutional procedures and the daily practices of given participants in particular situations.

Sociological interest in the field of education has covered a range of issues including the following.

> The relationship between schooling and social inequality.
> The description and analysis of the social organisation of schools.
> The analysis of the assumptions on which the organisation and content of the school curriculum is based.
> Gender and the reproduction of sexual divisions.
> The school as a social process, including how participants within school construct, manage and change their everyday worlds.
> The material basis and ideological support for the control of minority groups (Bernstein, 1975; Karabel and Halsey, 1977; Robinson, 1981; Walker and Barton, 1983, 1986).

However, until recently within the United Kingdom, very little sociological interest has been shown in the field of special education. A number of reasons have been proposed for this neglect. For example, Tomlinson (1982) argues that sociologists have concentrated on demonstrating the nature and extent of inequalities of selection by `brightness' in education, and failed to examine the increasing removal of pupils from normal schools on the grounds of `defect, dullness, handicap or special need'. Quicke (1986) maintains, as a result of analysing school-based ethnographies published within the past decade, that the concerns of sociologists were usually with pupils who were described as `disruptive', `troublesome', or `difficult' children. Attention was therefore not given to those pupils in remedial departments, or those who were seen as `slow learners'. Thus Quicke argues:

Deviancy for these researchers does not seem to include the majority who would fall into the special needs category of 'learning difficulty'. (My emphasis, p. 83.)

The lack of sociological interest may also have been as a result of the excessive emphasis on individualism that characterises much of the thinking and practice in the field of special education.

Given this situation, we have at an earlier point in our involvement identified several areas of concern for sociologists and more recently have offered a further series of ideas on this topic (Barton & Tomlinson, 1981, 1984). Sociological analysis is often critical of existing practices and institutional arrangements (Lane, 1981). Critical analysis is viewed as an essential prerequisite for change and, as such, can have a disquieting and unsettling effect on existing authority relations. Croll & Moses (1985) have recently criticised the application of a particular sociological analysis to the area of special education. Part of their argument is that sociologists working from within structuralist frameworks always attribute the worst possible motives to professional judgement and practice and that these sociological accounts fail to do justice to the very real needs that these particular children experience.

It is important to offer a number of observations about this form of criticism. Those who present such sociological critiques do not deny the existence of exciting innovations and good practice within the field of special education. Indeed, there are many teachers achieving great things against enormous odds. It is important to encourage more of these developments.  Also, by offering a critique of professionals and their vested interests, it is quite misleading to argue that all their motives are being seen in the worst possible manner. Rather, it is maintained that `well-meaning,' individual intentions, constrained by organisational and structural demands, often result in unexpected consequences (Bart, 1984). Finally, the sociological analysis should not be taken to mean that we do not recognise that many pupils have real difficulties in school. We accept this, but as Carrier (1986) argues, we want to treat:

> ... as questionable and worthy of investigation the ways they are identified as having one or another condition, the ways in which we explain the nature of their condition and its consequences, and the ways in which the condition is a reflection of educational practices and the forces which influence them. (p. 5)

What sociologists have argued is that the view that concern for the handicapped has developed as a result of progress, enlightenment and humanitarian interests, is totally unacceptable. The experience of this

particular disadvantaged group has generally been one of exploitation, exclusion, dehumanisation and regulation. In an excellent analysis of the development in the treatment of insanity in nineteenth century England, Scull (1982) contends that:

> . . . it remains the case that to present the outcome of reform as a triumphant and unproblematic expression of humanitarian concern is to adopt a perspective which is *hopelessly biased and inaccurate:* one which relies, of necessity, on a systematic neglect and distortion of the available evidence. (p. 15, my emphasis)

The establishment of the then-known asylums, was partly due to a desire to protect society from contamination and possible threat to the established order [3]. Added to this was the growing distinction that was developed, as a result of the rise of capitalism, between the able and non-able bodied, the productive and non-productive elements within society.

Asylums were institutions for the less-than-human groups within society, those who had no legal rights and who were viewed as having no powers of decision-making. They were believed to be sick and suffering from a disease. The treatment they required needed to be provided by doctors. Thus we have the emergence and dominance of the medical profession in the definition, diagnosis and treatment of the handicapped.

One cannot underestimate the influence of this particular professional . group in organising and decisively moving insanity into the medical arena. Part of their success was due to their claims to scientific expertise with, as Scull (1982) argues:

> ...its emphasis on order, rationality and self-control; goals which could only be reached in an institutional setting. (p. 44)

So, in terms of society needing to control a deviant section of its population And provide a particular form of institutional management and legitimation, the role of the medical profession has been very significant indeed.

Two particular outcomes of this involvement need to be noted. Through the impact of medication, the problem was firmly diagnosed as being within the individual's physiological structure. Also, the existence of such a powerful group of experts, who were viewed as definers of need, resulted in an increased demand for their services. The effectiveness of their influence can be seen in that it was only in 1970 that the education of severely handicapped children became the official responsibility of the Department of Education and

Science.  It was previously under the control of the Department of Health and Social Services.

We have argued elsewhere (Barton and Tomlinson, 1981), that the history of education and special education in particular, can be understood in terms of the outcome of a struggle between powerful groups.  Part of the conflict is over the maintenance of vested interests and the desire on the part of the professionals involved, to strengthen their hold over how 'priorities' and 'problems' are defined and 'solutions' provided.

This raises questions of power-relations between professionals and clients, as well as between professionals themselves. The existence of disagreement between professionals over what constitutes the needs of a particular child, is often overlooked by much of the literature. However, in a discussion of 'needs' and 'needs assessment', their meaning and use across a range of services, Baldwin (1986) argues, that they have been used *differently* by various professionals. An important issue therefore arises, that of understanding in whose interests needs assessments are conducted? Professionals tend to define and create needs which involves client relationships-fundamentally characterised by dependency. He maintains that this particular confusion over not able to express their ideas, or more importantly, are viewed as being incapable of such thought processes.

Another powerful group involved in this process are the educational psychologists. Cyril Burt [4] was appointed as the first official educational psychologist in Britain, by London County Council in 1913. He has been one of the most influential figures behind the shaping of policy and practice in the field of education and in particular in the development of psychometry or mental testing (Simon, 1985). Recent analyses has tried to offer some explanations for the growing influence of this particular professional group. Their suggestions include; the gradual implementation of the 1944 Education Act and the special provision for particular handicapped pupils; the 1968 Summerfield Committee established to investigate the employment of psychologists in the educational service; the increased popularity of psychology as a subject in universities and higher education coupled with the establishment of training courses for educational psychologists and finally, the growing belief that the education of mentally handicapped children should depend primarily on educational considerations, not on medical diagnosis (Thomas, 1985; Quicke, 1984).

Whilst the role of the educational psychologist now includes not only assessment and placement but also an advisory element, particularly to teachers, there is little evidence to question the belief that the use of

psychometrics is decreasing in their daily work. A relatively uncontroversial approach to questions of assessing a child's level, stage, need or skills with respect to emotional or cognitive functioning are still prominent features of their philosophy and practice and as Quicke (1984) goes on to argue:

> The allegedly 'neutral', 'objective' and value-free concepts and measuring instruments of the educational psychologist have served a vital function for the system by bringing a semblance of order and rationality to a potentially chaotic and contentious area. It is no exaggeration that the development of special education, in the broadest sense of the term, was not only assisted by but in a large part made possible by, the educational psychologist's technology. (pp. 123,124)

With the introduction and growing implementation of the 1981 Education Act, the role of the educational psychologist in the identification, assessment and provision for pupils who are believed to be in need of some form of special education has greatly increased.

A particular psychological approach that is having an increasing impact on special education programmes both in the United States and England, is that of behaviourism [5]. Discussing the nature of this view of education, Shapiro (1980) notes that:

Its goals are highly circumscribed, minutely fragmented and quantifiable. Such an approach generally excludes a concern with imaginative, creative or divergent thinking.

> . . Education becomes a process in which the student attempts to come as close as possible to the outcomes already anticipated by a teacher. (p. 221)

Increasingly, this perspective is resulting in the creation of more curricular materials that are total instructional packages. Apart from the question of the deskilling and re-skilling of teachers involved in this form of practice (Bart, 1984), the emphasis again is on individualising the problem.

CHANGING THE LABEL

During the 1960s and early 70s, increasing government attention was given to the question of young blacks in our society. They began to be described as a special group or `special problem' in that they were alleged to be suffering from personal or cultural inadequacies. Exacerbating this concern was the question of

increasing black youth unemployment and the belief that, as a result of alienation and frustration, they would become a danger and increasingly politicised (Rex, 1970; Humphry, 1972; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979; CCCS) 1982).

The ideology of `special needs' was used to both legitimate State intervention and as Solomos (1986) argues,

> Just as in educational ideologies the notion of `compensatory education' relied on the notion that those who failed educationally needed remedial help, so the special needs ideology saw minority groups as having failed because of personal or cultural inadequacies. (p. 136)

This emphasis upon `need' within the field of special education began to be expressed during the 1960s. Needs in any society are related to values-to power. Decisions about people's needs involves value judgements.

It is essential to recognise as Tomlinson (1985) has recently argued, that an ideology of `special needs' not only obscures contradictions and conflicts, but can also serve to support various policies and practices of the wider social order. Also, the rhetoric may be humanitarian but the practice can be mainly one of control. The concept of `special needs' already has a history of being used to support a deficit model of various disadvantaged groups.

THE WARNOCK REPORT

One of the most influential documents since the 1944 Education Act has been the Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People, better known as the Warnock Report. It has been influential in terms of informing the nature of the 1981 Education Act and stimulating a great deal of debate. Questions raised go beyond the concerns of a small group of children, to the sort of educational provision we believe to be important for all children.

In November 1975, Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, appointed a Committee with the following terms of reference:

> To review educational provision in England, Scotland and Wales for children and young people handicapped by disabilities of body or mind, taking account of the medical aspects of their needs, together with arrangements to prepare them for entry into employment; to consider the most effective use of resources for

these purposes; and to make recommendations (Warnock Report, 1978, p. 1).

Two of the key recommendations of the Report include:
(1) The abolition of the then existing ten statutory categories of handicap and replacing them with the notion of `special educational needs'. Part of the rationale for this was the belief that:

Categorisation perpetuates the sharp distinction between two groups of children-the handicapped and the non-handicapped. (p. 43) Furthermore, categorisation focuses attention on only a small proportion of all those children who are likely to require some form of special educational provision. We therefore recommend that statutory categorisation or handicapped pupils should be abolished. (p. 43)

(2) A further recommendation was that the concept `special educational needs' should apply to a much larger number of pupils within mainstream schools than had been previously regarded as in need of special education. The Report states that:

We refer to the group of children-up to one in five-who are likely to require some form of special educational provision at some time during their school career as `children with special educational needs'. (p. 41)

Thus, the Report raises issues and makes recommendations that are not only applicable to those involved in the segregated sector of special school - provision, but are for teachers in all schools. Secondly, it is concerned with encouraging a more positive attitude towards these pupils. Finally; the Report uses the concept of `special educational needs as a means of legitimating the expansion of provision (Fish, 1985; Tomlinson, 1985).

However, the Report is not without its critics. Sociologists have been critical of the strong medical/psychological emphasis underpinning the Report. Also, they have argued that the notion of `special educational needs' is largely a tool of administrative convenience which will lead to the increased bureaucratisation of the system and the power of professional judgements. Finally, they have criticised the Report for its failure to seriously address questions of the organisational structure of schools, the impact on the curriculum, teacher expectations and pedagogy, in terms of their contribution towards the creation of handicap (Lewis and Vulliamy, 1981; Tomlinson, 1982; Ford et al., 1982, Oliver, 1984b). One of the most powerful and insightful criticisms of the Report and policy issues in the field of special education has been provided by an American, David Kirp (1983). In a

comparison of British and United States legislation and policy, he maintains that in the British situation, the membership of the Warnock Committee tells you a great deal about the power of civil servants in determining the composition of such a group and the nature of the final outcome. Kirp claims that members were chosen to represent particular professional viewpoints: medical, psychological and teaching in particular. He notes that only one of the Committee's 26 members was a parent of a handicapped person and that there was no member of the black community, no lawyer and no handicapped person on the Committee. According to Kirp, it should come as no surprise that the Report fails to give serious consideration to system issues and encourages a reliance on professional judgement. Its basic message is `trust professionals'. The approach to policy and the handicapped in Britain generally, including the Warnock Report, is characterised by a model of welfare that:

> ... does not recognise conflict; it is silent concerning politics, and actually antagonistic toward law. It contemplates professionals and administrators working on behalf of an ever-expanding clientele toward an agreed-upon common good. (p. 106)

A great deal of the literature dealing with topics relating to special education is still of a very non-critical nature.

THE 1981 EDUCATION ACT

For some people this Act has been received as a clear indication of progress and a vindication of a great deal of the efforts of the Warnock Committee.

The new definitions, though expressed in sexist language, are:

(1) For the purposes of this Act a child has `special educational needs' if he has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for him. (p. 1)

(2) ... a child has a `learning difficulty' if:
(a) he has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of his age; or
(b) he has a disability which either prevents or hinders him from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided in schools, within the area of the local authority concerned, for children of his age. (p. 1)

One astute commentator has noted that within these brief definitions, learning difficulties are alleged to be the property of pupils, a deviation from a

population norm and relative to the provision within a local education authority (Booth, 1985b).

A number of contradictions have been identified within the Warnock Report and the 1981 Act:

(1) There is an assumption that they have introduced a totally new approach to special education, but we have no precise specification of the nature of this approach (Booth, 1985b).

(2) New opportunities for partnership with parents are being encouraged. At the same time they are now faced with a bewildering array of bureaucratic procedures.

(3) Emphasis is being given to maximising the opportunity of a certain group of children to be educated normally but we are now seeing the emergence of a new breed of person, the statemented child [6] (Jones, 1985).

However, perhaps the most important lesson, that we can draw from these developments, is that what we call `special' is fundamentally determined by the nature of normal or mainstream education. It is this particular issue I now wish to briefly consider.

## THE NATURE OF SCHOOLING

Policy and practice within education is fundamentally based upon a rationale in which economic priorities are central. In the past five years particularly, there has been an unprecedented intervention on the part of government in the field of education. The nature and control of the curriculum, the establishment of a new examination system, the role of the ManPower Services Commission [7] the control of local authority spending on education, the nature of governing bodies within schools, the organisation and future evaluation of teacher-education, all testify to this trend.

Pressures for accountability have been legitimated by allegations, in both the academic and popular press, of declining standards in schools, increasing discipline problems, inadequate time being devoted to the basic subjects and `wrong' teaching methods.

Demands for greater control and monitoring of standards within school are now finding their expression in calls for a specific form of assessment and evaluation of teachers. Indeed, legislation precisely concerned with this issue

has been considered in Parliament (Barton and Walker, 1984; Lawn, 1985; Grace, 1985).

The government's position has been expressed through many official documents, but a recent article by Sir Keith Joseph, the former Secretary of State for Education, sums up their concerns most clearly. In a discussion of the achievements and intentions of government, he says:

> Now we have turned our attention to standards, the aims and indeed the content of education and to the curriculum itself. The government's aim is to raise standards in all our schools. (1985)

Also, in a recent document presented to Parliament entitled `Better Schools' (1985), the principal aims of the Government for schools are set out. It is quite clear how standards are to be primarily achieved:

> For most pupils, the period of compulsory education culminates in assessment through public examinations. The Government believes that this should continue to be so. Examination results are one important means of assessing achievement; examinations, properly designed, are a stimulus to good performance, and parents and employers, as well as many pupils, rightly value them. (p. 29)

The pursuit of academic excellence through examinations is unquestionably still the dominant feature of our educational system.

Schools are thus involved in differentiating pupil from pupil on the basis of a narrow definition of ability. They find it difficult to offer equal status to other aspects of development. Knowledge within school is appropriated by the means of individual competition. Schools segregate pupils on the basis of age and they are characterised by an affiliation to, and presentation of, certain forms of knowledge. This knowledge as Young (1971) has argued is hierarchically ordered, with value being placed on abstract, individual and examinable knowledge.

This process of selection or differentiation has a number of features. First, as this type of schooling demands that the majority of pupils fail, an essential outcome of this evaluation is as Bates (1984) notes:

> Rather than a means of furthering the *educational* purposes of individual development and emancipation, educational evaluation has become, like class, a mechanism of exclusion (p. 128)

Thus, in terms of both the quality and duration of educational opportunity, many pupils are denied access. Secondly, by giving priority to certain forms of knowledge, schools tend to devalue other types of knowledge, particularly those of black and white working class pupils. Lastly, this process of differentiation helps as Connell et al. (1982) maintain

> . . . to generate a social dichotomy, stereotyping, and hostility between the 'brains' and the 'dumbos', those who can 'use their heads' and those who are 'good with their hands'... (p. 195)

Within this system of evaluation particular categories take on a crucial and specific importance. They include such notions as `bright', `able', `intelligent', `highly motivated' and `average', `slow', `thick', `difficult' and `lazy'. The teacher's position in mediating these labels and the messages they contain to pupils, must not be underestimated.

The school is an agency of social control and through constant attendance, children are subject to numerous social and cultural lessons. These include the establishment of cultural differences, what constitutes `normality', `competence', `disaffection' and `deviance'. Through the powerful mechanisms of ritual and routine, this complex process becomes the natural, taken-for-granted aspect of schooling. Of course, as we noted earlier, pupils are not passive in this process, but mediate these messages in different ways, and at times, actively work back on the system. They struggle to realise different priorities and are motivated by other concerns than those of educators. Yet paradoxically given the nature of the dominant hierarchy within schools, their very actions can be seen to be part of a response that is to be expected from `this type of child', and can be the means of reinforcing the need for more remediation.

In summary, I am arguing that developments in special education cannot be divorced from those in the mainstream. Schooling is fundamentally influenced by selection and the comprehensive ideal of ameliorating social class divisions has not been realised. Schooling cannot be viewed as socially disinterested or culturally neutral (Wexler, 1981). Schooling is profoundly social, yet its emphasis on individualism can lead to a fallacy in which questions relating to social functions are ignored (Hargreaves, 1982). The powerful influence of examinations and the ideologies associated with them, have historically been a legitimation for the existence of a segregated section of special educational provision. They are special in the sense that both institutions and pupils fail to live up to the standards established by normal or mainstream schooling. Thus pupils who are identified as lacking ability, difficult to teach, need to be given

an alternative form of experience. Special education has been a safety valve for the mainstream system.

It is important therefore to set the debate about special education within the context of the wider issue of education generally. If we go back to the notion of the Warnock Report, that one in five children will be in need of some special educational provision, then this, for some a modest estimate, will inevitably mean an expansion of services. It is likely that many more children from white and black working class backgrounds will be identified as having special educational needs. By recognising this and considering it in relation to growing youth unemployment, Tomlinson (1985) has recently argued that the expansion of special education is a political response to a critical dilemma facing the educational system and society generally. This is the need to control more and more disenchanted youth.

In a recent two-year study of young people in Wolverhampton directed by Paul Willis (1985) the Report suggests that the young unemployed are being thrust into a `new social condition'. These young people are experiencing an extended period of relative poverty and dependency on the family and an increasingly mean and coercive state. This new condition not only includes wagelessness and dependency, but also, for example, `alienation, depression and pessimism about future prospects'. Whilst acknowledging that there will be particular and distinct combinations of these characteristics according to race and gender, Willis (1986) is quite adamant that this is essentially a working-class experience. These young people, he maintains, have been sentenced to "the personal neurosis of individual worry for a structural problem over which they have no control". (p. 112)

These unemployed youths will increasingly be viewed as a special problem and post-school programmes catering for special needs, will become more and more essential. The Manpower Services Commission will be actively involved in providing such requirements. These programmes will act as a buffer-zone between the State, young people, and the realities of the labour market. Many of those pupils identified as having special educational needs will become the unemployed of tomorrow.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is essential that careful consideration is given to questions of teacher awareness and the relationship between the personal and the political. Teachers involved in special education need to be acutely aware of the nature of the inequalities outlined above within society. They need to examine the

implications of a system of education that is fundamentally concerned with selection and differentiation. [7].

Whilst the demands of teaching may encourage a focus on pragmatic concerns, questions relating to class, race and gender must not be neglected. Indeed, from the perspective of this paper, these are extremely relevant and urgent issues. In a recent paper on Inservice Training Progress in Special Education, Booth (1985b) illustrates their significance by noting that in Britain:

> Virtually all pupils sent to schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties or day maladjusted provisions are working class. (p. 11)

In the United States this is also true of many of those pupils who are involved in programmes for those with `learning disabilities' (Ysseldyke et al., 1982; Sigmon, 1985). He also notes that:

> The disproportionate number of black pupils in disruptive units or recommended for E.S.N. (M) [8] provision remains a cause of argument and conflict. (p. 11)

In the United States there is an over-inclusion of black pupils in classes for the mentally retarded (Collins and Gamblin, 1983).

> All categories of special school have a majority of boys and the preponderance in maladjusted schools is overwhelming (Booth, 1985, p. 11).
> In the first three years of the Open University course `Special Needs in Education', 78% of students were women. (p. 11)

Adequate explanations for these occurrences will only be found when we relate them to wider complex social, economic and political factors. This should include considering them in relation to mainstream or normal education and how they are both a response and contribution to the social inequalities, stereotypes and discriminating ideologies and practices of a divided society. One encouraging sign is the publication of the Fish Report entitled `Educational Opportunities for All?' which is the outcome of an independent review committee chaired by John Fish. It was concerned with the availability of provision to meet special educational needs within the Inner London Education Authority. This document is unique, in that it raises the question of the rights of children and young people with learning difficulties within the context of anti-

racist and anti-sexist policies. Priority is given to developing equal opportunities for all pupils within a truly comprehensive system.

In attempting to argue for the importance of a perspective that recognises the contribution of social factors towards the creation of handicap, criticism has been offered of some of the dominant assumptions and ideologies relating to this topic. Thus, it is worthy of note that the number of children labelled as having special educational needs increases in proportion to the available provisions. The nature of those needs, assessment and placement of particular cases are as much to do with the question of available resources than anything to do with inborn traits of the people involved. Economic considerations have always been a paramount factor in the development of Special Education.

Also, understanding how pupils with special needs experience the world must involve an examination of the *context* within which their interaction takes place. Thus, the physical features of a school, the ethos, the hidden and official curriculum and the teacher's expectation must be seen as powerful forces in the process of creating deviance and problems for pupils within school. As Ford *et al.* (1982) maintain:

> The range of processes which have an effect upon the pupil's career is enormous: the style of pastoral care, the availability of remedial provision, the content of the curriculum, the existence of a parent-teacher association and the creation of playgroups are only five very diverse examples of factors which might have a bearing upon the pupil's chances of being labelled and referred for a problem behaviour. (p. 169)

Many of those existing arrangements within schools catering for pupils with learning difficulties, such as withdrawal groups for remedial help, specific curriculum for less able pupils and special units, have been severely criticised. Confirming the observation of previous analysis, Galloway (1985) notes that the common elements in these approaches do not give mainstream teachers opportunity or encouragement to consider how the school contributes to the pupil's difficulties in the first place.

One of the effects of scientific interest in handicapped people has been to view them in terms of clinical and behavioural symptoms. Much of the life we have provided for them is unsatisfying and unrewarding. What we desperately need is a new vision or, as Martin Luther King would say, `a dream'. We need to work for what Wexler (1981) has called, a liberating perspective, one which provides an alternative cultural basis for meaning and personal identity. Individual dissatisfaction is, as Wexler notes:

Only an initial condition for the realisation of existing alternative social possibilities. (p. 259)

An important step in this process will be both in our theoretical work and in our practice to shift concentration on the differentiation of children and to identify what they have in common (Simon, 1985). Collective identity and struggle will be an essential feature of an effective demand for social justice and equality. Encouragement can be taken from the recent analyses of disabled people themselves who both recognise the inadequacy of existing theory and are attempting to develop a more effective foundation for radical change [9]. Some of their work is beginning to be expressed within the sociology of education (Oliver, 1984a, b, 1986; Abberley, 1985).

Those of us who are attempting to contribute to the struggle for change can learn much from contemporary feminist thought and practice. One crucial lesson is the importance of connecting the *personal* with the *political, so* that what has been seen in mainly *individual* terms, can be viewed as a social predicament and thus a political issue (Eisenstein, 1984). This perspective assumes that what people feel and experience in their lives matters. By sharing these experiences members of subordinate groups can begin to realise that they are not alone. Through this means they can begin to develop a greater sense of their worth and agency.

The task is an immense one-of moving from powerlessness and oppression to self and collective actualisation. It is important to let *people* speak for themselves. As McDonald (1980) writes,

> To be imprisoned inside one's own body is dreadful. To be confined in an institution for the profoundly retarded does not crush you in the same way; it just removes all hope.... Never seeing normal children, we were not sure what they were like. Where did we fall short? In your ugly body it was totally impossible that there could be a mind. Vital signs showed that your title was 'human'; but that did not entitle you to live like normal children. You were totally outside the boundary which delineated the human race. (p. 8)

As educators we need to ask: What sort of a society is it that generates and legitimates the policies and practices involved in treating people in this way? In making their private thoughts public, handicapped people provide essential substance for public campaigns and the basis of political alliances and endeavour [ 10].

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NOTES

[1] In a paper of this nature it is impossible to discuss some of the complex issues involved in this question. Within the sociology of education as a result of feminist concerns and an upsurge of interest in ethnography, questions relating to the perspective of the researcher, the relationship with respondents, the purpose(s) of the analysis have taken on important significance.

In a recent analysis of the development of approaches in the sociology and politics of education, Whitty in a discussion of the contributions made by sociologists who are committed to a radical perspective says (1986):

Certainly, there is no obvious reason to suppose that a concern to interrogate situations with a view to informing radical practice creates any less of an incentive to be empirically rigorous than producing knowledge for its own sake or to further one's own career. (p. 84)

[2] This is a very under-developed area. We have little material that provides us with an historical understanding of these issues in relation to the emergence and expansion of special educational provision.

[3] A predominant view at one period, was the belief that not only had handicapped people been conceived in promiscuity but that they would breed similar children and degenerate that quality of the genetic stock. Thus we had the significance of the Eugenics movement in this country (Woodhouse, 1982).

[4] It would seem that even the revelations of the fraudulent nature of his research have don( little to question his authority (Gillie, 1978; Simon,

1985). Very little serious consideration has been given to the issue within psychological or educational journals.

[5]    One recognises that this term covers a number of approaches (Ainscow & Tweddle, 1979; Wheldall *et al.,* 1984). Nevertheless there are indications of a strong behavioural approach to teaching children with special educational needs. This is particularly so with regard to those who have severe learning difficulties.

[6]    The 1981 act now specifies clearly the sorts of advice a local education authority must obtain when determining a child's special educational needs. Advice must be taken from the child's teacher, school medical officer and an educational psychologist as well as other professionals if it is felt necessary. Once a full assessment has been carried out the local education authority can issue a `statement' which determines the special education provision which is necessary for the child. A draft of the statement must be issued to the parents and their views sought. The authority may then decide to amend the original statement. Further appeals can be made by the parents with the ultimate appeal being to the Secretary of State for Education and Science.

[7]    The Manpower Services Commission is a body responsible for schemes concerned with providing young people with a more relevant training than what schools have allegedly been able to do. It is an extremely powerful body whose responsibility is not to the Department of Education and Science nor to the local authority (see M.S.C., 1981).

[8]    E.S.N. (M) was the former category used for educationally subnormal children who had moderate learning difficulties.

[9]    Critical of existing functionalists and Weberian perspectives on special education and disability, they use the concept 'oppression' both as a means of expressing their experiences and as a way of developing links between disadvantaged groups. We are at an early stage in the development of their ideas but there does seem ground for optimism here.

[10] The United States, for example, has a growing body of people involved in the Self-Advocacy Movement. In this country we are just beginning to see similar developments taking place.

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