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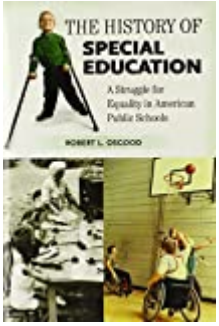

Robert L. Osgood. *The History of Special Education: A Struggle for Equality in American Public Schools.* Growing Up: History of Children and Youth Series. Westport: Praeger, 2008. xix + 157 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-98913-2.

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Published on H-Education (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

The Formalization of Special Education

I remember Russell, a classmate of mine in parochial school in the seventh grade who had diabetes. A tall, good-looking kid, he had been passed along from grade to grade, and his reading ability was poor. I did not think of Russell as disabled, but he was at the mercy of students, teachers, and staff who did not know what to do with him. At lunchtime, the teacher would ask us to tutor him. He had to read aloud from an elementary reader and identify whether certain consonants were âhardâ or âsoftâ sounds. I was surprised at how seriously he approached it. More honestly, I was surprised to discover that Russell was actually smart.

The History of Special Education is the second title in the Praeger Publishers series Growing Up: History of Children and Youth, edited by Priscilla Ferguson Clement, professor emerita of history at Penn State University. Robert L. Osgood is also the author of *The History of Inclusion in the United States* (2005). He defines disability as âpersonal, cognitive, physical, and behavioral conditions that have been identified as significantly limiting an individualâs ability to function effectively in normal society situations: family, neighborhood, school, and workplaceâ (p. xviii). According to Osgood, âthis history focuses less on laws, policies, structures, and operations of special education and more on the lived experiences of those involved as they were shaped by these external forcesâ (p. xiv). Furthermore, âthe words, depictions, photographs, and narratives of those who have experiencedâ quasi-permanent settings for disabled individuals directly inform the study (p. xv). As for delimitations, Osgood admits that the narrative approach is compromised by the silenced voices of persons with disabilities.

The book is divided into six chapters plus an introduction. Chapter 1, âChanging Worlds of American Children, 1800-1940,â begins with a brief overview of the history of childhood. Osgood implies that the social construct of childhood itself is connected to the emerging construct of disability but does not explore that premise. He goes on to state that with the advent of the Progressive Era (1890-1920) disability âhad become a key constructâ (p. 7). Alarmed by immigration and urbanization,

the progressive reformers concentrated on physical and mental disease. This was complicated, however, by the conflation of disability with âotherness.â In contrast to earlier explanations, disability now became environmental and attributed to genetics, poverty, unsanitary conditions, unfit parents, and the lack of English-speaking skills. In response to the growing number of children, urban schools adopted such practices as age-grading to differentiate and better manage the burgeoning enrollments. Special education began to occupy a specific category as well: âBy 1930 in the United States, special education in public schools had become a standard feature of public educationâ (p. 12). Although Osgood only mentions the eugenics movement in passing, he does hint at societyâs need to use disability as a basis of discrimination.[1]

In chapter 2, âLife in Institutions to 1940,â Osgood introduces the societal belief that mentally disabled persons needed to be segregated from society in order âto relieve families and society of the âburdenââ (p. 25). To broaden the context, this is consistent with the historical trend whereby families and communities institutionalized the poor, the disabled, and the criminals. By the end of the century, such institutions were receiving state support. He points out that it is unclear whether children were incarcerated as a custodial measure or for actual instruction. It is revealing, however, that most of the instructional programs for mentally disabled children in institutions followed the âphysiological methodâ of instruction that involved formal instruction focused on motor skills, personal hygiene, and work habits (p. 26). Blind students were instructed in vocational education and sensory training to compensate for the lack of sight. Over time, institutions for the deaf and blind concentrated more on education than custodial arrangements because there was a realization that they were not mentally impaired. Although Osgood gives the reader fragmentary glimpses of the quality of institutional life, he notes that âlittle direct or hard evidence exists that reveals what life in such undifferentiated settings was like for students and teachersâ (p. 42).

In the next chapter, âPublic Schools and the Accommodation of Students with Disabilities to 1940,â Osgood traces the growth in the number of students as well as the growing advocacy movement. During this period, disability became a broad spectrum–it now included speech difficulties, tuberculosis, and âcrippledâ students. Prior to 1900, everybody who was disabled was thrown into the same setting. The fact that public schools, in general, were becoming more specialized eventually affected the treatment of disabled children. Simultaneously, the number of children identified as disabled increased. As diagnostic methods became more sophisticated, large urban schools got away from the âdumping groundâ mentality and began to aggregate students based on specific conditions. Although he does not refer to the influence of Alfred Binet, he does mention the Binet-Simon intelligence test as an early identifier of disabled children. In this section, Osgood includes a few quotes from observers and teachers that provide insight into special education classes. He summarizes the persistence of the special class as follows: âCreated and sustained by interwoven drives for social control, operational efficiency, and individualized pedagogy, the special class remained the primary instructional setting for children with mental disability until the 1980sâ (p. 51).

In chapter 4, âThe Worlds of Childhood Disability, 1940-1960–Generating Public Awareness,â he cites âa dramatically heightened visibility and awareness of disability, prompting a greater scrutiny of the institutions and policies that affected the lives of exceptional childrenâ (p. 80). In particular, the deficit paradigm began to be challenged, and advocates argued for a broader conception of normalcy. For the regular grades of public school, though, the provision of special services within a segregated setting predominated. The inhumane conditions that characterized many of the institutions for the mentally disabled were unmasked through a series of exposÃ©s using photography and film evidence. This may have been precipitated by the same impulses that marked the beginnings of social unrest in the 1950s. At the least, disability followed the trend of other âcivil rightsâ that made considerable headway during this period.

The role of the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) is underestimated in chapter 5, âEnsuring the Rights and Enhancing the Lives of Children with Disabilities In and Out of the Classroom, 1960-1980.â *Brown* is widely recognized as an umbrella case that raised the question of whether âseparateâ–in any context–could ever be âequal.â[2] Along with the increase in federal intervention and regulation and the rise of more advocacy groups, another conflation resulted in new labels and explanations for behavior. The terms âat risk,â âdisadvantaged,â âculturally deprived,â and âhandicappedâ once again suggested environmental factors for disability and resurrected the deficit paradigm (p. 103). The federal role increased as students with disabilities became a protected class. All the while, the numbers of students who were placed into the expanded category of special education increased. Samuel Kirkâs

designation of âlearning disabilitiesâ in 1963 meant that special educators now had to address needs of children âwhose struggles in school previously had not fallen under existing categories of disability and thus had not been formally recognized and categorized.â By 1980, this had become the âsingle largest category of disability recognized under federal lawâ (p. 112).

Osgood does not discuss the affect of the development of the field of multiculturalism on disability or the rise of disability studies. In addition, he does not explore the cultural dimensions of disability. For example, Deaf Culturists may find separation to be preferable to an integrated setting in which deafness is considered a handicap.[3] Certain religious groups consider disability to be divinely ordained (in other words, âGod made them that wayâ) and resist intervention on the part of school personnel or social workers.[4]

The title of the last chapter, âVoices of the Present, Echoes from the Past: Considering the Lives of Children with Disabilities,â points out one of the deficiencies of the book. Osgood reminds the reader that the book has âexplored the lived experiences of children with disabilities who have been shaped by a world that has offered them a multitude of contradictory messagesâ (p. 123). Although the reader sees glimpses of this, particularly in chapter 5, this is not a narrative history. As the voices of persons with disabilities are silent, the voices of advocates and teachers are silent as well. Instead, the author has given a survey of the history of special education that demonstrates the formalization of the field and its relationship to the changing nature of schools and society. In his desire to cover so much ground (1800 to the present), Osgood has sacrificed much-needed context as well as a more robust narrative approach. In addition, the subtitle of the book suggests that equality has been achieved in regard to special education students in public schools. If anything, however, disability remains a contested and misunderstood issue.[5]

Overall, this is an appropriate text for an introductory course in special education or as a recommended text for courses in the history of U.S. education. Special education teachers and pre-service students enrolled in those courses, however, will find themselves to be largely unrepresented. But historians of education who want an overview of the history of disability and its relationship to schools–particularly urban schools–will find it to be helpful. The book is well referenced and well written but it does not deliver on its promise to reveal the lived experiences of those who were classified as disabled for political, social, or economic reasons and separated from society. And it does not fully explore the complex role played by disability, itself, in a society that discriminates along racial, socioeconomic, and gender lines. To paraphrase Philippe AriÃ¨s (*Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* [1962])–and return to the beginning of Osgoodâs book–the concept of disability remains a âmanifestation of the same intolerance towards variety, the same insistence on uniformityâ as the construction of childhood itself (p. 415). As a result, public schools are unlikely to fulfill the promise envisioned by progressive reformers as democratic spaces anytime soon.

Notes

[1]. For an informative discussion of eugenics in midwestern public schools, see Robert Osgood, âEducation in the Name of Improvement: The Influence of Eugenic Thought and Practice in Indianaâs Public Schools, 1900-1930,â *Indiana Magazine of History* 106 (2010): 272-299.

[2]. See, for example, Daryl Michael Scott, âPostwar Pluralism, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the Origins of Multicultural Education,â *Journal of American History* 91 (2004): 69-82; and David W. Romero and Francine Sanders Romero, âPrecedent, Parity, and Racial Discrimination: A Federal/State Comparison of *Brown v. Board of Education*,â *Law and Society Review* 37 (2003): 809-26.

[3]. See, for example, Adrienne Asch, âCritical Race Theory, Feminism, and Disability: Reflections on Social Justice and Personal Identity,â *Ohio State University Law Review* 62 (2001): 391-423.

[4]. See, for example, Ibrahim H. Diken, âAn Overview of Parental Perceptions in Cross-Cultural Groups on Disability,â *Childhood Education* 82 (2006): 236-240.

[5]. Paul T. Jaeger and Cynthia Ann Bowman, *Disability Matters: Legal and Pedagogical Issues of Disability in Education* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2002).

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Citation: Jayne R. Beilke. Review of Osgood, Robert L., *The History of Special Education: A Struggle for Equality in American Public Schools.* H-Education, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

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