Histories of special education: Stories from our past, insights for our future

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Abstract:
The history of special education is a collection of the memories and stories that serve as a foundation for the field. Historical research sometimes reveals previously overlooked insights. It is also an opportunity for understanding aspects of people and events that have previously been overlooked. Historical research may also help to bring a new or different focus to contemporary issues and challenges in the field of special education. Most important, however, historical scholarship is a commitment to seeking the "truest" story among the facts that have been recorded and transmitted in the discipline.

Article:
Del Dayan, the daughter of the revered Israeli patriot and statesman, wrote, "Memories are not history. They are fragments of things and feelings that were tinted and sifted through varying prisms of present time and disposition" (1985, p. 1). Historical understandings, while perhaps differing from individual memories, are also constructed through "varying prisms" of perspective. Histories may, in fact, be viewed as collected memories of a group or generation.

The history of special education is a collection of the memories and stories that serve as a foundation for our field. These memories and stories give special education as a discipline a richness and cohesion that would not otherwise exist. A sage in Barry Lopez's story of Native American folk characters on a quest for wisdom tells his young visitors,

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves. (1990, p. 48) In a very important way, stories of special education, histories of our field, have nourished and sustained it in its development. The stories of Itard and Victor, of Samuel Gridley Howe and Edward Seguin, and Helen Keller and Ann Sullivan, for example, have inspired generations of special educators and have provided them with direction. On the other hand, there have been negative stories that have proven to be challenges to the values and aims of special educators. The pessimistic and limiting stories of the Kallikaks and the Jukes, for example, questioned the feasibility of providing education for persons with disabilities (Smith, 1985). The story of Carrie Buck became central to the argument for the necessity for the institutionalization and sterilization of thousands of people perceived to be "defective" (Smith & Nelson, 1989). Burton Blatt observed that stories can be nurturing or

destructive. He also pointed to the great responsibility that storytellers have to those about whom they speak and to those to whom they speak. In The Conquest of Mental Retardation, he said:

Every story can enhance life or destroy it. Every story can lift us or depress us. Every story can make a hero or a scapegoat. Stories sustain if not make a person's world. And thus, the storyteller holds a certain power (and responsibility), for the storyteller is usually safer than those about whom he or she spins tales. (1987, p. 141) Historical scholarship, however, is committed to seeking the "truest" story among both the positive and negative facts that have been recorded and transmitted. Scholars seek to understand history through old and new "prisms" and to tell the stories that they find in the most revealing and honest manner. In this sense, the search for historical accuracy is always the search for the "good" story.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND NEW INSIGHTS

Historical research sometimes reveals previously overlooked insights. I offer here an example from my own journey as a scholar. During my undergraduate studies I read Margaret Mead's (1928) Coming of Age in Samoa as a course requirement. As is characteristic of many undergraduates, I read only the required textual material. Reading the appendices to the book never crossed my mind. Thirty years later, and in the pursuit of an entirely unrelated research question, I read these appendices. Included was a description by Mead of people with disabilities in the Samoan culture she studied. She described the individuals with disabilities in that culture, but she also noted that the Samoans "possess more charity towards weakness than towards misdirected strength" (Mead, 1928, p. 182).

Mead returned to this theme many years later. In 1959 she spoke to a conference sponsored by the American Association on Mental Deficiency (AAMD). In her remarks she referred to a statement made by a group of Catholic sisters who worked with children with mental retardation. She quoted them as saying that they were attempting to make it possible for the children they cared for to make a "contribution in time as well as in eternity" (Mead, 1959, p. 253).

Later in her speech she returned to the example of the work of the Catholic Church and persons with mental retardation. She gave the example of a child with Down syndrome who had been tested, diagnosed, and given every opportunity for the best skill training. In her early teens, however, the child was given religious instruction and Mead described the change that took place in the girl's life in terms of "wholeness." She said that at the same time the girl "became Catholic, she became a human being in a way that she had not been one before.... I think that what happened on the secular side with this little girl was that for the first time she met a situation where people were willing to teach her the whole instead of saying, `you are defective and you can only learn a part' " (Mead, 1959, p. 260).

Mead concluded her address to the AAMD by elaborating on the concept of education for "wholeness." She distinguished between societies where everyone participates in all aspects of the culture (e.g., Samoa) and segmented, socially stratified societies that no longer attempt to teach the "whole" to all people (e.g., the United States). She emphasized that what makes for a culture of full participation is genuine opportunities for most people to learn how to fully participate. She warned of the "risks of complicating sections of our culture so much that we define them as things most people can't learn" (pp. 258-259).

Margaret Mead's insights, unfamiliar to most special educators and previously overlooked in my reading of her work, added new meaning to my understanding that in order for people with disabilities to be genuinely included in our culture, we must strive to make accessible to more and more people the essential "wholeness" of citizenship (Smith & Johnson, 1997).

HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND DEEPENED COMPREHENSION

Historical research also provides the opportunity for understanding characteristics of people and events that have previously been overlooked. Personalities and social circumstances are far too complex to fit the neat categorizing that we are often drawn toward. The study of history allows us to learn from contradictions. Understanding these complexities may provide a deepened appreciation of the truly human character of even those we most admire.

My own sense of the contradictory nature of the study of the history of special education was sharpened recently as I read a fascinating book entitled The Black Stork. It concerns the work of a physician who openly practiced euthanasia on "defective" newborns beginning in 1915. Dr. Harry Haiselden did not just allow infants with severe disabilities to die, he administered drugs to speed the death of several of these newborns. He also campaigned for the widespread adoption of these practices and produced and starred in a movie promoting euthanasia, The Black Stork. The film was based on Haiselden's eugenic arguments and was shown in commercial movie theaters from 1916 through the 1920s (Pernick, 1996). In reading about this controversy I was intrigued by a reference made to Helen Keller's support of Haiselden's eugenic campaign. As I read her position on the euthanasia of infants with mental retardation in the December 18, 1915, issue of The New Republic, my perception of the contradictory nature of historical realities, and my sense of Helen Keller as a person of her time, was deepened.

In her statement Helen Keller expressed the following opinions:

It is the possibilities of happiness, intelligence and power that give life its sanctity, and they are absent in the case of a poor, misshapen, paralyzed, unthinking creature.... The toleration of such anomalies tends to lessen the sacredness in which normal life is held.

It seems to me that the simplest, wisest thing to do would be to submit cases like that of the malformed idiot baby to a jury of expert physicians. . A mental defective . . . is almost sure to be a potential criminal. The evidence before a jury of physicians considering the case of an idiot would be exact and scientific. Their findings would be free from the prejudice and inaccuracy of untrained observation. They would act only in case of true idiocy, where there could be no hope of mental development. (Keller, 1915, pp. 173-174) Burton Blatt wrote concerning the history of mental retardation that "virtually all histories in our field are dangerously incomplete . . . That which is preserved may be less relevant than that which is unknown; and the `facts,' however pertinent, are to a degree divorced from the social-psychological context of the period. . . To understand what actually occurred (and why) requires one to know what the times were like" (Blatt, 1987, p. 17).

Helen Keller's development as an intellectual and as an advocate took place within the context of the eugenics movement. It also occurred within the environment of political progressivism.

Progressive thought held that most of the problems of society, and those of individuals, could and should be reduced to scientific terms and resolved by scientific means. Helen's trust of a "jury" of physicians is very consistent with the faith in scientific progress that characterized the cultural climate of her formative years as a social activist. Her opinion that "true idiocy" lessens the sanctity of "normal life" reflects the eugenic principles to which she was certainly exposed (Smith, 1997).

Helen Keller was an advocate for people with disabilities. She also became a political activist and a spokesperson for victims of poverty, economic exploitation, gender discrimination, and other forms of oppression (Foner, 1967). Helen Keller's voice of advocacy was bold for its time. It was focused, however, on the potential for social intercourse and productivity in the lives of ignored, misunderstood, and exploited people. In that regard she moved beyond a social context that devalued many people with blindness, deafness, and other physical disabilities, for example, and she crusaded for their right to earn a place in society. She could not see, however, that this right extended to those people who might never "earn" their own way in society.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

A third important value of historical research in special education is that it may help to bring a new or different focus to contemporary issues and challenges in the field. The discovery concerning Helen Keller's position on euthanasia provided me with a different perspective on the issue of advocacy, but the challenges presented to advocates in our discipline were brought into even sharper focus by a recent finding concerning Laura Bridgman.

Laura Bridgman was born into a prominent Massachusetts family in 1829. At the age of 2 years she was rendered deaf and blind by scarlet fever. In 1837 she went to live at Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. There, she was tutored by the founder, Samuel Gridley Howe. Howe devised a teaching method that built on her ability to feel the differences in the shapes of objects. Through drill and practice in distinguishing shapes, he led her to the understanding that these objects could be given names. At first he used labels with raised print on them to assign the names that Laura came to comprehend. He then taught her to form these words using movable letters. He was thus teaching her by methods similar to those that were used for other students at Perkins who were blind. Eventually, however, he shifted to a communication method that had been developed for students who were deaf. He began teaching her words using finger spelling. He spelled words into her hand and then associated them with objects and actions. This was the method, of course, that would later come to be associated with Ann Sullivan's teaching of Helen Keller.

Laura Bridgman's fame and Howe's success in teaching her were later eclipsed, in fact, by the extraordinary accomplishments of Helen Keller and Ann Sullivan. It is ironic that little note has been taken of the fact that Ann Sullivan, herself a student at Perkins, learned to communicate with Laura Bridgman and then applied what she had learned in her teaching of Helen Keller (Smith, 1987).

For several decades during the l9th century, however, Laura Bridgman attracted international attention, and Samuel Gridley Howe's work with her was heralded with as much admiration as the "miracle worker" would later receive. To many American intellectuals she became a symbol,

"exemplifying the power of enlightened educational techniques and their capacity to transform seemingly hopeless cases" (Gallaher, 1995, p. 282). She was held up as a model of Victorian womanhood because of her courage and intelligence in the face of grave challenges. Some girls reportedly admired her so much that they "poked their dolls' eyes out and named them `Laura,' while reluctant young students were reminded to always compare their own efforts with those of the little deaf and blind girl who had accomplished so much in the face of such overwhelming obstacles" (Freeberg, 1992, p. 199).

Howe's accounts of Laura's education, published in the yearly reports of the Perkins Institution, attracted the attention of leading philosophers, theologians, and writers of the time. Historians who have studied Howe's reports are convinced that he recognized from the beginning of his work with Laura that her education would be of interest in scholarly circles. His efforts to teach her may have been motivated by the deepest altruism, but Howe recognized from the start that Laura Bridgman was not just another afflicted child in need, but "an object of peculiar interest." If he should succeed in teaching her to communicate, he surely realized, this work would have farreaching religious and philosophical implications that would capture the attention of the world. (Freeberg, 1992, pp. 194-195) For more than a century, John Locke's argument that the mind is a blank slate had dominated philosophy. The mind, according to Locke, was created by the experiential "writings" on that slate. The senses, therefore, determined the material character of the mind. If this portrait of the mind was accurate, then Howe should find that Laura's mind was empty of all images, including moral or religious formulations. As Howe began to communicate with Laura about ideas, however, he found that her mind was not a tabula rasa. He described her internal life as a soul jailed in a body that was "active, and struggling continually not only to put itself in communication with things without, but to manifest what is going on within itself" (Howe, 1893, p. 9). Howe described Laura's internal life, as he discovered it in its natural and untouched state, as being of the highest moral character. He found that "her moral sense is remarkably acute; few children are so affectionate or so scrupulously conscientious, few are so sensible of their own rights or regardful of the rights of others" (Howe, 1893, p. 50).

To support his argument that Laura was innately moral, he described her behavior toward other people after she had been liberated by his teaching and enabled to communicate. He reported that she was always eager to share with others and to help take care of sick people. He also said that she showed a keen sense of sympathy for people with disabilities. Howe noted, however, one exception to Laura's expressions of natural altruism. He said that she showed an "unamiable" lack of respect for the children at the Perkins Institution, whom she considered to be mentally inferior to herself. Interpreting this as an unstable manifestation of her Anglo-Saxon heritage, he excused the advantage she took of these children when she expected them to "wait on her" (Howe, 1893, p. 20). One of the most famous of Laura's powerful and influential visitors at Perkins was Charles Dickens. His admiration for her began with his reading of Howe's accounts of his instruction of Laura. His admiration increased when he visited her in Boston. For Dickens, Laura Bridgman was "both charming and inspirational: a merry, graceful, and intelligent young girl, she seemed also to symbolize the possibility of spiritual awakening and redemption" (Gitter, 1991, p. 163). Dickens described his visit to Laura at Perkins in American Notes. He relayed his impressions of her and he also quoted from Howe's reports. In his account he repeated Howe's observation that she had disdain for children she believed to be intellectually inferior (Dickens, 1842).

Samuel Gridley Howe is, of course, a person of importance in the history of mental retardation. In addition to his work with students with blindness and deaf-blindness, he was an early advocate for the education of students with mental retardation. He convinced the legislature of Massachusetts to provide funding for a school for the "teaching and training of idiotic children" in October of 1848 (Howe & Hall, 1904, p. 229). The school was initially housed at Perkins Institution. According to two of his daughters, however, Dr. Howe soon discovered that his blind students resented deeply the presence of the students with mental retardation under their roof. His daughters interpreted this resentment as an expression of fear that they might come to be associated with the retardation of these "weaker brethren" (p. 231). They quoted Laura Bridgman's journal as evidence of this feeling of resentment. Laura expressed the hope that the students with mental retardation would not actually come to Perkins and the fear that if they did they would "have our rooms. . . [and] our nice sitting room in a few days" (Howe & Hall, 1904, p. 231).

Laura's fears regarding the perceived association between herself and her "weaker brethren" may not have been unfounded. Indeed a literature has developed around the very notion of the transferability of social stigma-the process by which a "normal" person is seen by others as possessing the characteristics of a stigma merely by a close association with a stigmatized other. Erving Goffman (1963) has written about the acquisition of a social stigma by affiliation. There is evidence to suggest that mental retardation carries the most debilitating socially constructed stigmamore than alcoholism, depression, crime, or sexual orientation. As Edgerton has pointed out: "One might speculate that no other stigma is as basic as mental retardation in the sense that a person so labeled is thought to be so completely lacking in basic competence" (1993, p. 184). Gibbons (1985) has contended that persons with mental retardation are themselves acutely aware of this stigma and tend to react with derogation toward their own peers' social competence and physical attractiveness.

Laura Bridgman may have been acutely aware of the very real potential of being perceived as incompetent by association and of the social consequences inherent in that perception. The threat of a devalued identity provides a powerful incentive for maintaining both physical and social distance from people more seriously stigmatized. As Goffman (1963) suggested: "In general, the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual . . . provides a reason why such relations tend either to be avoided or to be terminated, where existing" (p. 30). Perhaps it is this attempt to avoid stigma by association that explains the attitude of Laura Brigman toward mental retardation. It may also explain the phenomenon of what might be called "differential advocacy" (Smith & Anton,1997). Recognition of this differential in the attitudes of people with different disabilities may also help special educators realize that they and the people whom they serve as advocates must strive to work more closely together across categorical lines to achieve the ends they wish to achieve. A WORD OF INTRODUCTION This special issue of RASE is devoted to historical scholarship in special education. The articles that follow were written by some of the most outstanding scholars in the field. I hope that they will be read with the same excitement of discovery with which they were researched and written. It has been my pleasure to serve as the guest editor of this issue. In each of the articles of this special issue I have found insights that deepen my appreciation of the heritage of our field. In each I have also found something that helps me understand the challenges facing our field today.

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