

## **Special Education and Enlightened Reform**

**Thomas Neville**

"In 1850, the marshals, the agents of the national government who were appointed to take the census, visited every family; and, among other items of information, they asked for the insane and idiots in the household" (Jarvis, 1855, p. 11).

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## **Introduction**

Although the penalty inflicted by the law has as its aim the reparation of a crime, it also intended to reform the convict, and this double aim will be fulfilled if the malefactor is snatched from that fatal idleness which, having brought him to prison, meets him again within its walls and, seizing hold of him, brings him to the ultimate degree of depravity. (Foucault, 1979, p. 240)

To bring a person to the lowest level of moral corruptness and evil was the first step toward reform. This concept successfully juxtaposed reform, rehabilitation and education to punishment. The principle was made powerful by evolving unconsciousness that placed punishment as a signifier of growth and learning. It was thought that the process of development was started by bringing a person to the bottom and then rebuilding individual value through productivity. Today, versions of this process are found in the armed services, the prison system, the rehabilitation system, and the educational systems. Institutions are built, with or without walls, to manage the process, control the prisoner, client, patient, student, and select the inductees.

*Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Michel Foucault (1979) is a thorough study of the history of punishment, corrective training and institutions. Throughout this book are found many similarities to the present educational system. The similarities are particularly relevant in the areas of devaluation, the use of exclusion and the roots of therapy. The ancestry of prevailing assumptions, once revealed, is the beginning of the discovery of solutions not presently imagined. Social change and social action are dependent on this revealing or consciousness raising process. The most vulnerable in our communities continue to live and die

under the burden of the dominant assumptions and ideologies.

### **The Process of Devaluation**

The common bond among prisoner, institutional client and special education student is the relegation to a low deviant status. With such a strong common status ‘treatment’ is very similar.

A person can be considered “deviant” or devalued when a significant characteristic (a ‘difference’) of his / hers is negatively valued by the segment of society that constitutes the majority or that defines social norms. While numerous differences do exist among individuals, it must be kept in mind that differentness by itself does not become a deviancy unless / until it becomes sufficiently negatively value-charged in the minds of the observers. Thus, deviancy can be said to be in the eyes of the beholder, and thus is also culturally relative. (Wolfensberger & Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 23)

A powerful tool of devaluation is deindividualization. The history of prisons used a process, which so focused on segments of a person that the individual was lost. No longer was a prisoner a human individual but instead a mass of deficiencies to cure. Instead

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of bending all its subjects into a single uniform mass, it separates, analyzes, differentiates, and carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units. It ‘trains’ the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual elements - small separate cells, organic autonomies, genetic identities and continuities,

combinatory segments (Foucault, 1979). Under the banner of providing ‘special education,’ the process has managed to deindividualize the student into a member of a mass of hopeless deviants. Less than 80 years ago, for example, people with mental retardation were considered by informed professional opinion to constitute a collective genetic reservoir of social evil and corruption in the body of human kind. That conception of disability led dedicated professionals of the time to build institutions to segregate or even sterilize people (Schwartz, 1992).

The above is an accurate definition of the present special education systems at its worst. A team of professionals gathers to plan for the individual. They assess, interpret, break down deficiencies into categories and divide those deficiencies to distribute among a variety of therapies and programs. The process has many names: Individualized Education Plan, Individualized Program Plan, or Personal Future Plan. The name changes, the process evolves, but the unconsciousness remains. The result, even if unintentional, is to break a whole child into perceived deviant parts and cause the child to become known as those labeled deviant parts. The effect on the professional is an acquired assignment, which is unsolvable and as a result harmful to both the professional and the student.

As long as the dominant assumption is one of human as machine, the unconscious evolution will continue. The invention of new models of education or new ways of doing things must not be seen as a sudden discovery. “It is rather a multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method” (Foucault, 1979, p. 140). A general method devalues the student and values the process. A method accentuates the

deficiency of the student in order to bring status to the professional and the methodologies.

Once the devaluation process has sufficiently unfolded, society and its agent, the school system, is free to create methods of treatment. Treatment for students we have now categorized in a variety of coded labels which amount to a branding effect. Once a person has been branded as having one or even multiple deviancies, issues of control, observation, protection (for the branded and for 'normal' society), and cure are what shape the paradigm.

### **Institutions and Prisons**

"The medical supervision of diseases and contagions is inseparable from a whole series of controls..." (Foucault, 1979, p. 144). That the processes of special education are founded on the rehabilitation model, which have been founded on the medical model, is no secret. Not so commonly known is that much of the medical model is founded on the architectural developments of punishment and prison models. When people have been deindividualized by individualizing their particular deviations, physical structures could be built in order to manage the needed cures. A well-disciplined system proceeds from the distribution of people in space. The techniques that are then employed involve enclosure, partitioning and the use of functional sites.

Discipline sometimes requires 'enclosure', the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony (Foucault, 1979). The Commission on Lunacy, in 1855, reported that the insane whose diseases are recent, and therefore curable, and those who are troublesome, excitable, violent or dangerous can be best managed in hospitals especially appropriated for their use. Foucault's report of the prison techniques and the recommendation of the Commission on Lunacy clearly show the impact of one set of assumptions on another. The treatment of criminals and the treatment of students with

disabilities is not differentiated enough so as to create the development of different assumptions or paradigms.

But the principle of enclosure is neither constant, nor indispensable, nor sufficient in disciplinary machinery. This machinery works space in a much more flexible yet detailed way. It does this first of all on the principle of elementary location or

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“partitioning” (Foucault, 1979, p. 143). The thinking of the 1855 Commission on Lunacy mirrors this belief. Diseases of the mind are affected by the influences that reach it. It is necessary, therefore, that these should be controlled, and that only such as are favorable should be allowed to reach the patients. This is best done in the hospitals, where everything is arranged for, and adapted to the condition and to the wants of those who are submitted to their care, according to Foucault (1979). In the systems of the prison, separation existed for lectures, sleeping areas, and work areas. Also, in institutions for people labeled as mentally ill (which in the early days included most anyone with a physical or mental disability), separation for purposes of control can be found. In sheltered workshops, it is common to find individual workstations to improve concentration and, therefore, learning. In congregate living situations (e.g. group homes), partitions of time are used as a means of orderliness. Certain times for meals, individual bathing or ‘programming’ time slots are viewed as necessary to any progress. Special Education is often applied in separate rooms. Meals taken during separate periods, transportation provided on separate vehicles and even the term ‘Special Education’ denotes a need of separateness.

The rule of functional sites would gradually, in disciplinary institutions, code a space that architecture generally left at the disposal of several different uses. Particular spaces were defined to correspond not only to the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications, but also to create a useful space. “The process appeared clearly in hospitals...” (Foucault, 1979, p. 143).

Nurse’s stations in hospitals and nursing homes are typically located so as to see along the corridors of several wards. Day rooms in institutions are open for easy observation by staff. The functional site concept is carried into community services. Often these services are referred to as an institution without walls. People being supported in the homes they live in are often encouraged or forced to live in geographical areas convenient to staff travel. Special educational services created resource rooms, specially certified professionals and life goals that do not always match the cultural norms. Sapon-Seven (1987) noted that even those reports critical of policies toward children with disabilities did not question the underlying separateness of special and regular education. The assumptions inherited from the prison systems are unconsciously pervasive in the design of the majority of state of the art special education designs.

“The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation... to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control - to render visible those who are inside it; in more specific terms an architecture that would operate to transform individuals” (Foucault, 1979, p. 170). In facilities of rehabilitation, one will find therapy rooms with one way mirrors, bathrooms with windowed doors or no doors at all, offices located near living rooms, video cameras, and strategically located nurses’ stations. The concept is refined in community and special education services. There are regulations which require assessment reports, daily activity reports, incident reports, daily logs, recording staff interpretations of individual

behaviors, visitor sign-in requirements and even police checks of friends. This infinitely scrupulous concern with surveillance is done in the name of cure, care, personal well-being and learning. The result familiar to the surveilled is the wound of loss of control, autonomy and rights.

### **Therapy and Punishment**

“...primary objectives: to make of the punishment and repression of illegalities regular function, coextensive with society; not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body” (Foucault, 1979, p. 82).

The justification of observation is not only to control but also, in the spirit of improvement, to understand. Activities are often given to prisoners, clients, and special education students that are of no apparent worth. Simulations of life experiences, such as work activities or daily living skills, are created. The purpose of the simulations is to observe, assess and further codify a person’s deficiencies so as to distribute the tasks of improvement to a variety of professionals. All of this is established in the effort to organize a national profession of special education professionals and a system capable of operating general norms; it is established in the standardization of industrial processes and products according to Foucault (1979).



The examination (assessment) combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish (Foucault, 1979). This standardization and acceptance of the "normalizing gaze" is known as assessment. Much of what special education bases assessment on is modeled after the IQ tests. But because the IQ tests are generally viewed as objective and free from bias, we assume would be present if children were identified as gifted or mentally retarded by their teachers, we neglect both the origins and the continuing uses of intelligence testing to facilitate educational and social stratification (Sapon-Shevin, 1994). The process and results have been signified as having a curative power. The power is systematically carried out through a variety of educational approaches.

The act of officially estimating a person's value and characteristics for the purpose of providing punishment or educational services has wounding impact on the observed. An older student requested help to purchase an affordable home and receive support while living there as part of transition services. Following several months of assessment and simulated living in a home

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owned by the professional group, the decision was to continue the existing process. The consensus by the special education professionals was that more therapies, programs of improvement and observation were in the best interest of the student. The final statement revealed the unconscious truth and set the stage for future control and punishment. "If he does

not even do what the aids tell him, how can he live in his own home?"

Exams in schools, assessments in services and resulting therapies introduced a whole mechanism that linked to a certain type of the formation of knowledge a certain form of the exercise of power (Foucault, 1979). The ability to (assess) transformed the “economy of visibility” (p. 191) into the exercise of power. The (assessment) also introduces individuality into the field of documentation. The assessment, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a “case” (Foucault, 1979, p. 191). The act of officially estimating a person’s value and characteristics for the purpose of providing punishment or educational services has wounding impact on the observed.

The “economy of visibility” brought about by architectural structures or system structures results in an exercise of power. People who spend most of their day in physical surroundings where they are continually observed only gain power, which is conceded to them by the observer. Similarly, people who are supported by community services are made visible. Visibility is assured by a number of required professional meetings, staff with unencumbered access to homes, and the creation of paid observers even in ordinary work places. People learning under these conditions also gain power only as it is conceded by the observers. The stated purpose of all this activity is for education to act in accordance with rules or a regimen that develops or improves a skill. The therapeutic discipline is applied to cure, care for, or design a more desirable future. The person is visible; the power of the regimen is not. Disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them according to Foucault.

The assessment and the following educational services brand **the student as a set of objectified characteristics to be improved**. Domination is assured through this objectification.

The examination (assessment) also introduces **individuality** into the field of documentation. The examination (assessment) that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them. (Foucault, 1979, p. 189)

The writings accumulated following the beginning of documentation allowed for the establishment of codes of expectations. Codes of behavior in the military or the educational codes of conduct are examples. It was the beginning of the formalization of the individual within power relationships. Each person is an individual, as documented by the observers, who is expected or coerced to behave in prescribed patterns. The code of "you are your career" forms the roots of vocational special education, which was created to assist people only to attain gainful employment. Assessment and the writing of results opened two correlative possibilities:

... firstly, the constitution of the individual as a describable, analyzable object; and, secondly, the constitution of a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given population. (Foucault, 1979)

“The examination (assessment), surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a **case**” (Foucault, 1979, p. 191). The need to punish a body for a specific behavior is transformed to the punishment (education plan) of the individual. No longer are behaviors separated from the person. The documented observations are understood to be the

person. The total individual becomes the subject of training, correcting, classifying, normalizing or a target of exclusion. The documented history of the individual is the document of domination and devaluation. The discipline of education plans, treatment, therapy and punishment made individual description a means of control and a method of domination. Writing the person's historiography is no longer a monument for future memory, but a document for possible use.

### **Critical Teaching for Empowering Education**

There is almost universal belief, today, that something has gone wrong with education.

The general public seems to have assumed two roles in the difficulty: the first role is that of general complainant and fault-finder with respect to education and schools; the second is that of making sure that nothing significant is done about the matter. (Hart, 1951, p. 62)

When something is wrong with the present system, two tracks of operation must be employed at once. Actions are taken to accomplish what is possible within the confines of the current structure, trying to minimize its harm. At the same time, collaborative work with others toward changing the structure is intentional while remaining conscious that nothing dramatic may happen for a very long time (according to Kohn 1993). By taking action only on the critical change aspect, the resulting structures may not be doing enough to protect the children from the destructive effects of the current system that analyzes, codifies, dissects and separates and will control them during any transition. As change is worked toward, three critical innovations emerge. The innovations must be taken as one unit: three pillars of the learning process. Remove one pillar and again the result is a reliance on institutionalized historic response.

The first innovation is to transform from roles of observation to roles of partnership. The

second transforming pillar is to progress from a ranker of characteristics to a door opener. The third is to cease being a professional specialists and start being a convener of community as a critical action.

### **Observer to Partner**

“Among values which American

Schools seek to preserve and extend

are a belief in (1) The infinite value

and dignity of every individual (2)

Equality of opportunity for every

individual to develop and use his

potentials (3) Basic rights and

liberties for all (4) The team method

of solving common problems based on the cooperation of equals (5) The use of reason in

the solution of problems (6) The dreams of a better life for all...” (Quillen, 1958, p. 102).

An observer is one who is sent to officially watch but not take part in the activities. In the dynamic world of learning this is an impossible task. Any quality teacher will feel part of what is happening. The teacher of quality reflects on each day’s events and learns from the experience. By nature of this reality, all who are together for a period of time to learn are sharing the experience in association with one another. The dance partners are equal. Both are enjoying, sharing, contributing and growing. This is the same as a teacher must be. The student will only learn as much as the teacher learns. When the teacher stops learning, so does the student. People who hope to foster learning and believe that they can simply "teach" and not learn are fooling themselves, cheating the student, and making negative contributions to society.

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**The teacher is responsible to create lesson plans for all learners, and this includes the**

**teacher.** Teachers have told me they feel a sense of being alone, the one with all the responsibility and no partners. I believe that this sense of being "outside" is commonly shared. Some people say they feel lost. According to Richards (1980), what they may not know is that it may be a matter of simply deciding to take the step of literally stepping inside the partnership.

### **Ranker to Opener of Doors**

"In the whole man everything must be connected with everything else" (Richards, 1980, p. 146). Teachers and parents who care about learning need to do everything in their power to help students forget that grades exist (according to Kohn, 1993). This is true also regarding the ranking, labeling and codifying inherent in the current special education systems.

**The time is now to shift thinking from "knowledge in search of students" to "students in search of knowledge."** The responsibility of the partners in learning is to immerse the group in experiences and reflections. In today's rapidly changing world that is diverse on a multitude of levels, awareness is the key. Awareness of people, events, lands, and beliefs is critical. The content of education must aim at developing the skills, confidence, and knowledge of the self-directed individual (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, and Thomas, 1991). Life experiences of the individual must be expanded and highly valued. Biographies of the individual must be brought into the core of the learning process.

Self-directed is most often used when referring to adult education. The concept is useful with children. The difference is in the level of guidance as well as the individual experiences to draw from. In essence, self-directed does not infer "all alone."

*Educating for a Change* (Arnold et al., 1991) is a very useful book to anyone pursuing the learning partnership and connecting learning with experience. The authors present seven points that are helpful:

1. making sure that participants understand that learning is valuable
2. seeing mistakes as integral to learning
3. drawing on and valuing the experiences of participants
4. connecting new facts or insights with what people already know
5. building in direct and frequent feedback to the educator
6. developing sensitivity to non-verbal forms of communication
7. encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own learning

(Arnold et al., 1991, p. 21).

### **Isolationist to Community Convener**

"...the institutionalization of values leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery" (Illich, 1970, p. 1).

**The educator's responsibilities in this process will transition from the expert and holder of knowledge to the facilitator of learning opportunities.**

The individuality of the child finds its origin in the family. From the small world of the family the infant emerges into the enlarging world of experience and association - the small neighborhood, the community, and then the progressively larger society. If one of the early steps in this social emergence is broken, a gap is

left in the child's personality development (Morgan, 1991). One of the barriers to quality learning is that the general public prefers to lay all the responsibility for education on the public schools. This monster is troublesome and self created. The responsibilities for learning must rest with the learner and family. The educational system, particularly the special education system, must turn

the responsibility and the power back.

When we design processes many parts of the child's life must be included. The learning experience must be seen as twenty-four hours every day. The educator's responsibilities in this process will transition from the expert and holder of knowledge to the facilitator of learning opportunities.

This is a bold agenda. High awareness and commitment to the principles are required. Although the implementation may be complex, a few concrete guidelines will be useful to those who are excited about the possibilities.

- understand and use the processes of community building.
- assure that 50% of the learning happens outside the classroom setting.
- each child must have more unpaid learning partners than paid learning partners.
- family, friends, community leaders and neighbors must be learning partners.
- base learning strategies on the interests of the learner.
- consistent contributions are made by the learner to his/her own learning.
- consistent contributions are made by the learner to others learning.
- consistent contributions are made by the learner to the betterment of her/his town and neighborhood.
- working on diverse teams to accomplish tasks the learners are excited about.

### **Conclusion**

There is a strict economy that has the effect of rendering as discreet as possible the singular power to punish. There is nothing in it now that recalls the former excess of sovereign power when it revenged its authority on the tortured body of those about to be executed. Prison continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through the innumerable mechanisms of discipline. By means of a continuum, the authority that sentences infiltrates all those other authorities that supervise, transform, correct, improve & teach. It might even be said that nothing really distinguishes them



any more except the singularly 'dangerous' character of the delinquents, the gravity of their departures from normal behavior and the necessary solemnity of the ritual. But, in its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating. It receives from them, and from their lesser, smaller task, a sanction from below; but one that is no less important for that, since it is the sanction of technique and rationality (Foucault, 1979).

The field of special education in all its forms draws heavily on the sanctions of technique and rationality. Punishment is the result of efforts to develop. Wounding is the impact of techniques meant to educate. Productivity of rational techniques is rewarded materially in place of compassion being rewarded spiritually. The wounding, the punishment, and the objectification to power systems is experienced by professionals and clients.

The world of materialism claims that security in life is acquired with knowledge and ambition, which in turn can be used to gain power, influence, wealth, and leisure. It follows then, that the road to such security values efficiency, productivity, speed, tenacity, and decisiveness; and that it rejects all of those forms of human weakness and inability which impede achievement of these goals. But the world of compassion may draw us away from the world of materialism and leisure. It may draw us into the world of people, which is a world of insecurity, for we do not know where people will lead us. They may draw us away from old values and into the world of involvement, sharing, and commitment.

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