

*Research paper*

## **From 'Idiot Child' to 'Mental Defective': schooling and the production of intellectual disability in the UK 1850 - 1944**

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### **Contextualisation**

This paper reflects a post-structuralist approach to the study of social phenomena. I look at the ways in which a set of social meanings – in this case those associated with what is now often known as 'intellectual disability' – has been produced over time. I use the notion of discourses and discursive practices to illuminate how these meanings were culturally and politically produced in relation to the prevailing material conditions of their time. Attention to specific discourses – regimes of story-telling and meaning-making that frame the possibilities of what can (and what definitively cannot) be said – enables an engagement that takes account of structure and ideology without being overly determined by either. Such an approach also reflects my commitment to a politics of egalitarian change, and draws heavily on feminist and Marxist theory. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the production of systemic relations of domination and subordination, in order to speak against such relations and practices. Whilst I focus primarily on power inequalities as produced through perceived intellectual ability, I aim not to lose sight of the imbrication – overlapping – of other indices of difference, notably (but not exclusively) those of gender and social class.

**Abstract:** *The UK government has committed itself, in theory, to a policy of 'inclusive education', and to reducing barriers to learning for children who struggle in mainstream schools. But there are many obstacles to such a project, not least of which is the government's own insistence on raising 'standards': an insistence that is deeply problematic for those students to whom normative levels of examination performance are not accessible. This paper looks at the history of educational provision for such students, through the discourses which produce and are produced by that history. I divide the period up into three: the period from 1850-1899, marked by the prevalence of the charity/tragedy discourse, the period from 1899-1921, when a rights/protection discourse came to hold sway, and 1921-1944,*

*when the medical discourse became more influential. Drawing on literature of the time, I show how various 'common-sense' meanings were established, and I examine how prevailing meanings and practices positioned those children and young people who were considered unable to benefit from mainstream schooling. These common-senses have not gone away, but underpin present understandings and practices. Although conditions for pupils now considered to have learning difficulties – or intellectual disabilities – have undoubtedly improved, their inscription into subordinate positions within a set of power relations largely constituted through the ability or otherwise to access dominant versions of academic 'success' has, I argue in this paper, remained constant.*

## Introduction

The last one hundred and fifty years have seen successive re-inventions of the phenomenon now often known in many parts of the world as 'intellectual disability'.<sup>1</sup> This paper – which forms part of an early chapter of my PhD thesis – explores how the parameters of what can be considered as an intellectual disability have undergone successive changes, and it traces changing notions of what constitutes appropriate (educational) provision for people so identified. It looks also at continuities. Social relations of capital, produced through class, gender/sexuality and 'race' as well as through perceived ability, have endured throughout the period, and have been central to the discursive and material production of 'intellectual disability'. This paper traces some of these continuities and discontinuities through three time-related sets of discourses and discursive practices, in the period from 1850-1944.

The advent of mass, and then compulsory schooling, at the beginning of the period in question, was predicated both on the needs of industrial capitalism to reproduce an appropriately-skilled workforce and upon the humanist ideal that education would produce 'civilised' individuals for a civilised society. Those children and adults who were never going to be able to compete in the labour market, and who were never going to be able to produce themselves as the liberal humanist version of learned individuals (Hall 1992), became marginal to the endeavour of compulsory schooling from its beginnings.

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<sup>1</sup> There is continuing controversy over nomenclature, with little consensus. Interest groups that take up the social model of disability variously recommend usage of 'intellectual disability', 'intellectual impairment' and 'learning difficulties'. Opinion is also divided over the use of 'people first' language – for example, 'person with learning difficulties' or 'learning disabled person'.

One of the problems with writing about intellectual disabilities is of knowing how to name the phenomenon and the people about whom one is writing. This problem has been in evidence throughout the past one hundred and fifty years. There can be no absolute notion of what constitutes intellectual dis/ability, since the means of coming to know about it is historically and socially situated. Unlike some physical and sensory impairments, a learning or intellectual impairment cannot be discerned in the absence of instruments of normalisation (Foucault, 1975). This is not to argue that intellectual impairments, whatever we choose to call them, do not exist. But the means of separating those who can be categorised as intellectually disabled from the general population has been produced through a discursive field in which the (political) imperative to separate out the economically unproductive from the productive has prevailed.

Alterations to the means of knowing and naming the phenomenon are undoubtedly associated with improved conditions for and more liberal attitudes towards people identified as intellectually disabled. The discourses that both produce and explain intellectual disability, and the practices they legitimate, became increasingly humane over the course of the period I am looking at. But none of these successive changes could change the meanings connoted and connected with intellectual subordination – the inscription of those to whom normative levels of 'ability' were not accessible into subordinate positions – in a capitalist society. Each successive re-naming became associated in time with the connotation of in-humanity from which it sought to distance itself. Indeed, these changes of nomenclature may paradoxically have been part of those discursive shifts that have allowed ameliorations in material conditions and attitudes, but have held the fundamental binary divide of 'normal/not-normal' in place.

As teachers, we have a limited and unsatisfactory set of terms we can use to talk about those pupils to whom normative versions of academic success are not accessible. We can use the rhetoric of 'special needs' and we can further specify what we mean by using the language of 'learning difficulty'. Both are fast becoming unsay-able (Corbett 1996). Behind these apparently neutral terms lie one hundred and fifty years of changing names and enduring (sometimes even static) meanings. To examine the discursive field that has brought this about, I will look at the policies and provision for the education of the people now known

as 'children with learning difficulties'<sup>2</sup>, and at the discourses that have underpinned these policies. For the sake of convenience and readability, I will use contemporary terms in which to describe the concerns of each era without qualification, although I would of course want to distance myself from the application of names and labels that I believe are beyond reclamation. I have divided the period into three sections on the basis of major pieces of education legislation. These divisions of time are not-quite-arbitrary markers around which to develop a way of conceptualising incremental and continuous change: they do not signify any major step-changes in or of themselves.

I will be focusing on state policy and provision which, in the case of educational provision, means policy for England and Wales. This necessarily means I am focusing almost wholly on working-class children. The children of the middle classes were not to be found in great numbers within the state system until the second half of the twentieth century, and private provision, whether in schooling or otherwise, was the norm for the least academically able middle class children. Arguably, in the earlier part of the period, middle-class children had an assured place in the social relations of capital almost irrespective of their perceived intellectual ability (Cole 1989; Hendrick 1990), although this operated differentially for girls and boys (Purvis 1991). They therefore constituted neither a financial nor an ideological problem for society, and did not have to be accounted or provided for in public policy (Hurt 1988). To an extent, this is a division that has endured, and must be read into any analysis of the production of intellectual subordination.

When I wrote the thesis chapter from which this paper is drawn, I was at first surprised to find how class and capital were foregrounded in the analysis. Should not a feminist post-structuralist approach be about drawing attention to the interaction and imbrication of *multiple* sites of systemic inequality – such as those of gender, class, race and perceived ability – in producing the conditions through which individual agency is exercised? I considered trying to re-write the chapter so as to pay more attention to the intersections of class and ability with these other features of what was, and is, an imperialist and hetero/patriarchal

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of a chapter in my thesis (Benjamin 2001) which goes on to explore the complex effects of the Education Acts of 1944 and 1981, both of which led to the categorisation of much larger numbers of children first as 'educationally sub-normal', then as having 'learning difficulties'.

society as well as a capitalist one. But the evidence before me suggested that, in the period in question, class and capital were indeed the major players in the game. This does not mean the analysis presented here is wholly a Marxist one, though it is undoubtedly concerned with the social relations of capital. It is primarily a *discursive* history: it looks at the cultural construction of 'intellectual disabilities' through discourses that became established as 'common-sense', in the context of material practices that produced and were produced by those discourses.

## **1850 - 1899: Christian Philanthropy and the Charity / Tragedy Discourse**

The 'charity / tragedy' discourse is well-known and documented in disability studies (Barton 1998; Allan 1999; Biklen 2000) for its objectification of disabled people. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the 'idiot' was re-invented as the object of Christian pity and charity. Whilst some members of the British ruling classes strove to ameliorate the emiseration of working class women and children, others chose to demonstrate their Christian philanthropy through a commitment to providing more humane conditions for idiots. The popular image of the 'natural' – the village idiot as object of scorn, revulsion and fear – was overlaid as pioneering Victorian writer/philanthropists sought to differentiate their society from earlier, crueller times. Unlike the more politicised efforts of those who were working, for example, to reduce the working hours of children, there was a tendency for the re-invention of the idiot to be de-politicised. Blame for the predicament of the idiot was laid at the door of a supposed past ignorance, and not at the door of a capitalist economy. Greenwell (1869) observes of 1860s England that 'in Humanity we may perhaps have gained something that removes us a long way from the days when, as in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, idiot children were frequently thrown to perish in the forest by their parents' (p.19).

The care of idiots was promoted as Christian duty towards the most unfortunate members of society, and, as such, set out to make itself apparently unarguable. Much of the writing of the period is in the form of poetry, designed for its popular moral appeal. It is worth quoting fully from an example of such a poem, as the construction of the charity/tragedy discourse is rooted in the linguistic address of the genre.

A mental blindness seals his eye  
To this fair earth of ours;  
He sees no brightness in the sun  
No beauty in the flowers.

Sweet sounds that gladden other hearts  
He seemeth not to hear,  
The melodies of singing birds  
Touch not his untuned ear.

Yet not upon him may we gaze  
With cold despairing eye,  
'Tis not decreed the idiot born  
Must a poor idiot die.

Yes, 'tis a blessed charity  
The fetters to unbind,  
That hold the dull imprison'd soul,  
The dark and hidden mind.

And God will surely give to those  
His blessing and His love,  
Who rightly use their better gifts  
Affliction to remove.

(Unattributed 1856, p. 4)

Much of the writing has an explicitly gendered address, appealing directly to women's supposed maternal concern. This appeal was intended to be translated into fund-raising, the object of which was to support institutions for the care of such children. One of the earliest of these, the Earlswood Mental Asylum, was founded near Redhill in Surrey in the early 1840s. It was the first asylum devoted to the care of idiots (as opposed to 'lunatics'), and it took both adults and children, though they were cared for separately. Following its success, an asylum for children – Essex Hall in Cochester – was founded. A later asylum, in Lancaster, was apparently modelled on Earlswood. All three were the subject of numerous 'penny pleas', through which members of the public were invited to

give a postage stamp to help sponsor the care of a nominated idiot child within their walls. The penny pleas used Christian-inspired ideas about philanthropy, expressed through poetry and through descriptions of the suffering (and 'torment') of named individuals. E.G. (1862) notes that, as of 1862, 'three different "penny pleas" have been at different periods issued, and though many hundreds of each have been circulated, the kind request for more is as frequent as ever' (p. 96).

The surviving literature refers to the figure of '50,000 idiotic and weak-minded persons' who were thought to live in the British Isles in the 1850s and 1860s (Greenwell 1869; Parkinson 1869). I have not been able to locate the source of this statistic, or the means by which it was determined. Definitions of what was considered as idiocy are comparatively vague and inconsistent, but appear to serve the practical function of differentiating (permanent) idiocy from (temporary) lunacy, and of emphasising the childlike-ness of sufferers. Greenwell (1869) argued that 'An idiot is one who is never strong enough to cast off the swaddling bands of infancy, and who lives bound round with them from head to foot, until he exchanges them for the cerecloths of the grave' (p. 10). In the same year, another writer, describing his day's observation of the Earlswood Asylum, writes that, 'Idiocy cannot be defined. Weak organisations, mental and physical; faculties unbalanced even when abnormally developed; an incapacity for the everyday duties of life; and a childishness which instruction and tender guidance may modify but can never remove' (Parkinson 1869, p. 3). The charity/tragedy discourse was thus underpinned by a sense that the suffering of these helpless individuals defied precise definitions: that such suffering could never adequately be described because it must always remain unimaginable to those who were required to feel pity and give charity.

Incorporated into the charity/tragedy discourse were the revulsion and disgust (Maguire 1996) that it ostensibly sought to replace. The act of caring for idiots could be considered and promoted as supremely charitable because these individuals were not just helpless, but also disgusting. And so the conditions of the asylums, and the moral character of those who worked in them, were romanticised and eulogised. These were Christian heroes, who could work acts of transformation, with the (financial) support of those who had no stomach for the work. The helplessness of the inmates of the institutions was re-inscribed through descriptions of their transformative journeys from repugnant creatures to viable human beings, made possible by the pioneers and social philanthropists

of the time. Reverend Edwin Sidney, an educator at Earlswood, gave numerous examples of such work in his public lectures.

It is not easy to imagine a more repulsive human being than the next to whom I shall advert. His head rolled distressingly, his barking was horrible, and he appeared senseless and indifferent. At the present time he is happy and lively, helps to clean the shoes, is musical, and what is more, can be depended on.

(The Rev. Sidney 1854 p.193)

In popular literature, the transformation of 'idiot children', through the heroic devoted Christian care of their teachers, was expressed poetically.

But honour! honour! be to those  
Gifted with patience rare,  
Who make the helpless idiot child  
The object of their care.

An idiot child! Oh, who can tell  
Of anything so sad?  
A heart without a pulse of joy,  
A mind in darkness clad.

To win that heart to feel and love,  
To nerve a listless mind,  
Is in itself a work of love  
Of more than human kind.

And more than human, too, will be  
The teacher's rich reward,  
To meet the object of his care  
Before the throne of God.

Meet him before the throne of God  
And hear the Saviour's voice,  
Proclaim another soul has come;  
Rejoice with me, rejoice...



Thou didst it to the helpless one,  
Thou didst it unto me;  
Thy work of love on earth is done,  
In Heaven thy rest shall be.

(Unattributed 1856, p.21)

With the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling in the 1870s, the contradictions between the industrial capitalist version of humanity, and this Christian philanthropic version, became more evident. Paradoxically, though, the resources generated in the contradictory space worked to uphold both versions. The primary purpose of mass schooling was to produce an appropriately skilled workforce, differentiated according to gender, to fulfil the requirements of late Victorian industrial society (Midwinter 1970; Lawson and Silver 1973; Gomershall 1997). Appropriate skilling meant the preparation of large numbers for labouring and for domestic work on the lowest rungs of the capitalist ladder (Wardle 1976). Education at this level never was the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, since this was only provided for those children whose destiny lay within the ranks of the leisured classes (Simon 1974). Those working-class children who were not considered able to benefit from elementary instruction were excluded from it, on the grounds that resources would be wasted on them. They would never make productive workers, and so had no claim on schooling resources. The supposed universalism of the law regarding elementary schooling effectively constructed these children as sub-human, since they were outside of the 'all children' specified by the education regulations. The asylums, although they emphasised the humanity of idiot children, in many ways worked to uphold their exclusion from mass schooling, through emphasising their helplessness and lifelong childlike-ness.

The provision of apparently universal schooling drew another kind of attention to the existence of groups of children supposedly unable to benefit from it. Until the 1870s, one category of mental deficiency – idiocy – had sufficed. The advent of mass, and then compulsory schooling brought with it the perceived need for finer categorisations. A means for excluding the least able working-class children (whose failure to make progress would both inhibit the smooth operation of the school and hold down the payment-by-results salaries of their teachers) was needed. This was found in the introduction of mechanisms for separating children into those who were, and those who were not, deemed able

to benefit from instruction. Additional terms had to come into common usage, to account for the children who, whilst they could be deemed unable to profit from elementary schooling, could not be considered as idiots. The terms 'imbecile' and 'feeble-minded' were already being used interchangeably with idiot (Pritchard 1963). Their function and meaning began to change in the late 1870s, when arguments for inventing ways of categorising people gained ground. In 1886, the Idiots Act provided for the care and control of idiots *and* imbeciles. This both marked the difference that had been established between the two groups, and made it necessary to develop increasingly sophisticated ways and means of differentiating between them.

## **1899 - 1921: Statutory Provision and the Rights / Protection Discourse**

The Defective and Epileptic Children Act of 1899 continued this process: it established the 'feeble-minded' categorisation and gave local authorities the right to provide education for feeble-minded children if they so wished. This Act both drew impetus from and gave impetus to the growing body of regulations regarding the differentiation of 'mental defectives'. By the beginning of the twentieth century, children categorised as mentally defective were divided into the four classes of idiot, imbecile, feeble-minded and dull, according to the perceived degree of impairment. There was an additional category of moral feeble-mindedness that encompassed those who were not mentally defective in its strictest sense, but who were thought to be unable to help themselves from degenerating into a life of criminal activity and/or prostitution. It was no longer considered adequate to rely on philanthropy alone for the provision of care and control. Debates about what kind of provision (including education) should be made for members of these groups, and enquiries into existing provision, led to the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.

The 1913 Act had at its heart the clarification of certification procedures (through which people could be consigned to insitutional 'care'), and the juridical inscription of the feeble-minded category. Its definitions were framed by a protection discourse: protection of both mental defectives and of 'society', (which thus, by implication, did not include mental defectives). Idiots were identified by the Act as those who were 'devoid of any understanding' and, as such, 'unable to appreciate the commonest dangers' (Hollander 1916, p. 143). Imbeciles were

said to be cognisant of major physical dangers but unable to manage their affairs. Moreover, 'if left to themselves, their instincts and manners become so repulsive that it is impossible to live in their society' (ibid, p.45). Feeble-minded children were defined in relation to the norm. They were the children who 'suffer from such an incomplete cerebral development that they are behind other children, at the same age and station in life, in mind and conduct, and do not profit by their environment and by education to the same extent as average children. They cannot be taught in public schools' (ibid. p.46).

By 1910, mentally defective children (and, to a lesser extent, adults), seem to have been effectively established as unfortunates. The battle to convince the 'public' (in other words, the non-defective population) that these pitiable creatures should be provided for had largely been won. And so the charity/tragedy discourse gradually merged with a version of a rights discourse, both legitimated by the meta-discourse of protection. Mentally defective people were increasingly perceived as having the right to care and provision, although this 'right' was constructed as a form of charity, since they would be cared for out of the public purse, with no expectation that they would contribute to the cost of their own upkeep. The question was about who should have these 'rights'. The 'community' too had rights. They had, above all, the right to protection from the unsavoury habits and potential moral corruption of the mentally deficient. So the legislation that provided for growing numbers of mentally defective people set itself twin goals: their care, and their control.

In the years immediately leading up to, and in those following, the Idiots Act of 1886, it had become a commonsense that idiots should be confined to institutions. The debate in the early twentieth century was over what constituted efficient and necessary care for imbeciles and, more controversially, for the adult feeble-minded. Should this last group be the recipients of statutory residential care, and what degree of compulsion should be enforced? This debate was not, strictly speaking, one of educational policy, but its construction is interesting here since it shows how the protection/rights discourse leant itself so readily to discursive practices that were to do with regulating, controlling and incarcerating people.

The moral high ground belonged to those who advocated the confinement of the adult feeble-minded on the grounds that this group was especially vulnerable and that it was over-represented amongst those convicted of crime and

prostitution. The advocates of such confinement – the direct inheritors of the philanthropic social reformers of the 1850s and 1860s – argued that it was cruel to feeble-minded individuals to allow them to sink into ‘degradation’ when this could be avoided through certification and institutionalisation. They won a partial victory. The 1913 Act did provide for feeble-minded adults to be confined, but feeble-minded children of school age could be exempted from residential care. Some groups continued to argue for the compulsory confinement of these children, and for the provision of ‘colonies’ similar to those in North America, in which girls could be systematically trained for laundry work and boys for farm labouring. The continuing arguments indicate the contested nature of ‘rights’ discourses. Whose rights were to prevail? The ‘rights’ of the feeble-minded to care and protection? The ‘rights’ of the rest of the population to protection from the feeble-minded? The ‘rights’ of the taxpayer not to have public money wasted on unnecessary expenditure?

Another key debate was around questions of heredity. Drunkenness and sexual disease were seen as the primary breeding grounds of mental deficiency. Hollander (1916) writes that ‘Idiocy, as well as imbecility, has defective heredity as the most frequent background for its development’ (p. 30). In the endeavour to provide scientific proof of heredity, the skulls of mentally defective children and their (working-class) families were measured, so that medical practitioners could work out the size of their brains and thus determine mental capacity (ibid.). This debate was located within wider debates on heredity and eugenics, which sought to prove that members of non-dominant groups were justifiably subordinated due to inferior brain size and capacity, and that some groups were less deserving of life, and less amenable to ‘civilisation’ than others (Gould 1981).

As the eugenic position gained popularity, it was used in the debates over appropriate provision. The perceived need to protect society took on a commonsense eugenic twist, since ‘the veriest tyro knows that if the useless thistle is not kept within bounds and prevented from spreading its kind broadcast, it may do untold harm and involve a far greater expenditure of time and money than if efficient measures for controlling it had been taken from the first’ (Lapage 1911, p. 45). The liberal oppositional discourse was again deployed by those philanthropists who advocated compulsory institutionalisation as opposed to forced sterilisation (then known as ‘asexualisation’). Both the advocates of eugenic measures, and the liberal opposition, held it as self-

evident that 'society' would be at risk of being overrun by mental defectives should they be allowed to propagate freely. Both, therefore, were situated within a master-race ideology that sought to use the politics of fear and disgust to establish non-dominant groups as the verminous, parasitic Other about to overrun 'civilised' society and take over the world for its own ends. Underpinning the juridical requirements for the protection of 'helpless' mental defectives then, was their construction as eugenic, moral and economic threat to Western capitalist society (Soder, 1984).

The multiple contradictions of the period were strongly nuanced by class and gender. The mental defective whose care and control was the subject of the 1913 Act was implicitly working-class and impoverished: the mentally-defective offspring of the rich middle classes would be provided for in the relative comfort of a family, or privately-run, home. The mental-defective-in-danger discourse was one of childlike, asexualised femininity. This was the construction which continued to evoke pity and its cousin, physical revulsion. The mental-defective-as-danger discourse was of aggressive, violent, physically powerful masculinity, and of non-respectable, out-of-control, promiscuous femininity. This was the construction that evoked fear, moral censure and a politicised version of disgust.

In the 1913 Act, there was also recognition, although not official certification, of 'backward', 'dull', and 'feebly gifted' children. These terms, as yet undifferentiated, were used to identify the children who, whilst they could apparently benefit from instruction in ordinary elementary schools, would, it was thought, make little progress there. Their identification involved their insertion into the both the charity/tragedy and rights/protection discourses. Hollander (1916) notes that:

Whereas idiots and imbeciles, and sometimes even the feeble-minded, may be recognised in their cradle, and their parents may therefore be early reconciled to their misfortune, it is otherwise with backward children. Their mental weakness often remains unsuspected until they reach school age, so the hopes of parents are kept alive for a longer time, making the subsequent disappointment all the greater. Moreover, while the deeply defective children, such as idiots, imbeciles and the feeble-minded, are in the eyes of parents merely helpless children, those of lesser defect – backward children –

are, and remain, frequently, a source of great trouble and anxiety to their parents.

(p. 63)

Boys, then as now, were over-represented in this category. Tredgold (1914) observes that 'it is interesting to note that the proportion of dull and retarded boys is greater than that of girls' (p. 177). But, in the years following the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, it was impossible to measure with any degree of accuracy the numbers of children receiving special provision, or failing to make progress in ordinary schools, since no mechanism for enforcing educational requirements of the Act had been established.

## **1921 – 1944: Science and the Medical / Psychological Discourse**

This perceived shortcoming was rectified by the Education Act of 1921 which required local authorities to ascertain exact numbers of dull, backward and feeble-minded children living within their jurisdiction. The 1920s and 1930s were characterised by incremental refinements to the markers of mental deficiency. Where descriptive markers had sufficed, numerical calibration, based on 'scientific' and 'objective' measures, was now required. The emotional, feminised language that had produced the pitiable idiot, and the emotive, masculinised vernacular that had produced the threatening, dangerous defective, merged with the scientific 'objectivism' of post First-World-War psychology. And where the medical profession had been uniquely responsible for diagnosis and certification procedures, psychologists now began to assert their professional claims to diagnostic expertise. The medical hegemony lingered, though: it was still only 'medical men' who could actually issue the certificate of deficiency, and, in the institutions, mental defectives were still referred to as patients, subject to educational and other 'treatment'.

The 1927 Mental Deficiency Act defined mental deficiency in relation to idiocy – presented as the absence of intelligence. The protection discourse was strengthened and reconfigured. Now it was the mentally deficient who were to be protected (from their own inability to recognise danger, or earn a living). The protection of society as a legitimizing narrative was omitted from the wording of

the Act, thus legitimising incarceration as an act of benevolent caring by a society that was financially secure.

From 1921, local education authorities (LEAs) were required to ascertain the numbers of feeble-minded children of school age in their districts, so that they could be provided with day or residential schooling in special schools for the mentally defective. But there was increasing concern at the wide variations in the proportions of children so ascertained by different LEAs. In 1926 a Joint Mental Deficiency Committee was set up to inquire into this. The committee set a figure of 1.2 per cent of the school population (higher in rural areas) whom it considered would be mentally defective. This convenience figure was based on the proportion of children already receiving special educational provision in London, and on the provision that the committee thought it was reasonable to demand of other LEAs. Charged with providing a more precise means of calibration that would ensure a degree of consistency, the committee looked to the work of French psychologist Charles Binet, and his tests for calculating mental age and mental ratio. The 'objective' tests that he devised calculated mental age, and then related this to chronological age: a ten-year-old scoring a mental age of five would be said to have a mental ratio of fifty per cent, whilst a ten-year-old with a mental age of three would be said to have a mental ratio of thirty per cent. In the following decades, the term 'mental ratio' was converted to 'Intelligence Quotient' and the child with the supposed mental ratio of fifty per cent became the child with the IQ of fifty, in a means of calibration that was set to last for several decades.

In 1929, the joint committee report set out maximum mental ratios for each group of mental defectives, based on lines of demarcation drawn according to the capacity (and projected capacity) of special education. Idiots were henceforth those who had a mental ratio of under 20, later equated to an IQ of less than 20. Imbeciles were those with a mental ratio between 20 and 40, later revised to an IQ of between 20 and 50. And the feeble-minded were those with a mental ratio of up to 60, to be revised as soon as provision could be made available to 70, and later equated with an IQ of 70 ( Burt 1935). These were the markers, arising from administrative requirements, that became enshrined as the true, objective delimiters of mental deficiency. As the 1930s wore on, the old descriptive markers passed out of common educational usage, to be replaced first with mental age, then with mental ratio, and finally with IQ. The new,

enlightened, scientific times sought to distance this scientific practice from the old days of idiosyncratic identification and patchy provision (Burt 1937).

There seems to have been consensus that, where the three categories of idiot, imbecile and feeble-minded were concerned, the deficiency was inborn. There also seems to have been unquestioned consensus that children classed as idiots, imbeciles and feeble-minded were in - educable in ordinary schools. There was less certainty about the area of backwardness, or dullness. Different educational provision was thought to be necessary for the innately dull (who could not be fixed) and the merely backward (who could be repaired and made useful through the appropriate scholastic treatment).

No grindstone can make a good blade out of bad metal; and no amount of coaching will ever transform the inborn dullard into a normal child. The pupil who is merely backward forms a different problem. He is a knife without an edge – good steel that has never been sharpened. He hacks away at his daily loaf; but will never cut true or smooth until he has been sent off to the repair shop to be whetted and sharpened.

(Burt 1937, p. 9)

It is in such metaphors that the old contradiction between the need for schooling to produce a useful workforce, and the imperative for a caring society to protect its most vulnerable members, lived on. The notion that a proportion, at least, of mentally defective children could be fixed and made useful replaced the pre-1920s social Darwinism with an optimistic view of the ability of schooling to remediate and ameliorate the problem of mental deficiency. Pedagogy, hand-in-hand with the scientific apparatus increasingly associated with psychology, was to lead the way to a more orderly, more rationalist future for mentally defective people and for the society in which they lived.

Increased testing showed that girls continued to do better than boys throughout the state schooling system, but this was apparently not a cause for great concern. Having noted that 'at almost every age the girls outstrip the boys', Burt (1939) comments that 'with boys, the slower onset of puberty and the added stimulus of freedom, fresh work and the earning of a wage, that comes when they change from pupils into workmen, place the date of their final mental spurt just beyond the period of school life (p.192). It was accepted as common-sense



that children from the 'lowest stations' would score lower marks than their more affluent counterparts in any form of testing, and Burt and his colleagues stressed that like should be compared with like: it would be unfair to compare children from the slums with children from the suburbs, and diagnoses of dullness or backwardness should be accordingly adjusted.

Provision for dull and backward children (the two terms were used interchangeably in practice, despite Burt's efforts to distinguish between them) was intended to be located in special classes in elementary schools. The school leaving age for pupils in such classes could be extended, at the discretion of the LEA, from 14 to 16. However, the economic downturn of the 1930s acted as a brake on such developments within special education (Cole 1989). Where such classes did exist, they were seen as examples of best, most enlightened, practice: as the application of scientific pedagogy. Teachers in special classes were encouraged to keep their pupils' innate capacity for learning at the forefront of their minds when planning work, although such information was to be kept from the pupils since it was constructed as knowledge that could only be relevant and useful to professional experts.

The children show little curiosity about the [IQ] number beside their name and are quite incapable of understanding how a number could be a measure of how clever they are. If by any chance they should show curiosity they have merely to be told it is a number which teacher has given them in her book and now it is entered on the sheet.

(Hill 1939, p. 88)

And so the 1920s and 1930s re-inscribed another of the contradictions at the heart of the discursive production of intellectual subordination. Enlightened, progressive opinion was that less severe forms of deficiency could and should be fixed by the application of scientific rationalist forms of assessment and pedagogy. But if the fixing of mental deficient individuals was the obvious 'solution', this left intact the implication that severely deficient children and adults were an enduring problem. Fully human status remained entwined with an individual's perceived ability to contribute to the nation's economy, and to take up a position within the social relations of capital. Within this irreducible problematic, education could not be perceived as a solution for people who were positioned as ineducable. Furthermore, in times of financial difficulty, (which the

1930s undoubtedly were), the schooling system had to make manifest a hierarchy of deficiency based on who might be made economically productive: a hierarchy which arguably was implicitly present all along. 'Acute financial problems... hampered the development of special education and led senior officials at the Board of Education to draw up a list of priorities at the head of which was the education of the deaf and blind, and at the bottom was help for lower-grade mental defectives' (Cole 1989, p. 90).

## **Back to the Future?**

As we look back to the 1850s we may wince at the terminology used to describe the children who we now consider to have learning difficulties. We may look back in pride at the discursive and policy shifts of the twentieth century, and sigh with relief that numbers of children are no longer certified and sent to spend their lives shut away from society, incarcerated in long-stay institutions. These are notable improvements, and I would not want to deny them.

But the dilemmas of special educational provision at the beginning of the twenty-first century reveal some unpleasant continuities with the past. The growing unsayability of 'learning difficulties' and 'special educational needs' points to the enduring negative meanings that continue to inhere in the phenomenon and in the group of people so identified. Shades of the charity/tragedy discourse and the objectification of 'vulnerable' children, the rights/protection discourse and the curtailment of liberty, and the medical/psychological discourse and the calibration of intellectual 'ability' for political purposes linger on in educational policy. They are imbricated in the discursive practices of the standards agenda – which demands that schools 'fix' as many pupils as they can by enabling them to perform to normative standards – and of the surveillant apparatus to which pupils considered to have 'SEN' are increasingly subject. In fifty or one hundred years' time, what will commentators make of the New Labour pro-capitalist version of 'inclusive education' as articulated in current policy (Blunkett 2000: Blunkett 2001)? Will they spot its contradictions and inhumanities, in the way we look back and so easily identify the contradictions and inhumanities of the past?

This paper has traced the intransigence of the meanings associated with intellectual subordination. Although I have characterised specific periods of time according to the prevalence of specific discourses, the reality is, as always,

much more complicated. The very prevalence of these discourses in the literatures of their respective ages speaks also to their deployment in the construction of common sense, a process that is always contested (McRobbie 1994; Weedon 1997). I have presented what is necessarily a very broad sweep of educational policy in its social and political context. In doing so, I have had to lose much of the complexity that would enable an analysis of how other indices of difference were worked into the construction of the various discourses (Yeatman 1995), and of what they meant for those who lived them, at the time of their living them. Such a project would be fascinating, but is well beyond the scope of this paper. My purposes here have been more limited. In providing an historical context, I have sought to explain how the meanings associated with intellectual subordination have remained largely negative, through politically and socially situated discourses and discursive practices that appear to have changed over time. The picture is one of changing discourses, but stable meanings.

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