

The valorization of difference:

A historico-critical approach of the inclusion debate within contemporary disability policy

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Abstract

When Stiker's influential and pioneering book *Corps infirmes et sociétés* was published in 1982, disability policy of that time was highly influenced by the theoretical tendencies of normalization and social role valorization respectively developed within Scandinavian countries by Bengt Nirje and Wolf Wolfensberger (Stiker, 1997). In answer to the institutionalization practices that were then widely spread within the European countries both theoretical approaches tried to, although in a slightly different manner, counter the well established and exclusionary practices of so-called total institutions by stressing the importance of normal life-experiences or social roles for disabled people (Wolfensberger, 1983). Stiker's book was born out of his discomfort with this willingness to integrate disabled people structured around society's impossibility to accept the difference as an inevitable part of reality and its passion for identicalness and similarity. Stiker tried to formulate a remedy for the above mentioned tendency to reduce the difference embodied by the disabled person to established norms and standards: Love of difference. Only by inscribing in our cultural models a view of difference as the law of the real and not any more as the aberration of some cultural established standard one would be able to counter a desire to exclude. This – especially when it would become socially contagious through education, cultural and political action – would, according to, Stiker lead to *human life* (Stiker, 1997).

Contemporary inclusive education policies, it seems to us, have come to meet to a great extent this theoretico-epistemological condition – if not already in practice then certainly in theory for on several places one can read: “A central difference between inclusion and integration lies in assumptions about *difference*. ‘Integration’ has usually been used to describe the process of the assimilation of children with learning difficulties, sensory impairments or physical disabilities into mainstream schools ... ‘Inclusion’ does not therefore set parameters around particular kinds of supposed disability. Rather, there is a fundamental principle of acceptance behind inclusion” (Thomas & Davies, 1999). This would mean that Stiker's dream of *human life* has become or is becoming reality. However, following Castel in his analyses of the practical and political consequences of organizing care not anymore on the premisses of a dangerous individual but on the occurrence of specific risk factors, we are inclined to wonder whether these trends do not inaugurate a set of new management strategies of a kind specific to ‘neo-liberal’ societies (Castel, 1991). Following a Foucauldian governmental perspective we would like to identify some historical figures and strategies which can also be found – although in a modified format – within contemporary inclusive education policies. In this post-disciplinary society, the position of the disabled person, his/her relationships with professional experts and the knowledge related to his/her disability all underwent – according to us – profound modifications through the recent interconnection of what we would like to call the valorization of difference and the activation of a will to freedom.

At the end of the eighteenth century the idea of (bodily/mental) difference, until then a major obstacle for knowledge about individual persons, became for several

reasons one of the most important places where knowledge about the self could be constructed. The difference symbolised by the loss of a bodily/mental function would in the nineteenth century become increasingly dissected, interpreted and analysed into particular knowledge systems which could be used to define the distance between the norm and its aberrations. Secondly, a closer look to Edouard Séguin's ideas, formulated in his treatise on the treatment of feeble-minded persons in 1846, will show us the increasing importance of freedom within the care and education for disabled persons. He for example wrote « Mais le but de l'éducation, loin d'être la passivité, est la liberté, et la première condition pour être libre est de le vouloir » (Séguin, 1846). These two major transformations coincided during the course of the twentieth century and resulted in a different role for the experts and the knowledge they produce as becomes clear within the inclusive strategy. Knowledge no longer is seen as an introduction of the self to a firmly established norm but became considered as the objective reflection of a mirror which invites the disabled person to act on itself in a specific way and to employ its difference as a kind of human capital. The expert moreover enables this willingness of being free through the economization of difference by providing the necessary infrastructure and instruments aligned with his/her potentialities. The question one could ask is whether this willingness of being different and the corresponding remoted position of the expert does not form another way of coupling an individualizing and totalizing strategy thus in a certain sense precisely immunizing the singularity of a disabled person's difference.

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