

# Essentials of Disability Studies for Special Education

Guest session: Theorising disability, modernity and change in special education

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This session uses sociological critiques of modernity as a way of identifying the origin and effects of policies that have historically excluded disabled children from participation in mainstream education and society more generally. Particular attention will be paid to dynamics of the clinical or medical 'gaze' that evolved from the fusion of industrialisation, political power and medico-scientific advances, drawing on ideas of French social theorist Michel Foucault and other scholars. We will apply this analytical framework to understand the evolution of special education in a range of contexts and options for reform within and outside existing systems. The main goal will be to develop a 'deconstructionist' approach to professional ideas about the nature of disability and educational interventions with disabled children.

## Core reading

Allan, J. (1996) 'Foucault and Special Educational Needs: a "box of tools" for analysing children's experiences of mainstreaming.' *Disability & Society*, 11:2: 219-233

This article considers how Michel Foucault's ideas can be used to deconstruct approaches in special education. It gives a useful introduction, but could be enhanced by explicitly giving some historical context in line with Foucault's critique of how modernity shaped the social construction of illness and difference. Note that references in the article to 'mainstreaming' and 'integration' in the UK are rather outdated, reflecting the fact that the article was published eighteen years ago.

## Further reading (optional)

McIntosh, P. (2002) 'An Archi-texture of Learning Disability Services: The use of Michel Foucault,' *Disability & Society*, 17:1, 65-79

As with the Allan article, this text is a little outdated in terms of empirical content, but provides an example of how Foucault's ideas can be used to deconstruct policy and practice messages surrounding people with learning disabilities

Pfahl, L. & Powell, J. (2011) 'Legitimizing school segregation. The special education profession and the discourse of learning disability in Germany.' *Disability & Society*, 26:4, 449-462

This article provides a historical overview of the professional discourses within special education in Germany. It takes a Foucauldian approach, although note that

references to his work could be more explicit. Nonetheless, the article provides a good example of the discourse analysis that any study of special education in a particular context or country should include.

Tremain, S. (2005) 'Foucault, Governmentality and Critical Disability Theory: An Introduction' in S. Tremain (ed.) *Foucault and the Governmentality of Disability*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 1-24, available online at <http://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472098764-intro.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2014]

The first half of this chapter gives a good overview of Foucault's thinking and its relevance to disability studies. Unfortunately both the chapter and the overall book are written in rather complicated language, but the content is interesting.

### **Additional resources**

O'Farrell, C. (2014) 'Bibliography of works on Foucault and Education.' Available online at <https://foucaultnews.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/foucault-ed-biblio-fn3.pdf>