

History and Background of the Treatment of the Intellectually Disabled in the USA

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In recent years, American ideas and practices concerning the education of intellectually disabled children have been successively introduced into Japan as matters of ideology. IEP (Individual Education Programs) and other such programs have been adopted and employed in the education of intellectually disabled children. This approach truly seems to espouse the American ideology as a model. However, prior to the establishment of such current ideology, there was a period, a truly dark period, during which the disabled in America were oppressed. In terms of economic conditions and other social factors, they were treated as fools and they were said to be like the main culprits of social vice. The enactment of various laws concerning the disabled has continued from the 1960s until the present, yet it is considered here that the factors underlying these laws might not have been adequately explained and discussed in Japan. Furthermore, there are various issues to do with 'inclusion' that require discussion.

Is the USA truly as kind to the disabled as one would expect? Why have attitudes to and ideas about the disabled changed? This thesis reviews the history surrounding America's disabled people and the history

of their education system, and includes a discussion of the author's own studies as well as materials that have recently come to light.

The second part of this thesis details the history of the treatment of intellectually disabled in the USA, which after passing through a kind of dark age, has continued to evolve various guarantees of rights, such as the ADA Act and inclusion. This in turn has influenced aspects of the academic study of intellectually disabled in Japan, such as education, health care, and employment.

This thesis presents a discussion of the following topics, with reference to the relevant literature.

- The advent of schools for mentally retarded people.
- The duties fulfilled by institutions.
- The advent of special education, special education classes and the public education system.
- Social developments concerning the intellectually disabled.
- Intelligence testing, eugenics, and sterilization.

- Laws prescribing compulsory school attendance for the intellectually disabled and special education classes.
- The Kennedy family and mental retardation.
- Laws concerning federal government educational institutions and education of the intellectually disabled.
- The move towards inclusion.

Some questions arising from these issues include the following.

(a) Has the USA always been kind to its intellectually disabled?

(b) Has eugenics ideology, which reached its peak in Europe, not played a considerable role in the USA and greatly affected people's thinking?

(c) What was it that caused a change in the government's stance towards the intellectually disabled in the 1960s?

Some reflections on these questions are presented here.

Firstly, regarding the first question, 'Has the USA always been kind to its intellectually disabled?' raises discussion that proceeds from the constitution of welfare states in Europe and the attitude of the USA towards them. One feels that because of such factors as inclusion and the ADA Law, the USA has been a leader among welfare states, yet on consideration of the facts that since WWII European nations have been moving closer to the ideology of the welfare state and that in the USA individualism is the predominant ideology, it may be said that in terms of welfare, it is actually latecomer. A reason for that could be that the welfare

state ideology was not compatible with the spirit of America's foundation¹⁾.

Secondly, there is the fact that radicalized forms of eugenics in Europe and justifications for sterilization of the disabled²⁾, which sought its own rationale, were sanctioned and taken to extremes in the USA.

Furthermore, while Nazism engaged Germany in such persecution of humanity, including the disabled and Jews, that had hitherto rarely been observed, and nationalism in that country was linked with the ideology of eugenics. However, It has recently come to light by some authors³⁾⁴⁾ in fact sterilization which is one result of the ideology of eugenics might be based on the model of eugenics theory and practice and sterilization law provided by the many USA states. While following the course of such history, this thesis discusses the course of eugenics thought as well as the treatment of and attitudes to the disabled in America⁴⁾.

According to the ideology of Social Darwinism, which was spreading about American society in the latter half of the 19th century, if the government were to provide relief for the poor and the weaker members of society then it would give an unfair benefit to the incompetent and thereby result in the slowing of social progress: so, the government had better do nothing for them. It could be said that the government's tendency to limit welfare budgets to the bare minimum, to place great importance on self-reliance and industry, and to favor the principles of market competition indicate that even in the present day, Social Darwinism is a stream of thought that runs deep in American society. It may be surmised with certainty from the various facts presented in this thesis that such ideology has also dominated the treatment of the disabled in the USA. From the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries, eugenics provided

the rationale for the exclusion of the disabled. It cannot be denied that this had an especially strong influence in the USA, due to overseas expansionism and the fact of it being a multiracial nation, and that this was reflected in the treatment of the disabled.

It was not until the Kennedy government of the 1960s that public demand for improvement of the treatment of the disabled in the USA arose and the federal government began to make legal amends. The third question seeks to examine the Kennedy government itself as well as the era of the 1960s, which was a momentous turning point in the treatment of the disabled in the USA. Why is it that from the 1960s improvements in the treatment of the disabled sped up? The answer can be perceived against the background of the movement of black and other minorities towards self-assertion and their demand for rights. Early in the development of these movements was the Brown case of 1954, which is mentioned elsewhere in this thesis. The decision handed down in the Brown case caused an uproar. It was vehemently resisted, especially in the southern states where opposition to racial integration was strong. So, the dispute with the federal government, which sought to advance its racial integration policy, continued over many years. And then John F. Kennedy was elected president. The great turning point in the treatment of the disabled came with the constitution of the Kennedy government and its domestic policies. The growth of Black and other minority movements as well as the movement towards enactment of the Civil Rights Act present the background for, and major influences on, the improvement of the treatment of the disabled. While the disabled question may be regarded as a part of that stream of movements, one cannot overlook the

great individual experience and dynamic character of Eunice Shriver, one of the Kennedy family⁵⁾.

Thus, through detailed examination of these three questions, this thesis discusses the background to changes in the treatment of disabled people in the USA.

Reference

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