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Special Education as Social Control:
The historical development of
industrial schools and special classes.

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Carol Vincent

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Abstract

This thesis represents an attempt to go beyond the largely descriptive surveys of previous histories of special education in New Zealand. The argument presented is that special education can be seen as a form of social control. The problem of who is selected for special education and the accompanying rhetoric is examined. It is argued that the definition of children as exceptional (deviant) and the consequent treatment of them constitutes a form of social control. Further, that the medical model has been the dominating influence in defining what is to be regarded as deviance, and has therefore, functioned as a form of that control. To illustrate how an historical analysis of special education in New Zealand can be informed through a sociological perspective, an analysis of the provisions for neglected and criminal children, and the establishment and subsequent development of special classes for backward children is presented.

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Introduction

"Every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted and to the fullest extent of his powers".

This now famous statement of policy by Fraser, as the Minister of Education in 1939, reflects a philosophy which is at the heart of justifications for special education provisions: That each child has a right to be educated to their fullest potential despite any handicapping conditions which they might have. As a consequence, the history of special education is characterised by an ever increasing differentiation and categorisation of 'handicapping conditions' which have been perceived as hindering children's educational development. Existing histories of New Zealand special education have tended to focus on these categories and document the subsequent development of provisions to cater for the children identified by those categories. The history of special education has thus usually been presented in terms of an ideology of humanitarian progress.

Through the process of categorisation special education involves the definition of children as 'deviant'. A vast array of categories exist which serve to identify those children. 'Abnormal', 'backward', 'retarded', 'disruptive', and 'maladjusted' are just some of the descriptive labels used to classify them. In this thesis the term

'exceptional children' will be used in a general sense to refer to all those children catered for within special education in New Zealand. That is, those children who are defined as deviating from the 'normal' child in mental, physical, and/or social characteristics to such an extent that it was deemed necessary to provide a modification of school practices or special educational services to enable the development of individual potential. The use of terms such as 'idiot' and 'imbecile' are not used in any way here to be disparaging of the children so defined, they are simply categories drawn from the historical material and are presented here in the sense in which they were initially applied.

Throughout existing historical accounts of the history of New Zealand special education, little attention is given to the way in which children have been perceived and identified as 'problems' and processed for special treatment. Such histories have not examined questions such as why particular groups of children were defined as being 'in need' of special provisions whilst others were not, or why particular policies were implemented rather than others.

To go beyond the largely descriptive surveys of previous histories, a sociologically informed historical analysis of special education is required. The problem of who is selected for special education and the accompanying rhetoric must be examined. An important aspect of social control is involved here: the individualisation and depoliticisation of social and educational problems through the process of defining deviance. A consideration of this process provides the basis for this thesis.

The use of case studies represents the most useful analytical approach to the development of a new historical perspective on special education. The areas selected for this purpose are the provisions for neglected and criminal children, and the establishment and subsequent development of special classes for backward children. Together these case studies cover the period from 1867 to the early 1930's. These areas of concern have been selected for analysis as they represent two of the very earliest provisions for children with 'special needs' in New Zealand.