A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Intellectual Disability in Irish Education

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Why did I do this particular piece of research?

- I have a son with Asperger's syndrome.

- I have been a parent advocate and set up a national charity for special needs parents in 2010 with 6 parents and ended up with 54,000.

- When researching a documentary I looked at the term intellectual disability and found, it had many definitions in different contexts, was very broad and disabled people did not like it.

- This lead me to Foucault and my dissertation.

Brief outline of this webinar

- Purpose of the research
- Why Foucault?
  - Problems with his approach
- Foucauldian Discourse analysis
  - His tools
  - Archaeology
  - Genealogy
  - How to identify power
- Stage 1 – Data
- Stage 2 – Identify episteme, surfaces of emergence
- Stage 3 – findings
- Overall conclusions

Purpose of Research

This thesis applied a Foucauldian Discourse analysis to the history of Irish Education.

1. Since the birth of the Irish State there has been three official terms for children with mental disabilities, 'mental deficiency', 'mental handicap' and 'intellectual disability'. Each new term replaced the previous one; 'mental deficiency' became 'mental handicap', subsequently 'mental handicap' became 'intellectual disability'. This research wanted to explore why this happened and more importantly did it cause marginalisation.

Purpose of Research

2. to expose the hidden conditions that underpinned the concept of Intellectual Disability in the history of Education, in order to answer the following questions:
    - What factors brought a particular conceptual configuration in the classification of intellectual disability into play in the first instance?
    - What made that configuration seem plausible and socially desirable?
    - What changes or events happened that caused the conceptual configuration to be replaced?
    - And did these changes cultivate marginalisation or demarginalisation?

Why Foucault?

- Foucauldian tools of analysis were applied to allow for the surfaces of emergence to be exposed and identified, thus in turn revealing the frameworks of knowledge that were hidden underneath.

- These frameworks were created from paradigms of information, practices and processes that surrounded the terms 'mental deficiency', 'mental handicap' and 'intellectual disability' in each of the overlapping discourses within the epistémè.

Problems with Foucault

- Is it objective? – selective but general, but necessary and for debate on the issues raised

- It does not offers solutions? Solutions can be transient, do not always solve the issues; it is the solution only for today.

- He does not label anything good or bad but by exposing it can create change, if temporarily. He wants to evoke change, to induce transformation of the knowledge.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

- How does a given object become knowledge?
- Two types of knowledge:
    - Connaissance – the type of knowledge found in academic books, like for example science or biology; it refers to the relationship between the subject to object and the formal rules that govern that relationship.
    - Savoir – is different bodies of learning, philosophical ideas, everyday opinions but also institutions, commercial practices and police activities.
- So he wants to reveal the Savoir – layers of knowledge that underpins a concept and the bodies of learning – Connaissance – that are present in the field being discussed.

Foucault's Tools of Analysis

- No book that sets out his tools – read all his books, interviews, books on his work (30 in total) then extracted the approaches and their tools
- 2 approaches: Archaeology and Genealogy
  - These contain many tools and methods influenced by history, culture, politics, sociolinguistics, all adapted to suit the concept being studied
  - It is up to the researcher to decide which tools are the most appropriate.
- There were three stages for the thesis
  - The first was to gather and read all the documents - 300
  - The second stage - broke down of the history of 'Intellectual Disability' within Irish Education into 'epistémè'. These were appropriately labelled. were the surfaces of emergence
  - Next par of Foucauldian analysis could be called the 'analysis of power relations' - the relations between knowledge and truth are produced out of power struggles.

Archaeology

- **Archaeology** By 'archaeology' I would like to designate not exactly a discipline but a domain of research, which would be the following: in a society, different bodies of learning, philosophical ideas, everyday opinions, but also institutions, commercial practices and police activities, mores – all refer to certain implicit knowledge [savoir] special to this society. This knowledge is profoundly different from bodies of learning [desconnaissances] that one can find in scientific books, philosophical theories, and religious justifications, but it is what makes possible at a given moment the appearance of a theory, an opinion, a practice. (p. 34)

Archaeology

- **Epistémè** - spaces in history – unconscious historical emergent phenomenon that can define and set conditions on thought in a particular time (p. 32, 35)
- **Discourse or Discursive Formations** – these formations that contain the knowledge & relations. 2 kinds – a field (education or medical), a set of events/set of statements (pp. 38-40)
  - discourse is the system by which the field speaks & communicates.
  - discursive events can have other effects outside of its own knowledge space
  - How these fields, events & statements relate to each other is a 'discursive formation'.

Archaeology

- **Surfaces of Emergence** - the social or cultural areas in which a specific 'discursive formation' makes an appearance (p. 41)
- **Authorities of Delimitation** - the authority to decide what is valid or invalid, true or false and legitimate or illegitimate within the 'discourse' comes from a specific quarter. This group are deemed legitimate as they speak from a certain 'enunciative modality' or subject position.(p. 41) - possessors to create certain parameters of 'norms' or normative behaviours (p. 42)
- **Grids of Specification-** The knowledge that experts rely on are part of. They can also be known as the frameworks of knowledge or systems of knowledge. This grid not only legitimises the expert's position but it is also fed by it. He calls this the 'a field of circular causality' (p. 42).
- **Games of Truth** -set of rules that facilitate decisions on what truth is and what it is not (pp. 43-44)

Geneology

- Definition **Genealogy** is:

a form of history that can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, and so on, without having to make reference to a subject that is either transcendental in relation to a field of events or runs in the empty sameness throughout the course of history (p. 34).

- Building on Archaeology – relationship between knowledge, truth and power

How to identify Power

Foucault's idea of 'power' is that power is not necessarily bad or oppressive. It is everywhere and functions on all levels. Power relationships cannot function without 'resistance', for where there is 'power' there is always 'resistance'.

- **Rule of Immanence** -power and knowledge must be viewed as always being connected.
- **Rule of Continual Variation** - power is not created in static relations, but that such relations are dynamic and can change over time.
- **Rule of Double Conditioning** - the 'local centres' of power are parts of larger strategies.
- **Rule for Tactical Polyvalence** - discourse joins knowledge to power. Does not imply repression. (p.45)

Geneology

- Power
    - **Biopower** – exerted primarily by the State. Two kinds: a disciplining of the body and the reproductive capacity of the population, which is the regulation of population, like a wealth analysis or birth/death ratios. (p. 47)
    - **Governmentality** or the **Art of Government** - Governmentality' is born out of the Christian 'pastoral' care model, the 'diplomatico-military model' and the police (p. 48) This is a new understanding of how 'power' can be used not only by government but by other institutions.
    - **Pastoral Care** - pastoral' care was exerted by the Christian church through its teaching to control its followers (p. 48).
    - **Myth of the Gaze** - the 'gaze' dehumanises and medically separates the patient's body from them as the person – the notion of identity. The doctor sees the underlying source of the medical problem, a skill acquired not from academic books but from learned experience; it is a culmination of all their knowledge. (p. 48).

Stage One - Data

- Official sources
  - Government papers, Dáil debates, policy documents, books, institutional documents, reports, statistics and official histories.
- Personal accounts, journal articles (psychological, psychiatric, charities), historical books, secondary sources.
- Nearly 300 documents

Stage Two

- The first part of the analysis divided the history of Irish education into three different epistémè and labelled them
  - the Institution, the Birth of Special Education and the Birth of Social Inclusion
- It also identified, Surfaces of Emergence:
  - The Family
  - The Church
  - The Government
    - Others also were the Asylum, the Child

Stage Three – Findings
The Institution – Chapter 3

- Timeframe: 1870-1960's

- Concepts Mentally Defective, Idiot, Feebleminded and Imbecile

- Context
  - Irish State – new and looked inward, isolationist, national plans
    - Predominant societal discourses – conservatism, nationalism, Irish identity and sovereignty
  - 2 main surfaces of emergence dominated – The Family and the Church
    - 66% of people with the mental disability were at home
    - Rest were in state workhouses, religious orders run institutions
    - The relationships between the surfaces of emergence here were very important
  - Government Policy and dominant practices - 'Segregation'
  - The analysis of the interaction between the surfaces of emergence within these discourses revealed how the concept of the mentally defective child was created

Stage Three – Findings
The Institution – Chapter 3

- Conclusions:
  - The Church, the Family and the State each created their own truth discourses
  - The Child – had no formal education – deemed uneducable
  - The mentally defective Child became an object of knowledge – The Church dominated and controlled the legitimate knowledge and truths about the child and were the main experts
  - Their Asylums were where this knowledge was created and enforced – the myth was established that these children were better off in here
  - The child were separated environmentally, personally and physically in education (p.85)

Stage Three – Findings
The Birth of Special Education - Chapter 4

- Timeframe: Mid 1960's to early 1990's

- Concepts: Mentally Handicapped – Severe, Mild and Moderately

- Context:
  - Irish State: dominated by social and economic progress – expansion and investment in education for an educated workforce
  - Ireland was less insular and more engaging with international influences, more egalitarian and liberal
  - Decline of institutional care – huge progressive thinking in education, better educated and more people educated
  - New ideas in education (child centred educational ideology) – the special school
  - The idea of 'family' changed, the processes surrounded mental disabilities changed (diagnosis, IQ's, assessments – a move away from the asylum, medical labelling – new experts)
  - Social model of disability

- Government Policy and dominant practices – Integration

Stage Three – Findings
The Birth of Special Education - Chapter 4

- Conclusions:
  - Power struggle began with the State and the Church – shifts in power, beginning of the decline of the Church's influence
  - New knowledge – replaced, changed or destroyed the previous frameworks
  - Rise of the parent and disability advocate, parental resistance
  - The Special School replaced the Asylum
  - Marginalisation still existed – schooling was segregated (p. 111)

Stage Three – Findings
The Birth of Social Inclusion – Chapter 5

- Timeframe: 1990's to 2013

- Concepts: Child with intellectual disability

- Context:
  - Historians call this time 'modern Ireland'
  - Rise of multiculturalism, the decline of the Church, ascent of secularism, the development of educational policy,
  - Government Policy – Neo-liberal political and social agenda, high levels of employment, economic prosperity and stability – however 2008 recession
  - The State dominant surface of emergence
  - dominant practices – Social Inclusion and inclusion

Stage Three – Findings
The Birth of Social Inclusion – Chapter 5

- Conclusions:
  - The State is the new author of delimitation on the child in education – international influence, exertion of power in the discourse
  - New experts in health and education – multidisciplinary teams
  - Towards the end of this epistémè a new one is emerging - The Institution of the Child – advocate (the Child's rights Alliance, Ombudsman for Children)
  - The Family resisting the power of the Church and the State – supported by state funding, more parent advocacy/lobby groups
  - The Church is in decline and is being pushed out of education
  - Questioning of the Social Model of Disability, medical labelling

Overall Conclusions

- The frameworks of knowledge that existed within the three epistémè analysed have constantly fluctuated.
    - While conventional historical analysis might suggest that these changes were as a result of progression or the natural evolution of knowledge, especially in the field of education and health, the Foucauldian analysis has shown that the progression or evolution of knowledge in this area is just an illusion and that the changes that occurred were not planned or predetermined.
    - They were in fact the products of institutional power struggles.

Overall Conclusions

- The institution that assumed a dominant position in the possession and exercise of power within an epistémè thereby became the principal determinant of what constituted valid knowledge in that epistémè.
  - In other words, the group which controlled and authorised the main experts/authors of delimitation in each epistémè had the power to make 'truth'.
  - This allowed it to endorse and produce the accepted framework of knowledge; it legitimised the valid truths, the main practices and processes that emerged in each historical time discussed. As already, illustrated these were different and changed in each epistémè.

Overall Conclusions

- The Foucauldian analysis performed in this thesis also has revealed that the consequences of these power relations, fluctuating grids of specification and knowledge is that marginalisation has existed, albeit in different forms, within each epistémè.
    - This was achieved by uncovering the hidden conditions that not only allowed for the objects of knowledge to emerge but also for the places of marginalisation to be unearthed.
    - This analysis has shown that marginalisation was an unforeseen consequence of these underlying conditions.

Overall Conclusions

- This thesis has made clear that the power relations that existed within the field of education has created and maintained the 'marginalisation' of children with mental disabilities.
  - However, it can be asserted with impunity that not one of the aforementioned institutions acted with malign intent: the exclusion of the Child with intellectual disabilities was in all cases an unintended policy consequence rather than an identified objective.
- The practices of 'segregation', 'integration' and 'social inclusion' were created to try and do 'what was best' for the Child with intellectual disabilities, as dictated by epistémè-governed and legitimated institutional principles.

Final Thought

Foucault's Discourse analysis does not offer any solutions to the issues raised in this thesis. As stated in the Introduction, solutions are only relevant for a limited time. This thesis is an illustrated of this very point. There is no guarantee that any solution offered will not cause or contribute to marginalisation in the future. This does not mean that the exercise of trying is futile; the only way to prevent marginalisation is to acknowledge it, work hard and to do better next time. As Foucault puts it:

> The problems that I try to pose – those tangled things that crime, madness, and sex are, and that concern everyday life – cannot be easily resolved. Years, decades, of work and political imagination, will be necessary, work at the grass roots with the people directly affected, restoring their right to speak. Only then will we succeed.[475]
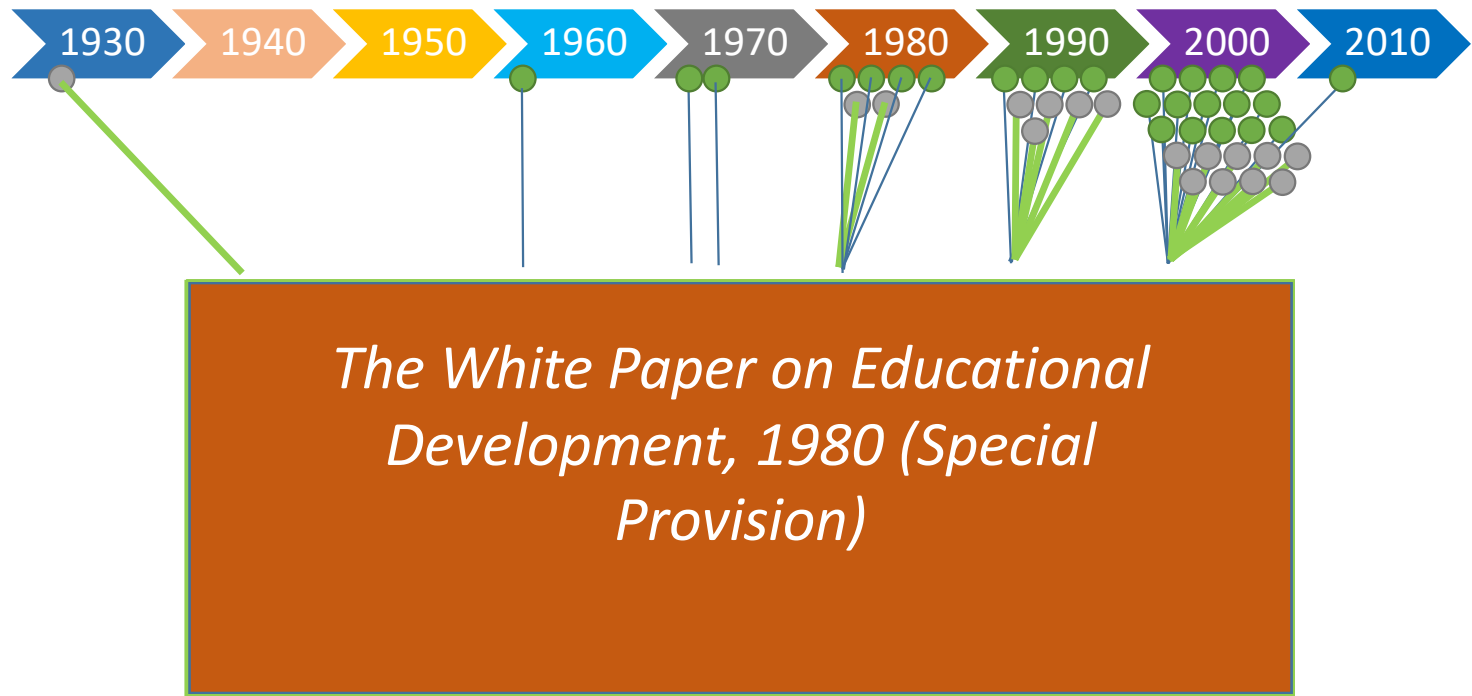
Discussion – Any Questions?

Reference

- Michel Foucault Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 2, Aesthetics, James D. Faubion (ed.), (London, 1998), p. 261.

- Michel Foucault Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3, Power, James D. Faubion (ed.), (London, 1994), p. 118.

- McSherry, E. (2013), *A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Intellectual Disability in Irish Education*, Unpublished Philosophy Theses (M.A.), University of Limerick, available: [A foucauldian discourse analysis of intellectual disability in Irish education](#)

Disability Policy in Education Timeline

1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010

The White Paper on Educational Development, 1980 (Special Provision)

Reports   Legislation