

Belgian-Dutch Society for the History of Education Conference. Belgian-Dutch Society for the History of Education (BNVGOO),

Reviewed by Jan Briffaerts

Published on H-Education (January, 2004)

From the 1960s onward, amateur and professional historians have been attracted to the history of education and care of handicapped people, as a theme of research. During the last few decades this historiography has gone through some important quantitative and qualitative changes. First of all, one can perceive a growing interest in the sub-field. This is clear from the increasing number of professional researchers who study this historical topic, as C.J. Kudlick's article, "Disability History: Why do we need another 'other,'" [1] illustrates, in relation to Anglo-American scholarship. To our knowledge, no such review article for scholarship in the European continent exists. But an increasing interest in the handicap as a historical category in Europe is demonstrated by such publications as: Wolfisberger's "Heilpädagogik und Eugenik", Dreves's *"Leider zum größten Theile Betler geworden"*, Ruchat's *Inventer les arriérés pour créer l'intelligence*, Chatelanat and Pelgrim's recently published *Education et enseignement spécialisés: ruptures et intégrations*, and by the historical series *Studientexte zur Geschichte der Behindertenpädagogik*. [2]

When one compares recent publications with those published forty or more years ago, qualitative differences are also noticeable. Some decades ago the almost fairy-tale like biographies of the pioneers in the education of people with a mental or sensorial handicap and, the methods they used,

constituted the core of the historical research. The present-day researcher tries to combine his or her research findings with professional historians' new emphasis upon contextualisation (*Ausdifferenzierung*) and professionalisation (*Verwissenschaftlichung*). He or she tries to look for different perspectives, and to contrast these with earlier historical writings. In opposition to what one could call a history of priorities (the search for the first institution, the first educator of the deaf, the first education of a deaf-blind girl), one tries to give priority to history itself. Nowadays, researchers in the history of science are (or should be?) more inclined to take a more humble position. [3]

These changes can also be observed in the Netherlands and Belgium. Although the study of the handicapped in historical perspective in these countries is still in its infancy, more researchers find their way to this tempting and interesting field, as can be seen from the fact that the BNVGOO (Belgisch Nederlandse Vereniging voor Geschiedenis van Opvoeding en Onderwijs) took this theme as the base for its most recent Congress, on November 28th, 2003. The purpose of the Congress was to build upon the little-known history of special education in Belgium and The Netherlands.

The Belgian-Dutch Society for the History of Education (BNVGOO) is an organization for researchers and specialists in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium and in the Netherlands, who are interested in the his-

tory of education. The BNVGOO regularly organizes conferences and meetings, thus constituting a forum where Belgian and Dutch research in this field can be presented and discussed. The purpose of this association is to stimulate research in the field of history of education, a discussion of theory and methodology, and to make contacts with people and organizations abroad. To achieve these aims they organize conferences twice a year and produce a publication on a theme in the history of education. The association also presents an award every three years. <p> The Belgian-Dutch Society for the History of Education held its Fall 2003 meeting and conference in Ermelo. The conference site was chosen for its relevance to the subject; the event took place at 'S Heeren Loo, one of the largest institutions for mentally disabled people in the Netherlands. The institution, founded at the end of the nineteenth century (1891) as the first of its kind, still hosts around 700 residents today. <p> Beginning with the traditional business meeting and a guided tour on the grounds of the institution, the conference then welcomed six speakers with lectures on topics related to the central theme. Fedor de Beer (University of Groningen) delivered the first lecture: "'Van hoofdrol tot bijrol': De veranderende rol van de schoolarts binnen de selectieprocedure binnen het speciaal onderwijs aan kinderen met een verstandelijke beperking" ("From leading role to supporting actor': the changing role of the school physician in selection procedures in special education for disabled children"). De Beer traced the role of medicine in the emergence and the development of special education in the Netherlands. He spoke about the struggle between school physicians and ortho-pedagogues, to control access to special education for disabled children. De Beer's central thesis was that during the twentieth century the ortho-pedagogues gained back the power and competence that the school physicians had originally appropriated and monopolized. He supported this thesis by reconstructing the factors that contributed to the development of a relative-

ly independent profession of ortho-pedagogy. <p> Corry Tijsseling (University of Utrecht) continued with a historical perspective on the treatment of deaf people by society, and specifically by the people involved with special education. In her presentation, "Een ongelukkig, bejammerenswaardig wezen?" ("An unhappy, deplorable creature?"), she considered several nineteenth-century scientific texts on the education of deaf people as well as seventy-four letters written by deaf people between 1809-1828. From these she drew the conclusion that it is not possible to speak about the deaf as a uniform and undifferentiated category. She distinguished surprisingly different attitudes regarding their ability to receive education. Originally they were regarded as fundamentally different from other human beings as to their learning ability, and not capable of learning anything beyond their restricted potential. This changed gradually into an attitude which saw them as humans, but with an incurable disease, or differences which made it impossible to cope with them, putting them in an even less favorable position. This lasted until recently. <p> In his lecture "De zwakzinnigenzorg in België in de 19de en 20ste eeuw" ("The treatment of mentally disabled in Belgium in the 19th and 20th century"), Marc D'hoker (University of Leuven) discussed two innovative initiatives in the care for children with mental handicaps in Belgium, developed nearly a century apart: the "children's corner" at the Guislain Institute in Ghent, and the "play class" of Netty Heynen in Antwerp. Dr. Guislain was the first to construct a separate space--in a theoretical and practical way--for these children in 1857. Almost one hundred years later, Netty Heynen established the playground "Katrien" in Antwerp (1952). D'hoker situated these innovative practices in an international context, concluding that these two initiatives, taken in a different century and a different kind of society, both had to deal with specific problems and prejudices, appropriate to the time and the contexts. <p> The fourth lecture, entitled "De (ortho)pedagogische hulp en begelei-

ding van een doofblind meisje Anne Timmerman (1816-1859)" ("The [ortho]pedagogical help and guidance of a deaf and blind girl named Anne Temmerman [1816-1859]"), was presented by Pieter Verstraete and Walter Hellinckx (both from the University of Leuven). On the basis of recent archival research, the presenters offered the story of Charles-Louis Carton, a "forgotten" nineteenth century Belgian pioneer in the field of education for the sensorial handicapped. Verstraete and Hellinckx attempted to reconstruct the efforts of Carton, a Flemish priest who tried to educate his deaf-blind pupil, Anne Thérèse Timmerman, from 1837 until 1859. Verstraete and Hellinckx began by placing the life and the theories of Carton within a national and international context, and then moved to focus on Carton's educational practices themselves. Finally, they analyzed his life and works, and discussed its lasting importance. <p> In the closing lecture, "Het zwakke geslacht en de armen van geest: gender in de geschiedenis van de negentiende-eeuwse zwakzinnigenzorg in Nederland" ("The weaker sex and the poor in spirit: gender in the history of nineteenth century care of the mentally handicapped"), Annemiek van Drenth (University of Leiden) presented a series of reflections on the theme of gender and special education, as it relates to the nineteenth-century treatment of children with mental handicaps in the Netherlands. Van Drenth based her reflections on the case of one of the earliest schools for mentally handicapped children in the Netherlands, the "school for idiots" ("Idiotenschooltje") in The Hague, which was established by Van Koetsveld, in 1855. Drawing on the thoughts of contemporary experts in the field, she drew an assesment of the positions, and the public image, of male and female staff at the school. <p> The triennial Maurits De Vroede Award for an outstanding publication by a young scholar in the field of the history of education in Belgium and the Netherlands was accorded to Jan Van Wiele (University of Leuven), at the conference. Van Wiele received the award for his article on "The Image of Mohammed in

Belgian Religious Schoolbooks", published earlier this year in the <cite>Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft</cite>. Dirk Leyder (University of Ghent) received an honorable mention for his article, "L'oeil du maître engraisse le cheval," on state control in secondary education in the Austrian Netherlands (1777-1794). <p> At this BNVGOO meeting, concepts popular in other fields of historical research, such as "professionalization," "contextualization," and "gender," were adapted to the historical study of the handicapped as a social category. Within the Dutch-Belgian context, this innovative manner of interpreting past experiences, in the education of people with a mental, sensorial or behavioral handicaps, built on a vast amount of already available historical texts. The new approach promises a more challenging historiographical outcome in the future. <p> The next BNVGOO meeting will take place in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on March 19, 2004. <p> Notes <p> [1]. Kudlick, C.J. (2003). Disability History: Why do we need another "other." In <cite>The American Historical Review</cite>, 108 (3), p. 763-793 <p> [2]. Wolfsberg, C. (2001). <cite>Heilpädagogik und Eugenik. Zur Geschichte der Heilpädagogik in der deutschsprachigen Schweiz (1800-1950)</cite>. Zürich: Chronos Verlag; Dreves, F. (1998). <cite>"Leider zum größten Theile Betler geworden." Organisierte Blindenfürsorge in Preußen zwischen Aufklärung und Industrialisierung (1806-1860)</cite>. Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach; Chatelanat, G. & Pelgrims, G. (Eds.) (2003). <cite>Education et enseignement spécialisés: ruptures et intégrations</cite>. Bruxelles: De Boeck; Ruchat, M. (2003). <cite>Inventer les arriérés pour créer l'intelligence. L'arriéré scolaire et la classe spéciale. Histoire d'un concept et d'une innovation psychopédagogique 1874-1914</cite>. Bern: Peter Lang; Lindmeier, B. & Lindmeier, C. (Hrsg.) (2002). <cite>Geistigbehindertenpädagogik</cite>. Band 3: der <cite>Studientexte zur Geschichte der Behindertenpädagogik</cite>. Weinheim: Beltz Verlag. <p> [3]. cf. Depaepe, M. (1993). History of edu-

cation anno 1992: 'A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?' Presidential address at the 14th ISCHE conference in Barcelona 1992. In *History of Education*, 22, p. 1-10.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

Citation: Jan Briffaerts. Review of *Belgian-Dutch Society for the History of Education Conference*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15300>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.