

Book Review

Title: *An Oral History of the Education of Visually Impaired People: Telling Stories for Inclusive Futures*

Editor: Sally French

Publisher: Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006

Cloth ISBN-13: 978-0773457065, 484 pages

Cost: \$129.95 USD

Reviewer: Beth Omansky

As a long time fan of Sally French's work, I confess I approached *An Oral History of the Education of Visually Impaired People* from a positively biased standpoint. This, however, could have worked against the book because my expectations were high and I might well have been disappointed. I was not.

This book offers a disability studies perspective on the history of blindness education in Great Britain as lived by 61 research participants from England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and the Channel Islands. The lived experience of people with visual impairments in residential schools reveals themes of abuse and friendship, social isolation and isolation from family, personal identity development, and how social prejudice affected standards of education from post-World War I to the current era.

The book is divided into six sections. The introduction "Telling Stories"; part one "The Early Development of Education for Blind Children"; part two "Stories from the Segregated Past, 1920 to 1944"; part three "Stories from the Special Education System, 1944 to 1981"; part four "Stories from the Special Educational Needs System, 1981 to 21st Century"; and the conclusion "Lessons for Inclusive Futures."

French provides an in-depth historical backdrop at the beginning of each section that helps the reader understand how public policy and world events would be revealed in the participants' stories.

This book marks the first time the oral history of blind children has been collected. Because French participated in special education she positioned herself as an 'insider' researcher, and included her own personal experience. Reports of institutionalized abuses, broken family relationships, loneliness, social and personal isolation, and powerlessness are sometimes emotionally difficult to read about, such as the story of school officials taking the pocket off a little girl's pinafore where she had been hiding the distasteful meat they served. Some students reported that the teachers sometimes hit, pinched, or pushed, and for any minor offence, a child might have to "sit in silence and you'd have to go without jam on your bread all week and cake on Sunday and you had to clean the little ones' shoes" (p. 56). As dismal as some of the students' experiences were, others were tales of academic and career success, deep lifelong friendships, and personal resilience – of "survival, collective empowerment, affiliation and resistance" (p. 413). The stories cover kindergarten through university by people who went into a variety of professions ranging from sheltered workshops to law, social work, nursing, and physiotherapy.

Because the stories are related in the participants' vernacular, their personalities shine through spiritedly and keep readers engaged. As in previous works, French's use of the personal as political makes the book quite suitable for historians, blindness educators, oral history researchers, rehabilitation workers, and anyone interested in how to apply the social model of disability to education and public policy. This work is another example of French's commitment to providing spaces for disabled people to tell their stories from their perspective rather than historically typical reporting of the disability experience by nondisabled professionals. French examines both diversity and commonalities within the stories, and concludes the participants' accounts make clear that "inclusion means far more than accessing the curriculum or moving around buildings. Inclusion induces a powerful psychological dimension of belonging" (p. 412). French asserts, "It is possible to experience inclusion in a segregated school and exclusion, or isolation, in a mainstream school (p. 411), and therefore, 'inclusion' must be a thoughtful, meaningful process.

As is often the case with research books with a limited audience, the hefty price could be a bit prohibitive for the average student, but it certainly is a worthwhile addition to public and university libraries, not just in Great Britain but around the globe. This book is a brilliant addition to disability studies and blindness education history.

Beth Omansky, Ph.D. is a disability studies scholar and community activist in Portland, Oregon, USA.