Forum: Disability Studies Meets Special Education

Introduction: Disability Studies Meets Special Education

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Abstract: An overview of key issues surrounding the intersection between disability studies and special education. Discussed are the history of special education, the role of special education in the quest for equal opportunities, and integrating disability studies and the disability experience into the educational field.

Key Words: special education, disability studies, instruction

Special education is perhaps the most well known social science field that concerns itself with the subject of disability, but few scholars in the field of disability studies see themselves as special educators. From the perspective of some disability studies scholars, a "special" education can be equated with segregation, social isolation, and stigma (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Irvin, 2004; Linton, 1998). By contrast, many educators maintain that special education represents every child's right to an education (CEC, n.d.). There is also the question of whether special education "takes away" from regular education and if another solution for the appropriation of resources should be found. Each of these perspectives has a valuable place in disability studies, because they represent the myriad of perceptions of disability itself (i.e. as socially constructed, as a civil rights issue, as a drain on society). Education is in many ways a microcosm of society and its attempt to prepare people for, or fit them into their functional and social roles (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Duke, in press; Puri & Abraham, 2004).

Disability studies has much to offer the field of education. The same lens that sees disability as a cultural, sociological, and historical construct can inform a field that is often criticized for viewing children with disabilities as a problem that will forever need fixing. Over the past decade, disability studies scholars have begun to develop a theoretical grounding and corresponding curriculum that seeks, not necessarily to take the "special" out of education, but to view each child as a "special" individual with a learning style to be nurtured and respected.

Whether looking at education through the eyes of the disability scholar or at disability studies through the eyes of the educator, questions that need to be explored include:

1. What is the history of educational opportunities for individuals with disabilities?
2. Has "special education" helped or hindered people with disabilities in their quest for equal opportunities?
3. How can the field of education better integrate the disability experience and disability culture into its curriculum?

These questions elicited interesting responses when they were posed online for a number of disability studies list-serves. Among the responses:

> "I know that educational law [in the United States] did allow for individuals with the correct IQ and the correct behavior to attend school before [the enactment of special education legislation]. The rest of us had to plead and were expected to show the appropriate appreciation just for the opportunity to attend any type of school…[But] special education is looked upon by our youth to mean that you are dumb, you have less value, you do not belong…disability experience should be life experience…" (Tricia Benefield, Alaska).
>
> "I think every student in public education should have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan)…[Although] I feel blessed to have [special education legislation] in place for [my children]…I have met many adults [with disabilities] who 'graduated'

with a certificate of attendance or a special education diploma that isn't worth the paper it's printed on…[They and their parents] didn't know that they had a choice [of a regular diploma]…" (Treva Maitland, Tennessee).

The remainder of this introduction will explore the questions above broadly, and will introduce the five articles in the forum, Special Education Meets Disability Studies.

The History of Educational Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities

As a special educator in the United States, it is easy to slip into the perception that the United States is the international forerunner of special education. While it is true that the United States has been at the cutting edge in terms of establishing government policy and laws that seek to guarantee civil rights for people with disabilities (most notably the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997), private and public action concerning the education of children with disabilities has been in evidence in Europe for longer than it has in the United States (Disability Social History Project, n.d.). What the United States and many countries in the world share, however, are a progression through various approaches to educating children with disabilities. At first glance these approaches may appear to be hierarchical, but they are not intended to be so. Various countries may be dominated by a particular approach throughout their history, or may cycle through different approaches (see for example, Quin & Redmond, 2003).

Approaches to Educating Children with Disabilities

No Education or Inclusion of Select Individuals

Under this approach, most children with disabilities are not educated at all. They may be institutionalized, or remain at home with their family. In some cases, they may contribute to the maintenance of the household and family while other family members work or go to school. A select few children, normally children with well-to-do parents or more "able" children, are educated by tutors or with their peers (Winzer, 1993).

Institutions

Institutions for the "deaf," "dumb," "blind," "mentally retarded," etc. are often initiated via the benevolence of a charitable organization or individual for the "benefit" of poorer children (Quin & Redmond, 2003). In many cases, these private institutions eventually come under the auspices of the government. Institutions vary in terms of the actual educational benefit that children receive from them. Some institutions function as schools with highly committed educators, others are mere "holding pens," and most fall somewhere in-between (Winzer, 1993).

Special Education Legislation

Government policy and legislation establishing and regulating special education can result from civil rights awareness and/or attempts to "normalize" people with disabilities (Linton, 1998; Quin & Redmond, 2003). Laws can be general, simply stating that children with disabilities have a right to be educated, or they can be more prescriptive, as exemplified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997) in the United States. This law states that children with disabilities are entitled to a "free and appropriate public education" and must be educated in the "least restrictive environment." In the United States, the IDEA has resulted in the government's becoming intensively involved in the "special education" process, with resulting policies, procedures and bureaucracy.

Professionalism of Special Education

With special education legislation and policy comes the professionalism of special education. Special education teachers are trained to work specifically with children with "special needs." Specialists, or "paraprofessionals" in the fields of speech therapy, physical therapy, rehabilitation, orientation and mobility, and the like, are trained to provide services that are deemed to be beyond the realm of the educator's responsibility or capability (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; De Poy & Gilson, 2004). University personnel develop personnel preparation and research programs around the study of special education (Winzer, 1993).

Special Education Classrooms

Special education for children with disabilities, with its related policies and professionals, usually takes the form of either (a) a specialized/separate classrooms within a "regular" school, (b) a specialized/separate school, or (c) what is known as "mainstreaming," where the Special Education student spends all or part of their day being educated with their non-disabled peers, but receives specialized supports and services from a special education teacher and/or paraprofessionals (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Linton, 1998; Winzer, 1993).

Reaction Against "Special" Label

Special education has been criticized by some members of the general public, educators, parents, and individuals with disabilities. They argue that special education draws resources away from "regular" education. Others say that special education segregates and labels children with disabilities, perpetuating their status as outcasts in society. Still others claim many special education classrooms and curriculum are inferior to regular education and do not prepare children with disabilities for adulthood, higher education, and employment (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Irvin, 2004; Linton, 1998).

Universal Design and Full Inclusion

The concepts of "Universal Design for Learning" and full inclusion of students with disabilities into the education system are attempts to address concerns about special education. In Universal Design for Learning, curriculum and classrooms are designed to meet a wide variety of learning needs. Thus, every child is "special," and intervention beyond the regular curriculum or environment is only needed for a small number of children. Ideally, a universally-designed curriculum and classroom means all children can be educated together, or "fully included," regardless of any disability or other unique characteristic (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Center for Human Policy, n.d. [a]; Linton, 1998; Puri & Abraham, 2004; World Bank, 2003).

Special Education in Greece and Lethosa

In Disability in Greece: Social Perception and Educational Policies, Stathis Balias and Pandelis Kiprianos trace the history of education for children with disabilities in Greece from the turn of the 20th century to the present. This ambitious article describes how civil unrest, war, politics, and educational thought imported from Europe and the United States have shaped Greece's education system for children with disabilities. "Greece does not stand comparison with the more advanced European nations," write the authors. Yet the unfolding of events and their effect on education in Greece are not unfamiliar to a majority of countries around the world.

In Who is Disabled, Who is Not? Teacher Perceptions of Disability in Lethosa, Christopher Johnstone presents an interesting picture of how intense training efforts can shape the perceptions of teachers about their students with disabilities. Children with disabilities are, for the most part, educated alongside their peers in Lethosa, not for reasons of inclusive philosophy but because the

government lacks money for special education. Efforts to educate children with disabilities in Lethosa have focused on professional training so teachers are accepting and sympathetic to their students. Acceptance and sympathy, as the author points out, do not mean children with disabilities are regarded as "normal" or are necessarily receiving an equal education to that of their peers. However, the author demonstrates these perceptions are a long way from the outcast status that is delegated to many children with disabilities elsewhere in Africa.

Special Education and the Quest for Equal Opportunity

Access to education is paramount to equal opportunities for people with disabilities (Puri & Abraham, 2004). As with women and ethnic minority groups all over the world, people with disabilities have an ongoing fight for the right to be educated and to have the full range of opportunities for employment and daily living that are available to the majority of the population. It can be argued that special education, as we know it today in the United States and in many other countries, has both helped and hindered people with disabilities in their quest for equal opportunity.

Importance to Societal Integration

It is important to recognize that in many respects special education promotes the right that all children have to an education equal to that of their peers. Under special education programs, children with disabilities may receive the services and supports they need to develop intellectually, emotionally and socially (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; CEC, n.d.). In many cases, special education is focused on individualized instruction, and teachers are trained to recognize and respect the individual difference of their students.

Barrier to Equal Opportunity

However, because special education often separates children with disabilities from their non-disabled peers, whether physically or nominally, it can also promote the very stereotypes of freakishness, pity, and lack of ability from which people with disabilities struggle to be free. Special education can be a subtle, or not-so-subtle, form of discrimination that tracks children according to their "ability" or other "distinctive" characteristics. Finally, because of all of the "special services" students may receive, special education can value the outside professional (i.e. health, rehabilitation, social work) over the student and the educator (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; De Poy & Gilson, 2004; Irvin, 2004; Linton, 1998).

Educational Spaces and Experiences

In Spaces of Education, Finding A Place That Fits, Nancy Hansen poignantly explores the educational experiences of women with disabilities in Scotland and Canada from a geographical perspective. Through the voices of these women, special education is portrayed as the cause of both their exclusion and their success. The "spaces" of education represent a society where people with disabilities are often not welcome but are ever present as a "problem" to be dealt with.

In Reflections on Inclusion, Integrating the Disabled Self, G. Denise Lance describes her educational experiences in the United States before special education became mandatory by law, and then later as an adult pursuing an advanced degree in education. Ironically, the author's experiences in elementary and secondary school were in many cases quite positive. It was not until she entered college and began studying special education as an adult that her disability manifested itself through other people's perceptions. Writes Lance, "My area of expertise was assistive technology, and when I attended exhibits at conferences vendors always assumed that I was looking for technology to help myself. The concept that I was looking for ways to help others was beyond their comprehension." Re-framing Special Education and Integrating the Disability Experience into

Education.

In recent years, increasing numbers of disability studies scholars and educators have begun re-framing education for children with disabilities as a diversity issue rather than as a special issue. These frameworks are focused on both fully including children with disabilities into the classroom and fully including disability studies and the disability experience into the general curriculum. Examples of these frameworks include (a) utilizing Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design, (b) including examples of disability and disabled people as "normal" aspects of the general curriculum, and (c) including disability culture and history in the general curriculum.

Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design

Universal Design originated as an architectural term and refers to a design that is intended to be usable by a wide variety of people with as little adaptation as possible (Center for Universal Design, n.d.). Universal Design has been adopted by a number of fields beyond architecture, and can be applied by designers of communications, websites and curriculum. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) delineates key differences between the design of existing general and special education programs and programs that implement "Universal Design for Learning" (UDL): "UDL shifts old assumptions about teaching and learning in four fundamental ways;

- Students with disabilities fall along a continuum of learner differences rather than constituting a separate category,
- Teacher adjustments for learner differences should occur for all students, not just those with disabilities,
- Curriculum materials should be varied and diverse including digital and online resources, rather than centering on a single textbook, and
- Instead of remediating students so that they can learn from a set curriculum, curriculum should be made flexible to accommodate learner differences" (CAST, n.d.).

UDL heavily emphasizes using multi-media tools to address the needs of a wide variety of learners. Differentiated Instruction is related to UDL and focuses on teaching methods: Examples of Differentiated Instruction methods include having students work in small groups, encouraging cooperative learning, encouraging both verbal and non-verbal means of communicating information, allowing students to present material in a variety of medium, fully utilizing web and computer-based learning, and presenting material to students using a variety of formats and methods (Center on Human Policy, n.d.[a]; Puri & Abraham, 2004).

Both Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction potentially minimize the need for special education and related services for many children with disabilities. This is not to say that by using these applications the need for some special services (for example instruction in Braille) and adaptations (for example assistive technology) are completely eliminated. However, with an emphasis on the different learning styles and needs of all students, the child with a disability is much less likely to be singled out from other children and is more likely to have their learning needs met in a non-segregated setting.

Including Examples of Disability in the Curriculum

Disability has largely been absent in curricula at all levels of the educational system (Taylor, 2004). Integrating disability studies into the curriculum provides children with learning tools that are meaningful and provides a realistic view of diversity and society. As with gender, race, and ethnicity, disability can be integrated into a wide range of curricula and teaching materials. Some examples are depicting people with disabilities doing ordinary things in textbooks, discussing historical figures with disabilities, learning about how people with disabilities contribute to civil rights movements, using symbols of disability (such as wheelchairs) to study scientific principles,

and discussing art and literature that is created by people with disabilities (Center on Human Policy, n.d. [b]; Disabled Women's Alliance, n.d.).

Model for Special Education in Finland

In Education in the Prevention of Social Exclusion, Markku Jahnukainen presents a model of education that embodies principles of Differentiated Instruction to establish various levels of inclusion for youth who are at-risk of failure in the general curriculum. Jahnukainen asserts that instruction should initially be designed to address a wide variety of student needs (primary level). The next level (secondary level) involves providing minimal adaptations or services to some students whose entire learning needs cannot be met under the regular curriculum. Only at the last level (tertiary level) is significant intervention needed for a few students whose needs are profoundly different from their peers.

Conclusion

This introduction is intended to acquaint readers with some of the issues and concepts explored in the forum that follows. These include the history and global status of special education, ways in which special education has helped and hindered people with disabilities in their fight for civil liberties, and innovative models for educating youth with disabilities and infusing disability studies into the general curriculum. The forum articles were selected from the numerous submissions because of their quality, and because they represent a variety of approaches to the meshing of disability studies and special education.

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