COMPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Origins to Contemporary Paradoxes

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JR & JP
Bellingham & London, May 2010

PREFATORY NOTE ON LANGUAGES OF DIS/ABILITY AND "SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS"

The issue of categorical boundaries and the process of labeling determine many contours of the phenomenon of disablement. Its significance derives from consequences of group belonging for every individual's sense of self and identity. However, this "belonging" is often involuntary, and such categorical memberships are frequently stigmatized. Individual life courses are shaped by disciplinary discourses and professional actions, in many instances according to bureaucratic classificatory practices. Language also plays a central role in contemporary identity politics. Furthermore, the tremendous shifts over the past decades in categorical labels and their meanings require reflection on continuity and change, because the use of euphemistic and politically correct terms may deflect or subvert more substantive demands for equality and improvements in service delivery. Frequently, new categories are championed by a diverse set of interest groups. Battles ensue, as resources must be redistributed to meet newly defined, but authorized demands, such as "special educational needs." Yet "far from being 'scientific facts' based on objective, universally understood definitions of difference, the categories and labels assigned in different societies are contingent, temporary, and subjective" (Barton and Armstrong 2001: 696; see also Chapters 6 and 8).

How people are talked about, how dis/ability is understood, and why certain terms are used in a particular cultural context cannot be relegated to the sidelines. Instead, historical and comparative analyses of categories and the classification systems they comprise tell much about the ideologies, values, and norms underpinning certain institutional arrangements, organizational forms, and policies. For example, in the United States over the past several decades, the categories of special education have been based on individual impairment and disability definitions, despite the growth of sociopolitical models of disability and rights-based legislation (see Chapter 5). In Germany in 1994, categories that fell under the "need to attend a special school" (*Sonderschulbedürftigkeit*) were replaced by pedagogical support categories, suggesting that school-based criteria should replace clinical priorities. Whereas the U.S. categories have always focused on individuals (wherever on the "normal curve" of measured intelligence they were found), the German categories have been transformed from organizational-administrative categories to those based on individual pedagogical supports (see Powell 2010). However, such changes in terminology may not affect either the categorical boundaries drawn in schools or the consequences of being classified if the (segregated or separate) school structures are not simultaneously transformed. In fact, countries routinely modify the labels within a classification as a response to scientific developments, as a gesture of goodwill, as an attempt to defuse the stigmatization and discrimination that often result from classification, or as a means to comply with the precepts of national and international bodies, such as the World Health Organization with its *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)* (WHO 2001; see also Bowker and Star 1999).

The *ICF* has replaced the simplistic, linear model of impairment causing disability leading to handicap with a "bio-psycho-social" model that describes body functions and structures as well as activities and participation shaped by environmental characteristics. By including all of these factors, the model aims to ensure that the relationships between individuals and environments and functioning and disability can be recognized in the contexts in which they originate. In its recognition of the importance of contextual factors in the process of being disabled by barriers, the *ICF* signifies the increasing global influence of sociopolitical conceptualizations of disability, even

within the clinical professions, international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and national bureaucracies. The transformation of the disability research agenda reflects parallel attempts in scientific thought and in the international disability movement to shift away from purely biomedical discourse and toward addressing ethical, social, and legal implications. The debate surrounding implementation of the *ICF* emphasizes the fundamental dilemma of providing a universal linguistic and conceptual framework for disability across languages and cultures. And although it recognizes that the experience of disability is unique to each individual whose personal differences and varying physical, social, and cultural contexts influence those experiences (Üstün et al. 2001), the *ICF*'s model has only just begun to be applied in educational contexts (see, for example, Florian and McLaughlin 2008).

In special education, the overarching cross-national categories proposed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2004, 2007) follow a resource-based definition of "special educational needs" that orients itself to "additional resources to access the curriculum" and reclassifies national categorical data into just three categories: (a) children with disabilities; (b) children with learning difficulties; and (c) children with disadvantages. This typology emphasizes the main groups served by special education programs and policies. Such efforts at international standardization increase the risk of losing nuances of meaning that reflect particular cultural developments, which offer insights into the social construction of disability. This is especially so as the analyses reach beyond the developed democracies to the majority world. Yet such comparative data also demonstrate forcefully that the subject of special education and dis/ability is indeed global and universal. At the same time, considerable disparities emphasize the importance of social, political, and economic contexts, above individual characteristics, in analyzing student disablement, achievement, and attainment.

In many countries, the social status of people with disabilities has witnessed a remarkable shift over the past few decades. Yet myriad challenges remain, despite the human rights revolution in concert with the global disability movement and stronger within-nation minority groups, striving for emancipation, whose continued awareness-raising and political action is still crucial. Such national and local politicized groups of disability activists and

academics may well choose terms different from those which political correctness would dictate—and such differences help to illuminate aspects of the disablement phenomenon. Within the Anglophone world, international debates continue to question the use of such terms as "the handicapped" and "the disabled." Yet there is no consensus regarding even the terms "disabled person" and "people with disabilities" (see Zola 1993). Throughout this book, we have largely unified the disability terminology used to reflect the current North American standard ("people first") language, except when a historical term provides enhanced understanding of a cultural context or is crucial for an argument. For non-English words, where possible, we include the original term after the translation.

In the end, like the categories themselves that await social situations to acquire their ultimate meanings, groups and individuals with and without disabilities must define for themselves which specific connotations they give to these categories, stretching or even rejecting the original impetus or official claim (see Corbett 1995; Hacking 1999). The global disability movement emphasizes the participatory principle "nothing about us, without us" (Charlton 1998). Yet we also emphasize that the "resource-labeling dilemma" remains in force in most education and social policies, as the receipt of additional and specialized resources continues to require bureaucratic classification in most countries analyzed herein. The ambivalence accorded the reification of disability categories in social science research is also a hallmark of special education. It must be tolerated if the research is to speak to contemporary dilemmas of equality and difference in education that begin with how we speak of ourselves and each other.