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BOOK REVIEW

Comparing Special Education: Origins to Contemporary Paradoxes

By John G. Richardson and Justin J. W. Powell (2011), Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA

Recipient of the “Outstanding Book Award” for contemporary issues in curriculum by Division B of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)

Reviewed by Ellen Brantlinger, Professor Emeritus, Indiana University

Comparing Special Education is an exceptionally well-researched and carefully documented tome that should interest both general and regular educators as well as other educational constituencies. The book’s content spans the origins and history of labeling and comparative (special) education services on a global scale. Although centered on the nature of special education, the authors insist that special education is interconnected in that it is always embedded in general public education practices and societal circumstances. Hence, special education cannot be understood without taking into account the total geographical and historical contexts. The authors’ focus is broad. It is also inclusive in its reliance on the analytical tools and theories of such disciplines as philosophy, sociology, and political science.

Regarding the “controversy” that makes the book relevant to being reviewed in the *Journal of Educational Controversy*, the introductory grounding assertions establish that right:

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. (pp. ix)

This introductory announcement situates the book in Disability Studies, a fairly recent but growing field. Disability Studies is judged as transgressive by some because it challenges the basic assumptions of traditional special education thinking and its segregating and stigmatizing practices. The authors quote the opinion of two Disability Study theorists’, Barton and Armstrong (2001), : “Far from being ‘scientific facts’ based on objective universally understood definitions of difference, the [disability] categories and labels assigned in different societies are contingent, temporary, and subjective” (p. 696; cited on p. ix). A perusal of prominent “special education” journals (e.g., *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *Journal of Special Education*, *Behavioral Disorders*) reveals that, for the most part, their published articles are based on the presumption that disability categories are neatly definable and fixed (for the children so-labeled as well as over time and settings) and that certain recommended educational practices work consistently well for particular labeled populations. Traditional special educators also convey that the educational strategies they recommend are unique to special education. The introduction clarifies that Richardson and Powell are affiliated with “the international disability movement” that “shifts away from purely biomedical discourse and toward addressing ethical, social and legal implications” (p. xi). Apart from this positioning, there is not much controversy in the book. Its global comparisons are carefully researched, and they would be clear and credible to readers of any persuasion.

In the Introduction, Richardson and Powell delineate the contemporary paradoxes in special education, which they return to in more detail in Part Three. For example, they note that although special education is based on the benevolent approach of offering support to people who experience difficulties, this benevolence is mostly paternalistic and/or punitive. Richardson and Powell also contend that although the “story of progress and the rhetoric of transformation have prevailed” in special education, there is “evidence of considerable continuity” in segregated school and classroom structures and in cultures in which “abnormal” learners are stigmatized and rejected (p. 11). Because members of dominant classes are the professionals who make decisions that affect people of other races and classes, the preferences and feelings of those on the receiving end of classifications and services may be ignored. Therefore, little consideration is given to the damaging impact of labels and the segregation associated with special education. To provide evidence of this, the authors refer to the well-documented phenomenon of overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities and low-income children in special education. They conclude the chapter by pointing out that despite the fact that the “paradigm shift from medical to social-political or minority-group models of disability has gained strength over the past several decades,” the “institutions and organizational forms of special education have changed radically in only a few societies” (p. 21).

Subscription to the ideals of inclusive education is fairly widespread; however, resistance to it in practice has prevailed.

Comparing Special Education is divided into three sections: the origins of special education, comparing [the global institution] of special education, and contemporary paradoxes. Although the ideas and the writing style are clear, this book is not an easy read due to its complexity, and there is some repetition in chapter coverage. The endnotes are informative and interesting, even out of the context of the book. The references indicate the comprehensive and far-reaching nature of the authors' scholarship.

Citing the end of the nineteenth century as when discussions about disability, education, and professional knowledge occurred, Richardson and Powell argue that "Enlightenment debates and concepts are the true ideational origins of special education" (p. 23). Formation of the nation-state, extension of citizenship rights, and "attraction of large, formal organizations" and institutions coalesced into nations' constructing organizations for the care and education of the blind, deaf, insane, and the poor. This chapter provides an excellent overview of how such philosophers as Locke, Descartes, and Berkely shaped public views of humanity and personal needs of individuals. Cross-national comparisons are offered to clarify the commonalities and distinctions between the development of care for the poor and for people with disabilities in various European countries. The authors further point out that because of Western dominance, Enlightenment ideas and models for special education have been exported around the world.

Chapter Three moves into Twentieth Century issues related to the onset of compulsory schooling and the development of meritocratic sorting of students that resulted in specialized educational arrangements for children with different achievement levels. However, throughout the book, the authors repeat the caveat that special education predated compulsory education in the growth of residential schools for the deaf, blind, and mentally ill. The global emphasis in this chapter is of particular value, partly because this information is rarely covered in American scholarship of disability and special education, and partly because it illustrates the authors' theories about the interconnectedness of culture, climate, and the nature of educational provisions. Richardson and Powell have collected data on numerous indices that they argue relate to the types of special education services offered in a number of Western European countries and regions of the world. This chapter begins to cover the tension between separated schools and classrooms and inclusion, which is elaborated on in later chapters.

Chapters Four and Five focus on historical models and social logics of special education systems. The authors discuss the globalized commitment to human rights principles and the subsequent pressures to institutionalize education for all, including access to education for students felt to have special needs. Certainly a benefit of one author's being German is the detailed comparisons of systemic divergence in the structure of special education in the U.S. and Germany. These cross-national, cross-cultural links among societal values, educational ideologies, and disability paradigms shed light on the distinctive structuring of services in the two countries. The evidence about post-1950s expansion in both countries is particularly enlightening. The authors note that: "Both societies share meritocratic values typical of Western capitalism: individual achievement and performance are most important, but social justice—providing for needs, compensating for disadvantages—is also crucial" (p. 184).

Chapter Six identifies continuing paradoxes involving special education labeling. As Richardson and Powell note:

Especially over the past several decades, international calls for inclusive education and the national and local movements needed to advocate for and implement such restructured schooling have led to increases in the proportion of students schooled in segregated settings. (p. 205)

The authors document that an ever-larger proportion of children are being diagnosed as having special education needs in many countries. There has been a *simultaneous rise* and *coexistence* of segregation and inclusion (p. 206, authors' emphasis).

International statistics from 18 Western European countries compare national classification rates (e.g., 12.0 in the U.S., 5.3 in Germany, 1.5 in Italy); number of disability categories (e.g., 15 in the U.S., 15 in Germany, 1 in Norway and Denmark); and total segregation rates (ranging from 0.5 to 6.0 of the day in the segregated settings of special schools and classrooms) (p. 219). Richardson and Powell conclude that within Europe, despite the rhetoric about equity reform and inclusive restructuring, "additional disadvantages in learning opportunities, educational attainments, and life chances" have resulted from diminishing economic and social services in many countries (p. 236-7).

Chapter Seven attends to legislative and policy development and looks at the futures of public education and juvenile justice. This chapter is replete with relevant litigation. The authors draw on Saussure's distinctions between *langue* and *parole* to understand the influential but largely unrecognized knowledge and norms related to labeling (p. 265). They also

return to their earlier ideas about the associative relations of punitive and paternalistic benevolence to clarify modern special education trends. It is pertinent to end with Sally Tomlinson's (2011) reference to *Comparing Special Education*. This noted sociologist of special education reports the following:

Richardson and Powell pointed out in their comprehensive overview of the origins of special education that most of the descriptions attached to handicapping conditions have historically been attached to poverty and to the manual working classes, and thus associated with exclusion and stigma (Richardson and Powell 2011). They suggested that dealing with those who did not fit easily into mass education systems is also part of an on-going project in capitalist countries to decide how much and what kind of education and training should be given to the working classes, especially those for whom there may be no work.

References

Sally Tomlinson (2011) The irresistible risk of the SEN industry. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38, (4).