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Book Review

The Sage Handbook of Special Education (2nd Ed.) by Lani Florian (Ed.)

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The Sage Handbook of Special Education (2nd Edition)

Lani Florian

London: Sage Publications (2014) pp.1040 Hardback £245

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The second edition of this widely acclaimed collection now runs to 54 chapters, housed in two volumes. Authors are mainly located in the UK and the US, but contributions from Italy, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, Israel, Norway, Luxemburg, and China demonstrate that the book is addressing a topic of truly international interest and concern.

In spite of its wide and diverse authorship, the book is centred around a strong shared critique of special needs education in its traditional form. The widespread practice of segregating children on the basis of their 'special educational needs' is robustly challenged. The limits placed on the learning of children, when difficulties are conceptualised as intrinsic individual shortcomings, together with the social consequences of marking some children as different are seen as deeply unjust. Hence it is argued, we are starting to reconceptualise the way in which mainstream classrooms extend their provision to support the education of all children.

The book addresses these complex issues from a number of perspectives and is, accordingly presented as five sections: How special educational needs are understood; The challenge of inclusion; Knowledge production; Teaching and learning; Future directions for research and practice. In the remainder of this review a small sample of the chapters will be considered to demonstrate some of the issues contained within these volumes and to illustrate the diversity of topics within this overarching theme.

Brahm Norwich argues that the classification of children's difficulties into categories lies at the root of endeavours to identify and provide for children deemed to be in some way exceptional. In the UK, since the Warnock report a single 'catch all' category of 'Special Educational Needs' has been used to identify the boundary between those who do or do not need support. Norwich points to the 'dilemma of difference' created by categorisation: that on the positive side it can be seen as a recognition and response to individuality, but that it brings the potential negative consequence of stigma and low expectation. He concludes by arguing for alternative ways of responding to difference that do not carry the risks of our current bald system of classification.

Beth Harry continues the discussion of classification in the context of ethnic minorities, pointing out the disproportionate presence of ethnic minority children in special education programmes in the US. She argues that race is not a biological construct giving rise to low achievement, but that the enduring history of discrimination and exclusion of minority groups disadvantages children, particularly when compared to white middle class norms of achievement. Yet, she contends that special education programmes assume an intrinsic deficit in children, rather than considering the effects of community / family and school environment on children's learning. She suggests that schools should simply support children who are struggling with their learning without spending time in assessing children to find some ambiguous proof of an innate deficit.

Gary Thomas explores the epistemology which shaped the development of special education in the early 20th century and demonstrates how this is changing. Drawing on Foucault's arguments that knowledge is situated in place, time and culture, he shows how the influences of Social Darwinism, Psychometric testing and Scientism dominated early developments in special education. The social Darwinian notion that the 'weakest' should be bred out of the human population together with the belief that intelligence was innate, led to the view that the certain types of children should be kept apart from the mainstream. Psychometric testing claimed to provide a means of identifying levels of 'intelligence' at an early age, facilitating the segregation demanded of social Darwinism. Scientism or the belief in objective scientific methods to diagnose problems and produce solutions provided support for these approaches. However, Thomas argues that there is now a new episteme in which researchers and teachers are not called upon to deny their own experience and knowledge in order to be objective, but instead we now know that it is through our own knowledge that we can make sense of the experiences of others. The epistemic base that justified segregation, he suggests, has given way to new inclusive discourses of equity, social justice and opportunity for all.

J.S. de Valenzuela draws from socio-cultural theory, in particular the work of Vygotsky to argue against the segregated provision for children with learning difficulties. Based on an understanding of the social origin of cognitive development (as opposed to individual factors such as innate intelligence), de Valenzuela argues that segregating certain groups results in them experiencing a less rich social and educational environment, and consequently opportunities are denied. She argues that socio-cultural theory has begun to seep into special needs education, for example through co-operative learning, but that much remains to be done to ensure that all children have the opportunity to learn through free association with others.

Louise Hayward also works with Vygotsky's theories as she discusses the use of Assessment for Learning (AFL) as a pedagogical approach to enhance learning of all children. Unlike some forms of summative assessment which seek to categorise children, AFL is formative assessment which uses evidence to discern achievement and to inform the next steps in learning and in teaching without coding or grading. Learners, teachers and peers are central to the process. Hayward argues in this pedagogical model (which has been widely adopted in Scotland), that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are closely linked and embedded in socio-cultural theories of learning.

In this short review, it is only possible to scratch the surface of the myriad of articles contained in the book, but these do serve to demonstrate the commonality of purpose within the book, albeit articulated from a wide range of theoretical, conceptual and practical perspectives. The book would be of interest to teachers, education students, academics and policy makers.