

# Introduction

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There are many stories that could be told about special education and the account in this *Handbook* is but one. This story explores special education as a response to notions of human difference. In addition it explores the contribution that different understandings of this response make, not only to theory, but also to practical knowledge. In other words, how do we know when, why and how to respond when students experience difficulties in learning? For many years scholarship in the field of special education has sought to develop this knowledge, and it has been influenced by competing ideas about what constitutes a special educational need and how pupils who experience difficulty in learning might be taught. The *Handbook* attempts to present a range of perspectives about the nature and purpose of special education as well as what might be considered an appropriate response to disability or other difficulties, and the extent to which research reproduces or addresses problems in the field. The overall aim is to provide a coherent account of the state of the field and consider where it might usefully go in the future. To this end, the book is organized in five sections as discussed briefly below.

## HOW SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS ARE UNDERSTOOD

This section covers theoretical foundations of the field and related policy areas. The opening chapters explore the dilemmas of access and equity that have characterized special education to date. They ‘problematize’ spe-

cial education and locate it firmly in a mainstream context of education for all. A chapter on the history of special education tells a particular story but, as the author notes, much of it remains an ‘unexplored cul de sac in the history of education’.

Other contributors to this section bring different perspectives to bear on what is known about the history of the field. Riddell points out that special education and its related constructs have been construed differently at different points in time. She argues that professional language and terminology also tell stories about underlying assumptions, values and beliefs. Though different terminology is used in different national contexts there is a continuing struggle to find an acceptable language for special education. From ‘handicapped child’, to ‘child with a disability’, to ‘child with a learning difficulty’, to ‘child who experiences difficulty in learning’ or ‘child who is considered to experience difficulty in learning’, there is a constant struggle to articulate more adequately the nature of what is meant and who is considered to have ‘special needs’. This theme is developed from a psychological perspective by Norwich.

Clearly, understanding what constitutes a special educational need is not straightforward. Nor are the responses to it. As pointed out in Chapter 1, a response to the difficulties students experience in learning is often defined as provision that is different or additional. In other words, it is largely defined by what is not generally available to all. The effects of policy decisions that are made about general and special education, whether they are to do with eligibility, funding, forms

of provision or outcomes, are considered in other chapters in this section. Evans argues that funding mechanisms set parameters on forms of provision. Rouse and McLaughlin consider special education in the broader international context of education reform, and Harry shows how institutional racism reverberates in educational placement of ethnic minorities in special education provision.

### THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSION

The second section of the *Handbook* considers notions of disability rights in education, inclusion and inclusive education as a model for meeting educational needs. Rioux takes up the issue of rights in education. Through an analysis of the *Eaton* case from the Canadian Supreme Court she critiques the arguments in support of segregating children in education and identifies what she calls the myths that deny inclusion.

Inclusive education can be understood in the context of 'Education for All', an international policy intended to provide universal access to primary school education. Peters gives an account of this and other international policies designed to protect and promote the rights of disabled people. Miles and Ahuja provide examples of how these policies are being implemented in different regions of the world. They argue that studying developments elsewhere, particularly in poor countries, can generate valuable insights and have implications for practice in other countries.

Slee considers inclusive schooling a precondition of democratic education but finds that much of what is offered in the name of inclusion fails to live up to the name. He theorizes that much of what is done in the name of inclusive education maintains a status quo of unequal power relationships among groups. Like other contributors he calls for changes in thinking about educational practice. Ainscow goes one step further and describes how he has attempted to apply this shift of thinking in practice.

### KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Much has been made of the so-called 'paradigm wars' in research into the social sciences, and special education has not been exempt from these disputes or the battle scars that have accompanied them. Indeed, many of the contributors to the *Handbook* are clearly associated with particular world views, for example, logical positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and so on. As Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) have summarized, some take the view that these paradigms are irreconcilable and adherence to one precludes not only the values and beliefs associated with another but a rejection of the methods associated with it and the knowledge that has been produced by it. Others disagree, arguing that the emphasis on epistemological differences is misplaced and overstated.

The association of particular methods of teaching and/or research with particular paradigms has reinforced the idea that they are incompatible. Behaviourism is rejected because some claim logical positivism has been discredited, experimental designs are rejected because they control rather than capture variation. Yet one does not have to believe in logical positivism in order to conduct an experiment or use a behavioural technique. Similarly, it is not necessary to reject the view that there is a single reality or universal truth in order to appreciate the role of language in the construction meaning. One need not agree on a particular philosophy of science to share the view that all children can learn.

This section of the *Handbook* contains a range of arguments about paradigms, methodology and method, on the grounds that these differences in perspective, and the arguments that arise from them, have coexisted for many years and a great deal has been learned from all of them. It also contains three chapters covering contrasting theoretical perspectives (Maag, Kugelmass and de Valenzuela). Each was chosen because of its implicit rejection of determinist views of ability, and because the theoretical perspective does not rely on med-

ical categories of disability for coherence. While readers will form their own views about the value of each of these perspectives, all make important contributions to understanding the difficulties learners encounter and, as such, deserve careful consideration.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

The section on teaching strategies and approaches contains several subsections exploring issues of curriculum and assessment, the phases of education, and cross-phase issues of teaching and learning. Rose notes how two major international developments, inclusion and standards-based reform are influencing decisions about curriculum, but these developments are also influencing assessment policy and practice, as the chapters in this subsection discuss.

Although many aspects of teaching and learning cross the various phases of education, chapters specific to each of the four main phases (early years, elementary, secondary and post-secondary) are included. Although these chapters are all located in the same national context, they are not intended to be read as an endorsement of any one model of provision. However, as so much research in special education is generated in the USA and exported elsewhere, it is useful to foreground this work in an understanding of special education as it is organized in this country.

The chapters on phases of education are followed by Dee's discussion of lifelong learning and quality of life for people who experienced difficulties in learning at school. Issues of transition are located in the tension between national policies that foster citizenship and those that emphasize education for employment. Here it can be seen how analysis of a policy from one national context can illuminate issues related to post-school experience that are relevant in other countries.

A range of teaching approaches and strategies used to teach pupils identified as having the full range of special educational need are

reviewed. Thousand, Villa and Nevin examine the knowledge base on collaborative teaching; Giangreco and Doyle provide an international review on teaching assistants, while Woodward and Ferretti address the contribution of assistive technologies. Dion, Fuchs and Fuchs review peer-mediated strategies and Male contextualizes this with a discussion of the importance of friendship.

As much of the research reported in this section was conducted in the USA it is difficult to avoid medical-categorical descriptions of the difficulties children experience in learning. However, it can be argued that the use of these descriptions does not invalidate the outcomes of the research. If, as Ysseldyke (2001) has argued, medical categories are irrelevant to instruction, it is possible to read research based on these designs as tests of particular strategies rather than tests of strategies for particular sub-groups of learners. As such, effective practice is construed as both informing and being informed by general education.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The final section of the *Handbook* considers the issues raised at the end of Chapter 1. These are issues of rights to and in education, the challenge of adopting anti-determinist views of ability, and the need for a shift in focus from studying differences between learners to learning for all. Chapter 1 sets an agenda but the concluding section details how it is being articulated at present. Gallagher's analysis of the debates within the field is set alongside Kershner's reflection on teacher knowledge and expertise, and how that knowledge develops through teaching. This theme is also taken up by Hart, Drummond and McIntyre who explore the work of teachers who reject ability labelling.

Furney and Hasazi argue that the demands of social justice require school leaders to take responsibility for promoting the success of *all* students, and in the concluding chapter

Hegarty considers the contribution of special education to the broader education community. He extends his reflections on the contents of the book as a whole by considering the knowledge that underpins educational action and the relationships between the different kinds of knowledge that underpin educational progress. He concludes that special education knowledge offers a great deal to education more generally. The argument advanced in this *Handbook* is that it is time to reflect on what special education consists of currently, and how it might be different in the future.

## REFERENCES

- Tashakkori, A. & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: Sage.
- Ysseldyke, J. E. (2001). Reflections on a research career: Generalizations from 25 years of research on assessment and instructional decision making. *Exceptional Children*, 67(3), 295–309.