



BOOK REVIEW

The Sage Handbook of Special Education

Editor: Lani Florian

Sage (2007). pp. xxv + 580. Hbk. £85.00

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The Sage Handbook of Special Education

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Reviewer: Jane Mott

The title of this book alone will probably ensure that it has a place on the shelves of all education libraries across the English-speaking world. It is an attractive, eye-catching book, well laid out and accessible, with a clear, easily readable print. The editor is well-known and respected, as are the vast majority of her chosen contributors, the list of whom reads like a 'Who's Who' in this field. This text makes an important contribution to special education. Perhaps, more significantly, it makes an important contribution to inclusive education, and possibly, even more widely, to education in general. Hence the title could be construed as somewhat misleading.

Using the words 'special education' suggests a traditional, positivist, child-deficit approach that may limit readership, and will determine a position on library shelves that reduces the likelihood of anyone other than specialists having access to it. The editor herself is clearly aware of this as she mentions it in the second paragraph of the Preface, justifying the decision on the grounds that much of the research generated within the field of special education is relevant to education more generally. Unfortunately, many education professionals regard 'special education' as a specialist field with little direct relevance to them, or use it to justify marginalising groups of children perceived as not fitting a predetermined norm. Perhaps the term 'inclusive education', associated with a more progressive, democratic and equity-based agenda, would have been more appropriate in the title, for this is surely what the book is about, and this is its strength. This would have ensured a wider readership, certainly within the UK, which the book certainly deserves.

The importance of this handbook to all areas of education is in the philosophical pragmatism underpinning the three principles which guide editorial selection. These are:

- a rejection of medical categories of disability as educationally relevant;
- an anti-determinist view of learning;
- a commitment to social justice in education.

The editor, Lani Florian, elaborates these principles in the first chapter entitled 'Reimagining Special Education', and makes it clear that her focus is upon change and challenge to the status quo. She

acknowledges that the field of special education is a contested terrain, both a problem of and the solution to injustice in education, and she rejects the polarisation of the special education versus inclusive education debate, calling for a truce between those who hold different perspectives, and a reconceptualisation of the work that is required.

Her suggestions for this reflect the three principles mentioned above. Firstly, a reconsideration of the right to education from one that focuses on social and economic reciprocity, to one that is a fundamental human right, which recognises difference as part of the human condition and renders obsolete the notion of 'normal' as the appropriate educational standard. Secondly, she challenges deterministic beliefs about human ability, that it is fixed and normally distributed within the population and supports the notion of 'transformability' described by Hart *et al.* later in the book. Thirdly, the development of research strategies that capture more fully the complexities of classroom practice when teaching diverse groups of learners. She finishes by suggesting, somewhat optimistically, that reimagining special education in this way may develop into reimagining of diversity in education in general, which in turn may, more pragmatically, lead to pedagogical practices that are inclusive of all learners. I liked this mix of idealism and the practicalities, and suspect that those who read the book, be they academics or practitioners, will appreciate the balance of the theoretical and the practical.

A five-section structure of the handbook allows for:

- the exploration of how special educational needs are understood,
- the challenge of inclusion,
- the production of knowledge,
- teaching strategies and approaches,
- and future directions for research and practice.

There is an international dimension to the book which brings together a range of scholars from across the English-speaking world, so that the text reflects different national contexts, competing ideological perspectives and varying epistemological positions, rather than a comparative analysis. This adds interest and illuminates the range of problems facing all those concerned with

educational access and equity.

As it is impossible in this article to review all 40 chapters in the book, I will highlight some of those that I found particularly stimulating, including Gallagher's challenge to the orthodoxy in special education. She argues persuasively that the scientific, positivist paradigm that has dominated the field for much of its history should give way to a research methodology that embraces interpretive/hermeneutic methods. She continues by rejecting the orthodoxy of the normal distribution curve favoured by scientists (and many educationalists), by highlighting that it reinforces both disability and social inequality. She states that the normal distribution curve is a construct, and, as a choice, has profound moral consequences that reinforce segregation. It also makes a mockery of governmental targets that every child should read above the average by a certain age!

Hart *et al.*, in questioning deterministic fixed ability labelling, suggest a fundamentally different concept of 'transformability' – a commitment to changes to classroom practice that ensure that all children meet their potential, thereby rendering the labels 'less able', 'more able', and 'average' irrelevant. Their research with nine teachers indicates that this can be approached in different ways, but that it embraces three pedagogical principles, the principle of 'everybody', co-agency between teachers and pupils, and, lastly, trust. They finish by claiming that a 'transformability' model of pedagogy is at the heart inclusive education. I found this practitioner-orientated chapter inspiring.

Roger Slee offers what he himself describes as a 'strident critique' of segregatory educational practices, listing neo-liberal policies and performativity as contributory factors to increasing numbers of children being excluded from mainstream education, as well as a lack of epistemological clarity and democratic open debate. He notes the journey of inclusive education from its beginning as a protest against traditional special educational practices to the present academic and governmental popularity. He uses his experience working in government to warn us of 'a promise unfulfilled'.

Naturally, and in view of the title, other chapters reflect the more traditional approach to special education. This provides the essential balance and historical perspective necessary for a comprehensive handbook. Brahm Norwich discusses categories of special educational needs and dilemmas of difference. Ken Kavale gives an eloquent justification for his quantitative research

methodology, but concludes with a statement that 'quality education for special education students will always be based on the artful application of science' which left me perplexed as to what contribution, if any, the more humanist approach (and qualitative methodology) of Gary Thomas had in his reasoning. There is much else besides to tempt the special educator, all of which is either provocative, stimulating, or of significant interest to all of us in the field of inclusive education and beyond.

Finally, the book promises much and is not cheap. Does it deliver? Most definitely, yes it does. As the editor, Lani Florian, states early on in the Preface, 'the challenge has been to develop an account of the field that combines a retrospective view of it with new ways of thinking about the issues that it faces'. For many of us, these new ways are about developing a more inclusive education system, and much of the book is about just that. The title may be somewhat misleading to many who consider education to have moved on from special to inclusive, or to those who have a very narrow view of special education. Presumably, the current title was chosen to appeal to the American market, which may be less favourably disposed towards the book had the words 'inclusive education' replaced 'special education' on the cover! The author herself is American, and this intimate knowledge of two education systems and access to two groups of academics and practitioners, gives the book further breadth. Personally, I would have preferred some reference to the Scottish education system, and the research of some Scottish academics such as Julie Allan - perhaps a poststructural deconstruction of governmental policy documents and 'the ghost of inclusion'.

I would recommend the book as essential to all education libraries, be they academic or institutional. Furthermore, I would recommend that, if the copy is placed on a shelf in the special education category, then a second copy should be purchased to be placed in the general education section. This will ensure that it receives a wider readership than from a small number of specialists. Much of what it has to say is relevant to all education professionals. I suspect that it will become recommended reading for some undergraduate courses and a core text for many postgraduate ones that cover special education and inclusion. Hopefully, teacher educators, and other education academics, in other fields will see beyond the title and recognise that it is a book that has significance for all of us who wish to move education towards a more equitable, democratic, humane, and dignified system for our young people.