Chapter 2: Reimagining Special Education

Introduction

Positioned as it is, as both the problem of and the solution to injustice in education, the field of special education occupies contested terrain. Throughout its history, advocates and critics have simultaneously hailed and condemned it as both a means of achieving equal educational opportunity and a perpetrator of injustice in education. The historian of education, Martin Lazerson (1983), articulated the issue well:

From its inception, some have condemned special education for not being available to enough children, and some, especially parents of handicapped children, have demanded more as well as better programs. Yet others have condemned special education for too readily identifying children as handicapped, and too readily placing them in segregated classes. All, from within and outside the educational system, have acknowledged that special education has been the least accepted of our public school programs. To paraphrase John Dewey, if a society ought to provide for its children that which the best parent would provide, special education stands out as a measure of the failure of public responsibility. (p. 16)

Though Lazerson was writing before the full implementation of the human and civil rights laws and policies that were adopted in many countries since the 1970s, the dilemmas of access and equity that he articulated have continued, despite the hope and the promise of national rights-based policies intended to resolve them, such as P.L. 94–142 (now part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – IDEA) in the United States, National Law 118/71 in Italy, or PL. 10/2002, Ley Orgánica de Calidad de la Educación (LOCE) in Spain.

This chapter considers dilemmas of access and equity by examining the role of special education in the context of the larger education system. It explores the right
to education, the power of the human need to mark some people as deviant, the corresponding concept of normal, and the conundrum this creates for special education. It argues that future progress in addressing the dilemmas of access and equity will require a reimagining of what special education is and can become. The chapter calls for changes in thinking about provision and practice, and suggests what some of these changes might entail.

[p. 8 ↓]

The Promise of Education

Education is defined as a universal right by Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). As such, it is commonly invoked for the purposes of establishing standards for the right to education (access) and for human rights in education (equity). Thus education is both a human right and a means of achieving human rights. As the concept of human rights has evolved, education has also come to be seen as a development right (Gearon, 2003), and as an economic, social and cultural right (Tomasevski, 2001). Though there is great philosophical promise in a rights concept of education, support for it is often based on a belief in its power to transform society (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). Over the past century, education has been seen as a remedy to many forms of social injustice. Where compulsory schooling exists, it has helped to eliminate child labour (Tomasevski, 2003), and more schooling for more people is considered the solution to social and economic problems in many countries (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). As a result, support for education is justified throughout the world, not simply as a human right but as an investment in the ‘development’ of individuals and societies to meet the demands of a market economy and as a requirement of a democratic society. World Bank policy makes this position clear:

Education is central to development. It empowers people, strengthens nations, and is key to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. Already the world's largest external financier of education, the World Bank is today more committed than ever to helping countries develop holistic education systems aimed both at achieving Education For All (EFA) and building dynamic knowledge societies that are key
to competing in global markets through Education for the Knowledge Economy (EKE). (World Bank, n.d.)

Here support for education is seen not as a remedy for injustice or a human right but as a way to strengthen economic competitiveness. The co-mingling of rhetoric about human rights, nation building and competitive markets is difficult to unravel. Linking the human right to education with education for the purpose of economic independence for individuals and prosperity for nations makes it difficult to see them as two distinct policies. Yet this is what we must do if we are to understand the role of special education in contemporary society.

The Role of Special Education

When access to education is widened it puts pressure on education systems and schools to accommodate increasingly diverse student populations. Indeed, as many have documented, special education is one of the mechanisms by which such diversity has been accommodated. For many years special education was seen as a fulfilment of the right to education for children with disabilities and there were expectations that the implementation of rights-based special education laws would promote social and economic acceptance and enable disabled children to participate in community life as adults. As one of the congressional reports that accompanied P.L. 94–142 in the United States noted: ‘With proper educational services many of these handicapped children would be able to become productive citizens contributing to society instead of being left to remain burdens on society’ (United States Congress, 1976, p. 11).

Yet these outcomes did not follow. A series of national surveys in the United States found that disabled people were less well educated, less likely to be employed and less likely to participate in social activities than non-disabled groups (Harris and Associates, 1986, 1987, 1989). Special education, it seemed, was not preparing children identified as having disabilities for life after school. Moreover, there were difficulties with the identification and classification of disabilities for educational purposes (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973), and these created additional problems of access and equity, generating controversies that persist to this day (see, for example, Keogh & MacMillan, 1996;
Experience in many other countries followed a similar pattern (CERI, 1994).

Sociologists of education (for example, Tomlinson, 1982) and others (for example, Skrtic, 1986, 1991) presented a critique of special education, not as a fulfilment of the right to education, but as a denial of that right by virtue of its exclusionary practices. Such analyses locate the problem of special education in the structures of mainstream education systems. Here the co-mingling of the right to education as a human right and the right to education as a mechanism of economic prosperity become conflated and confused. Legislation guaranteeing the right to education does not exist in a vacuum and rights-based legislation in and of itself has not proved sufficient for achieving access to education or preventing discrimination. Many children and young people continue to be marginalized within, or excluded from, education systems around the world, including those who live in countries with policy frameworks that appear supportive.

It has been argued that too much faith was placed in the law to overcome the deeply entrenched biases against and prejudices towards disabled people as judicial systems themselves are also influenced by problems of bias and prejudice (Hahn, 2001). In a provocative analysis, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2004) suggests how this dynamic operates. She asks why stigmatization is ubiquitous, why all societies view some people as normal and consider those who deviate shameful. In a detailed review of theoretical and empirical psychoanalytic work on shame and stigma she arrives at the following:

Human beings are deeply troubled about being human – about being highly intelligent and resourceful, on the one hand, but weak and vulnerable, helpless against death, on the other. We are ashamed of this awkward condition and, in manifold ways, we try to hide from it. In the process we develop and teach both shame at human frailty and disgust at the signs of our animality and mortality … In the case of disgust, properties pertinent to the subject’s own fear of animality and mortality are projected onto a less powerful group, and that group then becomes a vehicle for the dominant group’s anxiety about itself … In the case of shame, a more general anxiety about helplessness and
lack of control inspires the pursuit of invulnerability … An appearance of control is then frequently purchased by the creation of stigmatized groups. (pp. 336–7)

If such an insight is correct then it is little wonder that those who believed that the law could provide a complete remedy to the problem of discrimination were disappointed. What Nussbaum is arguing is that an understanding of the dynamics of shame, disgust and stigma and the ways they function in human social life helps us to understand why people with disabilities are marked as deviant or different in all societies. After all, what is ‘normal’ is generally decided by groups and it changes from place to place and over time. Nussbaum points out that the idea of normal is linked to two very different ideas: statistical frequency (usual and unusual) and a normative conception of the good (proper and improper, or appropriate and inappropriate). She questions why this connection should be drawn:

For, obviously enough, what is typical may or may not be very good. Bad backs, bad eyes and bad judgement are all very typical … [while] much progress in human affairs comes from people who are unusual … So why, in more or less all societies, has the notion of the normal as the usual also served as a normative function, setting up the different for stigmatizing treatment? (p. 218)

Her answer is that normal is a construction that permits us to protect ourselves from disruption, to hide from the imperfections about which we feel the deepest shame in ourselves. Little wonder then that special education is marked out as a measure of the failure of public responsibility. For no matter what educational rights it protects or what it achieves for individuals, it still permits others to hide from the shame of imperfection because it reinforces the notion of normal as usual and good. In this analysis, special education can never really be a good thing. So long as it remains focused on difference or what is unusual, normal can be defended as an appropriate standard.

Interestingly, Nussbaum argues that it is essential that an individual rights approach serves as a first response to the problem of stigma. She is in favour of laws that protect individual rights such as the IDEA because she sees their focus on human rights as a strategy for challenging stigma. However such an approach is not without
its own difficulties for, as Minow (1990) observes, the laws and policies that are created to protect vulnerable groups also serve to marginalize them. Thus we are caught in a vicious cycle where efforts to grant or protect rights to equal opportunity and treatment also mark and stigmatize.

Indeed, the history of special education can be seen as the effort to meet the dual purpose of providing for all children while protecting 'normals' from 'deviants' (Lazerson, 1983). Special education thus embodies what Minow calls the 'dilemma of difference' as it occupies the space between the inclusionary and exclusionary forces which operate simultaneously at all times in service of society's dual purpose of providing and controlling civic life. Consider the work of teachers of children who are designated as having 'special needs'. They aim to include children who have been excluded from what Booth and Ainscow (2002) call the culture, curriculum and community of school, but in so doing collude with an educational system that is underpinned by complex and subtle deterministic assumptions about difference, deviance and ability that produced the exclusion in the first instance.

Nearly half a century ago, Burton Blatt exposed the hazards involved in doing this work. *Christmas in Purgatory* (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966), *Exodus from Pandemonium* (Blatt, 1970) and *Souls in Extremis* (Blatt, 1973), highlighted the legally sanctioned forms of abuse that were part of 'caring' for disabled people in institutions. He showed how those who do the 'care-giving' as well as who are 'cared for' can also be victims of unjust social structures.

Teaching, it can be argued, is different from social care but the practices of special education have been subject to the same kind of critical analysis (Tomlinson, 1982; Skrtic, 1986, 1988, 1991; Brantlinger, 1997) provoking a heated debate about whether the effects of special education are beneficial or detrimental. There is concern about the nature and purpose of special education as well as what might be considered an appropriate response to disability and other difficulties. The idea of special education as a parallel or separate system of education to that which is provided to the majority of children has been challenged by notions of inclusion in which all children are part of one education system. The problem, of course, is that inclusive education is not a denial of individual difference, but an accommodation of it, within the structures and processes that are available to all learners. The process of accommodating difference
as a mechanism of equal opportunity, and as a fulfilment of the right to education for all, is not generally disputed by educationalists. But the means to this end, whether through ‘special’ or ‘inclusive’ education, continues to be forcefully debated.

‘Special’ or ‘Inclusive’ Education?

Fuchs and Fuchs (1992) have labelled those who undertake a critical analysis of special education as ‘abolitionists’ and those who do not as ‘conservationists’. They noted:

By the early 1980s [abolitionists] had developed a trenchant critique of the field, encompassing all aspects of service delivery. But their plans for rehauling special education tended toward extremism, and the accompanying rhetoric was often unremittingly negative, if not downright hostile and threatening. By the late 1980s, conservationists had fixed on their adversaries' unrealistic remedies and intemperate rhetoric to portray them as out-of-touch ideologues. To some extent, they succeeded. Simultaneously, and often inadvertently, they discredited, or at least muffled, the truthful ring of the abolitionist critique. (p. 413)

As a result, it could be argued that the discourse of special education was changed. Now, one was either in favour of special education or against it. To be in favour of special education was to be against the ‘extremism’ [p. 11 ↓] and the ‘intemperate rhetoric’ of advocates for change. To support the reform of the ‘cascade of services model’ of special education provision was to be against special education itself. Brantlinger (1997) called those in favour of special education ‘traditionalists’ and those who advocated for systemic change (for example, models of inclusive education to replace the cascade of services model), ‘inclusionists’. Traditionalists called those who advocated for inclusive education ‘radicals’. More recently the camps have been described as ‘incremental reformers’ and ‘substantial reconceptualists’ (Andrews et al., 2000). There is the beginning of a recognition that a ‘with us or against us’ type of debate has polarized the field in ways that have made it difficult to move practice forward. In an attempt to find common ground in the widely shared commitment of
acting in children’s best interests, a group of scholars representing a range of divergent perspectives has come to the following position:

We believe that special education can shape public opinion about disability in ways that help schools see all children as important stakeholders, while promoting the development of methods that enhance capacity for successful postschool adjustments among individuals with disabilities … We believe that a division of labour makes sense, wherein the incremental reformers focus on what to do on behalf of children, and the substantial reconceptualists focus on achieving the conditions necessary for promoting optimal methods. We believe the field needs to work simultaneously with the children and on the system (Andrews et al., 2000, p. 260).

While this is a refreshing departure from what had become a very polarized debate, there is a need to recognize that a call to work simultaneously with the children and on the system does not simply call a truce between those who hold different perspectives, but that new ways of conceptualizing the work are required.

The Problem of Difference Discourse

Sociological critiques (Tomlinson, 1982), legal analyses (Minow, 1990) and philosophical explorations of disability (Nussbaum, 2004) all show how assumptions about difference, deviance, ability and what is considered normal, interact in ways that produce, sustain and reproduce the dilemmas of access and equity in education that special education was intended to address. As one of the mechanisms by which schools accommodate diversity, special education, as currently construed, reinforces the exclusionary practices of general education, in part because it relies on a ‘difference discourse’ that essentially, though not entirely, agrees with the mainstream view that some children are qualitatively different from others and therefore require something different from that which is available to the majority.

Difference discourse is a term used by Ford (2005) to describe what he calls a set of interconnected beliefs conversations and practices that are mutually reinforcing and
socially pervasive. Though he uses the term in an analysis of the concept of racial
culture he is careful to point out that the concept applies to other social classifications
and identities. Many disabled activists and scholars argue for a concept of disability
culture, a kind of identity politics that seeks to challenge representations of disability as
deviant, grotesque or otherwise impoverished (for example, Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).
This is important work that serves to uncover and expose the deeply held belief that
disability is tragic because it is abnormal. Although this begs any number of questions
about what is normal, it also unwittingly affirms the concept of normalcy. Disability
studies scholars do not want to abandon difference discourse; they seek to change it
in favour of a concept of disability culture that is vibrant, beautiful and alive. But until
that day arrives, disabled people in general and children with disabilities in particular
will rightly continue to require and demand protection from discrimination within the
larger society and its institutions. What Ford cautions is an awareness that difference
discourse itself is problematic and limited. It might alter, but will not alone solve, the
problem of discrimination. So long as there is discrimination, dilemmas of access and
equity remain.

Thus far, this analysis suggests two interdependent problems facing the field
of special education. The first is the concept of normal as usual and good, the second
is the dilemma of difference. Clearly there is a need for understanding and challenging
the roles that notions of deviance, difference, disability and special educational need
play in all aspects of social life, but particularly in education. There is also a need to
confront the paradoxical nature of special education as it currently operates within the
larger education system. Should it be acceptable that dilemmas of difference are seen
as an inevitable feature of special education, a necessary evil that must be endured for
the sake of providing special education? Or is it time to reimagine the work of educating
children who experience difficulties in learning, not as a Faustian pact whereby in
exchange for access the field is eternally condemned as a measure of the failure of
public responsibility to children with disabilities and ‘special needs’, but as an integral
part of a school's response when students experience difficulties?
Reimagining Special Education

Changing the difference discourse is necessary and urgent work for the future of special education (whatever name it calls itself). The task of reimagining special education suggests that current assumptions, systems and procedures might be replaced by new ways of thinking and working, and many of the contributors to this book point in such directions. In the remainder of this chapter three areas of particular importance to the task of reimagination are discussed: issues of definition (what is special education?) deterministic assumptions (what is ability?) and the practices they have given rise to (what is special about special education?).

Special Education, Special Needs Education, or Something Else?

In 1997 the International Standard Classification of Education replaced the term special education with special needs education in order to differentiate it from the earlier international definitions of special education as that which took place in special schools or institutions (OECD, 2005). This change in terminology distinguished the provision of special education, meaning intervention, from placement in special education schools or classrooms. It is an important distinction because the concept of place had long been associated with provision, as placement in special schools and classes was often assumed necessary for provision. Special needs education, meaning provision, is defined as ‘educational intervention and support designed to address special educational needs’, wherever that intervention takes place.

The concept of special educational needs is broad, extending beyond categories of disability, to include all children who are in need of additional support. However, many countries still use categorical descriptions of disability for the purpose of special educational provision though the precise nature of the categories varies. In the United States, the Code of Federal Regulations defines special education as ‘specially designed instruction ... to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability’ (34 C.F.R. §
Currently there are 13 categories of disability covered by the American special education legislation.

Identifying children as having special educational needs (needing special treatment) or needing special education (requiring additional resources) has never been a straightforward process within education. First, children rarely fit categorical descriptions of difficulty. Second, not all disabilities give rise to special educational needs, nor are all special educational needs a result of a disability. A child with spina bifida may or may not experience difficulties in learning. A child who experiences difficulty with literacy may or may not have dyslexia. Categorical descriptions of difficulty may or may not have educational relevance. It was for these reasons that they were abolished in England and Wales in 1981 as a result of the recommendations of the Warnock Report (DES, 1978).

Though a number of countries have tried to leave the notion of discrete categories behind, some process of classification remains in place. England abandoned the use of medical categories in favour of a classification of ‘special educational need’ (SEN). Special education provision is that ‘which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the educational provision made generally for children of their age in schools maintained by the LEA, other than special schools, in the area’ (Department for Education and Employment, 1996, § 312). In Scotland, the non-categorical nature of special educational needs is also recognized. Recent education legislation specifies that ‘a child or young person has additional support needs (ASN) where, for whatever reason, the child or young person is, or is likely to be, unable without the provision of additional support to benefit from school education provided or to be provided for the child or young person’ (Scottish Parliament, 2004).

Whether the term special education, SEN provision or additional support is used, there is a common understanding that special needs education involves something ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’ that which is generally available in schools. When students are classified as needing something different or additional they become categorically distinct from other children and are often assumed, by virtue of needing something different or additional, to be qualitatively different as learners. This is the central dilemma. To further complicate the picture there is evidence that in countries without a system of special needs education, little educational provision is available
to disabled children (see Peters, this volume). The shame and stigma associated with
disability in many countries without a system of special needs education often acts as a
barrier to the development of any kind of educational provision, as children are hidden
at home or in institutions (UNICEF, 2005). The challenge is how to make educational
provision available to all children without the shame of marking some as different or
deviant.

Deterministic Assumptions about Ability, Difference and Deviance

Since its inception, special education has been bound by deterministic notions of
ability. The idea of one's 'intelligence' or 'ability' as a single fixed entity that is normally
distributed throughout a population is so deeply entrenched and pervasive in Western
human thought that it generally goes unquestioned even by those who have studied this
controversial topic as part of their professional training. The debates about intelligence
and IQ (whether it exists, in what form, how to measure it, under what conditions
and when) are well known in education and psychology, and yet it is a widely used
construct for sorting learners and in attempting to understand the difficulties they
encounter in school. The belief in intelligence as something an individual is born
with, though it may be stimulated or stunted, is foundational in education despite
professional acknowledgement that it is a problematic concept. As a result, there is a
deep professional ambivalence about the notion of intelligence that reflects both the
discomfort and the usefulness in using the construct.

Gould (1996) attributes the belief in fixed ability to the pervasive influence of biological
determinism, the recurrent view that we are primarily determined by biological rather
than social or environmental factors. Though most contemporary accounts of this
position claim that biological, environmental and social factors are not isolated
from each other but interact in reciprocal ways that influence each other and
produce individual differences, Gould asserts that these complex insights have been
misunderstood:
Errors of reductionism and biodeterminism take over in such silly statements as ‘Intelligence is 60 percent genetic and 40 percent environmental.’ A 60 percent (or whatever) ‘heritability’ for intelligence means no such thing. We shall not get this issue straight until we realize that the ‘interactionism’ we all accept does not permit such statements as Trait x is 29 percent environmental and 71 percent genetic’ When causative factors (more than two, by the way) interact so complexly, and throughout growth, to produce an intricate adult being, we cannot, in principle, parse that being’s behaviour into quantitative percentages of remote root causes. The adult being is an emergent entity who must be understood at his own level and in his own totality. The truly salient issues are malleability and flexibility, not fallacious parsing by percentages. A trait may be 90 percent heritable, yet entirely malleable. A twenty-dollar pair of eyeglasses from the local pharmacy may fully correct a defect of vision that is 100 percent heritable. (p. 34)

*The Mismeasure of Man*, Gould’s 1981 masterpiece (revised in 1996), presents a critique of biodeterminism not as a rejection of science but using the tools of science and philosophy to reveal the fallacious reasoning that underlie the theory of a unitary, innate, linearly rankable IQ. His analysis of the history of mental testing and measurement shows that the notion of fixed intelligence is based on some fundamental errors of science, notably reductionism, dichotomization, hierarchy and reification. As Gould explains it, the drive to understand intelligence resulted in the parsing of complex phenomena by subdividing and ranking it into grades of intelligence, for example, normal or retarded, average or above average, smart or stupid, and so on. This in turn led to the reification of intelligence as an entity rather than an abstract concept. Gould’s central argument does not reject a concept of intelligence or deny individual differences but points out that, contrary to popular belief, intelligence, expressed as IQ, has not been verified as a single entity let alone one that can be expressed numerically. He disagrees with IQ as an expression of the concept of intelligence because the two most contradictory hypotheses are both fully consistent with it: 1) that it reflects an inherited level of mental acuity (some people do well on most tests because they are born smarter); or 2) that it records environmental advantages and deficits (some people do well on
most tests because they are well schooled, grew up with enough to eat, books in the home, and loving parents. (p. 282)

It is important to remember that there are many definitions of intelligence and a number of views about its development, measurement and assessment. Though scholarly reviews of the concept remind us that intelligence is an attribute that reflects what a person has learned (for example, Sattler, 2001), the popularity of IQ as a meaningful expression of a person's ability persists. Many educational practices are based on a tacit assumption of fixed ability and the belief that it is normally distributed within the population. Moreover, in many parts of the world, identification of disabilities and/or special educational needs depends, at least in part, on some form of ability test scores, and again this tends to reinforce the notion that groups of learners can be sorted into students with and without special educational needs, who become those in special and those in mainstream or general education.

Hart (1998) has argued that much educational practice, including special education policy, standards-based reforms and classroom practice serves to reaffirm the legitimacy of the notion of fixed ability. Schools use 'cognitive abilities tests' to group pupils and target additional support, but this serves to confirm judgements about ability rather than raise questions about intervention. In commenting on the resilience of the concept of fixed ability, she cites Brown and McIntyre (1993), and Cooper and McIntyre's (1996) suggestion that the concept of fixed ability serves a practical purpose in that it enables teachers to reduce vast amounts 'of information about their pupils to a manageable form that can inform and guide their teaching' (p. 161). But is there another way to serve such a purpose? Hart and her colleagues (this volume) suggest what might replace the notion of fixed, differential ability in practice. Their notion of transformability offers an alternative way of thinking about the difficulties children experience in learning.
Reimagining Special Education beyond Special Needs Education

Many of those who have attempted to articulate what is ‘special’ about special education begin with a defence of teaching practices that have been shown to work with students identified as having disabilities. However, contrary to definitions of special education as something ‘different from’ or ‘additional to’ that which is available to other pupils, the strategies they identify also work with students who are not identified as having special educational needs. There is a similar situation in the field of psychopharmacology where the drugs used to treat presumed neurological disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder also improve the functioning of those who are not so identified (Farah et al., 2004). Tenner (2005) describes hypermotivational syndrome, a condition where students who have not experienced difficulty in learning use prescription drugs to attain a competitive advantage by chemically enhancing their performance. As they note, this begs a number of questions about who should have access to drugs that enhance neurocognitive enhancement, when and why. It also suggests that those whose neurocognitive functioning is considered to be impaired or deficient may not be qualitatively different physiologically to those who are considered to have normal functioning. The same can be said about teaching strategies. If strategies work with children who experience difficulty in learning and they work with other children, then who should have access to them and under what conditions should this access be available?

Critics of special education have questioned the terms and conditions of this access and they have questioned the high price that is paid by the unintended consequences of a dual system of special and regular education. To argue that sound teaching practices have been developed by special educators does not refute the criticisms that are levelled at the field. Placement in special education does have unintended side effects. It can and often does stigmatize those who are singled out for the ‘extra help’. Thus, to justify placement in special education on the grounds that it is better than the alternatives is to close off the possibility of thinking differently about alternative ways of working.
It is the process of providing something ‘additional to’ or ‘different from’ that which is ‘otherwise available’ in school that defines special education provision. The task is not to defend what is ‘special’ about this kind of provision but to challenge complacency about what is not ‘otherwise available’. Reimagining special education involves rejecting the questionable construct of normal as biologically determined, usual and good in favour of a more nuanced understanding of difference. As Minow (1990) reminds us, it is not difference, but the difference we make of it, that matters. Responding to individual difference is important but how this is done is equally important. Much has been learned about the processes of education. Our understanding of the relationship between teachers, learners, schools as communities and their relationship to society has deepened, creating an opportunity to think differently about the nature of special needs education, what it is called and how it is provided. Palinscar (1997) suggested that the sheer number of students served by special education programmes in the US – approximately 11.5 per cent of all school aged students – renders it a part of general education rather than one branch of a dual system of ‘general’ and ‘special’ education as it has been seen historically. The problem is that the history of a dual system has become part of the field's view of itself rather than a history of the struggle to achieve education for all.

The impact of this version of history can be clearly seen in the attempts to articulate what is special about special education. In examining the research evidence, Cook and Schirmer (2003) found that there was ‘substantial and compelling evidence of effective practices developed by special educators for students with disabilities’ though the ‘techniques that are effective for students with disabilities are generally effective for all students’ (p. 202). They went on to conclude that ‘there is little inherent, [then] in the content of the particular effective practices that make special education special’. What is unique is what Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2003) called ‘the delivery of instruction’. In their review of notions of specialist pedagogy, Lewis and Norwich (2005) came to a similar conclusion and suggested that rather than thinking of particular [p. 16 ↓] teaching strategies as differentially effective, they might be arranged along a continuum from high to low intensity. Here again the emphasis is on application rather than technique. If it is true that practices that are effective for students with disabilities are effective for all students, then it cannot be concluded, as it often is, that mainstream classroom teachers do not recognize or know to implement effective teaching practices.
for pupils with special needs. A cursory look at the content of many teacher education and educational psychology textbooks will recommend virtually the same teaching practices to those identified as empirically validated procedures in special education.

Arguing that the notion of a distinct special pedagogy is unhelpful, Davis and Florian (2004) pointed out that sound practices in teaching and learning in both mainstream and special education literatures are often informed by the same basic research, and that certain teaching strategies developed for one purpose could be effectively applied to other groups of children with different patterns of educational need. In fact, attempts to define what is special about special education generally acknowledge that effective practices in special education often originate in general education (for example, Kavale, this volume). Cook and Schirmer (2003) list direct instruction, self-monitoring, mnemonic instruction, strategy training, curriculum-based measurement, applied behaviour analysis and functional assessment as effective special education techniques. However, these are all well-known mainstream educational practices discussed in many mainstream educational psychology and teacher education texts (see, for example, Lefrancois, 2000; Pollard, 2002; Whitebread, 2000) though, as Cook and Schirmer point out, little is known about their uptake in special or general education classes.

This is not to say that all learners are the same or that there is no need to differentiate or otherwise be concerned with the delivery of instruction. On the contrary, it is the interest in how learners differ and the ways in which they can be helped to overcome the difficulties they experience in learning that is what drives much research in special education. But when the work is done in collusion with the exclusionary force that dichotomizes learners on the basis of ‘ability’ it cannot help us to resolve the dilemma of difference. Nor can it help with improving what is generally available in schools.

Conclusion

Seymour Sarason, in his foreword to Blatt's (1973) *Souls in Extremis*, noted that in between values and actions are our knowledge theories and conceptions. He suggested that ‘the road to hell is not only paved with good intentions, it is often coated with a thick layer of what is thought to be the best thinking’. It is important therefore to reconsider
what is thought to be best thinking, not because it is necessarily wrong, but because what may have seemed logical, just or right, no longer serves these aims, or when the cost of unintended consequences becomes too high. In this chapter, I have argued that the paradox of unintended consequences, of perpetuating exclusionary practices in the name of equity, that has defined the nature of special education to date, need not do so in the future. To move forward, however, will require some new thinking and a fuller level of engagement with the complex processes of education in general, than scholars have undertaken to date. Three areas of work deserve particular attention.

The right to education. Many educators accept the right to education as a human right and align themselves with the Deweyan idea of education for democracy. However, the right to education is situated within the purposes of education. In recent times the concept of democracy and the principles of a market economy have been combined, resulting in an emphasis in education on high standards and competition (see, for example, Rouse and McLaughlin, this volume). The curriculum is driven by international competition that places a premium on the skills thought to produce economic advantage. In such a situation there are winners and losers. As Nussbaum's examination of the role of shame in social life suggests (Nussbaum, 2004), those who lose in the educational marketplace are stigmatized by being considered to have ‘special educational needs’. Nussbaum argues that:

> modern liberal societies can make an adequate response to the phenomena of shame only if they shift away from a very common intuitive idea of the normal citizen that has been bequeathed to us by the social-contract tradition so influential in the history of European thought: the image of the citizen as productive worker, able to pay for the benefits he receives by the contributions he makes. (pp. 176–7)

Reimagining special education requires differentiating education as a human right from education as a means of achieving human rights, for example, economic and development rights. Such differentiation shows how designations of special educational need or placement in special education can be unjust, a barrier to, rather than a fulfilment of, human rights. But as Nussbaum's analysis points out, deeply rooted feelings of shame about human frailty make it difficult to change accounts of difference.
In her 2002 Tanner Lecture on Human Values, Nussbaum (2006) suggests that the idea of the normal citizen bequeathed by the social-contract tradition itself is fundamentally flawed because it is underpinned by a notion of reciprocity that assumes some level of equality among those who enter into it. She argues that theories of justice based on the social contract treat those with severe disabilities and long-term care needs as an afterthought rather than as full citizens. So, although rights-based policies are essential in combating stigma, they cannot be adequate if our theories of justice do not take account of human difference. Failure to take difference into account perpetuates the cycle of marginalizing and protecting vulnerable groups. However, accounting for difference as part of the human condition renders obsolete the notion of normal as the appropriate educational standard.

Challenging deterministic beliefs. In addition, deeper consideration needs to be given to the power of the beliefs that teachers hold about human ability, teaching, learning and specialist knowledge. Rethinking the concept of normalcy requires a consideration of how it is conveyed in teacher education and reinforced when working with pupils in schools. This is essential. It may not be possible to win the battle to change the structure of schools, as so-called ‘radical reformers’ advocate, but efforts to challenge and confront biological determinism in all it various guises must continue. As Skrtic (1991) reminds us, though professional work is inextricably bound by the organizational context in which it is performed, professions set their own standards. While it may not be possible to change the organizational context of schools, the field can determine the standards by which it aspires be held to account. To adopt an anti-determinist stance as a professional standard sets a new agenda for research and practice that requires, as I have tried to argue, a reimagining of what special education is and can become.

Researching teaching practice. Many who have attempted to articulate what is special about special education cite the lack of evidence that classroom teachers use ‘validated’ strategies when ‘including’ pupils with special educational needs (for example, Cook & Schirmer, 2003). Based on the logic of the evidence-based practice movement in medicine, the demand for more ‘scientific’ educational research is seen as the way to improve both practice and outcomes (Howe, 2005). Yet the scientific research base in education has been ‘stubbornly indeterminate’ (Huberman, 1993, p. 26) limiting its usefulness to improve practice. Studies of how teachers do their work (for example, Brown & McIntyre, 1993; Little & McLaughlin, 1993) suggest that its complexity and
demands have not been fully appreciated or captured by many experimental or quasi-experimental research designs. As Huberman (1992) notes:

[p. 18 ↓ ] Essentially teachers are artisans working primarily alone, with a variety of new and cobbled together materials in a personally designed work environment. They gradually develop a repertoire of instructional skills and strategies … through a somewhat haphazard process of trial and error, usually when one or other segment of the repertoire does not work repeatedly … Teachers spontaneously go about tinkering with their classrooms. (p. 136)

Though some would say that such a seemingly haphazard process is insufficient and inadequate for teaching pupils who experience difficulties in learning, it has been shown that teachers who are adept at embedding responsiveness to individual need within the process of whole-class teaching are able to sustain inclusive practice (Jordan & Stanovich, 1998). In other words, it is when teachers persist in tinkering that they expand their repertoire of responses to the difficulties students encounter in learning. Perhaps it is a mistake to deride teachers’ practice as unsystematic and lacking in rigour (Hammersley, 2001). McIntyre (2005) has argued that the kind of knowledge that is produced by research is different from that which classroom teachers need. He outlines a series of steps for bridging the gap between research and practice that calls on teachers to articulate fully their craft knowledge and researchers to understand better the indirect influence of the knowledge they generate. The question is not why teachers do not make better use of research but how to develop research strategies that more fully capture the complexity of classroom practice when teaching diverse groups of learners. Such strategies can help to generate new understandings about how to respond when pupils experience difficulty that do not continue to depend on designations of special educational need.

These three things, clearer thinking about the fulfilment of the right to education, the challenge to deterministic beliefs about ability, and a shift in focus from differences among learners, to learning for all, set an agenda for special needs education that can change the nature of what special education is and might become in the future. In time it may also help change the organization of educational provision and prevailing concepts of schooling so that the reimagining of special education becomes a reimagining
diversity in education. Then research on the difficulties students experience in learning might lead to pedagogical practices that are inclusive of all learners.

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