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Contesting the recognition of Specific Learning Disabilities in educational policy: Intra- and inter-national insights



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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses national and international inclusive educational policies to draw attention to the multiple ways in which different jurisdictions recognize, or inadequately recognize, students who possess specific learning disabilities (SLD). In making this argument, the paper analyses key international, national and state/provincial policies from the United States, Canada (Ontario), England, and Australia (Northern Territory, New South Wales). The research reveals the extent to which different jurisdictions elide the category 'students with learning disabilities' (in its various guises) with 'students with general learning difficulties' (GLD) (or its various iterations). The paper argues such an elision is detrimental to students who have specific learning disabilities, and recommends avoiding the conflation of their needs within the much broader paradigm of 'learning difficulties'. Reformed policies are a vital part of the broader contextual conditions necessary for changed practices. In delineating the nature of key policies within and across state/provincial, national and international settings, the paper also provides insights and examples of more productive practices as a path for change.

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1. Introduction

Why do some state/provincial and national jurisdictions fail to acknowledge the existence of some of their most disadvantaged members? This paper argues that consistent national policy recognizing students with 'specific learning disabilities' (SLD) is necessary for more effectively addressing these students' educational needs. While there is a global push for inclusion (especially since the 1994 UNESCO *Education for All* policy ('The Salamanca Agreement')), many national and sub-national policies do not adequately identify and recognize students with SLD. By not doing so, relevant policies deny these students the recognition and resources necessary for their genuine participation in education, and, in turn, society. Such policy omissions/anomalies also deny teachers the consistency of understanding of these issues to better inform practice. An inhibiting factor to increased engagement with issues of recognition and resourcing of students with SLD in policy settings is determining how to actually write (and talk) about these students in and across national policy contexts. This includes being able to construct policy in ways comprehensible to an international audience of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners for whom such terms as 'learning disabilities' and 'learning difficulties' conjure up many and sometimes varied understandings. This paper focuses necessary attention upon the myriad ways in which students with

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learning disabilities are understood within and across multiple policy jurisdictions at international, national and state/provincial levels. By doing so, we hope to inform the learning of policy-makers and practitioners seeking to provide the policy conditions to assist in the educational provision of students with specific learning disabilities, and other students more generally.

Students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) are a common group of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in inclusive classrooms (Clark, 1997; Woodcock, Dixon, & Tanner, 2013). We draw upon recent and current research in the field of learning disabilities, employing the term specific learning disabilities to describe those students with average to above average intelligence (i.e. excluding students with intellectual disabilities) whose neurological functioning inhibits the processing of information in the brain, and consequently, their learning (Lerner & Kline, 2006; Lyon, 2003; NJCLD, 1997; Turkington & Harris, 2003). However, these students are not consistently identified within and across national and international jurisdictions. Instead, there is a tendency to refer to students with SLD through the generic, overarching term of 'general learning difficulties' (GLD).

Informed by research in SLD, and critical educational policy analysis more broadly, this paper reviews key international, national, state/provincial educational policies, and the mission statements and policies of influential advocacy bodies supporting educators, relevant professionals, parents and students with SLD across North America, Europe and Australia. Collectively, this material helps to shed light upon how SLD is construed in policy, including how conflation with the term GLD serves to disadvantage these students.

2. Theory: Critical policy analysis, in the context of specific learning disabilities

2.1. Critical policy analysis

The paper adopts a broadly critical policy analysis approach to the issue of representations of SLD, heavily informed by research within the field of SLD. This section outlines the nature of critical policy analysis approaches, followed by a more specific account of the nature of specific learning disabilities (SLD).

Educational policy analysis exists in many iterations, and reflects a variety of theoretical, methodological and philosophical proclivities. More traditional analyses, such as the work of Harman (1984) have sought to foreground how understanding policy is a matter of recognizing a specific problem, and engaging in a series of predetermined steps, leading to a solution. In such an account, policy is conceptualized as:

[T]he implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being followed or to be followed in dealing with a recognized problem or matter of concern, and directed towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals. Policy also can be thought of as a position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict, and directed towards a particular objective (1984, p. 13)

More recent critical policy analysis approaches have challenged the lock-step process and 'objective' portrayal of policy in such accounts. Instead, critical policy analytical approaches argue policies (and associated policy 'contexts', 'texts' and 'consequences') are inherently political, and identifying the nature of 'what' and 'how' specific issues are portrayed is essential for determining who 'wins' and who 'loses' (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). Such insights have been applied to identifying specific policy enactments in schooling settings (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012), and how education policy is becoming increasingly 'globalised', requiring a subsequently 'globalized policy analysis' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Some research has also explored policy settings in relation to inclusive education more generally, including Peters (2007) historical analysis of international inclusive education policy for students with disabilities (Vlachou, 2004), as well as inclusive education policy approaches in specific nation-states (e.g. New Zealand (Kearney & Kane, 2006) Greece (Zoniou-Sideri, Deropoulou-Derou, Karagianni, & Spandagou, 2006), United States (Stuart, 2006), England (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006), and Canada (Quebec) (Allen, 2006)). Indeed, on this last point, the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* draws together these national-specific analyses within back-to-back special issues (2–3; 4–5) in 2006, focusing upon critical analyses of inclusive education policy across multiple nation-states, and seeking to draw across these experiences to isolate common themes and areas of interest (Slee, 2006). There is also a considerable body of research into students with (specific) learning disabilities, including earlier accounts of learning across cases of the nature and practice of inclusion for students with (specific) learning disabilities (e.g. Baker & Zigmond, 1995) and more recent accounts of the nature of multimedia instructional design of assistive and instructional technologies (e.g. Kennedy & Deshler, 2010).

However, there appears to be relatively little research which actively explores how policies construct the needs of students with SLD. Some research, such as Watson's (2010) account of the unhappiness which characterized Australian students, teachers and parents' experiences of schooling for students with SLD, seems to flag the importance of policy, but actually focuses upon practice in the context of specific policies. Other research, such as Keenan and Shaw's (2011) account of the legal rights of post-secondary students with (specific) learning disabilities focuses more explicitly upon the legal context which influences students with (specific) learning disabilities, but at a post-secondary level. Rutherford Turnbull's (2011) overview of current legal and policy settings (*IDEA Act, No Child Left Behind*) in the US does relate to schooling, but only from the perspective of an individual nation-state.

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