



Imagining disability? Conceptualizations of learners with disabilities and their learning in the pedagogic manuals of international development agencies



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the contrasting and complementary approaches towards the education of children with disabilities of international development agencies, as reflected in pedagogic manuals produced by these agencies. The efficacy and feasibility of these approaches are assessed in the light of research into the pedagogic requirements of children with disabilities and into pedagogic practices in the South. In the light of this analysis, questions are raised about some of the pedagogic precepts in the manuals. These questions in turn raise questions about the processes of development and dissemination for the manuals. The paper ends by considering the implications of the findings for the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

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1. Introduction

In 2011, visiting a Sightsavers programme in Malawi, I met an itinerant teacher in rural Lilongwe supporting 25 students in ten primary schools – five of whom had various degrees of hearing impairment, two of whom had low vision, and 18 of whom were categorized as having ‘learning difficulties’. The teacher struggled to provide meaningful support for these students, especially as she often had to travel considerable distances each day, sometimes by bicycle along poorly-maintained roads in blazing heat. Understandably she commented, ‘It’s tough being an itinerant teacher’. Her one resource was *Disability Toolkit* – a booklet produced by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) with financial support from the Department for International Development (DFID), which describes various types of impairment and ways in which teachers can support children with these impairments. She attached great value to this booklet as she had no access to continuing professional development or professional networks of support.

Research in the USA indicates that ‘educative materials’ for teachers (amongst which pedagogic manuals can be included) can increase teacher efficacy (Schneider et al., 2000; Schneider and Krajcik, 2002; Davis and Krajcik, 2005). However, the research

shows these materials are more useful for those teachers capable of critically and creatively engaging with them. The research also notes it is often difficult to measure the impact of these materials on teacher performance, and thus assess with any degree of precision their effectiveness (Schneider et al., 2000; Schneider and Krajcik, 2002; Davis and Krajcik, 2005). When working as an education advisor in Bangladesh (for four years) and university lecturer in Papua New Guinea (six years), the author found that educative materials for teachers in these countries were generally of poor standard, either because they were direct translations or paraphrases of Northern texts, and/or because they were written in the second or third language of the teachers. Even when the materials were of some relevance, teachers struggled to utilize them in the classroom situation, as a result of their limited literacy skills, professional isolation, and the challenging conditions in which they worked.¹ However, I also found that the teachers greatly valued these materials because of their lack of access to alternative sources of support and information – a phenomenon likely to be case in under-resourced education systems in other low income countries (see previous paragraph). Given the

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¹ While teachers working in under-resourced education systems in the South may experience particular difficulties meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities, it should be noted that teachers in the North often struggle to meet the needs of these children, even though the latter teachers tend to have much greater access to various types of support and work in more educationally-conducive environments – see, for instance, UNICEF (2013).

significance attached by teachers in development contexts to educative materials, international development agencies have a particular responsibility to ensure the teacher-materials they produce or sponsor are of high quality, including pedagogic manuals.

This paper discusses pedagogic manuals produced by two ‘multilaterals’ – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and compares and contrasts these manuals with manuals produced by other international development agencies. ‘Pedagogic manuals’ refers to documents written for teachers which identify various ways in which teachers can facilitate the learning of students in the classroom situation. This paper assesses the validity of the selected manuals in the light of research into the pedagogic requirements of students with disabilities and prevalent pedagogic practices in the South. In particular, the paper considers if the manuals are sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities, or if they are inclined to ‘imagine disability’. At the end of the paper, the implications of this analysis for international development agencies working in this field and the Post-2015 Development Agenda are considered.

The paper discusses two contested terms – ‘pedagogy’ and ‘disability’ – and it is therefore important that these terms are carefully defined from the outset.

In this paper, pedagogy is defined multi-dimensionally. On one level, pedagogy is seen as the teacher-initiated, teacher-orchestrated, and sometimes teacher-directed interventions designed to promote the learning of students in the classroom situation. On a second level, it refers to the mediation by the teachers of the various contexts which surround the teaching act – contexts which both enable and constrain teachers’ practice. These contexts include: the physical context of the school – its infrastructure, types and levels of resourcing, and geographical setting; its institutional contexts – the multi-structured yet dynamic relationships between its various sets of stakeholders; and its policy contexts – most particularly the requirements of national curricula. On a third level, it refers to the beliefs and values of teachers which both shape their teaching practice and are shaped by this practice. These beliefs and values tend to be grounded in deep-lying, culturally-based belief- and value-systems. This holistic definition of pedagogy draws upon the work of scholars such as Olson and Bruner (1996), Simon (1999), Alexander (2000), and Nichol (2011) who stress the extent to which pedagogy is complex, contingent, and evolving, and who therefore challenge simplistic, universalist conceptualisations of pedagogy.

Disability is defined in accordance with World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (WHO, 2002). This document conceptualizes disability (that is, difficulties in carrying out certain activities and participating in certain events) as the product of the *interaction* between “health conditions” (on the one hand) and (on the other hand) “environmental factors” (“physical, social and attitudinal”) and “personal factors” (e.g. gender, age, “coping styles”) (p. 10). Thus, while the educational challenges faced by children with disabilities are likely to be significantly (or even in some cases predominantly) related to social attitudes and practices (and the impact of these attitudes on education policy and practice), these challenges are also likely to be impairment-related. For instance, difficulties faced by blind students in studying mathematics may be partly (or even largely) a result of the low expectations of others, lack of access to necessary resources, ill-trained teachers, etc. However, these difficulties may also reflect the fact that certain mathematical disciplines, such as geometry and algebra are highly visual, and therefore tend to be challenging for students with visual impairments, especially those congenitally blind. Various scholars (Leonardi et al., 2006; Shakespeare, 2006) have

endorsed the interactive model of disability, as they believe this model best captures the diverse, complex, and fluctuating experiences of people with disabilities. However, it should be noted that other scholars continue to affirm the explanatory value of the social model of disability, which sees disability as the consequence of negative social attitudes and practices (Oliver, 1999).

2. Conceptualizations of learners with disabilities and their learning in existing research

Before analysing the pedagogic manuals produced by the international development agencies, I will briefly discuss the findings of researchers working in Northern contexts about the pedagogic requirements of children with disabilities. I will also discuss research into pedagogic practices in the South and the factors shaping these practices. This discussion will provide a useful framework for the analysis of the pedagogic manuals later in the paper.

2.1. Pedagogic research in the North

This discussion is based on two texts – an overview of the educational requirements of children with disabilities (Frederickson and Cline, 2009) and an edited collection of essays on pedagogy and special education (Lewis and Norwich, 2005). Both texts agree that it is difficult to make generalizations about pedagogic provision for groups of children with particular categories of impairment. First, children may have the same impairment (for instance, low vision), but different conditions (for instance, astigmatism, myopia) which impact upon their functioning in different ways. Even if children with disabilities have the same condition, the impact of this condition on their functioning may vary greatly. Furthermore, some children may be more ‘resilient’ than others with the same condition, and may therefore require less educational support. Second, the educational needs of children with disabilities are dynamic rather than static, reflecting changes in the development-levels of these children and changes in their home and school environments. Third, it is widely acknowledged that there is a dearth of methodical, evidence-based research in the field of pedagogy and disability (see, for instance, Miller and Hodges, 2005; Portwood, 2005; Wishart, 2005). Four, even if the necessary body of research existed, pedagogic assumptions would still be significantly value-laden, and therefore inherently contestable. For instance, there are two perspectives in deaf education, both based on different sets of values – a “medical/deficit perspective” (Frederickson and Cline, 2009, p. 505) which says deaf students should be provided with opportunities to acquire the greatest possible command of an auditory/written language (such as English), and a “social/cultural perspective” (Frederickson and Cline, 2009) which says sign language should be the primary medium learning for deaf students. One perspective attaches particular value to the assimilation of deaf people in mainstream culture and society, while the other attaches particular value to deaf language, culture, and heritage. Both perspectives have significant, contrasting pedagogic implications.

However, despite the above reservations, the literature broadly identifies five levels of appropriate pedagogic practice for students with disabilities.

Level 1: Pedagogic universalization. Teachers do not have to make ‘disability-specific’ changes to their practice in order to meet the needs of the students with disabilities in their classes. This is because these students do not possess any impairment-related ‘special educational needs’. For instance, these students may have physical impairments which do not inhibit access to the academic

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