



Review

Questioning special needs-ism: Supporting student teachers in troubling and transforming understandings of human worth



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Urgent action is needed to end systemic discrimination of 'special needs' students.
- Teacher educators have a responsibility to contest 'special needs' ideology.
- Dysconsciousness may explain student teachers' tacit acceptance of 'special needs.'
- Multidisciplinary pedagogical tools may be useful to support new ways of thinking.
- The critical role of emotions in learning - teaching needs to be widely recognized.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This paper is offered to spark discussion about teacher educators' contestation of 'special needs' ideology, to disrupt discriminatory thinking that diminishes educational opportunities for labeled students. Following discussion of the overarching purpose of education and evidence of the tenacity of special needs-ism, I explore multidisciplinary pedagogical tools that may facilitate engagement with student teachers, to trouble and transform hegemonic beliefs. These include notions of dysconsciousness, critical consciousness, threshold concepts, and pedagogies of discomfort, all of which highlight the role of emotion in realizing new understandings. Recognizing the inherent human worth of *all* students is considered fundamental in addressing educational inequities.

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My request is: help your children become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human

(excerpt of a letter to educators written by a Holocaust survivor, cited in [Ginott, 1993](#)).

1. Preface

Listening to Radio New Zealand National news on 3 November 2015, my attention was caught by an announcement that the government was asking, “What is education for?” ([Radio New Zealand, 2015](#)). As the news item continued, the flicker of hope sparked by this news dimmed. In response to the press release that the government was about to begin consultation about an Update of the Education Act 1989 ([Ministry of Education, 2015](#)), comment was invited from both the President of the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and the Chief Executive of the Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA). The latter declared, “Certainly, as far as employers are concerned, what we first and foremost want to see is good citizens.” That was hopeful. He explained that good citizenship required having the ability to calculate, read, reason, pass tests, “and finally, learn to get along with other people – and you want an education system that fairly enables, pretty much everyone, apart from people who are disabled in some way, to do that.” I actually texted Radio New Zealand to ask if I had heard this correctly. I had. The Chief Executive concluded with remarks about the competitive nature of the world, and asserted that New Zealand students “need to be as good, if not better, as everyone else – as employers we would task the education system to fill that goal.”

I heard this interview when I was in the process of writing this paper. It prompted (yet another) rewrite. I have chosen to position the EMA Chief Executive's opinion at the start of the paper, as it reflects its substantive focus: *understanding the power of hegemonic ideologies in determining what kinds of education are available, to whom, and what this means for teacher educators in guiding the development of ‘new’ teachers*. As a teacher educator in a New Zealand university, I am inevitably drawn to the issue of student teachers' thinking, about disability in particular. While heartened over the years by the latter's increasing interest in disability related matters, I remain troubled by the tenacity of deficit special needs ideology that underpins many aspiring teachers' well intentioned language and actions. Some twenty seven years after crossing the threshold of my first class as a beginning high school teacher, I continue to witness the compromising of disabled students' educational rights and opportunities, at both systemic and individual levels, based on inherently flawed assumptions about what it is to be human. I share [Lalvani and Broderick's \(2015\)](#) concerns about the “implicit ideology of Separate but Equal” and try to work with student teachers in ways that enable them to realize and respond respectfully to the full humanity of all their future students, unencumbered by any shadow of special needs-ism/ableism.

This paper has evolved out of a need to better understand

student teachers' interpretations of disability, to improve my attempts to ‘interrupt’ ([Ainscow, 2005](#)) deficit ideologies, and to offer alternative, hopeful understandings of students who carry the essentially meaningless yet assumption-ridden label of special needs. These concerns need to be positioned within the larger context of education and its overarching purpose(s), and so this is discussed at the start of the paper. The focus then turns to the enduring ideology of ‘special’ in education, and argues that schools play a critical role in its production and reification. Examples of the perspectives of first year student teachers are provided to illustrate the impact of immersion in school contexts in which markers of difference, signaling special needs, are typically accepted as the natural order. As one way of interpreting the entrenched nature of ideologies, I draw on the concept of dysconsciousness, developed by [King \(1991\)](#) in relation to racism amongst US student teachers. The multidisciplinary notions of threshold concepts ([Meyer & Land, 2003](#)), critical consciousness ([Gonsalves, 2007](#)) and pedagogies of discomfort ([Boler, 2004](#)) and strategic empathy ([Zembylas, 2012](#)) are then outlined as possible ways of supporting student teachers to engage with ideologies and other ‘troublesome knowledge’ ([Perkins, 1999](#), as cited in [Meyer & Land, 2006](#), p. xv). These approaches highlight the ubiquitous yet infrequently acknowledged ([Clouder, 2005](#); [Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007](#); [Martin & Lueckenhausen, 2005](#)) power of emotion – how both students and teachers *feel* about the content and process of teaching and learning, especially when negotiating material that may be challenging.

Please note:

- I realize that this paper's focus on disabled students may be questioned and interpreted as reinforcing (a) the destructive dichotomizing of students, and (b) the false notion that ‘inclusive education’ is primarily about disabled students. This is not my intention. I have chosen to highlight the issue of discrimination of disabled students in particular as it appears, certainly in a New Zealand context, that too many such students continue to be failed by the very system that is charged with the responsibility of serving them ([Human Rights Commission, 2009](#); [IHC, 2015](#)). I hope this paper may draw further attention to this injustice.
- While acknowledging the dynamic nature of language in any given time, context, and ideology, the term ‘disabled students’ is used when referring to students in this paper. This descriptor is consistent with the language claimed by and used within various disability rights' groups, to denote the ways in which socially constructed barriers oppress and exclude certain members of a society (e.g., [Cameron, 2015](#); [Disabled Persons Assembly NZ, 2015](#); [Human Rights Commission, 2013](#)). I also respect that some individuals/groups prefer the term ‘person with a disability.’ In specific contexts, if it is necessary and appropriate to use any descriptors, I am guided by whichever term individuals prefer.
- I use the term ‘special needs-ism’ to signal its invented, socially constructed nature as a ‘condition’ or ‘category’ that is imposed on students, usually without their consent.

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