

Defining Disability: Reviewing the Construct of Special Education

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Abstract: It is common within Ontario's educational context to hear the term 'special needs' or 'special education'. However, the relationship between language, definitions, and discourse in the treatment of students with disabilities in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools is understudied. Drawing on an extensive body of literature from the sociology of education, disability studies, and special needs education, this paper aims to recognize the profound influence of language and labels on societal perceptions and the treatment of students with disabilities. While investigating the historical definitions of disability, literature in this area highlights the continuous debate and inconsistencies surrounding terminology in academic and educational contexts. By focusing on the often-used term "special needs", this research examines the potential negative impact of this label on reinforcing ableism and prejudices for students with disabilities. Moreover, language, definitions, and discourse have the power to shape perceptions and, if not used thoughtfully, may inadvertently perpetuate negative stereotypes and hinder students' academic and social development. Therefore, educational terminology should be altered to reflect equitable decision-making and dignity throughout supports for students.

Keywords: disability language, 'special needs', 'special education', Ontario education, disability awareness

Introduction

Our society is centered around labels and definitions (Berwick, 2009; Pinker, 1994). As Stephen Pinker (1994) suggests, language shapes the way we view, hear and perceive situations. This suggests that the way individuals are perceived and treated is due to the language used and applied in given situations. When examining individuals with disabilities, specifically students with disabilities in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools (Green et al, 2005), there is a growing concern about their treatment. This concern has led to an increased desire to define disability and the more recent use of 'special needs'. The discourse used in the educational setting is important to examine what accommodations and treatment students are receiving. It is important to understand if negative discourse involving students with disabilities could result in lesser perceptions of students with disabilities and their abilities. Literature on the sociology of education, disability studies, disability education and special needs education will be examined. This paper will explore the definition of disability, its application, and the potential negative impacts of the 'special needs' label on students with disabilities.

Defining Disability

In the educational system, students with disabilities undoubtedly require additional assistance and supports for success (Anatasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Aron & Loprest, 2012; Carrington & Robinson, 2004;). Some educational programs and childcare centers even refuse enrollment to students with disabilities (Killoran et al, 2007). Educational programming for students with disabilities can mean the difference between an intellectually stimulating, socially fulfilling and economically productive life and an unstimulating, non-fulfilling life socially and economically (Aron & Loprest, 2012). When considering the diversity of students with disabilities, and more specifically learning disabilities, it is important to examine the historical and present definitions or guidelines for classifying students as such. This is important because these labels or definitions could influence students' trajectories, self-efficacy, or outcomes in the educational system (Aron & Loprest, 2012). The following literature will examine how definitions of disability and more specifically learning disabilities have emerged. Similar to Kauffman & Badar (2020), I argue that definitions are important for understanding the boundaries and classifications of disability within the educational system. Also, it is important for conceptualizing how vulnerability status (Razack, 2015) can influence treatment and acceptance of students in Ontario's education system.

Historically, debates have persisted both in literature and among the general population about defining disability and allocating resources (Baglieri et al, 2011; Withers, 1979). Reliance on the traditional medical model, which prioritizes legal and healthcare practices, has given medical professionals the authority to determine what was considered 'normal' or 'abnormal'.(Withers, 1979, Mackelprang, 2010). This approach primarily focused on biological or physiological symptoms rather the person as a whole (Withers, 1979).

In fact, many professionals in the educational field in the 1980s and 1990s were skeptical that learning disabilities specifically even existed (Hammill, 1990). Such biased and skeptical historical perspectives have persisted across generations, facilitating the continuation of ableism, discrimination, and inequalities in defining

disability. This has led to in-depth discussions on ‘locating’ cognitive or mental health disabilities through neuro-scanning and analysis (Davis, 2005).

When examining learning disabilities and the educational system, there has been a significant lack of clarity regarding what a learning disability entails (O’Shea & O’Shea, 1994). Torgesen (1982,) characterized “students with learning disabilities as passive learners who seem to lack strategies for self-regulating cognitive processes” (pg. 22). This has led to a focus on the development of procedures and practices for students with learning disabilities to center around meta cognition and meta comprehension training (O’Shea & O’Shea, 1994). Meta-cognition is the cognitive process of thinking about one’s own thinking (Mahdavi, 2014). The more important discussion in the sociology of education is how a learning disability is defined more specifically and how it is essential for the future of students and their success in academia. In 1962, Samuel Kirk offered one of the first definitions of learning disability that reads:

A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic resulting from a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbances and not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional factors (Colker, 2011, p. 85).

This definition built the steppingstones for the more recent definitions and characteristics of disability, although there has been little progress made in recent years to a clear definition (Hamill, 1990; McArthur et al, 2018; Wilson, 2020; Withers 1979).

Within the multiple definitions historically developed, there are nine elements that resonate with all of them (Hammil 1990). 1) Definitions for learning disabilities usually apply underachievement from the student. These problems or areas of underachievement may be centralized to one area such as math, science or language studies (Hamill, 1990, p. 79). Karvale and Foreness (2000) emphasize how the identification of a learning disability can be understood as an underachievement equivalent as well. An underachievement equivalent is a measure of deficits in academic abilities, behavioral deficits or the presence of a psychological disorder (Karvale & Foreness, 2000). 2) Learning disabilities originate from a central nervous system (CNS) deficiency (Hammill, 1990; Kirk, 1962). 3) Process involvement or the proficiency of the student to perform a certain process is impaired (Hamill, 1990). 4) They perceive the learning disability as being present throughout the life course (Hamill, 1990). Although, this approach has been criticized for not comprehensively understanding the development or progression of specific disabilities (O’Brien, 2001). 5) Impairments in language development can demonstrate a clear learning disability. 6) The specification around academic problems or academic impairment (such as reading, writing). 7) Some definitions specify that certain types of conceptual problems such as reasoning, can act as a predictor or sign of a learning disability (Hamill, 1990). 8) Other conditions such social skills or motor abilities can be signs of a learning disability (Hamill, 1990). 9) Impairments can coexist and be classified as primary or secondary (Hamill, 1990). For example, for a blind child their primary disability would be their blindness and their inability to read would be secondary.

While various definitions exist, there are common elements that they generally agree upon, though this does not come with no critics. O’Brien (2001) criticizes consensus approaches around disability services suggesting that they are more straightforward or standard, whereas the approach to disability services depends on many factors. It is important to examine the similarities and differences between common definitions to conceptualize how the language is used in the literature and greater society to promote universal accessibility across institutions.

The Canadian Government recognizes that disability is a complex phenomenon, influenced by both individual conditions and societal factors (Government of Canada, 2013). Disabilities can occur at any point in one’s life and can be permanent, temporary, or episodic (Government of Canada, 2013). The bio-medical approach to disability describes disability as a medical or health problem that prevents or reduces a person’s ability to participate fully in society (Government of Canada, 2013). The social approach views disability as a natural part of society, where attitudes, stigma and prejudices present barriers to people with disabilities, and prevent or hinder their participation in mainstream society (Government of Canada, 2013).

Although both of these definitions are included in the document, they finalize a universal definition from the World Health Organization that states “disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations,

and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations” (Government of Canada, 2013, p. 5). Contrary to the 2003 federal policy, there is no one harmonized operational definition of disability across the Governments federal programs (Government of Canada, 2013). Rather, the criteria for determining disability is now determined on a case-by-case basis across all federal programs.

More recently, research has been conducted on the concept of ableism. Ableism is discrimination towards individuals with disabilities (Friedman & Owen 2017; Gronvik 2009). This form of prejudice emerges from perceived abilities or inabilities to perform socially desirable tasks (Friedman & Owen, 2017). However, a challenge arises when defining disability. Over-simplifying the definition can perpetuate discrimination, as it might inadvertently reinforce ableism (Gronvik, 2009). Clearly defining disability offers its own problems with enacting or reinforcing ableism and prejudice against the community (Friedman & Owen, 2017). This is important as Friedman (2017) suggests that the majority of people hold a certain level of prejudice, even if minimal, towards individuals with disabilities (Antonak & Livneh, 2000; Friedman, 2017). Therefore, there are some structural concerns with defining the term ‘disability’.

Some concerns surrounding these definitions and included characteristics still persist today. Although some areas are gaining more consensus such as testing and affirmative approaches to education (Hammill, 1990), others are moving in the wrong direction and focusing too much on standardization and less individualization for each student (Colker, 2011). I agree with Colker’s (2011) argument that the educational system needs to limit the overemphasis on definitions and standardization of the term ‘disability’ and instead focus on providing students with proper resources and supports to be successful. The emphasis should be on students having resources, not only students who have the formal classification of ‘disability’ (Colker, 2011). Ultimately, while definitions provide structure, the genuine need is to ensure each student, regardless of labels, receives the resources and support necessary for their success in education.

Special Needs: A Bad Word within the Educational System?

Although ‘special needs’ is a more recent term to describe disability and is heavily used in educational settings, there are still some structural and institutional concerns with this definition. First, the term ‘special’ is an ambiguous term to define a need that is not general at all (Wilson, 2002). The term ‘special’ suggests a specific importance, talent or approach. While paired with the term ‘needs’ which suggests action, special needs education is about providing specific help for students. This leaves room for interpretation and differences between students and diagnostic criteria (Wilson, 2020). This definition is not clearly defined in all areas though including the curriculum. In terms of ‘special needs’, it is difficult to define the specific needs and aids without comparing to the standard educational curriculum (Farrell, 2005; Wilson, 2020).

Within the Ontario educational setting, the term ‘special needs’ is used in many documents and classrooms. Many schools have specific classrooms or educators dedicated to ‘special needs’ students or ‘special education’ (Ontario Public Service, 2017). Most of Ontario’s educational policies do not focus on the structural concerns related to education but focus on supporting programming and resources for students with ‘special needs’ (Ontario Public Service, 2017). Although within these policies there is limited discussion within these policies about how elements of ‘special needs’ education intersect with a student’s emotional, social, and physical well-being (Ontario Public Service, 2017). Within schools, the term ‘special needs’ has often been adopted as a euphemism for specific disabilities. Such terms are usually put in place to become more politically correct or more comprehensive, but some have been perceived negatively, taboo, offensive, or too direct (McArthur et al, 2018). Terms such as ‘put to sleep’ or ‘pass away’ have been deemed more politically correct or less offensive than the latter, euthanized or died (Gernsbacher, et al, 2016).

While terminology is significant, its impact extends to how disabilities are formally defined and understood. Research discusses how formal definitions of learning disabilities can result in exclusion, reproduce stigma and assumptions surrounding the individuals within and outside of educational contexts (Kavale & Foreness, 2000). I am curious if the notion of vulnerability or ‘special needs’ can be applied to students with disabilities and how this can influence both perception and treatment. Razack (2015) discusses the continuation of the term ‘vulnerable’ can

reproduce perceptions on how culpable an individual is perceived to be. By employing the term ‘vulnerable’ or suggesting an individual is from a vulnerable population can suggest how capable they are of participating or completing a task (Razack, 2015). In turn, by interpreting or labelling an individual as vulnerable can restrict the extent that an individual can become capable (Razack, 2015). In a similar manner, the term ‘special needs’ can be suggestive of vulnerability and what they are perceived to be inherently capable of. It is important to consider how this could influence treatment and the inherent definitions within the Ontario educational system.

In relation to using the term ‘disability’ or ‘special needs’, there has been limited research into which term is considered more correct (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). The term ‘special needs’ has emerged in the past few decades to replace specific disability descriptions or the term disability more generally (Berger, 2013). Within the United States the term ‘special needs’ is not a legal binding term and rather vague, so the term ‘disability’ is still used in formality and in legal documents (Clark, 2020; Gernsbacher et al., 2016). The National Center for Disability Journalism suggest the avoidance of using the word ‘special’ in discussing disabilities, but to use the specific disability to describe the condition or accommodations required (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Similarly, many researchers suggest that the term ‘special’ can be seen as suggestive, condescending, patronizing, inappropriate, and offensive to individuals (Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Linton, 1998; Woodward, 1994). Despite these national warnings from researchers and self-advocates alike, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has altered many documents to specify accommodations or disabilities as being ‘special education’ designations in schools.

In some instances, ‘special needs’ is classified as a dysphemism (Berger, 2013). A dysphemism is a derogatory term as opposed to a neutral or politically correct term (Berger, 2013). The shift towards the term ‘special needs’ was the rejection or adaptation away from the term ‘retard’ that was heavily used and accepted in the 1990s as a medical diagnosis and descriptor (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). The use of ‘special needs’ was also adapted in replacement of using the dreaded ‘D’ word, disability. Disability advocate, Oliver (2021), explains that the use of the term ‘special’ is derogatory, which implies an additional burden or service. Rather, the needs that disabled folks have are not ‘special’, they are basic needs and commonly human rights (Oliver, 2021). Additionally, Gernsbacher et al (2016) suggest that 49% of participants had a negative relationship with the term ‘special needs’. In comparison, the term ‘disability’ is 41% negative. This would suggest that the term ‘disability’ is seen as more positive than the euphemism of ‘special needs’. Although the study does not explore the specific reasoning for why one term has a positive connotation, and another has a negative. Ahmed (2012) also suggests the importance of language. The language of diversity suggests that diversity becomes a mechanism to be valued and managed as a human resource (Ahmed, 2012). In itself, the term ‘diversity’ invokes difference, but not action towards change or justice (Ahmed, 2012). Within this discussion of language and discourse, it is important to note how the language of diversity can be promoting differences and restricting action.

When discussing the implications that these definitions and approaches can have on students with disabilities, it is important to examine how this can influence their own self-perceptions and treatment. The application of the term ‘special’ implies difference, apartness, separation, and the possibility of ‘special’ rights (Woodward, 1991). While the reality of those living with a disability is not ‘special’, it is usually oppression, segregation, ablism, and disadvantages (Berger, 2013; Clark, 2020; Woodward, 1991). The term ‘special’ paired with ‘needs’ implies that the individual requires ‘special’ treatment or extra attention. This is not the case. Individuals with disabilities require accommodations to be able to achieve the same goals and expectations despite their situation. In addition, by labelling and providing clear guidelines for teachers and other staff, this can improve the student’s experience and support (Farrell, 2001). Being more specific with the disability instead of applying the generalizable label of “special needs” can aid students with disabilities academically and socially (Farrell, 2001). This would provide students with supports, resources, and accommodations more catered to their needs. More importantly, it is crucial to not allow these labels to assume the abilities of the student before accessing services and accommodations.

Although this body of literature is insightful, it is important to examine the individuality of students with disabilities and approaches to education. Many scholars articulate that the problem with the educational system is the resources and access to resources (Clark, 2020, Dymond et al, 2007; Farrell 2001; Tones et al., 2017). There is no one clear consensus on how the terms should be used within the educational setting, but it is important that it is taken on a case-by-case basis (Farrell, 2001). Despite the language discourse used, it is crucial to understand what the student requires for accommodations, educational assistance, and social development to be successful. Students with disabilities require assistance and accommodations to be assessed on an individualized basis. It is also

important to promote equity and equality in the classroom and school environment despite potentially problematic terminology used. Also, students with disabilities should not be presumably unable to do specific activities or tasks because of their conditions. Rather, each student should be assessed by staff and primary caregivers prior to making judgements about their abilities.

Conclusion

The power of language is not a new phenomenon (Pinker, 1994) and highlights larger inequalities and discriminatory perceptions and labels within society (Ahmed, 2012). Historically, individuals and students with disabilities have been subjected to unruly treatment and heavily stigmatized. Through the prescriptions of language that institutions, in particular education, use to describe or label these students, this can reinforce or perpetuate stereotypes, stigma, and discriminatory practices (Grönvik, 2009; Kavale & Foreness, 2000). The perpetual need to define and categorize students in education is rooted in the medicalization of disability and diagnostic criteria (Withers, 1979, Mackelprang, 2010). As O'Brien (2001) suggests, we need to be careful on how we define populations and the impact of labels, particularly in education. As the surrounding literature suggests definitions in themselves can be suggestive, offensive, and presumptuous. Similar to the manner in which Razack (2015) examines the term of 'vulnerability', 'special needs' or 'special education' could be perceived as a negative euphemism that could be rooted in the discrimination of individuals with disabilities in totality. The term 'special needs' can be viewed negatively to suggest 'special' treatment or the requirement of 'special' circumstances when what they require are basic human rights. This has the ability to alter the perception of students with disabilities to be inherently negative and hindering to what they can perceivably do.

But the continual use of medicalization has led to the harsh focus on diagnosis criteria and streamlining support or accommodations in education. Rather than a focus on each student and their individual needs, education becomes overtly focused on streaming support solely based on labels. This can leave students under-supported, with a lack of self-efficacy and with negatively prescribed labels. Although individuals can collectively change their language and use more affirming language such as neurodiversity or disability, larger systemic change needs to occur. If large institutions, such as education, continue to prescribe to harmful language, this promotes to the rest of society to follow suit. I would urge educational systems and school boards in Ontario to be introspective and critically assess the language they use in their daily practices, especially given the potential consequences for student self-perception and stigmatization.

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