

# Experience and Interpretation in Global Times: The Case of Special Education

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## Abstract

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## Keywords

Special education, interpretation, hermeneutics, experience, globalization, research theory, invalid

“Special Education” is focussed on the education of those deemed special in some way. In English, the word *special* has many meanings, such as “outstanding or exceptional,” “specific rather than general,” “for a particular purpose,” “denoting education for children with particular needs, e.g., the handicapped,” “a special person or thing, such as a (police) constable or dish” (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed.). What may be most relevant to the question of paradigm transformation in education, however may be the connection of the word “special” to the word “species,” from the Latin *specialis*. If special education is in any way linked to species differentiation, the implication easily slides into considering people regarded as “special” to be a different kind of species than everyone else, than those who make up the norms of society. It is this implication that I wish to address here. It is an implication that cuts deeply into many of the historically derived philosophical assumptions underpinning Western theories of education, such

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as Aristotle's Principle of Non-Contradiction (A cannot be A and B at the same time), and his Theory of Substance stating that a thing is most itself when it is disconnected from every other thing.

The problem with this understanding of specialness is not only that it leaves people in their specialness, literally in their distinctive species categorization; the worse thing is that, in such a condition, special people lose their pedagogical capability, that is their capacity to address the world from a common ground. If you are deaf, you are deaf; if you are blind, you are blind; if you are deranged, you are deranged, gifted - - gifted, but so what? Maybe "normals" can assist you in your deafness, your blindness, your derangement, or even your giftedness to help you to adjust to life with normals, but the fact that you are "species specific" means that there is a line dividing us that cannot be breached. Just as you are most yourself in your blindness, your deafness, or your derangement, so the rest of us are "ourselves" in a completely different way. It is this way of thinking that needs to be deconstructed, especially in the context of "global times" wherein the current theory of "Difference" provides a justification for imperial aggression against others seen as a threat to one's own truth. Being able to see the world as One, as a single reality, is a necessary condition for perceiving how it is that the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the infirm all participate and share in an organic unity that now requires a new kind of theorization within the various domains of the human sciences including Education.

This leads to my second interest in the symposium title, "...the qualitative transformation of the paradigm of educational practice." We know from the history of research theory that the turn to qualitative methods began around the mid 1970s. There was a reaction against the limits of what could be learned about human life through statistics and the methods of "rigorous science." The development of the new Human Sciences drew inspiration from the neo-Romanticism of nineteenth century Germany, and philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Edmund Husserl (1858-1938), which led to the existentialism of Heidegger (1889-1976) and Sartre (1905-1980), and the hermeneutic/interpretive work of H-G. Gadamer (1900-2002). Dilthey was the first to distinguish between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). "Nature we can explain," he said, "but human life we must understand (*verstehen*)." Such understanding should be built on a more concentrated attention to "lived-experience," to how people actually experience their lives in the world before any theorizing about it. Husserl's famous dictum, "To the things themselves," was a sort of battle cry against the metaphysical formalisms of Immanuel Kant, whose philosophy of idealism had dominated Europe since the eighteenth century.

It is from this root in German Romanticism, then, that *phenomenology*, as studies of experience, and *hermeneutics* as interpretation of experience, arose along with later developments in narrative methods, ethnography, and other research approaches now generically termed as "qualitative." I am trying here to contextualize qualitative research historically because of my conviction that we need to move beyond methodologism if we are to address the most pressing problems in education today, including Special Education. I tell my doctoral students that their most important research commitment should not be to "method" but to "interest." In other words, what in the world is demanding your interest? Following that interest will, itself, provide at least part of the answer for how it should be investigated. Correct method cannot be determined in

advance of an encounter with the subject of interest – that is a central insight from Gadamerian hermeneutic/interpretive philosophy.

Another reason for locating qualitative research in the tradition of German, or European, Romanticism is because there are ethnocentric biases in it that impede an appreciation of a broader understanding of “world” that is necessary in global times. Two biases in particular need naming. One arises from the fact that qualitative research is posed as a binary to quantitative research. In the traditions of strict science, quantitative research operates out of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment belief in universal reason. Once things are proven scientifically to be true, they are true for all time, and thence form the basis of the “new” scientific culture. This is still the dream that underwrites techno-industrial culture, and is the foundation of science as the legitimizing basis of Western imperialism as a form of universal truth. “Make the whole world look like America” said George W. Bush. Of course this is nonsense, but all the more frightening because it is backed up by the military and technical apparatuses that science can produce.

So, if not universal reason, then what? Well, the binary is qualitative research, or as van Manen (1984) once called it, “a theory of the unique.” Questions about the generalizability, reliability, and validity of qualitative research still permeate the literature, and doctoral examinations of theses approaching research qualitatively. But qualitative research is precisely *not* interested in generalizability *per se*; its primary interest is individual. All of the answers given in response to the question of how then qualitative research might be relevant to a broader world have had difficulty in articulating just what it is that gives qualitative research its power, and I think this has something to do with the way any theory of the unique privileges difference over commonality. The best qualitative research might be more like outstanding literature: on reading it, you feel joined to the broader world in new and refreshing ways. Unfortunately, much qualitative research does not achieve this bridging, mainly because, I believe, it has sought its impetus not from the broader world in which it is invested but from an understanding of human subjectivity divorced from politics, philosophy, history, etc. This is ironic, given that qualitative research has its origins precisely in Husserl’s call to return to the world -- (Ger. *Zu den Sachen selbst*). It is this recovery of a broader sense of the world that is what qualitative research needs in order to enhance its relevance. I have read many qualitative dissertations over the years, but even the best ones leave me wanting a more urgent connection to the great issues of our time. More on this later.

The second ethnocentric bias of qualitative research as a theory of the unique, or of difference, has been touched on above, and resides in the roots not just of European Romanticism but within the Euro-American tradition generally. This bias has been named by Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel (1995, 1996) as the problem of *subjectivity*, and it inhabits the Euro-American imagination at the deepest levels. There is not space here to elaborate Dussel’s historical tracings of the trajectory of European subjectivity. Suffice it to note that so many of the paradigmatic philosophical positions operating in the world today are grounded in an acceptance of the Self as the free and definitive arbiter of experience. This is true whether one refers to Descartes’ “I think therefore I am,” Adam Smith’s logic of “self-interest,” or Darwin’s evolutionism as a justification for “private” enterprise and individual self-development. Dussel’s point is that, in Anglo-American public rhetoric, “freedom” is the primary buzzword, but in actuality, it is

subjectivity that is the motive force. This is what accounts for the contemporary inversion of values whereby in the name of freedom, over 500,000 Iraqi children can be murdered by the enactments of British and American foreign policy (McMurtry, 2002). If freedom as an ideal is conflated with my subjective determinations of what is necessary for my survival, then the sacrifice of others has its own legitimacy. Hence, Dussel argues that killing and various forms of genocide are precisely the organic obverse of a subjectivist, self-enclosed logic of freedom. This helps to explain how, for example, the Bush Administration, like others before it, can commit gross atrocities throughout the world without any sense of guilt or remorse.

This entire discussion now brings me back to my opening remarks about Special Education. If qualitative research is to “transform” the practice of Education, two things have to happen. The first is to continue to affirm the originating gesture of the human science tradition, which is the turn to experience. This certainly was a major breakthrough in terms of providing the means for exploring and articulating what it is like to live in the world in one’s given situation, whether a school, a hospital, or a home. Much has been learned over the last fifty years or so about the day-to-day realities of human life from this contribution.

The second requirement is to broaden the hermeneutic/interpretive vision of qualitative research to better elucidate the political, philosophical, and cultural grounds out of which the subjectivity of experience is formed. Without this last gesture, subjective experience remains both self-enclosed and then left dangling helplessly in the winds of broader worldly events. American Zen (Ch’an) writer, Charlotte Joko Beck (1989, p. 28), has said “Unless you are aware, you produce illness.” Without recourse to forms of worldly understanding that might heal the wounds of which it speaks, qualitative research runs the risk of remaining stuck in its (European) Romantic origins. In a way, the designation of “special” as a form of “species” is linked to this challenge. Qualitative research in Special Education cannot rest simply with a detailing of how, for example a deaf person experiences deafness or how a teacher of handicapped children experiences her work. Such studies must continue, but they must also be linked to deeper appreciations, which I will now try to discuss under the topic of “global times.”

“Globalization” was a significant topic after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. The end of the Cold War inspired a frenzied lather of excitement amongst the corporate, political, and military elites of the Anglo-American alliance. They saw their chance at capturing the entire globe within the web of their particular theory of economic determinism, the last residual theory of the European Enlightenment’s dream of universal reason. Hence, 9/11, as a semiotic event, was produced by the US government itself as a pretext for invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan, and now perhaps Iran and Syria (Ahmed, 2002; Chossudovsky, 2003). The fact that the war went badly is a sign of the futility of its original conception, and I believe the world is currently witnessing the death-throes of the last great empire of Western “civilization.” We all need now to be asking about the necessary conditions for shared global futures.

My point is that the necessary conditions must include a re-thinking of the basic epistemologies that inspired and nurtured Western culture to its imperial heights but now are revealing their fundamental inadequacies. I have already referred to Aristotle’s Theory of Substance and Principle of Non-Contradiction which privilege separation and difference. Also easily traced are

the various philosophies of liberalism that underwrite the concept of the free autonomous person. Another source resides in the Judeo-Christian tradition itself and its concept of divine chosenness. That story begins with God choosing Abraham and his seed forever to be a “Light to the nations” (Isaiah 51:3-5) implying the rest of the world is in darkness. A later Christian formulation says that “Many are called but few are chosen” (Matthew 22: 13-15), and historically this text has inspired anxiety and neurosis from people’s fear of not being among the chosen. The theology of divine chosenness is especially pernicious when it is assumed that physical disabilities may be a sign of not being among the chosen. According to that theory alone, either disabled people, blind people, the deaf, and mentally handicapped all received their shape, character, and situation because they lie outside the plan of divine choice (how could a perfect God make imperfect beings?) or they must wait in hope to one day join the community of the well, but always outside looking in. This same problem resides in Western theories of national and cultural development. Your lack of development is a sign of your exclusion from the club, the club of the chosen. If you want to be selected to join the club you must first take on its ways and manners of being. As Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State during the Clinton administration said to the Harvard graduating class of 1997: “Today I say that no nation in the world need be left out of the global system *we* are constructing.... Every nation that seeks to participate and is willing to do all it can to help itself will have America’s help in finding *the right path*” (cited in Spring, 1998, p. 8, italics added). The original biblical words “Many are called but few are chosen” were directed at a poverty-stricken person who received an open invitation to a wedding feast but then was refused admittance because of not wearing the right clothes.

Again, the point of all the political references above is to underscore how it is that the way we address Special Education needs to be put in the context of how we understand the broader world in which students, parents, and teachers conduct their lives. So, if Special Education paradigms are constructed mainly through the interpretive frames and languages of the dominant Western tradition, then, when that tradition itself reveals its own pathologies, as it is now doing on a global scale, Special Education, like all academic areas in the same tradition, inevitably is inhabited by problems it cannot solve from within itself. It needs an Other, which can be defined as that which lies “outside” of the limits of what may be known or understood at any particular time.

Of course, in terms of the principle that I am promoting here, namely that there is only one world and each of us is connected, or interconnected within it, means that the Other is never actually “outside” anywhere, because there is no “other” place to reside outside of the fullness of life as it fully exists. By extension, what is required of us to heal ourselves is actually fully available to us at all times because it is always present in the world somehow. The fundamental problem pertains to matters of perception, openness, and appreciation, or, in the language of Wisdom traditions, of how to overcome one’s ignorance rooted in illusion or delusion. A common strain of ignorance may interpret disabled people as products of divine choice, which can further intensify their victimhood within normative culture.

In Asian traditions, the philosophy of *karma* can operate in a similar way. “Karma” names the relationship of cause and effect, especially in the moral realm. If bad things happen to you, it is because you did something bad, not necessarily five minutes ago, but perhaps many years ago.

Indeed, karmic influences can go on for generations. At the University of Alberta, I have developed a graduate seminar called “Teaching as the Practice of Wisdom” in which we study day-to-day encounters through the prisms of the world’s great Wisdom traditions, such as Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Sufism, and Aboriginal spirituality. One day, a student arrived in class, and when I asked, “How are you today?” she broke out in tears. “My husband just left me after eighteen years of marriage,” she said. A Chinese student in the class who had been studying Falun Gung philosophy, based on Taoism, immediately said, “That means you must have done something bad a long time ago!” Not very comforting words for someone feeling deeply betrayed and abandoned.

The Asian Law of Karma has its equivalents in the Judeo-Christian tradition through various theologies of divine retribution. God takes vengeance on people when they are unfaithful to their covenant, and this is taken as a reason for illness and catastrophic political events. The consequences of “sin” (which literally means “missing the target”) can be felt into the third and fourth generations (Exodus 20:5). This view is beautifully repudiated in the mythical story of Job, the world’s most godly, faithful man. In spite of his deep faith, he suffered misfortune and illness. He protests to God, claiming his own goodness: “Have I denied anything to the poor...? Have I eaten my food alone, not sharing it with the fatherless?” (Job 31:16). In reply, God refuses such self-justifications, pointing to Job’s ignorance: “Have you ever commanded the morning, or shown the dawn its place?” (38:12). In the end, Job is contrite, accepting the life he has been given, in all its mystery: “I spoke of things I did not understand, too wonderful for me to know” (42:3). The point of this ancient story is that human suffering cannot be reduced to a simple question of “Why?” Far more important is to affirm the goodness of life in spite of all human persuasions to the contrary.

Yes, there are profound connections between our actions and their long-term consequences, and it is important to be mindful of this at all times. But to say that we are always ultimately responsible for what happens to us is to place too much faith in the human capacity to correctly interpret human events. Many things that happen in life simply cannot be explained by human interpretation; to argue that they can is a sign of what the great Buddhist scholar and teacher, D.T. Suzuki (in Thompson, 1987), called “the homocentric fallacy” – the idea that the whole cosmos has its centre and reason for existence in humanity alone. So, if Western Reason through its Enlightenment traditions of science, including the qualitative human sciences, is incapable of explaining or even “understanding” the full meaning of human suffering, as embodied by those who come to be known as Special Education students, for example, and the Asian law of karma can unfairly interpret misfortune in a way that actually increases people’s suffering: how shall we approach those sometimes named in English as “invalids?”

That word alone points in an important direction that is related to the quantitative/qualitative debate. “Validity” in statistical research design is a measure of the degree to which an instrument actually measures what it is supposed to be measuring. So, does a particular test in math actually measure a student’s math ability, or really only his/her test-taking ability? In the context of our discussion here, whether a *person* is “valid” depends on the construct of what a person is ideally supposed to be. Otherwise they are in-valid; they are *invalids* (see Jardine, 2000). But such a claim itself is only valid if the original ideal construct itself is justifiable in some way, again relying on a judgement that is necessarily conditioned by time, place, and culture.

In the context of what I am proposing here, the world cannot be divided between persons who are valid and those who are invalid. Either we are all valid, or all invalid, and indeed I would argue that we are all invalids. Every one of us fails in some way to live up to any ideal, whether religious or secular, that human beings have been able to construct for themselves. But it is precisely our shared invalidity, our shared experience of falling short, indeed, our shared suffering, that can be the source of a new common bond between persons. This suffering cannot be interpreted precisely, because as the story of Job suggests, it is not for us to know. Our work is to accept life itself as a gift and to appreciate it as such, no matter how difficult it seems to be on the surface. When I am in difficulty, what is most helpful from friends and others is not, so much, advice, interpretation, hard solutions. What is most helpful is simple friendship, arising out of openness, generosity, and for-itself goodness. Of course, expertise is often necessary, but not the necessary pre-condition, which is *compassion*, meaning, “suffering with” (> Latin, *com-“with”, pati pass- “suffer”*). The great Indian social activist, Mahatma Gandhi (1967, p. 112), once said, “Intelligence without compassion is diabolical.”

Kindly allow me to relate a short personal story. My first job as a new graduate with a BA degree in Social Science and English Literature was as a Child Care Worker with emotionally disturbed children in a residential treatment centre. Most of the children suffered greatly from the consequences of physical or mental abuse, autism, schizophrenia, and other dis-orders. For me, the most startling revelation was that those workers most effective with the children were not the most educated or sophisticated, but those who simply extended the hand of human friendship to the children, accepting them as brothers and sisters of the same human family. I do not wish to reduce this complex matter to mere sentiment, but I do wish to note that those workers who, with their advanced degrees in Behavioral Psychology or other forms of therapeutic protocol, tried to “bring the children around” to some preconceived normative ideal – these well-meaning people were less “effective.” It is almost as if the children could intuit an inherent coercion in the practices of behaviour modification (for example), and they resented it, often starting to play different sorts of power games with their assigned staff members. No, we are all invalids; that is why we need each other. Without you, as a living, breathing presence with whom to share a world, I am only half a person. As persons, we need first to feel accepted and welcome in this world before we need to be “interpreted.” Indeed, as a contemporary sage, Wendell Berry (1999, p. 4) has put it, “a preoccupation with interpretation and meaning often gets in the way of simple appreciation.” I think this holds true also in the broader realms of culture and international relations. For example, we must not allow a single, culture-bound interpretation of economic development to rule the whole world, an issue with which I will end my remarks.

There are two ways of understanding the identification of “global times” referred to in the title of this paper. Most personally favoured is a view that, for the first time in the human story, people from around the world are “facing” each other in unprecedented and creative ways. New possibilities now exist whereby we might better alleviate our invalidity, our collective suffering, through accessing the deep wisdom traditions from around the world, providing visions of what is required at the deepest ethical levels for our mutual survival. This is a vision of “intercivilizational dialogue” over shared human futures (first so named by Pasha & Samatar, 1996).

Unfortunately, “global times” are being determined most fully by its second identification, which is not intercivilizational dialogue, but the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1998). The world seems saturated with war and conflict, and this is largely the result of legitimate (in my view) resistances to the over-determination of economic liberalism, or neo-liberalism, as a universal recipe for human development. There is not space here to elaborate on this matter, but for a good elucidation of neo-liberalism, see Bourdieu 1998. What is most important is its effects on increasing numbers of people, both in the West and around the world. As philosopher David Loy (1998, p. 17) has said, “Today, the logic of the Market is the world’s first universal religion,” and the consequences of this are, and will increasingly be, devastating. This is because reigning free market theory is nothing but an abstract mathematical formulation that provides justification for environmental exploitation, hoarding of personal resources, cutting of public finances for social programs and the heralding of “excellence” culture. Excellence culture is another name for social Darwinism: only the best deserve to survive, and such survival necessarily involves a struggle and war. For those of us in Education, and perhaps especially Special Education, social Darwinism does not look kindly on the weak, the vulnerable, and the infirm. If only the fittest survive, then under the reigning interpretive paradigm, only the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most wealthy, and the most powerful have a chance. The polarization of the rich and poor of the world is increasing at a rapid rate, with the wealthy now barricading themselves behind ever more sophisticated systems of security against “everyone else.”

As educators, what do we have to say about this? Surely “nothing” is an inadequate response, revealing our entrapment within interpretive paradigms that have lost sight of the worldly context of our work. Somehow, I think it means we must denounce at every opportunity, like the resistant children in the residential treatment centre, the dominant social hermeneutic of our time. Instead, let us affirm the fundamental solidarity and commonness of the human condition, sharing our ‘invalidity’ as our most important asset.

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