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TOWARDS INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: AN EXAMINATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES AND POLICY IN NEW SOUTH WALES DET SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to consider the relevance and consistency of socio-cultural theory to inclusive practices and the implementation of current government policy on inclusion. The policies of the NSW DET for the development of inclusive schooling will be examined. The implications of recent legislation as well as the recent initiatives such as Special Education initiative, curriculum changes, and collaborative processes will be analysed.

A brief review of the major tenets of social cultural theory that relate to special education is presented. An analysis is made as to how socio-cultural theory can serve as a theoretical framework to address the needs of teachers and students and enhance the development of inclusive schools in New South Wales. The discussion will centre on the implications of this synthesis for policy, practice in special education and theory, which may then be fed back into further development of the policy.

Introduction

The enrolment of young children and students with disabilities in regular classes has been one of the most significant pedagogical challenges for education systems over the last decade.

Inclusion is a philosophy that has it roots in social justice, and the deinstitutionalisation and civil rights movements of the 60s. The philosophy of inclusion and the development of inclusive schools have great rhetorical power and are influencing special education policy and practice in New South Wales. The adoption of this philosophy has brought profound changes to the provision of educational services for children with special needs in New South Wales. However, the implementation of these policies has faced a number of difficulties and it could be argued that there is a policy/practice divide. Inclusion is a philosophy and as such does not directly inform pedagogy or curriculum. There is a need for a theoretical foundation for special education that addresses this dilemma of the application of policy to practice (De Valenzuela, Connery & Musanti, 2000, p.113). A paradigm which shows promise in filling this void is socio-cultural theory of Lev Vygotsky and his theory of disontogenesis (atypical development) in particular.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the relevance and consistency of socio-cultural theory to inclusive practices and the implementation of current government policy on inclusion in New South Wales DET schools.

Philosophy of Inclusion in Special Education

Inclusion is not only a special education issue but has broader implications. Inclusive schooling is part of school change and effective school leadership programs. Inclusive schools try to provide a complete education to all students who are enrolled. There is growing recognition in DET policy statements that schools should try to be inclusive. An inclusive school has been described as one that caters for the needs of all learners where all learners are valued and respected.

Although all Australian states and territories provide educational services for students with special needs, these services are done at the discretion of these states and territories. There is much diversity in the special education policy statements and this diversity illustrates the extent to which arguments for inclusive education may have affected service provision in these states and territories (Dempsey, Foreman & Jenkinson, 2002).

In special education contexts, inclusion means that approaches to teaching, leadership and school organisation will have to be reconceptualised. Although there are different viewpoints, inclusion is a philosophy that implies the complete acceptance of a student with a disability in a regular class. Inclusion as an educational concept negates special education as a segregated placement. The child belongs in the regular classroom with support services delivered to the child rather than moving the child to the services. Many academics and professionals have argued that there is no place for segregated settings and that these students have the right to be educated not just in a regular school but in a regular class along with other students (Wolfensberger, 1980; Stainbeck & Stainbeck, 1996).

The Victorian and Tasmanian education systems advocate the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular classroom and stress the importance of providing the core curriculum for all students.

In NSW the curriculum framework under the direction of the NSW Board of Studies is underpinned by a set of principles that reflect the notion of an inclusive curriculum to meet the needs of all learners:

(a). all students must be able to engage in, take responsibility for and continue their own learning

(b). all students are entitled to a core of knowledge, skills, understanding and values

(c). education must be inclusive of all students attending schools in NSW

(d). teachers, schools and school authorities will decide how to maximize students' learning

(NSW Board of Studies: K-10 Curriculum Framework, 2002)

Arguments For and Against Inclusion

The basis of the adoption of these profound changes is that a unified and coordinated education system is likely to provide better educational support for all students than two separated education systems, i.e. regular education and special education. Rather than categorising students using psychometric tests and then assigning them to a service, students would be assessed on the basis of their curriculum needs and would be supported as far as possible in the regular classroom. This support would be supplemented by specialist teachers as necessary.

There are several arguments that the inclusion movement use to support its case (Cole, 1999). First, it is claimed that there are not two different types of students in the education system - regular and special. Instead there is a single body of students and it is the responsibility of the schools to meet their needs. Secondly, it is argued that having two education systems is inefficient as there is much of replication of services. Thirdly, it is thought that having a separate education system leads to the development of inappropriate attitudes and beliefs in society. A final argument is that maintaining some students in special schools and support classes is discriminatory and cannot be justified on the basis of equity. Inclusion is premised on the right of all children to be full members of regular classes of neighbourhood schools. Supporters of inclusive education suggest that with appropriate levels of peer and staff support and with appropriate levels of curriculum modification, the education of students with very high support needs in regular classes can be a meaningful experience for those students and their peers.

Not surprisingly, some people see inclusive education as an extreme option for many students with a disability. Some academics (Kauffman, Bantz & McCullough, 2002) have argued that special education has lost its way in recent years and has been overly influenced by philosophical arguments associated with inclusion. They argue that special education grew out of the recognition that the regular education system did not meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Some teachers also feel that they do not have the necessary skills to support students with special needs. The recent Shaddock report (2005) into provisions for students with special needs found that teachers in the regular system are developing negative attitudes towards inclusion and, particularly, high school teachers are making few accommodations and adjustments to meet the needs of the diverse students in their classrooms.

Historical Context in NSW

Special education services were originally provided outside of the regular state education systems. These schools were initiated by parents and concerned citizens. The state department of education took responsibility for students who were deemed educable and placement was often in terms of diagnosis and degree of disability. Essentially for some time there were two systems of education in NSW, the regular system and the special education system. There was a major shift in education as a result of the civil rights movements in the USA towards integration of students with special needs. This major shift also resulted in closure of some special schools and the move of others to more integrated settings.

Special Education Policy in NSW DET Schools

Recently in NSW, there have been significant changes to both legislation and practice which have brought significant changes to the provision of educational services for children with special needs. One of these is the Special Education Initiatives (2005-2007).

The Initiatives are a systematic refocus of the way special education is conducted in public schools across NSW to meet the needs of special education. The five themes of the Government's Special Education Initiatives are:

1. Doing things differently to meet the challenge of special needs through effective service delivery models
2. Addressing the specific support needs of students with special needs using needs based assessment
3. Meeting the challenges of personalised learning

4. Building the capacity of the workforce to respond to the challenge of students with special needs in mainstream classroom settings
5. Strengthening relationships across Government to better provide for students with special needs

(Auditors General's Report, Special Education Audit: August 2006)

Two Commonwealth Acts, the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), are now also available to be used by parents to enrol their children in neighbourhood schools. The impact of the Special Education Initiatives, plus the legislation, has brought significant changes in placement of students and in the roles and responsibilities of regular and special educators

The implementation of these policies has led to substantial changes in the delivery of special education to students with disabilities in NSW. There is substantial evidence that a large number of students have moved from special to regular schools and that there are increasing numbers of students with a disability being identified in regular classes (Dempsey, Foreman & Jenkinson, 2002). However, even though inclusion has been the stated policy and has informed special education service delivery and practice of the NSW DET, there has yet been no move to abandon completely segregated settings.

At the moment the NSW DET, although supporting the continuation of special schools and support classes, has signalled that the number of children enrolled in special schools will be reduced and that Support classes for children with mild intellectual disabilities will be or have already been closed. These students will be enrolled in regular classes with teacher's aide special support. Therefore, in New South Wales there are effectively three main types of enrolment options for students with a disability. The vast majority of students will be educated in regular classrooms and will have their needs adequately met by regular classroom teachers, with assistance from specialist support staff as required. A smaller group of students are enrolled in either support classes in regular schools or in special schools. The latest NSW DET special education initiative (Special Education Initiatives, 2005-2007) is to close the support classes for children in the category of intellectually mild and to place the children in regular classes with support from teacher's aides special. The purpose is to provide the least restrictive environment for this group of children, i.e. provide an environment that most closely parallels the regular classroom.

While the argument whether inclusion philosophy should be accepted now seems redundant, schools continue to debate the merits of including students with a disability in mainstream schools. Currently the debate centres on the degree to which this inclusion should occur rather than whether it should occur at all, and the strategies that should be employed to support this inclusion.

The policy changes have provided significant challenges, and practice is shifting and changing. Most importantly, the roles of regular classroom teachers and special educators will be

changing. No longer will special educators be delivering curriculum to students in segregated or semi-segregated settings. Increasingly, students with special needs will be enrolled in their regular classrooms and it will be the regular teachers who will be responsible for the delivery of educational services. Special educators will have more of a special education collaborative consultant role to regular classroom teachers and schools rather than a face-to-face teaching role.

The Policy/Practice Divide

Meeting a diversity of needs in the classroom can be a challenge. The demands of teaching in mixed ability classrooms, of changing instruction to meet individual needs, teaching to reduce prejudice, of working with others in the classroom, and of taking time out of the classroom to meet with other professionals, such as a special education consultant, are considerable and may be seen as a burden for regular classroom teachers.

A recent report has revealed that most regular class teachers (Shaddock, 2005) feel that they do not have the skills to provide for students with special needs in their classrooms. This is of great concern given that regular class placement with specialist support is now the preferred model of service delivery in NSW for the great majority of students with disabilities. The Shaddock's report (2005) has highlighted a severe policy/ practice divide in special education, particularly, in high school teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and their lack of confidence, skill and knowledge in providing for individual needs of their students.

Need for Theory to Implement and Reflect on Policy and Developmentally Appropriate Practice.

While the movement towards inclusion can provide obvious improvement for the quality of education and social life for children with special educational needs, the implementation of the principles of inclusive education need to be adjusted to the needs of particular students in a particular social situation for their development. Regular class teachers need to know how to implement pedagogy within today's inclusive school. Regular and special educators need a template for how learning will proceed given the interaction of language, cognition, and culture inherent in classrooms with diverse student populations. This problem needs to be understood within a suitable theoretical framework. Recently, the theory of Vygotsky and other emerging social constructivist perspectives have made a strong impact in the field of education as they focus not on an isolated individual but on the interaction of individuals within their social and cultural context (Harry, Rueda & Kalyanpur, 1999). Obviously, this theory has a great potential to inform the practice and the policy of special education, considering that Vygotsky's major concepts 'were conceived, formulated and elaborated upon within the special education framework and terminology' (Gindis, 1999, p.334).

Socio-Cultural Theory Contributions to Special Education

Over the past three decades socio-cultural theory has become a powerful influence in educational psychology, developmental psychology and early childhood education in English speaking countries including Australia. Some of the most influential theoretical concepts of Vygotsky's theory relate to the:

- central tenet of sociocultural theory is co-construction of knowledge between the individual and social processes (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996)
- role played by language and other symbolic systems
- function of social interaction in the development of the human brain
- role of word meaning in complexive and conceptual thinking
- relationship between elementary and higher mental functions in the development of psychological processes
- concept of the zone of proximal development to explain learning and teaching. (Mahn, 1999)
-

In spite of the fact that 'special education was the main empirical domain from which Vygotsky obtained data to support his general theoretical conceptions' (Gindis, 1999, p.334), the influence of the theory of Vygotsky on special education is still in its early stage (Gindis, 1999; Daniels, 2000; Harry et al., 1999). Even though Vygotsky's work in special education was published in Russia in the 1920s, it was translated into English only recently (Vygotsky, 1993). Gindis's analysis of this work suggests that the main aspects of Vygotsky's theories that apply to special education are the theory of socio-cultural activity and the theory of distorted development (Gindis, 1999). It has been proposed that the following are the major contributions that Vygotskian theory makes to special education practice (Vygotsky, 1993; Gindis, 1999; 2003).

Understanding the Social/Cultural Aspect of Disability

Understanding the nature of disability and the means to compensate for it are the core of any system of special education. Vygotsky was instrumental in the perception that:

a) Disability is a sociocultural developmental phenomenon, and

b) Disability consists of 'primary disability' (organic impairment) and the 'secondary' disability (distortions of higher psychological functions due to social factors).

For Vygotsky, the primary disability may limit the acquisition and the use of some social skills and mean that children acquire knowledge at a slower rate. However, it is the child's social milieu that may severely limit the course of development and lead to the delays or differences that are characteristic of many people with disabilities. Vygotsky explained that the many behavioural traits such as passivity, dependence and lack of social skills that are thought to characterise people with intellectual disabilities are in fact the product of poor access to socio-cultural knowledge, lack of social interaction and opportunity to acquire psychological tools. As a result of the primary disability, expectations and attitudes change access to social experiences leading to the development of the secondary disability. In order to prevent or remediate the development of secondary disability, Vygotsky proposed that changing social attitudes should be one of the first goals of special educators (Gindis, 1999).

Understanding Disability as a Developmental Process

Vygotsky stressed that disability will change during development and that it is sensitive to the influence of remediation programs and social influences. He emphasised that principles of child development are the same for children with disabilities as they are for typically developing children. These principles include social learning through the internalisation of external cultural activities into internal psychological processes. He also emphasised that culture is acquired through the mediation by material instruments and social signs/language. Within the context of development there are two classes of functions: these are natural and cultural. These relate conceptually to primary and secondary disability. Vygotsky thought that if the path of development diverges from normal social development because of the child's disability, then the child is socially deprived. This leads to the emergence of delays and deficiencies, ie secondary handicapping conditions and inadequate compensatory ways of coping (e.g. dependence, lack of problem-solving ability etc.). (Gindis, 1999).

Qualitative versus Quantitative Differences in Understanding of Development

Often people might feel that children with disabilities are just delayed in their development pattern or in the case of children with physical and sensory impairments are normally psychologically developing children but are different in their physical make up (e.g. deaf or blind). This view was interpreted by Vygotsky as a *quantitative* difference of development. But for him a child whose development is impeded by a disability is not simply 'a child less developed than his peers; rather he has developed differently' (Gindis 1999, p.36), that is in a *qualitatively* different way.

There are two major differences in the development of a child with a disability

a) the development of compensatory strategies
b) the emergence of social complications of the disability.

Compensatory strategies are a result of the child's personality, his or her experiences and education. They are aimed at the psychological tools (such as symbols/language). After they have been acquired then the child with disabilities will be able to develop the cultural or higher order concepts. Compensatory strategies are needed when the direct path to learning is blocked. They offer an indirect path to the same goal through mastering new psychological tools. Vygotsky emphasised that it is not a physical disability itself but its social complications that is the distortion of the relationship with other more experienced people, which affects the quality of the child's development (Vygotsky, 1993).

The social/cultural view of disability and understanding of the qualitative differences in development of children with disabilities led to the development of the zone of proximal development and dynamic assessment. These methodologies may be two of the most important ways that the policy/practice gap that is present in the field of special education may be closed (Gindis, 2003).

Zone of Proximal Development

The qualitative change that changes spontaneous concepts to scientific concepts is the interaction between more experienced experts and less experienced learners. This is the zone of proximal development. According to Vygotsky, children with special needs will have qualitatively distinct zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1993).

The zone of proximal development has a direct bearing on practice with children with disabilities, but as yet it has not been employed extensively in the development of programs in Australia. Its usefulness in this field is that it is capable of revealing the hidden potential of the child with special needs rather than just the current level of functioning.

According to Vygotsky the actual level of development (level of independent performance) does not sufficiently describe the development of a child. Rather, it indicates what is already developed or achieved, that is a 'yesterday of development'. The level of assisted performance indicates what the child can achieve in the near future, what is developing (potential level, 'tomorrow of development', what the child can become) (Vygotsky, 1986). In special education it is especially important not to concentrate on yesterday's development but on

tomorrow's (Gindis, 2003, p.211) as the gap between the independent performance and an appropriately assisted performance in children with special needs might be of a great significance due to initially distorted communication. Thus, the actual level of development becomes less important than the potential level of development with an expert.

Dynamic Assessment

The search for positive abilities and characteristics is trademark of Vygotsky. He thought that identification should be from the perspective of strengths not weaknesses and that there was a need to identify overall independence and a need for support rather than a measure of what the child cannot do or the static measure of an I.Q. test.

The idea of dynamic assessment has been elaborated on the basis of Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (Feuerstein et al., 1980; Feuerstein & Gross, 1997) and refers to an interactive process that has a test-intervene-retest format that focuses on the cognitive processes and meta-cognitive characteristics of the child. It provides important information about the child's learning characteristics and aims at leading the child with disabilities to success through the joint activity of a learning session.

Compensatory Strategies and Education of Individuals with Disabilities

For Vygotsky the aim of remedial education was to address the specific secondary disability. Physical and intellectual impairment can be overcome by creating alternative but essentially equivalent roads for cultural development. Students with disabilities must be enabled to acquire the psychological tools so that they can transform his or her natural abilities into higher mental abilities (Vygotsky, 1993).

As psychological tools must be internalised, teaching and learning must be differentiated so that the child develops the tools. In order to encourage the development of the tools it is necessary to change the signs of the symbolic systems but not meaning of the internalisation of the culture. Different methodologies have to be developed for different disabilities to help children develop the scientific concepts (Gindis, 2003).

The development of these higher mental processes depends on the quality and quantity of the mediating activity personalised in a teacher and in the structure and organisation of the learning environment. However, the focus of the compensatory mechanisms has to be on strengthening of the higher psychological function so that cultural learning can be internalised.

This will be achieved through the improvement in the quality and quantity of communication with adults and high functioning peers and social relationships with the group as a whole.

The emphasis on the concept of internalisation of psychological tools as the main mechanism of development has real importance for the field of special education. Vygotsky called for the development of different tools so that the same educational concepts can be conveyed. This may involve the acquisition of different symbolic systems but the content should remain the same.

Vygotsky's View of Inclusion as an Appropriate Design for Special Education

An important facet of Vygotsky's theory that relates to special education practice was his call for 'inclusion based on positive differentiation' (Gindis, 2003, p.213). Vygotsky was equally critical of segregation and mindless inclusion. In his early writings he advocated what is now called the Full Inclusion Model (Lipsky & Gardner, 1996). However, he was always equally critical of segregation and mindless inclusion. In his later writings he proposed that a very different learning environment where all of the staff could concentrate on the individual needs of the child was necessary. Although at first these two seem contradictory, Vygotsky emphasised that it was the methods of teaching that should be changed and not the school setting. The child must always be maintained as much as is possible within the mainstream social and cultural environment. According to Vygotsky, this is the only way that the secondary disability may be prevented or remediated (Vygotsky, 1993).

The Policy and Practice of Special Education in NSW DET Schools and Sociocultural Theory

Although Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory has not had a long history of influence on the policy and practice of special education in Australia, many of his theoretical concepts are consistent with the recent special education policies of the NSW DET.

Firstly, there is recognition of the ability of every student to learn, the need to focus on the student's strengths rather than their weaknesses and the need to recognise that instruction must be individualised in order to provide for a positive educational experience (Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, 2002).

Secondly, there is agreement that students with a disability should be placed in the least restrictive environment. Many states and territories interpret 'least restrictive environment' as the regular classroom (Department of Education, Tasmania 1997, Department of Education, Victoria,

2003). As a result of the Special Education Initiative placement in regular classrooms will become increasingly the case in NSW DET schools.

Thirdly, an important feature of special education policies in New South Wales is the provision of specialist staff to support regular class teachers. In NSW, an example of specialist staff is Itinerant Support teachers. Their main role is to support school staff in enabling students with disabilities to access and participate in the same curriculum as regular students. Regular staff are given assistance to develop support strategies so that they can deliver the core curriculum to these students (Thompson et al., 2003). In addition, access to the regular curriculum for students with a disability is now being encouraged by the Board of Studies.

Another key feature of educational policy for students with a disability is the collaboration of a variety of individuals to coordinate support for these students. In NSW, these are called Learning Support Teams (NSW Department of Education and Training, 1998). The core members of the team comprise the students, the student's parent or caregiver, the classroom teacher and other specialist support such as the counsellor or the itinerant teacher. Support teams consider the student's needs within the context of the regular classroom, how to coordinate support resources within and without the school, and the development of specific planning for classroom activities. The advantage of this approach is that the responsibility for supporting the student with special needs is seen as a shared, school-wide responsibility and keeps the student within the regular social and cultural community. However, it is becoming apparent that this is another area where policy is not being implemented in practice.

Finally, special education policy has made considerable accommodations for children with disabilities in the area of assessment. This is supported by most educational authorities as a means of promoting equity (Johnson, Kimball, Brown & Anderson, 2001). Modifications to assessment that are considered to be appropriate for students with disabilities include using appropriate technology, using time flexibly, allowing variations in the response, changing the presentation of the test and providing reasonable assistance (Foreman, 2005).

Further Implementation of the Policy

While there are obvious consistencies between the NSW Policy of special education and socio-cultural theory, further implementation of the policies can be enhanced by a closer look into the notions of the zone of proximal development and dynamic assessment.

The concept of needs based assessment is supported by the Special Education Initiative, but it is still a supplement to traditional assessment techniques such as individual I.Q. testing and other standardised measures which are usually administered by a School Counsellor. Recognition of dynamic assessment as a regular routine form of assessment of children with special needs and

the use of its principles will support the individual planning for specific educational strategies suitable for the needs of each child.

The operationalisation of the Zone of Proximal Development, the consolidation of compensatory strategies to support the development of the higher psychological processes and the development of an effective group support (collective) to mediate learning are all still areas that need further investigation and development in the NSW DET context before they can be implemented successfully.

Other areas that need further research are the key qualitative transformations, convergence of symbolic reference and thinking, the internalisation of speech and the development of verbal thinking, the interdependence of systems concepts and experience based concepts in the development of higher order thinking.

Vygotsky's call for an organised peer group has been reflected in peer-mediated social skill interventions in early childhood settings and the development of peer group and cooperative group methodologies in special education. However, regular classroom teachers have been reluctant to implement these methodologies because of the extra time and effort to establish the groups and to monitor and evaluate their activities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to assess consistency and relevance of Vygotsky's ideas for special education in NSW DET schools. Vygotsky's theories need further exploration in their connection to the practice of special education, but they are a promising start in giving direction to new policy development, particularly as it relates to how to implement inclusion in terms of curriculum and pedagogy in the regular classroom. His ideas relating to inclusion might seem contradictory but the focus is on core curriculum and differentiated pedagogy, which have always been the major concern in special education and social and cultural inclusion, both of which are supported in the Special Education Initiative.

Vygotsky's other major contributions have been the understanding that the development of children with disabilities is qualitatively different from that of their normally developing peers and that they must be provided with psychological tools to overcome this qualitative difference and not develop secondary disability. They will only achieve their potential if they can be given tools and symbolic systems which will compensate for the blocking of the normal developmental path.

This is where the policy/practice divide is occurring in NSW DET schools. The policy of inclusion is consistent with Vygotskian theory but the implementation of the policy needs to be supported by providing teachers with professional development on how to develop the higher

psychological processes in their students. They need to be shown what can be achieved through the development of compensatory strategies, the teaching of different symbol systems and employing the methodologies of the Zone of Proximal Development through interaction with a collective, and the use of Dynamic Assessment. These concepts are as yet poorly understood but have the potential to reduce the dissatisfaction and frustration with the implementation of the policy of Inclusion in New South Wales DET schools.

So does special education have a future in NSW DET Inclusive schools? Special education has a definite future, as Vygotsky has said special educators will have to be at the forefront of the change of attitudes towards students with disabilities. They will also have to develop programmes in the regular classroom that can provide students with disabilities with compensatory strategies, and mediated learning to develop the higher scientific concepts and encourage the internalisation of socio-cultural learning that will diminish the development of secondary disability. This is the challenge for special educators everywhere and this is where Vygotskian theory can inform practice and policy in a dialectic way, and overcome the policy/practice divide that is undermining implementation of policy initiatives in NSW DET schools.

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