Special Issue: Educating Children with Diverse Needs and Accommodating Difference

Guest Editor's INTRODUCTION

Kyunghwa Lee[1]

University of Georgia

This special issue examines practices, research, and policies relevant to educating young children who are considered to demonstrate atypical development and identified as having a disability in Asia and in the United States. Educating all children by providing them with a learning environment and pedagogy responsive to their diverse abilities, strengths, and needs is a pressing issue faced by educators across nations and regions. Yet, the education of children with disability labels has mainly been assigned to the field of special education (SPED), which is often separated from early childhood education (ECE). Instead of taking this disciplinary boundary for granted, I believe that we as educators should be concerned with serving the whole child population by actively and respectfully accommodating difference (Smagorinsky, Tobin, & Lee, 2019). To this end, this special issue invites early childhood educators and policy makers in the Pacific Rim and other geographic areas to engage in a critical conversation about (a) how we define disability and distinguish young children with disabilities from their peers, (b) how practices and policies relevant to the identification of and interventions for children with disabilities may reflect unquestioned beliefs about and expectations of child development and learning in local and global contexts, and (c) how those practices and policies may unintentionally lead to inequity in

Corresponding author, [1] kyunghwa@uga.edu

the education of young children who live on the margins due to their race, gender, socioeconomic class, language, immigration status, and other socially constructed identity markers.

Despite the contributions of SPED to the education of children with disability labels, the medical and clinical discourses and approaches on which mainstream SPED is based have been challenged by scholars in various disciplines, including, among others, sociology, literature, critical theory, economics, law, history, art, and philosophy (Taylor, 2016). In particular, since the establishment of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation in the United Kingdom in 1972 and the founding of the Society for Disability Studies in the United States in 1982 (Gabel, 2005), the field of disability studies (DS) has emerged from the humanities across much of the Western world. While science, medicine, and psychology focus on individuals, diagnoses, and treatments for disabilities (Connor, Valle, & Hale, 2015), DS is concerned with challenging "the society-wide, debilitating assumptions about people who do not conform to conventional notions of able-bodiedness" (Smagorinsky et al., 2019, p. 1). DS also honors the voices and perspectives of people with cognitive, neurological, and physical differences and encourages research carried out by scholars who themselves have experiences with disability labels (Gabel, 2005).

Applying the ideas and methods of DS to issues relevant to schooling, the field of disability studies in education (DSE) began in the United States in 1999 with the founding of a special interest group within the American Educational Research Association. Unlike mainstream SPED, the field of DSE encourages educators to contest "the view of disability as an individual deficit that can be remediated" and to critically examine how cultural, sociopolitical, and economic contexts "define people and determine responses to difference" (Gabel, 2005, p. 11). Thus, instead of treating cognitive, neurological, and physical differences as individual deficits which require early identification and intervention, DSE invites early childhood educators to interrogate how early schooling and ECE settings "*actively organize ways for [children] to be disabled*" (McDermott & Varenne, 1996, p. 109; emphasis in original). McDermott and Varenne (1996) remind us of how disability is culturally and historically constructed:

> The problems that exist in one culture do not have to exist in another culture, or at least not with the same interpretations and consequences, and the same is true in the same culture at different points of its history or at different levels of its hierarchy. (p. 110)

As an example of the cultural-historical nature of disability in schooling, my study of young children considered to have Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) revealed that those who do not promptly conform to teachers' expectations for good student behavior tend to be subjected to referrals for special education and for separate placements from the beginning of their schooling under the pressure of standards-based accountability reforms in U.S. public pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms (Lee, 2010, 2017). If we follow McDermott and Varenne's (1996) argument, how might the same behavior be interpreted differently in ECE settings in different cultures and at different historical times? Given that public ECE programs, particularly those designated as Title I schools, serve a large number of children of color from economically disadvantaged families, these children's schooling experience may well be different from that of their peers from affluent families. Many researchers have documented unequal educational experiences provided for children in two divided systems (e.g., Brown, 2007; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). In fact, the four children in my study, all of whom were recommended as participants due to their potential or officially diagnosed ADHD, were African-American boys from working-class families. Thus, the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability were evident and further raised an ethical question: are some children more likely to be classified as disabled and receive separate treatment due to their race, class, gender, or other identity markers? This is an important equity issue that all early childhood educators, regardless of their training in ECE or SPED, should engage with through critical dialogue.

A couple of clarifications are due. The social construction model of disability which in part frames DS and DSE can be misunderstood as a denial of human variation. Taylor (2016) clarifies:

> Human beings differ in many ways. Variations according to ability do not need to be valued negatively or wrapped in stereotypes and stigma. Disability is not viewed as a condition to be cured but rather as a difference to be accepted and accommodated. It is a social phenomenon through and through. (pp. xix-xx)

Similarly, critiquing medical approaches does not altogether reject "some benefits [e.g., medications and other technologies] the scientific method underlying the medical model" (Gabel, 2005, p. 8) has provided for people with neurological and physical challenges.

Gabel (2005) explains the aspects of the medical model that DS and DSE reject:

> The danger . . . is in the misapplication of the medical model to the social contexts of disability. Some of these misapplications include: using the medical model to diagnose, prescribe, and treat "conditions" that are the result of institutionalized oppression; adhering to the medical model's emphasis on individual pathology while ignoring social pathology; reproducing the myths used by the medical model (e.g., IQ) to stigmatize individuals and groups with labels; and dehumanizing individuals with functional limitations. There is also the danger . . . of the assimilation of disability culture through the use of the medical model to "cure" people when the results could be cultural genocide (e.g., curing deafness thereby eliminating Deaf culture, Tucker 1998; or curing Dwarfism thereby eliminating Little People, Ricker, 1995). (p. 8)

This special issue contains three empirical studies of how young children with disabilities are identified and educated in Japan, Bangladesh, and the United States; and one comparative review of research literature on the early identification and SPED services in China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Turkey. Not all articles included in this special issue are framed by DS or DSE. Nonetheless, they all illustrate how practices, research, and policies relevant to educating children either perceived to have disabilities or diagnosed with disabilities reflect the beliefs, values, priorities, and issues of each national culture.

In the first article, Stephanie Yagata shares a Japanese *hoikuen* (daycare/preschool) director's approach to working with children considered to have communication delays or differences. This director's discussion about purposefully refraining from intervention while carefully observing children over time is consistent with "the strategy of *mimamoru*" (p. 16) that Hayashi and Tobin (2015) observed in other ECE settings in Japan. In particular, Yagata found that in a Japanese version of *"individualized"* education discussed by this director, "progress is looked at individually and interventions are developed for individual students, but implementation of an intervention is provided within the whole class context and embedded into daily routines and play activities" (p. 19). These approaches are in stark contrast to typical speech and language therapy provided in many U.S. schools where intervention is provided immediately, repeatedly, and individually to target children but is rarely if ever integrated into other naturally occurring routines and play activities. Yagata concludes with thought-provoking questions which invite early childhood educators across cultures to grapple with the implications of these Japanese

approaches, challenging the unilateral influence of educational philosophies and practices from the West to other regions.

In the second article, Md. Jahangir Alam reports on his case study of parents' aspirations for the education of their children with special needs in Bangladesh. Alam generated data through interviews with parents and key informants, including education officers and teachers, and through observations in multiple urban and rural schools in Rajshahi Division. His analysis revealed that socioeconomic class was one of the major factors influencing parents' school choice. However, Alam also noted that "children with special needs are mostly out of school because of the school environment and the curriculum practiced at schools" (p. 36). Parents of children with special needs shared their struggles with a lack of information about ECE services and with "a lack of cooperation from schools, teachers, and the community" (p. 34). These concerns led to distrust in the schooling experience of their children with disabilities, and many parents thought "that keeping their child with special needs at home is safe and that rudimentary literacy and numeracy proficiencies is enough for their future development" (p. 37). Low parental aspirations for a child's education was more evident for girls than for boys. Alam's study reminds us of the importance of coordinated efforts among government offices, schools, communities, teachers, and families to actualize equity in education, rather than relying on only one of these parties.

In the third article, Serra Acar, Songtian Zeng, Ching-I Chen, and Huichao Xie discuss their review of research literature on assessment methods used to identify children for early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) services in China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Turkey. These authors reviewed peer-reviewed articles published in English in the last 10 years along with government reports and technical evaluation papers published in each country's native language. They organized their review of each nation's status in three areas, including legal foundations, assessment procedures for identifying young children with disabilities, and educational services for children with disabilities and their families, while discussing similarities and differences across the four nations at the end. Acar and colleagues noted that Western literature has greatly influenced the development of EI/ECSE research across the four nations and that "many of the tools are translated from Western studies" (p. 60). When considering the social construction of disability, using assessment tools developed in a culture that has different beliefs and values warrants

reconsideration. Acar and colleagues' suggestion for "[developing] instruments that are culturally and psychometrically sound for the population" (p. 62) is apt. Acar and colleagues' review also revealed the need for more teacher education and parent involvement in the area of EI/ECSE across the four settings. This invaluable comparative study makes one wonder how common terms, such as disability and inclusive education, are defined differently or similarly in these nations. Instead of assuming that they mean the same in all cultures, these foundational concepts beckon thoughtful investigations.

In the last article, Soyoung Park presents an ethnographic case study of how two Asian American kindergartners' SPED eligibility was determined during one academic year at an elementary school where over 90% of students were of Chinese descent and over 80% were English learners. Park generated multiple sources of data, including 460 hours of field observations; interviews with all teachers, staff, and parents who were involved in the SPED identification process for the two children; and documents on the individual children and on school-level procedures. Her findings revealed a key role played by general education teachers in the SPED identification process. In particular, even if the evaluation results of these children were not clearly indicative of SPED eligibility, the teachers working with the two children quickly determined that these children had disabilities because they deviated from the norms of behavior and academic development prevalent at their high achieving school. Park effectively illustrates how the teachers' views of these children were tainted by the model minority stereotype, which "attributes the success of Asian immigrants to culture, essentializing characteristics like hardworking, well-assimilated, and upwardly-mobile" (p. 77). She challenges the assumption that the disproportionate underrepresentation of Asian American students, compared to the disproportionate overrepresentation of Black and Brown students, in SPED placements ensures that the proper identification process is being used for Asian Americans. Park encourages us to critically examine how racial and other biases against a group of children influences the identification process of children with disabilities.

Together, the authors of these four articles invite readers to examine how children in different nations are identified as disabled and what intervention processes are used. Ultimately, I hope that this special issue will stimulate interest in DS and DSE among early childhood educators and researchers in the Pacific Rim and other geographic areas and lead

to critical inquiry into how practices and policies relevant to early identification and early intervention in each nation (a) are in sync or conflict with particular cultural beliefs and values and (b) both support and hinder equitable education for all children.

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