Special Education and Policy Change: A Study of Six Jurisdictions

Summary

Context and aim of the project
Over the past thirty years, inclusive education has become the dominant discourse in the field of special educational needs across the developed and developing world, reflected in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All (UNESCO, 2000) and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention includes a commitment to promote inclusive practices for disabled adults and children across all fields of social policy, including education, training and employment.

The focus on inclusion has tended to deflect attention away from changes within the special sector (OECD, 2007; EADSNE, 2010) and the use of official and unofficial forms of school exclusion, which is the focus of this network. This international collaborative project will analyse (i) the nature and extent of variation across developed countries in the use of special schools and classes; (ii) the permeability of the boundary between mainstream and special settings and (iii) the discourses underpinning the use of special settings in different contexts. The network will provide a state of the art analysis and critique of official statistics on the use of mainstream and special settings and their underpinning discourses reflected in policy and legislation. Of particular interest is the discursive use of official statistics within a globalised context. Special educational needs policy, with its emphasis on inclusive education, may be seen as a manifestation of travelling policy, with an overall homogenising tendency. At the same time, SEN policy is embedded within particular national and local contexts, thus adopting specific vernacular forms (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Dale, 2006). An international project using a network of researchers in case study countries is essential to understand the impact of both globalised and vernacular influences in SEN policy and practice across the developed world. All of the researchers engaged in this project have been working independently on this topic, and bringing them together, along with policy makers and practitioners, will allow important synergies to emerge. Further details of the significance of the programme are provided below.

The overarching question to be addressed by the network is the following:
In these six jurisdictions, what is the nature, scope and underpinning discourse of the special sector and what changes are evident in its shape and size over a ten year period?
Sub-questions include the following:
- In the six jurisdictions, what proportion of the population is identified as having SEN and what proportion of these children are in special settings?
- What are the social characteristics and circumstances of children educated in special settings and what disproportionalities are evident?
- What discourses on special provision are reflected in legislation and policy documents?
- What changes are evident in the shape and size of the special sector over a ten year time frame?

Description of the institutions involved
The following institutions are involved in the network: The Institute of Education, University of London; the University of Groningen; Macquarie University; San Diego State University; the University of Gothenburg; the University of Edinburgh. All are research intensive universities with a strong tradition of research and teaching in special educational needs. Each institution will host network meetings and seminars. Since submitting the original proposal, there has been some movement of project partners. Scot Danforth is now professor at San Diego State University, which has pledged commitment to the network. Professor Roger Slee has moved to the University of Victoria, Australia, where he is inaugural director of the Centre for Diversity, Educational Access and Success. He retains a part-time position at the Institute of education, University of London, which has continues to support this network. No other partner has moved institution. The Centre for Research in Education, Inclusion and Diversity (www.creid.ed.ac.uk), where Sheila Riddell is based, will host the network and will make available its administrative and academic resources to support the network.

Significance of the programme
There is a need for more high quality comparative research in the field of SEN. Existing comparative work includes Florian and McLaughlin's (2008) work on SEN categorisation, Norwich's (2008) study of dilemmas of difference and Harris and Riddell's work on alternative dispute resolution in SEN. The OECD and the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) publish and comment on national statistics (e.g. Meijer et al., 2006). However, there is no international comparative work that we are aware of which examines changing constructions of the special sector, the focus of this network.

The six jurisdictions included in the network exemplify different approaches to special education. Scotland and Sweden appear to have a low use of special schools and a continuing commitment to inclusive education. England, by way of contrast, appears to be in the process of revising its earlier commitment to inclusive education, with a growing use of special units, including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). New South Wales Australia has adopted an agnostic stance on inclusion and maintains a commitment to both special and mainstream schools. California has relatively high rates of SEN identification (about 21%) and, despite the rhetoric of education in the least restrictive environment, makes considerable use of special settings. Amongst European countries, the Netherlands has an academically selective education system and a traditionally large (but recently declining) special sector.

There are not only marked variations in use of special settings across the six jurisdictions, but also varying disproportionalities in relation to the categories which are employed and the social profile of children identified as having special needs, particularly in relation to race and gender, and (Florian and McLaughlin, 2008; Dyson and Kozleski, 2008; Riddell, 2011). For example, in NSW, although Aboriginal students account for just 5% of total school enrolments, in some parts of the state they constitute 40% of enrolments in special schools, and are particular likely to be identified as having behavioural and learning difficulties.

Official statistics, however, tell only part of the story in relation to the nature and use of the special sector. In some countries, there has been an erosion of the boundary

between mainstream and special (Slee, 2010), so that some children who are ostensibly enrolled in mainstream schools spend a large proportion of their time in behavioural support units or nurture groups. In many countries, the closure of special schools has been accompanied by a mushrooming of smaller special units attached to mainstream. Some countries have created new types of special unit for children who are deemed difficult to include in mainstream schools, such as Pupil Referral Units in England, which are often used to accommodate boys with behavioural difficulties. Elsewhere, however, research indicates that 'rather than altering the negative trajectory of some students', such responses may in fact 'precipitate movement down a school-to-prison pipeline' (Graham et al., 2010; Wald and Losen, 2003). Unauthorised absence is an issue in many countries, as is the use of 'partial enrolment'.

In the light of the evident gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the continued use of special settings, this network will use official statistics, key informant interviews and policy documents to identify trends in the use of special settings and the discourses underpinning particular practices. The project will explore the challenges in interpreting official statistics, given the evident ambiguity in defining what counts as a mainstream and special placement. **Each partner will produce a country report, organise a national inter-active workshop and contribute to a final international dissemination conference**.

During the first day of Workshop 1, 19th April 2012, presentations on each jurisdiction will be given covering the following broad areas:

- General characteristics and structure of each jurisdiction

- Structure of SEN/ASN system and how this relates to the structure of the general education system (proportion of school population in special settings, categories of learning difficulty/disability/social difficulty which are recognised).

- Broad principles underpinning the mainstream and special education systems and changes over the past decade.

- Major challenges for the special and mainstream systems at the present time.

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