

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

TOWARD A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY

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Educating students with special needs is often characterized as a challenge to teachers and administrators alike. Teachers are concerned with classroom management issues, curricular adaptations, and physical modifications in the learning space. Administrators are constrained by policy, budgets, and their boards. The challenges facing educators who advocate inclusion of all students are, therefore, readily ascertained: How do we create a supportive learning environment, how do we train our teachers, and where do we acquire the funding to support these changes? These are common, but important struggles. A diocese or district may take years to advance possible answers to these questions.

While it is necessary to face such concerns, some research is beginning to ask questions about how developmental disability is viewed in society as a way to prepare for addressing the questions of educators who work with students with special needs. Before strategizing about approaches and finances, perhaps it would be helpful to analyze the notion of developmental disability and reflect on the impact this idea has on educational practices.

DRAWING NEW MAPS: A RADICAL CARTOGRAPHY OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

PHIL SMITH. (1999). *Review of Educational Research*, 69(2), 117-144.

Phil Smith, a doctoral student in educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Vermont, offers a strident critique of the notion of developmental disability and sees it as a dehumanizing social construct.

Using the metaphor of cultural cartography, Smith demonstrates how the very idea of disability creates a cultural map that allows society to organize itself by locating various groups at certain places on the map. This cultural cartography, Smith states, while arguably useful for some in order to obtain adequate services, does not generally benefit those labeled as having a disability. Smith writes:

What does developmental disability mean? Why and how are people said to have it? How does that experience affect a person's life? For people with this label, for educators and researchers, for family members, and for policymakers, these are becoming important questions to answer. Throughout much of the twentieth century, persons with developmental disabilities have been institutionalized, hidden from public view by being removed to disability ghettos. (1999, p. 117)

Exploring a post-disciplinary approach, Smith shows how, in Western culture, positivism has been the dominant discourse in understanding all disabilities. A positivistic outlook maintains that the world is made up of clear and distinct knowable things, and that reason allows us to organize and give order to the world based on our knowing of said things.

In effect, Western positivistic science is driven to compare people to a standard norm, bound by the restrictions of linear progress and unifying explanation. Unable to be self-consciously critical of its essential normative structure, it cannot understand the values from which it rises. (Smith, 1999, p. 124)

The mapping of developmental disability clearly relies on a taxonomy of difference. Science assumes there is a standard for the socially typical person. Those who deviated from the prescribed norm are disabled.

The effects of positivism can be seen in the professional world when educators, ministers, social service agencies, and government officials espouse a philosophy that maintains that persons with disabilities need special assistance in order to live full lives. More often than not, the notion of a full life means the typical life that persons without disabilities live, which is presumed to be normative. Smith cites numerous examples from research into clinical practices that show that many professionals believe that they are better able than service recipients and their families to make choices and decisions regarding the kind, location, and extent of necessary services. Developmental disability is presented here as a socially created reality, a cultural map, drawn by positivistic cartographers, intent on keeping the world in order. In this cartography, persons with developmental disabilities are described as "using surveying tools such as intelligence quotients and adaptive measures" (Smith, 1999, p. 124). The discourse of disability remains

centered in the narratives of professionalized, positivistic science and requires, Smith argues, counter-narratives in order to “inhabit marginalized territories” (p. 124). As a result of this mapping, persons with disabilities are seen as being incomplete or broken and needing help so as to be fixed. Smith is even critical of educational practice in the state of Vermont—long acknowledged as among the most inclusive of students with mental retardation—for continuing to rely on psychometric maps in ascertaining eligibility for educational and community services. While such diagnostic testing is arguably common practice before the delivery of most special education services, researchers have found inequalities in the manner in which educational services are provided. Citing an earlier study on special education, Smith wonders who benefits from the labeling of students and from the creation of special education tracks:

Intelligence is a code word used by educators, psychologists, and other human-service workers to explain the current distribution of benefits from publicly supported programs.... Special education programs relying on the construct of intelligence (e.g., programs for those labeled retarded or learning disabled) distribute benefits to students, teachers, parents, teacher trainers, and other participants. In general, those who are said to have intellectual deficits receive fewer profits, advantages, or opportunities than do others associated with these programs. (Heiny as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 130)

After a brief discussion of the history of developmental disability and the concomitant medicalization and professionalization of the discourse of disability, Smith proposes a radical reconstruction of the very notion of disability. Calling for a new cartography, Smith maintains that all people with labels need the tools to create their own territories and to draw their own social maps. If empowered sufficiently to cross the borders erected by the dominant cartography, people with disabilities will be able to move from positions of marginality to positions of centrality in our society.

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