

## BOOK REVIEWS

DEBORAH FRASER, ROGER MOLTZEN & KEN RYBA (EDS.). *Learners with Special Needs in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press (2001). 535 pp. NZ\$79.95 (ISBN 0-86469-361-3)

*Learners with special needs in Aotearoa New Zealand* has become the standard text for anyone in this country working in special education. The fact that it has reached this second edition testifies to its popularity and utility for many teachers and parents. The book contains a wealth of information on disabilities which teachers need to understand, particularly the intellectual, sensory and physical disabilities, including some useful advice for teachers of regular classrooms.

In his foreword, Professor Ian Evans employs a navigational metaphor identifying how this book is a source of information, a 'marker point' charting where we are in the hazardous seas of special education. If this is the case, and indeed it appears to be so, then special education is caught in cross currents and one is left wondering where the contributors are going to put out their sheet anchor.

To use another apt metaphor, this book illustrates clearly both in its overall structure and the content of many of the individual chapters that special education is indeed 'caught between stories'. A major paradigm shift is taking place in special education. We are moving from a segregationist, deficit view of students with special needs to an inclusive, ecological one. This locates the book in a somewhat different place in the literature. This book is not just a manual on special needs but one which recognises (and should advocate clearly for) the move to inclusion. A number of the authors of this book appear to move freely between the stories without making apparent that they are even aware they are doing so. Parts One and Two of the book claim to take an inclusive perspective, while Part Three is then devoted largely to identifying categories of disability, going so far as to offer a category of 'less obvious special needs'. We shall return to this point.

While the book is well set out and carefully edited (with the exception of the last page listing the contributors), it would have been helpful to have a chapter that identified the conceptual framework for the book. In its absence the reader could become confused by the espoused recognition of inclusion and the categorical approach to any number of categories of disability. Mitchell's chapter on policies and systems comes closest to providing such an approach. It offers an analysis of the current state of special education and some insight into its origins and purposes.

Some writers (e.g. Bevan-Brown, Glynn, Macfarlane, Myer) have made clear their commitment to inclusion by the ways in which they have structured their chapters and offered suggestions to teachers. Some others have either accepted a categorical model or even advocated for segregated systems and national policy by category.

One must also wonder why so many writers who go into detail about the difficulty of definition still hanker after a categorical approach. The notion that a teacher 'knows one when they see one' is alive and well in the book. For example, "Ask any teacher to provide a definition of behavioural difficulties, and it is probable that they, along with many other professionals will find it a conundrum. However, ask the same teacher to identify a child in his or her class with behavioural difficulties and one can almost guarantee an immediate and definitive response" (p. 295). Or, "Ask teachers if they have any 'gifted' students in their classes and they can usually attest to their presence or not; where the response is affirmative these students can usually be identified without hesitation. When the same teachers are asked to provide a definition of the term 'gifted' they will often struggle" (p. 342).

This author makes the point that such a student "does not represent one of a homogeneous group of children, who reflect a unitary set of behaviours. In fact the difficulty in describing and defining this group of children and thus in developing a rationale for them as a group with special educational needs, has probably been a significant factor in the lack of attention accorded them" (p. 338).

Chapman & Tunmer devote a large part of their chapter to discussing the very real problems in defining specific learning disabilities (SLD). Their scholarly chapter is a testament to the elusiveness of the term. They conclude, "Because there is no one acceptable definition of SLD the label has become an umbrella term for a vast number of diverse learning and behaviour problems" (p. 245). They go on to say, "There is no one set of behaviours or characteristics that will be found in all students who have SLD. The term SLD covers a heterogeneous range of difficulties. Nonetheless, even though it has been difficult to determine precisely what SLD is, there is fairly widespread agreement that people can learn to know what SLD is when they come across it" (p. 246).

In identifying less obvious special needs we are told that they are “not instantly recognizable” (p. 500). One wonders how this is different from so many other categories, which, as the authors agree, defy description. Every student can be included here, however – a kind of reverse inclusion to bring everyone into the fold of special education. One is tempted to compare this to what Thomas Armstrong has recently coined, a category of IKS<sup>W</sup>AL (interesting kids saddled with alienating labels).

Many of the authors appear to espouse inclusion (Part Three is entitled ‘Including All Learners’) but in practice are reluctant to move from the deficit categorical approach. Throughout the book there is evidence of a struggle with definition with one author even using mainstreaming and inclusion interchangeably. This indeed may reflect the situation in special education itself. However, despite this struggle with definition, many authors courageously offer advice on how to work with students whose condition cannot be defined.

While New Zealand has not differed from most other Western countries in its use of categories, a national debate on identifying categories in the Education Act, which engaged a select committee of Parliament for over two years, resulted in no decision to proceed with such a proposal. Indeed, many of the advocacy agencies dealing with disability firmly opposed such a move. In this sense New Zealand has avoided the bureaucracy and, some would say, impediment of a categorical system. It is a testament, therefore, to the pervasive lure of the approach, that the standard text on special education in this country should advocate inclusion while still determinedly focusing upon each and every category for which an expert can be found.

One of the strengths of the book is that it is, to quote Evans, “a source of information that is directly relevant to us in this country” (p. 3). It makes a valuable contribution to all those in Aotearoa New Zealand who are interested in special education. Mitchell’s chapter gives an excellent overview of the policy and administrative systems that influence practice. A number of authors, notably Macfarlane, Glynn and his co-authors and Bevan-Brown, give a focus to the particular needs of the tangata whenua, the Maori population, of New Zealand. Meyer & Bevan-Brown’s chapter on social relationships is an invaluable contribution to the knowledge base of teachers wishing to build truly inclusive classrooms. Curzon and her co-workers have written a clear and helpful chapter on the role of information technology.

The reviewers are in total agreement with Evans who says in his foreword, “Modern special education is not only complex but rife with dialectical contradictions”. For example, “We reject labels yet organize our knowledge around syndromes and categories” (p. 5). He goes on to say that this book addresses these contradictions and here the reviewers must disagree with

him. Rather than address the contradictions, this book illustrates them and in some parts appears to show a lack of awareness of them. A student of special education would come away from much (but not all) of Part Three of the book confused as to why a section on including all learners should have such an emphasis on their identification and classification – even in one instance to the extent of supporting their segregation.

Ballard (cited by Chapman & Tunmer) argues that the crucial question that educators should ask is “How can I teach this child?”. Chapman and Tunmer point out that this makes the issue of teaching and the student’s learning needs the focus of attention. Not all the chapters offer such an approach. The book would have been improved if all the contributors in Part Three had made this their major emphasis.

Considering the almost perilous cross currents in which special education finds itself today, the editors should take some satisfaction from their success in raising the issue of inclusion. Finding a means of identifying special needs in a truly inclusive system demands a careful reframing of existing knowledge and practices to ensure contextual assessment and collaborative planning with regular class teachers. This book goes some way to meeting that demand.

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KEITH SULLIVAN. *The Anti-Bullying Handbook*. Melbourne, Auckland, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (2000). 267 pp. NZ\$29.95 (ISBN 0-19-558388-4)

Bullying has been a hot topic in the media over the last decade. Schools have become increasingly sensitive to the issue and parents are no longer accepting it as just being part of growing up. While it is recognized that the behaviour is widespread and frequent surveys point to its pervasiveness, there have been few books that provide assistance in dealing with bullying. Dr Keith Sullivan, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Wellington’s Victoria University, has produced a very useful manual that should be a must in every school’s library and compulsory reading for teachers and school administrators.

A mark of the quality of the work is that it is one of only three general works identified and recommended in the recently updated Department for Education Anti-bully kit, ‘Don’t Suffer in Silence’ in the United Kingdom. Sullivan clearly has the support of the leading English-speaking anti-bullying expert Professor Peter Smith, who has not only led the development of