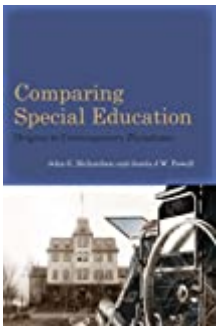
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John G. Richardson, Justin J. W. Powell. *Comparing Special Education: Origins to Contemporary Paradoxes.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. 360 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6073-7.

Reviewed by Henry C. Alphin Jr (Drexel University)

Published on H-Disability (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Comparing Special Education is a work that covers a lot of ground both theoretically and geographically. John G. Richardson and Justin J. W. Powell approach special education from several angles, evoking theories of disability evolving through a system of governmental classification development and social stigmatization. In this manner, Richardson and Powell provide history and perspective on special education pertaining to educational, sociological, economic, linguistic, and political worldviews. This holistic approach permits the reader to consider various perspectives and better understand how the disparate approaches developed into the structure of special education systems in existence today.

The book is split into three parts: the origins of special education, comparisons of (global) special education, and contemporary paradoxes. In the introduction, Richardson and Powell argue that special education and disability are interconnected to regular education, and multidisciplinary study has led to scholars and practitioners âcontinuously renegotiating boundaries.â As scholars and stakeholders analyze special education structures and institutions, they have come to uncover bureaucracy, âbattles for professional control,â and financial challenges (p. 7). Scholars and stakeholders are surrounded by indirect angles provided by institutions and structures, and the authors argue that the study of social implications of special education, including juvenile delinquency and educational and social stratification, should occur in order to truly analyze special education systems.

A central focus of the book is on government and social inclusiveness of education, whereas there is a convergence in âthe belief … that individuals considered to have special education needs *can* and indeed *should* be educated with intent similar to that which is accorded their peersâ (emphasis in the original). However, while many countries have signed up to a theory of inclusiveness, segregation of special education students from the regular education population creates a lack of a âglobal consensusâ on just how to bring about inclusiveness (p. 17). A roadblock to inclusiveness occurs when educational structures are devised according to political, economic, and cultural elements that tend to classify students. Classification and segregation tend to focus on the studentâs disability, rather than lowering impediments that institutions and systems tend to create. The authors use historical, economic, and social data to expand on a theory of disability as adversely institutionalized, which places the onus on comparative special education systems and governments to deinstitutionalize special education, rather

than stigmatize the student–or along historical lines, penalizing and removing from societyâs view the disabled minds and bodies.

Richardson and Powell strategically fuse history with philosophical thought when explaining the history of comparative special education. The Enlightenment–in official, counter, and periphery elements–contributed to special education thought on a philosophical level, with John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, George Berkeley, and RenÃ© Descartes providing theories of knowledge. Particularly, Lockeâs view of property was âfreedom from necessity,â with an example that servants and children did not lack freedom because of a lack of material resources; they were simply tied to the resources of others in a âbondage to the necessities of survivingâ (p. 35). It is refreshing to see a structured philosophical perspective, in chapter 1, on the origins of the intertwining of disability and subsistence, with the disabled tied to the property owner, whether the owner is an individual, family, institution, or government. The reader is able to see how the worldview of a society influenced by Locke could lever the perspective of those in charge of the present and future lives of the disabled, during the Age of Reason.

The authors discuss Lockeâs take on education as teaching the ability to adapt to âsocial and civil restraintsâ that lead to membership within a civilized society, with Jean-Jacques Rousseauâs views providing a similar French ideal (p. 59). Philosophers have played a symbolic role in social views toward humanity, thus determining who might become educated and how this education should take place. Yet, as noted by the authors, social deviants and the disabled were often grouped together, and Jeremy Benthamâs panopticon came about at a time when supposedly inferior minds and bodies were institutionalized through juvenile reformatories. It should be noted that Enlightenment reforms were largely concerned with deaf and blind individuals, and thus the scope of considered disabilities spread over time to eventually include modern classifications of disability, including speech impairments, learning difficulties, and various intellectual maladies now treated with pharmacological remedies.

The late nineteenth century provided a foundation for the future of special education through compulsory education laws. Richardson and Powell argue that mass schooling and economic development were goals set by nations, which assisted in providing a national comparative gauge of âstrength and statureâ (p. 65). Chapter 2 lays out the dichotomy of Englandâs constitutional regime and punitive benevolence type versus Franceâs absolutist political regime and paternalistic type, which ultimately leads to a nationalistic view for the former and an attempt at decentralization for the latter. The reader leaves chapter 2 understanding that the end of the eighteenth century, with âinstitutions and schools for the deaf, blind, and mad,â marked a period toward integration that affected special education and the disabled, particularly with a shift from criminalizing and hiding the disabled to developing vocational skills that could better provide for the economic development of nations (p. 89). This aspect of inclusive and compulsory Western education would become exported, at least in theory, to much of the rest of the dominant and some of the emerging economies. Chapter 2, with T. H. Marshallâs three sets of rights (civil, political, and social) and Karl Polanyiâs socioeconomic perspectives of reciprocity and retribution, provides a fair assessment of the growth of the social perspectives of civil rights and competing economies, and how this provided a forum for the disabled. Disabled individuals benefited through a better understanding, by society, that the disabled were not âparasiticâ ineducable monsters and could be taught labor and social skills, rather than being illegitimately disciplined for maladies outside of their control (p. 82).

Part 1 is the strongest part of the book, and lays the foundation for a better understanding of the growth of special education. For instance, Richardson and Powell argue that a countryâs level of economic development is a reflection of the nationâs economic and political history, which is of specific âconsequence for education provisionsâ (p. 103). Mass schooling that provides inclusive education for the disabled places focus on the need for strategies to better prepare the disabled for higher education enrollment, as the country develops. As with much of the book, the view here is that inclusive education integrates, rather than separates, the disabled, thus acknowledging the existence of the disabled; acknowledgment through inclusive education, rather than hiding these individuals or segregating them, prepares the disabled socially and intellectually to challenge their next level of possible growth, which could entail entering the workforce or enrolling in higher education.

Richardson and Powell go into great detail on the process of determining placements of students in special education systems, including a semi-closed feedback system and Max Weberâs ideal type approach for understanding political, cultural, and organizational elements that affect decision making. Country, regional, and cultural comparisons include Chinese guanxi; African polit-

ical corruption; Latin American clientelism (control over access and resources); and Eastern European authoritarian regimes. The American and German education systems are compared in chapter 5, with the understanding that while Germanyâs class-based school systems and the United Statesâ tracked comprehensive schools are similar in theory, the countries diverge in their approaches to inclusive education. The United States is partly restricted in flexibility by legal precedents and Germany faces local and cultural differences in the disparate Lander priorities.

Part 3 delves deeper into the â*simultaneous rise* and *coexistence*â of the inclusive and segregated special education systems, including a cross-national comparison of classification rates; segregation and inclusion rates; segregation index (percentage of students with special education needs spending most of the day outside of the general classroom); and the dichotomous decentralization indicator (importance of national government intervention to reform education systems) (p. 206, authorsâ emphasis). Richardson and Powell expand on unitary systems that aim for full inclusion, multiple tracks that utilize inclusion and segregated schools, and dual systems that âoccupy parallel worldsâ yet are moving toward the multitrack system (p. 223).

Chapter 8 is another strong, thorough chapter. Richardson and Powell discuss medical model deficits, Lennard Davis on âDeafâ as a social category and linguistic minority, the roles of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and globalization, and economic development and education in East Asia. The authors argue once more for inclusive education in the final section. In essence, the first part of the book provides a great philosophical layout of comparative special education, and the final chapter argues for inclusive education while naming who will be factors and why current models need reform.

In *Comparing Special Education*, there is very little coverage of higher education disability services, aside from one paragraph in chapter 7. The authors rightly argue that more college students are beginning to self identify as disabled, but they could have said more about how secondary education systems, in preparation for vocation or further education, could do a better job of preparing students with the need to self identify in order to receive the assistance they require or the benefits of the legal status they acquire. The authors briefly discuss higher education enrollment as a goal, but they offer no explanation of how that might happen. Tied into this concern is that the authors neglect to provide empirical data backing up their promotion of integration of regular and special education systems versus separation of the two, and this is a deficit throughout the book. A better focus on higher education and outcomes assessment would have bridged the gap.

Richardson and Powell provide no coverage of e-learning and e-learning accessibility, which has become a topic of interest since the 1990s and is of great importance in the twenty-first century. Each of these concerns has a general focus on disability theory, philosophy, and the economics of education, which all form parts of the general focus of *Comparing Special Education.* These are such important topics that the authors could have created part 4 based around these subjects and completed a truly thorough book. My final concern with the book is that the authors bounce around topics quite a bit, with many paragraphs either as iterations of previously discussed topics or not quite staying on target. I think that about a quarter of the book could have been carefully eliminated with the authors still entirely getting their points across.

Comparing Special Education is a well-researched book that must be on the shelves of disability theory, disability history, and comparative education scholars. The book is heavy on theory and less on practical approaches, and thus it is not a handbook for practitioners seeking to create inclusive environments, but it explains why integration is necessary. Lastly, one sentence in the book has stuck with me, and it sums up Richardson and Powellâs theoretical and utopic view of inclusiveness: âThe opportunity for countries without a history of asylums, hospitals, and segregated or separated special schools and classrooms that goes back centuries is to learn from these experiences and proceed to directly inclusive education for allâ (p. 274).

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36896