A Sociological Perspective on Special Education

Sheila Riddell

INTRODUCTION

This chapter identifies social theories currently in play in the field of special education, drawing on literature from Scotland, the wider UK and Europe, with some reference to North America and Australia. Particular reference is made to the Scottish policy context, placed within a wider UK and national context. An underlying assumption is that theories of special/additional support needs and disability are crucial in terms of understanding policy responses in school and the wider society. As Kirp (1982) noted, the way in which a 'social problem' is constructed says a great deal about how it will be resolved. In this chapter, I suggest that two broad perspectives relating to social theory may be identified in research and policy making in the field of special educational needs, namely functionalist and critical paradigms. Within a functionalist paradigm, it is assumed that current approaches have developed in order to meet children's needs most effectively, and that amongst these it is possible to identify best practice. Critical approaches, which dominate within the sociology of special education, seek to problematize existing practice, asking more demanding questions about which social interests are being served by existing arrangements and dominant discourses. For example, Fulcher (1989) observed that the discourse of inclusion can be deployed for tactical purposes by different interest groups to justify almost diametrically opposed practices.

Drawing on the sociology of special education, which deconstructs theories and practices, this chapter examines the way in which functionalism and critical

social theory have been applied in special education policy, practice and research. Functionalist thinking is rooted in the ideas of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, which were set out a hundred years ago. Durkheim developed the view that social cohesion was a natural and desirable state, and conflicts which threatened this social stability were to be repressed. The aim of the healthy society was to include as many people as possible, and neutralize or reform those at the margins. Exclusion was thus seen as residual rather than endemic (Levitas, 1998). Critical paradigms, on the other hand, rather than seeing conflict and challenge as abnormal, regard these as manifestations of unequal power relations or social interactions. Accounts located within critical social policy and socio-cultural theory serve as important challenges to common sense notions of how the world is and should be organized, particularly during a period of growing inequality and economic crisis (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008).

THE CURRENT STATUS OF SPECIAL AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

At the present time in most developed countries, in line with international agreements, it is evident that the trend is for disabled children and those with special/additional support needs to be included within mainstream schools. Following the publication of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) inclusion has been accepted as the policy orthodoxy of the European Union and member states. Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities underlines the importance of inclusive education as a means of enabling disabled people of all ages 'to participate effectively in a free society'. Article 24 specifies that states have a responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations and appropriate support tailored to individual needs.

Vislie (2003) suggested that from the 1970s onwards, there has been a clear trend across Europe towards more inclusive educational provision, although progress has been rather slow. Rather than disappearing altogether, separate provision has taken different forms, with considerable variation between different groups of countries. In Northern and Western Europe, countries such as Norway, Sweden, England and Scotland have created broadly inclusive systems, although in all four countries there is evidence of increased use of special classes and special units attached to mainstream schools. The use of special units may blur the extent to which segregation is taking place, since children may spend large parts of their day in separate settings, but be officially enrolled in mainstream school (Riddell, 2012, chapter 2). There is also concern in the UK about the use of 'illegal exclusions', whereby parents are requested to keep their children at home until a more suitable placement can be found, but no official record is kept of this practice (Reid, 2009).

Significant use of special schools continues to be evident in countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where the Soviet tradition of individual pupil deficit

or 'defectology' was strongly embedded (Radoman, Nano, & Closs, 2006; Tsokova & Becirevic, 2009). Countries seeking accession to the European Union have been under considerable pressure to adopt more inclusive practices in their school systems, but such changes have sometimes been cosmetic. For example, in Lithuania, Kugelmass and Galkiene (2003) suggest that the development of inclusive education has been hindered by a range of factors including the following: lack of competent and appropriately trained educators; a tendency to blame families for the problems of their children; and financial difficulties facing countries during a period of economic and political transition.

To summarize, despite the international dominance of discourses of inclusion, it is evident that exclusive practices persist and special settings are often rebranded as particular forms of mainstreaming. In the following sections, I review the broad sociological theories which underpin special and inclusive education and the types of research which have been informed by particular approaches.

FUNCTIONALIST PARADIGMS

Essentialist or individual needs approaches

Early approaches to special education were informed by eugenic ideas which were in the ascendancy in Europe and the US in the late 19th and early 20th century (Kerr & Shakespeare, 2002). Francis Galton distinguished between positive eugenics, which focused on encouraging good stock to breed, and negative eugenics, which focused on discouraging the mentally and morally unfit from reproducing. Those exhibiting mental or physical deficiency should be isolated from the rest of the population to avoid contamination. IQ tests, developed in the early 20th century, provided educational psychologists with an additional tool to use in determining whose intelligence might be deemed to fall outwith the normal range. Lubeck and Garrett (1990), describing the construction of the 'at risk' child in the USA, noted that American pioneers of mental testing believed that intelligence was inherited and fixed rather than malleable, and was linked to racial origin. Henry Goddard, an early proponent of mental testing, was invited by the government to administer the Binet Simon scale and other performance tests to recent immigrants at the Ellis Island receiving station. Goddard's work, published in 1917, showed that around 80% of Jews, Hungarians, Russians and Italians were feeble-minded.

Translated into practice, eugenic thinking was sometimes brutal in its insistence on incarceration, but could sometimes adopt a more benevolent face, suggesting that identifying the weak and feeble-minded was essential in order to provide appropriate treatment. Tomlinson (1982) noted that the Egerton Commission of 1889 recommended access to basic vocational education for the blind to prevent them becoming a burden on the state.

Early eugenic social theories played a pivotal role in shaping the emergent systems of special education in the US and Europe. In most developed countries, the focus was on identifying individual deficits, leading, at least in theory, to an appropriate form of special placement. In Scotland, for example, prior to 1980,

individual assessments were geared to the identification of the following nine legal categories of handicap: deafness, partial deafness, blindness, partial sightedness, mental handicap, epilepsy, speech defects, maladjustment and physical handicap. If a child was suspected of having one of these conditions, parents were legally obliged to present the child at a clinic for medical assessment with a view to ascertaining whether 'special educational treatment' was required. In urban areas, special schools were set up to deal with each of these conditions, whilst in rural areas children were either educated within local schools or sent to residential establishments at some distance from their homes. Until 1974, a certain proportion of children were deemed 'ineducable and untrainable', and the health board rather than the local authority had responsibility for their care.

Following the Warnock report (Department for Education and Science, 1978), legislation in England and Scotland replaced the legal categories of handicap with the overarching category of 'special educational needs' (SEN). This new category was intended to emphasize that SEN were not solely located in the child, but signalled a mismatch between school provision and the conditions required by the individual child to make educational progress. Control of the special education terrain shifted from medical practitioners to educational psychologists, who orchestrated the process of assessment and recording. Teachers were accorded only a subordinate role in assessment and diagnosis. Despite the apparent rejection of the deficit approaches, children's principal difficulties were still recorded and published by the Scottish Government.

In Scotland, the concept of SEN was replaced under 2004 legislation by that of additional support needs, reflecting the view that failure to make progress in education may arise as a result of social problems as well as learning difficulties and disabilities. The difficulty of moving away from categories of deficit, however, is clearly indicated by the Scottish Government's decision to gather and publish data on reasons for support. These cover the traditional categories of learning disabilities, sensory and physical impairments, but also cover social factors such as interrupted learning, having English as an additional language and being looked after by the local authority.

To summarize, the individualized, or essentialist approach, which regards mental or physical deficits as being rooted in the individual, is the traditional approach to special education throughout the developed world, with the vast majority of countries adopting SEN classification systems (OECD, 2007). Challenged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, classification systems are currently enjoying something of a resurgence. Parents and voluntary organizations, supported by allies in medicine and psychiatry, have campaigned for the re-adoption of particular labels such as ADHD (Graham, 2010; Lloyd, Stead, & Cohen, 2006), often with a view to accessing resources or avoiding more stigmatizing categories. The individual needs approach also creates a triangular tension for resource allocation, with parents, professionals and bureaucrats pulling in different directions. In practice, professionals were often co-opted into the work of the bureaucracy, ensuring that their assessments did not conflict with

budgetary controls (Riddell, 2006, chapter 3). It is also worth noting that, despite the extensive advocacy of individualized assessment and teaching approaches in the professional literature, there is little research-based evidence to suggest that most children with SEN require provision which is completely different from that which is delivered to the majority of children. The vast majority of children with SEN, it would appear, require adaptations related to the intensity of support and the pace of learning but not an entirely different curriculum and pedagogy (Lewis & Norwich, 2005).

Managerialist or systems-based approaches

A particular branch of sociology of special education draws on a range of approaches to management, based on the fundamental assumption that if organizational systems are correctly aligned, public sector institutions will operate smoothly and effectively. In the UK, from the early 1980s to the mid-2000s, the focus was on making mainstream schools more inclusive by reformulating the curriculum, pedagogy and classroom organization. For example, Hart, Dixon, Drummond and Macintyre (2004) maintained that if mainstream schools were geared to provide additional support as part of normal provision, then special needs labels would be redundant.

The role of the learning support teacher or 'special educator' in comprehensive schools has dominated discussion in the professional literature. For example, Dyson and Gains (1995) point out that the emergence of the 'whole school approach' resulted in problems of 'uncertainty, ambiguity and conflict', as learning support teachers, known as Special Educational Needs Coordinators in England, were expected to adopt significant management and legal responsibilities for which they often lacked training and institutional back-up.

Management discourses within special education became increasingly dominant with the advent of new public management from the 1980s onwards. Informed by the ideas of economists such as von Hayek, and drawing on behaviourist psychology, the central thesis of new public management was that everything associated with the workplace can and should be measured. Targets were promoted as essential to human motivation and external regimes of accountability were deemed necessary to discipline the actions of otherwise self-serving professionals (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Pollitt, 1993). Within the field of special education, questions were increasingly asked about the performance of children with SEN and the extent to which the funding allocated to this area of education was delivering improved results. In the UK, this type of thinking resulted in the promotion of Individualized Educational Programmes (IEPs) as a means of charting individual progress and assessing the effectiveness of interventions. Research on the implementation of IEPs in Scotland suggested that whilst teachers welcomed the opportunity to chart the progress of individual children against personal goals, they were hostile to the idea of accountability at the level of the institution or the individual teacher (Banks et al., 2001).

In the US, IEPs have long been regarded both as a means of accountability as well as a formal document specifying the additional resources to be allocated to individual children (Russo & Osborne, 2011). Instituted under the terms of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act 1975 (PL 94–142), about 12% of the pupil population in US schools has an IEP, compared with about 4% of the Scottish school population. Gallagher (1972) argued that legal contracts should be established 'with parents as equal partners in the plan, using objective measures of goal attainments, and developing punitive consequences of failure to deliver' (Goodman & Bond, 1993, p. 411). Legal sanctions for failure to achieve objectives were necessary, according to Gallagher, because 'bureaucracies such as educational systems will move institutionally only under threat or duress' (Gallagher, 1972, p. 531).

More recently, there has been concern that the requirement to include all students in states' wider target-setting and testing programmes may widen the use of IEPs and incentivize the use of extensive curricula and assessment accommodations (McLaughlin & Tilstone, 2000, p. 57).

To summarize, policy-making in the field of SEN has tended to be informed by functionalist assumptions about assessing individual needs and/or managing special education systems to maximize efficiency. Research has often been geared to supporting these enterprises, but has also revealed difficulties in using individual assessments to determine optimal types and levels of support and in using individual targets to monitor systemic efficiency.

Critical paradigms

Materialist or critical social policy approaches

Materialist approaches in the sociology of education have sought to understand the link between education, the reproduction of social relations within capitalism and the way this relationship is regulated by the state. In the 1970s, neo-Marxist writers such as Bowles and Gintis (1976) suggested that social and curricular divisions in school corresponded directly to those in the labour market. Children in vocational programmes were prepared for their future role in blue collar jobs, whilst the academic elite were groomed for their future place in the professions. The label 'learning difficulties' might be applied to some of these children, but academic excellence was not expected of those destined for manual work and therefore poor literacy and numeracy skills were regarded as less of a problem.

Willis (1977), in his classic text *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, presented a slightly more complex picture. Working class boys who understood that their future lay in hard manual labour responded by celebrating a particular version of masculinity. School was to be treated as a 'laff', since it had very little relevance to their future lives. Studious boys were labelled the 'ear 'oles' and were treated with the derision suggested by their name. Girls who conformed to the role of the supportive home-maker
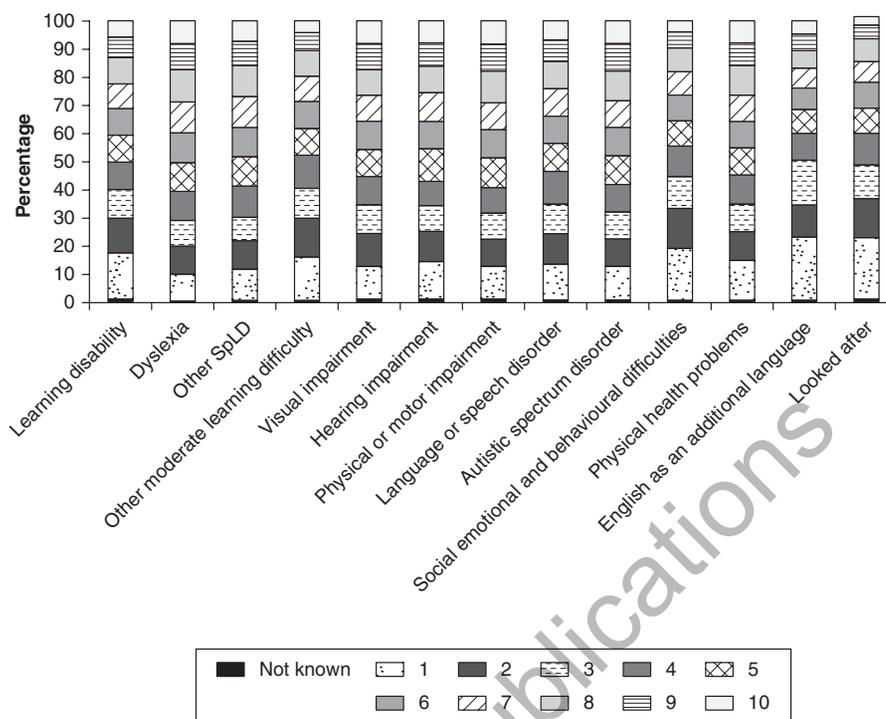
Figure 6.1   Percentage of pupils from publicly funded schools in Scotland with particular types of difficulty by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation decile (2009)

were dubbed 'good as gold'. Willis characterized the lads' rejection of schooling as a form of heroic resistance, since it allowed them to assert a degree of agency, whilst forcing them into a life of exploitation. Were the same group of lads to be observed in a contemporary classroom, the label of behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties or ADHD might well be attached to them.

Over recent years, behavioural difficulties have been regarded as classroom management problems and there has been less analysis of competing sub-cultures and their relationship to the capitalist social relations. This, of course, reflects the fact that government funders of research want to know what behaviour management strategies work in school, and are unsympathetic to the message that behavioural difficulties are an unwelcome by-product of unequal social relations. The implicit social determinism of neo-Marxist accounts is sometimes at variance with attempts by government to achieve social cohesion through inclusive education and employment policies, as outlined in Levitas' (1998) analysis of the social inclusion discourse which characterized many aspects of social policy under the UK Labour administrations of 1997–2010.

A body of literature has applied a materialist analysis to the construction of special education. For example, Tomlinson (1985, 2012) noted that

the expansion of the category of SEN in the early 1980s coincided with the collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s, with particularly negative consequences for traditionally male areas of employment such as manufacturing. Whereas in the 1940s, only 2% of UK pupils were deemed to require special provision, by the 1980s this had increased to 20%. By labelling young men from socially disadvantaged backgrounds as unemployable, politicians were able to avoid responsibility for managing the demand side of the labour market more effectively. As Armstrong (2003) pointed out, the expansion of special education was accompanied by an increasing tendency to pathologize the behaviour of black pupils. 'Special educational needs', he noted, 'is a convenient tool for legitimising discrimination, racism and the lack of opportunities generally for young people' (Armstrong, 2003, p. 121). The disproportionately high identification of pupils from minority ethnic groups across the developed world is discussed in greater depth by Harry (2007).

The social class differentials in England, noted by Tomlinson, are also evident in Scotland, and are particularly pronounced in relation to certain categories of difficulty. Using the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as a measure of poverty, Figure 6.1 shows the proportion of pupils with particular types of difficulty by area deprivation decile, with 1 being the most deprived and 10 being the least deprived. There is a very strong association between stigmatized categories such as social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (which is also the largest category), but a weak association between disabilities such as visual impairment, hearing impairment and dyslexia, which are relatively unstigmatized categories (Weedon, Ahlgren, Riddell, & Sugden, 2012).

The importance of intersectional analysis, which explores the inter-connections of a range of social variables, is underlined by Riddell and McCluskey (2012). Boys are much more likely than girls to be identified as having additional support needs, to be excluded from school and to be educated in special settings. In 2011, Scottish Government statistics showed that 70% of pupils with SEN, 67% of pupils attending special schools and 80% of those excluded from schools were male (Riddell & McCluskey, 2012). OECD data (2007) confirm that in all countries boys make up more than 50% of pupils identified as having SEN and receiving additional support (Riddell, 2012).

Social constructionist approaches

Thus far, we have reviewed social accounts of special education which locate difficulties in learning within the individual child, within the management structures of the organization or within wider social structures rooted in economic relations. In this section, we explore the use of interactionist ideas in the sociology of special education. Goffman (1968) challenged the thinking of Durkheim and Parsons by questioning the extent to which behaviour is an expression of a rigid system of defined status and roles. For example, in his work *Asylums* (1968), Goffman examined the 'career' of mental patients and prisoners in their respective closed institutions. His aim was to understand the way in which individuals make sense

of the world and negotiate their social identity, often in very difficult circumstances. This may well involve resisting unwelcome labels imposed by others in establishing their own definition of the situation. The familiar criticism of interactionist work is that, in emphasizing the power of individual agency, it may underplay the power of wider social forces, such as those associated with gender or class inequalities. It may also present all perceptions of the world as equally valid, attracting the criticism of naïve relativism. Nonetheless, he argues that this approach may contribute usefully to the study of educational inequality by introducing cultural elements into highly deterministic macro-theories, injecting human agency into theories accounting for social inequality and opening the black box of schooling to examine the reflexive relations between the institutional practices and students' careers.

The socio-cultural approach is particularly evident in a number of recent Swedish studies which seek to understand the reification of labels in the field of special education. For example, Hjörne and Säljö (2004) explore the use of the term ADHD/DAMP in Swedish schools in the context of the politics of representation. They comment:

> ADHD/DAMP as a category, thus, has established itself within schooling, and in this sense is both a social fact and a resource that is actively used for dealing with problems. It has implications for the manner in which teaching is organised and for the use of limited resources. It will also have consequences for the student's educational career, and obviously, a neuropsychiatric diagnosis, indicative of a brain injury, will play a critical role identity formation of young people. (Hjörne & Säljö, 2004, p. 7)

Their analysis of verbal exchanges in pupil–student welfare team meetings illustrates the way in which professionals focus on evidence which supports the emerging idea that a particular pupil has a specific form of neural deficit, seeking only confirming rather than disconfirming data. In their discussions, practitioners tended to ignore the influence of pedagogy, curriculum and classroom ethos, which might provide alternative explanatory accounts of individual children's failure to learn. Many parents accepted the professionals' diagnosis quiescently, with only one parent challenging the teacher's version of events. Whilst emphasizing the role of everyday interactions in building social reality, Hjörne and Säljö are also aware of the wider social context. They suggest that the use of categories such as ADHD/DAMP reflect changes in public schooling in Sweden, as the increase in free schools threatens to undermine the principle of universal education provided in comprehensive schools. As noted by Lloyd and Norris (1999) and Graham (2010), disputes over the label ADHD have been taking place in many parts of the world.

A further example of the exploration of the establishment and contestation of labels in special education may be found in the Scottish study of dyslexia conducted by Riddell, Duffield and Brown (1994). Drawing on interviews, surveys and observation, the researchers noted the different understandings of dyslexia promoted by different groups. Voluntary organizations and some doctors tended to believe that dyslexia was inherently different from other forms of learning

difficulty. They believed that the condition was physiological in origin, favoured forms of psycho-metric assessment designed to identify discrepancies in ability and promoted particular teaching methods which were best delivered by specially trained teachers. Educational psychologists, education officers and teachers, on the other hand, believed that children with specific learning difficulties (their preferred term), did not represent a discrete group but were part of a continuum, with a diverse array of abilities and difficulties attributable to environmental and individual factors operating interactively. According to this perspective, there was no absolute dividing line between children with 'common or garden' learning difficulties and others. The preferred form of assessment was classroom observation of difficulties in order to devise a range of teaching strategies, to be implemented by the class or learning support teacher, without the need for intervention by an educational psychologist. Faced with a refusal to acknowledge dyslexic children as a discrete group with specific problems and teaching needs, parents often became extremely frustrated, and adopted a range of strategies including engaging independent psychologists to conduct assessments and, in England, taking appeals to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal.

To summarize, struggles over the creation and negotiation of categories within the field of special education are still taking place, and social interactionist theories have a great deal to offer in terms of understanding the material consequences which ensue. In the final section, we consider the influence of the sociology of disability, which has had a major impact on thinking about special and inclusive education over the past two decades (see the collection of papers edited by Arnot, 2012, for a review of this work and of the contribution of Professor Len Barton to the field).

Civil rights approaches

According to early social model theorists such as Oliver (1990) and Barnes (1991), disabled people are systematically excluded or marginalized within capitalist societies. Whilst impairments may have real effects, these are not automatically disabling. Rather, disability is always experienced within a specific social context and it is always political, cultural and economic arrangements, rather than impairments, which exclude. Recently, the sociology of disability has diversified. For example, some of the literature on learning difficulties adopts a strong social constructionist position (Goodley, 2001). Corker and Shakespeare (2002) have emphasized the historical contingency of disability, describing it as a postmodern category because of its mutability. Abberley (1987) drew attention to the fact that many impairments arise as a result of war, disease and global economic oppression.

The social model of disability has had a major impact on everyday thought and action, and has led to significant political progress for disabled people, reflected in anti-discrimination legislation such as the US Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 (as amended in 2008) and the GB Equality Act 2010. Anti-discrimination legislation

generally conceptualizes disability as being a characteristic of the individual, but places an onus on public bodies, including schools, to make reasonable accommodations in order to minimize the impact of the disability on a person's social experiences and life chances. Anti-discrimination legislation often dovetails with education legislation to provide legal protection for children and young people with SEN and their parents. However, as illustrated by comparative accounts of the socio-legal aspect of special education (Harris & Riddell, 2011), in most developed countries the balance of power continues to lie with professionals and policy-makers, with parents and children often having little opportunity to realize their rights in practice.

Despite the power of the social model as an analytical tool and a driver of legislative and wider societal change, only a small number of studies have explicitly adopted this approach in research. For example, Riddell, Baron and Wilson's (2001) study of the meaning of the learning society for people with learning difficulties is clearly informed by social model thinking, as is Armstrong's (2003) retrospective study of the experience of special schooling by people with learning difficulties.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that many social theories jostle for position in making sense of the field of special education. This chapter grouped theories into functionalist and critical paradigms. The former are based on the idea that stability and cohesion are natural and desirable social states, whilst the latter see tension and conflict as an inevitable product of capitalist social relations. Functionalist accounts have traditionally reflected the view that the role of special education is to identify those children who should be excluded or marginalized because of the threat which they seemed to pose for the social order. Over recent years, within developed countries, a growing emphasis has been placed on inclusion as a key ingredient in the creation of a modern knowledge economy. However, debates continue with regard to which children should be excluded from the mainstream classroom and what sort of provision should be made for them. These struggles are often over the allocation of scarce educational resources, as government insist that more attention should be placed on recognizing the needs of individual children, whilst targeting resources on improved educational outcomes for higher achieving children.

Whilst functionalist accounts tend to be favoured by parents, practitioners and policy-makers because of their focus on how to improve educational efficiency and effectiveness, critical paradigms provide important insights into the forces of change and challenge without necessarily providing a route map to guide future developments. Given the array of social forces operating in the field of special education, each perspective contributes distinctive understandings of ways in which the field of special education has developed thus far, and the tensions and challenges which continue to shape its future direction.

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