



Study of Theories of Learning Disabilities

Varsha

Assistant Teacher, Basic Education Department, Khurja,
Bulandshahr, UP, kashyapvarsha2020@gmail.com

Abstract

The "social model" of disability is the result of the application of sociological theory to ideas about physical impairment, but there has been less effort to develop a sociological framework for cognitive disorders. Particularly among minority student populations, kids with learning impairments have become the public-school system's fastest-growing special education group. Although there is much evidence that kids of colour are overrepresented in special education, there have been very few attempts to apply sociological theories to our understanding of this trend. Discussion of the significance of this finding for the field of special education and the research of learning disorders, with emphasis on the disproportionate representation of kids from underrepresented groups in these settings.

Key words: Racial disproportionality, special education, overrepresentation, sociological theories

Introduction

Education is an essential human virtue, a necessity of society, basis of good life and sign of freedom so that everyone wants to see children going towards success which is only possible through the good and proper education. Every parent tells their kids from childhood about the importance of education in the life and all the advantages of education to make their mind towards better study in the future. Education is not only confined to personal development but core factor for equality and empowerment of any a given society. Though the right to education and equality of educational opportunities are guaranteed by the Constitution of India, it is a disturbing fact that more than half of the population of children and youth with disabilities are denied the rights and do not receive adequate schooling in an appropriate environment. Most of these out of school children with disabilities are those who were refused admission in the neighbourhood school where all other children of their village were going.

Review of literature

(Anyon, 2009) Studied "*Sociological Theories of Learning Disabilities: Understanding Racial Disproportionality in Special Education*" and found that in 2001, more than half of the students in special education were identified as having a specific learning disability, more than any other disability that qualifies youth for such services. Since 1977, after special education categories such as "culturally deprived" were eliminated, learning disabilities have constituted the fastest-growing special education population, particularly for students.

(Qu, 2015) Studied "*Critical Review: Making Sense of Special Schools from Sociological Perspectives*" and found that special schools have increasingly been questioned in terms of being discriminatory and segregatory, especially under the political and academic context of inclusive education. This paper explores the nature of special schools from the sociological perspectives of rights discourse, charity discourse and corporate discourse, as well as social model and medical model in the debates over special and inclusive education.

(Bheenaveni, 2016) Studied "*Sociology of Special Education: Teacher's Support and Student's Performance*" and found that the process of inclusion starts with the assessment of attitudinal barrier of the learner by teachers/classmates in school/classroom settings demands special and unique strategies, care and support for inclusion. To examine the phenomena of teachers, support and student's



performance, five schools offering special education in Hyderabad and Secunderabad twin cities were taken for this study and 300 samples were collected by following snow-ball sampling method. The inventory related to views, attitudes, teachers' supportive mechanism and performance of children has been taken into the consideration to generalize the observations which have been persisting in special education schools.

(Tomlinson, 2015) Studied "*Is a sociology of special and inclusive education possible*" and found that Since then it is undoubtedly the case that worldwide, education systems have been developing, and expanding. In many countries higher level education was initially for elite groups, basic education for some and exclusion from education for many. But increasingly countries have accepted the premise that education should incorporate all social groups. By the end of the twentieth century concern for groups excluded from regular or mainstream education, especially those regarded as having special educational needs (SEN), disabilities or difficulties in learning had become a world-wide issue.

(Fidishin, 2017) Studied "*Special Education Disproportionality through a Social Lens: A Mixed Methods Approach*" and found that the disproportionate nature of special education, notably with African American students, is longstanding and most pronounced in judgmental eligibility categories such as intellectual disability and emotional disturbance. Numerous studies on disproportionality conclude there is not a single causative factor, but point to the multifactorial nature of the issue and the complex interplay among different factors. Research related to the role social factors exhibited in an institution have on special education referral and eligibility determination is more limited.

Theories of Learning Disability and Special Education

- **Social Constructionism**

Three aspects of social constructionism that are used in sociological theory and applied to learning disability and special education. They are anti-essentialism, anti-realism, and language as social action. Anti-essentialism rejects the proposition that there is one cause of learning disabilities. For example, it is more than the neurological processes within an individual's brain that makes a person learning-disabled (also known as the medical model of learning disabilities). Instead, an anti-essentialist approach requires the consideration of multiple perspectives and possibilities rather than one objective truth.

- **Interactional Theories**

Interactional theories focus on relationships between individuals and groups, helping to identify bias in referral and assessment that often serve individual and professional interests. Using a medical model, learning disabilities are defined as neurological disorders within the brain of an individual student. However, given limitations in technology, students are identified based on behaviors that are associated with brain damage, not by any proof of cellular injury. For example, the symptoms required for a diagnosis of a learning disorder are (1) achievement levels that are substantially below that expected given the person's chronological age, measured intelligence and age-appropriate education; and (2) such low achievement significantly interferes with academic success or activities of daily living (American Psychiatric Association).

- **Institutional Theories**

Institutional theory focuses on the identities of institutions and how they shape individual and group behavior. These sociological theories can help to explain the referral, assessment, and intervention decisions made by teachers, school psychologists, and education administrators that are formed by the institutions within which they work. From this perspective, the institutional needs fulfilled by the identification of children with learning disabilities and their placement in special education programs



provide the context for understanding individual interests. Similar to interactional theories, institutional theories provide an alternative to the medical and psychological construction of learning disability that locates the “problem” within the mind of the individual rather than the institution. This approach affectively absolves schools from acknowledging their inability to teach all students and allows them to blame individual students for their lack of achievement.

- **Structural Theories**

Structural theories focus on the macro-forces that shape the behavior of organizations and institutions. These sociological theories help to illustrate how dominant societal values and historical trends inform the nature of education and the behavior of social actors within schools. This viewpoint stresses that special education serves to reproduce larger social inequalities. Another structural theory applied to learning disabilities suggests that labelling students helps schools to sort students for future roles in the labour market. Before mass schooling, this kind of sorting occurred prior to school enrolment, as those who fulfilled low-skill positions worked to support their families and did not attend. Only with compulsory public education did schools need to develop internal sorting mechanisms that prepared students for different labour market roles and allocated different resources accordingly. At a minimum, schools have always been organized to prepare students to be good workers who arrive on time, respect authority, follow directions, and complete tasks efficiently.

Special Education as a Structure for Managing Diversity and Difference

In contrast to interactional theories, institutional theories point to the mechanisms that schools use to manage difference as the cause of racial disparities in special education. In the late 1960s, school districts across the country received court orders to integrate their schools. “student disability and special education are institutional categories created” in response to “a dramatic increase in student diversity and bureaucratization of schools”. At that time, when students of colour were referred for assessment, they were identified as culturally deprived, slow learner, or mentally retarded, essentially re-segregating minority youth within schools. However, in response to the civil rights movement, the first two categories of cultural deprivation and slow learner were eliminated, and the IQ threshold for mental retardation was decreased as an attempt to create greater educational equity for children of colour. Schools could no longer make reference to a child’s background as part of the official criteria for a diagnosis of learning disabled.

Racial Competition and the use of Special Education to Produce Racial Inequality

Sociological theorists argue that the disproportionate number of students of colour in special education programs is a function of racial competition. This theory argues that as the numbers of racial minorities grow, there is more competition for resources such as jobs and education, which leads to the use of racism to create an advantage for white communities. In the context of learning disabilities and special education, as schools become more integrated, there is more competition for the educational resources (the best teachers, curriculum, and materials), and students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to be assigned to special education classes using exclusionary and stigmatizing labels. These structural theorists argue that the sorting process that schools use to allocate their resources is as much about perpetuating racial hierarchy as it is about class dynamics.

Conclusion

The discipline of sociology provides an important lens for understanding learning disabilities, special education, and related racial disproportionalities. Renewed sociological inquiry is necessary to help



balance the medical and psychological views of learning disabilities that dominate public discourse. In the context of human behavior and the social environment, interactional theories can inform our understanding of human behavior with respect to learning disabilities and special education by highlighting the individual decisions, interests, and biases that lead to the identification of students as learning-disabled. Institutional and structural perspectives can guide our analysis of the social environment with attention to the larger forces and systemic pressures that influence individual behavior and shape such social phenomena as racial disproportionality.

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