CHAPTER ONE

Special education – theory and theory talk

Brainstorming around a table at Frontier College, Toronto, in July 1988 sat a group of educators, writers and parents, together with adults who had in their youth been taught in special schools. Concerned about the deficiencies of mainstreaming as it was then happening, they came up with a new idea: inclusive education. Their ideas about rejecting exclusion and encouraging participation for all spread rapidly to inspire a global educational community about the benefits of inclusion.

In developing notions of inclusion, the focus of the Frontier pioneers was disability and desegregation (see O’Brien and Forest 1989). But there has been a progressively broadening compass to that original idea of inclusive education and 20 years hence the focus of inclusive thinking is diversity and social justice just as much as it is mainstreaming and disability. The 1990s saw thinking about inclusion billow out from a one-dimensional plane, along which one viewed the integration and the valuing of children with disabilities and difficulties, to a three-dimensional terrain that now incorporates a more extensive spectrum of concerns and discourses – about the benefits that come from valuing diversity.

A major part of this book is about these changes in thinking about inclusion: an examination of the growth of inclusion and a rationale for this growth lies at the core of the second half of the book. But it is important to remember here, right at the beginning of the book, that the revolution that has occurred in thinking and practice has taken, relatively speaking, only a short while in the history of education. It appears ephemeral and frail when contrasted with nexus of thinking and practice that represented the century-long tradition of special education. It thus sometimes seems at something of a disadvantage when looked at alongside the seemingly solid epistemological and empirical foundations of special education – a new kid on the block, still to prove it has any substance beyond ‘ideology’ and competing poorly with the knowledge claims of its predecessor.

So our aim in this book is to give some attention to the reasons both for the
new and the traditional thinking. Our purpose is to examine the rapidly evolving changes that are occurring in the movement to inclusive education and also to look with a critical eye at the provenance and structure of the thinking that has led to special education. It is the latter with which we start.

Deconstructing special education

We start our examination by looking behind special education to its intellectual foundations and to its construction. We look in this chapter at the growth of special education, at its many faces, at its reconstruction of itself in different forms and at its response to a changing political mood. Most importantly, however, and running through each part of this enquiry, is an examination of the knowledge of special education. Faith in certain kinds of knowledge provides the credence, the believability behind special education’s status. Trust in this knowledge secures special education’s reputation as a rational, sensible way of educating a portion of the population. But if one takes a questioning disposition to this knowledge, serious challenges to the legitimacy of special education begin to emerge.

Many excellent critiques have located the existence, growth and status of special education not so much in these knowledge-related matters, but in professional, structural and institutional interests at play in society. We do not deny the significance of these analyses; indeed we draw on them extensively in this book. We believe, however, that to assume that they can proffer anything like a full analysis of the growth of special education is to ignore, or at least to downplay, the impact of ways in which knowledge is arrived at, disseminated and used. At the risk of sounding pompous, it is these epistemic features in the growth of special education to which we give special attention in this book.

There often existed over twentieth-century discourse about special education a presupposition almost of rock-solid knowledge. On this solid knowledge the edifices of special education could be confidently built. The very words which have been used to discuss not just special education but, more importantly, its key concepts – words like ‘intelligence’ – have been taken to have reasonably straightforward meanings, the logoi of Derrida (1978). But, as Derrida points out, there is no ordinary, uncontaminated language. If this is so – and there is a clear case for it to be especially so in the words surrounding the tenuous human ‘sciences’ from which educators have borrowed liberally – the argument must be strong for a close scrutiny of the underlying (usually unspoken and taken-for-granted) assumptions and frameworks that form the basis for thought and belief.

Our focus, then, is the knowledge held and promulgated by special educators and the means by which this knowledge is secured. There have been assumptions in the empirical and rational arguments behind special education almost of a kind of special, privileged knowledge. In this book, this kind of knowledge – or at least assumptions that it can exist – will be critically examined.
**Critiques**

Before examining these epistemic features, it is important first to set such attention within the context of other critical examinations of special education, for there have been many of these. We need to outline these in order to make clear our points of agreement and, more importantly, disagreement, with them. For much critique that gives rise to an inclusionary mindset emerges from committed theoretical positions which, it seems to us, share a need for scrutiny: the topic of inclusion is hardly uncontroversial (see, for example, Croll and Moses 1998; Dorn et al. 1996; Hornby 1999; Kauffman and Hallahan 2005) and if fairness is being aimed for, the epistemological premises underpinning these committed inclusionary positions need as much deconstructing as those which preceded them.

What, then, are these viewpoints and critiques? Slee (1998) provides an excellent summary of the different perspectives from which disability and special education have been viewed and, in certain cases, critiqued. Turning his analysis around notions of disability and basing it on earlier work by Fulcher (1989) and Riddell (1996), he suggests that these perspectives comprise the following:

1. **Essentialist perspectives** – which locate children’s differences and disabilities unproblematically in their individual pathology. This has sometimes been called a **deficit or medical approach**.
2. **Social constructionist perspectives** – which interpret and present disability as a socially contrived construct ‘deployed against minorities enforcing social marginalisation’ (Slee 1998: 128).
3. **Materialist perspectives** – which see disability as a form of exclusion created and maintained by the economic system. It is worth noting here that Abberley (1987), an exponent of this view, has said that ‘the main and consistent beneficiary [of exclusion] must be identified as the present social order, or more accurately, capitalism’. These are, then, Marxist analyses (although are not offered explicitly by Slee as such).
4. **Postmodern perspectives** – which reject the theoretical explanations offered by materialist accounts, seeing the experiences of excluded children and adults as discontinuous and ungroupable. Although Slee does not give examples, it is worth noting that Young (1990) suggests that the mere existence of excluded groups forces us to categorize – and the categories encourage a particular mindset about a group, while in reality the ‘groups’ in question are ‘cross-cutting, fluid and shifting’ (Young 1990: 45). Meekosha and Jacobowicz (1996) make a similar point: there is no discrete class of people who are disabled.

Others have taken different angles on the conceptualization surrounding disability and special education. Söder’s (1989) stance is interesting since it is critical of some of the received wisdom of critics themselves. He outlines four distinct approaches:
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1 The medical/clinical perspective (similar to Slee’s first perspective).
2 The epidemiological approach – which sees disability as an abnormality but seeks to account for this abnormality with a range of social and other explanations.
3 The adaptability approach – wherein disability arises out of some maladaptation of the individual to the environment, due perhaps to the expectations imposed by people in that environment.
4 The social constructionist approach – in which disabilities are constructed on the basis of interpretations made because of social values and beliefs.

Söder sees much of the critical analysis surrounding this field as being off the mark. He suggests that there is an ‘epistemological error’ in the assumptions behind the fourth of the categories of analysis he identifies, namely the social constructionist approach, which has been at the root of much of the progressive thinking behind moves to inclusion. He suggests that this analysis rests in a hope that ‘structure’ can be changed – that the meanings ascribed to structures can be altered by goodwill. He calls this kind of thinking ‘voluntarism’ and puts it down to researchers trying to be reformers, change agents and politicians.

Many disagree with Söder’s position. They would challenge his view that there is an epistemological error at the base of this and – in direct contradiction to his point that researchers are trying to be politicians – take the position that researchers’ engagement with the political and social in this area is an imperative. Their view is, in other words, that critique and analysis cannot disengage itself from social and political issues (see, for example, Armstrong et al. 1998; Gitlin et al. 1989). It is from this perspective that analysis has taken into account what Tomlinson (1987) has called the ‘social, economic and political structures of a society’. She locates her own critique of special education specifically in critical theory, which she finds useful ‘in interpreting events and explanations in the expanding area of special educational needs’ (Tomlinson 1987: 33). It is worth quoting her at some length since she summarizes her position and the position of many critics of special education with great clarity:

Critical theorists have suggested that the answers to questions about ‘why children fail’ might lie as much in the social, economic and political structures of a society as in anything intrinsic to children or ‘lacking’ in a child. From a critical theorist’s viewpoint, it becomes easier to question the deficit model of children, which assumes that negative properties intrinsic to children – low IQ, disability, inability – are wholly responsible for his or her educational failure. It becomes easier to examine the social processes by which ‘achievement’ is defined. Who, for example, decides what achievement is in a society where the highest achievers are almost always white, upper- or middle-class males? Why does being a poor reader and working class seem to have much more serious and long-term social consequences than being a poor reader and upper or middle class?

(Tomlinson 1987: 34)
Not the first, Tomlinson is one of the most articulate advocates of this theoretical position and she has done as much as anyone to drive debate and analysis about special education forward. As she notes, her work has paid particular attention to the institutional and professional interests at play in the growth of special education: ‘I have been concerned in my work in special education to use critical theories to question the part professionals and practitioners play in the social and cultural reproduction of a particular class in our society’ (Tomlinson 1987: 39).

The resilience of special education

Such critical commentary is well developed and has since the mid-1970s helped to lay the platform for many notionally progressive changes in legislation across the world. The USA was among the pioneers in this legislative sea change with its Public Law 94-142, which mandated public education for students with disabilities in ‘the least restrictive environment’ – or, in other words, the most natural, mainstream or integrated environment.

Despite the legislation, however, and despite the critical commentaries, there has, as the analysis of Skrtic (1991) has pointed out, continued to be a re-emergence of the kind of thinking which leads to ever newer forms of segregative and exclusionary practice. As Skrtic (1991: 150) puts it, ‘the new practices associated with . . . mainstreaming simply reproduced the special education problems of the 1960s in the 1980s’. The exclusionary practices are still there: there is still labelling; exclusion shows no sign of declining (see Parsons 1999).

The critical theorists might see the resilience of special education as a clear demonstration of education’s inevitable reproduction of the existing social system. As Tomlinson (1987: 34) puts it: ‘Critical theorists have noted the way that education often helps to reproduce the children of blacks, minorities, working-class – and the handicapped – into inferior, powerless, social positions.’ The process being referred to by Tomlinson is exactly the same as that referred to (only half-flippantly) by the French social philosopher Simone Weil in The Need for Roots ([1949] 2002): ‘Culture is an instrument wielded by professors to manufacture professors, who when their turn comes will manufacture professors.’ Educational culture, at whatever level, is predisposed to remake itself and the society from which it draws. Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, has done most to explicate this process of reproduction (see, for example, Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), pointing to the role of ‘cultural capital’ in this.

Some observers of the social and political scene subscribe to a distinction in the management of human affairs between what is popularly known as ‘conspiracy theory’ versus ‘cock-up’ (McLynn 1999). Those who do subscribe to such distinctions will notice something of the conspiracy theory in analysis of special education that rests in critical theory. For the existence of special education is seen through this particular theoretical template in terms of maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order for the benefit of those
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who already possess power and ‘cultural capital’. There is an assumption of intentionality in the system. The system is assumed to be about the reproduction of the social order. There could be said to be strong and weak versions of intentionality here and one doesn’t have to subscribe to a strong version of intentionality in order to assent to Archer’s (1979) analysis of the development of educational systems as related to the interests of those who manage the system.

Clearly, the interests at play in the education system have contributed to the manufacture and maintenance of segregation. But there are other more prosaic ways of interpreting the perpetually re-emerging exclusionary practices of education – ways that avoid any kind of intentionality. A good example of an approach which might be considered less conspiracy oriented is the analysis of Skrtic (1991), which locates the phenomenon more in functionalism. If functionalism, which ‘presupposes that social reality is objective, inherently orderly, and rational and thus that social problems are pathological’ (Skrtic 1991: 152), is consciously or unconsciously adhered to by planners and practitioners, it will lead to a particular mindset about the way to deal with education’s problems, namely the children who don’t fit or won’t learn. He continues:

When industrialization and compulsory school attendance converged to produce large numbers of students who were difficult to teach in traditional classrooms, the problem of school failure was reframed as two interrelated problems – inefficient organizations and defective students.

(Skrtic 1991: 152)

He is surely right about the framing of school failure in notions of bad schools or bad children and his analysis is borne out by the contemporary discourse of education and special education, with its discussion of effective (and, by implication, ineffective) schools. He goes further to suggest that it is what he calls the ‘machine bureaucracy’ of schools, itself a product of functionalism, which is responsible for the re-emergence of old thinking and old practice in new clothes – even when schools are notionally moving to inclusion. Instead of achieving the ‘adhocracy’ which he looks forward to, schools retain (presumably because they are tacitly cleaving to the tenets of functionalism) the organizational structure that perpetuates exclusionary responses to children who are difficult to teach. We do not demur from this analysis in any way; indeed, we find it helpful and draw on it, especially in Chapter 2 of this book (see also Thomas and Glenny 2002).

Theories of special education and theoretical critique: reasons to be different

However, we try to cast the net even wider and to avoid theoretical analysis. If ‘atheoretical analysis’ in education is a contradiction in terms to some, it is anathema to others, who see any such analysis typifying a philistine and anti-intellectual stance. Some commentators – such as Garrison (1988) and Suppes
(1974) – have even claimed that atheoretical research in education is impossible. Non-theoretical research seems taboo for a large part of the research community in education.

But one of the problems, as we see it, of analysis in education is that it is discipline oriented: it tends to follow the theoretical and methodological furrows of disciplinary preference – of sociology, psychology, history or whatever. The trouble is that in education, and in special education in particular, foci for analysis do not usually lend themselves to the analytical instruments borrowed from the major disciplines. We take up this theme in the next chapter, borrowing from the neurologist-turned-anthropologist Oliver Sacks who argues that research and diagnostic instruments fashioned for one set of questions are inappropriate for another set. Back in the 1960s Barker (1968), in arguing for a more ‘ecological psychology’, made the same point. He highlighted the need for recognition of different forms of enquiry and analysis by giving an example of alternative, but equally valid, explanations for the same event. He asks us to imagine the movement of a train of wheat across the Kansas plains. How is this movement to be explained? An economist will explain it in one way, while an engineer will explain it in another. ‘Both the laws of economics and the laws of engineering are true; both operate in predictable ways on the train’ (Barker 1968: 12).

The train analogy is a nice one, for it points to the diverse number of analytical frames that can be lain over any phenomenon. The crude questions asked about an event (such as ‘how is the train’s movement to be explained?’) disguise the multiplicity of levels at which analytical purchase can be made. It may be easy to ask certain questions, yet those questions may be wholly inappropriate for the task in hand.

**Theory-shaped critique**

Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate.

Robert Louis Stevenson (Stevenson 1999: 85)

For the words ‘a work of art’ in Stevenson’s presciently postmodern statement, one could easily substitute the words ‘theory’ or ‘research’. Art, theory and research are all examples of artifice: the attempt to draw a narrative, a theme out of the ‘monstrousness’ and ‘abruptness’ of life. The theory of our educational scholarship and this applies especially to special education, seeks order. It is measured for its effectiveness by the extent to which it is logical, clear, tidy, parsimonious, rational, consistent. The disciplines in which theory is framed encourage attempts at explanation in a social world which is singularly lacking in order or intentionality. As Oakeshott (1967) puts it, the rational mind behind the attempt to forge theory has none of that *negative capability* . . . the power of accepting the mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness, only the capability of subjugating experience . . . [The
rationalist has] no aptitude for that close and detailed appreciation of what actually presents itself.

(Oakeshott 1967: 2, emphasis in original)

It is a freedom to make a ‘close and detailed appreciation of what actually presents itself’ which a loosening of grasp on theory offers. If we are seeking to understand why one child isn’t reading, or why another refuses to go to school, we should perhaps trust in our own knowledge as people – trust in our experience and understanding of fear, interest, friendship, worry, loneliness, boredom. We know what it is to be confident, over-confident or to feel self-doubt. We understand lying, openness, hypocrisy. We understand guile and the possibility of being deceived. We have self-knowledge, and this is our principal tool in helping us to understand others. As Joynson (1974: 2) puts it, ‘Human nature is not an unknown country, a terra incognita on the map of knowledge. It is our home ground. Human beings are not, like the objects of natural science, things which do not understand themselves.’

We can use our understanding of these facets of being human, however, only if we feel confident in the knowledge that using them does not restrict our understanding – only if we feel that we are not missing out on some important empirical knowledge or missing some key theoretical insight. One of the points that we wish to make in this book is that the models, theories and intellectual castles created in the field of special pedagogy have helped little in improving learning – helped little in understanding why children fail at school6 (and this is discussed further in the next chapter). This is unfortunate enough in itself, but the even more unfortunate corollary is that the existence of this kind of supposedly privileged knowledge has persuaded teachers in ordinary schools across the globe that they may not be sufficiently knowledgeable or sufficiently expert to help children who are experiencing difficulty: that they do not have sufficient technical expertise or theoretical knowledge to teach all children.

To say merely this, however, is to make the case too weakly: this privileged knowledge, these theories and models have, by satisfying Oakeshott’s ‘irritable search for order and distinctness’ distracted attention from the ways in which we may use our common humanity to understand others and use our common sense to make schools more humane, inclusive places. For the knowledge is compartmentalized and disbursed according to the frames provided by academic disciplines most obviously adjacent to special education.

Free thinking is difficult in such an intellectual atmosphere. When Foucault (1970: 49) said that ‘knowledge [has] closed in on itself’ he was referring to the codification of knowledge into disciplinary compartments. It would be a brave set of practitioners who would dare to move outside the professional edifices and procedural imperatives generated by those codifications. Procedural and professional responses and reflexes thus emerge from schools when problems with pupils arise, but these are often no more than what Skrtic (1991) calls ‘symbols and ceremonies’, distracting attention from more obvious and straightforward (but probably less prestigious, and certainly less immediately credible) action based on humanity and common sense. As Kohler (1947)
put it in his masterpiece *Gestalt Psychology* (in the gendered language of the time – for which, apologies):

I feel that I must take sides with the layman; that, for once, he rather than our science is aware of a fundamental truth. For the layman’s conviction is likely to become a major issue in the psychology, neurology and philosophy of the future.

(Kohler 1947: 323)

Kohler’s prediction, made halfway through the twentieth century, looks to have been a little too optimistic at the beginning of the twenty-first. Even though there has been a turn away from the mechanistic behaviourism of his time, there is still strongly detectable a sense that those who urge the need for a more humanistic turn are slightly soft in the head. And this applies particularly at the ‘applied’ level of implementation: even in the 1970s and 1980s there was a feeling among applied psychologists that behavioural psychology had been drawn from the white heat of contemporary psychological discourse. This was despite the warnings of those like psychology’s elder statesman Sigmund Koch (1964), who warned of the necessity to remember that:

In every period of our history we psychologists have looked to external sources in the scholarly culture – especially natural science and the philosophy of science – for our sense of direction. And typically we have embraced policies long out of date in those very sources . . . Psychology is thus in the unenviable position of standing on philosophical foundations which began to be vacated by philosophy almost as soon as the former had borrowed them.

(Koch 1964: 4–5)

The warning is about the transposition of one kind of thinking to a different arena and it applies today as much as when Koch wrote. Theoretical, modeling, grand explanatory effort is in a human field bound to be not only short of the mark, but possibly misleading. It is especially so if it leads to the belief that practice – practice in schools and with children – involving know-how knowledge (Ryle 1990) can be extracted from such endeavour.

The tack taken in this book is that the theories and models of special education are no exception in this respect. Indeed, they provide an exemplary case of how grand explanatory frameworks can be misleading and we give examples of this in Chapters 3 and 4 where we look especially at children’s behaviour at school and at their difficulty with reading. Especially worrying in this is how these frameworks can seem to make us lose confidence in ourselves as teachers and, indeed, as people.

The problem as we see it, however, lies not just in these theories and models of special education and special pedagogy, but also in the theories employed in its critique. One of the difficulties of taking an explicitly theoretical stance – like that of critical theory – in trying to understand a phenomenon like special education is that things become shaped according to the theoretical lens through which one is viewing them. Barrett (1978) poses the danger thus:
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The greater and more spectacular the theory, the more likely it is to foster our indolent disposition to oversimplify: to twist all the ordinary matters of experience to fit them into the new framework, and if they do not, to lop them off.

(Barrett 1978: 149)

The warning here is about the simplifying tendency of theory in the social and symbolic sciences in general – the problems are not restricted by any means to special education or even education. Theoretical moulds, from wherever they derive, the argument goes, are the Procrustean bed of the educator; there is the danger that in compacting, trimming and generally forcing the worlds with which we work into these theoretical moulds we may distort and misperceive those worlds. And education is by no means peculiar in this respect: Wright Mills (1970) described and attacked this theoretical tendency in socio-historical analysis, where he suggested that theory (in particular in the philosophies of Comte, Marx, Spencer and Weber) creates a ‘transhistorical strait-jacket’ into which the evidence of history is coerced.

Thus, while many have seen theory as the sine qua non of educational analysis, we view it here with profound scepticism. This is not to dismiss it: where it can provide what Bourdieu calls a ‘thinking tool’, it can be valuable, enabling the perception of something in a different light or from a different perspective. However, where it dominates thought, permanently dictating the direction of analysis, it can become hypnotic and even dangerous. This is how Bourdieu himself puts it:

Let me say outright and very forcefully that I never ‘theorise’, if by that we mean engage in the kind of conceptual gobbledygook . . . that is good for textbooks and which, through an extraordinary misconstrual of the logic of science, passes for Theory in much of Anglo-American social science . . . There is no doubt a theory in my work, or, better, a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield, but it is not built as such . . . It is a temporary construct which takes shape for and by empirical work.


Theory is, then, for Bourdieu, a thinking tool – a temporary construct. It is something that comes and goes: a brief model, a metaphor, an idea or set of ideas which come out of one’s thinking, one’s reading and one’s experience of the world. It is evanescent and fragile, to be captured and cradled when useful but discarded when it begins to dominate and steer the analysis. Foucault says something similar. For Foucault, while Piagetian or psychoanalytic theory may form useful stepping-off points, they are useful only in the sense that they are caricatured or theatricalized. The conclusions one draws thus emerge from a disrespectful tossing around of the notions of the grand theory builders. They cannot emerge, according to Foucault, from the very architecture of the theorists’ palaces. To use theorists’ ideas in this way, as totalities that provide a useful explanatory framework, can lead us on interminable wild goose chases and down infinitely long culs-de-sac. Foucault suggests that when social
Theories have been used as explanatory frameworks they have proved a ‘hindrance to research’ (Foucault 1980a: 81). Likewise with Bourdieu: theory should never be a dogma – an unvarying liturgy of principles for the operation of some analytical process.

This is important for three distinct reasons. First, it is important because of the direct effects which the grand theory of the Great Thinkers has had in special education. In Chapter 3, we examine how special education has suffered from the influence of psychoanalytic theory on the understanding of behaviour difficulty at school. That which is, notionally at least, ‘theory’ has a particularly powerful influence since it confers academic legitimacy on the subject of the supposedly ‘theoretical’ analysis.

So, in a field like special education, which has always suffered something of an inferiority complex about its academic status, there is the danger that ‘theory’ may be used to add cachet to simple ideas or propositions – and to claim some epistemological legitimacy and explanatory currency for these ideas and propositions. But those ideas and propositions lent credibility by theory are as likely to be incorrect as correct. Indeed, the imprimatur of correctness, while proffered by supposedly theoretical analysis, is probably entirely inappropriate for a field like education, given the plasticity of the stuff with which we work and which we study. There is no means in educational research of enabling what the philosopher of science Canguilhem (1994: 41) calls the ‘elimination of the false by the true’. Educational theory is (and we are thinking here of its ‘grand theory’ which has been particularly influential in special education: Freudian, Piagetian, behavioural), unlike science’s theory, non-progressive – in science there is an eventual elimination of false by true or at least (for those who balk at the starkness of false versus true) an elimination of less reliable knowledge by more reliable knowledge (Ziman 1991).

But in education that process of elimination of less reliable by more reliable is far more problematic – because of the kind of knowledge we trade in, as educators. The knowledge that we have and which we seek as educators of whatever kind – teachers, planners, researchers – is not progressive knowledge. Today’s school student knows more about electricity than Faraday, knows more about chemistry than Mendeleyev and more about genetics than Mendel, because of the cumulative, transferable nature of the knowledge involved. It is unlikely, however, that today’s student of education knows more about education than great educators such as Froebel, Pestalozzi or Rousseau – although today’s experienced teacher in any and every school in the land may well ‘know’ more than these luminaries. The reasons for the contrast between the education student and the practising teacher lie in the difference between what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1990) called know-how knowledge and know-that knowledge. The know-how knowledge is practical knowledge – and the practising teacher’s know-how knowledge may (or may not) be more sophisticated than that of Froebel. The ‘know-that’ knowledge is the accreted knowledge of facts, collectable and progressive and clearly demonstrable in the sciences; but this latter has offered little progress that one can discern in education: there has been little conspicuous elimination of the false by the true – and neither should we expect there to be. The problem with the cachet
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imputed by theory, however, is that it suggests that the truth, the right path has been found or at least is in some way findable.

All those who work in education, and particularly special education, should be concerned about this: concerned about the consequences of theory, since those consequences are in the real world of classrooms and the real lives of teachers and children. Theories are not simply the playthings of bored academics: they have often been used to ‘explain’ how children learn, and why they fail. Piaget’s thinking, for example, has been responsible for many ideas and initiatives in education. Reliance on Piagetian theory and what Bruner (1966: 214) calls ‘the cloying concept of “readiness”’ led to wholly mistaken notions about readiness for reading. Bryant (1984: 257), indeed, contends that ‘there can be no question that the implications of Piaget’s theories about children’s logical skills are, as far as teachers are concerned, restrictive and negative’. It is surely not too early to say that certain elements of that theory proffer a serious misrepresentation of the way children think. This has happened for two main reasons: from unrealistic expectations about the place and limits of theory in education and from the understandable fascination of professional and academic communities by a particularly powerful nexus of theoretical knowledge.

It is worth saying a word or two about Vygotsky here, since his genius in thinking about learning has often been presented as the anti-venom to Piaget’s genetic determinacy. One wonders whether his reputation is entirely justified or whether the fascination with him is due to his romantically short life, his clever flirting with the apparatchiks of the USSR (in contrast to the leaden political correctness of Lysenko) and his bright acceptance of the importance of the social element in learning. His, after all, was an optimistic way of seeing learning – and the message with which Vygotsky leaves the teacher contrasts with that left by Piaget, which Bryant (1984: 257) says is ‘a pretty bleak one’. But while Vygotsky’s ideas are refreshing, most educators (outside the scholarly world of Vygotsky interpreters) would probably flounder if asked to expound, without waffling, in more than three or four sentences exactly what Vygotsky said. Their answers would probably be of the variety: (i) ‘Learning is social: children learn from those – usually adults – who know more than they do about something’ and (ii) ‘Learning happens best when children are being stretched a little bit – but not too much; what they are learning shouldn’t be too easy and it shouldn’t be too hard.’

The extraordinary fact is that neither of the latter ideas is particularly startling and neither is particularly new. Their consistency rings through the work of all the great educators: Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori, Rousseau. The reason that they have been so interesting recently is that they have presented an alternative to the crystal-hard theorizations with which they were contemporaneous. Theorists like Freud and Piaget seemed to be constructing channels within which our ideas about children’s thinking were to be constrained. Vygotsky, along with these other educators, returns to unadorned knowledge of learning which comes from our knowledge, as people, of what it is to learn. That knowledge is, then, by no means new to us: it has not been revealed by some remarkable theoretical disclosure. It comes from Ryle’s ‘know-how’ that
we gain of others (as learners, friends, deceivers, trusted colleagues, or whatever) and that knowledge arrives from our experience as teachers and as people. While Rousseau shocked the world with *Émile* ([1762] 1993), he said only what *good* teachers know (and probably have always known) about learning:

Instead of keeping [Émile] mewed up in a stuffy room, take him out into a meadow every day; let him run about, let him struggle and fall again and again, the oftener the better; he will learn all the sooner to pick himself up. The delights of liberty will make up for many bruises. My pupil will hurt himself oftener than yours, but he will always be merry; your pupils may receive fewer injuries, but they are always thwarted, constrained, and sad. I doubt whether they are any better off.

(Rousseau [1762] 1993: 49)

The contrast drawn by Rousseau seems remarkably prescient, and rather like a contrast between good nursery education and that which might be offered by Direct Instruction, Doman Delacato or one of the other miracle methods of special pedagogy. No miracle pedagogy has been discovered since his day or is ever likely to be revealed by the theoretical endeavours of educators or psychologists.

We reject the view, then, that special educators (or, indeed, any educators) have to adopt some formulaic schema for collecting data, some analytical sieve for sifting them or some theoretical frame for synthesis. As the historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin (1979: 86) says: ‘What do the greatest classical scholars of our time know about ancient Rome that was not known to Cicero’s servant girl? What have they added to her store?’ If, in other words, practitioners are immersed in the practice and observation of education, its traditions, literatures and the literatures of cognate areas, there is no need for some external validation of their action.

The second reason for mistrusting theory, as we have indicated already, is that theory may dominate analysis when one is seeking to understand a phenomenon like special education. This is so even with a theoretical system as open ended, personal and ‘emancipatory’ as critical theory. The argument of critical and emancipatory theorists is that theorizing that excludes or ignores meaning, significance and social and historical contexts denies the possibility of social critique. Theory, these advocates would say, has to emerge out of political stance. In addressing the critique of Clark *et al.* (1998) of certain kinds of sociological theory applied to special education, Slee (1998) says the following:

There is a failure to recognise that imported sociological theorising of disability and education is not a quest to force theoretical closure to eliminate doubt. It is essentially a political project demanding ever-clearer explanations of complex realities in order that we know ‘what’s going on, why and how we change it’ (Troyna 1994). In this respect it is what Troyna (1995) referred to as partisan research.

(Slee 1998: 129)
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Stanley Fish (1989) is one of the most forthright critics of the kind of theoretical enterprise of which Slee speaks here. The disavowal of forced ‘theoretical closure’ is not enough, Fish would argue, not only because it is contradicted by the subsequent commitment to ‘partisan research’ (which surely loads one’s reasoning toward some expected endpoint), but because the analysis that is sought and proffered with the honorary title ‘theoretical’ assumes some kind of privileged status. But in reality this discourse, this ‘theory talk’, possesses no epistemological advantage over any other. There is no way of showing that it is right or wrong. Neither is there any way of showing that the undoubted commitment to social and personal improvement – the partisan-ness of which Troyna writes, and which lies behind it – can in any way be validated. Many sincere people at the turn of the century, for example, believed – no doubt after due dialectic and reflection – that it was right and proper to ship children from England to Australia for a ‘new life’ (Newman and Roberts 1996). It is now recognized, of course, from the personal accounts that have come from the recipients of such well-meaning policy, that it often caused unquantifiable misery. The problem is that critique and theory which comes out of one political stance is as likely to be right or wrong as another. That which determines to provide critique is liable to be undermined by it. Fish (1989) notes that the critical theorist:

is unable to show that critical self-reflection is something it is possible to do . . . [this] means that critical theory is faced with two unsatisfactory alternatives: either it admits an inability to distinguish between its own agenda and the agenda it repeatedly exposes, admits, in short, that it is, like everything else, merely ‘interested’ and not possessed of a special interest called the emancipatory or it preserves its specialness by leaving its agenda without content, operating forever at the level of millenarian prophecy, issuing appeals in the name of a generalised human potential, calling for actions that have no particular content, celebrating goals that remain unachievable because they remain unthinkable.

(Fish 1989: 455–6)

The problem stems not from taking a political stance, for part of our argument is that to pursue a value-oriented education system is just as valid a project as the seeking of an evidence-led one (and this is explored in Chapter 7). Rather, the problem stems from the assumption that a particular stance is validated and given credibility by its association with a certain theory. Again, the problems emerge from the privileges that theory confers.

The third reason for mistrusting theory, aside from its Procrustean and legitimizing tendencies, is that it may distract us from action and from concern with the kind of social justice that is necessary for a movement to inclusion. This may seem a strange proposition and is certainly one which would be disputed by those who promote their theoretical analysis as ‘emancipatory’. The argument for the proposition is articulated powerfully by Richard Rorty (1998). Academics since the mid-1960s, he says, have become so preoccupied with the weighty matters of theory and theorizing that they no longer bother to concern themselves with the mundanity of reform – of the kind of efforts at social justice that are behind inclusion. It is the ‘mundanity’ that is important:
effecting social justice is, for Rorty, about a difficult, dirty agenda of change in statute, regulation and ways of operating public organizations like schools. Recently, however, concern with this kind of agenda has become submerged under a welter of theorizing. Academics nowadays, he asserts, in their fascination with theory, have turned away from secularism and pragmatism. Academics seem to want always to see things ‘within a fixed frame of reference, a frame supplied by theory’ (Rorty 1998: 36).

The ‘fixed frame of reference’ argument is the one articulated by Barrett and others and which was addressed earlier. But Rorty is going further: he contrasts the contemporary academy with pre-1960s’ reformers whose uncomplicated agenda was to protect the weak from the strong. Rorty’s message, if it is right, surely has particular resonance for special educators. The message is that for those in fields like education, the priority should be change. Change is effected only through an unremitting focus on the particular – by concentrating energy on a detailed, unglamorous agenda of administrative, legal and financial matters. But a focus on these mundane but necessary matters is subverted by the contemporary intellectual’s obsession with theory. The product of the theorizing academy has been ‘many thousands of books which represent scholastic philosophizing at its worst’ (1998: 93). Rorty asserts that this kind of academic theorizing ‘produces dreams not of political reforms but of inexplicable, magical transformations’ (1998: 102).

This theorizing (and these dreams) of academic special educators would be harmless enough if they didn’t have consequences. But the trouble is that our theories in special education do have consequences – consequences of both omission and commission. On the omission side, if we are too busy theorizing, we may neglect to act, as Rorty asserts; we become too obsessed with our own theory projects. On the commission side, theory – of whatever kind – legitimizes some potty ideas and practices. ‘Theory’ carries with it such academic cachet that it is taken to be a sound basis from which to proceed. That which is ‘theoretically grounded’ is taken to be more worthy of respect and support than that which, more simply and prosaically, seems right and sensible.

Rorty says that this theorizing often offers ‘the most abstract and barren explanations imaginable’ (1998: 93) and that it distracts from the proper job of the academic in the social sciences, which is to reform. Special education is surely one of the clearest cases in point, where reform should supersede theorization. This is one of the clearest messages from this book: that the kind of theory employed by all branches of social scientific endeavour over the twentieth century often channelled thinking about special education inappropriately. Further, it provided misleading metaphors for understanding some of the social and psychological processes in which we are most interested.

Think small: the need for local enquiry

Because of this, we would want to reassert, theory should be seen better as the ‘temporary construct’ of Bourdieu: the thinking tool. Dewey said much the same: take Meiklejohn’s (1966) summary of Dewey’s position:
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It is unwise, Dewey tells us, to philosophize, to have and to use ‘general theories’ . . . ‘What is needed,’ Dewey says, ‘is specific inquiries into a multitude of specific structures and interactions. Not only does the solemn reiteration of categories of individual and organic or social whole not further these definite and detailed inquiries but it checks them.’

(Dewey 1966: 83)

Dewey’s emphasis on ‘specific enquiries’ is very similar to Rorty’s emphasis on a particular, detailed agenda and Skrtic’s adhocery. The corollary of such a way of thinking is that we should invest less dependence in the grand theoretical edifices and rigid castles of metaphor constructed by education’s intellectual heroes. And we should place less faith in theory’s methodological handmaidens. As the iconoclastic critic of social science, Stanislav Andreski (1972: 108–9) puts it: ‘The overemphasis on methodology and techniques [in social science], as well as adulation of formulae and scientific-sounding terms, exemplify the common tendency . . . to displace value from the end to the means.’ In education in general, and special education in particular, there has been this tendency to displace value from the end to the means as the legitimacy and value of research is determined less by common-sense evaluations of its status and likely impact, and more by notions such as ‘reliability’, imported from the natural sciences.

Not only does a focus on means rather than ends deliver a particular kind of knowledge, one that may well distort the sort of practice we feel that it is right to implement, it also may, again in Andreski’s (1972: 116) words, provide ‘an alibi for timorous quietism’. It may, that is to say, distract attention from important yet challenging matters for the educator – away, in other words, from critical thought, inquiry and innovation about the curriculum; away from children as people. It may lead the gaze instead towards the less challenging paraphernalia of measurement and research procedure. Postman (1995) puts it well. He notes that Confucius:

insisted on students studying what we would call ‘good manners’. Can you imagine a school today requiring as a major subject the study and practice of good manners? Surely, no one can say it is not an important subject. Perhaps it is not in the curriculum because the Educational Testing Service would be hard-pressed to figure out how to assess it.

(Postman 1995: 104)

Thus, for example, with the kudos which learning theory invested in behavioural methods, more attention was devoted to the proper application of task analysis procedures or the correctness of behavioural objective specification than was given to the question of what was actually wanted from an education of children for whom the procedures were devised. It was only when critical voices reached sufficient volume – from a number of directions (see for example, Stenhouse 1975; Wood and Shears 1986) and from the protestations of teachers – that serious questions began to be asked about what was going on.

If one doesn’t think small, one is in danger of being guided by the safety of prestigious theory, by the putatively secure knowledge emerging from the
findings of supposedly empirical enquiry. The problem with a theory, as distinct from Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tool’, is that it always returns to a guiding path. The underlying assumption is that there is a proper way of examining things. As Foucault put it (in discussion with Gerard Raulet) in interpreting the behaviour of revolutionary Marxists in the 1960s, there came to be an ‘antidogmatic violence’:

_Gérard Raulet:_ An antidogmatic violence in search of references [. . .]
_Foucault:_ And looking for them, on occasion, in an exasperated dogmatism.
_Gérard Raulet:_ Via Freud or via structuralism.
_Foucault:_ Correct. So, once again, I would like to reassess the history of formalism [. . .] within the larger phenomenon of formalism in the twentieth century, as important in its way as Romanticism or even positivism during the nineteenth century.

( _Foucault_ 1994: 111)

None of this is to deny the particular and specific insights that may come from particular kinds of theory and which may be used as thinking tools in considering particular problems that arise out of children’s reluctance to learn. It is the seeking of form, in Marx, Freud, the Frankfurt School or wherever, that is of concern – and this is important when we are looking to explain the history of special education, since the grand theory postulated by the Grand Theorists has been highly influential. Even to the present day, as we discuss in Chapter 3, notions of emotional disturbance dominate explanations of behaviour difficulty and these rely for their legitimacy on a Freudian ontology, even if that ontology is, as Crews (1997: 298) has put it, an ‘ontological maze peopled by absurd homunculi’.

Even with, as Rorty (1998: 76) puts it, a ‘partial substitution of Freud for Marx as a source of social theory’, there remains the seemingly willing dependence on the structure of a theory or what Dewey (1982: 187) called the ‘logic of general notions under which specific situations are to be brought’. Dewey asserted that instead of these general notions, ‘What we want is light upon this or that group of individuals, this or that concrete human being, this or that special institution or social arrangement’ (1982: 187).

When Foucault says that his ‘genealogy’ entertains ‘the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge’, he sounds distinctly like the Dewey of nearly a century ago who warned of theory – of ‘true knowledge’. Indeed, Rorty (1991: 193) suggests that ‘Foucault can be read . . . as an up-to-date version of John Dewey.’

**Concluding comment**

The picture drawn in this chapter is of special education as something of an epistemic jumble. Its ‘jumbleness’ has not evidently been a source of concern to
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many, or even a source of note. Indeed, the very legitimacy of special education is proudly constructed out of its ‘theory’, even though the theory is an agglomeration of bits and pieces from Piagetian, psychoanalytic, psychometric and behavioural theoretical models.

We make an argument here for a loosening of hold on the erstwhile theoretical knowledge behind special education, contending that less of our inquiry into children’s difficulties at school – and, more importantly, less of our response to those difficulties – should be defined and tackled in the way that it has hitherto. An argument is made, if we are looking to the shape of an education system for the future, for more reliance by all in education – practitioners, planners, academics, researchers – on ideals about equity, social justice and opportunity for all. In pursuing these ideals, in improving the education system, we should accept rather than deny the insights that emerge by virtue of being human – insights that emerge from our own knowledge of learning; our own knowledge of failure, success, acceptance or rejection. There is nothing to be lost in so doing, for the evidence is that there are no magic fixes or startling insights to emerge from the traditional knowledge base of special education. Indeed, there is a great deal to be regained through a recourse to our common humanity. Joynson (1974) begins his book *Psychology and Common Sense* by précising a G.K. Chesterton story that makes the point well:

[A] man dreams of emulating the great explorers. One day he sets sail from the West Country and heads out into the Atlantic, confident that he is destined to discover an unknown land. For many weeks he wanders across the ocean, buffeted by storms and uncertain of his position. At last, a coastline comes in view and, as he approaches, he sees the towers and domes and minarets of a strange civilisation. Greatly excited, he makes his way ashore. To his astonishment, the natives speak English. He has landed at Brighton.

(Joynson 1974: 1)

Maybe the research indicating the ineffectiveness of special education (reviewed briefly in Chapter 2) has landed us at Brighton. Maybe the realization that we haven’t found a new civilization and neither are ever likely to leads us to a separate set of questions about failure at school. Maybe it leads us to re-evaluate our research and its methods and to place more value in what we – as people – already know and want.

Analysis framed by the research methodology of special education and the discourse that surrounds it tends always to push discussion about alternatives to special education into boxes. Discussion tends to lead to this method versus that method, or segregation versus integration, or exclusion versus inclusion. In Vygotsky’s metaphor, words are the tools we use for thinking and the words we use in our discourse here tend always to channel discussion along predictable furrows. The tools for thinking – the vocabulary, the theory, the research methodology – encourage particular ways of thinking. Worked with these tools, failure – whether it is perceived to be failure of children at school, or failure of schools to educate children – becomes yet another special education discourse.
In the next few chapters we proceed to examine the consequences of this discourse, such as the influence it has had on professional and popular thinking about learning difficulty. Suggesting that much of the ‘knowledge’ of special education is misconceived, we proceed to make the case that arguments for inclusion have to emerge out of ideas about social justice and human rights.

Summary

Much critique has focused on the place of special education in the wider social system. Special education has been taken by critics to act as a kind of service industry to the mainstream; acting in that role, the argument goes, it is discriminatory and oppressive. While such critiques are not invalid, they leave much unsaid. The point made in this chapter is that notions of learning difficulty that underpin special education and special pedagogy rely for their status on some questionable kinds of knowledge and reasoning. They rely on notions that have been elevated by ‘scientific’ methodology and theory to something more than they really are. The Great Thinkers of the ‘ologies’ (usually psychology) have built impressive theory, which gives credibility and kudos to particular (and often mistaken) ways of viewing learning, viewing children and viewing the difficulties that they experience at school. Often, these theories distract attention from simpler explanations for children’s failure to thrive. An argument is made for a renewal of confidence in practitioners’ knowledge as teachers in understanding the failure of children at school. Only outside the confines of the disciplinary and professional knowledge that enjoys such status in special education will there be a restoration of faith in the kind of principles which must guide inclusive practice.

Notes

1 Special education is taken throughout to mean not just segregation in special schools, but also the special procedures and systems – sometimes in the mainstream – that exclude certain children.

2 It is worth noting that Fish (1989) makes a critique of ‘anti-professionalism’, which highlights what he takes to be an epistemological arrogance among anti-professionals. He notes that the anti-professional position assumes: ‘let us free ourselves from the confining perspective of particular beliefs (even when they are our own) and with the help of acontextual and transcultural algorithm . . . come to see things as they really are’ (Fish 1989: 277). He argues that what anti-professionals ‘seem never to realise . . . is that power not only constrains and excludes, but also enables, and that without some institutionally articulated spaces in which actions become possible and judgments become inevitable (because they are obligatory), there would be nothing to do and no values to support’ (Fish 1989: 239).

3 By cultural capital, Bourdieu means the accumulated resources and insignia which can be ‘cashed in’ for society’s goods and services.

4 Intentionality in the philosophical sense is different from intention in the familiar sense. Deliberate intention to oppress others may or may not be assumed (in the people who populate a society) by theorists to exist. The existence of intentionality,
however, on the part of the model maker or theory constructor is different. It is described by Dennett (1996: 46–8) as ‘aboutness’: ‘Something exhibits intentionality if its competence is in some way about something else . . . Intentional phenomena are equipped with metaphorical arrows, you might say, aimed at something or other . . . But of course many phenomena that exhibit this minimal sort of intentionality do not do anything intentionally, in the everyday sense of the term.’

5 Many would seek to disabuse us of the notion that we are not theorizing (see Rajagopalan 1998). However, one needs to draw in for support again Stanley Fish, who has had a lot to say about the overuse of the notion of ‘theory’. He (1994: 378) highlights the highly varied activities shoved under the billowing cloak of ‘theory’, concluding that ‘to include such activities under the rubric of theory is finally to make everything theory, and if one does that there is nothing of a general kind to be said about theory.’ He distinguishes between theory and what he calls theory talk; the latter being ‘any form of talk that has acquired cachet and prestige’ (Fish 1989: 14–15). When informed analysis occurs, we are in Fish’s terms not following a theory, but extending a practice, employing a set of heuristic questions or, as E.D. Hirsch (1976) puts it, ‘making calculations of probability based on an insider’s knowledge’. This is not using theory. We can, says Fish, always call such kinds of thinking ‘theory’ but nothing whatsoever will have been gained and we will have lost any sense that theory is special. We discuss this further elsewhere (Thomas 1997b; 1999a; 2007).

6 As Baker et al. (1995: 14) put it: ‘There is no separate knowledge base for teaching children classified as mildly retarded or learning disabled.’

7 Bourdieu’s drawing of this distinction is not unique. Mouzelis (1995) makes the point that there is a classic distinction (drawn by S.K. Nadel) between (i) theory as a set of substantive statements, provable by empirical investigation, which try to tell us something new about the world, and (ii) theory as a set of tools. Mouzelis further points out that Althusser makes a similar distinction between theory as tool/means (which he calls Gen. II) and theory as provisional end product (which he calls Gen. III). In education (as distinct from sociology) Chambers (1992) identifies no fewer than nine meanings for ‘theory’ as it is used in this field. Only one of those meanings concerns theory as ‘thinking tool’.

8 Trofim Denisovich Lysenko was the Soviet agronomist and geneticist who progressed in the Soviet scientific establishment by developing a genetic theory that was consistent with Marxist–Leninist thought. Darwinian evolution and Mendelian genetics, he asserted, could not be correct because it conflicted with Marxist–Leninist ideology. His ideas received official support, being taught in biology courses in the USSR and they were incorporated, with disastrous consequences, into agricultural programmes.

9 Commentators such as Armstrong et al. (1998) make a persuasive case for the social value of theory, arguing for a Habermasian extension of personal theory to critical and emancipatory theory.

10 James and Prout (1990) make the case persuasively with respect to the damage that has been done to our view of children as people. In particular they point to ways in which models such as those of Piaget have inappropriately ‘constructed’ notions of childhood. Readers of Piaget will have noticed that he calls himself not an educator or even a psychologist or a biologist but rather a ‘genetic epistemologist’. The phrase gives some clues about Piaget’s mission and his core beliefs. As Toulmin (1972: 424) points out, there are two ways in which this *epistemology genetique* can be understood: as ‘intellectual phylogeny’ of human cultures, on a collective level, or to ‘intellectual ontogeny’ of individual human beings. The former, he says, is the correct interpretation of Piaget’s meaning. The rational adult is, in other words, seen as the butterfly at
the end of some ugly but necessary pre-rational stages. Seen through such a theoretical
lens, all kinds of implications follow for teaching and for an understanding of failure
to learn in the child.

1 It is worth noting that those who promulgated behavioural objectives insisted on the
observability of the behaviour that was being promoted and that this insistence owes
a lineage directly to logical positivism via Skinner’s behaviourism. The insistence that
a child be seen to do something, rather than merely be noted vaguely to enjoy it is
traceable with no difficulty at all to the logical positivists’ insistence on the verifica-
tion of meaningfulness through observation. Carnap (leader of the logical positivists’
Vienna Circle) would no doubt have turned in his grave at the knowledge that the
philosophical school that he helped to form had, 50 years later, provided the intel-
lectual lead for a system of teaching that involved breaking down learning into
dozens of ‘behavioural objectives’.