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Special Education Research and Policy: A Comparison between the United States and Developing Nations

Meghan Healey, 2011

Access to a free and quality education is supposedly a basic human right. However, both throughout the United States and internationally, there are millions of children who are being denied this right every day. Among these neglected children are those afflicted with a variety of learning disabilities and other more complicated neurological disorders. Special education is, admittedly, a costly initiative, and this financial burden seems to be the primary obstacle preventing these children from receiving the type and quality of education they rightfully deserve. Still, legislation both within the United States and on a global scale affirms every student’s right to a quality education regardless of disability; the question now is what needs to be done in order to ensure this promise is kept and these students are finally taught in a manner that benefits them.

Emerging in the second half of the twentieth century, neuroscience is a relatively new scientific discipline dedicated to the study of the brain and nervous system. Current research in neuroscience includes studies about learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia, as well as other developmental disorders, such as autism or Fragile-X syndrome. Outcomes of this research, which is often funded by private organizations, includes new treatment possibilities, teaching models, and behavioral strategies. However, is this research contributing to the formation of new education legislation? Is it shaping the “quality” education that is being promised to special needs children? It does not appear that way. Existing policy does not seem to fully incorporate the information gained through this research; rather, it seems to reflect the economic and political decisions of government officials.

The idea of a disabled person’s right to a quality education and full inclusion in society is not a new one to me. Because both of my parents are special education teachers, I have been exposed to the field almost since birth, but only in the context of the United States. I spent my days as a child in and out of their classrooms, watching them teach and listening to them vent. I have witnessed the joy my parents and their colleagues get out of teaching, but at the same time, I have also witnessed their frustration at the way the system is organized and their inability to help certain children in the way they wish they could. It is difficult to get funding for the resources and technology necessary for their classrooms, and it is
even more difficult to successfully award students a proper amount of service hours, again because of funding. It is painful to watch as administrators and government officials ignore the children they work so hard to help each and every day.

I too have experienced this same conflicting blend of pain and joy. Volunteering in a summer program for preschoolers with special needs and then working as a classroom aide in an elementary-aged intermediate life skills class, I have gained my own perspective. Having now worked with the children directly and observed the inner workings of the system for myself, I believe the special education system needs to be reformed. Policy makers and teachers need to be better informed about the brain processes involved in their students’ disabilities, as well as the best strategies to address them; education needs to be adapted to meet the specific needs of these students. It also seems to me that the administrators and government officials who make the policies are not extremely knowledgeable about current trends in special education, nor do they seem to have much experience in the classroom setting. Therefore, to improve the quality of education offered to special needs students, we need researchers, teachers, and policymakers to work together cooperatively.

Despite the apparent failure of the system and the lack of attention that is often paid to this issue, policy does exist regarding Special Education, both in the United States and on an international level. Within the United States, special education is currently guided by one major piece of federal legislation: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), also known as Public Law 94-142. IDEA was formerly referred to as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act when first written in 1975, but upon major amendments in 1990 was renamed. The most recent update of IDEA was signed into effect on December 3, 2004 by President George W. Bush, and this revision was perhaps the most significant in its history. Generally speaking, IDEA is a federal law “ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities” (“Building the Legacy of IDEA 2004”). IDEA guarantees services for children from birth to age twenty one and provides regulations in several areas, including but not limited to: No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Early Intervening Services (EIS), evaluation and reevaluation, state and district wide assessments, highly qualified teachers, and perhaps most notably, funding. Starting with 2005, IDEA delineates a “seven year path to full funding” at the state level, which gradually increases the amount of federal aid given to states for the purpose of special education. Of course, this money comes with rules and restrictions as to how it may and may not be spent. The promised budget appropriations build from $12,358,376,571 in 2005 to $26,100,000,000 in 2011, which is over a two hundred percent increase (“Building the Legacy of IDEA 2004”).

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While this sounds encouraging, the National Education Association, which is the country’s “largest professional employee organization” and dedicated to “advancing the cause of public education” (“About NEA”), explains that IDEA is not the success it might appear to be:

Ever since its initial enactment, the federal law has included a commitment to pay 40 percent of the average per student cost for every special education student. The current average per student cost is 7,552 and the average cost per special education students is an additional $9,369 per student, or 416,921. Yet, in 2004, the federal government is providing local school districts with just under 20 percent of its commitment rather than the 40 percent specified by the law, creating a $10.6 billion shortfall for states and local schools districts. (“Special Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act”)

Also guaranteed under IDEA is every student’s right to a “free appropriate public education” (FAPE). FAPE requires that schools provide students with an educational program that is designed to address the child’s particular needs and prepare them for future education, employment, and self-sustainable living. Each student receiving such an education under IDEA is required to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which includes descriptions and analyses of the child’s current performance level, annual goals and measurement parameters; services received and recommended; participation and inclusion efforts with nondisabled children; and performance on state and national assessments (“Building the Legacy of IDEA 2004”).

What makes special education in the United States problematic is the fact that it also differs from state to state and district to district. IDEA is one of the sole pieces of federal legislation; more specific policies regarding curriculum are generally created at the state and local level. As a result, the quality of special education is hard to ensure; it has such great variability. Is more national control necessary? Quite possibly, but this would be a challenging task for the government, as the Constitution clearly states that education is a responsibility of the states (Hardman and Dawson 5). In fact, for many decades, the federal government stood by silently as state policies blatantly excluded disabled students from public schools (5). So, when does the federal government intervene? Generally, patterns across history have shown that national law is formed in response to the “work of grass roots organizations composed of both parents and professionals” (Mock, Jakubecy, and Kauffman 2280). Many of these advocacy groups, including the National Association for Retarded Citizens and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, enacted change by using the courts system. For example, the national definition of FAPE was a result of the 1982 case of “Board of Education v. Rowley,” which asked the question of whether or not a deaf child deserved a sign language interpreter in the classroom (2281). It is only when pressure is exerted on the
federal government that they will expand their policy-making abilities at the cost of the states, and still then, the policy made by the government is often general and nonspecific, leaving much room for interpretation and variable implementation.

While the United States is far from excelling in terms of the special education opportunities it offers its students, there is still a dramatic difference between the quality of services offered in the United States compared to those of developing countries across the world. The Global Campaign for Education, led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), now requires yearly reports to ensure that each country is making adequate progress. The report cards of developing countries, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa, indicate that special education is essentially absent at this point in time. These countries are failing miserably at providing equal opportunities for their all of their children; access to schooling is often limited to the elite and the rich and exclusionary towards others based on gender, race, disability, etc (“Global School Reports 2008: No Excuses!”).

International policy on special education and the rights of those with disabilities serves as a replacement for the lack of policy in developing countries. Due to economic distress, access to education for special needs students is not the most dire or pressing concern; these countries are concentrating first on providing a standard education that is appropriate for the majority of the population, whether this is fair or not. As a result, global organizations, namely the United Nations, have taken responsibility for promoting the issue of special education. The history of disability initiatives at the UN dates back over fifty years to the formation of the UN and the Social Council, which is the subdivision that encompasses the rights of persons with disabilities (“History of Disability and the United Nations”).

Past UN efforts regarding the disabled began with Article 19 of the 1969 Declaration on Social Progress and Development, which focused on assisting the rehabilitation process of physically and mentally disabled people and their full inclusion in society, including the educational realm. In 1970, the UN brought together several world agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO, the United Nation’s Children Fund (UNICEF), and the World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF), by forming a program to raise and distribute money to disabled people in several underdeveloped regions of the world. Following this, in 1971, the UN drafted the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons and in 1975, the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons. 1981 was considered the “International Year for Disabled Persons,” dedicated to increasing the integration of these citizens into society and emphasizing the need to increase research efforts. This year was marked by several conferences, including the International Symposium on Disabled Persons; the World Symposium of Experts on Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries and Technical Assistance in Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons; the
World Conference on Actions and Strategies on Education, Disability Prevention, and Integration of Disabled Persons; and the First Founding Congress of Disabled Peoples International. In 1982, the results and recommendations of the Advisory Committee of the International Year for Disabled Persons resulted in the “World Programme of Action,” whose efforts are financially supported by the UN Voluntary Fund on Disability, and also in the declaration of 1982-1992 as the United Nations Decade for Disabled Persons. The UN Voluntary Fund on Disability provides assistance to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments in order to promote greater awareness of current issues and to implement the goals outlined by the UN at its international conferences; its intent is to build a “society for all” by 2010. In 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, which again set guidelines to ensure equal opportunities, including educational opportunities, for persons with disabilities (“History of Disability and the United Nations”). From this date and for no particular reason, it seems as if the UN efforts in regards to disabled persons have slowed down dramatically; fewer international conferences have been held on the topic, attempts at awareness have dwindled, and new research has been less frequently announced.

More recently, though, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, whose main focus is to “ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy human rights on an equal basis with others” (“Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”), was adopted in December 2006, and its constitution was opened to signatures in March 2007. Currently, there are 138 signatories to the Convention. The Convention is “the first human rights convention of the 21st century and the first legally binding instrument with comprehensive protection of the rights of persons with disabilities” (“History of Disability and the United Nations”). Its main goals are to “ensure that international development programs are inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities, to facilitate cooperation in research and access to scientific and technical knowledge, and to provide technical and economic assistance as appropriate” (“Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”). A new focus of the convention is also to alter the public perception of the definition of a disability; a disability is not a medical condition but rather “a result of the interaction between negative attitudes or an unwelcoming environment with the condition of particular persons” (“Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”).

Today the issue of education for persons with disabilities is also being addressed by the “Education For All” movement, which has defined six major goals and nine flagship initiatives to improve the education available to different groups worldwide. “The Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities: Towards Inclusion” is a flagship effort spearheaded by UNESCO, as well as the International Disability Organization (IDO), UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and
Development (OECD). The initiative first emphasizes that there is a major link between disability and poverty; disability can be caused by malnourishment, abuse, injury, and a variety of other environmental factors. The overarching goal of the initiative is to “unite all partners in its effort to provide access to education and to promote completion of quality education by every child and adult with disabilities” ("Education and Disability"), which EFA explains can be achieved mainly through policy reform and the inclusion of special needs students in National Education Plans. EFA also plans on producing new educational and training materials for teachers that will help them prepare for inclusive and/or special education, as well as new technology that will enhance communication and other opportunities for the students themselves. The initiative is strong here in delineating the ways in which the stated goals can be met, but it is still yet to be seen whether or not it will be successful.

While most definitely well-intentioned and still beneficial to a certain degree, some of the actions of the United Nations in regards to persons with disabilities seem greatly flawed. The agenda of each conference and/or declaration made by the UN is always the same: to ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. This goal is vague, and its repetition suggests that not much progress has actually been made. The UN even admits that no new rights of persons with disabilities have been delineated in the recent Convention ("Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities"). Instead, it is an effort to clarify the obligations of nations and states to protect the rights of the disabled, which seems very necessary after fifty years of legislation has been unable to do so. One of the specific rights listed in this latest Convention is the “right to education,” but it is difficult to find where more specific policy recommendations are made in regards to this. How helpful is this Convention to developing countries? True, the financial aid provided by the UN is crucial, as the state of the economy is one of the greatest obstacles to providing both general and special education; however, it seems that perhaps more specific guidelines are necessary in order for these governments to establish an education that is appropriate for their special needs students. To facilitate this, the UN and its agencies, as well as the United States federal government, need to include recommendations from current scientific research.

Research is constant in neuroscience; new theories and therapies are being discovered almost daily. Current trends are extraordinarily relevant to special education; autism spectrum disorders and other learning disabilities, mainly those involving impaired reading skills, are the focus of many studies. These studies examine the brain biology and environmental factors responsible for the disorders, as well as the strategies and treatments that best address them. Classroom teachers and policymakers could both benefit from knowledge of the latter; neuroscientists are offering clear suggestions as to how these students can learn. It is in the best interests of the students that this research is made
accessible so that it can have an impact on these parties.

Due to the high volume of research available and the specific characteristics of the disorder, autistic students provide a perfect example of a group of students who could benefit from more informed policy and teaching strategy. According to new research on the effectiveness of special education and/or eclectic treatments, “children with autism in special education do not demonstrate significant improvement in adaptive, social, cognitive, or language function” (Chasson 402); current methods of schooling are failing these students. To define it simply, autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that manifests itself through the triad of impaired social interaction, impaired communication, and impaired imagination (Happe, Ronald, and Plomin 1218). In addition to these three major characteristics, which can present themselves in a variety of ways, many people with autism demonstrate a need for routines, sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and other learning disabilities (“About autism.”). The incidence of autism is currently on the rise; it is now believed to afflict between 50 and 60 of every 10,000 school-aged children. Boys are over twice as likely to be diagnosed with autism as their female counterparts (“What is autism?”). Autism can be reliably diagnosed between ages two and four, if not sooner; “the first behavioral signs of autism may appear between one and two years of age and largely involve abnormalities in social attention, language development, and emotional reactivity” (Courchesne et. al 399)

The disorder is thought to be the result of interplay between both genetic and nongenetic/environmental factors, but it is unclear as to exactly what all of those factors are. Twin studies show a concordance rate of only sixty percent, proving that environmental factors do play a role, but siblings also show a concordance rate of two to eight percent, which in comparison to the less than one percent rate of incidence in the normal population, demonstrates that genes are also crucial (Muhle, Trantacoste, and Rapin 472). There are several genes that are currently being examined as candidates, and it seems likely that multiple of these genes, rather than just one, are responsible. Several different regions of chromosome seven have been implicated in autism: the FOXP2 gene, TCAG genes, and area 7q31-q33, all of which when damaged can result in impaired speech and language skills, as well as the WNT2 gene, which when damaged can result in reduced social interactions. Chromosome 15 is also a target area; the “chromosome 15 phenotype” of autism, which is caused by duplication, mutation, or inversion or the 15q11-q13 region, results in ataxia, language delays, epilepsy, mental retardation, and facial dysmorphia (Muhle, Trantacoste, and Rapin 475-7). The GABA receptor subunit on chromosome 15 has also been implicated in epilepsy, which is often comorbid with autism, as well as learning and memory deficits.

Alongside gene mutation, several structural abnormalities have also been found in the autistic brain. Increased cerebral white matter and early brain overgrowth in terms of the
frontal lobe, temporal lobe, and amygdala are the major concerns. These excessive neuron numbers and connections could create a crowded and “noisy” brain incapable of focusing on important tasks and running smoothly (Courchesne et al. 401-5). Alternatively, the Mirror Neuron Theory hypothesizes that the behavioral impairments of ASD are a result of a malfunctioning mirror neuron system, which when functioning properly allows humans to put themselves in the perspective of the other, imitate, and feel empathy (Oberman and Ramachandran 310). Finally, environmental factors, including toxin exposures, teratogens, and prenatal infections, could also contribute to the acquisition of autism. A distant parenting style and cold “refrigerator mothers” were once blamed for causing the disorder, but this theory has since been disproven (“About Autism”).

So while much still remains to be understood about autism, neuroscience has already done a fine job at defining the symptoms and possible causes of the condition. However, can neuroscience also affect the education that is available to these children? Many researchers have recognized by now that their observations should not remain in the realm of science; they have the potential to impact other disciplines and better the lives of those that have been afflicted. As a result, many studies now contain policy recommendations and suggestions for teaching strategies.

In terms of autism research, two main areas will be discussed: the need for early intensive intervention services and the appropriate model of therapy. More specific curriculum suggestions have also been made by researchers (e.g. the incorporation of technology to improve communication skills or the incorporation of music and adaptive physical education to improve cognitive functioning), but these are debates that lie outside the realm of federal responsibilities; the formation and development of curriculum is a task given to individual states and districts.

Ideally, early intervention services are awarded to children who are identified by teacher and/or doctor screenings as having special needs before and during the preschool years. Preferably, intensive intervention will include 25 or more hours per week of focused treatment with very low teacher to children ratios (Stephens 10). Research complied by Sally J. Rogers of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center displays that regardless of curriculum, setting, functioning level, measurement strategies, etc., “all the (early intervention) studies reported (a) significant acceleration of developmental rates, resulting in significant IQ gains; (b) significant language gains in the treated children; and (c) improved social behavior and decreased symptoms of autism” (Rogers 243). These gains, which were achieved in an average of only one to two years of treatment, were then maintained for years after the intensive therapy ended. Because autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder and depends on the maturation of the brain, it is important that education begins early when the brain is still plastic; there is a critical period in which these children can mold the way in which their brain works. Older children who
receive the same treatment will not make the strides that the younger children can, in terms of scholastic skills and effective brain functioning. Therefore, it is fiscally wise for the government to invest in early intervention programs since children receiving these services will likely to require less services in the future (Chasson 410). Statistics have shown that between twenty five and fifty percent of students receiving early intervention will move into general education programs by kindergarten (Stephens 3). A study performed in Pennsylvania in 1998 compared the costs associated with children who received Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) with those who did not and ultimately revealed a savings of $656,000 to $1,082,000 per EIBI child (Chasson 404).

So if early intervention is in the best interests of both the student and the government, why is there not a greater focus on early identification of autism? True, IDEA does stipulate that children can begin receiving services at the age of two; however, the majority of children are not diagnosed until age six, which is when the critical period for learning closes. (Stephens 4). Perhaps national policy should then insist that doctors and teachers perform screening tests on all children; there are new evaluation methods, such as the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT), that are highly accurate but not time intensive (Crane and Winslter 251-2). The M-CHAT is essentially a yes/no survey about the child’s behavior; a child will be recommended for further evaluation when two “critical” items or three items overall are failed. The time and money spent both on early identification and then early intervention would be well worth the eventual savings, both in terms of finances and in terms of the children’s well being.

The most intense debates about autism tend to revolve around which model of therapy is most successful. Truthfully, it does depend on the individual child, since no two children are the same and autism manifests itself differently in every child. Research does show that certain methods are more effective than others, but again, the schools and the government are not listening. While IDEA does require that all schools provide a continuum of placements (Mock, Jakubecy, and Kauffman 2286), there are no stipulations as to what type of service is provided. Government policy does not appear to include any insight in regards to the specific therapies or in regards to a parent’s right to choose which type of therapy their child is provided. As a result, some schools only offer one type of therapy to their students, even if the children may be better served by a different approach or a combination of different approaches.

The therapy debate often revolves around two main models. Stanley Greenspan’s developmental, individual-difference, relationship-based (DIR) model, commonly referred to as “floor time,” promotes spontaneous play sessions as a means to establish attention, engagement, and interaction with autistic children (Wieder and Greenspan 425). Applied behavior analysis (ABA) presents activities as discrete tasks to be completed, rewarded, and repeated (Hilton and...
Seal 1198). In a study of monozygotic twins, the twin receiving ABA treatment gained more gestural and vocal skills, while the twin receiving DIR treatment showed more improvement in eye contact and reciprocal and symbolic play skills. It is also notable that the ABA treated twin demonstrated more negative behaviors, such as pushing away toys or indicating he wanted to stop. As a result, the family chose to continue with DIR treatment, even if statistical analysis may have supported ABA (Hilton and Seal 1198-1200). The conclusion here is that more research needs to be funded by governments in order to determine which approach, or combination of approaches, is best. Since no concrete answer can be reached at the present time, it is important that instead both parents and teachers are given the information needed to make the choice that is appropriate for each individual child. It is unfair to only offer one type of therapy since that is less expensive; if something is ineffective, the money might as well not even be spent. Policy stemming from this therapy debate could therefore include parental rights about therapy choice and mandated teacher training for multiple types of therapy. The outcome of therapy is heavily dependent on the person who gives it (Hilton and Seal 1200); teachers and specialists must be well qualified to provide these services and educate parents about the advantages and disadvantages of each.

As the discussion of early intervention and appropriate models of therapy has shown, research can provide beneficial insights into policy. However, the issue of research informing policy is not that simple. Different pieces of research can find contradictory results, and research can be biased. It is important, therefore, to analyze who is funding and/or performing the research: what are their underlying motives and hopes about the outcomes? In terms of the United States, a high volume of neuroscience research is performed by universities and private organizations, but the government-associated Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services and the Arc of the United States/American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities also sponsor projects. Is the information used by the government coming only from experiments that it has funded, or is it open to the conclusions reached by outside parties? Developing countries not typically performing any research of their own, but rather rely on the information collected by the United Nations. Does the United Nations have a particular bias? Is money driving the amount of research and the particular policies the UN will support, as is generally the case in the United States? As much as we wish it were not the case, economics are a factor in the formation of policy; Frederick Wirt explains that “theory and research contract to fit the funds available” (Wirt 6). Consequently, policy cannot be idealistic; it must be practical. However, at the current time, “the influence of theory and research on policy and practice is limited, so the argument goes, because policy maker/practitioner culture is often refractory to ideas from the research domain” (Ginsburg and Gorostiaga 178). While recognizing the varying factors
unique to each nation, how can we facilitate this relationship in both the United States and developing countries? At the current time, though, the state of this interaction varies quite greatly between the United States and developing countries; does that make this an ineffective comparison? Reijo Raivola once explained that “cross-cultural comparison may reveal institutions and their functions that are nonexistent within some other culture” (Raivola 364), and this certainly seems to be the case here. Analysis of multiple countries, no matter how similar or how different they may be, is never a worthless endeavor though. The issue of education for persons with disabilities is one that all countries will ultimately face, even if they refuse to recognize it initially. The United States once excluded special needs students from education as developing nations are now doing, and in actuality, the policies constructed by the United Nations for the developing countries are not all that far removed from the policies in the United States. Additionally, when the issue finally comes to the forefront, comparative educators agree that “policy makers and practitioners should dramatically increase utilization of research [knowledge] in education” (Ginsburg and Gorostiaga 173). The ability of governments and other organizations like the UN to listen to this claim will determine how well these nations, already developed or still developing, can provide a quality education for all of their children, regardless of disability.

In order to address this issue, it is first necessary to delineate the factors that may complicate it: politics, economics, and social dynamics are all among these interplaying factors. Katarina Tomasevski, Timothy Reagan, and Walter Feinberg and Jonas F. Soltis offer varying perspectives on some of these factors that have led to the current state of special education in the United States and in developing countries. In particular, Tomasevski raises the concern about exclusion and segregated education, Reagan discusses the negative impact of ethnocentrism, and Feinberg and Soltis debate the merits of functionalist, conflict theorist, and interpretivist viewpoints.

Katarina Tomasevski, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and author of Education Denied, writes that “international human rights law obliges individual states to ensure that each child has access to education” (Tomasevski 15). Very few, if any, states have achieved this goal; millions of children across the world are still not receiving the education they deserve. Who are these excluded children? Tomasevski offers a brief definition, explaining that “out-of-school children tend to share features such as sex, minority status, the lack of identity papers, or disability” (127). Higher percentages of children are out of school in countries where no registration of children exists; developing, rather than developed, countries often fall into this category.

Exclusion of children from education tends to overlap with both discrimination and poverty. However, increased funding is not necessarily the answer to solving the problem of exclusion from schooling and legislation. Tomasevski writes, “If children are
excluded from school because they belong to a frowned-upon minority, additional funding is not likely to be channeled to their education until discrimination against minorities is removed” (127-8). While Tomasevski was likely referencing racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, the same logic can be applied to handicapped persons. This logic suggests that attention to the formation of policy should not necessarily be the only or even primary focus; it is equally important to work on incorporating people with disabilities more fully into society because government officials and policymakers will not choose to spend precious resources on the education of people they do not value or respect. Only then once money is more available to the education of special needs students can the specific merits of policy and the possible contribution of research be discussed. So, is the dialogue about special education research and policy in developing countries a worthwhile one? Or do these nations first need to target the social equality of these persons and successfully gain more financial resources on which to base this education? At this point, the United States, with a more substantial budget for education and already existing special education programs, might be more prepared to handle the debate about funding scientific research in the hopes of improving policy.

While increased funding may not be the complete answer to the dilemma of exclusion, it certainly does play a significant role. Children with special needs are “defined as costly” (151) according to Tomasevski, and “unlike decisions on what children should learn, which are seen as political choices, education for children with disabilities is viewed in terms of funding” (151). Research will not have the effect that it should on educational policy until finances are not a pressing concern, or at least until a compromise between the ideal situation and what is possible financially is reached. In the meantime, however, a conflict over funds is still present, as parents want the maximum budgetary allocation possible for their children and schools would rather keep the money for purposes other than dealing with the “difficult-to-handle” special needs pupils (153). IDEA legislation within the United States currently has the nation on a seven year path to full funding, where the special education budget is increased annually until forty percent of all special education is paid for by the federal government. Developing countries do not appear to be spending any money specifically on disabled students, but grant proposals are accepted and funded by the United Nations on their behalf. The specific manner in which this money is being allocated is also an issue for further consideration.

Tomasevski furthers this discussion regarding the opportunities available to special education students by applying human capital theory. She explains that “children with disabilities may be excluded from schools because providing wheelchair access might not be commercially viable, or because their learning is deemed not to yield a sufficient marginal return on investment” (33). Nations will refrain from making policy that will formally exclude these children, but a lack of policy or policy that is not well informed
by research still reflects their desire not to spend money on students that will not be able to contribute as much to society as adults. In contrast to human capital theory, Tomasevski offers the human rights viewpoint, according to which “education is an end in itself rather than merely a means for achieving other ends” (33). Education should enhance social cohesion rather than emphasize differences, and education should “teach the young that all humans beings- themselves included- have rights” (33). Perhaps in order for change to be enacted in special education, governments will need to adopt a human rights perspective, rather than a human capital one.

Walter Feinberg and Jonas F. Soltis, authors of *School and Society*, explore the relationship between schools and society by examining three different ideologies. What purpose do schools serve? The functionalist viewpoint “sees schools as serving to socialize students to adapt to the economic, political, and social institutions of that society” (Feinberg and Soltis 6), whereas conflict theorists “believe the driving force in complex societies is the unending struggle between different groups to hold power and status” (43) and interpretivists “are more concerned with the culture-bound frameworks of particular schools and the ways individuals understand and act in specific social contexts than with finding general laws or all-encompassing explanations” (81). Do any of these perspectives apply to Special Education?

Functionalism, while it could provide a model for our government, does not seem particularly relevant as our schools are not currently preparing special needs students to adapt to or participate in society. Functionalism proposes that individuals should be rewarded on the basis of achieved, rather than ascribed, characteristics (Feinberg and Soltis 20), so preexisting low skill levels may be the underlying justification for functionalists not to provide special needs students with an appropriate education. Instead, these students are being ignored and neglected, which is where conflict theory becomes pertinent. The varying quality of education being offered today has created a definitive divide between students, special needs students being at the bottom of this hierarchy. Education is not a means for these students to grow and learn; the poor education that they are receiving only functions to maintain and reproduce the preexisting social order.

Interpretivism does seem particularly applicable to special education theory. Interpretivists believe there are no correct answers and no absolute truths. This definition translates to mean that there is no right way to teach because learning means something different to each student; good teaching is the result of giving attention and effort to each individual student. Special needs students in particular learn differently than the so called typical child; in order to reach these students, teachers need to be prepared to adapt the curriculum to meet their needs. Does this happen in today’s schools? As mentioned before, in the United States, IDEA guarantees every student a free and appropriate education; however, this promise has been limited by a lack of resources and by a lack of teacher knowledge about
the disabilities that their students are facing. In developing countries, students are excluded from education for exactly this reason: it is too difficult to adjust or tailor the education available to the individual student, so only students belonging to the elite or who fit general education practices are given an appropriate school experience. Policy, therefore, needs to ensure that all children are not generalized into one category. Children are individuals, and they need to be treated as such. Research, too, needs to beware of this caution; it is impossible to recommend treatment for all the children who happen to share the same disorder. Multiple treatments could be successful; research can distinguish different advantages and disadvantages to each strategy, but each one should be available to students.

Timothy Reagan, author of *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Indigenous Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice*, offers a unique addition to the conversation about special education research and policy with his analysis of ethnocentrism. Reagan defines ethnocentrism as “the practice of using one’s own society and sociocultural practices as the norm by which other societies are viewed, measured and evaluated” (Reagan 5). In terms of research, it is important that the writer’s ethnocentrism and positionality are considered. Reagan explains that a person’s background knowledge and experience can influence their understanding of their chosen research topic and the arguments they put forth (17). Therefore, many authors choose to identify their biases and position at the beginning of their research. Regarding this particular issue, my experience as a child of two special needs educators and having worked in schools myself has created a distinct bias against current policy efforts aimed at special education.

How else can ethnocentrism apply to the discussion about special education research and policy? Researchers and policymakers compose two distinct groups; they each have their own individual beliefs, biases, etc. that are evident in their writings, whether they be experiments or legislation. Researchers want to see the strategies used in their studies used in the classrooms, regardless of cost, whereas policymakers want to provide an education that requires the least resources possible. Logically enough, analysis of current research and policy has shown a substantial gap between the two; the recommendations made by researchers are not often found in legislation. In order to bring the two together, communication and compromise between scientists and policymakers is necessary. Each group must overcome its own ethnocentrism and begin to recognize the position of the other group for progress to be made.

The dominant question that is left then is exactly how to reconcile the desires of researchers with those of policymakers. However, while the gap may seem obvious, many policy makers would actually reject any reference to its existence and cite the scientific evidence that underlies existing legislation as proof. To a certain degree, they are even correct: policy makers do cite research. Negating this though is
the fact that the research is flawed due to its bias; policy makers only consider their own needs and desires, not those of the researchers or teachers and certainly not those of the students. This poor level of communication between scientists and policy makers is caused in part by a lack of understanding of “the way in which knowledge can affect institutions” (Ginsburg and Gorostiaga 174). There are several different models of knowledge utilization, and the so-called “strategic model” that is frequently used by legislators uses “research findings or the research process to support a predetermine position related to a policy or practice decision” (175). Here, research is being used to justify a previously created policy, not to find an unknown answer to a novel question. As Linda Chisholm explains, “much of what passes for research and analysis for policy is little more than scientific confirmation of certain prevailing opinions, legitimation of particular assumptions and approaches by appeal to ‘rationality’, ‘logic’, ‘evidence’, ‘expertise’, and ‘quantifiable facts’ (Chisholm 3). Policy makers only look for results that fit into their plans and disregard those that contradict their beliefs, or even worse, would cost more. Alternatively, policy makers should take part in the “conceptual” use of knowledge with researchers. The conceptual model is interactive in that “research findings are used along with experience, political insight, and opinions from a variety of actors in a nonlinear process of decision making” (Ginsburg and Gorostiaga 175). The key idea here is collaboration; people from different backgrounds and different positions of power must share their opinions in order to form the best piece of policy possible. Those with experience in the classroom, the laboratory, and the government are all equally valuable, and by giving each group a voice in the policy making process, we would ensure that the result is a compromise between economics, science, and the classroom reality.

It sounds easy: researchers, policy makers, and practitioners must combine their efforts and work together in harmony. Why is it then that this cooperation has yet to occur? The answer is not so simple, but Catherine Marshall provides some perspective on the issue. Marshall is a noted feminist and critical theorist who writes this about the status of women: “The powerful define the mainstream policy problems and determine the appropriate concerns for research in education. Those in power have operated for years from a male-normed paradigm. As a result, the needs and contributions of women have been marginalized” (Marshall 59). This same logic can be generalized so that it applies to special education. Those in power have acted for all of history from a majority-normed paradigm. In terms of education, this creates a “regular education” paradigm, one that excludes or marginalizes the needs of students with disabilities. Marshall continues that “debates over education policy are power conflicts over which knowledge is the truth” (64) and “decision makers and power brokers seldom employ or enjoy analysts and evaluators who criticize policies they created” (69). Quite simply, this collaborative effort is a challenge tied up in power relations,
one that requires people to put aside their own beliefs about what is right and consider someone else’s view. Until we can convince governments and policy makers that current legislation needs reform and in particular needs the contribution of scientists and teachers alike, the gap will remain, or even widen.

Researchers and teachers are not completely blameless in this story though. In terms of researchers, it is crucial that they recognize the future outcomes of their research. Research may occur in the laboratory but it is not meant to remain there; the results have a greater application. Education takes places in the classroom, so scientists must gear their recommendations to be plausible in the same setting. As Donald Deschler writes, “research that is limited to traditional “bench science” results in a broadening of the research-practice gap and an increase in skepticism by practitioners about the value of education research” (Deshler 3).

Research is essentially irrelevant when it is created in a reality that is vastly different from the reality of the classroom. Chisholm expands on this idea, recommending use of “qualitative research methods such as ethnography, action research, participatory research, and so on, in analysis both of and for policy” (Chisholm 4). Research is too often presented only in terms of numbers and statistics, but quantitative data cannot fully represent the behaviors of a special needs child or what transpires in the classroom environment. Qualitative accounts of this information is equally as important; the situation needs to be examined and reported from multiple angles in order to gain a complete picture and form a complete recommendation. In terms of the teachers, it is important that they remain current in terms of new legislation, research, and training opportunities. The teacher is ultimately the person responsible for educating the child, and “the frequently heard statement that children with learning disabilities are actually “teaching disabled” is unfortunately accurate in many cases” (Lyon 142). Professional development opportunities should be made available to teachers by their schools and government, but the teachers themselves must remain dedicated to improving their skills and knowledge on behalf of the students.

Another pressing issue does not pertain to the research-policy gap, but rather to a policy-implementation gap. Research may successfully inform policy, but it means nothing if that policy is not successfully applied. Marshall comments on the matter: “critical policy analyses see through symbolic inaction and are suspicious of policy actors’ rhetoric and policies with no enforcement. Symbolic policy can be harmful, like the placebo that only gives the pretense of treatment” (Marshall 60). How can we ensure that policy is implemented in the way that it was intended to be? Comparative education researcher Caroline Dyer tackles the issue of policy and practice in both developed and developing countries. She first notes that “misjudging the ease of implementation is probably the most frequent error in policy planning” and furthermore that “if implementation is not planned and structured, effective management of change may give way to ad hoc adjustments and short-term
strategies for coping, with a subsequent dilution of policy efficiency” (Dyer 45). A lack of forward thinking is also costly in terms of finances, and developing countries in particular cannot afford to waste any resources. In support of this idea, Dyer references Craig’s work on the implementation of policy in African nations, which argues that implementation is essentially neglected and therefore uneconomical and unable to promote change. Also of note though is that Craig’s work, which is one of few studies on educational policy in developing countries, demonstrates that policy has the capability to have comparatively greater and more enduring impacts in developing nations than policy does in developed nations like the United States.

So, what can be done to facilitate this policy-implementation gap? Diane Stone, author of “Using Knowledge: the dilemmas of ‘Bridging Research and Policy,’” offers several suggestions as to how to improve communication between those responsible for the policy research, formation, and practice. According to Stone, we must develop practices that take researchers beyond supplying and/or brokering research in a one-way direction and allow a more productive exchange between decision-makers and implementers on what does and does not work in the transition from theory to practice. Practices could include mechanisms that bring researchers into government such as through internships, co-option onto advisory committees and official patronage of policy research networks as well as broader practices that encourage societal interaction. (Stone 293)

In conclusion, continuous communication between the groups is paramount. Schools and children are constantly changing, so teaching strategies and curriculum will have to grow to fit them. Policy may not work in its original form, so it will have to adapt. This process will never be complete.

The final variable in this dilemma is the individual nation, whether it is the United States or a developing nation whose policy is directed more by the United Nations that by its own government. What should the role of the governments be in these new policies? The human rights framework provides a partial answer to this dilemma, assigning the responsibility to the central government. According to Tomasevski:

Exposing and opposing abuses of power is the main purpose of human rights work. The focus on the state stems from its role in creating and enforcing law, affirming or denying individual and collective rights. Human rights law defines rights as claims addressed to governments; these specify what governments should and should not do (Tomasevski 128-9).

It seems that governing bodies might need more authority than they currently have in order to ensure that all special needs students are having their needs met, but it would be difficult to justify and/or institute this increase in centralized power. In fact, prior expansions of federal policy-making
have come under attack from the conservative public (Kantor 1), and history has not always proven that the federal government is better able to guide special education than local districts. Equalizing education opportunities will likely demand cooperation not only between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, but also between those at the federal and local levels of government.

The discussion about Special Education research and policy is a challenging one; there are no answers but many questions and even more variables. Before we can determine to what extent research influences the formation of policy, we must be able to determine if policy even exists and what the obstacles to its creation are. Then, once we have successfully entered the realm of policy formation, we must be wary of “global” rather than “local approaches” and a lack of communication between researchers and policy makers and then policy makers and practitioners. So where does this leave the United States and developing countries? While recognizing the varying factors unique to each nation, how can we determine the direction that each should follow in order to create the policy that will best serve their special needs students? In terms of the United States, policy is currently in place, but reform is clearly needed. The promised budgetary allowances need to be fulfilled, if not even expanded, and the government needs to better monitor the state of special education by encouraging more research and facilitating the relationships between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. This could likely be achieved by adapting a human rights perspective; the interpretivist viewpoint and conceptual model of knowledge would also be necessary contributors. Generally speaking, developing countries, like those mentioned in Africa, find themselves at a different stage. Universal primary education has not yet been achieved, and as a result, it is special needs and other minority students who find themselves excluded from schools. The guidelines set forth by the United Nations and its organizations are often the only forms of policy in regards to special education, and similarly to the United States, the United Nations needs to expand its research efforts and improve the means by which research influences both policy and practice. The United Nations, though, can only have certain effects; the governments of developing countries also need to recognize the issue of special education and devote themselves to including these neglected students. Finances, poverty, and social discrimination are all factors here, so the desired transformation will not be quick or simple. However, it has been agreed that access to a free and quality education is a basic human right: it is time that all children, regardless of disability or other differences, receive what it due to them. Policy that is well informed by current scientific research seems to be the vehicle needed for such a change.
Bibliography


