Special Needs Education as a Social System: responding to the challenge of methodology

Pol Ghesquière1* & Geerdina M. Van der Aalsvoort2
1University of Leuven, Belgium; 2University of Leiden, The Netherlands

In this concluding article we discuss how the different contributors of this special issue deal with the methodological challenges in special needs education research. The shift from an individual perspective towards an interactional and systemic point of view in special educational needs research has introduced research methods that are able to describe the complexity and the recursiveness of the social reality under study. The different studies presented in this issue provide interesting illustrations of some of these methods. The discussion of these studies makes it clear that social cultural theory is a useful framework for research on special needs education. It is suggested that in their investigations researchers should attach importance to the meaning of discourse and keep their minds open to change and new challenges.

Introduction

This special issue includes articles that consider how changes in ideas about special needs education have put new demands on research methodologies and vice versa. The authors have shared their struggle with this challenge in their professional lives. Moreover, they have illustrated their points of view with research examples in which they have tried to meet this new demand.

In this article we first provide an historical overview of methodology used in studies on special educational needs. We then discuss the articles included in this special issue. Finally, we suggest future directions for studying special needs education at the level of the individual, the classroom, and the school.

*Corresponding author: Centre for Disability, Special Needs Education and Child Care, University of Leuven, Vesaliusstraat 2, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. Email: Pol.Ghesquiere@ped.kuleuven.ac.be

ISSN 1034-912X (print)/ISSN 1465-346X (online)/04/020217-06
© 2004 Taylor & Francis Ltd
DOI: 10.1080/10349120410001687418
Discussing Changes in Methodologies in Studies of Special Educational Needs

Until the beginning of the 1990s special needs education was defined as education that adapts itself to the specific characteristics of the children who were enrolled in special schools. Disabilities were perceived as specific to the child. Most research focused on the child and his or her development. Cognitive and psychosocial profiles of children with special needs were used to organise educational practice in special schools. Individual assessment was the basis for individualised treatment and education plans.

With the introduction of the concept of inclusive education, attention shifted from individual children to schools as systems providing education for all children. With this shift, the concept of special educational needs became defined in an interactive way. Special educational needs were no longer specific to the child, but were a consequence of the interaction between the child and the educational system in which he or she participated (Englert & Mariage, 2003). From this perspective, research should not be limited to the study of the child and his or her development. Rather, it should incorporate the interaction between the child and the educational context (Jenkinson, 1997). The object of study should become the interactional process or circular system (Söder, 1997).

This change of perspective has brought new paradigms of research on special educational needs (Meijer, Pijl, & Hegarty, 1997) and puts new demands on research methodologies. Interactional processes or circular systems cannot be analysed with unidirectional research methods. Methods that allow the complex interplay of the factors to be investigated are required. Multiple descriptions and data-triangulation are necessary tools to understand the interactions or recursiveness and to gain insight into the ways schools, classrooms, teachers, and the like facilitate or hinder the education of children with special educational needs.

The contributions in this special issue illustrate how researchers deal with the interactional or recursive aspects of special needs education as an object of study at different levels.

Elbers is interested in the development of children. So, the level he is interested in is the individual child. But even at that level he argues that in order to understand children’s development, research should not only be about the child, but include the child’s perspective as well. From his point of view the use of analysis of conversations and interactions is particularly valuable. Observations and interpretations of teacher-child and child-child interactions are his basic data collection and analysis techniques. Interpretation focuses on the social constructions of the child.

Elliott is also interested in aspects of child development, but he focuses more specifically on locus of control and achievement motivation of high school students. His experience with multi-method approaches in educational research has shown him that surveys tend to overlook the complexity of the reality under study. Moreover, he concludes that, in order to understand the
nature of learning, we need to study human development at different levels of the ecosystem and this requires research using multiple methods.

Van der Aalsvoort, Van Tol, and Karemaker are interested in the quality of social interaction in classrooms. Social play is their object of study. When using social play as a diagnostic tool to investigate emerging learning difficulties, researchers have often considered problems as a child characteristic. But the social play of young children at-risk for learning difficulties can be considered as an interactional phenomenon. Via an interpretative analysis of social play data collected through use of a microgenetic design the authors reveal different aspects of classroom culture.

Ghesquière, Maes, and Vandenberghe situate their object of study at the level of the school, the school as an organisation. Their aim is to understand the implementation of inclusive education as an innovation in regular primary schools. They have argued that the complexity of studying schools as a system requires qualitative case studies involving interviews, observations, and field participation. Their analysis of the data revealed that certain practices increased the likelihood that innovative changes in school practice would be accepted by teaching staff. They also identified commonalities across schools in regard to views of inclusion of children with a range of disabilities, as well as revealing some aspects of the innovation that were viewed differently across schools and/or teachers.

Daniels describes a study in which the learning of professionals working with young people who are marginalised or at-risk of exclusion from their community, including those with special educational needs, will be investigated. His research is associated with Victor and Boynton (1998) and Engeström’s (2003) studies of the professional learning of adults. Daniels’ work involves a diversity of data collection methods and he proposes to interpret his results using Cultural Historical Activity Theory and theories of learning at work. His research design suggests that the data on learning gathered from the interagency professionals participating in his research should be interpreted as both personal and organisational.

Cybernetic system theories suggest that investigations of the nature of social systems require multiple descriptions and interpretations of the reality under study (Keeney, 1983). Thus, multi-method approaches, multiple descriptions, data-triangulation, and interpretative analyses are necessary in order to represent the interactional and recursive complexity of schools and their inhabitants. MacArthur’s (2003) overview of qualitative research on learning disabilities shows that little use is made of qualitative studies in research of special educational needs. The contributions in this themed issue may provide some examples of the type of studies for which MacArthur has called.

Methodologies Based on a Social Cultural Framework

We started this article with an historical overview of the methodologies used in studies of special educational needs and showed the movement from an
individual to a systemic point of view. The contributors in this issue also have made this transition. They all argue that the term “special educational needs” makes sense in a systemic context only. Their insights and transitions during their research careers were not coincidental. The contributions presented in this issue indicate that specific choices were made by the authors concerning the methods they used. Although not always explicitly stated, all of them share a similar understanding of the importance of the social context in their research.

Söder (1997) stresses that we have to move away from a normative and technical way of viewing the school situation of children with special educational needs towards viewing a school as a social context for learning experiences. Focusing on the experiences of pupils can be a fruitful way of achieving this. The contributions by Elbers and Elliott are examples which clarify how children struggle with meaning making at school. Van der Aalsvoort and her colleagues also show how children discuss the meaning of the play during social play. Ghesquière and his colleagues reveal that teachers themselves struggle with the language needed to explain their practice. Daniels provides a complex model that he will use to unravel the relations between the individual and the environment in his investigation of professional learning.

The units of analysis in the studies in this issue refer to larger relational systems, the dynamics of which are reflected in the interactions between multiple agents and their environments. The units of analysis then mirror the change from an emphasis on the psychological analysis of individuals to the analysis of systems and contexts. In describing the systemic nature of special educational needs, researchers have to make use of language. However, words have a natural propensity to evoke unidirectional relations. Describing multidiirectional and recursive realities through language is difficult. The researchers in this issue labour with language to describe the reality of special educational needs.

In our opinion the use of narratives may help to overcome this problem, as complex social realities can be evoked in narratives (Casey, 1995-1996). The literature about the professional development of teachers has shown that a narrative-biographical perspective can offer interesting insights into complex school realities (Kelchtermans, 1999).

The papers included in this special issue make it apparent that the methodological responses to the complexities of special needs education research are being attempted across a number of Western countries, and that similar approaches have been found to be useful. It must always be remembered that societal and political realities are a necessary frame of reference both for approaches to answering and interpreting research questions on special needs education (Berkhout & Wielemans, 1999).

The Meaning of Discourse

As we have seen, the interaction of children with their environment has become
a central focus of research in special needs education. From a systemic point of view, education can be considered as “a meaning-processing system in which the interacting participants maintain and transform the identity of themselves and of their network through a more or less shared understanding of both themselves and the world” (Bråten, 1986, p. 193).

Using traditional discourse analysis as a research tool within special educational needs research can be difficult because of the restricted use of language by children with special educational needs. We suggest that researchers should not confine their investigations to the analysis of speech only, but they should consider examining joint activity and non-verbal aspects of communication as well, as was done by Van der Aalsvoort and her colleagues. Recognition of non-verbal behaviour as communication (Van der Aalsvoort, Cowie, & Mercer, 2000) and of its importance in discourse analysis may advance this methodological approach considerably. Other examples of researchers who have investigated non-verbal aspects of communication include studies of pupils with a sensory impairment (Daelman, Nafstad, Rødbroe, Visser, & Souriau, 2001) and children with severe intellectual disabilities (Grove, Bunning, Porter, & Olson, 1999).

New Challenges for Research on Special Educational Needs

Discussions about research methodologies are part of the professional life of researchers, but researchers investigating special needs education also have to consider how their research findings might improve the quality of education.

We argue that the methodologies presented in this issue provide research findings that can be used to improve classroom and school practice. Innovation and change in educational practice often outpaces research. Methods of research that can respond to, and in some ways reflect these changes, are necessary if research is to remain relevant. The Analysis of Innovation Processes model used as conceptual framework in the study by Ghesquière, Maes, and Vandenberghhe might be an interesting tool for guiding such research. Change agents can use the contents of the model to work on innovation projects.

We should, however, bear in mind that in order to understand special needs education as a socio-cultural, interactional, and recursive system, we always will also need new perspectives. So inevitably, new research methods will be necessary. Researchers in the field must, therefore, be innovative and open to continuous challenges and changes. We are thus not calling for a specific methodological shift, but we are calling for open-mindedness.

References


