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UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF STUDENTS WITH “SIGNIFICANT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES”:
AN ANALYSIS USING DISCOURSE THEORY
by Karen Schwartz

Notwithstanding the prominent focus on inclusion in the discourse of special education, students with significant intellectual disabilities in North America continue to receive a part of their education in segregated contexts (G. L. Porter, 2008; Schwartz, Mactavish & Lutfiyya, 2006; P. Smith, 2010). This situation creates an interesting and perplexing anomaly that I attempt to reconcile through an examination of the discursive conceptualizations of these students in Canadian introductory special education textbooks.

My study is framed within (a) the academic field of disability studies, which re-imagines disability using new perspectives (Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996), and (b) new philosophical concepts of “personhood”, which critique traditional definitions of personhood based on intellectual ability (Carlson, 2010; Carlson & Kittay, 2009; Nussbaum, 2006). Situated within social constructionism and discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), this analysis examines how students with significant intellectual disabilities are depicted in these textbooks.

The language used in portraying these students suggests a discourse of individual pathology, medicalization and professionalization, distancing students with significant intellectual disabilities from other students because of their perceived lack of abilities, needs and behaviours. This discourse relies heavily on traditional understandings of people with significant intellectual disabilities as lacking in value. There is little discursive evidence to suggest that these students are presented in ways that challenge either historical or modern conceptualizations.
This work is relevant to pre-service and current educators, schools administrators, professors in faculties of education, para-professionals, and all other individuals involved in teaching students with intellectual and other disabilities. As consumers of, contributors to, and disseminators of the language of special education, it is vital that all people working to educate these students understand the role that language plays in creating and maintaining student identity. Ultimately, it is important reconcile the conceptualization of students with significant intellectual disabilities, with the kind of education they receive.