

Education of Children with Disabilities as Constructed within a Russian Newspaper for Teachers

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Abstract: This study explored the ways in which the varied meanings of the education of children with disabilities were discursively constructed in a Russian newspaper for teachers, the *Teacher's Gazette*. We identified three articles addressing issues related to children with disabilities. Based on our analysis, we identified the use of two broad discourses: special education as separate and special education as inclusive. In our discussion of the findings, we point to the importance of giving voice to children with disabilities and engaging with children with disabilities and their families in constructing new imaginings of what education might be.

Key Words: inclusion, Russia, special education

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Historically, the education of children with disabilities¹ in Soviet Russia has been predominantly segregated. Children with relatively severe, low incidence disabilities have often experienced significant alienation from society (Dimenstein & Larikova, 2000). Further, even children with less severe and pervasive disabilities have frequently received education in specialized preschools and schools, most often within boarding schools (Malofeev, 1998; Oreshkina, 2009). Children with severe and multiple disabilities have usually been placed in closed institutions under the supervision of the Department of Social Welfare, with many of them receiving no education at all. In the past, individuals with disabilities, including children of school age, were essentially invisible within the society at large. During the 1980's, Russian handicap activist Fefelow, exiled for his position abroad, succinctly captured this situation in Soviet Russia in the title of his book, which reads *There are No Handicapped in the USSR*² (as cited in Grigorenko, 1998).

The education of children with disabilities in post-Soviet Russia began to change in the early 1990's. Russia adopted several international policies that supported the rights of children with disabilities, including *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 1994). Newly adopted state documents also expressed Russia's commitment to integration and inclusion. As a result, more children began to attend programs and schools where they freely interacted with their non-disabled peers. A recent overview of special education policies and practices revealed different approaches to making the system more inclusive (Oreshkina, 2009). According to the representatives of the formal special education system (Malofeev & Shmatko, 2008), the amount of time children with disabilities spend with their peers should be determined by the "severity" of their disability, with special education services being provided in a pull out manner. Another approach, promoted by non-governmental organizations, supports the ideas of inclusive schools (Perspektiva, 2009). Others suggest that a variety of settings should be created

whereby students with disabilities can receive quality education of their parents' choosing (Dimenstein & Larikova, 2000; Smolin, 2006). These varied approaches are reflected in the variety of educational settings available. Despite increasing numbers of schools offering inclusive education, many children with disabilities continue to be placed in self-contained classrooms or are minimally integrated with their non-disabled peers.

After decades of being muted and dismissed, a national dialogue regarding the education of children with disabilities has been taken up by educators and society at large. In an attempt to explore this evolving dialogue, our study aimed to examine the ways in which the education of children with disabilities was represented in a Russian newspaper for teachers, *Uchitel'skaya Gazeta* (*Teacher's Gazette*). Considered a reputable publication within the Russian community, *Teachers' Gazette* has been published since 1924, with an electronic version published since 1995. Approximately 95,000 copies of each issue are distributed across Russia. The central focus of the publication includes education, education-related laws, and the social protection of children and adolescents.

The study of newspapers offers one means by which to explore the varied ways in which society talks about disabilities. Kellner (1995) pointed out the power of the media culture in shaping "the prevalent view of the world and deepest values" and defining "what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil" (p. 1). Oliver (1990) noted that historically, people with disabilities as represented in films, newspapers, and novels have been constructed as "more than or less than human, rarely as ordinary people doing ordinary things" and are often portrayed "either as pathetic victims of some appalling tragedy or as superheroes trying to overcome a tremendous burden" (p. 61). He further noted that many of these cultural images have not resulted in an understanding of "the actual experience of disability" (p. 62), and at times have worked to perpetuate prejudices. Recognizing the power of mass media in constructing and mediating understanding of given phenomena, we decided to explore the representation of children with disabilities in a publication for teachers, those individuals closely engaged in everyday educational practices.

We focused our analysis on the most recent articles of *Teachers' Gazette* (2009), which, in our view, offered current examples of the conversation around children with disabilities. Within this qualitative study, we drew upon methods of discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998; Wood & Kroger, 2000), treating articles as discourse. The following research questions framed our inquiry: (1) What meanings are constructed in newspaper publications which discuss the education of children with disabilities? and (2) How is the discourse within such publications used to construct these varied meanings?

Theoretical Framework

In our project, we took a social-relational (Thomas, 2004) perspective on disability. This perspective holds the view that disability is constructed in the relationship between the individual and the environment. This position, however, does not deny the fact that impairments, not disabilities, are *real* and do have consequences for the individual in his/her everyday life (Osteen, 2008). Thus, as we carried out this project, we were informed by the work of disability studies scholars (Finkelstein, 2000; Oliver, 1990, 1992; Thomas, 1999, 2004), which served to support our presumption that disabilities are not knowable as objective truth. Instead, we

assumed that disability is only known as it is interpreted and constructed. This understanding aligned closely with the underlying assumptions of our study's analytical framework: (1) we are all active producers of social realities and (2) these social realities are continually being constructed and re-constructed through discursive practices. Following the principles of discourse analysis (Potter, 2004), we understand discourse as action-oriented, situated, and constructed, moving away from a view of discourse as representative of static, internal thoughts. The action-oriented nature of discourse led us to focus on what the discourse was doing within each newspaper text. In other words, what meanings did the discourse construct? The situatedness of discourse implies that phenomena are always bound up and embedded within a given context (Potter, 2005). Finally, discourse is both constructed and constructive, being made up of actual words, rhetorical devices, idioms, metaphors, and so on that work to construct and stabilize certain versions of the world (Potter, 2004).

Methodology

Data Sources and Collection

One of the researchers (Maria) searched the 52 issues of *Teachers' Gazette* published in 2009. Despite 2009 being named "The Year of Equal Opportunities" in Moscow, we identified only three articles that addressed issues related to children and individuals with disabilities. We viewed the absence of extant writing around inclusive education and/or children with disability labels as significant, interpreting this as indicative of the low priority given to this issue within the educational community. We decided to use all three articles for the analysis for several reasons. First, we decided to focus on articles within the newspaper written specifically for teachers. Second, in that we choose the discourse itself as an object of the study, the number of analyzed articles did not limit our study.

Data Analysis

We viewed our analysis as an interpretive and iterative process, and our interpretations as emergent. The first step in our analysis involved reading and translating the articles. The first author (Maria), who is a fluent speaker of English and Russian, read the articles out loud, translating them into English for the second author (Jessica), who typed the translated articles. Throughout the translation process, we stopped to discuss and record idiomatic expressions and metaphors, and took notes of the implicit and explicit meanings of the texts in relation to the larger socio-political and cultural-historical contexts. To ensure the fidelity of the translated text to the original text, the first two authors were particularly attentive to word choices made in the translation processes. Following Temple and Young (2004), we acknowledge that translation involves meaning construction. Unfortunately, we did not have access to another native Russian speaker who was capable of confirming the translation; therefore, our interpretation of meanings constructed in the publications was based on only one version of the translated text.

As we did this intensive reading and translation, we developed a thick, rich description of each publication. Analyzing each article line-by-line, we then compared within and across the texts, identifying patterns of meanings, word choices, text structures, authors, and the relationship of the texts to the larger contexts. Further, we considered what was not being discussed by the authors, as well as other ways in which the authors could have constructed their

accounts. We also took into consideration the stated purpose of each article, attending to the genre in which it was written. Upon the completion of the analysis, the initial findings were sent to the third author (Sharon) who read the text in English to ensure that the initial interpretations were plausible and to indicate whether further clarifications were needed. The communication between the authors continued until we reached consensus regarding the findings.

Within this process of interpretation, we viewed both the researchers and the journalists of the researched articles as active producers of knowledge (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We recognized the importance of explicating our positionalities (Aretxaga, 1997; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Tillman, 2002) and acknowledging that the ways in which we chose to represent our findings have consequences (Hall, 1997). We did not attempt to generalize our findings to the larger society and we acknowledge that our interpretation is one of many possible interpretations. We recognize that in the broader conversation about special education in Russia, there are likely perspectives that work to disrupt and complicate the patterns we noted in our study. As such, we invite the active role of the reader in re-interpreting our descriptions.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present a detailed analysis of the three articles, illustrating the varied meanings of educating children with disabilities, and how the discourse is used to construct varied meanings. The three articles were written in different genres which reflected the different purposes that the authors pursued in their writings. These differences in genres influenced the way in which we wrote up our findings. We present the articles in chronological order, beginning with the title of each and followed by the abstract in its entirety.

Issue #9, "Fluffy fairy tales for little people: A diagnosis is not a reason to give up joy"
(Muravieva, 2009)

The first article, constructed as a narrative account, discusses recent practices within a boarding school for children with developmental delays. The journalist narrates the experiences of the school, and includes some quotes from the school principal and teachers. The abstract is as follows:

“The student is laughing and hiding her face in her hands—being bashful. ‘Why are you hiding?’ The principal moves next to her and puts her arm around her. ‘Look at these pictures.’ There are puzzles in front of her on the desk that she will have to put together. Why is she laughing? Either she really is bashful or it is the sunny weather which is not so typical for February or it is the end of the school day or it is her grandmother who came to pick her up; and indeed there are so many reasons for children to laugh. ‘Sonechka [diminutive term] has autism,’ says a special educator and the principal, Galina V., of a boarding school for children with developmental delays. ‘She started writing recently on her own, with her own hand.’”

The article has eight paragraphs, each communicating a distinctive meaning. The first paragraph introduces the reader to the history of a particular special education institution, as well as the school’s goal to raise “full-fledged members of society.” The principal is quoted as saying:

“During our history, our students graduated from community colleges and with professions they became full-fledged members of society. Now, our goal is to continue this tradition so that in our difficult society our graduates can work and make a living (make money for bread) and not to walk on the road (beggars).”

In the above quote, the reference to “our history” seems to legitimate the practices of the institution as being valid and effective. These institutionalized practices, situated within the traditions of special education, appear to position individuals with disabilities as being in need of “service” in order to decrease their chances of becoming peripheral members of society (aka beggars).

The second paragraph describes the current changes resulting from the restructuring of the school. This restructuring is constructed as positive, as it improved the school’s ability to provide more services to its students and some of their families. Further, the words of the principal also make explicit the school’s close alliance with the local psychiatric hospital. For us, this stated alliance is particularly important, as it reinforces the consistent emphasis upon expertise, while also points to the new practice³ of bringing educational services to students in psychiatric institutions. This alliance is also noteworthy considering the historical and cultural emphasis upon the medical model of disability which views disability as a pathology in need of being cured (Davis, 1995; Waltz, 2005).

Within the third paragraph, the journalist constructs children with disabilities as the same as their peers. She states:

“Children here are the same as in regular schools—curious, ready to laugh, eager with the first invitation or even a hint to tell you that ‘my skis slide and are very uncomfortable to wear,’ ‘we had nice soup for lunch,’ ‘we liked our excursion very much.’”

The journalist’s use of the phrase, “children here are the same as in regular schools,” seems to presume that the readers view children attending special schools as being different. The journalist constructs an alternative view of children with disabilities by using the historical values of Russian education to normalize their life experiences: emphasis on fitness (“my skis”), good nutrition (“nice soup for lunch”), and raising a well-rounded individual (“liked our excursion”).

The fourth paragraph tells the story of a student, Serezha, described by his teacher as follows:

“Serezha is our best shop student...In summer he works for a local businessman who makes furniture. He [local businessman] had fired all the alcoholics and hired Serezha instead.”

Within the paragraph, the journalist describes Serezha’s future as being “cloudless,” grounding this conclusion in her claim that one day Serezha will become “a wonderful carpenter or tile layer.” Implicit within this description of Serezha is an assumption that by giving a trade to a student with a disability, society and perhaps more particularly, the experts, create a “cloudless” future for the student. We noted that Serezha’s story and his “success” were depicted solely by

the journalist and his teacher, with the reader never meeting Serezha and learning of his life story.

Moving from the individual, the fifth paragraph focuses upon disability within the family. The paragraph begins with the words of the school principal who states:

“In fact we have children from different families.... Of course, we have children from single parent households and at-risk families. But in fact, developmental delay is a tragedy which doesn’t choose the family. For example, we have a child from a family of university professors.”

For us, on the one hand, the principal constructs disability as being typical for “single parent and at-risk families” by introducing the second sentence with the words “of course.” On the other hand, she describes disability as being a “tragedy” that may even “choose” a family of intellectuals. The journalist concludes that the graduates of the boarding school can continue their education in community colleges and “even higher education institutions,” “if they develop normally.” In this paragraph, the reader is presented with a particular version of normalcy where everyone is assumed to continue their education upon completion of secondary school.

Within paragraph six, the definition of family is expanded, with the journalist describing the boarding school as “a big family where everybody knows everybody.” Furthermore, the principal is presented as the expert who has worked in the school for 36 years. The description of the institution as a family legitimizes the institution’s capacity to fulfill the role of the family.

Paragraph seven locates the institution’s needs within the larger political and economic contexts. In the previous paragraph, the reader learns that the school received 3.4 million rubles from the president’s fund and that resources from private donors are also available. Yet despite these new resources, “the story is the same” as in the 90’s—the school must go door-to-door requesting for money. Here, we noted the principal’s reference to the 90’s, a particularly difficult time for the Russian economy and society in general.

The final paragraph highlights that, despite the economic problems, life within the boarding school results in success for its students. The notion of success is re-introduced with further elaboration; it is described as the students’ ability “to sew, needlepoint, do carpentry, garden, write, speak, think, in other words to live.” More importantly, the description of the environment of the boarding school works to challenge the assumption that life in boarding schools is limited. The journalist does this by describing the school as a place where “on the clean children’s bed one can find fluffy fairy tale characters, and the children who walk out of the boarding school are not invalids⁴ needing medical and social help but are children who have a full life ahead of them.” From our perspective, the last paragraph ultimately works to encapsulate the overall meaning of the article: special education boarding schools are “special” places that produce success for their students.

In many ways, this article is written as a “success story,” with the institution’s experts turning a story of “tragedy” into one of hope and success. The untold story is of the individual students and their families, which is reinforced by the fact that the “success story” is told by a journalist and expert teachers. Never does the reader hear from a student or family member, as

the historic emphasis on the role of the expert pervades. Ultimately, educational practices are situated in the tradition of segregated special education, thus legitimizing this practice.

Issue #28, "The year of equal opportunities: Capital standard for all of Russia"
(Larionova, 2009)

This particular article, constructed as a factual account, describes a bill on the education of children with disabilities developed in the city of Moscow. The head of the Education Department of Moscow, the author of the article, presents the salient points of the bill. In contrast to the previous article, the speaker does not draw upon personal narratives; instead, she uses statistical evidence and legal discourse to validate her claims. The abstract was as follows:

“For a long time children with disabilities had an opportunity to study only in special schools. It seems that they have always had a right for education, but they couldn’t use that right because the whole system didn’t offer opportunities for that. There was no legislation which would support education of children with disabilities in regular schools. This gap is supposed/needs to be filled with a bill developed by Moscow Department of Education. According to the deputies of State Duma⁵, these documents will serve as a model for all other parts of the country, and possibly will push authorities to pass a federal law. So what does the Moscow Department of Education have to offer? The head of the department talks about that.”

With Moscow presented as the center of expertise and policy development, the abstract communicates the idea that the bill will be disseminated throughout Russia. However, the potential of dissemination is never re-affirmed in the article, leaving the reader wondering if it will occur.

The head of the Education Department of Moscow chooses to present the bill article-by-article, working to educate the audience on students’ rights and the technicalities of the bill’s implementation. As we attended to the description of the bill, we noted contradictions between the stated commitment to education for all and actual implementation policies. For example, the bill purportedly guarantees “education in any state, educational institution in any form,” yet the required condition to realize this right is “to act upon the recommendation of the psycho-medical-pedagogical committee.” Another guideline outlines the expected ratio of children with disabilities to their peers in inclusive classrooms, with no more than “10% of all students within a particular institution, and no more than 3 children of a particular type of disability” allowed in “the same class.” And finally, students are “guaranteed” psycho-educational-pedagogical supports; however, such services are only available in regular schools if there are more than six children with disabilities enrolled. Otherwise, the children and their families must turn to special education schools for services. Therefore, these guidelines work to counter not only the noted right to receive education in *any* school, but also the bill’s purported intent to increase the numbers of children studying in inclusive settings. The author’s final account of the bill situates its prospects for passage and implementation in the larger socio-political and economic context. Due to a shortage of federal and city funding, the review and vote on the bill has been postponed. Nevertheless, some parts of the bill are already being implemented.

Issue #30, "Inclusive education: Equals among equals/how the problems of education of children with disabilities are being solved" (Molodtzova, 2009)

The third article appears as the leading article, with the journalist presenting the experiential accounts of five individuals (referred to hereafter as "speakers") who participate in developing new practices and policies for individuals with disabilities. The article was written against the backdrop of "The Year of Equal Opportunities," a Moscow initiative designed to promote inclusive practices. The abstract was as follows:

"In the 90's the *Teacher's Gazette* published a special issue on education of children with disabilities. At that time we talked about something that didn't exist, yet according to our deep convictions it should have existed—inclusive education, which allows the integration of children invalids in the environment of their peers. The year of 2009 became in Moscow 'The Year of Equal Opportunities' as well as the year of making evident many problems of inclusive education."

The first speaker, a school principal, describes the advancement of inclusive education in her school and school district. She indicates that 13 children with disabilities attend her school. However, she also notes that "the more children we enroll... the more problems we encounter." Such obstacles include the lack of legislation, unclear role of psycho-medical-pedagogical committees, and lack of funding. The speaker emphasizes that only when such issues are addressed can children with disabilities become "equals among equals, not on paper or mere words, but in real life."

The second speaker, a chairperson for the Association of Young Invalids, states that his institution of higher learning has become more open to students with disabilities. Yet, due to the lack of funding and legal foundations for alternative forms of education, such as online learning, those students who go on medical leave are still minimally supported.

The third speaker, a parent of a child with a disability and special educator in a boarding school, shares her firsthand experiences. She first describes how she encountered the "tragedy" of having a child "bound to a wheelchair," as she put it. As a result of minimal support, her son did not have access to preschool. The rest of her account communicates the hope that she associates with a new Moscow-based bill (the bill discussed in the previous article). She believes that with the passing of the bill, parents "will not feel as unprotected as we did when we were faced with a tragedy," and schools will have access to badly needed resources.

The fourth speaker, the director of a resource center for families of children with Down syndrome⁶ shares innovative practices for such children, describing how the center provides teacher support in education of these students. Similar to the previous accounts, this speaker reiterates the need for legalizing inclusive practices.

The article concludes with the words of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of Education of the State Duma who talks about "the violation of the rights of children with disabilities" in many regions of the country. "On the one hand, parents are denied access to schools. On the other hand, [there are cases of] enforced integration... when in order to save money special schools are being dissolved, and children are transferred to regular schools

without the necessary support.” The speaker suggests a comprehensive approach to inclusion which will provide full and equal access to all forms of education.

We interpret the intent of this article to offer diverse perspectives of five individuals who, through sharing personal experiences, become positioned as experts. The sequence of the five accounts is similar: all five of them start by discussing the benefits of inclusive education, followed by the need for legal and financial support. In contrast to the first article we analyzed, which legitimizes education in boarding schools, these five accounts promote inclusive education through personal experiences.

Conclusion

The intent of this study was to explore how discourse is used to construct various meanings of the education of children with disabilities in Russia. Across the three publications in the *Teachers' Gazette*, we noted two broad discourses—*special education as separate* and *special education as inclusive*. The discourse of *special education as separate* was grounded in the tradition of segregated education and was prominent in the first article. This discourse privileges expert knowledge and locates this knowledge in institutionalized spaces. The discourse of *special education as inclusive* introduces the idea of equitable educational rights and was noted in the second and third articles. These two broad discourses were produced against a larger socio-political context and, in our opinion, reflect the current condition of educating children with disabilities in Russia. The discourse of *special education as separate* supports the approach of educating children with disabilities in special education settings. The discourse of *special education as inclusive* reflects the growing awareness of the rights of children with disabilities to receive education alongside their peers in regular education settings. Despite the fact that these two discourses are associated with different approaches to educating children with disabilities, two similarities stood out: (1) the role of experts in shaping the education of children with disabilities and (2) the view of the context as restrictive to the development of special education and inclusion. Therefore, we suggest it is not only the commitment to the idea of inclusion that matters, but also how it is taken up, negotiated, and deployed within a local context is critical.

Our findings indicate that the discourse of *special education as inclusive* produces and maintains the authority of expert knowledge, positioning children with disabilities and their families as passive receivers of “services.” While our goal is not to generalize, and we apply our analysis only to the publications we analyzed, the broader disability studies literature has also noted and examined the existence of unequal relationships between individuals with disabilities and service providers (Tremain, 2005). Broderick and Ne’eman (2008) suggested that individuals with disabilities typically remain the “off-stage character” (p. 471) in conversations about their lives and educational hopes. We propose that this was indeed the case in our study, with no individual children with disabilities or their parents being included, apart from one parent who was legitimized in this context as an expert by virtue of her vocation rather than her parenting experience. We ask then: Who benefits when *only* the “experts” or “non-labeled” individuals are allowed and/or encouraged to speak?

Viewing people as active producers of their realities, we attended to how the context was constructed within the texts. We noted that the authors of the articles described their context as

restrictive. The lack of appropriate legislation and funding were repeatedly mentioned as impediments to promoting inclusion. While these challenges are real, we also recognize that constructing the context as limiting, may constrain the social imagining of developing a more inclusive approach to the education of children with disabilities. Following Fairclough (1993), we orient to the “constitutive/constructive effects of discourse” (p. 4) as a tool to shape and shift the ways in which people with disabilities and their environment are constructed. Instead of a discourse that privileges the voices of experts and depicts the context as limited, we argue for discursive practices that are built around the experiences of individuals with disabilities and create new public imaginings of education. Through such a discourse, children with disabilities and their families may develop a sense of agency and empowerment. Media sources, such as newspapers, offer one such venue for the production of new and varied ways of talking about and imagining how the education of children with disabilities might be.

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End notes

- ¹ Even though we chose to use person-first language, we recognize that the words we chose are not without contradiction and consequence.
- ² Fefelow's text, *There are No Handicapped in the USSR*, was originally translated into English in 1986. "Handicapped" was the translator's word of choice.
- ³ Educational services were not available to residents of psychiatric hospitals during Soviet times.
- ⁴ The term "invalids" or "children invalids" is used within the newspaper publications. It is important to note that within the Russian language, "invalids" or "children invalids" is a word/phrase used to refer to children with severe disabilities.
- ⁵ The State Duma is a lower chamber of the Russian parliament.
- ⁶ In the past, parents of children with Down syndrome were advised to give up their newborn children to the state.