

Policy shifts in special needs education

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1. Policies and practices relating to the education of students with special educational needs (SWSEN) must take account of the general educational context, especially those aspects that are derived from such neoliberal philosophies as marketisation, decentralisation/devolution, choice, competition, and the setting of accountability criteria such as standards and high-stakes testing.
2. In most countries, the direction of the shifts in administration has been centrifugal (i.e., away from the centre), but in some it has been centripetal (towards the centre), and in others there have been fluctuations in balances as new settlements are reached.
3. According to some writers, neo-liberal market philosophies contain many elements that tend to work against equity, the valuing of diversity and inclusive education.
4. The shift of focus to outputs in the education system is making 'unproductive' students less welcome in schools.
5. The implication of these (presumably) unintended consequence is that the state may see itself as having an obligation to intervene to ensure that such consequences are prevented or ameliorated. It can do this through legislation or regulation and by close monitoring of schools' behaviour.
6. The coexistence of inclusive education provisions and special schools (which is the case in almost every country) suggests that choices must be exercised as to where SWSEN are 'placed'. In this process, the relative weight given to the preferences of SWSEN and their parents and those who administer education systems constitutes a major point of tension.
7. Accountability boils down to the multi-faceted question of who should be held responsible for what, how they can be evaluated, and with what consequences? Its scope therefore is quite complex.
8. Increasingly, decisions at all of these levels are evidence-driven, or are being expected to be evidence-driven.
9. How to measure the educational performance of SWSEN with validity and reliability is one of the major contemporary challenges facing educators.
10. Several countries have developed policies requiring SWSEN to have access to general education accountability systems,
11. One of the educational battle cries in many countries since the 1990s has been for 'standards-based reform', with its goal of higher and more rigorous achievement standards for all students, including those with special educational needs.
12. Leadership should be exercised throughout an education system: by legislators, policy-makers, school governing bodies, principals and teachers. At the school level, particularly by the principal, but also by others in a school.