TITLE: The Discursive Practice of Learning Disability: Implications for Instruction and Parent-School Relations

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ABSTRACT
This article serves as an invitation to rethink and to broaden the scope of learning disabilities (LD) research and practice. We begin with 3 assumptions: Education in a representative democracy is inevitably a political enterprise; social justice is everyone's responsibility, but educators have a special role to play; and segregated schooling is neither equal nor equitable. After an analysis of the primary extant discourses, we argue for a more comprehensive and more openly political vision of the LD field, which we think is supported by Disability Studies in Education. Finally, we draw 3 conclusions relevant to our collective work as researchers and educators. First, learning disabilities are not objective fact; they are historically and culturally determined. Second, disability is both a personal and a societal attribute. Finally, learning disabilities are not and have never been immutable. We contend that we are ethically bound to transform educational practices to both welcome and accommodate everybody's children.

The point is that the elements of this web are historical, not "natural." This does not mean that they are easily disentangled, dismantled. It means only that there is a possibility for something else, under historical conditions not yet realized. (Zinn, 2003, p. 38)

At a time when scholars in education, special education, and learning disabilities (LD) are embroiled in heated epistemological and, therefore, theory- and practice-defining debates (Andrews et al., 2000; Brantlinger, 1997; Dudley-Marling, 2001; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1991; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2000; Slee, 1998; Walker et al., 1998; see Note 1), it is instructive to interrogate the process of meaning-making in LD scholarship. To examine and problematize the "conventions that structure the meanings assigned to disability and the patterns of response to disability that emanate from, or are attendant upon, those meanings" (Linton, 1998, p. 8) is to reveal the discursive practices that both define people as having LD and determine what happens to them after they are so labeled.

Often, readers interpret discourse or discursive practice as synonymous with language usage or meaning. Foucault (1972), however, argued that we should not treat "discourses as groups of signs ... but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49; see Note 2). A discourse is, then, both the system of rules that defines what can be said (i.e., what counts as natural and true within a particular discursive practice) and the instrument through which people become positioned, but not determined, within that discourse. As Foucault (1972) explained, we are not determined because we, as individuals and groups, have the agency to resist any particular discourse, thereby expanding, challenging, or otherwise reformulating it.

The field of LD, with its particular history of enduring debates around what exactly constitutes a learning...
disability as a differentiated category for certain students who display difficulty in learning and not others (e.g., Aaron, 1997), provides a rich context in which to consider what it means to identify and serve students designated as having "special needs"--special enough to warrant attention apart from the needs of "ordinary" learners. The very act of making decisions about which children deserve which resources for what purpose (i.e., determining the position of individual children within the educational system) constitutes the construction of meaning-making about how we conceive a free and appropriate education for all children. As Dudley-Marling (2001) argued, "the meaning of learning disabilities is tied closely to the meaning of schooling" (p. 13); the two discourses are aligned and mutually defining.

**Discursive practices** (and formations; see Thomas & Loxley, in this issue) give rise to a corpus of knowledge (Foucault, 1965,1973,1980), and knowledge determines practice--in circular fashion. That we know there are learning disabilities, for example, enables us to monitor (and recruit) children for unexplained school failure in a way that was not possible before the LD category was reified and passed into law in 1969. Franklin (1987) has pointed out that prior to that time, educators used the more diffuse categories of "slow learners" or "backward children." On the other hand, the identification and "treatment" of "learning disabled" children reinforces our confidence that the LD category exists in a reality beyond words and practices.

In reflecting on the assumptions and practices that constitute our particular field of scholarship, we are not trying to place discursive practice at some "deep, original level," nor are we trying to place it at the "level of lived experience"; we are instead trying to reveal "a whole set of differences, relations, gaps, shifts, independencies, autonomies, and the way in which they articulate their own histories on one another" (Foucault, 1973, p. 191). Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish among discourses, because they are always in flux and because many overlap and intersect (Foucault, 1972). For example, the general education and special education discourses are sometimes distinguishable; sometimes they are not because they so strongly intermingle and define each other. The same may be said of the interrelationships among mental retardation, behavior disorders, and learning disabilities (Mehan, Hartwick, & Meihls, 1986).

Although we argue that knowledge is constituted discursively, our position is meant neither to diminish nor to call into question the academic difficulties of students labeled as having LD. We acknowledge that individual differences do exist and that these students struggle in school. The differences are variations from what is considered the "norm" and are assumed in the LD definition to be neurological. These human variations are often viewed as impairments. Our intention is to question conventional and naturalized ways of thinking about difference in order to bring greater balance to the intellectual grounding for understanding school failure and the decision making that both emanates from that understanding and confirms it (S. Gallagher, 1999). Because what we think drives what we do (and vice versa), the way we frame difference has personal, material consequences for students and for the LD field as a whole.

In this essay, we use the term impairment to refer to "variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing" (Linton, 1998, p. 2). On the other hand, disability is the product of social, political, economic, and cultural practices (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002). In highlighting this distinction, we hope to bring unintended consequences to the fore, consequences that result from taken-for-granted assumptions. Impairment, too, is, as Vygotsky noted more than 100 years ago, socially determined--a cognitive-physical difference is just a difference until we make it a problem. Moreover, the LD discourse is, like all other discourses, a discourse that responds to the shifting nature of the culture in which it is embedded. Disability becomes constructed and reconstructed through the ways we choose to speak about it and practice it. We agree with Shakespeare and Watson (1997) and with the feminist writer C. Thomas (1999) that we cannot afford to get caught up in yet another dualism (i.e., impairment vs. disability). Instead, we need in our talk and our practices to remember that

it is quite possible simultaneously to make a conceptual distinction between impairment and
disability, reconceptualize the latter as a form of social oppression, understand that bodily variations classified as impairments are materially shaped by the interactions of social and biological factors and processes, and appreciate that impairment is a culturally constructed category which exists in particular times and places. (Smith, 2002, p. 63)

**Grounding Assumptions**

Three assumptions undergird this essay. First, education in a representative democracy is an inherently and inevitably political enterprise: It cannot avoid enacting particular visions of desirable student outcomes. These are usually grounded in the popular discourses that reflect the widespread beliefs and values of voters, particularly those beliefs and values that define the relationship between the individual and society (Barton & Armstrong, 2001). Some (e.g., Apple, 1993; McLaren, 2002) have argued that the purpose of public education in late capitalism has been to provide workers who are minimally skilled, obedient, and punctual for employment in industry, corporations, and the service industry. Others have addressed the need to develop individuals to their fullest potential-- each according to her or his (presumed) capacity, as Rickover (1959) did in arguing for gifted education.

Clearly, policies and practices aligned with historically instantiated visions have not served and do not serve all segments of the population equally well. Remarkably, in the last 100 years, since the inception of compulsory education in this country, the educational system has failed or simply excluded the same groups of students--African Americans, American Indians, students with disabilities, a succession of recent immigrant groups, poor Whites, and so forth (Spring, 1989). Even more remarkably, the public and educators have historically and systematically located the reason for failure within the groups themselves, rather than in the practices and policies of schooling (Valle & Reid, 2001). If we believe the rhetoric of the American dream, that schooling is the key to success and mobility in our society, the politics of education have become a matter of social justice.

The second assumption is that social justice is an ethical responsibility for all citizens of a democracy, but particularly for its educators. Along with increasing numbers of our colleagues (Artiles, 2003; Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002; Patton, 1998), we-- middle age, middle class, White, able-bodied women--are concerned about the overrepresentation of students of color, students living in poverty (often rural or urban students), and students who are English language learners in special education (Losen & Orfield, 2002). As Dudley-Marling (2001) noted, special education serves as a vehicle for preserving general education in the midst of ever increasing diversity. We are also concerned with the greater frequency with which these groups of students--in comparison to middle class, English-speaking Whites--are placed in segregated settings after they are identified (Losen & Orfield, 2002). As S. Hall (2000) pointed out, the problem with categorizing people is that we assign more value to some groups than to others, thus introducing inequitable power dynamics. The term people of color is illustrative: It makes whiteness invisible--as if White were not a "color"--at the same time that it centers whiteness as the normal and natural standard (Bartolome & Macedo, 1999). The term English language learner functions in a similar way in that it centers Standard American English.

Although the data suggest that some groups in some geographical areas may be underrepresented in the LD category, we are aware that, ironically, underrepresentation and the concomitant denial of services and supports is a problem as well. The reasons for our concern become clear when we realize that Latinos, who tend to be underrepresented in LD, are excluded from general education classrooms in other ways--namely, through segregated language classes and overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). Moreover, the vast majority of "at-risk" and low-academic-track students are from the same non-dominant culture groups who overpopulate special education (Oakes, 1995), but they are not counted among its ranks.

Furthermore, as the number of students classified in one high-incidence category of special education
goes down (e.g., in the category of mental retardation after the California courts determined that a disproportionate number of African American children had been labeled as having mental retardation), the number in one or both of the other two categories (i.e., learning disabilities and emotional disturbance) tends to go up. Accordingly, there is little fluctuation in the combined number of students assigned to the three most difficult to define, yet highest incidence, categories (Kavale & Forness, 1998). When we consider that learning disabilities alone account for more than 50% of the population of special education students, we begin to see the proportions of the injustice.

Surely, part of the problem is that daily school practices--referrals, evaluations, placements, and instructional practices--are carried out under conditions that were not anticipated by the law (Mehan et al., 1986). Another part of the problem, however, is that the mostly White, middle class teaching force operates on assumptions embodied in our discursive practices about what constitutes knowledge, the purpose of schooling, and appropriate curriculum (Losen & Orfield, 2002) and makes referrals based, at least in part, on those unconscious assumptions (Harry et al., 2002). It is this latter issue with which we are concerned in this essay: What is it about the very essence of our practice that has led to and maintains this unjust state of affairs? We are, after all, well-intentioned people.

The third assumption is that separate is not equal. Grounded in a civil rights discourse that focuses on interactions among difference, impairment, and disability, we do not ask if students labeled as having LD belong in a particular class. Instead, we assume that everybody belongs and ask how educators can make general education classrooms welcoming, productive, and constructive environments for all students. The responsibility for "fitting in" has more to do with changing public attitudes and the development of welcoming classroom communities and compensatory and differentiated instructional approaches than with the characteristics of individual learners (Shapiro, 1999). In other words, our focus is on redesigning the context, not on "curing" or "remediating" individuals' impairments.

We acknowledge that there is considerable resistance to this position. We believe that this resistance is a result of historical and current discursive assumptions about disability and the practices and purposes of schooling (cf. Ferri & Connor, in press). We are not arguing that our stance replaces all others. We recognize that individual differences may have neurological, biological, cognitive, or psychological aspects and that science, technology, medicine, psychology, law, and institutional practices have contributed significantly to the field. Nevertheless, our basic assumption is that social justice is best served through the pursuit of increasingly more comprehensive, pluralistic (not dichotomous) approaches to the conception of disability and to research and instructional practices. We also believe that we need to learn how to engage more productively in the process of inclusion and that we might never become so sufficiently skilled that we are always able to include 100% of students for all of every day. It is, therefore, incumbent on us to work diligently to learn how to implement inclusion well, both in our classrooms and in our professional discourses. Our intention in this article is to promote collaborative engagement in a self-reflective process to improve the services we offer students and their families.

Scientific, Medical, and Psychological Discourses

Medicine and psychology are widely acknowledged as the root disciplines of the field of LD (as well as the institution of special education and other categories of disability). It is, therefore, no surprise that traditional conceptualizations of LD embody aspects of these discourses. Their presence becomes apparent as we consider the process by which once-ordinary children struggling in school become "disabled" students.

In current practice, teachers assign academic tasks deemed "grade appropriate" and hold expectations for a specified range of responses that represent mastery. The child who responds consistently outside this specified range eventually will, in most cases, be noticed as "a person with qualities to be discovered by agents of the school" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 215). The child then becomes the object of intense
observation and documentation, a process reserved only for children who perform outside of the anticipated range of response but whose capacity for learning is suspected to be "normal." In order to confirm or rule out the possibility of LD, a knowledgeable teacher makes a referral so that a psychologist (and perhaps other experts) can administer a battery of psychoeducational tests to the child to generate an individualized psycho-educational report based largely on the results. Soon, a special education committee meets to discuss the test results and to determine the child's eligibility for individualized special education services. If the child is deemed eligible on the basis of "really being" a special education student, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed. The transformation from ordinary schoolchild to disabled individual is now complete. This process involves the centering and privileging of statistically defined "normalcy" (Davis, 1995), the individualizing and pathologizing of difference (Skrtic, 1995), and the adherence to the epistemology and traditions of positivist science (Linton, 1998). Hence, the "problem" is located within the individual.

The act of assigning individuals, specifically children, as the unit of analysis reveals much about the taken-for-granted assumptions that under-gird special education generally and LD specifically. Such assumptions form the basis of a particular discourse of disability that, in turn, constructs a particular individual--the "special needs child." Reliance on the scientific, medical, and psychological discourses for making meaning of disability discourages conceptualizations of difference other than as "deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and significantly, as an individual burden" (Linton, 1998, p. 11). Carrier (1986) provided insight into how difference came to be conceptualized as pathology early in the field of LD and how, consequently, LD scholars have come to favor biological over cultural explanations of school failure.

As a profession, special education relies on the assumption that it is both legitimate and possible to expose, measure, and categorize "normal" and "abnormal" cognitive, emotional, and behavioral phenomena within individuals. Thus, a close relationship exists between psychometrics and special education. Given the origins of special education in medicine and psychology and the close association of psychometrics with the natural sciences, it is unsurprising that special educators have embraced the construct of intelligence, simultaneously giving rise to a means to distinguish between learning disabled and mentally retarded students and to the widespread use of tests and an accompanying new discourse of testing. With the discourse of testing came a sustained belief in professionals' capacity to portray accurately how individuals learn and think (G. Thomas & Loxley, 2001). However controversial, this reliance on tests (rather than portfolios, for example) to explicate learning or failure to learn engenders a particular way of thinking about children.

The language and practice of testing provides a host of constructs and terms that might be evoked in explaining a child's struggles to learn. For example, we might describe a child as having "a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement," "areas of deficiency," "visual and auditory processing deficits," "inattentive behaviors," "erratic performance," "low risk-taking behavior," "poor inhibitory control," and so on. Perhaps, as Linton (1998) contended, because difference has typically been studied from a deficit model, "we are deficient in language to describe it any other way than as a 'problem'" (p. 141). Furthermore, the more we focus on the individual, the more likely it is that the individual will become "determined" and restricted by her or his disability status (Varenne & McDermott, 1998) and enveloped in a now test-justified "cocoon of professional help" (G. Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. 53). Ironically, although the intention in testing is to "level the playing field," it is common knowledge that tests have become instruments to confirm unconscious assumptions about the unacceptability of some students and to legitimate their exclusion.

Let us consider how such exclusionary practices can become naturalized within the school environment. Because learning is an inherently social activity (Nieto, 1999; Vygotsky, 1987-1998, 1993), it is through interacting with others that one becomes socialized into the strategies and practices of the community--that
is, becomes a literate person (Gee, 1999). Furthermore, the primary means for inculcating American culture into children is schooling. Schooling, therefore, is about teaching children ways of talking, acting, thinking, strategizing, knowing about knowing, and "doing school" that constitute a shared, secondary discourse (discourse here is used in the sense of an "identity kit"). In classrooms, "appropriate" ways of talking, acting, thinking, strategizing, and knowing about knowing are often considerably different from those of children's primary discourse--that is, the one learned at home (Brice-Heath, 1983). This mismatch is particularly apparent when children from marginalized groups enter school and confront the need for language usage that is narrowly defined by Standard American English (SAE) exposition.

When a child's primary discourse is noticeably different from that of the school, educators may question a child's linguistic competence and use standardized tests to "diagnose disability." These tests tend to measure aspects of correctness and grammar, which, according to Gee (1989), are the precise features that assess "whether one was apprenticed in the 'right' place, at the 'right' time, with the 'right' people." These superficial features of language are "most impervious to overt instruction and are only fully mastered when everything else in the discourse has been mastered" (p. 11). Assessment of these discourses, then, serves the gatekeeping function of ensuring that the "right people" get into the "right" classes in schools and, subsequently, the "right" positions in our society (p. 11). The nature of the assessment thus serves to sort students in ways that perpetuate the unconscious assumptions of the status quo (see Note 3).

Another aspect of psychological discourse imported into the field of LD emerged from the computer modeling of intellectual functioning popularized during the 1970s and 1980s. This orientation, with its focus still on the individual as the unit of analysis, differentiated between "hardware" (i.e., the brain itself) and "software" (i.e., mental operations), shifting the emphasis from structural, embodied issues (the dysfunction/disorder metaphor) to those related to productive and efficient "information processing." The strategy instruction movement in education and educational research adopted many of the ideas and principles generated in this cognitive science endeavor (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2002; Swanson, 1996; Wong, 1996). This particular psychological discourse moved swiftly from the research arena to the school level in the form of teacher workshops and extended and systematic schoolwide (and in some cases district-wide) training sessions--the most visible being the work generated by Deshler and colleagues (Boudah et al., 2000; Deshler & Schumaker, 1993; Swanson & Deshler, 2003) at the University of Kansas Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities.

Today, it is not uncommon for children's learning styles, individual learning patterns, and neurodevelopmental functions or dysfunctions to be a topic of discussion in popular media (e.g., news magazines, popular scientific journals, parent and women's magazines, newspaper articles, talk shows, television news shows). Perhaps the information processing expert best known among the general public is Mel Levine, the prolific neurodevelopmental pediatrician and champion for children with learning and attentional difficulties. Levine's books for parents, teachers, and students consistently appear on national best-seller lists (Levine, 1998, 2002, 2003)-- evidence of a discourse that circulates well beyond educational and research settings into the popular culture.

As such, this scientific-medical-psychological framing of disability, concomitant testing, and the additional emphasis on mental processing has solidified the selection of the individual as the unit of analysis and made it seem natural and unproblematic. As a result, the focus of much of our knowledge-generating work, as Artiles (2003) pointed out, has been directed toward the micro level of analysis, the study of individuals or groups--for example, group achievement under different classroom conditions, the behaviors of teachers and their impact on certain students, or IEP team resistance to parental input. This micro-analytic lens, in turn, has perpetuated the focus on the individual with compelling evidence of individual failures, effective approaches to individual remediation, and so forth. As Foucault reminds us, knowledge determines practice that determines knowledge that determines practice--and so on.

What we need to break the cycle is to generate knowledge about how macro-level processes--societal
attitudes about diversity, school funding patterns, emerging patterns of immigration, terrorism and "preventive war," and so forth--interact with micro-level conditions and events as they are articulated in commonly held beliefs and in the legislation that protects those values. In short, we need to recognize in our research agendas that we construct knowledge as a community (Nelson, 1993) not only of scholars but also of consensus-builders in all walks of life.

Institutional and Legislative Discourses

People act intentionally to construct social structures that support and distribute particular discourses, and special education is the institution (or discursive formation) our society has constructed in response to children who struggle in school. Conceiving of language as a form of social practice, we more clearly see how "conventions [are] routinely drawn upon in discourses [that] embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere 'common sense'" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 77). Thus, our interest lies in examining special education as an institution that speaks about LD in naturalized ways and enacts particular practices for individuals so classified.

Foucault's (1983) analysis of the human sciences is useful to our conceptualization of special education as a social institution. In understanding how an object of discourse (e.g., madness, sex, LD) becomes "an overall discursive fact," Foucault (1978) considered "who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, [and] the institutions which prompt people to speak ... and which store and distribute the things that are said" (p. 11). Therefore, what interested Foucault (1978) was not the truth of what is said but, rather, as noted earlier, the apparatus through which what is said can be said in a particular society. If, like Foucault, we address special education as a discourse, or system of rules through which a whole system of practices functions in a coherent way, we grasp the ways in which disability is produced and maintained and, in turn, produces and maintains (or resists) its own discourse.

Special education is a complex apparatus constructed and monitored through law (e.g., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, of 1990 and its subsequent reauthorizations), enacted through the domain of public education, and financially supported by federal and state governments. As such, IDEA (and also the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA] of 1990, which guarantees nondiscriminatory employment) represents the intersection of political beliefs and scientific ideas about disability within the specific cultural context of America at a particular time in history (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). For example, IDEA's emphasis on individuals with disabilities reflects not only its other discursive roots, but also the particularly American value of individualism, revealed in the law's intense focus on individual educational programming (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). As Varenne and McDermott (1998) maintained, "The people of the United States tell each other that education is about individuals and their development and that educational practice is legitimate only to the extent that it fosters individual development" (p. 106).

As mentioned, the legal and educational practices underpinning the institution of special education likewise support the scientific, medical, and psychological discourses that select the individual as its unit of analysis. To recapitulate, in response to the occasion of a child's failure to learn, a cadre of professionals who together constitute the LD service industry stand poised to apply their scientific tools to the task of identifying the educational needs of the individual child. Once the child is characterized as having "special needs," the scientific, medical, and psychological discourses reposition the child who fails to learn as a child who requires an education that is, by definition, special--so special that it may mean an education apart from children without a "special" designation. For in America, the child who fails to learn is living in "a world well organized to label and disable" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 42).

Legal practices also instantiate instructional models. Under the influence of Taylorism (Taylor, 1911), and reflecting their earliest discursive roots, American educators have long endeavored to base instructional programs and practices on the methods and conventions of science and technology, believing this
framework to be enriching (Holt, 1993). "The logic, it seems, is that if technological rationalization and scientific objectivism have led to international superiority, then surely the integration of technology and scientism in the schools will result in an exemplary educational system" (Powell, 1999, p. 30). Now a mandate under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, instruction "based on scientific research" constitutes another example of the ways in which the legal discourse embraces popular assumptions that determine what we tell each other about education. Many research-based practices, however, are scripted or otherwise "packaged" to facilitate implementation that is faithful to the original, supporting research. They can be ritualized, mechanical, linear, and decontextualized and may control responses narrowly. To the extent that they obscure the social, cultural, and political dimensions of literacy and learning, they legitimize the "scientific diagnosis and treatment" of diverse learners (Bejoian & Reid, 2004). These and other discursive practices inherent in the present apparatus of special education lead professionals predictably toward the "easy over-attribution of events to the dispositions of individuals rather than to the failings of institutions" (G. Thomas & Loxley, 2001, p. 53).

Among the first to challenge the use of the individual as a unit of analysis, Skrtic (1991, 1995) greatly contributed to our conceptualization of the "institution" in his landmark deconstruction of special education's knowledge tradition and institutional practices. In the tradition of Foucault, Skrtic focused his analysis on the revelation of essential assumptions undergirding the discursive practices of special education (i.e., disability is pathological; special education promotes student success; systematic scientific research enhances diagnostic practices, which are neutral and beneficial; progress in the thoughtfully conceived and delivered system of special education occurs as a result of incremental improvement in educational research)--assumptions that ultimately drive and sustain special education as "the" institutional response to student failure within public schools. In reconsidering such assumptions, Skrtic (1995) concluded that school failure is an "organizational pathology" resulting from the way schools are structured and from schools' individual cultural characteristics.

Being "handicapped" in school is a matter of not fitting the standard practices of the prevailing paradigm of a professional culture, the legitimacy of which is maintained and reinforced by the objectification of school failure as a student disability through the institutional practice of special education. (Skrtic, 1995, p. 214)

Current institutional and legislative discourses also legitimize dualisms--"normal" and "abnormal," "able" and "disabled"--as naturalized categories of individuals. The consequences of this dualistic thinking position students as either "disabled" or "nondisabled." It is commonsense knowledge, however, that there is no clear definition of disability; the boundaries are flexible and permeable (Peters, 2002), as the ADA definitions make clear. Instead, disability exists along a continuum. Dualisms perpetuate the idea of a strict legal and medical differentiation and can be harmful in the sense that they often extend deep within an individual student's "most private deliberations about their worth and acceptability" (Linton, 1998, p. 24); the detriments of labeling are legendary.

Finally, the public seems to assume that laws serve to protect students and their families, rather than reflecting and enforcing societal values. This is probably the case most often for mainstream families (although we will note their difficulties in interacting with schools), but legal ideology functions to stabilize social structures that reproduce inequitable educational outcomes for others. People in the White mainstream tend to overlook the ways that laws justify and negotiate (Brantlinger, 2003) school advantage for their own children. The law, then, can have the effect not of protection but of setting limits on what professional educators can understand about themselves and the world around them (see Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

Social, Political, and Cultural Discourses
In contrast to the scientific, medical, psychological, institutional, and legislative "educationally operationalized" discourses that individualize and legitimate LD and related educational policies and practices, there has been increasing attention to the sociopolitical and sociocultural analysis of the field. Sleeter (1995), for example, argued that the category of LD satisfied a national need at a particular historical moment, namely, when increasing numbers of White, middle class students began falling behind in school as standards were raised in response to Sputnik. Dudley-Marling and Dippo (1995) examined how the discourse of LD became an enabling factor in the preservation of general education.

The disability rights movement is a powerful and substantial example of an emerging sociopolitical disability discourse that continues to gain momentum on the national front (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). This movement constitutes what Foucault (1980) called "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (p. 81). Subjugated knowledges exist in two forms:

1. Those historical events that have been buried or disguised beneath a functionalist interpretation of the present (see Carrier, 1986, and Skrtic, 1995, for examples).

2. Knowledges that have been disqualified because they do not carry the authorization of "scientificity" (see Valle & Aponte, 2002).

Subjugated knowledges instruct us in the power of the disciplines to define truth, to determine what constitutes knowledge, and to authorize some people--but not others--to speak. The disability rights movement, therefore, decodes the injustice of having (medical or educational) experts (including researchers), government officials, and others label disabled people and make decisions about their lives. For them, the personal is clearly political. Their message is that when people are viewed as "objects" and their voices are marginalized, we as a society cannot hope for social justice. Those authorized to decide "are responsible ... for the stories we tell as researchers [and educators], and the kind of world those stories might make" (D. J. Gallagher, 2003, p. 14).

This focus on the inclusiveness and fairness of research raises another concern: Many communities and sub-communities are not represented in the research process. Bernal-Delgado (1998), for example, has called for a Chicana epistemology; Delpit (1999), an African American scholar, has warned the White majority that we cannot make assumptions about teaching "other people's children," and Charlton (2000), speaking for disabled people, said, "Nothing about us without us." These are just a few examples of arguments that focus on the situatedness of research perspectives. The feminist scholar Harding (cited in Phillips & Burbules, 2000) put it this way:

In societies stratified by race, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics [e.g., disability] shaping the very structure of a society, the activities of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them. (p. 61)

In other words, in the research community, those at the top are so embedded in professional discourses and in their own personal situatedness that they do not see the same problems as those marginalized groups at the so-called bottom, who are outsiders to the professional discourse. And so we are prompted to ask, What questions might researchers who grew up labeled as having LD pursue? How might those questions differ from those that are now being addressed? Do teachers who identify as having LD teach differently (Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, in press)? How would they reorganize schools if they were given the liberty to do so? Would they choose to be labeled? These are not trivial questions, because they reflect a difference in positioning that would likely modify what counts as current knowledge.

Moreover, the burgeoning field of disability studies, closely linked to the aforementioned perspectives...
through its emphasis on the social and political dimensions of disability (indeed, most of the people whose work is described in the previous paragraphs align themselves with disability studies), offers a vehicle for the expansion of the **discursive practice** of (learning) disability. We have been noting throughout this essay that although we are positioned by the discourses in which we operate and by other discourses operating around us, those discourses do not determine us. Indeed, we have the agency to resist and to counter as both individuals and groups and, thereby, to enlarge, refute, or otherwise modify aspects of the existing **discursive** formations. Although there has been a long history of dissent in LD and in special education more generally (Heshusius, 2003), only recently has a group materialized as a new special interest group within the American Educational Research Association (AERA), known as Disability Studies in Education (DSE). These scholars stand apart from, and in many ways in opposition to, the AERA's Special Education interest group. Clearly, because it is engendering a new community of scholars, this is a **discursive** departure, a reframing of the field, which is significant.

DSE has in common with disability studies a more broadly interdisciplinary focus informed by the knowledge base and methodologies of the traditional liberal arts (particularly philosophy; see D. J. Gallagher, Heshusius, Skrtic, & Iano, 2003; Heshusius, 2003) and grounded in postpositivist perspectives (as opposed to the positivist science of medicine, rehabilitation, and special education; see Danforth, 1999; D. J. Gallagher, 2001, 2003). The aims of this newly consolidating field are twofold. The first is to promote understanding of disability as a function of both (a) ordinary, pervasive human variation (as opposed to pathology and deficit) and (b) the meanings attributed to those variations (i.e., impairment, disability; Linton, 1998). By examining the social meanings we give to variations that exist in human behavior and appearance, DSE challenges the implicit or explicit valuings that construct exclusionary categorical binaries (e.g., "normal-abnormal," "able-disabled") and recognize them as mutually constitutive. That is, we can change the nature of "disability" by revising our conceptions of "ability," of "abnormality" by revising our definitions of "normal." Such changes do, in fact, occur both over time (Stiker, 2002) and across cultures (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

The second aim of disability studies is to examine the role that disability has played, is playing, and can potentially play in the arts, humanities, sciences (for examples, see Adams, 2001; Garland Thomas, 1996, 1997; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Stiker, 2002), and education (e.g., Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995; Sleeter, 1995). Within this new framework, the external conditions--social, political, and cultural--that contribute significantly to the disability experience share center stage with or even eclipse human variation (labeled as impairment) as the unit of analysis. The **discursive** frame then shifts from the individual to the interaction between the individual and society and to the structures of society itself.

In contrast to an understanding of disability solely in terms of deficits located within the individual (i.e., impairment), this new discourse acknowledges that disability may be experienced differently depending on an individual’s race, class, gender, and other aspects of positionality and identity. Typically, the studies dominating the LD field are situated in the medical/scientific discourse. They randomize away or otherwise ignore (Reid, 2001) personal identity factors, unless such factors are specifically selected as the focus of the study. Given the impact of such varying combinations of identity dimensions on the material consequences of disability, however, it follows that there can be no single experience of disability and that attention to race, class, and gender perspectives--both our own (Artiles, 2003; Heshusius, 2003) and those of the persons we study--would be instructive.

If we reconceptualize LD in terms of human variation rather than pathology and acknowledge that general education classrooms have traditionally been inhospitable environments for students who "can't keep up," it silences the debate about whether all children should receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment--that is, in inclusive (see Note 4) educational settings (see Baglieri & Knopf, in this issue). When we view variation as productive and natural, we can address it through the differentiation of
instruction, not through the sorting of children into already available categories—a very different way of thinking about both disability and classrooms. In assuming that the problem lies in our failure to teach groups of students whose abilities vary, it becomes necessary to move beyond assessment and "remediation" (what we will refer to as acceleration, because it is about improving the rate of learning rather than about "fixing" students) of individuals with impairment—already a socially constructed entity—to the assessment and redefinition of, and some assumption of responsibility for, the contexts in which they function.

Obviously, we too align ourselves with the DSE perspective. We find the sociopolitical repositioning of disability troublesome for the scientific, medical, and psychological *discursive* foundations we described earlier and for the institutional and legal discourses that support them. Examining disability from the outside as "experts" and focusing on human variation as necessarily problematic and individual are clearly incompatible with the view that there is no impairment until society constructs one.

On the other hand, that does not mean there is no place at the table for empirical, medical, legal, or other kinds of research. We stand to benefit from a wide variety of research strategies—from the openly local and subjective (e.g., collective memory work) to the hermeneutic and ostensibly objective (Moore, Beazley, & Maelzer, 1998). If we open our minds to the possibility, we can enrich and expand our knowledge by reading the first-person reflections of disabled people on lived experience (for examples, see Finger, 1990; Mairs, 1996; Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001) and scholarly analyses of representations of disability in the arts and humanities (for examples, see earlier list of references). Our objection is related to thinking that what empirical work tells us is privileged with respect to what counts as knowledge. We all, whatever our persuasions, need to be more judicious about the limited claims we can make for our work, taking into account the partialness and situatedness of any given perspective.

In sum, examining LD as a *discursive practice* reveals that education is always construed according to someone's vision and someone's system of values (Barton & Armstrong, 2001). Educators and the public have seldom acknowledged that we are making choices and that with those choices comes ethical responsibility. Either we can continue to sort and segregate students according to the current special education discourses, despite the lack of evidence that these are helpful to them—or we can work in solidarity with and for disabled people to foster a set of different assumptions: not competition, but cooperation; not exclusion, but inclusion; and not disability, but ordinary human diversity. Either way, special educators need to work with and within general education, not in addition to it, and not as it is now, but as it might become.

A Sociopolitical Vision for the Classroom

When we as educators focus on LD as a *discursive practice* that draws on a variety of different, sometimes competing, related discourses, we begin to notice that it is often the orderliness of schools—rather than children and their families—that drives the sorting, labeling, and construing of difference as a deficit that lies within the student (G. Thomas & Loxley, 2001). To refocus on students and to suggest ways to create welcoming and productive learning environments for all learners, we draw mainly on two comprehensive lines of thinking:

1. Vygotsky's theory and its associated instructional perspective (e.g., Berry & Englert, 1998; Boxtel, Van der Linden, Roelofs, & Erkens, 2002; Englert, 1992; Englert, Berry, & Dunsmore, 2001; Englert, Mariage, Garmon, & Tarrant, 1998; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Kerr, 1998; TorresVelasquez, 1999,2000); and


Together, these allow us to promote academic achievement in a reflective environment in which educators (a) actively consider the meanings we give to difference (to recapitulate, a physical or cognitive
difference is only an occasion for social framing as an impairment) and (b) focus on the context as the site of the realization, or actualizing, of the impairment or disability (e.g., Harry et al., 2002).

Because (a) every student is different (there really are no "types" of students); (b) learning disabilities are--by medical, legal, and sociocultural definitions--a heterogeneous group of disorders; and (c) language is both the context for and content of instruction (see Fahey & Reid, 2001), curriculum is enacted in each classroom with each teacher and each group of students during each minute of the day, making the least restrictive environment no more a place than is special education itself (see Rueda, Gellego, & Moll, 2000). Grappling with the creation and re-creation of effective classroom environments requires a thorough understanding of the nature of society and how culture and learning inseparably construct and position students with disabilities who have, after all, varying ages, races, classes, genders, sexual orientations, and language backgrounds. All these variations affect each student's interactions with the demands and supports of both the classroom and the historical, political, and material environments (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Stiker, 2002) outside of school. Consequently, effective instruction must be student centered, authentic, and contingent. Once well-designed and inviting tasks are assigned, teachers can observe and evaluate students' responses to those tasks and scaffold (Stone, 1998) the students' behaviors by helping them extend appropriate responses and redirect incorrect or insufficient ones.

Accordingly, teachers need to approach their work as scholar-practitioners (see Note 5), that is, to operate as responsive curriculum makers and informed decision makers rather than as technocrats. Teaching to students' strengths rather than their "deficits" grows increasingly important as we implement the recent reauthorizations of IDEA and the NCLB, which emphasize access to the general education curriculum. Learning how to ask and answer questions to evaluate and improve teaching and learning--the key to success in providing access--requires the tools of critical inquiry: observation, conferencing, and interviewing; generating anecdotal records; taking and analyzing field notes; constructing sociograms; analyzing student work samples and portfolios; and so forth. Data are collected as an integral part of planning, evaluating, and revising instruction for each student vis-a-vis the standard scope and sequence. Such data also play an important role in prereferral trial teaching and in the development of IEPs.

There are three types of instruction often recommended for ensuring access to the general education curriculum: differentiated, compensatory, and accommodating. Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001) is a flexible system of offering multiple levels or types of instruction around the same key learning goals. Teachers vary the process, product, or content of assignments to meet the needs of students working at various levels of familiarity and competence. The common instructional goal allows all students to share in large-group instruction, discussion, and debriefing. To facilitate the implementation of differentiated instruction, some textbook publishers are producing (social studies and other) texts that cover the same content at different levels of reading complexity.

Compensatory instruction, also desirable and effective, is designed to promote access to the general education curriculum in ways that work around students' differences or impairments. Struggling readers might watch a film, listen to a recording, read with a partner, or prepare a text at home the night before (perhaps with the help of their families) to enable them to participate in classroom activities. As another example, students may be taught to use computer spelling and grammar checkers.

Finally, perhaps the most well-known approach, but nevertheless an approach we do not advocate, is instructional accommodation. Our objection is that this term is situated in a discourse that advocates designing classroom instruction for those students who "fit" grade-level requirements and then modifying such instruction after the fact for those who cannot perform well. This kind of thinking continues to marginalize students with disabilities, who are nearly always perceived as not "fitting" academically, socially, or physically. Instead, instruction should be differentiated and designed from the outset with all students in mind (for an example, see Ware, 2001).
Seldom, then, is it appropriate to conceptualize a classroom as a space in which a single teacher teaches a single lesson to all students at the same time. Instead, it is more productive to think of the classroom as a community of learners, including and guided by teachers and instructional aids, who work together to make certain that everyone is supported in doing work that is appropriate, although perhaps not the same. Building a classroom community facilitates academic, social, and emotional growth among students, particularly within communities composed of diverse learners (Peterson & Hittie, 2003; Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

Community-building is a conscious and evolutionary process that begins on the first day of school and ends on the last. It is the foundation that supports cooperative learning, differentiated instruction, and the formation of positive classroom relationships and talk. To ensure successful implementation, teachers intentionally create classrooms that engender a sense of safety and belonging, value for diversity, shared responsibility for the community, and an overall atmosphere of support and caring.

Another way of actually including students with disabilities (rather than having them in general education classrooms in which they are still marginalized) is to help students learn to generate and value oral, written, and multimedia experiences and materials that incorporate different ways of knowing. Disabled people, particularly those outside the dominant culture, frequently have reduced life chances and are among the undereducated. Even so, they can inform people without disabilities, emotionally as well as cognitively, about the experience of participating in schools and other life settings with a disability label. It is, therefore, helpful to include in the curriculum personal experience narratives in the form of speeches, autobiographies, interviews, focus groups, and essays and then to assist students in discussing them in empowering ways.

Respect for life experience helps all of us militate against the notion that we and other "experts" have the answers. We hope that it might also help engender in today's children, both with and without LD, a stance of solidarity with those people who are working so assiduously to improve circumstances for themselves and others, particularly those who are unable to speak for themselves because of poverty, language issues, health impairments, and so forth.

Clearly, our approach to classroom practices is more politically grounded (in that it addresses power hierarchies) and interactive than many teachers and colleagues might suggest. Many take for granted, for example, that the deficit is in the child, whereas we prefer to think of the problem as a sociopolitical one: It is the lockstep grade-level curriculum that serves to disempower and disable, no matter what the level of competence of the student. There is no reason why all students could not learn side by side while working at personally appropriate tasks and levels.

A Sociopolitical Vision of Parent-School Relations

IDEA mandates collaborative decision making among parents and professionals. Specifically, the law ensures that parents have the right to be informed, the right to be knowledgeable about the actions to be taken, the right to participate, the right to challenge, and the right to appeal. Thus, by law, parents have the right to engage with professionals in the special education process. However, on stepping into the arena of special education to exercise their legal right to participate, parents enter an already ongoing drama, in which the principal players speak the elaborate language of science and law and, more often than not, offer mere walk-on roles to them. If we understand special education as the apparatus through which scientific, medical, psychological, institutional, and legislative discourses are supported and distributed, it becomes relevant to consider the ways in which such discursive practices operate in parent and professional negotiations.

As we have previously established, the diagnostic criteria for LD as conventionally conceived in public schools reflect the particular discursive practices of science, medicine, and psychology. The parent who enters a special education committee meeting enters a complex network in which this discourse further intersects with an institutional and legislative discourse. In accordance with the law that under-girds the institution of special education, professionals conceptualize and justify the presence of a learning disability
(or not) from within a framework established by science, medicine, and psychology. School professionals, speaking from an authority based on the Western conception of science as an objective, indisputable truth, position themselves (intentionally or unintentionally) in a dominant rather than a collaborative role with parents. It is paradoxical, indeed, that the discourse of special education—a system of practices in which parent-professional collaboration is legally mandated—operates simultaneously out of a scientific framework that by its very nature gives authority to professionals.

Foucault's (1977) understanding of the relationship between power and science—a particular type of knowledge highly valued in our culture—is useful to this discussion, as he asked us to consider what types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: "Is it a science"? Which speaking, discoursing subjects—which subjects of experience and knowledge—do you then want to "diminish" when you say: "I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist"? (pp. 84-85)

As Foucault suggested, professionals, speaking with the authority that science allows them, may disqualify (intentionally or unintentionally) the knowledge that parents bring about their own children. Entrenched within the positionality of "scientific expert," school professionals typically sit at the center of this exchange—initiating, directing, and terminating the discourse—which revolves around scientific explanations (e.g., IQ tests, achievement test scores, discrepancy formulas) and institutional options regarding placement and services. Parents may struggle to understand the legal and scientific language that circulates among professionals. Their own child, described by professionals as an amalgamation of test scores, discrepancies, deficits, and limitations, may be virtually unrecognizable to them (Valle & Aponte, 2002). A parent's knowledge of the child, in contrast, appears informal (i.e., less important) in its lack of scientific verification. It is up to the parent who disagrees to "disprove" professional opinion in terms of the knowledge base valued by the professional, as opposed to presenting arguments rooted in "other ways of knowing." Thus, special education discourses that drive and sustain practice can, ironically, alienate parents from the collaborative process guaranteed by law.

How might special education professionals reconceptualize their relationship with parents to come closer to the kind of collaboration envisioned by IDEA? We offer the following suggestions as a starting point for decentering the expert world.

Recognize ways in which the discursive practices of special education estrange parents from the process. Entrenched in habituated practice, professionals are often unaware of, and therefore insensitive to, the ways in which our discursive practices may alienate parents. Rather than assume that some parents express little interest in their legal right to participate, we need to reflect seriously on our commitment to parent collaboration by asking ourselves how our practice becomes "disinviting" to parents. Not only must we consider how the very language of special education erects barriers between parents and professionals, but we must seriously question whether we rely on "professional language" as a means to maintain a dominant position. It is, after all, our responsibility and obligation to decode the language of our profession so that parents can rightfully engage in the process.

Choose to refuse the standpoint of objectivity to embrace "other ways of knowing." By refusing the standpoint of objectivity required in scientific, medical, and psychological discourse, we open a space in which parents can participate as experts in their own right—bringing to the table their holistic conceptions of the child across time and contexts. The integration of such textured and contextual understandings of the child with educational perspectives would most certainly lead us closer to authentic collaboration. Furthermore, the release of special education professionals from the shackles of objectivity should enable parents and professionals to engage with one another as people with a common interest in the educational welfare of the child—in sharp contrast to performing the "roles" of parent and professional as typically
expected in current special education practice.

Acknowledge that parents may experience the institution of special education differently depending on their cultural orientation. We must let go of the notion that parents necessarily share our conception of the world, particularly as we have defined it through scientific, medical, psychological, legal, and institutional discourse. As Kalyanpur, Harry, and Skrtic (2000) have suggested, "the principle of parent participation is based on ideals that are highly valued in the dominant culture" (p. 122). In other words, parents from cultures other than the White, middle class culture of the United States may not value the special education guarantee of due process or the scientific determination of "disability" in quite the same way. Furthermore, in some cultures the needs of collective society supersede those of the individual, and it may be difficult for parents coming from such cultures to appreciate the emphasis that special education places on individual performance and intervention (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). In short, it is our responsibility to recognize the assumptions about the world that we hold and to consider ways in which to connect effectively across equally valid cultural orientations.

Allot adequate time to collaborate with parents. In order to put into practice the suggestions outlined previously, it is essential that we reconceptualize the amount of time required for parent–professional collaboration. Collaboration implies that both parties engage in a relationship that goes beyond the superficial, "rubber-stamping" information session that all too often passes for having met the requirement for parental participation. We must also consider whether our "expert stance" serves as a means to minimize the time that is required to develop and maintain close collaborative relationships with parents--a strategy for keeping parents at bay by disallowing adequate time for authentic participation.

In summary, differing world-views operate within the context of parent-professional collaboration. In order to communicate and collaborate effectively, we contend that the position of the special education professional must be extended to include the role of listener/learner. To engage in meaningful collaboration with parents means letting go of the alienating expert stance that positions professionals above parents rather than beside them.

Conclusion

This discussion of the LD field as discursive practice allows us to derive three assertions relevant to our work with students and their families. First, learning disabilities are not objective fact (see also Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). They are a social construction, molded by the cultural and historical discourses within which they were conceived and by the ongoing accidents of time that, for better or worse, have influenced their direction and progress--for example, the return of brain-injured veterans after World War II, the international competition for dominance during the Cold War, the rapid technologizing of medicine, the civil rights movement, the maturing of statistics, the ubiquity of the personal computer, the conservative trend in American politics together with the economic downturn, and, more recently, the insurgence of the disability rights movement and the formation of a new AERA special interest group.

Second, disability is not only a personal characteristic but a societal characteristic as well. The "normate" (Garland Thomson, 1999) is socially produced and re-produced. Many disabled people, for instance, describe as problematic the ways they are "othered" or might be othered "if they knew" (Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor, 2004); the ways they are represented as deviant, dangerous, or malignant in literature, the media, and popular arts; or the sociocultural barriers to opportunity, acceptance, civil rights, mobility, or learning that they face. Personal anomalies, rather than being eschewed, are most often described as an important and valued part of identity.

Disability is, perhaps first and foremost, a sociopolitical enterprise. Experts, not only in schools but also in other federal, state, and local institutions (e.g., judicial and social service agencies, hospitals), determine what resources are allocated to whom, under what conditions, where, and when. The disability experience, then, is inseparable from broad academic, social, historical, and economic conditions (see also Albrecht,
Seelman, & Bury, 2001; Hahn, 1987; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997). What constitutes a disability is as elusive, mutable, and complex as any other minority designation imposed on a diverse group. As Williams (2001) noted, "The trick is to ... recognize impairment/disability not as something that is either-or but as simultaneously and ontologically both personal and public" (p. 123).

The third assertion is closely linked to the previous two: Learning disabilities are not and have never been immutable (see Hammill, 1990; Poplin, 1988a, 1988b). In other words, learning disabilities, like all apparently objective constructs and categories, are interpretations, or social constructions—the outcome of people's collective but shifting beliefs, needs, and actions. With respect to education, the field of LD has morphed several times—from a medical to a behavioral to a social category, from a condition to a processing deficit to an instructional outcome or institutional by-product (D. J. Gallagher, 2001), from a presumed injury or malformation to a dysfunction to a "lack of fit." Through these shifts, we can read how discursive formation and re-formation (i.e., changes in the rules that determine what can be said) conform to and reconfirm disciplinary knowledges (Foucault, 1972).

The outcome of these shifting discursive practices has been the centralizing of power in the institution and its organized, "scientific" discourse—a discourse that distributes people hierarchically. Some people are valued more than others, and "disabled people"—in this case, those who do poorly in school or score poorly on tests—often least of all. It is, after all, the student with LD who is positioned by the educational discourse as the least powerful person—after physicians, psychologists, school administrators, teachers, and so forth.

Perhaps we have not seen this situation as strange because, since medieval times, people in the West have privileged science and those engaged in scientific discourse. The study and practice of education have become more and more elevated as they have aligned themselves increasingly with science and technology (Cutler, 2000). Indeed, laws now mandate "research-based practices." When we proceed as if schooling were objective and neutral, however, "science becomes the surrogate for morality" (D. J. Gallagher, 2003, p. 7). We absolve ourselves from responsibility for the consequences of the educational decisions we make and from the consequences of the ways we construct people as "other." When we think of impairment as a medical "fact," we do not have to take responsibility for school failure. We can continue to insist that students labeled as having LD "be made to look and perform as much like other students as possible before they might be considered suitable aspirants to membership in a 'normal' community of learners" (D. J. Gallagher, 2003, p. 11). Furthermore, this kind of institutionalized, discursive power is faceless (Foucault, 1973). No one and everyone is responsible; "it's just the way things are." There is no one to blame and only experts to thank. By reflecting on those faceless assumptions, by challenging things as they are, by judging them not on conformation to custom or tradition but rather in terms of their power dynamics (i.e., identifying those they serve and those they hinder; S. Gallagher, 1999), we can expose the disguises and the oppressions that have resulted from them. For instance, the medicalization of disability and its unidimensionalizing of diagnosed people often leads to responses of pity and undervaluing that are disempowering. Clearly, disabled people are powerfully positioned by these discourses. But then, because of this facelessness, so are we who participate as "experts."

To say that we are positioned by discourses is not to say, however, that they determine us: Through action, reflection, and consensus, we can resist and eventually change the discourse itself. Because we know that exclusionary practices are inherently marginalizing and unjust—whether they make instruction easier and more effective or not—we contend that we are ethically bound to choose to elevate values over negative data (and negative attitudes) about academic outcomes and work to reform and even transform the educational system to accommodate all learners. Public school classrooms are not for some children but for all children. But our discursive practices are standing in the way; we tend to see the process of education the way it is, not as it could be.

REFERENCES


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ADDED MATERIAL

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AUTHORS' NOTES

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2. Sections of this paper were originally written for publication in Wong (in press). The article has the form it does because we were asked specifically to address LD as a discursive practice and its implications for instruction and parent-school relations.

NOTES

1. Similar debates permeate the humanities and social sciences; they are not limited to the LD field or even to special education more broadly.

2. "When one describes the formation of the objects of a discourse, one tries to locate the relations that characterize a discursive practice, one determines neither a lexical organization nor the scansions of a semantic field: one does not question the meaning given at a particular period to [particular] words" (Foucault, 1972, p. 48).
3. We agree for political and economic reasons that students should be taught SAE so that they can become bicultural and reap the benefits of living in our society, but we also argue that their home languages and other aspects of culture be accepted and used as the basis for crossing boundaries to SAE. That they are not results largely from political rather than pedagogical decisions. The Oakland debates (Norland, 1998; O'Neil, 1998; Pinsker, 1998) of the recent past are a case in point.

4. We must acknowledge that there are serious problems with the ways in which what people call "inclusive education" is being carried out. In many instances, students are put into general education classes, but they never become part of the class—that is, they are never truly included. They may have a "Velcro aid" that makes them immediately obvious or be "pulled over" rather than pulled out, seldom or never participating in lessons with the so-called normal students. Or they may be put into classes where they are expected to do the grade-level work they cannot do without either the students or the teacher receiving sufficient supports. However, recognizing that inclusion is not yet done well does not absolve us of our ethical responsibility to work toward a more just society. Exclusion is stigmatizing and renders those who are absent and marginalized impotent. We must learn to appropriately instruct every child without excluding them from the mainstream. It is now fashionable to describe special education as a set of services rather than a place. In that case, we need not opt for exclusion, but inclusion is a process that we must still learn how to improve.

5. We are not talking about every teacher becoming a teacher-researcher, although we have no problem with teacher research. The model we have in mind is that teachers continuously observe students, analyze and keep track of what each student is doing (see Atwell [2002] and Calkins [1994] for specific and reasonable methods for doing this), and make decisions about what and how to teach the student using the data collected. In this way, the teacher becomes the curriculum maker.