

Learning Disabilities: The Missing Discussion in Disability Studies:
Is There a Possibility for Alliance?

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Abstract: We propose an alliance between disability studies (DS) and the field of learning disabilities (LD); an alliance based on the need for shared research ethics and a critique of contemporary educational practices that perpetuate misunderstandings and marginalization of disabled students. The positivist thinking that has permeated both research and instruction in LD has resulted in significant minority overrepresentation. Not only could LD benefit from DS social analyses and humanities scholarship, but DS could become a more inclusive, more representative discipline.

Key Words: learning disabilities, disability studies, impairment

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* Authors' Note: We chose to use the term "disabled students," rather than person-first language for two reasons. First, it is the preferred term of many disabled persons and disability rights activists¹ (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Erevelles, 2000; Gallagher, 2001, 2004; Kudlick, 2003; Linton, 1998; Longmore, 2003; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; and Peters, 2002). Second, it shifts the focus from personal "impairment" to society's disabling practices.

I propose an intellectual alliance between whiteness studies and disability studies in order to accentuate the underlying invisibility of normative whiteness and able-ness ideologies. These structures are at the core of Western culture, and yet remain unnoticed, un-observed. Without turning our cultural gaze on them – without scrutinizing and inspecting their borders –these ideologies will continue to oppress and obfuscate, exclude and excise, human communities that have been placed not just outside the margins, but off the page (Smith, 2004, p. 13).

In this essay, we propose an intellectual alliance merging learning disabilities (LD) and disability studies (DS) discourses. Our project is similar to that of Smith in that we also use a DS lens to shed light on and accentuate the underlying invisibility of the normative standards and able-ness ideologies, not of whiteness per se (although it is certainly implicated), but of our lock-step, largely reductionist educational system. These structures—normative standards and able-ness ideologies—are at the core of Western culture as it is embodied in the white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Eurocentric standards of behavior and curriculum that undergird both historical and contemporary public education in the U. S. Up to 12% of the school-aged population is typically and legally labeled as disabled for funding purposes (based on the assumption this population requires a more expensive "special" education) and about 40% of those students are labeled as LD (Hehir, 2002). Moreover, many of these students are from so-called minority groups who have been marginalized historically by our society and hence, our schools (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Across all high incidence disability categories—LD, Emotional and Behavior Disorders (EBD), and Mental Retardation (MR), for example — we find minorities are overrepresented (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002) to varying degrees.² To those who would benefit from noticing such discrepancies and particularly to those whose children profit from the current state of affairs

(see Brantlinger, 2003), the disparities and injustices appear to be inevitable or remain unnoticed and un-observed. Without turning our cultural gaze on these normative standards and able-ness ideologies—without “scrutinizing and inspecting their borders” —they will “continue to oppress and obfuscate, exclude and excise, human communities that have been placed not just outside the margins, but off the page” (Smith, 2004, p.13).

Why the Disengagement?

There is an ever-growing group of inclusive educators (including LD scholars) who embrace principles of DS and who participate in the Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. Nevertheless, as things stand, DS is typically disengaged from LD—and vice versa. It is difficult, for example, to find references to LD in the mainstream DS literature in the social sciences or the humanities, and it is equally rare to find references to DS in the mainstream LD literature. However, the two fields have much in common. When we heed Smith’s (2004) call to look closely at the way Eurocentric maleness operates to subjugate disabled people through disability-centered technologies promoted by capitalism, we see the LD category as one of those technologies. Moreover, whiteness-bias as it intersects with disability prejudice is common to both our educational concerns and those of the larger community of DS scholars. Because he mentions special education students who are affected by minority overrepresentation, Smith (2004) at least gives a silent nod to the impact and importance of LD, as the largest of those special education categories within the sphere of DS concerns.

It seems, then, that there is a continued silence around LD as a *specific* societal and institutional concern, rather than as one aspect of special education. Perhaps this is because DS scholars are perceived as “outsiders” whose distant gaze perceives the field of special education as one entity. Or perhaps there is a general aversion to sorting and labeling students. DS scholars may also have overlooked or avoided the LD question because of their preoccupation with their own concerns—many of the influential scholars in the field have physical or sensory disabilities, their work is centered in the humanities and the social sciences, and the historical preoccupations that accompanied the Disability Rights Movement were with more visibly embodied differences (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). Another reason emerges from sad memories or even disdain for the personal experiences of people with disabilities within special education and a concomitant fear that this new DS discipline may become tainted by association with an educational discourse. Moreover, some DS scholars may also want distance from the intellectually challenged “other” (i.e., a person labeled LD) and thus buy into the disability hierarchy favoring the physical over cognitive differences (see Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).³ We could speculate *ad infinitum*.

But there is one reason we would bet on: The absence of LD in the DS literature is because many suspect that LD is school-generated and not a *real disability* at all—the opposite of the assumption made by most LD scholars (we shall deal with this issue later). We, however, consider the “realness” of LD as being precisely and strategically a product of our perceptions as they are shaped by cultural needs and discursive practices. There is little doubt that we *make LD exist* to the extent that *we need it to or think it does*, which goes to the heart of one of the major DS premises that disability per se is a social construction.

What Do We Mean by Learning Disabilities?

Following psychological, medical, and statistical models, most LD researchers and practitioners use the individual student as its unit of analysis and so address “the personal qualities of those defined as having or being the problem” and, as a result, focus on “personfixing rather than context-changing” (Linton, 1998, p. 6). LD has its roots in early post-World War II neurology; hence, there is an assumption of a neurological substrate (undocumented in individuals), which is thought to distinguish between those who are “truly LD” and those who are misdiagnosed (Kavale & Forness, 1995). The field’s greatest growth spurt paralleled the rise of psychometrics, because testing provided a way to identify operationally the purported discrepancy between potential and achievement. This disability category was legalized as a federally-fundable category of disability in the 1970s on the heels of, but two decades after, the Civil Rights Movement, largely through parent effort (Ferri & Connor, 2005). Sleeter (1986) argues this new label was welcomed, because it enabled schools to raise standards in response to our national embarrassment over Sputnik by providing a way to segregate white students who could no longer keep up with the accelerated instructional pace. Thus, students with LD did not have to share classrooms with students labeled as MR and EBD, groups composed mostly of racial and ethnic “minorities.” LD’s current formulation came after the “Great Society” turned its attention to the management, if not the eradication, of poverty, and LD simply preempted popular concerns for the “disadvantaged” as scholars began to view that term as both incorrect and indefensibly prejudicial (Carrier, 1987). Only recently has overrepresentation of students of color in LD become a national concern.

We understand the category of LD to exist through reification: After Admiral Rickover's (1957) press to improve science and mathematics education as a matter of national security, there were suddenly, as Sleeter noted, thousands of white, middle-class students who were no longer “making it” in general education classrooms. LD became a solution to the practical problem of how to accommodate simultaneously widely opposed racial integration and accelerated curriculum. Nevertheless, as we noted earlier, given the realities of schooling and the real problems that many students have in school, *LD exists*. It exists as a set of complicated and oppositional discursive realities (i.e., both the language and the practices that accompany it, are legitimated by, and in turn sustain language usage) that, in their positioning of students and their effects on their lives, have material consequences that are all too real (see Reid & Valle, 2004, for an extended argument). As McDermott and Varenne (1998) note, many students and their families *have been acquired* by this label.

Theorizing Impairment, Disability, and Difference

DS scholars typically use the term *impairment* to refer to natural human variations. Linton (1998, p.2), for example, defines impairment as “variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing.” These “impairments” may be relevant to the field of LD, because there may well be subtle behavioral, sensory, and cognitive processing differences causally related to difficulties learning in school. We agree with Thomas’ (1999) materialist argument that differences as experienced by individuals are more than the sum of parts of gender, class, race, sex, and sexuality. However, because we consider LD a discursive phenomenon formulated in the social nexus of power relations, rather than as a neutral

term or a purely factual, material syndrome, we interpret impairment as a term that *already* assigns to difference a negative valence. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (1994) explains to some extent how this happens when he traces the way clinicians came to *read the different body as diseased*, rather than as just in flux or *different* through time. *Impairment*, since its medicalization, has come to carry (albeit unnecessarily) an implied sense of limitation and residual *devaluation* that continues into contemporary culture. Indeed, the term *disability*, referring to the resultant oppression, should be understood as a reality that is immersed in “systems of representations, social and material practices, discourses, and ideological effects” (Thomas, 1999, p. 111).

Ableism, like racism, exists not only in material structures and experiences of prejudice, but also in conceptual and linguistic figurations and the systems of thought and practices that attend them. Disability is more than the palpable strains and inconveniences that individuals and groups of individuals experience in their lives. Disability is, broadly speaking, an oppressive cultural enactment sustained and perpetuated through the myths, legends, jokes, anecdotes, narratives, and other discursive practices that circulate throughout Western society (see, for examples, Hall, 2000; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Stiker, 2002; Thomson, 1999). Hence, the importance of DS to our (re-)exploration of the field of LD and our proposal for a stepped-up alignment between the two fields.

An Alliance Based on a Critique of Educational Research?

One way to re-imagine LD in terms of DS is to consider the possible ethical consequences of adopting similar research practices. As Gallagher (2001) states, the way we conduct research reflects our ethical choices. Unlike DS, most of the research in LD—and certainly that research which is considered acceptable by the mainstream (e.g., Macmillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996; Scanlon, Boudah, & Elksnin, 2003; Swanson, 2000)—continues to be grounded in positivist science. Positivist science is “objective” research that takes the individual as its unit of analysis and is based on evidence derived from clearly stipulated and widely accepted experimental methods. These methods are often considered as the only neutral and fair ones in determining who is LD and who is not. As such, they also determine how students who acquire the label are to be “remediated” and where they will receive educational “interventions.” The goal of nearly all of this scientific discourse within LD is to probe the “misfit” between the student and the schools. And, because it focuses on what standardized testing says about what is wrong with a student, considered either individually or as a member of the group of students “with LD,” little attention is accorded contextual factors that more progressive DS-friendly LD researchers believe enact the disability. Despite the fact that most classroom accommodations are environmental—extended time, distraction-free settings, and preferential seating—researchers seldom conceptualize the “problem” of disability as a socially nested phenomenon, tending instead to ignore the sociological and historical factors that shape contemporary understandings of disability (Artiles, 2003).

Mainstream LD Researchers

Unsurprisingly, mainstream LD researchers conceptualize variations in the pace of learning as *problems*, not as ordinary human diversity. Whatever evidence questions that

orientation is largely ignored. For example, IQ tests used to measure the potential upon which the definitive proof of LD potential-achievement discrepancy diagnosis rests were, decades ago, exposed as biased measures of acculturation and achievement, rather than ability, as purported (Siegel, 1989; Siegel, 1995). Although achievement depends on the interplay of nature and nurture, the role of nurture in a labeled student's life is certainly not examined either closely or extensively. Even worse, standardized achievement tests (through which presumed notions about disability are both often defined and confirmed) also reflect assimilation to what is sanctioned as knowledge legitimated by the white, middle-class (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003) and defined through the Eurocentric curriculum. Furthermore, Aaron (1997) in his review of the literature on dyslexia or "LD poor reading" and "non-LD" poor reading makes a strong case, based on the scientific literature itself, that there is no defensible evidence for the purported distinction between struggling readers with and without the IQ-achievement discrepancy.

Using a methodology that quantifies by "objectively" separating the knower from the known (Broun and Heshusius, 2004), researchers maintain the superficial appearance of fairness and, therefore, benign-ness of an approach that requires problems to be labeled, classified, and understood. However, these methods are not so benign as they seem. Positivist science as a *discursive practice* positions the research participant as an object to be examined—and the perspective endures because positivist science always leads to more questions in an infinite regress (see Foucault, 1994). Indeed, the entire project of the scientific discourse in LD seems to be about identifying, examining, explaining, and remediating the students' problems, with little regard for the effects of such research on the people it examines. The onus thus falls on DS-aligned researchers to consider "the moral implications and social consequences of disability research" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 10).

Research Rooted in a DS Perspective

Gallagher's seemingly straight-forward and ethical charge turns out to be a complex and thorny one, however. Moore, Beazely, and Maelzer (1998), for example, show how difficult disability-friendly research can be (i.e., research conducted to help labeled students frame issues they consider crucial for the betterment of their lives). Let us consider a relevant example from Moore, Beazely, and Maelzer's work in England. A parent, or professional-in-charge, considers an adult who carries an LD label (who in the U. S. might be labeled either "learning disabled" or "mildly mentally retarded") still childlike in the sense that he "requires" adult care and adult-imposed rules "for his own protection." This is a common assumption: That disabled adults need care and protection from the nondisabled (see Longmore, 2003). The researchers have a hard time figuring out who has the "best" interest of the disabled person at heart: Is it the parent, the professional, or the disabled man who wants to be thought of as a grown-up and who wants the same rights to self-determination as other adults? In such a situation, the researcher enters an ambiguous zone of decision-making where it is hard to know (if anyone can know) what might be best for the disabled person. Such scenarios can be additionally confusing when researchers have their own sense of who has primary rights. And, if that sense conflicts with the parent's or professionals' opinion, there may be rancor, difficulty securing extended participation of the disabled man in the study, or even withdrawal of funding. Other possible complications include having to make tough decisions about what to study (emancipatory studies that challenge the status quo are likely to be difficult to fund; see Moore et al., 1998, for an extended explanation),

how much input from disabled persons is warranted (where do the boundaries exist between the demands of research and the needs of researchers and those of the researched?) and how to achieve a balance between being truly helpful or coolly distant, humane or opportunistic, probing or voyeuristic, and context-bound or context-free.

Unfortunately, in our opinion, it is rare to find among LD researchers the kind and degree of sensitivity that Moore et al. (1998) bring to their work. Because of the rigorous procedural regulations of positivist work, recognition of such thorny dilemmas is virtually absent. This is one of the possible benefits of the alliance between DS and LD that we seek. If professionals in LD were to take more seriously the difficulties and consequences Moore et al. address, they could open up spaces for a new crop of broadening insights that may reveal the, as yet largely unexplored, positive aspects of labeled persons' life experiences and shift the focus from the person labeled to the enactment of disability within and across various contexts in which their lives take place.

The Counter-Discourse in LD

There is, however, a separate, more progressive and more hopeful counterdiscourse that exists within the LD research community. This alternative discourse emerged from the critiques of the medical-scientific, deficit-oriented, mainstream perspective. Brantlinger (1997), Carrier (1986), Dudley-Marling and Dippo (1995), Heshusius (1989), Poplin (1988), Poplin and Pamela (1983), and Sleeter (1986, 1995) have all questioned traditional school practices and their positivist underpinnings. This discourse, however, has not yet moved to center stage, even though it has become increasingly powerful and visible (Anderson, 1995; Wong, 2004). Some more current work continuing in this vein includes recent studies by Collins (2003), Dudley-Marling (2004), and Reid and Valle (2004b). These scholars, all using actual classroom transcripts, demonstrate how, through the discursive reality of LD, differences come into contact with cultural assumptions—obviously a concern for DS scholars too. They analyze interplays between teachers' ideas and expectations about difference and ways they exercise power to confirm those assumptions that play out in actual classroom practice. The result is confirmation of the maxim that “you get what you see” and a sense of clarity about how, on the micro-level, disability is actually enacted in classrooms. But, these studies tend to address disability as a free-standing factor, one separate from other personal identity factors.

Losen and Orfield (2002), however, have documented clearly how minorities are seriously overrepresented in the high-incidence disability categories of special education, disabilities that are psychometrically defined such as LD, mental retardation, and emotional and behavior disorders. In both DS and LD, we are all concerned with the long-standing debate on how to live by democratic principles and also address more conscientiously than before the need for more situated understandings of human experience—understandings that recognize the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, sexual preference, first language, and so forth, with disability. Artiles (2003) argues for such an approach when he calls for the analysis of both the discourse of “inclusion as rationale” and of “inclusion as implementation.” The former refers to students' moment-to-moment experiences in school, examining the varied contexts that support (or not) students' active self-expression. In contrast, with respect to the latter, Artiles urges deconstruction of the structural limitations associated with stigma that minority groups face.

Disability constitutes one of those stigmas and so must be considered simultaneously in the mix. Because they disrupt the positivists' tendencies to frame students in essentialized and "timeless" (i.e., ahistorical) frameworks and to ignore a particular people's (e.g., the Latino/a's) unique history with poverty and oppression, these two lines of ethnographic LD research could be very promising.

To elaborate, Artiles (2003) makes a powerful argument for how some racial/ethnic groups have prevailed against "incredible" odds to relocate and survive. He laments that our scholarship in high-incidence disabilities tends not to tell students' stories with such histories in mind. He argues for a third space of conceptualization, in which we view culture as a constant dynamic between the micro- and macro-levels of a person's existence—a project useful to DS as well. Indeed, as former teacher-practitioners in the inner city, we often wondered whether students in our classes receiving services for LD were labeled because of their unfamiliarity with Standard American English and culture, rather than for problems noted in the LD definition, and the data on overrepresentation justify our skepticism. Gersten (1994) writes that teachers are increasingly, "uncertain about how to determine whether bilingual students are experiencing problems due to learning disabilities or due to their limited comprehension of the English language" (p. 311). He further reports an accelerating pattern of misidentification, misplacement, misuse of tests (testing in English rather than the students' native languages), and concomitant poor academic performance even within special education. Obviously, there are social justice issues we need to explore more deeply: How disability, race-ethnicity, and poverty become conflated is an obvious and an important one. But, there are also more subtle difficulties to be identified and investigated as well: For example, the way the language of testing and the testing of language reinforce our assumptions about LD (See Reid & Valle, 2005, for an extended discussion).

However, respecting individual experiences with disability while focusing on the broad, social barriers that define disability as a minority culture, even as a matter of policy, is hardly enough. As researchers, we need also to understand inclusiveness as an *internal reality* for a person who considers him or herself (or who is considered by others) to be different. As Peters (2002) suggests, for true fulfillment, a person cannot accept standard definitions of beauty, culture, and history against which to measure the self. Nor should researchers, who are equally bombarded by these Western standards, take such constructs for granted. Postmodern epistemologies, with their emphasis on pluralism, assist us in becoming sensitive to discourses that unfairly keep each of us—disabled, nondisabled, student, or researcher—from appreciating our own and others' differences as unique and acceptable.

Disability-friendly researchers then have an ethical responsibility not only to study the positive aspects of LD—students' agency, resistance, and accomplishments—but also to support students in becoming adept at detecting how cultures arbitrarily position them as "less than." Perhaps, as Artiles (2003) suggests, they can do this by comparing the interactions between micro- and macro-levels of students' existences. In this way, both the researched and the researchers can achieve real autonomy. As academics, we share a basic ethical responsibility to ensure that our inquiry promotes understandings about what reality is and how we come to know it that both allow and encourage students, their families, ourselves, and others to imagine a different, more just world order (Greene, 2003). It is not enough to gauge the integrity and

quality of our individual research studies. We must evaluate their collective consequences as well.

An Alliance Based on a Critique of Educational Practice?

Over the last several decades, DS scholars (Barton, 1998; Biklen, 1985, 1988; Biklen & Zollers, 1986; Erevelles, 2000; Gallagher, 2004; Ross-Gordon, 2002; Ware, 2001; Wilson, 2000) have made it eminently clear that current models of special education are incompatible, and in fact run contrary to the tenets of DS, primarily because of their deficit orientation, their reliance on binaries (e.g., normal/abnormal), their focus on individual characteristics, and their positioning of disabled students as subjects, rather than as sovereign agents in their own lives. These incompatibilities resist resolution for many reasons. First, our continuing emphasis on what is wrong with students obscures the problematic factors in the *school environment*, i.e. (a) the lock-step, age-related, Eurocentric curriculum, (b) Eurocentric standards for classroom and academic behaviors, (c) the assumption that the only acceptable mode of discourse is Standard American English, (d) the separation and lack of alignment between general and special education, (e) the legislation that instantiates Taylor's (1911) positivist model of instruction based on principles of accountability through assessments of outcomes and objectives, and so forth. The list is a long one and we have given only a sampling of problems here.

The point is that educators and the public in general have come to take for granted that schools must be, should be, as they are. We accept the dictum that schools are expensive and so must operate as efficiently as possible and that their efficiency derives from educating students in homogeneous groups. We believe that medicalized and psychometric diagnoses are viable and fair ways to sort children into such groups. In addition, the federal imposition of standardized, high-stakes testing and funding requirements for labels works not only to convince us schools must operate in prescribed and traditional ways, but holds us accountable for doing so. These assumptions and practices lead to one conclusion that if the schools are okay, then the source of the difficulties in a notoriously ineffective educational system must lie in student diversity. An alliance with DS could help us turn the spotlight away from the students and onto the cultural and educational systems that disable them.

For example, one very powerful insight from DS is how popular conceptions of normalcy pervade our cultural and institutional practices (Davis, 1997). The arts, literature, historical records (or lack thereof), and general media coverage dictate popular beliefs that shape and sustain educational practices as well as attitudes toward disability. These beliefs converge with disciplinary knowledges—medical, psychological, and educational—to define who is normal and what is normal practice. However, these perceptions of the normal are a function of political and historical pressures, decisions, and accidents (Foucault, 1981; Skrtic, 1995). Perceptions of normalcy are shifting constructions; not immutable, natural categories.

From DS, we might borrow a postmodern, pluralistic lens through which to (re-)examine this *situated interplay of language, bodies, and institutions* that, in a practical sense, defines LD—as it does every other disability. Scholarship in DS implies we need to challenge unitary, universalized explanations of LD not only within classrooms, but within schools and clinics, between districts and states, and across nations as well. Ghai's (2002) work in India, for

example, recognizes a set of unique histories and conditions that inform people's thoughts and actions differently across the Indian subcontinent. As a result, she argues, conceptions of disability cannot be directly transplanted to fit Western models of reality. To study LD (or any other disability) in India requires attention to fragmentation and local situations.

This same fragmentation and changeability pervades every culture and every classroom. Only when teachers become sensitive to and accepting of individuality as valuable and unique can they begin to set aside their categorical expectations for "LD students" and understand the un-reality of a positivist educational system. There simply is no "normal" pace for our approach to learning. Through such awareness, they can replace the mental image of "a unified and individualistic subject... with the *indeterminate subject* constituted and reconstituted in multiple ways" (Ghai, 2002, p. 95, emphasis added). Indeterminacy promotes the ability to shift perspectives and to tolerate ambiguity, so that teachers can make the moment-to-moment, situated judgments that disrupts the social process that enacts disability.

Given our inability to make any judgments about students from their disability labels, we are also likely to profit from DS's model of studying (auto)biographical counternarratives. We have very few narratives (Levine & Osbourne, 1989; Reid & Button, 1995; Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001; Trumbull, 1991) written by people publicly labeled with LD, so we know little about their analyses and representations of the world. When educators insist we see differences for what they "really" are (i.e., impairments), they ignore their own power to represent. It matters that we become more aware of how we frame students' bodies, because how people are positioned through language and materiality (in short, discourses) says a lot about how much power they have (Foucault, 1981).

However, being conscious that discursive systems give birth and sustenance to words used to reposition difference as impairment, such as we do when we label someone LD, does not dilute the significance of the lived experience of the people so labeled. If work such as Shuttleworth's (2002) chapter on the intimate confessions of men with cerebral palsy in search of love and sex can stand as a testament to the power of representation in lived experience, we do not see how to justify dichotomizing between reality and representation. For example, Shuttleworth states that the men he describes in his study have "sequences of intentions and feelings... [that are] only sensible within a culture's system of meanings and structuring of social relations" (p. 115). Like Shuttleworth, we do not see how we can divorce the "systems of meanings" from the reality of students' school lives. How students identified as being in the LD category negotiate such framing—what they accept, reject, resist—is exactly the type of awareness that should inform our judgments. And that kind of information does not come from the observations of outsiders.

Furthermore, despite our aversion to labels, so long as they are required and used, we need scholarship that reads LD as a distinct category of difference, unlike physical and sensory impairments, one made visible only through performance in a particular context. We must explore the consequences for such bodies considered abnormal (i.e., *having* or *being* LD) and also for the emotions evoked—the micro-level, personal response to inclusiveness we addressed previously—by such students' lived experiences.

In addition, an educational system premised on the growth and affirmation of each student would certainly be more ethically appropriate than this current system of competition that highlights conformity and regards individual differences as problems-to-be-remediated. Disability-friendly teaching, like disability-friendly research, would explicitly teach students strategies to build a critical awareness of the world and of their own places in it (Freire, 1970)—to help them acquire tools needed to assert their competence and to self-advocate. One means might be learning to deconstruct (to think critically about) text—talk, print, visual images and so forth. As Cherryholmes (1993) writes, through deconstruction students learn to “see the power of the text as shifting and requiring continual justification and rejustification, authorization and reauthorization” (p. 19). Instead of trying to determine the author’s meaning as if it were a fixed “fact,” students learn to *attribute* meaning to texts and re-signify them.

Furthermore, teachers must negotiate ways to provide all students access to text, whether they speak or not, read on grade-level or not. To assume students cannot interpret and respond to text because they cannot read it independently is to deny them their right to a “free and appropriate education” (IDEA FAPE; 20 U.S.C. secs. 1400(c) and 1412(1)). Only by providing students with opportunities to interact and learn in ways not determined by their differences (in the current climate labeled as impairments and disabilities) can teachers help promote self-awareness. Moreover, only by changing their approach can LD teachers design instruction to fit the student rather than the other way around and this reversal is necessary if they are to encourage students to read their own bodies and question the discourses that disempower them.

As the continued rejection of the DS-aligned LD discourse by mainstream LD scholars makes clear, the LD community cannot accomplish such important change alone or even with the support of other educators. There must be structural changes in schools that depend on public attitudes and commitments. Only through supportive coalitions of students, families, community members, academics, activists, and agency providers will we be able to shift the focus from rigorous science to the moral consequences of our research and educational practices. In solidarity with and building on the work that is being done in DS and by disability activists—work that supports the progressive discourse that already exists within LD--the possibility for change has the potential to increase dramatically.

What Does an Alliance Offer DS?

Because one of the primary and ultimate goals of DS includes promoting understanding and acceptance, not for some disabled people, but for everyone who experiences the marginalization of disabling oppression, the most compelling reason DS could benefit from an alliance with LD is the sheer number of people involved. There are large numbers of people who are not likely to be widely represented in the academic or even activist communities any time soon, as a result of their disabling experiences. The numbers are already staggering and are poised to increase as educators continue to place just less than half of 12% (the legal funding limit) of the increasing school-aged population in the LD category (see Aaron, 1997). The inclusion of LD in the DS discussion would work to diminish the *disability hierarchy* (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000), favoring physical and, more controversially, sensory differences over the less visible, more contextualized and performance-based ones, such as cognitive and emotional differences. Ironically, these latter disability categories depend more

essentially on social constructions than do those that have physical and sensory substrates (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Reid & Valle, 2004). These disabilities are not only constrained by social attitudes and barriers, they are defined by them psychiatrically and psychometrically.

An LD label can lead to severe marginalization, particularly for the less affluent and for students of color. In public schools, students with LD are often placed in segregated classes in dead-end low tracks where expectations are lowered, curricula are watered down, and the pace of instruction is slowed (see Aaron, 1997; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gersten, 1994; Tomlinson et al., 1997). Instruction often consists of uninteresting and unmotivating repetitive drill and practice. Few students with LD are ever returned to general-education classrooms, because the nature of the remedial education they receive tends to ensure the students it serves continue to need remediation (Tomlinson, 1999). Their life courses are altered and their life chances, particularly with respect to higher education opportunities and employment, frequently diminished (Hehir, 2002; Powell, 2003). Instead of fostering students' unique abilities, protecting and expanding their rights, and providing opportunities for real growth and active social participation, schools tend to prepare these students to accept their "natural," lower rank by continually reminding them they do not "fit," and positioning them at the margins. Unfortunately, many grow to accept the low-status view the schools have of them as their station in life (Hehir, 2002).

It is because of the definitional loophole created by murkiness about the nature and boundaries of the high incidence disability categories (i.e., LD, mild mental retardation and emotional and behavioral disorders), that special education has come to serve as this *official* tool of institutionalized racism. The fuzziness of the categories opens a space to support "fabrications" that justify the placement of disproportionate numbers of African Americans and other cultural and linguistic minorities in segregated classrooms (Linton, 1998; Losen & Orfield, 2002). As DS historian, Baynton (2004) suggests, the subjugation of minority peoples, particularly women and black slaves, was in part constructed by associating them with various aspects of disability—weakness, stupidity, etc. Furthermore, educated white males have led most of the disability movements in Europe and America (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Peters, 2002; Thomas, 1999). We juxtapose that observation with the obvious fact that the same has been true throughout the history of American education: Although education is clearly a feminized profession, its leaders have always been dominant-culture men (Grumet, 1981; Tyack, 1974). One outcome has been that women and minority students have become significantly undervalued, just as have students with disabilities. The story of contemporary special education clearly suggests race-ethnicity-gender-disability confluences are continuing in mutually supportive ways. Still, academics from both the LD and DS fields have been slow to study the problem of minority overrepresentation in segregated programs for labeled students, the literal well spring from which "disabilities" emerge. Given the commonalities that Baynton (2004) and Smith (2004) describe between the function of race and disability in DS and in sanctioned educational practices that affect the large numbers of students labeled LD, joining forces seems like a promising venture.

It may help to work against Thomson's (1999) assertion that there are tacit complicities among institutions that speak and intend one thing, but do another. Since many DS scholars are

interested in interpretive studies typically aligned with the sociological, literary, and arts traditions, they may not warm to the positivist (medically- and psychologically-based) research and practices that predominately characterize the field of LD. Nevertheless, education represents a cultural institution central to the problem of stigma (Goffman, 1963) by providing and perpetuating the breeding ground for such entities as LD, which respond to the needs of the cultural institutions rather than those of the students (Carrier, 1986; Sleeter, 1995; Thomas & Loxley, 2001). DS stands to benefit from an alliance with LD (and other categories of disability) because of a mutual interest in subverting current, deeply entrenched, yet clearly destructive and unwarranted practices that are likely to continue into perpetuity—unless we actively and forcefully oppose them. The sooner we blend these disciplines, the more likely it will become that we prohibit the indoctrination of yet another generation of disabled and nondisabled students into a medicalized and stigmatizing model of disability.

Although we have focused in this argument on common concerns, permeating borders between DS and LD would certainly unveil tensions. Re-examination in light of these tensions, may, as we have suggested, help LD scholars achieve a new awareness of the biases in the traditions of positivist inquiry and deficit-driven approaches to education that keep us from risking new moves towards formulating how difficulties in reading or other language-based academic problems can be better accommodated, understood, and destigmatized. DS, on the other hand, would have to take on a much broader scope and become more comprehensive and contextually human than ever before, reaching, for example, as far as language-literacy communities that label six-year-olds as impaired because they do not match school norms (Gee, 1999). With our combined expertise in critical social analysis, we might turn our cultural gaze toward dismantling the educational-medical-social systems that “oppress and obfuscate, exclude and excise” the LD community (Smith, 2004, p.13).

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¹ For example, Rod Michalko (a blind author cited in Smith & Ervelles, 2004) argues that the “person-first” language (e.g., a person with a disability in contrast to the preferred *disabled person*, the latter of which reflects societal oppression) so pervasive in the educational literature demonstrates “normate” (Thomson, 1999) society’s demand that, for disabled people to be accepted, they must demonstrate that their disability is an unessential feature of their being.

² Several studies show a pattern of overrepresentation of minority groups in the category of LD, and special education generally. For instance, Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) present recent demographic information showing minority overrepresentation in all three categories (LD, MR, and EBD). The greatest gap exists between the number of white students and both blacks and Native Alaskan students placed in special education settings, respectively, as judged by the proportion of whites to blacks and native Alaskans attending schools. In addition, data show Black and Latino/a students have been overrepresented in LD for several decades (Brosnan, 1983; Tucker, 1980), although not to the same extent as in the MR and EBD categories (Losen & Orfield, 2002). In Connecticut, Lipsky and Gartner (1997a), mention that researchers found that 36% of non-white males and 34% of non-white females labeled as LD were put in segregated special education classes, whereas white males and females combined constituted only 15% of that group. Lipsky and Gartner (1997b), furthermore, state there is no reason to believe this is unique to the state of Connecticut.

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