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Impact of the Social Construction of LD on Culturally Diverse Families:

A Response to Reid and Valle

Maya Kalyanpur and Beth Harry

Abstract

This response focuses on the effects of the current construction of learning disabilities (LD) on families of children from devalued racial/ethnic groups. Agreeing with the arguments of Reid and Valle, we add that parents from such groups are further disenfranchised because they are not participants in the critical discourse surrounding LD and because of the persistent belief that their parenting skills are deficient. We also suggest that the expectation of parental advocacy may be alien to parents whose cultures do not embrace an individualist perspective. Professionals can improve their responses to such parents by an understanding of the principle of cultural reciprocity.

Reid and Valle's arguments about the social construction of learning disabilities (LD) and their analysis of its implications for instruction and parent-school relations are disturbingly familiar in their description of how the legal, medical, and educational systems have combined to bestow almost godlike powers on professionals to perceive or impute academic failure in certain students and create a disability where no real etiological discrepancies might exist. As a result, many students end up being labeled as having LD and receiving services for LD in a system that does not recognize its own shortcomings.

As Reid and Valle point out, their reiteration of the argument that disability is not only an individual characteristic but also a societal characteristic and a sociopolitical enterprise becomes chillingly apparent in their observations that "in the last 100 years, since the inception of compulsory education in this country, the education 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." Although the terminology used to label these groups toward facilitating their exclusion has changed over the decades, and despite the use of IQ tests and other standardized forms of assessment in an effort to provide objective or "hard" data, the learning and behavioral characteristics that constitute the category of "learning disabilities" continue to be "soft," elusive, and based on personal interpretation (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995; Sleeter, 1986). Reid and Valle suggest that we begin to move away from an interpretation of difference that perceives the individual as being at fault and begin to recognize the larger, systemic disparities that contribute to perceptions of difference.

Reid and Valle analyze the implications for the families of these specific minorities that are targeted for labeling due to the discursive practice of LD. To this analysis, we wish to add the following point: Parents deal with addi-

tional inequities in their struggle with the educational system on two counts:

1. They are not participants in the critical discourse, precisely because they are parents and not professionals.
2. Culturally diverse families are further excluded because of perceived "poor parenting skills."

We cannot overlook the ineluctable fact that this discourse about the social construction of LD is not being argued in schools but in university classrooms and other, similar higher education academic settings. Most parents, regardless of their ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status, are dismayed to be faced with the brute fact that their child is not academically successful in school. Although they may be aware—consciously or not—that their child's failure can be attributed to systemic discrimination and school failure, few parents will point fingers at the system in seeking to "fix the problem." Parents learn quickly that accepting the individual child as being at fault, whether

they agree or not, is more conducive to accessing the solutions available within the system (or, if they can afford it, outside the system), be it medication or remedial and special educational services. Currently, parents are not participants in this critical dialogue—and not by choice.

Within this context, the high value placed on individualism in the mainstream culture asserts itself (an argument made by Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999), placing the cause of the disability in the individual and providing an interpretation for the etiology that is less stigmatizing and, therefore, more acceptable, such as a genetic disposition over which the individual has no control. For culturally diverse families, if the interpretation of a learning characteristic is less individualistic and seen more in terms of how another family member would behave (“She likes to read real slow, just like my aunt, and take her time”), the stigma of the label affects not only the individual but the entire family.

The reality is that the legal and educational systems continue to target individual student failure, and parents must accept this outcome if they want services; indeed, by law, a student who is academically at risk cannot receive special education and related services unless he or she is deemed to have a certified disability. Furthermore, collectivistic interpretations of the causes of LD, which are more likely to occur among nonmainstream families, may broaden the scope of blame from the individual to the family.

This brings us to our second point: In analyzing causes for school failure, we cannot overlook those that have particular, insidious implications for minority families. Scholars (e.g., Apple, 1995; Brice-Heath, 1983) have argued that the concepts of the “hidden curriculum” or “different ways of knowing” provide one avenue to understand school failure. They noted that many young children come to school with skills and knowledge that are not considered significant to academic success. Children who have

grown up speaking a language other than English, who have not been read aloud to, and who have listened to stories or can narrate stories that do not conform to the style and structure prevalent among the dominant mainstream are perceived to lack those preliteracy skills determined by professionals to be necessary for “kindergarten readiness.” Others (e.g., Fordham, 1988) have argued that the idea of “racelessness” is another way to understand how schools contribute to student failure. As minority high school students become increasingly aware that the skills considered desiderata for academic success are those practiced by the dominant mainstream, such as speaking Standard American English, they choose between “becoming White” and taking the mainstream path to success or staying loyal to their own cultural heritage and “opting out.”

The message that is communicated to parents is that their parenting skills are deficient because they do not teach children what they need to know to be successful in school. For instance, Mexican students, socialized at home into believing that a “good student” is one who sits quietly in class and listens to the teacher, are perceived in school as nonparticipatory, not sufficiently opinionated, and, therefore, not good students (Valdés, 1996). Similarly, African American parents who do not understand the implications of their middle school child’s letter grades in terms of long-term academic success may fail to encourage their children to improve their grades so that they can later take honors level or advanced placement classes—often a prerequisite for admission to college (Garlington, 1991). Furthermore, Harry and Klingner’s (in press) recent case studies of children in inner-city schools have shown that service providers consistently constructed negative images of families based on minimal information and negative stereotypes, and that these images had a negative effect on the service providers’ educational decisions for these children.

Consistently, then, the same groups of parents are disenfranchised by an educational system that excludes their ways of knowing and excludes the children who follow this tradition. The systemic discrimination embedded in the discursive practice of LD has contributed to the widespread belief that it is not the school but the individual who has failed. Instead of questioning the *professional* practices that lead to disproportionate representation, it is the *parenting* practices that come under scrutiny. No wonder, then, that parental participation in the educational decision-making process is lower for culturally diverse families than it is for mainstream families.

In their sociopolitical vision of parent–school relations, Reid and Valle describe the inherent conflict between the legal mandate for parent participation and the epistemological belief in the hierarchy of professional expertise. The expectation that parents become equal partners with professionals in the educational decision-making process, implicit in the mandate for parent involvement and parental rights, is paradoxical to the institutional convention that because professional expertise is scientific, objective, and indisputable truth, it is superior to parents’ knowledge of their child, which is anecdotal, subjective, and, therefore, less true. Reid and Valle posit ways professionals can reconceptualize their relationships with parents and “decenter . . . the expert world” in order to develop closer collaboration, including becoming aware of how discursive practice alienates parents, eschewing the belief that professional knowledge is superior to what parents know about their child, recognizing the assumptions embedded in professional practice, and allowing adequate time for authentic participation from parents.

We agree that professionals, as members of the special education system, have the responsibility to share with parents the “cultural capital” or the knowledge that will help them to negotiate their way through this system. To this we add the following

caveat relevant to culturally diverse families: The expectation that families will assert their rights by advocating on behalf of their child, participating in the educational decision-making process, and demanding to be considered equal partners is based on the mainstream values of equity, individualism, and choice. Perhaps a component of authentic participation could include cultural reciprocity (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999), where professionals are cognizant of the limits of the advocacy expectation for parents and respond accordingly.

Bowers (1984) has referred to *cultural capital* as the knowledge and skills with which we negotiate our way in society as competent adults. Acquiring cultural capital about the special education system, for instance, empowers parents to become effective partners in the educational decision-making process for their child. Knowing how school systems work is easier for parents who have been through the system themselves as children and perhaps observed how their own parents negotiated their way through it. This knowledge is harder to come by for parents who have not experienced the American public school system themselves or may have had negative experiences while doing so. Often, the acquisition of cultural capital is difficult for culturally diverse parents, because they are more comfortable using informal sources of information, through personalized connections and conversational language, whereas in the bureaucratized structure of the special education system, information is transmitted formally—that is, written or using technical language (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Rao and Kalyanpur (2002) described the case of an Asian Indian mother who found during her son's first year in school that the telephone conversations she had with the speech-language therapist once a month were more useful to her than the written notes from the special education teacher once a week. Talking directly to the therapist allowed her to get clarification, ask questions, and

build a relationship. At the end-of-the-year meeting, she asked the special education teacher if she would be willing to call her rather than send home a note. The special education teacher readily agreed to her request and was later surprised to find how actively involved the mother was in her son's education. Changing her communication style changed her attitude toward the parent and, in turn, enabled the parent's further acquisition of cultural capital.

We believe that it is the professional's responsibility to help parents acquire cultural capital. Professionals are more familiar with school systems and how they work, having been trained to work in them or having actually worked in them. On the other hand, parents are not. If we respond by saying, "But they can find out by asking," we are overlooking the fact that often, in new situations, we do not know what questions to ask to find out. It would be impossible for professionals to anticipate every contingency and provide parents with all the answers. However, if professionals are aware of this responsibility and make a conscious effort to help parents, especially those new to the process, acquire cultural capital, they can provide information that parents may not think to ask about. As parents acquire more experience, they will be able to ask more informed questions.

Banks (1997) has stated that cultural identity is fluid and highly nuanced, so that no two families may share the same values or levels of acculturation. By the same token, although there may be some convergence of professional values due to educational training, no two professionals will share all the same values. Developing culturally reciprocal relationships with families involves an understanding of each family's uniqueness and the recognition that the relationship is an outcome of the interaction of all the variables of cultural identity of both the family and the professional. If, as professionals, we respond to, say, an Asian Indian family

based on stereotypic or preconceived notions of what we think we know Indian families do or believe—or without an understanding of what *we* think and believe—we are doing both the family and ourselves a disservice.

For professionals, the first step toward cultural reciprocity is building self-awareness and developing a sense of one's own cultural identity. Clarifying our personal values by identifying the adages we grew up with, the lessons our parents taught us, and our moral standards as adults is one strategy (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Awareness of cultural identity occurs at three levels: overt, covert, and subtle (Kalyanpur, 1998). The *overt* level is an awareness of obvious aspects of cultural difference, such as outward appearance. The *covert* level is an awareness of aspects of cultural difference that are not immediately identifiable, such as communication styles or religion. The *subtle* level is an awareness of aspects of cultural difference that are embedded, even taken for granted, such as our values and belief systems.

Another strategy is by asking the question "why?" when we recommend a service to a family. "Why does 3-year-old Kavita need to eat independently?" "Why do I send written notes home to communicate with my students' parents?" By doing so, we can identify the personal or professional value embedded in the practice, such as the high value mainstream society places on independence and self-reliance, or our professional reliance on the written word for documentation and accountability. This understanding facilitates a dialogue between professional and family wherein the values of the family, if different, are highlighted. As families learn about mainstream values and recognize where the conflict lies, they acquire cultural capital.

By developing our cultural awareness and enabling families to acquire cultural capital, we can develop culturally reciprocal interactions with the families we serve. As Reid and Valle state, through this reconceptualization of parent-professional relationships,

we recognize the cultural assumptions embedded in professional practice and begin to allow adequate time for authentic participation from parents.

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