

# **Complicating, not explicating: Taking up philosophy in learning disability research**

**Paper submitted to:**

***Learning Disability Quarterly***

Julie Allan  
University of Stirling  
Stirling Institute of Education  
Stirling  
FK9 4LA  
Scotland  
Tel: +44 1786 467622  
Fax: +44 1786 467633  
e-mail: [j.e.allan@stir.ac.uk](mailto:j.e.allan@stir.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This article provides an introduction to some theoretical ideas and practices from the so-called “philosophers of difference” – Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari. They afford an opportunity to think differently about the construction of learning disability and to envision new forms of learning. Two key concepts – Foucault’s transgression and Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome – are introduced and examples from research on learning disability and other dimensions of disability are given to illustrate their potential. The theoretical practices of deconstruction, developed by Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic analysis are also presented and exemplified. I argue that these these theoretical concepts and practices, if taken up, shift the researcher towards an ethics of research and to greater responsibility. The implications of this are discussed in the final part of the paper.

## Introduction

This paper proposes some new forms of engagement with theory in research on learning disability. These provide the prospect of “thinking otherwise” (Ball, 1994, p. 23) and enabling us as academics to meet our responsibilities towards students identified as having learning disabilities more effectively. In advocating a more extensive engagement with theory, I am suggesting some particular associations, most notably with a group of French philosophers known as the philosophers of difference. Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida and Foucault have been portrayed as philosophers of difference because of their concern with achieving recognition of minority social groups and because they all, in differing ways, attempt to formulate a politics of difference based on an acceptance of multiplicity (Patton, 2000). Each of these writers have in common an orientation to philosophy as a political act and a will to make use of philosophical concepts as a form, not of global revolutionary change, but of “active experimentation, since we do not know in advance which way a line is going to turn” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 137). Their work is a philosophy of affirmation, which is a “belief of the future, in the future” (Deleuze, quoted in Rajchman, 2001, p. 76). It does not offer solutions, but rather produces new concepts, “provocation” (Bains, 2002), and new imaginings, “knocking down partitions, co-extensive with the world” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 22).

The ideas of the philosophers of difference are made to work in a practical sense in two ways. First, the ideas themselves are taken and are *used* to provoke a different kind of sense-making within the field of learning disability. It is not, however, a simple task to see, think and act differently; it is necessary, therefore to also use some of the theory

practices of the philosophers of difference to help achieve a new orientation to research methodology (Allan, 2008). A brief ‘taste’ of two key ideas of the philosophers of difference – *transgression* and the *rhizome* - is provided below, together with some examples of how these have been used to reflect upon current ways of thinking about and discussing people with learning disabilities and to “relocate them in new words and worlds” (Granger, 2010). Two major theory practices which could be taken up in research within learning disability – *deconstruction* and *rhizomic analysis* – are also outlined and exemplified. The examples are drawn from the US, the UK and Australia and relate to learning disability and other dimensions of disability. In the UK and Australia, learning disability (or intellectual disability) has a different provenance and politics from that in the US (Sleeter, 1987) and is deployed across a greater proportion of student population. It is hoped that in spite of these differences, the examples will illustrate the powerful capacity of these philosophical theories to inspire new thought. The utilisation of these concepts and practices take the researcher into a new kind of engagement within the field of learning disability which can best be described, drawing again on the philosophers of difference and on Levinas (1969), as an ethics. The implications of an ethical engagement in learning disability research are discussed in the final part of the paper.

### **Transgression**

Many researchers are familiar with, and have even used, Foucault’s concepts of power and knowledge to explore, often to very good effect, the way in which individuals with learning disabilities and other kinds of special needs are controlled and constrained

within schooling contexts (Allan, 1999; Reid & Valle, 2004; Tremain, 2005). Whilst such analyses provide important insights, they offer little hope that individuals can escape such constraints. Foucault's still relatively unexplored later works on ethics enables the examination of how disabled people can and do challenge their constraints and his notion of transgression is particularly helpful in this regard. Transgression, the practical and playful resistance to limits (Foucault, 1994), is an important way for disabled people to challenge the disabling barriers they encounter. Transgression is not antagonistic or aggressive, nor does it involve a contest in which there is a victor; rather, it allows disabled individuals to shape their own identities by subverting the norms which compel them to repeatedly perform as marginal. For those who transgress, according to Boyne (1990), "otherness lies ahead" (p. 82) and they are not required to – and indeed could not – reject these identities entirely, but can vary the way in which they have to repeat these performances.

Evidence of transgression by disabled students emerged in my own work (Allan, 1999) as something of a surprise. The research focused on experiences of students with special needs, and their mainstream peers, in regular schools, and, in line with Foucauldian genealogies of power and knowledge, I had expected to find students who were constrained and controlled by the discourses and practices of special education. This indeed was the case and the hierarchies of surveillance through the assessment procedures and teaching practices had significant disciplinary effects on the young people and their families. However, the disabled students also transgressed these effects in particularly subtle and effective ways. Raschida, a visually impaired student,

first alerted me to the extent and scope of transgression, beaming as she described how the long cane which she hated, because it was so visible, had been 'dropped' in a lake. The loss of the long cane, she reported gleefully, had annoyed her teachers, but had enabled her to escape the imperative to perform her visual impairment in public. She had subsequently acquired a smaller folding cane which was much less obvious and with which she was more comfortable. Raschida also described an episode of transgression in which she pretended to be 'blind drunk,' rather than blind, when she was with her boyfriend:

I usually met him at nights and that and he was [drunk] ... I used to always pretend that I was drunk as well. I [wasn't] really, but I was just saying that he'd think, if I couldn't see anything, he'd realize [laughs] ... I decided to tell him. Because we used to meet up at my friend's house and I knew her house quite well as well, so I never used to bang into things or anything, I'd just act normal, casual (Allan, 1999, p. 106).

Transgressive strategies surfaced among students with a 'learning disabled' or 'learning difficulties' label, although, as has already been made clear these descriptive categories, having emerged in the UK through routes of mental retardation and mental handicap, have had less of the political and ideological significance than learning disability has had in the United States. One student, Brian, who had Down's syndrome, orchestrated a subtle shift in the extent of the presence of his learning disability depending on which of his special needs assistant was on duty. He appeared to exhibit a more significant

degree of learning disability and dependency with his afternoon – somewhat mothering – assistant which contrasted with his morning experiences when the assistant who took a more disciplinarian approach was present. Dudley-Marling (2004), in his research, illustrates how powerfully the teachers’ positioning of students and whether they identify them positively or in relation to their deficits can have on their responses and Brian’s reaction demonstrates this as well as highlighting the capacity of students to transgress. Brian also transgressed in his relationships with other students, appearing to cross the line of normal boundaries of touch with one student in particular. What was striking was the mainstream students’ capacities to recognise and tolerate such transgression but to also seek to turn such encounters into pedagogic instances where they were able to support Brian’s inclusion.

Researchers have uncovered instances of students transgressing in ways which made them seem more disabled. Ferri and Connor (2009) demonstrated the powerful capacity of young working class women of colour to transgress into learning disability through a recognition of the perceived advantages it offered. They also uncovered a variety of sophisticated strategies by the young women to evade the unwanted attention of peers and found that “passing, rather than signalling an internalisation of stigma or self-hatred, serves as a tactic for negotiating what is perceived as an invasion of privacy and for refusing ableist assumptions” (Ferri & Connor, 2009, p. 109). In my own research reported above, Peter, who had behavioural difficulties, regularly referred to himself as “a spastic” (Allan, 1999, p. 54) and described how he would “sometimes say things to shock people” (Allan, 1999, p. 54). As with Brian, Peter’s fellow students demonstrated

their ability and willingness to make some space for such transgressive acts and to try to support his inclusion.

Granger (2010) describes how she transgressed her learning disabled identity, as it had been formed for her by her teachers, and which characterised failure on her part. Her initial self loathing at what she had been told she could not do was replaced by a recognition of the uses of social power that had produced that hate. She acquired a “ghostly presence” that “threatened to disrupt” and took great satisfaction in whispering to her fellow students that it was not necessary to conform: “this shit doesn’t matter”. Granger’s account is a powerful call to “transform silence about our denigration, to outrage about this denigration and a celebration of who we are”.

These acts of transgression enabled individuals to challenge the limits placed upon them and exercise control over themselves and others. They were also largely positive acts, which challenge the idea that *passing* or evading an identification as disabled is shameful. The transgressions were, however, temporary and partial, had to be constantly repeated and reactions to them had to be monitored. Transgression appears to have value as a concept in helping to understand ways in which learning disabled individuals may challenge and resist practices within school. It allows us to find a way of reading these, not as further evidence of pathology, but as positive expression and as desire.



## **The rhizome**

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer the rhizome as a model of thought, which challenges both conventional knowledge and the means of acquiring this knowledge. According to Deleuze and Guattari, conventional knowledge is rigid, striated and hierarchical and has an “arborescent” or tree like structure. Learning within such a structure involves the transfer of knowledge through a process of representation, “which articulates and hierarchizes tracings” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 12) and emphasises facts and students are required to display their learning merely through repetition of these facts, with little opportunity for variation. Knowledge of this kind relies on the logic of binarism for example normal/abnormal or able/disabled, and places these hierarchically within the system, identifying those on the negative side of the binary as targets for remediation and control. This kind of learning is inadequate because it is partial, with meaning being lost through continual fracturing. Students’ involvement in these learning processes is also partial, contingent, and tied to individuals’ pathologies, which in turn fragment and locate students within the striations of the school system.

In place of the arborescent tree structure of knowledge, Deleuze and Guattari propose the notion of a rhizome, which grows or moves in messy and unpredictable ways. Their examples of rhizomes include bulbs or tubers, but also rats and burrows: “the best and the worst” (1987, p. 7). Rhizomes have multiple connections, lines and points of rupture, but no foundation or essence, and the connectivity of these lines make a rejection of binarism inevitable:

That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject – anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9).

The rhizome as a model of learning “releases us from the false bondage of linear relationships” (Roy, 2003, p. 90) and allows for endless proliferation, new lines of flight and new forms of knowledge:

Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings. When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 28).

Each rhizome contains:

lines of segmentation according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc.; but also lines of deterritorialization along which it endlessly flees (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 18).

These “ruptures and new sproutings” present new challenges and new ways of experiencing learning. They are not, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) caution, secure

spaces where individuals can be passive but a series of lines in which they must participate: A rhizome, a burrow, yes – but not an ivory tower. A line of escape, yes – but not a refuge (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 41). Rhizomic learning is always *in process*, having to be constantly worked at by all concerned and never complete. This in-betweenness is an inclusive space in which everyone belongs and where movement occurs. Whilst the rhizome has obvious metaphorical appeal, establishing it as the model for thinking about learning is much more complex:

It is not a matter of exposing the Root and announcing the Rhizome. There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes and rhizomatic offshoots in roots. The rhizome is perpetually in construction or collapsing, a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again (Gregoriou, 2004, p. 244).

The concept of the rhizome appeared useful in understanding the learning and experiences of group of children in a school in which the headteacher had introduced children's rights (Allan et al, 2006). A small group of children was formed to look at inclusion in the school and the group, which called itself the Special Needs Observation Group (SNOG), was initially established by a parent of two disabled children in the school, but the children gradually assumed responsibility for their own activities. The group experienced a form of rhizomic learning in which they experimented with, and experienced, inclusion. They took rights - literally - on a walk through the school in order to discover the points at which exclusion arose. Simulation exercises of this kind, in which non-disabled individuals pretend to be disabled, can be superficial and

essentialist, but these young people directed their gaze to the disabling barriers and found themselves able to imagine the exclusion experienced by their disabled peers. This kind of learning about rights seemed to be particularly effective because it took them off in new and unanticipated directions. Having *dealt with* disability, the group decided to move onto ethnicity, and identified some concerns about the level of participation of some individuals. They then decided to tackle weight issues when they became aware of some of their peers' discomfort when changing for gym. Their experience and experimentation with rights had alerted them to new forms of exclusion that they wished to do something about.

For one young person, Alistair, the experience of being part of the SNOG group, and of rhizomic learning, was particularly significant in rescuing him from a downward spiral of misbehaviour and exclusion. He described himself as having been out of control, often getting into trouble in the playground for fighting and being regularly excluded. Prior to joining SNOG, he had become a buddy to a disabled child and being responsible for someone else had made him alter his own behaviour. His membership of SNOG had, by his own account, transformed him into someone else, someone who had to have regard for others, and had allowed him to escape the deviant identity that was being ascribed to him. It was a dramatic line of flight:

Well, when I started to know [disabled students] I was, like, I need to show them I want to be good, 'cos I used to get into fights and stupid things like that but when I started to get to know them and got into the SNOG group I started my

behaviour; I wanted to start again and be good ... I didn't want everybody to know me as Alistair the bad boy. I want to be good now. So that's what I was trying to do when I went into the SNOG group ... sometimes I'm amazing (Allan & l'Anson, 2005, p. 133).

Alistair had transformed himself, but recognised that he had to police his own newly formed identity and occasionally he lapsed:

I get into a fight or I get angry because it didn't happen. If I didn't get to sit beside my friends I start to get angry. I just want to be a good boy now. As everybody says "good boy." That's what I want to be – I want to prove them all wrong. They all think I [can't] behave but I want to prove them all wrong that I can behave ... some people just know me as "there's Alistair – stay away from him." But I'm to prove them all wrong – that I'm good. I'm going to be good. I just want to be good now (Allan & l'Anson, 2005, p. 134).

Clearly such opportunities for escape would not be available to, or taken up, by every student with a label of behavioural difficulties. It is, nevertheless, a heartening transformation that delighted all those with whom Alistair was connected – the headteacher, the teachers, the janitor, Alistair's mother, and the researchers. Most impressed of all was Alistair himself who came to know himself as "amazing".

The concept of the rhizome has been used effectively by researchers to rethink disability in a more constructive way. Hickey-Moody (2008), working with learning disabled

dancers in Australia (where learning disability has a more generic application than in the US), has deployed the rhizome to reposition the body as becoming through movement - where they are in a state of continuous evolution - while Goodley and Moore (2002) have explored the potential of the arts' rhizomic qualities and its absence of constraints associated with language to open up possibilities for individuals with learning disabilities. Granger's (2010) reframing of her learning disabled self as transgressive and disruptive was arrived at through a recognition, although not articulated as such, that her learning was rhizomic. She described reading "in the shape of a spiral" and her understanding taking the form of webs, puzzles and Rubik's Cubes that had to be constantly tended. Her recognition of her learning as having these features allowed her to enjoy her reading and understanding as "playfulness" rather than as "frustrated aggression" and to turn that playfulness into a game that she could play with others. Deleuze makes the point that children are already *in* the rhizome in their learning:

Children never stop talking about what they are doing or trying to do: exploring milieus, by means of dynamic trajectories, and drawing up maps of them (Deleuze, 1998, p. 61).

This argument is also made by Olsson (2009) in her research with very young children and her work illustrates the positive effects of viewing learning as rhizomic which could be of great use in learning disability contexts. The value of the rhizome in learning disability is in its capacity to recognise forms of learning in their essence, rather than in relation to norms and expectations.

## **Deconstruction**

The function of deconstruction, as a theory practice, is to interrupt closure and certainty within texts and to create undecidability about their meaning and intent. Existing concepts such as justice, democracy, decision and responsibility are reinvented with a double meaning, relating to their absolute and unconditioned form and their contingent version into which the Other is allowed to come (Caputo, 1997; Patton, 2003). Texts are read with an eye to the way in which they “get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves” (Eagleton, 1993, p. 134). The process of deconstruction, for Derrida (1988), involves a double reading, a reading with at least two layers, usually by first repeating the “dominant interpretation” (p. 143) of a text, which takes the form of a commentary; and then opening up the text to its own blank spots, which lie behind, and are protected by, commentary. But these multiple readings have to be managed simultaneously, forcing the deconstructor to operate with “two texts, two hands, two visions, two ways of listening. Together at once and separately” (Derrida, 1982, p. 65). They involve reading both from the inside and the outside and Derrida (1976) depicts the deconstructor as a tight-rope walker who risks “ceaselessly falling back inside that which he deconstructs” (p. 14). It is a double reading that traverses the text and achieves “the destabilization of the stability of the dominant interpretation” (1988, p. 147). Deconstruction seeks to locate a point of otherness and opens up a discourse on the Other which has been appropriated through logocentrism (Critchley, 1999). How one reads the text depends on the text itself and the less a text deconstructs itself, the more it can be deconstructed, opened up to itself, showing the flows of thought and assumptions which direct it and what it excludes. The deconstructive process has to

enter into the text's own trajectories and engage with them to find their moments of undecidability. Such moments may be understood as what Derrida terms an "aporia" (1992, p. 22), a necessary ordeal of impossibility which one has to go through in order to make a decision and take responsibility:

The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention* (Derrida, 1992, p. 41; original emphasis).

According to Derrida, the aporia, because it produces this ordeal of impossibility and forces a recognition of one's obligation to the Other "conditions affirmation, decision and responsibility" (Derrida, 1992, p. 63).

Deconstruction can help with the articulation of new political subjectivities, by privileging the voices of minorities and marginalised groups, including students with learning disabilities, and mobilizing politically around these. This is done by naming these groups, since, as Critchley reminds us, politics always requires naming a political subjectivity and organising around it. Ranciere (2008) usefully describes this process of naming making a discourse of that which has formerly been a noise and a process of rupture that renders certain identities visible:



For me a political subject is a subject who employs the competence of the so-called incompetents or the part of those who have no part, and not an additional group to be recognised as part of society ... It's a rupture that opens out into the recognition of the competence of anyone, not the addition of a unit (p. 3).

Critchley (2007) cites examples of 'indigenous' becoming a political force and achieving change in Mexico and Australia as a result of the process of claiming this name. In Mexico, recognising that the name 'peasant' no longer had any purchase, activists sought to enforce acceptance of a collective indigenous identity and Australian Aboriginals forcefully cemented the challenge to land rights through the establishment of a beach umbrella on the lawn facing the National Parliament which it named the "Aboriginal Tent Embassy" (p. 108). Critchley advocates a kind of demonstration as demonstration, with demos referring to the people, on behalf of minorities, "manifesting the presence of those who do not count," (p. 130) and this could be undertaken in research, writing and teaching with students with learning disabilities. The dangers of patronage or of spectacularising their difference are, however, strong and the declaration of the subjectivity of learning disabled whilst at the same time aspiring to deconstruct that very category is a double bind which it may not be possible to resolve. Artiles (2004) has argued that there is an urgent need to theorise the issue of representation in order to deepen our understanding of learning disability as a discursive practice. It is also necessary to theorise human subjectivity and while deconstruction helps to articulate and foreground subjectivity, a further step – towards ethics – is needed. I return to this in the final part of this paper.

Maclure (2005a) offers some extremely useful guidance on reading texts which amount to what she calls a deconstructive ethos. First of all, she recommends that researchers see the world, their data and themselves as text and that they think of such things as “the classroom”, “the child”, “the researcher” with invisible quotation marks round them. These constructs, she contends, are not natural, not self evident and never innocent. Second, she suggests looking for binary oppositions in texts, for example normal/abnormal and including the researcher’s own biases and assumptions. Finally, she encourages researchers to challenge the taken-for-granted, not in a destructive spirit, nor in an effort to find the truth, but in order to open up textual spaces that seem closed and to confound things which seem simple but which are simplistic.

A powerful deconstruction of learning disability is given by McDermott and Varenne (1995). Starting from their contention that a disability is a display board for the weakness of a cultural system than an indication of real people, they illustrate how three different ways of looking at culture and disability - a deprivation approach, a difference approach and a culture as disability approach - produced four different versions of Adam, a boy they observed in third and fourth grade. Their deconstruction shows how the various Adams are blamed, in different ways, for the failures of the systems. When they turn the focus of the same framework onto illiteracy, they are able to diagnose the nature of the systemic failings which lie in the testing processes themselves. McDermott and Varenne’s deconstruction is a positive analysis and one which could generate solutions which could alter the outcomes for students with learning disabilities.

Baker and Campbell (2006) offer an equally potent deconstruction of disability, law,

schooling and nations and demonstrate the way in which legal discourse, drawing on biomedical narratives, constructs the learning disabilities that then account for abnormal behaviour. They argue that such constructions produce, in Derrida's terms, aporias which create "openness and closure around leaky borders" (p. 341). Baker and Campbell suggest that rather than fix labels and diagnoses upon people, the openness and closure operate as "relations of intensification" (p. 341) and may provide new ways to think about the disabled body as in a constant state of "unfinishedness" (p. 342). So, by revealing the aporias as moments of undecidability, deconstruction enables us to see where there may be possibilities to think and practise differently.

Examples of deconstruction in education generally include Lather's (2006) deconstruction of the scientificity within educational research and Maclure's (2005b) use of frivolity as a means of "discomposing the language of policy and thereby of unsettling its totalizing ambitions" (p. 1). My own deconstruction of disability policy within higher education (Allan, 2003) highlighted the ways in which exclusion became inscribed alongside declarations of inclusivity and access for disabled student teachers. The value of deconstruction for learning disability, in problematising our understanding and underlining our misunderstanding, is, as Derrida (1988) points out, "a stroke of luck ... Otherwise, why speak, why discuss?" (p. 80).

## Rhizomic analysis

The metaphor of the rhizome can be deployed effectively in relation to the process of analysing research data, enabling what has previously been closed to surface and to effect:

An *unjamming* effect in relation to the closed truths of the past, thereby freeing up the present for new forms of thought and practice (Bennett, 1990, p. 277).

The use of the rhizome permits analysis to be concerned not with *explaining* or empirically demonstrating, but with exploring the various discursive formations which, following Foucault, seek to produce truths and create particular forms of subjectivity. Mozère (2002) described the kind of analysis offered by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as a “style” (p. 4) of philosophy which engaged individuals’ own ontologies:

The novelty also of course was the way [Deleuze] *used* philosophy and how he encouraged people listening to him, not to conform but to experiment with new ways of being that would suit them (p. 4).

Deleuze and Parnett (1987) emphasise the importance of rhizomic analysis doing something other than seeking to capture or pin down phenomena, since “movement always happens behind the thinker’s back or in the movement when he blinks” (p. 1).

Rhizomic analysis differs significantly from that depicted within research textbooks aimed at doctoral and beginning researchers. These books, for example *How to get a PhD* (Phillips & Pugh, 1987) and *Doing your research project* (Bell, 1993), typically present the analysis process as linear, depicting research frameworks as arborescent and with a neat ordering of research themes. They promote the search for an orderly set of descriptive categories which leaves novice researchers ill-equipped for the series of “derailments” (Shostak, 2002, p. 5) and for the “logical graveyard where sense and nonsense fuse and meanings are loosened from their anchorage in master narratives” (p. 5) that they will inevitably experience during their own attempts at sense-making. Rhizomic analysis, in contrast, is non-linear, non-hierarchical and instead wanders, looking for *things* rather than *themes*. Data categories or thematic content become less interesting than routes and connections, breaks and fissures, and analyses become ‘maps’ rather than ‘tracings’ of knowledge.

Whilst, as I have already suggested, several researchers have taken up the concept of the rhizome to help explore and explain learning disability and disability more generally, there are fewer instances of researchers undertaking rhizomic analyses. This is largely due to the unsettling nature of such analyses, but those who have gone down this route have been rewarded with some new understandings. Mercieca (2008) pursued rhizomic analysis in his doctoral study of profoundly disabled students in his own classroom and has subsequently argued that the rhizome enables the researcher to “engage with the different intensities that are being offered by persons with disabilities and their

environments” (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2010, p. 89). Mercieca’s analysis situated him in a “zone of proximity” (2008, p. 2) to his students, in which he experienced how:

thinking again is possible through the involvement within the lives of students with [Profound or Moderate Learning Difficulties], and also how the different spaces of intensities provide us with becomings: becoming-teacher and becoming-PMLD, and as Deleuze-Guattari would say becoming-imperceptible (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2010, p. 170).

Mercieca’s rhizomic analysis took him to a series of planes of sense-making - space, body, sound and time - which allowed him to see the disabled students as altering and affecting the educational terrain in quite profound ways and which provided, for Mercieca, ultimately “a violent experience” (p. 178). The recognition of the violence of his own becomings, through the intensities of the students, led him to advocate rhizomic analysis and the experience of intensities, leading to an unlearning, as part of teacher education.

Olsson’s (2009) analysis of young children’s learning is rhizomatic, enabling her to portray, often visually, the children’s assemblages of desire and refusing to inscribe these with the formal knowledges of developmental psychology and pedagogy. She endorses Mozère’s (2002) depiction of the act of rhizomic analysis, as not a technique, but “a style of philosophy” (p. 124) which enables her to “do research by *using* and *experimenting with*” the experiences she found in the preschools and the concepts from

Deleuze and Guattari. Olsson contends that her analysis differs fundamentally from conventional analyses by not “telling practices what they are lacking” (p. 125) and instead “focusing on ourselves and the world from another perspective from that of lack” (p. 125). Such a positive orientation, enabling the exploration of how desire functions in the lives of students with learning disabilities and those with whom they engage, is clearly an attractive proposition for learning disability research.

### **Conclusion: theory and an ethics of research**

Try again. Fail Again. Fail better (Beckett, 1992, p. 101).

The invitation given in this paper to use the theories from the philosophers of difference – in the form of concepts and theoretical practices – reflects a plea to address both the inequalities produced by an education system that insists that “everyone do better than everyone else” (McDermott, 1993, p. 274) and the power of ideology to attribute success and failure to children’s characteristics (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010). It seeks to progress further the work initiated by Sleeter (1987); Carrier (1983) and Tomlinson (1988) and taken up by Disability Studies in Education. It delivers none of the “moral stakes” (Gallagher, 2010) or “sacrificial ideas” (Sleeter, 1987, p. 552) that was a feature of the work of those scholars writing in the 1980s and does not seek to enter into the ideological “bickering” (Kavale & Forness, 1995, p. 333) which has characterised the debate, within the US, described as occurring between special educators and inclusionists.

What I aspire to do, by bringing the concepts and practices of the philosophers of difference into the arena, is to shift our attention within learning disability away from fault, blame and lack and towards something more positive:

Thus the conversation can be turned towards understandings of human difference that lead to more productive teaching practices and arrangements, more inclusion, and, in the end, a more lucid sense of what we are about as educators and researchers (Gallagher, 2010).

The concepts of transgression and the rhizome, just two of the myriad deployable from the philosophers of difference, allow us to recognize, in students with learning disabilities, resistance and desire and to see them as *becoming*, with all the potential that this entails to grow, change and even succeed. The theoretical practices of deconstruction and rhizomic analysis, again only a sample, enable the researcher to examine the politics and ideology associated with learning disability and to interpret and experiment with the world of learning disability and its inhabitants.

The theory offered by the philosophers of difference enables academics to undertake research which is akin to an ethics and which “might be able to face and face down the iniquities of the present” (Critchley 2007, p. 88). Such an ethics, which as Levinas (1969; 1999) points out, constitutes a reorientation to human subjectivity, has as its core an absolute responsibility to the Other. The relationship with the Other is also experienced, because of an inadequacy in the face of the Other, as not benign, but as a responsibility



that “persecutes me with its sheer weight” (Critchley 2007, p. 59). It is also a vital part of what it is to be human: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if not, we’re missing something” (Butler 2004, p. 43).

Academics choosing to reframe their research along these ethical lines will have to accept the inevitability of uncertainty and Biesta’s (2008) notion of “pedagogy with empty hands” (p. 198), although depicting an approach to educating, is an extremely useful way of thinking about a research ethics. It requires the academic to approach those in the research relationship - teachers, parents, students - without ready solutions or “tricks of the trade” (p. 208), derived from research or elsewhere, and to ask “what do you think of it?” (p. 208). It demands of the researcher a high level of transparency about both the research practices and the researcher’s position in these. It also requires resisting demands for success criteria and, following Samuel Beckett, perhaps offering, as an alternative, frameworks for failing effectively. Torrance (2008) advocates that we “acknowledge the imperfections of what we do” (p. 523), but these imperfections are potentially where new ideas and possibilities for change emerge.

The role of research, if both theory and the implied ethics are taken up, is “to complicate rather than explicate” (Taylor 1995, p. 6), allowing academics to “approach” (Biesta 2008), rather than understand, learning disability and indeed human subjectivity. It demands of the researcher a high degree of reflexivity, humility and a recognition of his or her inadequacy in the face of the student with learning disabilities. Lyotard (1988) describes this relationship as the differend: “the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” (p. 13). As

Burbules (1997) suggests, encounters with the Other are a kind of mystery and the researcher should face these with both intense curiosity and the utmost responsibility.

## References

- Allan, J. (1999). *Actively seeking inclusion: Pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools*. London: Falmer.
- Allan, J. (2003). Inclusion and exclusion in the university. In T. Booth, K. Nes & M. Stromstad (Eds.), *Developing inclusive teacher education* (pp. 130-145). London: Routledge.
- Allan, J. (2008). *Rethinking inclusive education: The philosophers of difference in practice*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Allan, J. & l'Anson, J. (2005). Children's rights in school: power, assemblies and assemblages. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 12, 123-138.
- Allan, J., l'Anson, J., Priestley, A. & Fisher, S. (2006). *Promising rights: Children's rights in school*. Edinburgh: Save the Children.
- Artiles, A. (2004). The end of innocence: Historiography and representation in the discursive practice of LD. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37, 550-555.
- Bains, P. (2002). Subjectless subjectivities. In B. Massumi (Ed.) *A shock to thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Baker, B. & Campbell, F. (2006). Transgressing noncrossable borders: Disability, law, schooling and nations. In S. Gabel & S. Danforth (Eds.), *Vital questions facing disability studies in education* (pp. 319-346). New York: Peter Lang.

- Ball, S. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*.  
Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press
- Beckett, S. (1992). *Nowhow on*. London: Calder.
- Bell, J. (1993). *Doing your own research project: A guide for first time researchers in education and social science*. Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Bennett, T. (1990). *Outside literature*. London: Routledge.
- Biesta, G. (2008). Pedagogy with empty hands: Levinas, education and the question of being human. In D. Egéa-Kuehne (Ed.), *Levinas and education: At the intersection of faith and reason* (pp. 198-210). London/New York: Routledge.
- Boyne, R. (1990). *Foucault and Derrida: The other side of reason*. London: Routledge.
- Burbules, N. (1997). The grammar of difference: Some ways of rethinking difference and diversity as educational topics. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 24, 97-116.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious lives*. London: Verso.
- Caputo, J. (1997). *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida*.  
New York: Fordham University Press.
- Carrier, J. G. (1987). Masking the social in educational knowledge: The case of learning disability theory. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 18, 968-974.
- Critchley, S. (1999). *The ethics of deconstruction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Critchley, S. (2007). *Infinitely demanding: Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance*.  
London/New York: Verso.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *What is philosophy?* (H. Tomlison & G. Burchell, Trans.). London: Athlone Press.

- Deleuze, G. (1998). *Essays critical and clinical*. (D. Smith & M. Greco, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, G. & Parnet, C. (1987). *Dialogues*. (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of philosophy*. (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (1988). *Limited Inc.* (S. Weber, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1992). Force of law: The mystical foundation of authority. In D. Cornell, M. Rosenfield & D. Carlson (Eds.), *Deconstruction and the possibility of justice*. (M. Quaintance, Trans.). (pp. 3-67). New York/London: Routledge.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2004). The social construction of learning disabilities. *Journal of learning disabilities*, 37, 482-489.
- Dudley-Marling, C. & Paugh, P. Confronting the discourse of deficiencies. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30. Retrieved from <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/1241/1285>
- Eagleton, T. (1993). *Literary theory: An introduction*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

- Ferri, B. & Connor, D. (2009). "I was the special ed girl:" (En)gendering disability from the standpoint of urban working class young women of color. *Journal of Gender and Education*, 22, 105-121.
- Foucault, M. (1994). "A Preface to Transgression". In Michael Foucault. *Aesthetics: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2* (pp. 69-88). London: Penguin.
- Gallagher, D. (2010). Hiding in plain sight: The nature and role of theory in learning disability labelling. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30. Retrieved from <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/1231/1278>
- Goodley, D. & Moore, M. (2002). *Arts against disability: The performing arts of people with learning disabilities*. Plymouth, MA: BILD.
- Granger, D. (2010). A tribute to my dyslexic body, as I travel in the form of a ghost. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 30. <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/1236/1281>
- Gregoriou, Z. (2004). Commencing the rhizome: Towards a minor philosophy of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36, 233-251.
- Hickey-Moody, A. (2008). Deleuze, Guattari, and the boundaries of intellectual disability. In S. Gabel & S. Danforth (Eds.), *Disability & the politics of education* (pp. 353-370). New York: Peter Lang.
- Kavale, K. & Forness, S. R. (1998). The politics of learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 21, 245-273.
- Lather, P. (2006). (Post)feminist methodology: Getting lost OR a scientificity we can bear to learn from. Paper presented at the research methods festival, Oxford, July. Retrieved October 22, 2006, from <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/festival/programme/cfe/documents/lather.pdf>

- Levinas, I. (1969). *Totality and infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, I. (1999). *Alterity and transcendence*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Lyotard, J. (1988). *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (G. Van Den Abbeele, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lyotard, J. (1993). *The postmodern explained*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.
- McDermott, R. P. (1993). The acquisition of a child by a learning disability. In C. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 269-305). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McDermott, R. & Varenne, H. (1995). Culture as disability. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26, 323-348.
- Maclure, M. (2005a). Deconstruction as a method of research. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.) *Research methods in the social sciences*. London: Sage.
- Maclure, M. (2005b). Entertaining doubts: On frivolity as resistance. Keynote presentation to the Discourse, Power, Resistance Conference. Plymouth, March.
- Mercieca, D. (2008). Living otherwise: Students with profound and multiple learning disabilities as agents in educational contexts. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Stirling.
- Mercieca, D. & Mercieca, D. (2010). Opening research to intensities: Rethinking disability research with Deleuze and Guattari. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 44, 79-92.
- Mozère, L (2006) What's the trouble with identity? Practices and theories from France. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 7, 109-118.

- Olsson, L. (2009). Movement and experimentation in young children's learning: Deleuze and Guattari in early childhood education. London/New York: Routledge.
- Patton, P. (2000). *Deleuze and the political*. London: Routledge.
- Patton, P. (2003). Future politics. In P. Patton & J. Protevi (Eds.) *Between Deleuze and Derrida*. London: Continuum.
- Phillips, E. & Pugh, D (1987). *How to get a PhD*. Milton Keynes/Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Rajchman, J. (2001). *The Deleuze connections*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rancière, J. (2008). Jacques Rancière and indisciplinary. An interview. *Art and Research*, 2, 1-10.
- Reid, D. K. & Valle, J. (2004). The discursive practice of learning disability: Implications for instruction and parent-school relations. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37, 466-481.
- Roy, K. (2003). *Teachers in nomadic spaces: Deleuze and curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Shostak, J (2002). *Understanding, designing and conducting qualitative research in education*. Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Sleeter, C. (1987). Why is there learning disabilities? A critical analysis of the birth of the field in its social context. In T. Popkewitz (Ed.), *The formation of school subjects: The struggle for creating an American institution*. (pp. 210-237). London: Falmer Press.
- Taylor, M. (1995) Rhizomatic folds of interstanding. *Tekhnema 2: Technics and Finitude*. Spring. Retrieved June 27, 2003, from <http://tekhnema.free.fr/2Taylorhtm>.

Tomlinson, S. (1988). Why Johnny can't read: Critical theory and special education.

*European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 3, 45-58.

Torrance, H. (2008). Building confidence in qualitative research: Engaging the demands

of policy. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14, 507-527.

Tremain, S. (2005). (Ed.), *Foucault and the government of disability*. Ann Arbor:

University of Michigan Press.