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Disability Studies in Education: The Need for a Plurality of Perspectives on Disability

Susan Baglieri¹, Jan W. Valle², David J. Connor³,
and Deborah J. Gallagher⁴

Abstract

This article asserts that the field of special education, historically founded on conceptions of disability originating within scientific, psychological, and medical frameworks, will benefit from acknowledging broader understandings of disability. Although well intended, traditional understandings of disability in special education have inadvertently inhibited the development of theory, limited research methods, narrowed pedagogical practice, and determined largely segregated policies for educating students with disabilities. Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, along with the growth of the Disability Rights Movements, meanings of *disability* have expanded and evolved, no longer constrained to the deficit-based medical model. For many individuals, disability is primarily best understood within social, cultural, and historical contexts. As career-long educators, the authors describe the emergence of Disability Studies in Education, illustrating ways it offers them the means to engage with longstanding tensions, limitations, and promises within their chosen field of special education—helping to reframe, accurately ground, and define their own research and practice. The authors call upon the field of special education to acknowledge and accept a greater plurality of perspectives about the nature of disability, recognizing the profound implications this raises for research, and viewing it as a welcome opportunity for ongoing dialogue.

Keywords:

disability studies, special education, inclusion, research

Introduction: Toward Cultivating Open Dialogue

In the September 2000 issue of *Remedial and Special Education (RASE)*, a now oft-cited article appeared in which a disparate group of 15 influential scholars in education weighed in on an apparent and growing schism within the field of special education (Andrews et al., 2000).¹ The authors clearly identified a divide between those who conceptualized special education as merely requiring the “incremental improvement of a basically sound system” and those who saw special education as needing the “substantial reconceptualization of a fundamentally broken system” (p. 258). Now a decade since the publication of this article, it appears timely to consider our current state of affairs in special education by revisiting the five areas of disagreement originally posed by these authors. In that our article extends the conversation begun in 2000, we begin with a brief summary of the points of debate presented by Andrews et al. (2000).

1. Conceptualizations of Disability

- *Incrementalists*, working out of the medical model of disability, assume that a deficit exists within the individual—something to “fix, cure, accommodate, or endure” (p. 259).
- *Reconceptualists* frame disability as a social construction and, while not denying physiological aspects of impaired function, address disabilities as they gain meaning in social and cultural contexts.

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2. Purpose of Special Education

- *Incrementalists* understand the purpose of special education as changing the individual through performance-enhancing interventions.
- *Reconceptualists* see the value of enhancing individual performance but focus more on changing environmental limitations placed on students with disabilities.

3. Beliefs About the Expected Outcomes of Special Education

- *Incrementalists* believe special education prepares students to adapt for the postschool world.
- *Reconceptualists* seek the creation of a caring society that accepts human differences without labeling, hence stigmatizing, them.

4. The Current State of Knowledge About Special Education Practice

- *Incrementalists* believe the course taken by the field is set and practices are promising.
- *Reconceptualists* claim the knowledge base is limited and inadequate.

5. Necessary Steps for Improving Special Education

- *Incrementalists* continue to support traditional research, understood to mean scientifically proven practices to be used by teachers, whose work is construed as the technical application of interventions and strategies specific to types of educational deficiencies.
- *Reconceptualists* seek substantial change, calling for more self-reflective, ethical decision-making responsibilities for teachers.

The authors, representing both sides of the divide, believed the opposing position to pose a genuine threat to the well-being of the field. They asked, "Can the distinct views be reconciled?" and concluded, "We think so" (p. 260).

Since Andrews et al. (2000) first appeared in *RASE*, proponents of incremental progress and those seeking a reconceptualization of special education have continued to debate, explore, and research the "either/or" nature of these issues. At the same time, a group of critical special educators became increasingly engaged with the interdisciplinary field(s) of Disability Studies (DS), from which the robust subdiscipline of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) emerged, complete with tenets that articulate points of connection and difference between itself and special education (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008).

In what follows, we offer an overview of DSE, a field that has attracted scholars, both in the United States and from around the globe, who are interested in engaging with, rather than avoiding, difficult questions about the nature of disability and the educational practices surrounding the phenomenon of disability. In the process of providing this overview, we argue that despite what appears to be an apparent standoff in some quarters, the vast majority of special educators have more in common with critical special educators than is usually thought. All of us have an interest in averting an unnecessary discordance by encouraging a plurality of perspectives not only about the nature of disability but also the research and educational practices surrounding the phenomenon of disability (Danforth, 2006; Paul, 2002).

A Brief History of DSE

The academic discipline of DSE evolved, in part, from scholars in special education whose foundational works posed such questions as:

- What is the nature of disability? (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Shakespeare, 1994; Sleeter, 1986)
- What are appropriate teaching practices for students with disabilities? (see Heshusius, 1984; Iano, 1990; Poplin, 1988)
- What counts as research and inquiry in the field of special education? (see Danforth, 1999; Gallagher, 1998; Heshusius, 1989; Iano, 1986; Poplin, 1987; Skrtic, 1991).

Perhaps the most contentious issue of all is found in ongoing debates surrounding inclusive education—in other words, those arguments concerning where and under what conditions students with disabilities should be instructed (see Allan, 1999; Barton, 1997; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Sapon-Shevin, 1996). In the years following Andrews et al.'s (2000) optimism about the possibility for reconciliation, it seems that anything approaching consensus has, so far, eluded our grasp. More recently, in fact, it appears that achieving if not a consensus then perhaps a rapprochement or détente seems less, rather than more, likely (see, for example, Brantlinger, 1997; Gallagher, 2006; Heward, 2003; Kauffman & Sasso, 2006a, 2006b, Kavale & Mostert, 2003; Sasso, 2001).

Like other forms of oppression, the history of disability discrimination chronicles a relentless infliction of segregation, dehumanization, and exploitation. However, unlike race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, disability as a civil rights issue has received considerably less public attention. L. J. Davis (1997a) pointedly observed, "As fifteen percent of the population, people with disabilities make up the

largest physical minority within the United States. One would never know this to be the case by looking at the literature on minorities and discrimination” (p. 1). According to Fleischer and Zames (2001), the lack of attention is attributable to two factors. First, disability is often misrepresented as a “health, economic, technical, or safety issue” such that “prejudice based on disability frequently remains unrecognized” (p. xv). Second:

this oversight stems from a collective fear of disability since everyone is subject to illness, accident, the declining powers of advanced age—all forms of human vulnerability. “Handicapism,” also referred to “ableism,” is the only ‘ism’ to which *all* human beings are susceptible. (p. xv, emphasis in original)

As most special educators are aware, a major groundswell demanding equality for people with disabilities emerged through the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1960s. In the United Kingdom, the Disabled People’s Movement was initiated by a proclamation by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation in 1972. Out of this movement emerged the social model of disability that reframes, indeed redefines, disability as a set of restrictions, an identity, and a set of power relationships imposed on people with impairments (see Oliver, 1990). The social model of disability, like its American counterpart, the minority group model, provides modes of inquiry and understanding that counter ways in which the medical model has shaped the narratives surrounding disabled persons’ experiences (discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section of this article). The rights movements in the United Kingdom and the United States, and the field of DS inspired by these movements, were instrumental in asserting disability both as a social phenomenon as well as a civil/human rights issue.

Over the past three decades, DS has grown to become an established academic field both international and interdisciplinary in scope. We emphasize the origin of DS in the activism of people with disabilities to highlight its conception as a field strongly rooted in its commitment to social and political transformation. It has evolved, as Barnes, Oliver, and Barton (2002) expressed, “from a position of engagement and activism rather than one of detachment” (p. 2). Today, DS scholars can be found in the arts and humanities as well as in law, medicine, and the social and natural sciences.

Many special educators are surprised to learn that the primary journal addressing interdisciplinary scholarship on disability, *Disability Studies Quarterly (DSQ)*, was founded in the United States in 1982 as the *Disability and Chronic Disease Newsletter*. Shortly after, *Disability & Society* was launched in the United Kingdom in 1985. Both are regarded as flagship journals of the field. In 1986, the establishment of the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) marked an

important milestone in the development of the discipline. SDS became affiliated with and named *DSQ* and has since published the journal and hosted annual conferences dedicated to interdisciplinary scholarship on disability.²

During the 1990s, special educators seeking to examine the ethical, social, and political problems resulting from the domination of the medical model of disability and its positivist underpinnings were increasingly drawn to the field of DS. Those in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States increasingly focused their disability research on the DS framework using non-positivist and critical theory methodology. Academics from Europe, Australia, and New Zealand coalesced within an organization named the International Council for Inclusive Education. In June 1999, Linda Ware, with the support of a Spencer Foundation grant, organized an international conference in Rochester, New York, that brought many of these scholars together for the first time in the United States. The conference encouraged continued international engagement with DS (Ware, 2004).

In December 1999, Scot Danforth submitted a proposal to the national conference of The Association for Persons With Severe Handicaps (TASH). The session was titled *Ways of Constructing Lives and Disabilities: The Case for Open Inquiry*. The session’s panelists asked questions, such as “Why should a person with a disability, a teacher, or a parent care what academics say in their research and scholarship?” “Why should you care about the seemingly distant and esoteric writings in research journals and university textbooks?” “What is happening in the world of academia that makes a difference?” The panelists centered their presentations on the social and political value of current trends and developments in disability research and scholarship. In the process, they explored the importance of “open inquiry” in addressing the social valuation and inclusion of education of people with disabilities. In short, they made the case that “open inquiry,” meaning an expansion and diversification of what is considered legitimate and valuable research and scholarship, should be welcomed in special education journals, conferences, and other venues.

Also during the 1999 TASH conference, a group of about 30 disability researchers from around the world gathered together with the purpose of forging new alternatives to traditional special education research. They explored innovative ways of envisioning, writing about, and talking about the lives and possibilities of people with disabilities, including many traditions of scholarship (in social science, humanities, arts, spiritual traditions, etc.) and the numerous voices that have something of importance to say about disability issues. The group came to a consensus that the kind of work they were discussing is best described as “disability studies in education.” Near the conclusion of this discussion, Susan Gabel announced that she had taken the initiative to submit an application to form a new special interest group called DSE at the American Educational Research Association. This

marked the founding, at least in a formal sense, of the now thriving field of DSE (Gabel, 2005; Gabel & Danforth, 2006).

Interest and involvement in questions concerning how various conceptualizations of disability could affect research, policy, and practice has continued to grow. In June 2001, a small national conference hosted by National-Louis University titled *Disability Studies in Education: Critical Reflections on the Themes of Policy, Practice, and Theory* was held in Chicago, Illinois. The conference proved such an enormous success that it has become an annual event attracting ever-growing numbers of researchers, academics, teachers, and others actively seeking a more pluralistic approach toward theory and practice in educational and rehabilitation services for people with disabilities.

In defining or characterizing the relatively new field of DSE, careful consideration has been paid to ensuring that it retains its commitment to “open inquiry” and honors the spirit of pluralism on which it was founded. As Taylor (2006) pointed out:

Neither Disability Studies nor Disability Studies in Education represents a unitary perspective. Scholarship in these areas includes social constructionist or interpretivist, materialist, postmodernist, poststructuralist, legal, and even structural-functionalist perspectives and draws on disciplines as diverse as sociology, literature, critical theory, economics, law, history, art, philosophy, and others. (p. xiii)

Taylor went on to add that this diversity does not preclude the existence of “key themes or core ideas” that characterize DSE, chief among them “the idea that disability is a social phenomenon” (p. xiii). It is to this core idea that we now turn.

What Is the Meaning of Disability?

Today’s special education programs in American public schools emerged in a time when children and young people with disabilities were routinely denied the access to education that their “nondisabled” peers could take for granted. The signing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (reauthorized in 1997 as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] and amended by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA] in 2004) marked a decisive shift, making the denial of educational access illegal and thereby putting the full force of federal legislation behind their right to a free and appropriate public education. Special educators of all stripes have remained steadfast in their commitment to make good on the promise of this legislation. This is an accomplishment about which we can all be proud, and it serves as common basis for continued efforts to improve the educational lives of all children. Even so, the debates surrounding the provisions of this legislation endure.

Several years before the mandate requiring special education programs in the public schools, provocative discussions had begun taking place among scholars about the meaning of disability. IDEA (1975) did not reflect, and perhaps could not have reflected, an adequate account of these important discussions if it was to accomplish its more immediate goal of advancing educational equality. The fact that unconventional ideas about the meaning of disability were in their relatively early stages offers an explanation for why the more familiar medical model understanding of disability was embedded into, and thus systematically informed, the new legislation. It was simply too early and the ideas too new, too unfamiliar (and possibly too exotic) for any thoroughgoing consensus about the meaning of disability to emerge at that point.

It was then that scholars in sociology, psychology, education, and special education began making the case for a minority group model of disability. In the process, they asserted that the medical model’s objectivist depiction of disability was neither as straightforward nor as sufficient as it appeared (Taylor, 2006). In retrospect, the crux of their collective analyses is actually rather obvious—disability is an idea, not a thing. It is not that people do not vary or differ from one another in sometimes very noticeable ways, but to call or think of some of those differences as “disabilities” is to make a social judgment, not a neutral or value-free observation. Put differently, it is not the way in which people vary or the differences they have in comparison to others but what we make of those differences that matters. Ultimately, this has an impact on the material consequences of people with disabilities.

As DSE scholars and former teachers of students receiving special education services, we do acknowledge that individual differences may have neurological, biological, cognitive, or psychological referents. Our collective experiences of teaching span the decades since the first passage of IDEA to the millennium, during which time we have experienced and here recognize the significant contributions of science, technology, medicine, psychology, law, and institutional practices to the field of special education. However, our intention is to question conventional and naturalized ways of thinking about difference to bring greater balance to the intellectual grounding for understanding and responding to school failure. We are interested in generating knowledge about how macrolevel processes—such as societal attitudes about diversity—intersect with disability issues as well as how better to understand the ways that race, class, gender, language, culture, and sexual orientation shape the experience of disability.

Furthermore, we make a distinction between impairment and disability. *Impairment*, as described by DS scholar Simi Linton (1998), refers to “variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing” (p. 2). *Disability*, on the other hand, is the product of social, political, economic, and cultural practice. Consider, for example, the ongoing problem of defining mild disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities [LDs], mild intellectual/

developmental disabilities (or mental retardation [MR]), and emotional disturbance (ED). If the definitions of these disabilities can change, as they certainly have over the years, then clearly they are the product of judgment. If the criteria for identifying any of these disabilities involve drawing a line somewhere between what is and what is not considered to be LD, MR, or ED, these judgments are necessarily, and at best, arbitrary. All of this is not to denigrate the role of judgment.³ It is simply to say that the fact that they *are* judgments should not be forgotten or disregarded. Such ambiguity creates confusion for educators and parents alike. For example, eligibility criteria for high-incidence disabilities (e.g., LD, ED) may vary from state to state or even district to district. In other words, a student may become “disabled” or “cured” by crossing a state or district line. If these disabilities were anything other than interpretations about certain context-dependent differences, crossing state or school district lines would not, and could not, change a student’s disability status.

Educators’ sincere, though frustrated, attempts to distinguish a child’s cultural and linguistic diversity from a disability is a further source of confusion that reveals the judgmental nature of disability. The reason attempting to make such a distinction is frustrating is because both cultural/linguistic diversity *and* disability are differences that are context-dependent (Connor, 2008; Ferri & Connor, 2006). It is quite easy to recognize that cultural/linguistic diversity is context-dependent. Anyone who has traveled to a different country, even one where his or her first language is widely spoken albeit with a different accent, knows firsthand that the context determines his or her status as a member of the majority or a member of the minority.

It requires a bit more of a conceptual leap to understand disability as context-dependent, but most of us have had life experiences that are instructive in this regard. Anyone who has ever taken a class in which the instructor graded on a curve knows that a significant portion of the students in that class will experience low achievement no matter how much they actually learn. The same holds true, although less overtly, in classes whose instructor is bent on demonstrating his or her “rigorous standards” by designing tests guaranteed to result in low grades for many if not most of the students. Finally, bear in mind that very capable people can be made to appear quite incompetent in an academic situation in which most or all of the other students have more background knowledge, life experience, personal dispositions, and interest in the subject at hand. This is the reason the dazzlingly accomplished art major rarely enrolls in an advanced accounting class or vice versa. Any one of the above situations, that is to say, contexts, transforms competence into incompetence, ability into disability.

It is important to note that understanding disability as a social phenomenon also pertains to what are known as moderate and severe disabilities as well as physical, visual, or hearing disabilities. Historical examples of communities like the Martha’s Vineyard towns of West Tisbury and

Chilmark offer glimpses into contexts in which hearing and deaf persons’ use of sign language to interact emerged as a cultural response to a citizenry with high rates of hereditary deafness, thus exemplifying the viability of an argument to distinguish impairment from disability (Groce, 1985). In spite of the example, however, the initial contention is, understandably, a bit more difficult to come to terms with because people described as having moderate or severe disabilities seem *so different* from those considered *nondisabled* that thinking of their differences as socially constructed (the context-dependent creation of our interpretations) may well strike one as, well, nonsense. We (the authors) can certainly relate to this response because initially we also found this perspective more than a little bewildering.

Yet the lines drawn to produce the “existence” of mild disabilities are no less arbitrary than those drawn to establish moderate or severe disabilities. Where, after all, is the cutoff between nondisabled and mildly disabled, between mildly disabled and moderately or severely disabled? Are not all of these lines, in the end, judgment calls? And are not these lines premised on our beliefs about what constitutes *normal*, a concept that is itself context-dependent (see Brantlinger, 2004; L. J. Davis, 1997b; McDermott & Varenne, 1995)? What is normal in one time and place is not in another. As L. J. Davis (1997b) has noted,

“a common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed. After all, people seem to have an inherent desire to compare themselves to others. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society” (p. 9).

Might we instead consider all of human differences or diversity normal? Yes, until we decide to do otherwise for various reasons or purposes, most, if not all, of which are not so helpful upon careful consideration.

The idea that disabilities having an obvious physiological referent (e.g., anatomical structure, vision, hearing) are socially constructed also strikes many as nonsensical. It seems ridiculous because it appears to deny that some people cannot walk, see, or hear. To be clear, the fact that some people cannot walk, hear, or see is *not* what is being questioned. What *is* being questioned is the *significance* or *meaning* that we, as educators, place on those biological differences. This is not a trivial point, nor is it making too much of what seems to be a minor issue because the interpretations made about some people’s differences holds direct and profound implications for how they are educated in our public schools.

DSE: Implications for Pedagogy and Practice

A view of pedagogy from a DSE perspective of disability is aligned with, although not always synonymous with, work

in inclusive education. If we perceive disability as manifest in interactions among social contexts and bodies and minds—all of them unique—our work in practice is primarily to shape learning environments in ways in which all classroom and school members have access to curriculum and learning opportunities (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004).

Imagining education as a practice of access can be conceived through three general considerations:

1. Perceiving ability and disability, and ideas about mastery and learning as fluid.
2. Considering how the interactions and settings contribute to the creation of disability (i.e., make markers of difference/impairment meaningful as dis-ablement).
3. Querying how pull-out, tracking, or containment practices both mark individuals as disabled and/or limit their access to curriculum and learning.

Let us consider, as an example, two of the hottest topics of inclusive practice in today's research literature—co-teaching and modifying/accommodating instruction for students with impairments, or those labeled with disability. Many, if not most, of us in DSE struggle with the unintended consequences of these approaches even though we share the inclusive ethos that animates them. Our concern centers on the way that the concepts of accommodation and modification contribute to the separation or partitioning of types of students as “special needs” as opposed to “typical” or “general education.” One way that the concepts of accommodation and modification contribute to isolation of certain types of students is that they presume the “rightness” of a *normal* (one-size-fits-all) curriculum and set of teaching practices (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995). If these are unsuccessful for some students, it is the struggling child who is deemed problematic, rather than our curricular choices and pedagogical practices. The students who do not experience success become *the problem* to be accommodated and the ones for whom modifications are needed, which stigmatizes the individual. Furthermore, left unexamined are the decisions and practices that led to their struggle. Subsequently, we labor away at trying to fix or remediate the students rather than altering the teaching and learning conditions in the classroom.

In addition, the essentially static baseline from which we begin to imagine instruction too often creates a situation in which working with diverse students appears to be *extra work* for the general educator in the inclusive setting. Conventional wisdom suggests that this kind of work is best left up to those specifically “trained” to teach these students (i.e., the special educator). Problematic is the division of labor that can emerge in the co-teaching relationship—most often recommended for inclusion—that positions the consideration of

particular students as marginal to the “regular” work of teaching. In turn, a synthetic, detrimental division is created between special and general educators just as it is between special and general education students. Thus, the supposed solution to the problem leads to newer and more intractable problems, which are well captured in research on co-teaching arrangements. An old adage appears to apply well here—if you are in a hole, stop digging.

One approach to getting out of the hole is the use of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) as a way to approach *all* teaching situations, useful to *all* teachers (Hitchcock, 2002; Pisha, 2001; Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003). The principal concept of UDL—universal design—was drawn from architecture and engineering and refers to the design of physical spaces that anticipates the diversity among users of spaces and seeks to design them such that they are both functional and elegant for the broadest possible constituency. UDL seeks the same elegance and functionality, as it offers a conceptualization of planning, teaching, and learning, which presumes that *all* students possess unique sets of strengths and needs. It precludes the unproductive and rather frustrating need for teachers to make modifications, a process better understood as retro-fitting instruction after the fact.

UDL invites us to

- (a) think broadly about the learning opportunities (cognitive, social, and emotional) that can be featured in our curricula and teaching practices,
- (b) think fluidly about the ways that learners may choose to or need to interact with the curriculum and classroom/school space to the maximum benefit, and
- (c) recognize and put a stop to educational practices and arrangements that position general and special educators as occupying different roles and responsibilities in the inclusive classroom/school.

Instead of tediously piecing together accommodations or modifications based on what we believe a learner can or cannot do (should or should not do), we design in ways that offer a spectrum of possibility. We structure our teaching always and already designed for the many ways that learners can engage learning, thus allowing opportunity to emerge in each new moment, in each new day.

We acknowledge that the popular idea of Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson, 1999) is similar to UDL. Differentiated Instruction offers a concept of lesson planning that strives to incorporate diversity into whole-group design by including modifications that can be made to the learning tasks offered to students. Three operations of teaching that may be modified are (a) content, the topics, and skills; (b) process, the mode of engagement; and/or (c) product, the evidence of

learning. Although promising in its ideals, Differentiated Instruction—when narrowed into learning operations—too often materializes as a hierarchical tiering or tracking process. That is, differentiation assumes a baseline and then modifies “up” or “down” for particular individuals. Consequently, it recreates the same divisions it seeks to eradicate. In other words, precision in leveling emerges as deterministic tracking and ability grouping in the field of practice, rather than inviting fluidity in approach.

Practice born in UDL, in contrast, begins with a holistic conception of the potential for many possible learning experiences, in which the emphasis shifts from a focus on the benefits to an individual to the benefit of the whole community, from determined outcomes to those interpreted through open inquiry in assessment. When many possibilities are presented, learners are poised to interact with the multitude of variations in context that inform whether a task is achievable one day but not another. Teachers are positioned to assess and plan based on learner strengths that show themselves in context, occasionally in surprising ways.

Another approach for educational practice suggested by DSE relates to centering the stories and desires of disabled persons to understand disability experiences and in considering instructional practices for students labeled as having disabilities. Despite IDEIA’s policy that gives the appearance of including families and learners in educational planning, special education remains steeped in an expert discourse that privileges the opinions and perspectives of professionals over learners and families. This expert discourse also tends to relegate educational planning to what is available in the school rather than what may be most beneficial to the student (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2006; Solis & Connor, 2006; Valle & Aponte, 2002). For example, it is the school’s prerogative to *choose* an oral approach over one that centers on American Sign Language for students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing despite the student’s possible identity as a member of Deaf Culture (Baglieri, 2006). These kinds of choices can have the untoward effect of precluding the student’s potential for seeing himself or herself with a Deaf (capital D) cultural identity or, at least making such an identity unwelcome in the school. In honoring the preferences of learners and families, we cease imposing barriers such that they are positioned as the central narrators in their stories of school and education (Valle & Reid, 2001).

Centering self-narrated stories of disabled persons in our curriculum for children and in programs of teacher education is another way to shift the expert-driven discourse to one that opens to their life experiences in all of their complexity. Such works as Jonathan Mooney’s (2007) book *The Short Bus* and Kenny Fries’s (1997) collection *Staring Back* capture the complexity of disabled experiences and resist the imposed meanings that have been made about them by others. Categorical views of disability and their labels do not address the intricacies of the body and mind, identity,

and other ways that they are positioned in schools and society (Connor, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2005). Providing a wide variety of self-narrated accounts can support teachers and children by revealing and discrediting the deceiving “neatness” of disability “diagnoses.” The narrative accounts make clear the failure of these diagnostic categories to contribute anything meaningful to our interpretations of people’s differences. Through these narratives, we mitigate beliefs about disability and disabled lives that lead to divisions between special and general education and perceptions (judgments) about groups of children as not-able.

UDL, centering on learners and families, and including curriculum rooted in disabled persons’ self-narrated experiences are not concepts, ideas, or theories of practice that are unfamiliar to our fields of study. We all continue to struggle with realizing the best our fields can offer in practice, and teachers continue to contend with under-resourced schools, state-imposed curricula, and funding formulas that complicate, indeed hamper, our efforts to support school-wide universal design. Social models of disability, however, provide theories of practice that disrupt much that we have taken for granted in education. Through them, we have the opportunity to alter the systems in which we seem embedded and find possibilities for something more workable and satisfying for everyone. We raise *human* questions of voice, of agency, and of the beliefs and commitments of education for all children.

Research

The issue of voice—that is, who is allowed or not allowed to tell their stories—figures prominently into how DSE approaches questions about research and inquiry. Heshusius (2004) cut right to the heart of the matter, stating that “[s]cholarship in special education has always been about the other—about the differing other, about the other that needs to be measured, ranked, segregated or integrated, remediated, or adjusted to” (p. 216). Of primary importance to DSE scholars is taking great care that we do not use research as a means of excluding the voices of people with disabilities. Said differently, we aim to use research as a vehicle *for* their voices so that they can tell their own stories and share their own goals, aspirations, and needs (Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008; J. M. Davis & Watson, 2000, 2001; Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2006; Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001). In effect, DSE researchers view research as an emancipatory tool that affords those who do not hold power in our society to achieve more equality, more inclusion, and ultimately more of the dignity they deserve (Mercer, 2002).

One might ask, Isn’t that being ideological? The answer is an unqualified “yes.” In that all research is, at its core, ideological (i.e., values-laden), DSE scholars have sought to bring this condition to the forefront. Rather than pursue

the unattainable goal of research objectivity and neutrality (a goal they find fundamentally misleading), they turn instead to the concern about how all researchers construct knowledge about disability and the consequences this knowledge has on the lives of those we call disabled.

We would hasten to add here, however, that this does not mean that DSE scholars take this as a license to be undisciplined, dishonest, or self-indulgent. In short, it does not mean that “anything goes.” Like all researchers, they are obligated to exercise skepticism toward their own interpretations in the conduct of inquiry. They are emphatically required to listen to others who raise questions and doubts about their research knowledge. And they are obliged to concede to others whose research not only provides a fuller, more consistent, and lucid account of a given phenomenon but also to those whose research knowledge results in more worthy outcomes for the people they serve. Inevitable judgments about what outcomes are more worthy must be resolved dialogically. Again, discussion over rival claims unavoidably involves putting our values on the table for serious scrutiny. In short, DSE scholars’ recognition that no research methodology provides foundational objectivity enjoins them to engage inquiry not only as a technical undertaking but also as an ethical one—a central organizing idea that honors our civil rights roots.

Some have found DSE’s position on research methodology difficult to abide (see Kauffman & Sasso, 2006a, 2006b; Sasso, 2001). At the core of their disagreement is the belief that research neutrality and objectivity are possible, and they wonder why others would contest the authoritative knowledge claims of “scientific” or “evidence-based” educational research in special education. The straightforward answer to this question is that there is no defensible basis for the claim of scientific objectivity. The methods of scientific educational research are neither objective nor neutral.

Although this answer appears to fly in the face of generally accepted beliefs and assumptions, they are just that—beliefs and assumptions. And these beliefs and assumptions have been challenged (and soundly undermined) by eminent philosophers of science as well as scholars in the social sciences, including education and special education. Unfortunately, most of us have not been exposed to this very important work. For our purpose here, we provide a brief overview with the hope that those interested will pursue more information on this topic.

One might ask, How can anyone contend that “scientific” research in education is not neutral and objective? The most straightforward answer is, Because it is not possible for researchers to achieve theory-free observation. All researchers (like all people) view the world from someplace in it, meaning that all our observations are influenced by our intentions, experiences (what Gadamer, 1975, calls our “effective histories”), culture, and values. As philosopher of science Hillary

Putnam (1981) puts it, there is no “God’s eye point of view.” Similarly, Thomas Nagel (1986) pointed out what is obvious once we think about it—we cannot view the world from no particular place in it. There is no such thing as “a view from nowhere.” If all of our observations as researchers are values-laden, that means we are not (and cannot) be neutral and objective. This is the case in both the physical and social sciences, but it is especially problematic in the social sciences because we are dealing with human beings and are interested in the how they make sense of their social and educational worlds and how this accordingly influences their behavior. We always start our research endeavors from a particular position or set of assumptions. In turn, our position or assumptions influence what research questions we ask, the specific methods we choose, the operationalization of variables, selection of control and experimental groups, outcome measures, and so on. All of these decisions are choices and are loaded with researchers’ values, whether we recognize it or not.

One might then ask, Well, if we cannot be totally objective, do not the procedures of science at least make us more objective than we otherwise would be? No. This is so for a number of reasons. First, even the statistical formulas we use do not enforce objectivity. Though the details of this point are too complex to cover here, it is important to realize that both the normal curve and the related statistics used in “scientific” research were developed by people (including Sir Francis Galton, Karl Pearson, and R. A. Fischer) whose goals were quite ideological. Simply put, their goal was to lend scientific justification to existing social hierarchies. More to the point, they wanted to further the goals of the eugenics movement they founded. This involved the need to demonstrate conclusively that some people were naturally (i.e., genetically) inferior to others. Interestingly, that is exactly what the normal curve appears to accomplish. For an in-depth analysis of this history, please see Donald MacKenzie’s (1981) *Statistic in Britain 1865-1930*.

Second, the concept of partial objectivity is seriously problematic. To make good on the claim of “partial objectivity” would require one to then be able to sort out what part of the research findings is objective and which is not. How can that be accomplished? The answer is, It cannot, because we now find ourselves back to the impossibility of theory-free observation. Third, many people attempt to bolster the claim of scientific neutrality/objectivity by citing Karl Popper’s falsifiability thesis, which says that we can hold research knowledge to be factual or true until it can be falsified. As Lawrence Hazelrigg (1989) pointed out, though, this would require being able to verify that the new knowledge that falsified the old knowledge is true in an objective sense. Because we cannot do that, we are back to square one. In beginning to see the circularity of all these arguments defending the objectivity of scientific educational research, we are right on the mark. Hazelrigg aptly

refers to this situation as a “wilderness of mirrors” (see also, Gallagher, 2006).

This situation raises a further question, Can’t “scientific” research do a better job predicting the *probability* of some teaching practices working better than others? Again, the answer is, No. There are complex issues here, but briefly, probabilistic generalizations work in the physical sciences because of the control physical scientists can exercise over their variables. For this reason, they can pin down the variables with precision. This means they can achieve genuine predication and control because they can eventually figure out why something does not work 100% of the time. This just is not the case with educational research. The reasons some educational “intervention” does not work on this day with these students in this classroom with this teacher (and so on) are endless. So when an educational researcher claims that this or that intervention works 80% of the time, all she or he is really providing us is a list of instances in which the intervention worked in his or her experimental settings. That is a far cry from a scientific probabilistic generalization (see Gallagher, 1998, for a fuller explanation).

Finally, the question has been raised, If both quantitative and qualitative research cannot claim scientific objectivity, why not use both? Actually, a case for using both can be made, so long as both kinds of researchers acknowledge that both forms of research *construct* knowledge. That said, we would add here that there are also some very convincing reasons why quantitative research procedures can be problematic. First, there is the problem of reductionism. Because quantitative research must “operationalize” variables to make them observable and quantifiable, those variables are necessarily taken out of the unique contexts of real-life classrooms (Iano, 1986; Poplin, 1987). This leads to the infamous “research to practice gap” because once we de-contextualize, it is difficult or impossible to re-contextualize (i.e., to apply the research in real-life classrooms).

Even scientific special education researchers have acknowledged and attempted (unsuccessfully) to deal with this problem (see Gersten, Baker, & Lloyd, 2000); only they refer to it as the problem of internal versus external validity (for a fuller examination, see Gallagher, 2004). Second, quantitative procedures have the unfortunate effect of taking the moral nature of education and our attendant practices off the table for discussion (again, see Iano, 1986). These procedures attempt to determine if an educational intervention “works,” but they cannot address whether the intervention is a *good* thing to do to children. Nor do they allow us to examine the worthiness of what we are trying to achieve. In fact, one of the most longstanding arguments against inclusion is the one that insists that we should not implement it until it has been shown to be scientifically superior to segregated special education placements (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Is this a scientific question or a moral question?

Third, research using these procedures distorts the nature of teaching. It characterizes the act of teaching as a technical undertaking, turns teachers into quasi-technicians—exemplified in our earlier discussion of the concept of Differentiated Instruction made operational—and deprives educators of their professional autonomy (Iano, 1990). Finally, and of great importance to DSE scholars, “scientific” research procedures have the very regrettable consequence of objectifying people, especially people with disabilities. In effect, these procedures enjoin us to see them as “subjects” rather than complex and competent human beings (see Heshusius quote earlier). Subsequently, we wind up centering on pathologizing them, asking what’s wrong with them, how we can fix them, and so on, until eventually they become the deficient, “disabled” other.

Conclusion: What We Have in Common

Like Andrews et al. (2000), we find no use for the notion that competing methodological frameworks, ideas, or positions must inevitably give rise to schisms (or opposing factions) that make dialogue and action impossible. Nor do we believe that disagreement must invariably produce discordance. Much depends on *how* we approach disagreement. It can either be welcomed as an opportunity to deepen and broaden understanding, or it can be met with resistance and even outright rejection. The latter does not appear to have served us very well. A refusal to participate in genuine dialogue rarely does. More often than not, it leads to a lot of hard feelings and misunderstandings, but not much else.

Jim Paul (2002) made the case that “the strong resistance to philosophical changes is a marker for a discipline, or area of professional practice, being in the ‘parenthesis’ of change, or experiencing the cumulative effects of bracketing ideas that do not fit within the conventional discourse . . .” (p. 74). In plainer terms, resistance to dialogue means that change is closer than it may seem precisely because bracketing ideas that do not fit within conventional discourse has clearly not resolved fundamental questions about the nature of various educational disabilities—or many other problems confronting special education for that matter.

The evolution of DSE by special educators who felt confined by the self-imposed limitations of their own discipline and looked to DS in general has given rise to a diverse body of knowledge that is globally recognized (Gabel & Danforth, 2008). At its core, DSE holds that understandings of disability occur through human expectations and interactions in social contexts. As such, it offers much to the traditional field of special education, providing various lenses through which to view disability that, in turn, influence how we conduct research, the ways that we teach, and the place of students with disabilities in schools.

As a relatively new and growing field, DSE is interested in exploring questions that are of importance to all of us. We, the authors, believe that regardless of one's particular academic allegiances, the common ground we all share happens to be those values that are most important and most defining. We know of no disagreement in education about whether people with disabilities should be afforded full equality. We know of no disagreement that educational arrangements and teaching practices should reach for the greatest extent of participation and should strive to eliminate segregation and isolation. All of us share a commitment to ensuring the human dignity of all of our students, regardless of their differences or the sources of their diversity. We are also aware that everyone shares a common interest in resolving the most intractable problems or obstacles standing in the way of achieving these goals.

To accomplish this progress, it is necessary to engage new thoughts and alternative philosophical perspectives and to welcome ideas that do not sit easily with current beliefs and assumptions. For this reason, DSE encourages professional dialogue that embraces the values of pluralism. We are convinced that all of us committed to the issues of disability and education can carry on such a conversation, and we invite everyone interested to join us.

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Notes

1. Although guidelines of the American Psychological Association state that only the first six names of a long list of co-authors should appear (followed by et al.) in a reference citation, we list all 15 co-authors (see this page) to highlight the breadth of scholars who debated these issues in RASE.
2. SDS still remains the leading organization for DS in the United States. Of note, because of an increase in interest of DS in the United States, in 2004 the *International Review of Disability Studies* was launched from the University of Hawai'i.
3. Here the argument may be raised about the superiority of professional or clinical judgment over everyday or lay judgment. The distinction of professional or clinical judgment as superior has been seriously critiqued and undermined by Danzinger (1994) and Biklen (1988).

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