Literacy Education and Disability Studies: Reenvisioning Struggling Students

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Kathleen (first author) was in the first week of her second year of teaching high school literacy to freshman students tracked into her English 9B class when she assigned them the task of writing an essay. In this heavily tracked high school near Washington, DC, English 9B was composed almost entirely of students identified as at risk for academic failure. Officially, *B* was shorthand for *basic*, and the curriculum of the course was focused around basic literacy skills. Unofficially, she was told by her more experienced colleagues that the students in her class would never go to college and that she should therefore focus on teaching them workplace literacy.

Kathleen is a white, middle class woman whose native language is English. The students in her English 9B class were almost entirely students of color, and many spoke languages other than English at home. When she assigned them the task of writing an academic essay, she treated it as a pretest in that she did not give them any scaffolding or modeling. She simply wanted to see how her students would respond to this assignment so she could plan her writing instruction for the next few weeks. For homework, students were to bring in an article from a newspaper or news magazine. During the following class period, the class members discussed their articles in both large and small groups, orally summarizing content, analyzing genre, and identifying the different purposes and audiences for writing. That evening, they were to write an essay on their own, responding to the content of the article they had chosen.

Margarita (all student names are pseudonyms), a bilingual student and the captain of the freshman volleyball team, was originally from Puerto Rico and had moved to the area during elementary school. She was very fluent in spoken English and not at all reserved about participating in class conversations. For this assignment, she selected a *Reader's Digest* article on gun control. She turned in an essay that looked appropriate in terms of organization and content; however, when examined alongside the *Reader's Digest* piece, it was evident that she had copied most of the sentences in her essay from the original article. Her strategy was to copy the first sentence of every paragraph from the original piece and string them together with words and short phrases to create a piece of written work that looked like an essay (Collins & Collins, 1996).

Dwayne, a black native English speaker, was also very competent in classroom discussions. At 14 years old, he was the quarterback of the junior varsity football team; his classmates looked to him as a social leader within the classroom as well. The second day of class, he did not have an article to share with the rest of the class; he initially stated that he forgot it and then said he just did not have time to do the assignment after football practice. Kathleen supplied him with various newspapers, and he selected a sports column from *The Washington Post* to use in class. When it was time to start writing his essay, Dwayne took out a blank piece of paper and wrote, "S.A." (representing *essay*) at the top. When he turned his paper in the next day, the rest of the page remained blank.

How might teachers make sense of the behaviors of students like Margarita and Dwayne? Was Margarita copying from the *Reader's Digest* text to cheat or to get

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away with not writing an original essay? Should she have been disciplined as a plagiarist? Was a learning difference impeding her ability to produce written academic English? Should she have been referred to the English language support teacher or perhaps identified for special education testing? Was Dwayne simply refusing to do what was asked of him in class? Should he have been disciplined as defiant or noncompliant, or did he have some sort of cognitive or learning impairment that impacted his ability to produce written text? Should he have been referred to the Student Study Team for possible testing and placement within special education? Should either or both of these students have been given a failing grade on this assignment?

These questions, which Kathleen asked herself as she thought about how to move forward with Dwayne and Margarita, each positioned her students as struggling with academic writing in English as a result of a cognitive, linguistic, or moral deficit within themselves. Through this deficit lens, these students are seen as cheating, choosing to defy authority, or incapable of completing this writing task. These questions also assume that there is a "normal" approach to producing written academic genres, such as the ubiquitous five-paragraph essay. The source of struggle here is depicted as the students' deviation from this assumed norm, a deviation that resulted from a deficit within each of them.

In this commentary, we reflect on Kathleen's experiences with teaching Dwayne and Margarita from our current positions as teacher educators. Together, we draw on disability studies in education (DSE) as an alternative way to reframe, understand, and teach students like Margarita and Dwayne. As we will detail, a DSE perspective changes the relationship between teachers and students to a more reciprocal one, and in doing so, it relocates the source of and responsibility for literacy struggles. We begin with a discussion of DSE, followed by a reconsideration of how to support Dwayne and Margarita in developing their academic literacies. We conclude with a discussion of why, in an era marked by increasing educational standardization and homogenization, a move to teaching that is informed by a DSE perspective is increasingly a matter of great urgency.

DSE as an Alternative Lens

DSE is an emerging and interdisciplinary field of study that provides an alternative way to think about student struggles, including disability and disability-related supports. DSE draws on social (rather than medical) model perspectives. Drawing on a social model, disability is not seen as a problem located in particular bodies or brains of individual students but rather as a social artifact created and maintained by a lack of fit between a particular learner and his or her context (Danforth, 2015; Goodley, 2007). In other words, it is the social context (including inaccessible classroom and school practices) that turns differences into disabilities. DSE helps us disrupt deficit thinking, view students with disabilities as a cultural minority group marginalized by normative school structures (Goodley, 2007), and shift the object of remediation from "defective" students to inaccessible school structures and practices. DSE represents a sea change in thinking about disability, but how would it shift literacy practices in schools?

DSE represents a stark contrast to traditional special education perspectives often taught in teacher preparation programs. In these programs, students often take as few as a single course focused on students with disabilities or special education practices. Typically, these introductory courses, often organized around a disability-of-the-week approach, present disability as an immutable and fixed deficit within the person (Ashby, 2012). Introducing teachers to disability in this way hyperfocuses on the differences between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. Reliant on medical or deficit model frameworks, traditional teacher preparation reduces student variation and diversity into two discrete binary categories: abled and disabled, normal and abnormal. Students without disabilities are portrayed as having no special needs and students with disabilities are defined solely by their difference from typical (or normative) peers. Further cementing this binary, teacher certification, too, continues to be organized into general education and special education. DSE represents a complete rethinking of this approach to teacher education and practice. Rather than focusing on "fixing" students, DSE places an emphasis on things that are actually within teachers' spheres of influence by placing the focus on changing classroom structures and practices to supporting a full range of student learning needs within diverse and inclusive classrooms.

DSE, however, takes aim at not only who is in the class but also what is taught. Because disability is seen as both an issue of access and an equally valid aspect of identity and culture, teachers must think about how to both infuse disability across the curriculum and actively work to remove barriers to full participation and learning. Together, students with and without disabilities should have opportunities to read and discuss narratives featuring disability experiences across a range of genres, including first-person accounts. Rather than a problem, disability is thus seen as an important and

valued aspect of diversity, like multicultural or LGBTQ identities. Intentional inclusive classrooms foster a sense of belonging by providing a challenging and supportive curriculum and creating a positive classroom and school culture where every student is valued, respected (Shogren et al., 2015), and represented.

Importantly, DSE also recasts student struggles around literacy as an academic problem rather than a disability problem. Traditionally, content teachers have referred students who are struggling in literacy to special education or, more recently, for tiered supports. Once placed, the student is often pulled out for specialized instruction, often resulting in the student missing out on quality classroom instruction. Moreover, instruction provided in segregated spaces is often watered down, featuring highly scripted instructional programs, where students experience less time on task and have fewer opportunities to read interesting or engaging connected texts (McCloskey, 2011). Because instruction is often focused so intently on areas of weakness, students are given very little opportunity to develop their strengths, engage in higher ordered thinking, or participate in engaging literacy experiences and instruction. It should be no surprise that students rarely catch up and, instead, fall further and further behind once they are pulled out for instruction.

DSE encourages classroom teachers to use rather than abdicate their content expertise to support diverse learners. Adopting what we are calling an ethic of *being with* struggling students, we encourage teachers to use their content and pedagogical knowledge to ensure equitable and effective literacy instruction for all learners, rather than thinking someone else is more suited for this task. When student difficulties are understood as a literacy problem, then expertise in literacy becomes the most important skill set that struggling students have access to. In other words, the classroom teacher is likely the person with the most relevant and extensive expertise to help his or her struggling students.

Further, the experience of being labeled and segregated involves stigma that cannot be divorced from how a student experiences those systems of support (McCloskey, 2011). Teachers who embrace DSE presume competence (Biklen & Burke, 2006), maintain high expectations, and provide flexible support structures in ways that do not further isolate, marginalize, or disempower students. These teachers understand that even good intentions can result in problematic practices that further marginalize and stigmatize students, a disproportionate number of whom are already members of racial, ethnic, linguistic, or class-based minorities. DSE positions students as experts of their own experiences and honors their desire to learn what their peers are learning and to receive supports in ways that do not require that they be reduced to a label or segregated from their classroom teachers or peer group (Shogren et al., 2015).

Thus, instead of thinking about how to "fix" a struggling student, a DSE approach involves not only being with students with disabilities but also *working with* disability. Instead of requiring the students to fit into normative expectations, DSE recognizes disabled ways of being in the world as equally valid. Working with disability requires honoring the most efficient way for each student to operate, rather than requiring them to operate in ways that approximate their nondisabled peers. Students may write better when they have access to a keyboard, or acquire information better when they have access to recorded texts. A balanced approach to literacy must include not just flexible support structures and multimodal literacies but also adaptive, assistive, and alternative technologies, formats, and approaches that allow a student with a disability to operate in disability-specific ways (Hehir, 2002). In this way, literacy becomes a tool, a way to learn, and sometimes a personalized approach to learning, rather than a barrier to learning.

A DSE approach is, therefore, highly suspicious of calls for narrowly defined evidence-based practice. If someone is having difficulty reading a particular text, finding what works in a large, randomly assigned clinical trial matters less than finding what works for that person. A truly responsive model of instruction takes seriously the need to be responsive to individual learners rather than simply maintaining unquestioned fidelity to an instructional program or approach that has been deemed effective in a clinical trial but may not be a good fit for a learner's unique learning needs, strengths, and interests (Ferri, 2015). DSE respects the professional integrity and expertise of teachers and supports active problem-solving approaches to determining the most appropriate instructional strategies for students who struggle with literacy. Regardless of approach, however, students who struggle with text should not be denied deeply meaningful experiences with literacy. After all, if a student is to struggle deeply with accessing text, that text better be worthy of his or her best efforts.

Finally, DSE requires that teachers and teacher educators work together and in collaboration with parents and students with disabilities to lay bare taken-for-granted practices that dehumanize and disenfranchise disabled learners. How is it that decades after the disability rights movement and 25 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, inclusion in classrooms and schools is still treated as optional?

Whether a child with a disability should be allowed to enroll in a school or be included in a classroom should never be a question. When else are schools or teachers permitted to veto a child's inclusion based on some aspect of their identity or culture? Traditional special education has led us to mistakenly think of inclusion as a placement option (among a continuum of equally necessary and reasonable placements), whereas DSE scholars view inclusion as a moral obligation (Gallagher, 2001) and a civil rights issue. Understanding that disability and ability labels are infused with unequal power and privilege, DSE demands an expansion of social justice aims to include disability, along with race, gender, class, and sexuality.

What Would Literacy Teaching Informed by DSE Look Like?

How would DSE help Kathleen as a new teacher encountering Dwayne and Margarita? How practical is this framework in thinking about supporting students for whom school literacies pose diverse challenges? What would being with and working with look like in relation to students who struggle? How would DSE help Kathleen ask different questions, and how would it lead her to a different way of framing the problem of the literacy struggles she encountered?

One way of thinking about the implications of DSE for the design of supportive learning contexts is to recognize the need to develop particular habits of mind that promote being with and working with each learner. An important DSE habit of mind is beginning from the standpoint that everyone in the classroom community belongs there. The key question that follows from this habit of mind is, How can I support the meaningful participation of everyone in this learning community?

In practice, this means that teachers take responsibility for being with their students and for designing a learning context that facilitates students' participation. Rather than looking for a way to remove students from the classroom, this habit of mind encourages teachers to change the learning context so everyone has access. When students identified as having difficulty with academic literacy are included and supported, it sends a message to the rest of the class that everyone is valued and that everyone is a vital member of the classroom community. This is quite the opposite message sent to students when peers are removed from the classroom. DSE explicitly and intentionally shifts the instructional relation to one that is reciprocal, mutually respectful, and inclusive of difference.

For example, Kathleen would not be so quick to consider referring her students to someone, anyone else. She would claim Dwayne and Margarita as her students and would commit to fully being with them by using her expertise to scaffold their emerging literacy skills. She would know that when a teacher gives up on students, it is not long afterward that the students will often give up on themselves. Instead, she would understand that teachers must commit to the students in their classroom communities, not some idealized and fictional "normal" student who seamlessly and effortlessly navigates lessons with ease.

A second but related DSE habit of mind is presuming competence (Biklen & Burke, 2006). This "Hippocratic oath for educators" (UNESCO, 2012, para. 17) means making the presumption that each learner has something valuable to contribute and wants to participate. Importantly, presuming competence means recognizing that learners who may have difficulty with one aspect of literacy, such as the production of written academic text, or one mode of communication, such as speech, can still think in literate ways (UNESCO, 2012). The task for the literacy teacher, then, is to develop supports that can facilitate the externalization or expression of this literate thought so it is available to be taken up and responded to by others in the classroom community.

Presuming competence involves reading students' behavior as meaningful communication expressed with a benign or neutral intent. In the case of Kathleen's students, for example, what could have been read as copying or cheating on Margarita's part might be viewed as her attempt to scaffold herself into a new form of discourse. By borrowing from the *Reader's Digest* essay, she was able to create a piece of writing that was more essay-like than one she was able to create independently. From this perspective, her actions were quite strategic. Read through the lens of presuming competence, she was telling her teacher, Kathleen, that she needed assistance with expressing her thoughts through essayist discourse (see the discussion of Margarita's use of writing strategies in Collins & Collins, 1996). Similarly, reading Dwayne's behavior through a lens of presuming competence leads to the understanding that rather than being defiant or noncompliant, he was simply stuck on this assignment and needed Kathleen's support as his teacher (or perhaps peer supports) to participate fully in this task. Indeed, after being provided with the opportunity to map out his ideas visually prior to writing and then use this map to orally explain his ideas to his peers, he was able to draft connected essayist text independently.

A third DSE habit of mind is recognizing that struggle is located in the interaction between learners and features of learning environment, including text genres, patterns of talk, and modes of literate expression. Struggle is not a characteristic of individual learners; a struggling reader or writer is one who is experiencing a mismatch between their preferred literate mode and the one they are being asked to communicate with in school. It is important to note here that this aspect of a DSE framework is consistent with sociocultural and sociocognitive perspectives on literacy learning and instruction (see Collins, 2013).

When designing supportive and inclusive literacy instruction, then, this habit of mind entails examining the forms of meaning making available and considering additional ways to scaffold students' participation. Teachers can exert influence over the learning environment by changing the forms of literacy and modes of expression available to learners. In this way, teachers can disrupt, shift, or alleviate literate struggle. For example, Kathleen would likely shift the object of remediation from what was wrong with her students to consider instead what was wrong with her assignment or the way that she approached it. She might think about expanding the range of options for students to participate in the lesson, including a broader range of texts they could draw on and an expanded choice of texts that they could produce.

Beyond creating more ways for students to participate in the assignment, a DSE habit of mind that recognizes struggle as a result of an interaction between learners and the features of literacy contexts calls for a deep understanding of the ways that learners engage with a range of texts. What forms of literacy and meaning making is this learner drawn to? Students are thus seen as individuals who bring unique constellations of experiences, strengths, and challenges with multiple forms of literacy from their lives both within and beyond school. Awareness of the literate and communicative strengths of each student positions teachers to build on those abilities. For example, this habit of mind would guide Kathleen to think about how each of these students learns best and to use those strengths to provide supports for areas of difficulty. It would also help her consider a balanced approach between developing her students' skills as writers and considering ways to augment or bypass those difficulties with various technologies or adaptations, fading those supports as students gain skills and confidence with their literacy practices.

Final Thoughts

Disability identification has long been used as a means of justifying exclusion from access to the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship in the United States (Baynton, 2001) and in the classroom. The choice to teach from a DSE perspective is therefore the choice to disrupt long-standing patterns of exclusion and dehumanization of disabled individuals. By adopting a DSE lens, literacy teachers and teacher educators disrupt dangerous, exclusionary consequences of deficit perspectives. This powerful stance for inclusion signals that all students belong and are valued and rejects framing some students as damaged, deficient, or noncompliant.

In taking up a DSE perspective, literacy teachers have the opportunity to play a particularly important role in resisting educational sorting, disrupting patterns of exclusion, and shaping students' subsequent life opportunities. Identifications of ability based on assessments of competence in academic literacies have a long and well-documented history of being used as markers for who belongs in particular classroom communities. They can also influence the ways in which teachers like Kathleen position students in high- or low-performing categories within those classrooms (Cazden, 2001; Collins, 2013; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). Moreover, narrow, functional definitions of literacy contribute to the overrepresentation of students of color, students from low-income families, and bilingual students in special education (Au, 1998; Gutierrez & Stone, 1997; Poplin & Phillips, 1993; Ruiz 1995a, 1995b; Sleeter, 1986).

Consider, for example, that it was not by chance or random assignment that Kathleen's class was composed predominantly of students whose uses of written academic literacy were similar to those of Margarita and Dwayne and who identified as black or Hispanic. Incoming high school students were tracked into literacy classes based primarily on their score on a standardized reading and writing assessment given in the spring of their eighth-grade year. Much of the score on the assessment was the result of their ability to produce, independently and on demand, an argumentative or five-paragraph academic essay. As in many school districts across the United States, academic literacy in Kathleen's district served as a gatekeeper and determined which courses students were able to take.

Throughout this commentary, we have argued for providing learners with the supports they need to participate in classroom literacy communities without labeling them as deficient or looking for a diagnosis. Such labels are not instructionally relevant (they do not help us know how that student learns best), and

they mistakenly lead to the erroneous assumption that all students with a particular label are alike. Informal labels, such as struggling, are also dangerous in that they position students in particular roles. Such labels get cemented over time with repeated usage until they are seen as the social identity of that student. In this manner, the interaction between learners and features of an instructional context, an interaction that can be changed or disrupted with thoughtful teaching, becomes reframed as a characteristic or trait of individual students and hence a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

Taking up a DSE perspective requires that teachers actively choose to reject deficit thinking and its attendant assignment of deficit, deviance, or defiance. In doing so, teachers create space for seeing struggle differently, that is, not as the result of a characteristic or trait belonging to a particular learner but as a condition created as a result of the learners' interaction with the features, such as types of texts or participation structures, inherent to a particular instructional design or lesson. This is a critically important shift because it asserts that all students belong. Our task, as teachers, subsequently shifts to changing the instructional context so full and meaningful participation is possible for all of the learners in our classrooms.

DSE, however, is not just about technical fixes. A DSE approach to teaching and learning requires a complete challenge to the status quo. It requires rethinking and questioning the centrality and expectation of normalcy and homogeneity in classrooms and schools. Specifically, it requires that teachers and teacher educators take up different habits of mind and consider how to support the meaningful participation of students who come to us with an array of literacies, which may or not include facility with written academic literacy. This shift asks a lot of us as teachers but also offers a more powerful set of tools to create classroom learning communities that are responsive to our increasingly more diverse classrooms.

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