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Reimagining Special Education from a Disability Studies Perspective

Beth A. Ferri

They don't really want to hear the truth. (Isis, cited in Jones, 2004, p. 72)

Which is the greater right, treatment or freedom? Judging from our journals and our rhetoric, one can make the case that our field [of special education] has decided that it's more important for the individual to be treated than to be free. (Burton Blatt, 1984, p. 170)

The field of special education has historically situated itself within either a humanistic discourse of care and support or within an advocacy-based orientation of civil rights, espousing "ideologies of cure, care, benevolence, charity, control, [and] professionalism" (Ware, 2004, p. 2). Special education in the United States can also be linked to advocacy efforts, oftentimes on the behalf of parents, who rallied against the widespread discrimination, marginalization, and outright exclusion of their children with disabilities. Given its roots in advocacy and educational rights, special education can be thought of as having social justice aims.
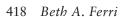
Nonetheless, despite even its best intentions, there is much to be gained by looking at how special education specifically, and the category of disability more generally, has served to justify the exclusion of certain groups of students in schools (Erevelles, 2005, p. 75). As Brantlinger (2004) writes, it is time to turn the gaze inward and actively work to eliminate oppressive educational practices and structures to which we participate. In other words, as the late Burton Blatt would remind us, "What is needed in the field of special education is not merely more research, more presentations, or more publications, but regular and thoughtful [and I would add critical] analyses of our works" (1984, p. ix).

Taking seriously these calls for self-reflexivity and critique, requires that we cast a critical eye on both the history and current practices of special education—particularly focusing on the mechanisms that turn student differences into pathologies and that result in the overrepresentation of students from minority racial groups in special education. Taken together these critiques highlight how special education ultimately functions not so much as a service to students with special needs, but also as a tool to shore up the exclusivity of general education—allowing it to maintain a false sense of homogeneity and a rigid set of normative practices that disempower an ever-increasing number of students. Thus, I am arguing that what on the surface seems to support educational rights and access, paradoxically upholds social injustice and exclusion.

In the following sections of this chapter I highlight some of the major critiques of special education, first from scholars in disability studies in education and then from current and former special education students, whose bodies and histories bare the effects of current practices. These voices, drawn from a several sources, remind us that it is not enough

for scholars to talk to us about social justice, but that we must also put ourselves in a position where we can hear from those most disaffected by our current state of affairs. As Bell (1997) writes, "social justice education begins with people's lived experience and works to foster a critical perspective and action directed toward social change" (p. 14). If we take student voices seriously, they point us toward a reimagining dis/ability and recasting special education practice in ways that are more fully informed by an expanded notion of social justice.

Reframing Special Education Practice

Special education was originally conceptualized as a set of specialized *services* designed to ensure educational equity and access for students with disabilities; however, over the years, special education has come to be (mis)understood as a *place* to send students who cannot or will not assimilate into general education's rigid "demands for conformity and rationality" (Erevelles, 2005, p. 72). Designed as a parallel system to general education, the dual system of education privileges certain groups by separating and marginalizing students that general education casts as problematic or difficult (Artiles, 2005). Once students are separated out and marked, they are assumed to be *"fundamentally different"* [italics in original] from their nondisabled peers (Brantlinger, 2004, p. 20). In this way, the category of disability itself constitutes these students as "special." Thus, disability labels function as a discursively produced system of social othering that creates divisions between students who are considered normal and regular and those who are seen as deficient and disordered (Slee, 2004).

Once a student is defined as a "problem," the mechanisms that label, rank, and exclude him or her are assumed to be neutral and valid—a rational and necessary response to student difference (Brantlinger, 2004, p. 11). But not everything falls under the diagnostic gaze. In its hyperfocus on etiology, diagnosis, and specialized interventions directed at individual learners, general education practice, which is often inflexible, rigid, and ineffective for an increasingly wide range of learners, falls conveniently outside the clinical gaze (Slee, 2004; Wedell, 2005). When a child is referred for special education, the "classroom context is seldom taken into account" because disability is presumed to be intrinsic to the child (Harry & Klingner, 2006, p. 67). In this decontextualized view of disability, it is only the student, not the system or larger educational context, which is deemed deficient and in need of intervention. In other words, when traditional models of instruction fail students, it is the student who is seen as deficient rather than the instructional model (Gallagher, 2005). Even under the recent changes to the way schools diagnose learning disabilities, called Response to Intervention (RTI), when a child does not respond to an intervention, the problem is still assumed to be intrinsic to the child. Thus, under RTI the student is considered to have a learning disability when he or she does not "respond" to research-based academic interventions. In other words, if clinical research says an instructional approach *should* work, then a child who does not benefit from that intervention must be deficient in some way. Therefore, although RTI will make interventions available to a wider group of students who are struggling, it remains a tool for determining eligibility for special education and ultimately labeling the child, not the educational context, as deficient. Moreover, the model does not challenge the efficacy of the intervention itself, which, because it is research-based, is not called into question. Thus, regardless of the model, it is telling that we label students rather than classroom practices (or teachers) as deficient, disordered, disabled.[1] Likewise our intervention efforts are typically directed at individual students, rather than at instructional practices. In other words, the object of remediation is the student, because it is the student who is deemed deficient.
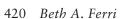
Critiques of special education in recent years have questioned the efficacy of and the moral and ethical justification of segregated special education placements. As Linton (2006) argues, "special education is not a solution to the 'problem' of disability, it *is* the problem, or at least one of the major impediments to the full integration of disabled people in society" (p. 161, italics in original). Other critics have focused on the over-representation of students from racial minorities in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Rather than viewing these critiques as *either* about race *or* about disability, I would argue that they underscore the interconnected forms that exclusion and discrimination take in schools. In other words, each of these critiques highlights a failed commitment to teach everyone, to value everyone, and to exclude no one (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). They are at core about the complicated ways that race, ethnicity, social class, and gender intertwine with disability status, which leads to interlocking forms of exclusion and marginalization. These include practices such as academic tracking, special education placements, disciplinary policies and practices, as well as gifted/talented programs and advanced placement options given to students.

The practice of sifting out "deficient" students often segregates the very students who are *already* marginalized on the basis of social class, race, or ethnicity. Schools enact a form of "ability profiling" by relying on "cultural narratives and deficit discourses," identifying, labeling, and sorting students based on their perceived risk rather than their potential or promise (Collins, 2003, p. 192). This practice relies on a dovetailing of racism and ableism and underscores how firmly entrenched special education is in the ever-present "quagmire of educational segregation" (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 43). In fact, questioning the disproportionate placement of students from racial minority groups in special education is one of the most longstanding critiques of the field (Dunn, 1968; Sleeter, 1987). Recent data confirms that students from racial minorities are as much as two to three times as likely to be labeled mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed as White children (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Once labeled, students from racial minorities are also more likely to be placed in segregated classrooms (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

History shows us that the moment segregated special classes came into being they were populated with students from racial and ethnic minority groups, from immigrant populations, and from lower social classes and statuses (Erevelles, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Franklin, 1987). Coinciding with the eugenics movement, these nongraded classes and facilities flourished in the first half of the 20th century. Designed for children who were deemed "slow," "retarded," or "feebleminded," these classes were precursors to today's self-contained special education classrooms. Thus, the relationship between segregation based on race and segregation based on disability is not a recent phenomenon, but it came into particularly high relief after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision made segregating students based on racial categories unconstitutional. As I argue elsewhere, special education, like tracking and gifted/talented programs, functioned as a way to subvert desegregation orders after *Brown*—creating a way to segregate students *within* schools once it was impossible to segregate them *between* schools (Ferri & Connor, 2006). Ultimately serving the needs of general education, special education became a "clearinghouse" for children deemed defective, disordered, or simply difficult (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 54). This practice proved so effective that by the early 1970s, disability categories served as the "chief metaphor" for explaining and highlighting differences between students and for justifying their exclusion (Harry & Klingner, 2006).
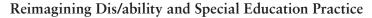
Of course, as Roger Slee (2004) argues, "schools were never really meant for everyone" (pp. 47–48) and special education simply masks general education's need for conformity and homogeneity (Baker, 2002). It could, therefore, be said that special education simply provides an exceptionally effective buffer zone between the children of the dominant group and those who would be relegated to the margins of the educational system. It provides a way to remove "challenging students from view" creating a "perverted" form of democratic education (Jones, 2004, p. 190). Thus, we should not be surprised that like all low status placements in schools (i.e., remedial and vocational tracks), special education is likewise marked by an overrepresentation of historically marginalized students (Brantlinger, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In recent years, even "the special education population has become increasingly segregated along racial lines" (Artiles, 2005, p. 92) students from different racial backgrounds with similar educational profiles receive different diagnostic labels, according to race.

When one considers who benefits from these arrangements, it becomes obvious that general education has a large stake in maintaining the status quo of a dual system of education (Brantlinger, 2004). We should not expect general education to give up its *special need* for keeping its "clearing house" for the children it deems defective (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 54). Perhaps, then, it should be acknowledged that special education is neither simply a set of *services* for students with particular learning needs nor is it a neutral *place* to serve these students. Instead, special education must be seen as a dubious mechanism for the maintenance of an exclusionary general education system. Thus, meaningful reform and a more just educational system will require nothing less than a complete rethinking of the entire system. Likewise, if social justice is our goal then our policies of inclusion cannot simply be focused on students with disabilities, but rather must encompass the goal of supporting and welcoming all learners and eliminating all forms of social exclusion (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). Socially just education cannot be limited to "softening the blow" of a rigid general education system. It must acknowledge that our current system is not working for a wide range of learners (Wedell, 2005). As the numbers of students in special education continue to expand in unprecedented numbers, perhaps we are near the point of recognizing that we cannot label everyone—at some point we have to begin to question our own practices. This questioning will require schools to move away from a medical model approach to thinking about disability as a deficit or pathology within the individual child, toward a social model conceptualization of disability as socially and politically constructed. In other words, disability must be primarily understood as one of the ways that we have organized difference in schools (Erevelles, 2005).

The taken-for-granted "normative practices, beliefs, and assumptions about disability" are being rewritten by scholars in the area of disability studies in education (DSE); they are both rewriting and critiquing the discourse of dis/ability[2] (Ware, 2005, p. 104). DSE distinguishes itself from traditional approaches to disability by rejecting medical model understandings of disability and by aligning itself with other identity-based studies. As Gabel (2005) writes, "the disability-as-deficit [model]…is rejected as the basis for understanding the lived experience of disabled people because it tends to pathologize difference and rely solely on expert knowledge" (p. 2). As a field of inquiry, DSE positions itself as critical rather than clinical, social rather than individualist. It assumes competence (Biklen, 2005) where traditionalists only see deficit, and views all students as diverse in their abilities, interests, and needs. Scholars in DSE have cast a critical eye on traditional practice, and along with people with disabilities, they are forging new ways of reimagining dis/ability and difference in schools and society.

Reimagining Dis/ability and Special Education Practice

Traditional special education methods are "rooted in deficit-bound psycho-medical paradigms" that transmogrify different ways of moving, learning, behaving, and being into individual pathologies (Slee, 2004, p. 47). Steeped in medical and deficit models of disability, special education positions disabled students as objects of a clinical and diagnostic gaze that leaves little room for alternative ways of knowing about disability experience. Because students are positioned as objects of study—as problems to correct or remediate—their voices and perspectives remain silenced and devalued just as their bodies remained segregated and marginalized. Any cursory survey of special education journals yields a mountain of quantitative studies examining every possible nuance of the assessment profiles of students with disabilities. There remains a dearth of research that focuses on the voices or perspectives of disabled people themselves. But what happens when we shift the object of the gaze from students with disabilities to special educational practice—what do students and former students have to say about the practices that have been set up to serve them and about the labels that they have been given? In the next section I focus on what can be learned from taking seriously what students have to say about our existing practices.

The following quotes are taken from several recent studies that prominently feature the voices of current and former students who received special education services. Although these are certainly not exhaustive of research that includes student voice, I attempted to represent a range of student experiences, as informed by race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and disability label. I also included only studies that include interviews that quote directly from interviews, dialogues, or writing. Unfortunately, special education research continues to be dominated by positivist research, which limits the number of studies published that focus so intently on the lived experience of students. Thus, studies like the ones that I include continue to be the exception to the rule. As Reid and Valle (2004) persuasively argue, because students with disabilities are not seen as subjects of their own meaning making, their voices are often authorized or mediated by a clinical or diagnostic gaze, which leads to an absence of insider perspectives on special education practice.

Representing a range of races, ethnicities, genders, and social classes, the individuals that I include in this chapter have also been given a variety of special education labels, from learning disabled to autistic to emotionally disturbed. Despite these and other differences there are surprising similarities among the group, particularly related to the construction of dis/ability and the efficacy of special education services. Their insights offer important critiques of current educational practices and point the way toward greater reform.

In the first group of excerpts I include examples of individuals questioning the label of disability itself. In these examples, individuals are actively rejecting the dominant understanding of disability, which cast it as a deficit or deficiency. They instead point to a more social model of disability, defining it as something that is constructed and arbitrary. As Biklen (2005) notes, disability is not "knowable in any definitively objective sense…[it] can be studied and discussed, but it is not knowable as a truth. It must always be interpreted" (p. 3). In these quotes, we hear students negotiating alternative ways of knowing about disability.

- I have a disability, but I am capable. (student in Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 149)
- They think you don't have any intelligence (student in Fleischer, 2001, p. 115)
- I hated to go to the "dummy room." I'm not dumb. (student in Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 150)

- I have limitations. So do many other people. (Frugone, in Biklen, 2005, p. 196)
- Mental retardation is the most disgraceful label…[and it] does not prove that the mind is incapable of thinking. (Mukhopadhyay, in Biklen, 2005, p. 136)
- If I were to say anything about autism, it would be how fascinating it is…. More importantly I have to admit that other people's attitude toward autism and to its various attributes are even more fascinating. (Blackman, in Biklen, 2005, pp. 148–149).
- No one's behavior is naturally bad—other people make it that way. (Air, in Jones, 2004, p. 177)

If disability is always a construction, however, the question becomes whose construction is privileged? In the field of special education it is not the "subjugated knowledges" (Bell, 1997, p. 13) of individuals who have been labeled, but the clinical view of disability that reigns. Alterative understandings that would call into question these dominant notions of disability remain marginalized in traditional special education discourse.

Another area of consensus among the individuals in these studies involved their views of the diagnostic process, which redefined their particular differences into categories of deviance (Apple, 2001). Many of the individuals in this sampling were highly critical not only of the labels they received, but also of the procedures and mechanisms involved in assessment.
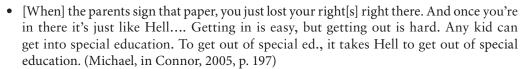
- I became the child that was disabled, the one who went to a school for children with disabilities. (Attfield, in Biklen, 2005, p. 209)
- The psychologist and the other people decide…I couldn't stand those people. They would get into my business about everything. (Michelle, in Connor, 2005, p. 232)
- I had hundreds of tests…everyone wanted to know what was wrong with me rather than just seeing the energy and passion that I had for so many things. (O'Connor, in Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001, p. 72)
- The whole testing procedure is somehow actually constructed on whether the tester observed the person to socialize in the way the tester understood to be socialization. (Blackman, in Biklen, 2005, p. 149)

Wary of the power inherent in the ability to assign disability labels, many described the process of testing and labeling as invasive. Still others question why individuals should be held to such rigid and inflexible norms. As Mukhopadhyay writes, "Students are not pieces of a jigsaw puzzle who could be forced inside to form a desired pre-planned picture" (quoted in Biklen, 2005, p. 134). Another finds it "ridiculous" to expect all children "to learn the same way" (O'Connor, in Rodis et al., 2001, p. 71). Instead, they argue that all students are different and all students have needs that are fluid and contextual (Reid & Valle, 2004). They locate disability in inflexible school structures and the low expectations that teachers have once they learn of a child's disability. Contrary to how their teachers and peers view them, however, individuals see themselves as capable and intelligent, even fascinating.

It is instructive that students feel mystified about the process of being labeled and placed in special education. As Vanessa (in Connor, 2005) asks, "Who put me in special education? I never knew nothing, it just happened…I think it's unfair" (pp. 311–312). Another student in the same study explains how parents are often coerced into putting their children into special education. He says that parents end up signing the papers because school officials threaten to retain their child unless they agree to the placement. He goes on to say,

- [When] the parents sign that paper, you just lost your right[s] right there. And once you're in there it's just like Hell…. Getting in is easy, but getting out is hard. Any kid can get into special education. To get out of special ed., it takes Hell to get out of special education. (Michael, in Connor, 2005, p. 197)

Another 16-year-old African-American male questions the limited access students in special education get to the general education curriculum. He notices that in special education, "All you see is Black faces" (Jesse, in Smith, 2001, p. 113). Because he believes he's getting an inferior education and less of a chance in life he comes to view the situation as a crisis, exclaiming: "I want out! Get me outta' here" (p. 110)! Other students share similar stories.

- As I see it, I was not given a fair chance. No one at the time thought to ask me where I would like to go to school. (Attfield, in Biklen, 2005, p. 203)
- [That] label followed me for a long time. (O'Connor, in Rodis et al., 2001, p. 64)
- Whenever I had trouble with a class they immediately took me out of there and stuck me in resource…. They kept pulling me out and putting me in resource again… [but] we didn't do anything about the class [I was missing]. We didn't learn about social studies in resource; we played games. All we did was play games. (Rose, in Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001, pp. 25–26).

Here students recognize how little control they and even their parents have in the process. Pushed and pulled from general education classes to special education and back, students feel powerless over the decision making process. As Harry and Klingner (2006) write, "once the discourse of disability is set in motion, it becomes a very difficult mechanism to interrupt" (p. 7). "Social forces intertwine to construct an identity of 'disability,'" which constitutes certain student types that general education "finds too difficult to serve" (p. 9). In the process students are made to feel powerless over decisions that will impact their lives for years. When we consider how students feel about the process, we must question our taken-for-granted notions of special education needs and ask, "Whom does the current system serve? Who feels empowered/disempowered by the current model of service provision?"

Another issue brought up in these and other examples involved the ineffective instruction students received in special education. Many talked about unchallenging curriculum and days of playing games. The following examples focus on the actual instruction provided in resource rooms and other special classes.

- Instead of giving you challenging work, they just teach you the same thing, over and over, every year…. You basically have to learn on your own. (Michael, in Connor, 2005, pp. 194–195)
- …[T]he assignments at this school suck! They don't have anything to do with anything and we learn absolutely nothing from them. Its all just work to keep us busy and out of trouble. We do the same things everyday…. It's senseless! (Isis, in Jones, 2004, p. 72)
- The work will be all too easy, you won't learn anything. (Chanell, in Connor, 2005, p. 123)
- All we did was play games. [We] played computer games. [We] played board games…. I would come home with all sorts of toys…from winning stuff from games…but I felt stupid because I had to leave the class. (Rose, in Ferri et al., 2001, p. 25)

- The [special education] teachers were kind, but…they underestimated me. (Pelkey, in Rodis et al., 2001, p. 21)
- When you're in there you ain't doin' nothin'. You're doin' basics…for example, when I was in fifth grade, I was doin' first grade work. (Jesse, in Smith, 2001, p. 111).
- School was a big disappointment and the work was never challenging. (Attfield, in Biklen, 2005, p. 209)

Believing that the instruction they were receiving in segregated settings was inferior led many to favor inclusion. Some have very specific suggestions of what would have been helpful to them.

- I don't live in an isolated society; I shouldn't learn in an isolated classroom…. Other students benefit from the insight I have…I can sometimes perceive things that other students miss. (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 149)
- I would have liked to have seen someone try to help me, you know, get through those classes instead of taking me out. (Rose, in Ferri et al., 2001, p. 26)
- The special ed system is dumb…it teaches you nothing. (Jesse, in Smith, 2001, p. 112)
- Sometimes I think the teachers make things worse with kids by riding them when they are already having a bad day. They should leave us alone when we are like that. (Air, in Jones, 2004, p. 42)
- Teachers must be willing to not just give me a desk and then leave me to fill the chair. I need to be asked questions, and given time for my thoughtful answers. Teachers need to become a conductor, and guide me through the many places I may get lost. (Burke, in Biklen, 2005, p. 253)
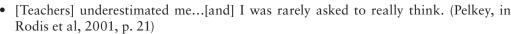
Regrettably, special education, like all low status educational placements (such as remedial or low tracked classes and underresourced urban schools), is characterized by low expectations and traditional skill-based direct instruction (Brantlinger, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Although general educators continue to believe in the efficacy of segregated special education classes, the reality of these classes is often marked by large class sizes, increasing teacher shortages, undifferentiated and ineffective instruction, inappropriate curriculum, undue restrictiveness, stigma, and disappointingly low graduation rates (Harry & Klingner, 2006). It is a fact that many resource rooms are not much more than "supervised study halls" (Brantlinger, 2005, p. 127). As a result, those who come to school with the least cultural capital and who are in the most need of progressive and effective instruction are given the least opportunity to learn from highly qualified and engaged teachers (Gallagher, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

In the next set of examples, I focus on how special education labels change the way students are perceived by others, leading to a form of "social othering" (Slee, 2004, p. 49).

- It sounds to me like they [teachers] gave up on me. (Rose, in Ferri, et al., 2001, p. 27)
- [Teachers] didn't really set high expectations for me…That's where I lost some…confidence, academically, especially. (John, in Ferri et al., 2001, p. 27)
- Cuz of my reputation, I'm sure they'll try to get me angry so they can throw me out again. It won't even have to be a big thing, just something stupid, and they'll use it as an excuse to kick me out like they did in middle school. (Isis, in Jones, 2004, p. 70)

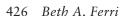- [Teachers] underestimated me…[and] I was rarely asked to really think. (Pelkey, in Rodis et al, 2001, p. 21)
- Of course, coming from this [special] school doesn't help when you're trying to find a job. (Air, in Jones, 2004, p. 34)
- My teacher gave up on me within weeks of my beginning school. She went through the motions but she had no great expectations of my achieving. I felt like I was being denied an education. (Attfield, in Biklen, 2005, p. 209)
- Since the [the Art teacher] new [sic] I was in special education…he was treating me differently…. Hmm, it's a special education thing…how he treated me. (Chanell, in Connor, 2005, p. 121)
- Once they find out, girls don't want to date you, no one wants to talk to you. Because you're labeled as a special education kid. Not attractive. (Michael, in Connor, 2005, p. 202)
- When I was in [special education], I really wanted to kill myself, because that's the most embarrassing thing to a kid. (Michael, in Connor, p. 191)
- Segregation made me a social outcast. I made no friends. (Attfield, 2005, p. 209)

In these excerpts students highlight some of the personal, social, and educational costs of being labeled. Rejected by peers and diminished by teachers, students who are labeled must learn to cope with a stigmatized identity. Labels "confer a lesser status on those labeled," although they are seen by professionals as necessary in order to provide students with services (Apple, 2001, p. 261). Conveying that they feel like "social outcasts" or pariahs, students communicate the degree to which being labeled creates a form of social stigma (Goffman, 1963). It is no surprise, therefore, that students who receive these services are "less likely to evaluate them as helpful and necessary" than students who do not receive these services (Brantlinger, 2005, p. 134). It was telling that many of the students in these studies made references to confinement, prison, and even death in describing special education classrooms and services.

- At fifteen years of age I was drafted into "Life Skills." It was like a deathblow. (Attfield, in Biklen, 2005, p. 210)
- It's like prison, once you learn your lesson, you should be released. (Michael, in Connor, 2005, p. 196)
- It was like jail. (Chanell, in Connor, 2005, p. 116)
- Ten years of my life has been wasted in special education. (Jesse, in Smith, 2001, p. 113)
- [It was] standard practice for the district, locking their embarrassing students away so as not to be embarrassed by them and tossing enough food down so they'd survive, not so much that they might grow and thrive. (Queen, in Rodis et al., 2001, p. 4)
- I knew the doors of education would always remain closed for me…. So, when one school said "sorry" and the next school referred me to a school for the mentally retarded, mother did not even try to ask a third. (Muklopadhyay, in Biklen, 2005, p. 128)
- My parents refused to send me to a school for children with severe learning difficulties, which was the only offer on the table. (Attfield, in Biklen, 2005, p. 203)
- In the back of the building…we were kind of hidden away. (Rose, in Ferri et al., 2001, p. 28)
- Because I feel so closed up in there. It feels like a prison. I can't stand that. (Isis, in Jones, 2004, p. 178)

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Based on these examples it is difficult to view much of our current special education practices as either effective or moral (Brantlinger, 2004). It is stunning to hear students speak not of services, but of confinement, incarceration, and punishment. Like many disability studies scholars and activists, these students reject deficit views of disability as well as the traditional approaches to instruction that are based on these views. Instead, they actively forge alternative conceptualizations of disability, defining it "as a symbol of oppression, as a marginal social status, as membership in a minority group, as an embodied experience" (Gabel & Danforth, 2002, p. 3).

If we want to enact meaningful reform, we would do well to listen carefully to the voices that are positioned on the furthest margins of our schools. Drawing insights that resonate with social justice education, their voices call for a complete dismantling of the "underlying [ableist] assumptions that produce and reproduce structures of domination," which disadvantage students with disabilities (Bell, 1997, p. 11).

In the final section of the chapter I propose various ways to reimagine dis/ability from a disability studies perspective. I examine the need to shift the object of remediation from disabled bodies and lives to inaccessible educational structures and ableist attitudes. I draw on the above voices of disabled people to help us imagine dis/ability otherwise. Finally, I conclude that when we view disabled people as sources of knowledge, we can begin to reconfigure practice in ways that honors different ways of knowing and being and that seamlessly integrates supports for all students.

Reforming Schools for Everyone

Despite the history of overrepresentation in special education, advocates of inclusion and scholars working on issues of overrepresentation have not engaged in any sustained dialogue regarding the complex ways that exclusion and discrimination work in today's schools. Likewise, the social model of disability is also "conspicuously missing in the scholarship of prominent educational theorists," who write about other ways that students are marginalized in schools (Erevelles, 2005, p. 67). As Jones (2004) writes, *ableism* is too often ignored when scholars are critiquing "other *isms* such as racism or sexism" (p. 15). This lack of engagement with more critical understandings of disability signals an "unquestioned support of the dominant paradigm pertaining to disability" (Erevelles, 2005, p. 67) and a failure to identify with the struggles of disabled people to dismantle such ableist notions of dis/ability.

In our reform efforts, we must take a stand against all forms of segregation and marginalization in schools, whether based on racism or ableism or any other ism (Ferri & Connor, 2006). This will require that we take responsibility for all students and reject deficit models of disability and ethnocentric views of culture, ethnicity, and race. Anything short of this will fail to address how a dual system of education depends on the practice of marginalizing students based on perceived difference and will fall short of developing a "socially just educational system in a democratic society" (Artiles, 2005, p. 86). The dialogue that Artiles (2005) and others (Erevelles, 2005; Ware, 2005) call for must also include the perspectives of those most invested in reform—those students whose bodies and histories "bear the weight" of segregation (Kliewer & Raschke, 2002, p. 43). Paying close attention to the voices of students themselves provides us with insider knowledge about how to make schools more democratic and just.

For example, the focus of our efforts should be on modifying our instructional practices and institutional structures, rather than requiring students to adjust to arbitrary norms. Instead of rushing to label a child as deficient when they do not learn the way that we teach, we must teach students the way that they learn (Kluth, Straut, & Biklen,

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2003, p. 18). This shift in the object of remediation requires that we honor different ways of reading, writing, perceiving, and moving through space as equally valid (Hehir, 2005; Reid & Valle, 2004). It requires us to adopt a "presumption of competence" rather than a deficit orientation (Biklen, 2005, p. 1). Instead of locating our failures within students, it demands that we look inward and ask, "What other approach can I try" (p. 73)?
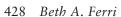
Rather than viewing students with diverse learning needs as a drag on resources, we must begin to value what students with disabilities bring to the classroom. Honoring diversity requires that we view students with disabilities as valued members of our schools and classrooms—not because we are charitable, but because students with disabilities, like all students, have a lot to offer. If the students cited in this article have anything at all to say, it is that we are missing out on what they have to teach us—both about themselves and our practices. Their words demand that we question our taken-for-granted assumptions about disability—recognizing the ways that they are smart, "capable" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997, p. 149), and even "fascinating" (Blackman, in Biklen, 2005, p. 149)! By revaluing disability and difference, they ask us to reject ableist assumptions that it is "better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille" or listen to an audio book (Hehir, 2005, p. 15). In other words, they demand that we refuse hegemonic notions of literacy and learning and being in the world. They also ask us to think carefully about the efficacy of labels and special education services that come to feel like a form of imprisonment. They show us how when we label kids we rob them of their "energy and passion" for learning (O'Connor in Rodis et al, 2001, p. 72) as well as their rights (Michael, in Connor, 2005, p. 197).

Because all students are different and all students have needs, learning supports must be embedded seamlessly into the general education classroom, not tacked on or subcontracted out. When supports are embedded and integrated into the general education classroom, they can be made available to support any or all students who need them, *whenever* they need them. By embedding services we also stop giving students and parents a false choice between general education settings offering little or no supports or flexibility or segregated special education classes offering little access to a challenging or meaningful curriculum. It also shows that we understand that disability is contextual and reflects a lack of fit between one's particular body or brain and one's environment. Instead of thinking about disability as an either/or category, by embedding supports in inclusive classrooms, we recognize the fluid nature of disability and provide supports when they are needed. Rather than thinking of disabilities as severe or mild—as if impairment related needs are static across settings—we understand that it is the setting and the availability of supports, resources, accommodations that determine the level of impact of any disability. Of course, ideally our classroom structures and instructional practices would be universally designed[3] to maximize the degree of fit between all students and the learning context—providing students with differentiated, meaningful, and challenging curriculum, along with high-access instruction, targeted supports structures, and choice.

In closing, a social justice approach to special education services must move away from structures and practices that dehumanize and marginalize students (Jones, 2004). There is no excuse for students or their parents to feel mystified (or imprisoned) by the services set up to support them. We need to recognize that students have something to teach us about their learning styles and needs. In shifting our attention from the center to the margin, we gain important insights about how to make our educational practices better not just for students who are labeled, but for everyone. We begin to see that *all* students need real choices, authentic curriculum, and appropriate levels of control over their school lives (Jones, 2004). Finally, by repositioning our ideas about where expertise

about disability is located, a social justice approach to disability honors a foundational motto of the disability rights movement, "Nothing about us, without us."

Additional Resources

Disability Studies in Education (Special Interest Group) of American Educational Research Association (AERA). http://www.aera.net/Default.aspx?id=1297

Disability Studies for Teachers of Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy. http://www.disabilitystudiesforteachers.org/

Universal Design for Learning, website of the *Center for Applied Special Technology* (CAST). http://www.cast.org/pd/index.html

Building pedagogical curbcuts: Incorporating disability into the university classroom and curriculum. Available in pdf download through Syracuse University's Graduate School . http://gradschpdprograms.syr.edu/resources/publications-books.php
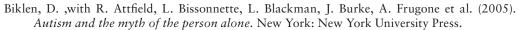
Notes

1. I often have a somewhat tongue-in-cheek conversation with my teacher education students about changing who gets labeled in schools. Inverting the gaze, we shift labels from students to classrooms or even individual teachers. In our new system the most inclusive teacher gets the label of "gifted" and the least inclusive classroom or teacher gets the label of "pedagogically delayed or instructionally disordered."

2. Scholars in disability studies sometimes use dis/ability to highlight how what we think of as normalcy or "ability" is every bit as constructed as disability. So, the use of dis/ability simultaneously calls both disability and ability into question. Another example that is particularly useful in illustrating the doubleness of words is reflected in the terms *dis/ease* (which can mean illness, but also discomfort) and *in/valid* (which can mean incapacitated, but also illegitimate). Similarly, I use *(Dis)Service* in the title to demarcate ways that special education considers itself as a service and yet, in practice, this so-called service can be very disempowering to the individuals it proposes to serve. Likewise terms like *(mis)understood* signal the ways that taken for granted assumptions and understandings are called into question by a more critical framework.

3. Universal Design for Learning is an approach to instructional design that borrows from the concept of universal design in architecture. Its goal is to design instruction that meets the needs of the widest possible range of learners. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) has been at the forefront of this approach to instructional design. See their website at http://www.cast.org/research/udl/index.html

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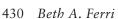
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