# [Re]claiming "Inclusive Education" Toward Cohesion in Educational Reform: Disability Studies Unravels the Myth of the Normal Child

SUSAN BAGLIERI

*Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus*

LYNNE M. BEJOIAN

*City University of New York*

ALICIA A. BRODERICK

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

DAVID J. CONNOR

*Hunter College*

JAN VALLE

*City College of New York*

**Background/Context:** *This article calls attention to the restrictive notions of inclusive education promulgated within the discourse of special education in the United States and asserts the value of using disability studies in education to support broader conceptualizations of inclusion that potentially incorporate all students.*

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** *By dismantling the myth of the typical/average child, the authors reveal ways in which educational practices actively contribute to the creation of "normalcy" and discuss the harmful effects that this can have on*

*all citizens. They illustrate selected practices that help constitute the normative center of schools by using the organizing principle of disability as a heuristic device to enable multiple simultaneous critical standpoints.*

**Research Design:** *Analytic essay.*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *The authors call for the dissolution of the normative center of schools through an interdisciplinary alliance between disability studies and other criticalist fields that share the aim of claiming value in human diversity over standardization.*

> What is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience
> of the limitations of the body.
>
> — Lennard Davis

Imagining schools as places where children can find belonging and community conjures values and ideas with which few would argue. Democracy is posed as *the* political ideal of our culture. Even federal education policy asks us to leave no child behind. How is it, then, that an idea and a value that upholds social equity—embodied within the now-familiar educational term *inclusion*—ends up as the source of contention in a polarizing debate now spanning decades? Words and phrases that express our values and actions toward including children in schools have been part of the educational lexicon for many years. In the United States, for example, *inclusion* refers to initiatives to open general education to students labeled with disabilities. *Full inclusion* has been distinguished as an ideological position in debates over whether children identified with "severe disabilities" should be completely unfettered from special education. More recently, *inclusion kids* has become a commonplace term within public schools to refer to students labeled disabled who gain access to general education.

Ideology, Fairclough (1989/2001) proposed, is always present in language and serves to legitimate "existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted" (p. 2). The now banal term *inclusion* has been so frequently associated with children labeled disabled that its usage reifies taken-for-granted assumptions that the "natural" position of this group is one of dis-belonging. Stigmatizing particular students as "inclusion kids," for example, has surely missed the mark (for examples of this language form, see Moss, 2002, and Ware, 2000).

We argue that the [re]claiming of inclusive education provides a concept around which many strands of educational reform can cohere. We contend that national insularity within the American educational

community has contributed to a parochial iteration of inclusion that primarily considers only the physical placement of students with labeled disabilities. Rejecting the dominant usage of the term in American educational literature, we instead position our conceptualization of inclusive education within international discourses that query exclusions of all kinds. At the center of our critique is the myth of the normal child—an idea of interest to scholars in the fields of disability studies (DS) and disability studies in education (DSE).[1] Similar to other critical traditions, unraveling the fallacy of human typicality exposes the values-laden processes through which "disability" constructs "ability," "Black" instantiates the privilege of "White," female becomes the neutered male, and so on. Discerning the ideologies of difference that ultimately boil down to distinguishing the normal and acceptable from the abnormal, and hence unacceptable, is relevant to understanding common bases for exclusion. For example, Leonardo (2007) explored the ways in which the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) operates as a form of "whiteness as policy" (p. 261) and interrogated whiteness as ideology in the reproduction of educational disparities. In discussing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Beratan (2006) similarly called attention to the law as a form of institutional racism and ableism, illuminating subsequent limitations imposed on children further disabled by legislation. We contend that the commonality among a wide variety of ideologies of difference is rife with underexplored promise for *allied work* in inclusive education.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Several authors have attempted to sketch conceptual histories of the construct of inclusion. For example, Ainscow (1999) and others have located the notion of inclusive education as emergent from a history of educational service provision for students with identified disabilities. This history ranges from a complete absence of service provision, to largely separate or segregated educational provision, to integration, to inclusion. Clough and Corbett (2000) outlined a rough historical sequence of what they called five "perspectives" on inclusion: "the psycho-medical model, the sociological response, curricular approaches, school improvement strategies, and disability studies critique" (p. xi). Ballard (1999) also acknowledged that "in New Zealand, as elsewhere, the notion of inclusion has grown out of the mainstreaming movement focused on disabled children" (p. 1). Thus, regardless of the conceptual organization of this history, it seems evident that what is commonly termed "inclusive education" in the English-speaking world has emerged from within the

discourse and practices of special education, the long-dominant province of disability-related issues in education. Yet despite this common discursive heritage, a good deal of divergence currently exists in the meanings attributed to the construct of inclusive education, both between and within the various educational discourse communities circulating among nations around the world that draw upon the term.

Ballard (1999) acknowledged this divergence, noting, "For example, some researchers view inclusive education as an ongoing development of special education. Others believe, as I do, that what we refer to as inclusion is, and should be, derived from mainstream approaches to instruction and school organization, creating an alternative to special education knowledge and practices" (p. 1). We concur with Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson's (2006) assertion that "for many people, inclusion in education is thought of only as an approach to serving children with disabilities within general education settings" (p. 2), and argue that this particular conceptualization of inclusive education continues to be dominant within American educational discourse. Indeed, due in large part to the history of the term as being derived from special education, the two most central facets of the dominant discourse on inclusive education, both in the United States and in many other nations, seem to be: (a) that it is fundamentally about students with identified and labeled disabilities, and (b) that it is fundamentally about issues of place; that is, where are students so labeled to be educated? In addition to these two primary facets of the dominant discourse on inclusive education, a third common facet of the dominant discourse within the United States is the codification of these two central elements in procedural, bureaucratic, positivist conceptualizations of "service delivery" models (Broderick & Gustafson, 2008). For example, in New York City, there is a rapidly growing trend toward establishing "inclusive classrooms" cotaught by two teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., a general educator and a special education teacher, or a general educator and a bilingual special education teacher) in which there is a recommended ratio of general education students to students with disabilities who have individualized education plans (IEPs). Typically, a "regular" general education classroom and a cotaught classroom are offered at each grade level. It is noteworthy that parents of general education students as well as general education teachers may choose whether to participate in the "inclusive" classroom setting—reflecting a persisting conceptualization of inclusion as "service delivery" for children with disabilities rather than an educational philosophy and practice for all children. Likewise, in many areas within the United States, "inclusion" is procedurally defined as a student with an identified disability, spending greater than 80% of his or her school day in a general educa-

tion classroom in proximity to nondisabled peers.

Yet there is an increasingly strong international discourse on inclusive education that transgresses the boundaries and limitations of the construct's discursive history as emergent from within special education. Challenging special education orthodoxy, Slee (2001) pointed out a "fundamental cultural flaw" inherent in introducing and exploring ideas related to inclusive education in required coursework on "special education" in preservice teacher preparation: centrally, the unexamined assumption that "the focus for inclusive education is narrowed to the traditional constituency of special education" (p. 168). Indeed, in teaching just such a course (a required "special education" elective for preservice teachers), Broderick and Gustafson (2008) reported that many students entered the course with an understanding of inclusive education such as "placing students with disabilities in a normal classroom setting," a conceptualization entirely consistent with Ainscow et al.'s (2006) assessment of the dominant conceptual elements of inclusive education.

However, in keeping with the incursion of ideas from DS (what Clough & Corbett, 2000, have called the "disability studies critique"), and from international DSE scholarship particularly, it seems clear that conceptualizations of inclusive education have evolved well beyond the limitations of special education discourse. The DSE discourse on inclusive education as "deep cultural transformation" (Corbett & Slee, 2000, as cited by Ware, 2004, p. 184) constitutes a radical departure from the parameters of "inclusive education" within special education. Indeed, as Thomas and Loxley (2001) contended, "Inclusive education has to become more than a synonym for special systems in mainstream schools, more than a peripheral dimension to mainstream education" (p. 142). Moreover, as Ballard (1999) noted,

> To be inclusive requires that we strive to identify and remove all barriers to learning for all children. This means that we must attend to increasing participation not just for disabled students but for all those experiencing disadvantage, whether this results from poverty, sexuality, minority ethnic status, or other characteristics assigned significance by the dominant culture in their society. (p. 2)

Ballard further argued that "inclusive education is about confronting all forms of discrimination as part of a concern to develop an inclusive society based on 'social justice, equity and democratic participation' (Barton, 1997, p. 233)" (p. 3). Slee (2001), too, departed from the dominant conceptualization of inclusive education as being fundamentally

about the education of students with labeled disabilities (the "traditional constituency of special education"); in contrast, he asserted, "Inclusive education is about all students. Inclusion is an aspiration for a democratic education and, as such, the project of inclusion addresses the experiences of all students at school" (p. 168). Similarly, Ainscow et al. (2006) rejected the dominant conceptualization of inclusive education as being primarily about issues of place in regard to serving the educational needs of students with labeled disabilities. Rather, they pointed out that internationally, inclusion

> is increasingly seen more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners (UNESCO, 2001). . . . [We assert] that the aim of inclusion is to reduce exclusion and discriminatory attitudes, including those in relation to age, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and attainment. It does not focus only on a response to individuals but on how settings, policies, cultures and structures can recognize and value diversity. (p. 2)

We concur with scholars such as Ballard, Thomas, Loxley, Slee, Ainscow, Booth, Dyson, and others in their rejection of dominant conceptualizations of inclusive education that are grounded in and limited by special education discourse in its acontextual focus on the individual. We further cannot help but note that the preponderance of scholars and educators who position inclusive education as democratic educational reform, seeking to resist exclusion of all kinds, are working in countries other than the United States (Ware, 2004, stands as a notable exception). Although the term *inclusive education* will no doubt continue to operate as a "multivalent educational term" (Ware, 2004, p. 1), with underlying politics and ideologies embedded in the term's usage often obscured and difficult to discern, we feel the need to press on with efforts to claim particular political and ideological positionings of the notion of inclusive education in concert with our international colleagues.

In an effort to politically and ideologically position notions of inclusive education within the Elementary Inclusive Education Preservice Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, a recently issued position statement on inclusive schooling and teacher preparation, asserted, in part, a conceptualization of inclusive education as

> education that seeks to resist and redress the many ways in which students experience marginalization and exclusion in schools. . . . we believe that inclusive education is not just about students with

> labeled disabilities, but rather is fundamentally about all stu-
> dents, and more significantly, about the cultural practices of
> schooling. Consequently, the full spectrum of challenges of con-
> temporary schooling must be attended to in order for education
> to be inclusive, and therefore, we necessarily interrogate and
> work to actively resist and dismantle the many socio-cultural,
> institutional, bureaucratic, and interpersonal ways in which chil-
> dren and their families experience marginalization and exclu-
> sion in schools (e.g., on the basis of race, ethnicity, social class,
> dis/ability, gender, nationality, sexuality, language, religious
> [non]affiliation, etc.).

Thus, the program politically and ideologically aligns itself with a DSE
(rather than a special education) stance on inclusive education, as one
that asserts that inclusive education (a) is fundamentally about all learn-
ers (rather than just about disabled learners), (b) is fundamentally about
striving to make all learners' experiences with schooling inclusive and
participatory rather than exclusionary and marginalizing (rather than
just being concerned with where particular learners are physically
placed), and (c) is concerned with aspirations for democratic and
socially just education, and therefore fundamentally concerned with
interrogating the cultural practices of schooling (rather than just seeking
to prescribe procedural, techno-rational definitions of inclusive school-
ing to be implemented).

Taken together, these departures of the DSE discourse on inclusive
education from the dominant special education discourse around inclu-
sive education are radical. The question remains, however, How useful is
it to align oneself and one's efforts with a term that may at best be more
obfuscating than useful, and that at worst may actually serve to perpetu-
ate and reinscribe culturally regressive ideas and assumptions about
inclusive education each time it is invoked? This quandary is particularly
cogent in the United States, where the construct of inclusive education
remains deeply entrenched within special education discourse. The ques-
tion must be asked whether it may be time for radical, DSE-oriented
inclusive educators to abandon the term *inclusive education* as simply car-
rying too much regressive baggage associated with special education dis-
course, or as being so broad and diffuse in its meaning as to be effectively
meaningless. Although this fatalist impulse may be tempting, we are ulti-
mately encouraged by the ever-strengthening international discourse on
inclusive education that, broadly speaking, focuses on issues of equity
among all children and youth, and we choose to explicitly position our
work squarely within that discourse community.

## MYTHOLOGIZING THE NORMAL CHILD

If we are to interrogate equity issues among *all* schoolchildren and youth, it is useful to shift the focus away from students with disabilities to consider the normative student for whom public schools are designed—the mythical normal child. Educators readily have on hand a host of labels and terminology with which to demarcate the boundaries of typicality. Calling our children "diverse" or "different" circumvents the ugliness of diagnostic labels and/or our discomfort with specifying the raced and cultured experiences and identities of non-White children. *English language learner* emphasizes the normalcy that awaits an "ELL" just as soon as he or she masters the dominant language. "At risk" children need be thankful for "at risk" teachers assigned to change the course of their educational fates. This kind of labeling implies the presence of a standard according to which "diverse" and "different" children are gauged; however, it is within special education that cognitive and biological ideologies of normalcy and abnormalcy are codified and exercised—even championed for relentless methods of identifying pathology within schoolchildren in order to deliver "appropriate services."

Practices in disability labeling are considered scientific, and therefore made irreproachable within a positivist paradigm. A history of exclusionary school practice, however, demonstrates the influence of social and cultural milieu on disability labeling. As Sleeter (1987) pointed out, labeling students with "learning disability" increased and became the justification for continued racial segregation when minority groups pressured educators to "discard the notion of cultural deprivation and stop classifying disproportionate numbers of minority children as mentally retarded" (p. 231). Currently, response to intervention (RTI) is rapidly developing into a standard practice that proposes "learning disability" to be an explanation of last resort. When a child fails to respond to a series of educational interventions, we then "know" that the problem is a learning disability. Special education, therefore, is the adjudicator of difference when other explanations for school failure are made culturally unacceptable or threaten to expose the limits of intervention (McDermott & Varenne, 1998).

The foundations and infrastructure of special education are built on the bedrock concept of disability as a biomedical impairment that needs fixing, curing, or remediation. A restoration (or closest approximation) to normalcy becomes the goal. Contrastingly, DS is rooted in examining multiple ways that people with disabilities are systematically oppressed through social arrangements and practices, calling for action toward broad social change. A point of conflict between the fields resides in the

concept of normalcy—what special education strives to enforce, DS seeks to dissolve (Michalko, 2008).

Using a DS lens that primarily frames disability as a social, cultural, political, and historical phenomenon situated in a specific time and place rather than a medical, scientific, or psychological "objective fact," we call attention to the concept of the typical child, or the young version of what Garland-Thomson (1997) termed "the normate" (p. 8). Troubling the concept of the normate child requires examination of the fundamental assumptions made about human difference. Like the concept of whiteness in relation to "people of color," normates or able-bodied people are rarely discussed in a direct manner. Normalcy is often assumed to be an omnipresent understanding without the need for iteration. Smith (2008) pointedly noted, "In the same way that Whites forget they are 'colored,' so too do Normals forget they are differenced" (p. 423). Bearing this in mind, we contemplate who *is* this normal child that disabled children are not?

"Normal" is a seemingly benign category that is often used interchangeably with other concepts such as average, ordinary, typical, and standard. Simply put, these concepts signify how similar *we* are to others like *us.* From the moment of birth, when Apgar scores are taken and recorded, human beings are continually subjected to pressuring practices, rules, regulations, and cultural beliefs in order to fit the mold of normal—a concept that is always socially defined and context specific, and therefore changeable. Generally speaking, society expects the majority of people to look, think, communicate, and act as similarly to one another as possible. When this principle is applied to contemporary schools, students who are perceived as and labeled disabled have been noticed for the "wrong" reasons—namely, for not conforming to expectations. As Michalko (2008) stated, "Disability is conventionally conceived of as trouble and as a problem" (p. 401). In contrast, students without troubles/labels are viewed as more desirable pupils.

## THE AVERAGE BECOME NORMAL (DESIRABLE) CITIZENS

Considering the emphasis on normativity within public schooling, it is of interest that the origins of "normal" are rarely considered. It appears relevant, then, that we trace the rise of the concept of "average" and how it became used in the service of normalizing individuals. In *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Lennard Davis constructed a compelling argument that charts the rise of statistics in mid-19th-century Germany and Great Britain to quantify the population in pursuit of determining "average citizens," a particularly useful concept for estimating the needs of war and

predicting the workforce in relation to implementing government goals. It is not coincidental that the science of eugenics (literally meaning "well-bred" people) evolved within the same cultural climate as these nations sought to cultivate their own populations as superior to European rivals and inhabitants of all their empires. Smith (2008) argued, "Eugenics essentially creates the Normal, a cultural landscape outlined in order to support the hegemony of its inhabitants, a liberal bourgeois class of white, able-bodied and—able-minded men" (p. 419). The drive for increased efficiency within expanding nation-states spawned the idea of further developing robust, "healthy," normal bodies as *desired* citizens equipped to fight abroad or serve ever-growing industries, both related to Western expansionism around the world. Davis (2002) noted an increase in governmental expectations and regulation of individuals at this time, stating, "For the formation of the modern nation-state not simply language but bodies and bodily practices also had to be standardized, homogenized, and normalized" (p. 106).

The state's goal of a "normal" (desired) population is still projected on individuals at every turn: how we walk, move, talk, act, interact, think, dress, eat, *learn*, and so on—in addition to being inscribed into a host of other pressurizing discourses such as nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Every day, thousands of interactions with other people (real and/or virtual via media) clearly convey acceptable and unacceptable ways of being in the world. The force on individuals to conform is enormous, and once normalcy is attained, it requires a degree of conscious maintenance. In most instances, all of us self-regulate (and therefore self-normalize) in the pursuit of social acceptance. We constantly seek validation from others in a variety of ways, whether it be receiving gold stars in school or compliments about our appearance. If we deviate from culturally established norms, there is usually a price to pay in one form or another—be it embarrassment, victimization, estrangement, banishment, ridicule, or even death. The body itself, claimed Wharf (2004), "is the primary vehicle through which prevailing economic and political institutions inscribe the self. . . . The body is the most personalized form of politics; all power is, ultimately, power over the body" (p. 46, in Smith, 2008).

Notions of normalcy are exerted in a multitude of inescapable ways, subjecting the body to its power, thereby playing an integral role in maintaining society as it is currently configured. In contemplating the upholding of social norms, Davis (2002) pointed out, "the hegemony of normalcy creates compliant and disciplined bodies . . . which meet the needs of a bureaucratic, corporate state" (p. 116).

ENFORCING NORMALCY IN SCHOOLS

How, then, might public schooling, an example of what Davis referred to as a corpus of bureaucratic, corporate state processes, enforce normalcy? To explore this question, we turn to the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose examination of the human sciences provides a lens through which to consider "the device of normality." What interests Foucault, in particular, are the ways in which institutions produce and circulate *discourse*, which he defined as "a system of rules that defines what *can be said*—what counts as natural and true within a particular discursive practice—and the instrument through which people become *positioned*, but not determined, within that discourse" (Reid & Valle, 2004, p. 466). Thus, it is relevant to consider the material apparatus (or structures) of public schools through which language circulates, as well as the accompanying material consequences for students within those structures (Foucault 1965, 1972, 1973).

In typical public schools, students are separated into particular spaces within the building on the basis of such factors as age, grade, achievement level, ability, and language proficiency. So natural is this demarcation of space that it goes largely unnoticed. Foucault (1977), however, would argue that classrooms function as a means to classify, supervise, hierarchize, and reward (or discipline) students.

> In organizing "cells," "places" and "ranks," the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional, and hierarchical. It is spaces that provide fixed positions and permit circulation; they carve out individual segments and establish operational links; they mark places and indicate values; they guarantee the obedience of individuals, but also a better economy of time and gesture. They are mixed spaces: real because they govern the disposition of buildings, rooms, furniture, but also ideal, because they are projected over this arrangement of characterizations, assessments, hierarchies. (p. 148)

It is precisely the organization of classrooms by age and grade that constructs expectations for particular behavior. In this sense, classrooms become spaces of surveillance and examination. Should a student demonstrate behavior deemed outside agreed-on parameters, it becomes an occasion to be noticed.

As Foucault (1977) contended, "The sciences of man were born at the moment when procedures of surveillance and record-taking of individuals were established" (p. 74). If we are to better understand how a

structure (such as special education) operates, it is relevant to consider *who* is in the position of surveillance and record-taking and *who* is the object of the surveillance and record-keeping. Professionals who observe and document "the individual" obtain a knowledge imbued with the power to name, classify, and determine. There is no mistaking the relationship between power and knowledge that results from such an arrangement. Foucault (1975) explained that

> this turning of real lives into writing . . . functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection. . . . The examination as the fixing, at once ritual and "scientific," of individual differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity . . . clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the "marks" that characterize him and make him a "case." (p. 192)

Thus, the classification of characteristics (and, by extension, human beings) as normal and abnormal takes on great significance—yet the process has become so naturalized within schools that its significance is seldom questioned by those who participate in it (see, for example, Julie Allan's 1999 Foucauldian analysis of the process of "recording" or "statementing" children and youth labeled disabled in Scotland).

Once captured by the special education industry, the individual becomes an unending object of study for a well-intentioned cadre of professionals. The system of classification provides the means by which professionals are able to conceptualize, speak about, and respond to the identified individual. Foucault referred to such agreed-on assumptions as "statements"—presuppositions that circulate as true and understood by a listener in a way that need make no reference to the everyday context in which the statement is spoken. As such, rules for governing statements are found only within domains (e.g., medicine, psychology, education) that establish structures around *who* has the right to make statements, from *what sites* these statements originate, and *what positions* the subjects of discourse inhabit (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). Thus, Foucault considers statements to be the product of a field of relations, maintaining significance only within those systems in which they make sense.

Foucault's work focuses on the analysis of discourse within the human sciences in which "the individual" becomes a function of that *discourse*—defined as a system that "unifies the whole system of practices [within which] various social, political, economic, and technological, and

pedagogical factors come together and function in a coherent way" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). Foucault (1973) explained that "Western man could constitute himself in his own eyes as an object of science, he grasped himself within his language, and gave himself, in himself and by himself a discursive existence, only in the opening created by his own elimination" (p. 197). It is this space of elimination that allows for the objectification of human beings into subjects.

The child who becomes labeled as disabled, then, is made into "an overall discursive fact" (Foucault, 1978, p. 11) by the system that envelops him or her. Systems that support certain statements as Truth typically operate within contexts that have the capacity for serious social consequence. Special education is just such a context, for within this system lies the power to define normal and abnormal—the means by which a polarizing "discourse of difference" is created.

## THE SUBAVERAGE BECOME ABNORMAL (UNDESIRABLE) CITIZENS

As discussed elsewhere in this article, a student who fails to meet predetermined academic criteria set by national, state, and local standards will come to the attention of assorted school personnel, including teachers, administrators, and psychologists. Student performance deemed outside of the defined parameters of "normal" becomes understood and acted on within the "discourse of difference" that circulates among school personnel. As Brantlinger (2004) pointed out, a premise of special education is that all children should be at least average; "If children do not match the statistical average, they are said to have risks, special needs, and learning disabilities" (p. 491). In turn, to be below average is synonymous with being abnormal, and societies have historically responded to various "abnormalities" by containment, forcing populations with disabilities into colonies, clinics, institutions, hospitals, asylums, special schools, and other segregated spaces.

Subjugating the majority of students with disabilities by placing them in special schools and segregated classrooms has been the norm in American education (Kauffmann & Hallahan, 1995; Stiker, 1999). Brantlinger (2004) pointed out, "In our present educational and economic ranking systems, some have to be subnormal for the seemingly desirable hierarchies to survive" (p. 491). Regardless of its original intention to educate all students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, the result of P.L.94-142[2] passed in 1975 was the unfettered growth of overwhelmingly segregated arrangements. The bifurcation of general and special education systems still exists despite several decades of three-steps-forward-and-two-steps-back movement toward inclusive

education. And although some gains have been made, in most places, they are modest at best (Smith, 2007). Furthermore, dual systems have led to the reification of two "types" of students: "kids" and "inclusion kids," for example. As within any binary, one side is considered more valuable than the other. To wit, the binary of general/special is broadly interpreted as abled/disabled, creating desirable/undesirable students in an educational caste system of unproblematic/problematic pupils.

Removal from and prohibition to reenter the "normal" classroom inevitably subject students to diminished status, reduced cultural capital, and feelings of powerlessness, although these issues are not acknowledged in traditional special education research (Andrews et al., 2000). Children emerge from special education having had considerably fewer opportunities to engage in substantive academic discourse, leaving them devalued and culturally disadvantaged (Tomlinson, 2004). DS scholars call attention to the position of children who are unable "to receive general education until they are normal if [they are already] boxed into special education spaces with dummied-down curricula" (Brantlinger, 2004, p. 495). Young and Mintz (2008) pointed out the absurdity of having to *earn* the right to be in a general education classroom through performing academically at a certain standard that some may never be able to achieve.

ABOVE AVERAGE BECOMES OUTSTANDING (VERY DESIRABLE) CITIZENS

Whereas the below-average student is considered abnormal, the above-average student is oftentimes labeled "gifted and talented." Cast as highly intelligent, creative, and worthy of high esteem, these children are viewed as the most "promising," and hence desirable, citizens. Yet, it must be noted that whenever the idea of gifted and talented learners is invoked, it also evokes constitutions of the nonideal, reinforcing the notion of second-class citizens. Harwood and Hymphry (2008) argued that "discourses of exceptionality are not focused on categories of difference, but rather configure new notions of the ideal student" (p. 374). Definitions of gifted students usually reflect their "extraordinary" abilities and subsequent achievements. In contrast, although considered normal, the average student is also nonideal (in terms of originality, creativity, innovation). Abilities and achievements of average students also lie within socially determined academic and behavioral boundaries that serve to establish and reinforce the borders of ordinary. In questioning the relentless emphasis on pressurizing many students with "disabilities" to become average (and be restored to normalcy), Brantlinger

(2004) wryly remarked, "Indeed, as no one recommends with-holding further education from advantaged children to make them the same as the statistical average, why insist that those below average 'catch up'?" (p. 492). In a similar vein, Harwood and Hymphry stated, "non-exceptional or nonideal students are branded by what was being *done for* them as opposed to what they *can do* or can achieve" (p. 374). We emphasize a simple but important point: Students labeled by difference are defined as outliers within schools according to what they have not done, cannot do, or can do very well in relation to the curriculum. This institutional disposition obscures the notion that all individuals have strengths and weaknesses that should be considered when teaching them, meriting teaching practices for all students that balance both talents and needs (Levine, 1994).

THE NORMATIVE CENTER OF SCHOOLS

There is clearly a normative center around which schools gravitate. Like gravity itself, the force exists despite being invisible. One instance, for example, lies in how tracking systems mirror a class-based society that does not recognize itself as such (Brantlinger, 2003). In brief, school hierarchies are akin to unacknowledged deep social class divisions. Upper-class children likely attend prestigious private schools (preserving power, influence, wealth); students labeled "gifted and talented" and "advanced" are placed in top tracks (paralleling middle-class maintenance or aspirations of working class); average or normal classes are attended by working-class students (paralleling working-class maintenance or aspirations by poor); and lower track, remedial, and segregated special education classes are attended by poor students (paralleling working-class slippage). Although attempts at detracking have been successful in some cases, old habits die hard, including institutional resistance to working against the separation of students along class and race lines (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Indeed, Blanchett (2006) interrogated the ways in which these class-based disparities are problematically and inextricably intertwined with racial disparities, arguing that class disparities intersect with White privilege and racism to produce at least four "subsystems of American public education" (p. 25): (a) a general education system for children who are disproportionately White and perceived to be "normal" or without disabilities; (b) a general education system for children who are disproportionately African American or of color and perceived to be "normal" or without disabilities; (c) a special education system for children who are disproportionately White and perceived as having disabilities; and (d) a special education system for children who are

disproportionately African American and identified as having disabilities. Blanchett's analysis of the complex intersections of White privilege and racism with ableist and classist social structures is compelling and raises significant questions about how the work of creating more equitable schooling experiences needs to be conducted. Although we must be very careful not to oversimplify and overgeneralize, the hierarchies outlined above capture the reality of the majority of American children and youth. Operating within this highly stratified structure, how do children learn about normalcy as they pass through the process of schooling?

Slee (2004) called attention to the divisive nature of "special" schools in terms of how nondisabled individuals come to perceive themselves in relation to those with disabilities. Reflecting on being an "able-bodied" child in a segregated mainstream classroom, he noted, "normal became a very powerful concept established in childhood that took some time to jettison. The definition of normality for us [nondisabled children] was simple. They [disabled children] aren't like us" (p. 24, in Rice, 2006). The concept of *us* and *them* serves to "other" people with disabilities as the sense of normalcy within normates quickly becomes accepted without question; normates believe that these social arrangements of segregation are how it should be, and continue to be, simply because "that's the way it is."

It is not uncommon for this kind of unquestioned acceptance to emerge among graduate students attending our classes to prepare for a degree and subsequent state certification in special education. In what is often the only course on inclusive education in a master's degree program, the vast majority of students experience discomfort when asked to engage with the notion of normativity. Many describe a "jolt" in consciousness that destabilizes their neat and tidy conceptions of where and how to educate students with disabilities (McClean, 2008). Interestingly, a number of graduate students initially become defensive and advocate for the status quo, resisting any contemplation that they, as normates, are part of the problem. Smith (2008) pointed out, "The borders of normative landscapes are at once clearly marked, closely guarded, and created in such a way as to make both the boundaries and their inhabitants invisible to themselves" (p. 419). An engaging, reflective, and critical stance toward these normative landscapes is necessary to reframe notions of disability and difference. The alternative, that is, a nonengaged, nonreflective, and uncritical stance, provides normates with a cocoon of oblivious self-assuredness that separates and distances them from the abnormates they define and are unable to understand in any other way.

At the normative center stands the imagined and mythical normal child, an abstraction that has become deeply rooted in our collective

educational consciousness. General educators often claim, "I haven't been trained in special education" (therefore implicitly stating, "I cannot teach those children"). They frequently ask, "What about the 'regular' students? Doesn't inclusion take away from their education?" Even within general education classes, many teachers proclaim, "I can't get to them all, so I just teach to the middle." Although it is imperative that these concerns be unpacked and explored, such disparate comments all circle around an unexamined normative center, a center built on the desirability (and therefore expectation) of all students being taught at the same time, in the same way, learning at the same rate, and demonstrating their knowledge and skills in the same way, presumably on the same examinations. Teachers and graduate students, of course, are responding to the naturalized framing of regimented and exclusionary schooling—to the very fact that special education *exists* as an option to segregate children (Reid & Valle, 2004). A departure from this perspective must be built from radical critique of the discursive practices through which our beliefs about schools and children develop.

CARVING OUT THE NORMAL CHILD

The content pages of any standard introduction to a special education college text usually reveal a category-by-category approach to understanding disability (e.g., Friend, 2007; Hallahan, Kauffmann, & Pullen, 2008; Kirk, Gallagher, Anastasiow, & Coleman, 2006). "High incidence" categories such as "learning disabilities," "speech and language disorders," "emotional and behavioral disorders," and "mental retardation" are often dealt with first. Then, "low incidence" disabilities such as "visual impairment and blindness," "hearing impairments and D/deafness," "significant cognitive disabilities," "physical impairments," and so on, are addressed. At the end of the table of contents, "gifted and talented" appears, somewhat anomalous to its predecessors.

Such texts function as the blueprint of special education courses, with new and improved versions constantly arriving (usually unsolicited) in mailboxes of university instructors. Dividing the texts into chapters that mirror 15 class sessions, corporate companies exert undue influence on the content knowledge and pacing of courses about children ascribed disabled (Brantlinger, 2006). Disturbingly, the unimaginative approach of marketing a disability-of-the-week akin to items on a checkoff list ignores the socially constructed nature of disability, a reification of human difference accorded to a segment of the population. College professionals become so conditioned to this predictable format that when reviewing proposals for new texts seeking to break the mold, they still

request a categorical chapter-a-week approach. Even more problematic is the texts' overwhelming depiction of disability not as a natural part of human diversity and difference, but rather as a dysfunction, disorder, or deficit.

We take issue with the limitations of such medically categorized texts, finding them disingenuous to the various social, political, and historical frames in which "disability" is made meaningful. In highlighting how knowledge about disability is staged within and generated from many foundational college classes, we are left with an invisible elephant in the middle of room: the normal child. To illustrate our point, it is useful to imagine the entire special education textbook as block of stone, and each disability category/chapter as a piece that must be chipped off, one fragment after another, so that all physical, sensory, cognitive, and emotional differences are systematically removed. When all these categories/chapters are read, and each piece taken away, what exactly is left? The *absence of disability* must, by inference, render the statue of a normal child. Why, we then ask, is there not a chapter in these texts titled "The Normal Child"? Why is that child allowed to serve as the invisible elephant in the room, an omnipresent phenomenon never required to materialize in solid form? The answer lies in a collective tacit belief that the state of "normal" can only exist if it is disability-free. As fledgling teacher-readers systematically chip away at this block, by a process of elimination, they are unwittingly drawn into constructing normalcy through carving out—by default—the mythical normal child. So amorphous a construct, any deviation from what might be expected about learning and behavior becomes a concern. Judgments made during classroom practice are, however, relational and subjective. They are often based on the teacher's cultural background and values (Ferguson, 2001) and always mediated through the child's interaction with the *particular* school curriculum and within a rather specific set of discursive rules for attentiveness and behavior (Collins, 2003; Harry & Klingner, 2006; McDermott & Varenne, 1998).

There are, of course, significant material consequences that emerge from the "discursive fact" of normal and abnormal bodies. For example, there is no mistaking the eugenics mentality that lurks within our institutionalized school practices for identifying differences—practices that Baker (2002) called the "hunt for disability": How can we find subaverage (disabled) citizens? What are ways to best deal with the (disabled) problem? How can they (disabled) be moved away from the general population, and where can they go? How will they be monitored and helped (and perhaps limited) in planning their futures? Of course, this is a morally indefensible position, leading Smith (2008) to observe, "So the

work of eugenics involves a kind of disappearance act—those inscribed as Normal cannot (must not) see themselves as such" (p. 423). The apparatus of special education, including IQ tests, observations, segregated classrooms and schools, specialized psychologists, various service providers, and therapists galore, all conspire to reify human difference into one of disability that marks individuals from what is deemed normal. Although usually well intended, such practitioners and chosen practices are inherently ableist because they "hope to turn everyone into one kind of being at least at some level" (Baker, p. 675), meaning the normal child. Baker continued, "All forms of schooling teleologically seek to govern, discipline, and engineer students' being toward some named ideal . . . whether one agrees with the ideal(s) so named as the goals of education" (p. 676). An ethereal construct at best, "the normal child" guards the gate to general education as hopefuls are compelled to approximate this illusion.

Ultimately, the full apparatus of special education coalesces via the reification of disciplinary knowledge, the desire of the state for a normalized citizenry, and the conceptualization of schooling and curriculum as a one-size-fits-most enterprise (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995). A plethora of pathologies are named in a dictionary of disorders based on what is expected of students in strictly manufactured conditions. As Baker (2002) noted, "A preferred style or way of learning only becomes a learning disability, for example, in light of the impatience and structure of an institution that presents things in a limited number of ways with rigid expectations for what counts as a timely performance" (p. 685). For example, learning disabilities cannot exist without the notion of what a "normal" child is expected to do. Sleeter (1987) artfully constructed an argument that the concept of learning disabilities (LD) arose from a series of contingencies in the late 1950s, including the raising of educational standards in response to Sputnik. When a segment of the population (middle-class, White) children—hitherto successful in school—became "failures," affluent and well-connected parents (of children in this new group) lobbied for acknowledgment of learning disabilities as a neuropsychological explanation for unsuccessful school performance. Hence, the term LD became encompassed in law, enshrined in educational discourse, and used as the basis for providing additional support for specific children. In these multiple manifestations and self-affirming processes, LD became reified, morphing from an idea into an actual "thing." Once turned into fact, the "disabled learner" is now a subject that can be acted upon. "Special" and advantageous treatment is now justifiable, and exclusion is also permissible.

Similar arguments have been made about other "school-related"

disabilities such as emotional disturbance (Harwood, 2006), speech and language impairment (Kovarsky, Maxwell, & Duchan, 1999), cognitive impairment/mental retardation (Biklen & Duchan, 1994), and attention deficit disorder (Danforth & Navarro, 2001). When combined, these categories account for approximately 85% of all students with disabilities in schools, indicating large-scale dysfunctionality of school organization and operations in their conceptions of and response to human difference (Hehir, 2005). Although a cursory summary of national statistics can neither capture the proportional variations among individual schools and communities nor overlap across demographic categories, we wish to highlight a few figures for the sake of our conceptual argument. Students identified with disabilities accounted for 13.5% of the children served in American public schools in 2006–2007; 12.2% of the population in 2004–2005 were English language learners (ELLs) served in special programs, and 20% of all students spoke a language other than English at home. A total of 6.7% of students were "gifted and talented" in 2004. Minorities—Hispanics, Blacks, Asians/Pacific Islanders, American Indians/Alaska Natives—constitute about 33% of the U.S. population. After we also consider children deemed "at risk," those with attention deficit disorder (not always served in special education), those who are poor, those with nonnormative family arrangements, those who identify as queer, those extremely beautiful and not-so-beautiful, and so on, we are left with our initial question: Who *are* the "normal" children?

## DISSOLVING THE NORMATIVE CENTER

Systems of organization in schools that segregate and marginalize students with disabilities have been critiqued as justifying administrative needs through the use of pseudo-scientific classifications (Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004; Skrtic, 1991). For example, could we not view schools that persist in the sifting and separating of students according to what are ultimately cultural definitions of disability as functioning abnormally *themselves* (Brantlinger, 2004)? It is the project of DSE scholars to turn the tables on the enforcement of normalcy to expose the pathology of pathologizing schoolchildren. Inscribing a child as "special" actually means that "the [subsequent] treatment is often premised on morphing the recipient into accepting uncritically the subjectivities of ableist normativity" (Baker, 2002, p. 688). Furthermore, attempts to normalize schoolchildren into restrictive and able-bodied notions of normalcy creates "kinds of anguish that parents, teachers, and children often experience and express" (p. 692).

What can be done to disrupt this damaging notion of a normative

center? Graham and Slee (2008) incited a call to "exorcising presences at [the] center" (p. 83). They argued that "an authentically inclusive education invites the denaturalization of 'normalcy' to arrive at a ground zero point from which we banish idealizations of center" (p. 84). The interrelated and largely synonymous concepts of average, ordinary, normal, and the ubiquitous "standard" must be looked at with a critical eye. If we rely on a Foucauldian lens through which to consider the proliferation of subfields of education, including special education, we are able to understand articulation of these strands as the apparatus through which discursive facts about normal and abnormal are circulated. To classify a child as "disabled," "ELL," "gifted," "at risk," "diverse," "of color" and so on signifies deviation from the norm. Little else can be derived about *individuals* within these groups, given that diversity among those even within the same (expansive) category outweighs their similarities. Fields of study, including teaching English as a second language (TESOL), gifted education, multicultural education, and special education, developed to differentiate groups of nonnormative learners—often to specifically instantiate the value, recognition, and belonging of the group to education, writ large. However, they also *maintain* the subjects of whom we speak when considered in terms of a more encompassing idea of inclusive education. Our [re]claiming of "inclusive education" signifies a broadening of the systems in which inclusion "makes sense." As a concept, it can serve as a unifying construct for radical reform of exclusionary notions and practices that reify ideologies expressed in "regular" education and the construction of the "normal" child.

## BEGINNING WITH QUESTION-POSING

We have established that the myth of the normal child is a notion well-embedded within the collective consciousness of public schooling. In fact, this myth has existed for so long that it appears we are unable to conceptualize and respond to children in any other way.

We believe that Foucault's (1972) notion of "the statement" is a useful conceptualization toward our project of problematizing "types" of students, such as those deemed as ELL, gifted, disabled, or at risk. For example, we could learn much about the discursive practices that constitute each category by asking ourselves questions such as the following:

1. *What is the relationship between the sayable and the visible?* What gets said in education (e.g., theories, diagnoses, labels, legal interpretations), and what is visible (e.g., student files, written documentations, test

results, spatial segregation)? How are sets of statements organized within the intersecting systems of education, medicine, and law?

2. *What is the relationship between one statement and other statements?* How are statements ordered? In what ways do statements emanating from the federal and state governments interact with statements constructed within local contexts of education?

3. *What are the rules for the use of statements?* What are the procedures used by government authorities, school administrators, teachers, and parents to promote some statements and not other equally feasible statements about children labeled outside the realm of "normal"? How do some statements come to be recognized as Truth and not others?

4. *What positions are established between subjects?* What is the process by which statements construct subject positions in education? How are the various players in education positioned within the discourse (e.g., psychologist, teacher, specialist, parent, student, teacher aide, principal, special education administrator, physician)?

5. *What are the "surfaces of emergence"?* Where are the *places* within which "objects" (i.e., students deemed outside the realm of "normal") are designated and acted upon?

6. *What are the institutions through which statements are dispersed?* In what ways do the institutions of education acquire authority and limit the discourse? How is the authority of law, medicine, psychology, and education manifested within subsystems of special education, gifted education, and English as a second language, for example?

7. *What are the "forms of specification"?* What are systematic ways in which children are targeted for special, remedial, or accelerated educational services? What role does the testing industry play in the construction of normal/abnormal? How does the vocabulary of education construct children as disabled or deficient? How does the classification of children as normal/abnormal interact with other educational phenomena?

We offer these questions as a means to probe the ways in which systems in education, and arrangements of people, have come to exist in their current configuration. More important, we also use these questions as seeds to begin germinating new thoughts, ideas, and possibilities of how things *can* change. As Gallagher (2006) noted, "At the core of disability studies lies a potentially subversive idea. Succinctly stated, the idea is that knowledge, and even reality itself, is not discovered but rather is constructed by us human beings" (p. 63). In the section that follows, we consider possibilities for expanding the interdisciplinary work that has

begun in DSE and offer suggestions about the promise of change by nurturing existing and potential alliances.

## (RE)CLAIMING OF "INCLUSIVE EDUCATION": TOWARD COHESION IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

In considering (re)claiming inclusive education toward cohesion in educational reform, we are reminded of Kliebard's (2004) seminal analysis of the various movements in American curriculum reform that have all been identified as "progressive," and his question of how to reconcile the wide disparity of political and ideological positions that these various "progressive" movements represent. Rather than trying to come to a shared, stable consensus of what constitutes "progressive" education and what does not (a consensus that has thus far proved elusive), or trying to stake out one particular subgroup and define it as the *real* "progressive" education movement, excluding "everything that may be inconsistent with it from what may legitimately be defined as progressive education" (p. 286), Kliebard proposed that the variety of reform subgroups "can be defined in terms of rather consistent and recognizable ideological positions" (p. 286) and that

> progressivism "writ large" . . . becomes a reaction against traditional structures and practices but with multiple ideological positions and programs of reform emerging. Although efforts to define progressive education seem to have reached a dead end, it nevertheless seems possible to identify reasonably coherent subgroups and movements that functioned within what we usually think of as the progressive era. In no sense, however, do they add up to one progressive education movement. (p. 287)

Similarly, we understand inclusive education "writ large" as a reaction against traditional structures and practices that marginalized and segregated students with identified disabilities, with multiple ideological positions and programs of reform emerging. Although efforts to define inclusive education may appear at times to be a discursive and political dead end, tied as the term is to special education and therefore to issues specific to disability and to place, we concur with our international DSE colleagues (Azzopardi, 2008; Harwood & Hymphry, 2008; Nes, 2004; Kinsella & Senior, 2008; Van Drenth, 2008; Van Hove et al., 2008; Willis & McLean, 2008) that the term is worth (re)claiming. In the process of doing so, it becomes incumbent upon us to explicitly identify implications for theory, research, and practice—particularly in light of the

political and ideological shifts that we are urging as a reasonably coherent subgroup of "inclusive" educational reform (topics explored and discussed in our closing article). For now, we agree with Thomas and Loxley's (2007) assertion that

> children's difficulties at school do not arise solely from putative "learning difficulties" but may arise from a range of factors related to disability, language, family income, cultural origin, gender or ethnic origin and it increasingly seems clear that it is inappropriate to differentiate among these as far as inclusivity is concerned. . . . The notion of inclusion therefore . . . is about providing a framework within which all children—regardless of ability, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin—can be valued equally, treated with respect, and provided with real opportunities at school. (p. 124)

The framework of valuing each individual child equally is a simple idea, yet it calls for some potentially complex interactions among disciplines if we are to understand the impact of managing each identity marker.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS WITH DSE

Although many scholars working within the relatively new discipline of DSE self-identify as critical special educators, Gabel and Connor (2008) noted that others are primarily located in educational sociology (Michalko, 2002; Titchkosky, 2001), educational foundations (Erevelles, 2000), and curriculum studies (Baker, 2002; Selden, 2000), as well as education policy (Kinsella & Senior, 2008) and many other subfields. Moreover, there are special educators who do not identify with disability studies but who share aligned perspectives, such as Thomas Hehir's (2005) focus on ableism within schooling practices.

Some scholars regard DSE as a necessarily interdisciplinary project if we are to deeply understand the interplay between ableism and other aspects of culture. For example, several researchers have explored ways in which both subtle and blatant forms of institutional racism in education have served to actively disable students of color over the decades (Ferri & Connor, 2006; Reid & Knight, 2006). In addition, others have developed intersectional analyses on the interstices of race and disability (Ferri, 2008; Mitchell, 2006), class and disability (Brantlinger, 2003), sexual orientation and disability (McRuer, 2006), and gender and disability (Erevelles & Mutua, 2005), each revealing unique interanimations between different markers of identity. These works demonstrate the

versatility of DSE, as well as highlight how it is similar to many critical movements in education. Each discipline mentioned above centers on the experiences of people who have traditionally been excluded from the normative center of society. As DSE scholar Len Barton pointed out, inclusive schooling is not only about the "'rights' of disabled children, [but is] part of a wider critique of that which constitutes itself as 'normal.'" He continued,

> Our own starting point is that inclusive education is inextricably linked to a political critique of social values and practices and the structures and institutions which they support. . . . In struggling for the implementation of inclusive practice we are engaging in a political process of transformation. (2000, p. 11, as cited in Clough & Corbett, 2000, pp. 52–53)

In keeping with Barton's assertion, our aim is not only to focus on the margins, but also, perhaps more critically, to deconstruct the center. Moreover, we are able to home in on unacknowledged ableist assumptions of privilege if we do not focus solely on marginalization. In short, unraveling the construct of the "normal" child as fiction exposes the institutionalized rationalization for how and why children and youth become positioned as "abnormal" within schools. That said, we agree that there is much more work to be done in further theorizing this area, work that can perhaps be best achieved through interdisciplinary alliances.

SUPPORTING COALITIONS

We believe that engaging with others both within and outside the academy is essential if we are to forge change toward achieving access, equity, and social justice. Crossing self-imposed lines and creating coalitions with scholars from other disciplines and fields (as well as educators, parents, families, activists, advocates, people with disabilities, and so on) allow us a stronger political, scholarly, and community base from which to challenge the exclusionary forces at play. Commitment to, and collaboration with, those who share concerns about marginalization, segregation, and exclusion of diverse peoples who "do not fit" the norm is imperative (Fine & Weis, 2003; Hamre, Oyler, & Bejoian, 2006; hooks, 1994; Nieto, 2005).

Such commitment and collaboration—grounded in an ethic of care, equity, social justice, reform, and the need for change—are also inherent within other disciplines, such as multicultural studies (Banks, 1995), gender studies (Bettie, 2003), critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1992),

critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1993), and queer theory (Warner, 1999). In *Teaching to Transgress,* bell hooks (1994) noted that "despite the contemporary focus on multiculturalism in our society, particularly in education, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of ways that classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive" (p. 35). Her sentiments about multiculturalism are equally relevant in regard to the potential transformation of ways in which issues of gender, sexual orientation, and disability are addressed in the classroom.

Giroux and McLaren (1992) have spoken against the limitations of "the present historical conjuncture, with its appeal to universality, its totalitarian view of history, its ethnocentric embrace of culture, and its celebration of greed and individualism" and appealed for "reclaiming democracy as a site of struggle within a wider socialist vision, and developing a radical ethic that rejects finality and consensus for the voice of difference and dialogue" (p. 20). However, although scholars from numerous fields of study share their vision and sense of agency to challenge dominant, normative discourses, many have not yet moved from a singular location, opting to remain content within their own academic comfort zone. Gustafson (2007) summarized the state of affairs quite clearly when she asserted that "just as many scholars who bring an anti-subordination perspective to their scholarship have neglected disability, so too have many disability studies scholars overlooked critical scholarship." Indeed, Gustafson's critique echoes Erevelles, Kanga, and Middleton's (2006) cogent analysis of the uneasy, provocative, and often distant relationship between many critical race theorists and disability studies scholars, which noted that many "critical race theorists have actively sought to distance race from any associations with disability" (p. 78) and that, conversely, "some scholars in the area of special education have also sought to distance themselves from analyses that link race and disability together" (p. 79). Despite the relative dearth of theorizing around the intersections between race and disability, Erevelles et al. noted that by reading both bodies of literature against one another, one can see the ways in which critical race theorists and disability studies scholars have "unwittingly collaborated" to "(re)theorize difference as a historical, social, and economic construct that is (re)constituted in complex ways by contesting ideological configurations" (p. 80). Thus, the value derived from such collaborations across the academy can work both ways. Indeed, Erevelles et al. suggested that rather than addressing these

> political and conceptual tensions between different minority groups by claiming that the collective experience of marginality can be construed as the common thread linking these axes of dif-

> ference[,] . . . it is more important to move beyond this obvious
> commonality and treat disability as a critical theoretical cate-
> gory—one that can also effectively account for the theorizing of
> difference along the axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality
> (Erevelles, 2000; Middleton, Rollins, & Harley, 1999). (p. 78)

Thus, it seems that disability, rather than being added to a master list dedicated to facets-of-identity, with each item serving as a locus for marginalization and oppression, may instead better function as a useful theoretical organizing construct in dismantling the politics of difference, marginalization, and oppression along multiple other axes of identity. The potential for theoretical and political generativity that such alliances may yield is exciting and provocative. We are eager to engage with colleagues from across disciplines in this developing dialogue, hence the invitation to scholars in this special issue who engage in a variety of fields, including critical pedagogy, critical race theory, feminist theory, multiculturalism, postcolonial theory, queer studies, social foundations of education, sociology, special education, third-world feminist theory, and urban education. If each discipline only engages in and promotes its "own agenda," it forgoes opportunities to experience mutual benefits that include experiencing the power of expansive and diverse dialogues, a deeper and more complex knowledge of exclusive practices on a larger scale, and the strength and synergy that coalitions can provide. Disability can therefore serve as a framework through which to see other experiences, and other frameworks through which to see disability.

While possessing hope and optimism, we also know that our work continues ahead in creating and maintaining a more inclusive society. We firmly believe that disability studies and disability studies in education have much to offer scholars, activists, and artists—alongside individuals with disabilities, their families, and community members. Ron Michalko (2008) has pointed out that in DS, disability is not a useless abnormality, but rather a teacher that disrupts conventional views of the normal body/mind. Similarly, we believe that DSE can educate citizens to question school organization, personnel, and practices that perpetuate the damaging myth of normal/average/ordinary/typical/standard children. Recognizing commonality among the many critical traditions in their problematization of "normal"—including a shared need to disrupt notions of what constitutes a "normal" body/mind—will give rise to numerous opportunities to unite and further develop nascent alliances.

*Notes*

1. In 1999, a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)—known as Disability Studies in Education (DSE)—was formed, marking "the formal beginning" (Gabel, 2005, p. 1) of what had been a long-standing trend (Taylor, 2006) in educational research and practice of extending the theoretical perspectives, frameworks, and approaches of DS (in the humanities and social sciences) to issues of educational policy and practice. According to Taylor, what distinguishes DSE from traditional DS generally is a practical concern with schooling practices. In contrast to a traditional special education perspective and consistent with a disability studies perspective, DSE examines disability in social and cultural context. Constructions of disability are questioned, and special education assumptions and practices are challenged.

2. P.L.94-142 is considered a major law that guaranteed every child with a disability in the United States the right to a "free and appropriate" public education. Previous to this law, school districts could deny students with disabilities access to an education. It has been reauthorized several times under the name of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), most recently reauthorized and renamed in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act.

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SUSAN BAGLIERI is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus in New York City. Her research interests are teacher education, inclusive education, and disability studies.

LYNNE M. BEJOIAN is a committed educator to the full inclusion of and access for all persons with disabilities in all aspects of human endeavors. She is an experienced disability advocate and services professional. Currently, she teaches disability studies in education within the City University of New York. Research areas of interest include women and

disability, media representations and disability, inclusive teaching and collaboration, and spirituality and disability.

ALICIA A. BRODERICK is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her work is grounded in commitments to pursue inclusive schooling from a collaborative stance informed by disability studies in education (DSE) and other criticalist perspectives. Her research and teaching interests include critical explorations of cultural representations of dis/ability (particularly autism), and the role of DSE in pursuing socially just and inclusive schooling.

DAVID J. CONNOR is an associate professor in the School of Education at Hunter College, City University of New York. He also teaches a course in disability studies in education for CUNY's School of Professional Studies and is a faculty member at large of CUNY's Graduate Center doctoral program in urban education. His research interests include disability, learning disabilities, inclusive education, and general issues of social justice.

JAN VALLE is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture at the City College of New York. Her research interests include parents and families of children with disabilities, parent and professional collaboration in schools, disability studies in education, and disability and the arts.