**The Disability Studies in Education Annual Conference: Explorations of Working Within, and Against, Special Education Dr. David J. Connor Professor/Chairperson, Department of Special Education, Hunter College, City University of New York E-mail:** [**dconnor@hunter.cuny.edu**](mailto:dconnor@hunter.cuny.edu)

**Keywords:**

disability studies in education, critical special educators, teacher education, research in education, ideology

Abstract

This article focuses on the Disability Studies in Education (DSE) conference as an example of expanding disability studies (DS). First, the origins, purpose, and history of the DSE conference are described as a valid alternative discipline to special education. Second, the following three questions are posed in relation to DSE scholars: (1) To what degree can we transgress within existing structures of teacher education and doctoral programs without being provided lip-service, coopted, or dismissed as ideological versus practical? (2) To what degree can we engage (and critique) the field of special education within its journals and conferences—and provide a greater plurality of perspectives within them? And, (3) how can we strategize to widely circulate ideas within DSE throughout education and its related fields? Presentations from the 2012 DSE conference are analyzed, described, and used as a collective response to help answer these questions. Fourth, DSE scholars share post-conference thoughts on the future of DSE. Finally, the deep debt of DSE to DS is acknowledged, along with speculation about possible ways in which DSE may help inform the growth of DS.

**Introduction: The Birth of Disability Studies in Education**

When I began my career as a special education teacher in 1987, I was immediately taken aback by how public schools were configured, and the forceful justification to separate education into two realms, general and special. Labels used such as learning disability (LD) and emotional disturbance (ED), and terms such as "co-morbidity" of disabilities such as LD and ED combined, were used to determine the physical location, class type placement, forms of instruction, and teachers for disabled students. In brief, I recognized that the structural systems and cultural practices within education tended to further actively disable children who already struggled to succeed in schools. As a new teacher, it seemed to me that schools were overwhelming, oppressive places driven in part by a narrow, rigid understanding of human differences.

Everything pertaining to the combined concepts of *disability* and *education* was unquestioningly funneled into the default box of special education. Special education, therefore, was an unquestionable reality. It existed as evidenced through laws, institutional certifications, academic degrees, teacher training programs, administrators, school organizations, professionals, textbooks, research, and so on. However, this "reality" disturbed me profoundly and questions constantly arose. Could there be two types of people in the world—disabled and nondisabled? How could we be one hundred percent sure? And, even if this was true, why did they have to be segregated in schools from one another in dis/ability-apartheid? The youth I taught were largely from poor or working class families, some immigrant, almost all children of color. I never saw them "mirrored" or represented in professional literature; special education journals were filled with tables and charts that did not make much sense to me, but sounded authoritative. In brief, from the moment I began there was great dissonance between the established, academic field of special education and the lived reality of those who functioned within it on a daily basis, both students and professionals.

I reconciled myself to working in what I saw as an unjust system, intolerant of students who could not fit into the mold required in schools, and so instead, I focused my energy upon supporting inclusive education—the poorly articulated trend that still seemed rich in promise. Tellingly, however, at the same time, I noticed a significant level of resistance within the field of special education toward the inclusion of students with disabilities (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995), and found such a stance antithetical to the desires of most people with disabilities (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). It was then I realized that the field of special education was not a reality *per se*, but rather a largely unquestioned monopoly of thought that had influenced how children with certain differences—be they physical, cognitive, emotional, sensory—were conceptualized. The trouble, in a nutshell, was that special education was predicated on a deficit-based model and always focused on the disability to the point that it symbolized the entire child. The complexities of all other aspects of identity, experience, and context that showed a three-dimensional, multi-faceted human being were a distant second to the primary interest of disability. Indeed, the disability served as the most single important determination of the child's experience in school—building location, curriculum, teacher, level of additional services and so on. Even then, I noticed many professionals seemed more concerned with issues of legal compliance rather than the actual lives of children. It seemed like school professionals and researchers alike were going about their business without truly acknowledging the lived realities of the children, youth and families whose best interests they claimed were at heart.

**Coming to Know Disability Studies in Education**

While Disability Studies had grown as an interdisciplinary academic field of inquiry since the 1980s, Disability Studies in Education is a relatively new phenomenon. I initially came into contact with it during my doctoral program and immediately found a "home" that reflected my long-held beliefs about human differences that were not represented within special educational structures, schooling systems, and educational research. I must acknowledge how fortunate I have been in crossing paths with a small constellation of both national and international colleagues who led the way in forging an alternative framework to special education for conceptualizing issues of education and disability. The establishment and growth of DSE has kept me grounded, informed, hopeful, equipped, motivated, and challenged in terms of how to best help educators to educate children with diverse abilities. DSE has done this through being applied to, and pushing the boundaries of, existing research, theory, practice, and policy. Propelled by the need to circulate the story of DSE as a means of providing an alternative paradigm to the master-narrative of special education, my colleagues and I have written about its growth in various venues (see, for example: Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2010; Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008; Connor, Gabel, Owen, & Peters, n.d.; Connor & Gabel, 2013).

Without wishing to be unnecessarily repetitive of previously published accounts, I will recall several key events that triggered the formal establishment of DSE. In 1999 Linda Ware hosted a small international conference funded by the Spencer Foundation to challenge the ways that ideology explicitly and implicitly shaped inclusive education practice and to broaden the critical special education discursive community informed by international scholars of disability [1](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4257/3597" \l "endnote01). Funding was targeted for graduate students' travel to Rochester to join these well-respected scholars in close conversation as most were known only through their writing. Ware's conference extended discussion of ideology and cases of non-recognition through critical examination of *exclusion* across multiple educational contexts (Ware, 2004). Some months later, Scot Danforth submitted a proposal for a panel to the national conference of TASH (The Association for Severely Handicapped) in Chicago under the name of Coalition for Open Inquiry in Special Education (COISE). The session was titled "Ways of Constructing Lives and Disabilities: The Case for Open Inquiry." His co-presenters included Lous Heshusius, Ellen Brantlinger, Chris Kliewer, and Phil Ferguson. They asked questions such as: Why should a person with a disability, a teacher, or a parent care what academics say in their research and writings? Why should they care about the seemingly distant and esoteric writings in research journals and university textbooks? What is happening in these worlds that makes a difference? The panelists discussed the social and political value of current trends and developments in disability research and scholarship, emphasizing the importance of inquiry and writing for persons concerned with the social valuation and inclusion of persons with disabilities. Arguing for "open inquiry," they urged for expansion and diversification of what was deemed legitimate and valuable writing within special education journals. In addition, they were highly critical of special education's unquestioned acceptance of positivism as the foundational paradigm of the field. Simply put, positivism is a way of doing social science that imitates the ideology and practices of the natural sciences asserting detached objectivity and employing quantitative measurement as ways to find "The Truth." However, as critical special educators were aware of, this "hard science of disability" contributed to a series of unfortunate assumptions in the field of special education, including:

* disability is a primarily bio-physical phenomenon consisting of a deficit condition existing within an individual;
* service professionals know better than persons with disabilities and family members what is best for a served individual;
* diagnosed or labeled individuals should be separated from the mainstream population for purposes of treatment.

In contrast, the panel explored alternative ways of envisioning, talking about, and writing about the lives and possibilities of persons with disabilities including many traditions of scholarship (social science, humanities, arts, spiritual traditions, etc.) and the numerous voices that have something to say about disability issues—in particular international voices convened at Ware's earlier conference. The moment seemed ripe for carving out institutional support and encouraging transgressive perspectives, methodologies, and research.

After much discussion about what the group should be called and with whom it should affiliate—TASH, Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), or the American Education Research Association (AERA)—Susan Gabel and Linda Ware urged affiliation with "Disability Studies." At the same time, Susan informed those assembled that she had already submitted an application with that name to AERA to form a Special Interest Group (SIG), which was approved, and subsequently met for the first time in 2000. Since then, the discipline of Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) has steadily grown from its "informal" beginnings.

**The Annual Disability Studies in Education Conference**

The following year, DSE launched its inaugural conference in Chicago hosted by National Louis University. As a doctoral student from Teachers College, Columbia University, I attended and presented with co-researchers from my cohort. It was here that we found like-minded educators who were interested in reconceptualizing disability and education *beyond* the narrow confines of special education. As a result of the conference success, it became an annual event that helped nurture and grow the emerging field of DSE. It is worth listing the themes of each year to provide readers of DSQ with a sense of how critical special educators have encouraged transgressive perspectives, methodologies, and research and along the way, grappled with their identities as "outsider-insiders" (Connor, 2013).

* **2001** *Disability Studies and Education: Critical Reflections on the Themes of Policy, Practice, and Theory,* National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.
* **2002** *Education, Social Action, and the Politics of Disability,* National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.
* **2003** *Traversing the Chasm between Disability Studies and Special Education,* National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.
* **2004** *Reforming, Restructuring, Resisting in Special Education,* The Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness at Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA.
* **2005** *The 30th Anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and its Impact on American Society,* Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY.
* **2006** *Disability Studies and Inclusive Education: Negotiating Tensions and Integrating Research, Policy, and Practice,* Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.
* **2007** *Disability Studies and Inclusive Education: Implications for Practice?* National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.
* **2008** *Mitigating Exclusion: Building Alliances toward Inclusive Education Reform in Pedagogy and Policy,* Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, NY.
* **2009** *Righting Education Wrongs: Disability Studies in Education Policy and Law,* Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
* **2010** *From "Handicapped Family" to "Partners in Policy": Disability Studies in Education and the Dialogue with Families and Natural Networks,* University of Ghent, Belgium.
* **2011** *Rethinking Accessibility for the Next Decade of DSE,* National-Louis University, Chicago.
* **2012** *Contemplating Disability Studies in Education Throughout Life: In School and Beyond*, Hunter College, City University of New York, NY.
* **2013** *(Re)Imagining and (Re)Building Education for All*, University of Christchurch, New Zealand.
* **2014** *Learning from the Past. Ensuring the Future*, University of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

Even the most cursory look at this list reveals a desire for DSE to advance changing education and society as the recurrence of "politics," "policy," "practice," "pedagogy," "inclusion," and "law," conjure a collective stance of critical educators interested in disability who seek to "rethink," "reimagine," and "reform" schools and society. We recognize that the radical change we seek cannot be achieved overnight, but take some satisfaction in *creating* different ways to understand disability that can be useful in undoing the damage done by limited, self-imposed, and oppressive framings of disability proliferated by the field of special education. Thus, DSE scholars (many of whom also refer to themselves as critical special educators) believe DSE provides social, political, cultural, and historical understandings of disability that reframe how all educators can better understand human differences. By challenging the hegemony of predominantly medical, psychological, and "scientific" knowledge used within special education, scholars in DSE offer different means of understanding and responding to human differences that have come to be signified as disabilities. Such differences are therefore no longer considered an abnormality or aberration; instead, they are seen as normal.

Since 2000, a world-wide network of scholars have published research and position papers, created several book series, guest-edited journals, and developed tenets describing DSE. Their work openly acknowledges the few scholars in special education who went before them to critique an insular, positivistic field at the expense of those it claimed to help (see, for example: Bogden & Biklen, 1977; Bogden & Taylor, 1989; Brantlinger, 1997; Gallagher, 1998; Heshusius, 1989; Iano, 1990; Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995; Peters, 1990; Wang, Reynolds & Walberg, 1986; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Skrtic, 1991; Slee & Allan, 2001; Tomlinson, 1987; Ware, 1998). Interestingly, the work of these scholars who existed in relative professional isolation and were often rejected by the field of special education is acknowledged as the foundations of DSE "before it had a name DSE" (Taylor, 2006, p. xiii).

For those of us who have chosen to research, write, present, and publish within DSE while working within the institution of special education, Snyder and Mitchell's comment about institutionalizing disability studies "comes fraught with difficulties in that the field situates itself as a force of destabilization" (2006, p. 192) accurately captures dilemmas unique to our profession that include:

1. To what degree can we transgress within the existing structure of teacher education and doctoral programs without being coopted, or dismissed as too ideological and insufficiently practical?
2. To what degree can we engage (and critique) the field of special education within its journals and at its conferences—to provide a greater plurality of perspectives within them?
3. How can we strategize to widely circulate ideas within DSE throughout education in general and its related fields?

The annual DSE conference has served as a venue to explore these and other important conversations over the past thirteen years. With the help of colleagues in the New York City metropolitan area, I hosted the 2012 conference at my institution, Hunter College, which continues to house a large traditional special education department with category-based programs. However, as a DSE-identified scholar, I believe having this event at my institution has served multiple purposes, including: "forcing" my colleagues to take note of DSE as an established field of study; collaborating with other universities, programs, and projects in the NYC area that are interested in DS and DSE; and last but not least, providing opportunities for a continued dialogue among scholars with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and interests who support—and keep building—a valid alternative to traditional special education. In the following section, I describe the structure of the 2012 conference ([www.hunter.cuny.edu/conferences/dse-2012](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/conferences/dse-2012)), along with an analysis of the topics presented. Through these sources, the questions listed above can be explored, all subsumed within the larger question: *How do we continue to grow DSE?* As the conference has always served the ongoing purpose of nurturing and expanding our discipline, it makes for an ideal "site" to analyze in relation to the theme of this special issue of *DSQ*.

**Snapshot of 2012 Conference**

The structure of the DSE conference is somewhat different from many other professional conferences. For example, the badges have a person's name and affiliation—but not rank. Regardless of professorial status (emeritus, distinguished, full, associate, or assistant), student level (doctoral, masters, undergraduate), community organization, family member, or interested parties—all are encouraged to talk, sit, and eat together. There are frequent breaks and long lunchtimes to chat informally. In addition, there are "full group" events such as presentations by senior and junior scholars who receive recognition for their work in the field, as well as screenings of documentary films. The 2012 conference listed approximately seventy-five presentations, two film screenings, and time to spotlight our junior and senior scholars. One of the major differences between this and other conferences is the presentation format option. Options include: a full-fledged article, a paper in progress, or a good idea proposed to engage participants that may potentially yield a project. The conference maintains an international following and this year included individuals from Australia, Belgium, New Zealand, South Korea, UK, and the USA.

In the following sections, I provide selected information about the historical context of the conference and thematically describe a selection of presentations as responses to the three questions posed earlier, all subsumed beneath the overarching question: *How do we grow DSE?*

***1. To what degree can we transgress within the existing structure of teacher education and doctoral programs without being coopted, or dismissed as too ideological and insufficiently practical?***

Once DSE had emerged as an academic location in which alternative forms of knowledge claims about disability and education could be made, scholars in DSE noticed that the term was being appropriated by special education who simply thought it was a modernized take on "business as usual." This was evident in some submissions to both the DSE conference and AERA. DSE scholars were initially reticent to self-define, wary of inadvertently supplanting one rigid ideology by another. After all, DSE had been the safe space in which questions could be posed, explored, and debated. In many ways what originally brought educators together had been shared disillusionment, and in some cases outright rejection, of special education as an institution. The phenomenon of DSE was originally informally agreed upon by *what we were not*. However, to counter misunderstanding and cooptation by those in special education who assailed thinking outside of that particular and powerful box, we initiated a year-long discussion via a listserv in which tenets of DSE were constructed and subsequently published in the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008) and posted on AERA's website (<http://www.aera.net/SIG143/DisabilityStudiesinEducationSIG143/tabid/12121/Default.aspx>). These have become useful in framing the use of DSE within theory, research, practice, and policy.

Bearing in mind that the concept of DSE is radically different from special education, every year some conference attendees arrive with imagined, nascent, or partial knowledge about what DSE is and why it exists. Because of this, we have always scheduled one or two presentations within the first sessions of the conference that help clarify DSE—and how it is different than special education. 2012 was no exception, with a session titled "Introduction to Disability Studies in Education" (Baglieri & Broderick, 2012) in which the presenters asked and answered a series of questions such as: "What is Disability Studies in Education? Why does it exist? How did it evolve? What are some differences—and some common areas of interest—between DSE and special education? How can DSE be used: in classroom practice; as a theoretical tool; in research on dis/ability; to influence educational policy?" (p. 20).

As DSE is political regarding how people with disabilities are understood in terms of power, value, oppression, and inclusion (along with many other ways), it is often characterized by traditional special educators as being primarily ideological and therefore without use in matters of practical concerns (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). However, DSE scholars have called attention to the hypocritical non-recognition of ideology that drives the field of special education (Brantlinger, 1997; Gallagher, 2006). At the same time, DSE scholars have been working to demonstrate the usefulness of having an educational disposition informed by DSE, and its applicability to all aspects of schooling. Given that education is a *practice*, it is important to focus on both teacher dispositions and practical application of ideas to K-20 classrooms.

The 2012 conference reflected many ways in which DSE helps shift thinking *beyond* special education. For example, teachers usually enter the profession motivated by a desire to help children learn. This is complicated, in the education of children with disabilities, due to *all* students having been saturated life-long in disability deficit-discourses of pity, charity, and inferiority that can lead to a religious-like mission of tending to the downtrodden. The importance of teacher disposition toward understanding and teaching about difference was underscored in several presentations. For example, in Mac's (2012) "My Journey from Teacher-Savior to Abled Teacher: A Foucauldian Analysis of Special Education," the author challenges the assumed order of things by encouraging a discussion about the role of the usually able-bodied special educator and how students identified as disabled can contribute to creating equitable and safe classroom communities. On a related note, Lee and Recchia's (2012) presentation focused on teacher abilities to understand the whole child in multiple contexts. In "The Critical Role of Disability Studies in Developing Teacher Competencies in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms", they shared case studies of pre-schoolers and looked "…holistically at teacher competencies through a DSE lens allow[ing them] to move beyond simple statements of what to do, leading to clearer explanations for weaving together theory and teacher beliefs and practices" (p. 35). Likewise, Lalvani's (2012) "Institutionalized Discourses on the Education of Students with Disabilities: Preparing Teachers for Critical Educational Practices" made "a case for a conceptual shift in teacher education; moving away from special education dogma and toward an understanding of inclusive practices as linked with equitable education" (p. 34) [2](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4257/3597" \l "endnote02), through the acknowledgement and use of socio-cultural practices.

Linking DSE to pedagogical practice is vital, as what initially appears as a destabilizing theory to many educators must be shown as a useful tool in conducting day-to-day business in classrooms. For example, Howerter and Marx (2012) surveyed the recent body of literature on co-teaching, recognizing that this is not adequately addressed in teacher education programs. At the same time, special educators in collaborative teams working within general education classrooms can be empowered to explain beyond the *whys* of inclusive education but lead the way in the *hows*. Young and Luttenegger (2012) documented ways in which *all* students were factored into constructing 63 units of study over 4 semesters. The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was utilized throughout such presentations, including Naraian and Surabian's (2012) calling attention to underutilized technology and its ability to expand narrow notions of literacy. Classroom pedagogies were also featured in Lambert's (2012) work in which she focused on a case study of 12-year old Shaundra who self-describes as "not a math person," provoking the researcher to explore aspects of identity and perceived dis/abilities. In a panel session coordinated by Connor, Valle, and Hale (2012), we asked: What works in DSE? More specifically, "How Applicable Are the Ideas of Disability Studies in Education to Educational Policy and the Practice of Teaching?" Continuing to demonstrate, provide evidence, and circulate ideas of DSE, we firmly believe, is the work we have ahead of us.

Interestingly, such work has begun in Adult Education. The focus of Bates, Downer, Marchionne, and Fleet's (2012) research was a DS master's degree program in which career-long service providers changed their understanding of disability. In their presentation they asked how their program informed students' professional practice as service providers before exploring tensions experienced between DS and the medical model framings of dis/ability utilized by most programs in New York State. This work exemplifies how DSE is playing an important role by helping shift perspectives from primarily medical and deficit-based toward social, political, and holistic understandings of disability.

***2. To what degree can we engage (and critique) the field of special education within its journals and conferences—and provide a greater plurality of perspectives within them?***

Engaging with the field of special education is crucial because special education enculturates all educators who work within it to be unquestioning of its own practices and the status quo it helps maintain. However, special education has a long-standing practice of not wishing to engage with critiques, no matter how pressing the issues may seem. Traditional journals have long rejected submissions by DSE scholars critiquing the field of special education (Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004). However, some of these rejected works end up "outside" of special education, ironically reaching a wider audience (Brantlinger, 1997; Connor, 2009). That said, several publications within special education have created space for DSE-focused special editions such as *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (Reid & Valle, 2004), *Learning Disability Quarterly* (Connor, Gallagher, & Ferri, 2011), and *Remedial and Special Education* (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). At the same time, there is always "pushback" against social models of disability by well-respected, authoritative special education scholars, and this seems to have far more space than attempts to diversify thinking within the field (see, for example the recent rhetoric of Anastasiou & Kauffman: 2011, 2012, 2013).

Much of what DSE seeks to address is what special education willfully ignores, usually sweeping a host of problematic issues under its carpet, including the very concept of disability, stigmatization, low graduation rates, the overrepresentation of children of color within certain labels, the maintenance of segregated settings, the school to prison pipeline, unemployment and underemployment, the enforcement of normalcy, and so on. Far from wanting to sweep these under the carpet, DSE place these timely concerns atop the rug—to be viewed, analyzed, debated, and researched. Some of the major issues at this DSE conference focused upon pathologizing difference, institutionalizing pathology through bureaucratization, and the need to re-create alternatives to these restrictive and damaging responses to dis/ability.

In "Who Wants to be Special? Pathologization and the Preparation of Bodies for Prison," Adams (2012) proposed that the widely-used term "special" is a misleading euphemism that sugar coats a bitter pill of systemic racism and ableism found in the preponderance of African American and Latino males categorized with emotional disturbance and intellectual disability. The school-to-prison pipeline is also rendered visible in the work of Amoako (2012) whose presentation described how segregated high school spaces for students labeled behavior disordered can ironically increase aggressive behavior for many youth who soon find themselves incarcerated as adults. Likewise, Broderick's (2012) presentation centered on personal vignettes retold as "an expert witness," in a case involving a child with autism. She noted that although DSE has been used in teacher preparation programs to "right educational wrongs" through an epistemological critique of special education's knowledge base, it has not yet had an impact in the process of litigation under IDEIA (Kanter, 2011). The danger of highly limited understandings of disability within law, a field in which (pseudo) scientific authoritarianism eclipses all other epistemological claims is clearly demonstrated. This pattern has been evidenced in high profile cases involving children in inclusive settings whose parents argue from non-scientific perspectives including civil rights, parental knowledge, and cultural values. [3](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4257/3597" \l "endnote03)

Scholars working within DSE recognize that laws pertaining to disability can simultaneously be a blessing in that they offer protection, and a curse in their unintended consequences. For example, in her presentation, McLaughlin (2012) asked: "What work has the IEP done throughout history? How have the academic and legal institutional discourses coordinated to create this work? How has this work impacted perspectives of disability in schools?" The role of IEPs, while liberating and enabling for some parents, may, to the contrary prove alienating and disabling for others in their attempts to "do what's best" for their child. McLaughlin underscores this neglected area within special education research as one that tends to not "taint" studies with issues of culture, race, and social class.

The increased inclusion of children with disabilities into general education classrooms has been a consistent topic within education over the past twenty-five years (Lipsky & Gardner, 1987; Sapon-Shevin, 2000; Strax, Strax, & Cooper, 2012). However, other educational reforms often appear to conflict with inclusive practices. In her presentation, Bacon (2012) chronicled how standards based reforms can lead to a backlash of integrating children with disabilities. She notes that the academic success, social integration, and emotional growth of many children with disabilities cannot be "measured" in numeric high stakes test scores. Likewise, in Schlessinger's (2012) work, she notes how the emphasis on a highly bureaucratic, compliance-driven system provides a counter-pull to the inclusion of children with disabilities. In a refreshing counterpoint provided by an undergraduate team of pre-service educators, and their professor, "Left in the Dark—Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Meets the NYS Standards" (Ware, Snyder, Starr, Agius, Passick, & Randall, 2012) offered specific disability-infused lesson plans that explicitly linked DSE values to instructional practices.

While much as been said so far in terms of how DSE is used as a tool to critique special education, it is equally valuable in its own right as a basis on which to *create* changes within policy and practice. For example, Morton (2012) describes the impact of DSE relative to national policy discussions within New Zealand. She revealed the utilization of narrative assessments of students focused upon how they engage with the curriculum. Morton notes how "DSE reminds us to always be vigilant to the pull of powerful normalizing discourses…and provides a framework for interrogating practices of inclusion in education" (p. 38).

Much of what DSE can offer reframes familiar problems through fresh eyes. In Voulgarides (2012) presentation, she illustrated ways in which a K-12 public school district cited for disproportionality of minority children in special education fail to see *why* they have been cited. Her critical ethnography finds that "…although there are very few forms of overt discrimination present in the district, there is a 'fragmentation of harm' that allows for racially and ethnically diverse students to remain in special education and be disserviced despite the 'best intentions' of social actors within the district" (p. 47).

Reframing *who* is important is also a central theme in DSE scholarship. In keeping with Charlton's (1998) mantra of "Nothing about us without us" (p. 1), DSE privileges the voices, experiences, perspective, and knowledge of people with disabilities. In Podlucka's (2012) "Dis/abling Learning in a Community College," the author integrated disability studies and cultural-historical activity theory asserting*,* "In order for meaningful learning I call for the necessity of overcoming individualistic notions of disability, learning, and human development prevalent in teaching and instructional practices" (p. 40). Such radical thoughts are antithetical to how special education has evolved, and provide us with much-needed divergent perspectives on the ongoing interactive relationships between teacher, child, and environment.

***3. How can we strategize to widely circulate ideas within DSE throughout education in general and its related fields?***

Just as DSE scholars strategize *where* to present—traditional special education conferences or DSE-friendly venues—they are faced with the professional dilemma of *where* to publish. Seeking to expand a field can be risky in terms of how faculty are evaluated for tenure and promotion—as the value of academic work is often in the eye of the beholder and therefore highly political. After all, the beholder/evaluator's disposition is informed by the field's knowledge claims. Questions endure around what counts as knowledge, who decides, and on what basis. These issues occupy the battleground upon which ongoing paradigmatic wars will continue to be fought. As a minority field, scholars within DSE are vastly outnumbered, and therefore must strategize wisely in order to survive, find a safe place, and influence the field of education and beyond.

What has attracted, in part, critical special education scholars to DSE is its potential for expansiveness (Ware, 2005). We in DSE have worked to counter claims of being merely ideological in a number of ways. In addition to engaging the field of special education in special editions of their own journals (e.g. Valle & Reid, 2004), we have also published articles that actively seek a plurality of perspectives on disability (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011; Danforth & Taylor, 2004; Smith, 1999). Furthermore, Valle and Connor's (2010) commercial publication *Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices* in McGraw-Hill's Practical Guide Series was a deliberate move to bring DSE into "mainstream" circulation within education through emphasizing its relevance to teaching in schools.

Apart from engagement within the field of special education, DSE scholars have been actively engaged in encouraging an interdisciplinary approach to research thereby emphasizing limitations when disability is viewed as a singular category. The conference has always been, for example, a productive site to engage with issues of disability as it intersects with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, DS have been critiqued as being "White Disability Studies" (Bell, 2006), and other academic areas such as Critical Race Theory have been noted as removed from issues of disability (Erevelles, Kanga, & Middleton, 2006). Because this is actually a potentially rich site of inquiry, Annamma, Connor, and Ferri's (2013) in "Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Disability" focused on creating a new theoretical framework, born of necessity, to better understand the lived experiences of people simultaneously subjected to ableism and racism.

Other markers of identity are theorized and focused upon in detailed ways that largely elude traditional special education journals. Cowley's (2012) presentation utilized "feminism(s)…to better understand how young women with intellectual disabilities experience girlhood, schooling, transitions, and agency" (p. 25). Interestingly, research with mothers who have disabled children, exemplified in the work of DSE scholars Jan Valle (2009) and Linda Ware (2002; 2006), is significantly represented at the annual conference. This year was no exception, with many presentations on the topic (Allred & Hancock, 2012; Dodds, 2012; Duncan, 2012; Linder-Berman, 2012; Wilgus & Ware, 2012). Although quite different in content, all of these presentations share the central premise of ways in which mothers in particular (although fathers' roles are recognized too), come to know their disabled child and ways in which that knowledge is used to educate and advocate as *activists*. Many scholars who present in this area are parents of children with disabilities who believe their knowledge of their own child has been dismissed or denied by special education professionals.

In keeping with DS, narratives of people with disabilities were well represented. In the panel titled "Narrative Approaches to Disability Studies in Education Research" (Collins, Danforth, & Valente, 2012) each of these scholars presented work that defies easy categorization within general or special education (Collins, 2002; Danforth & Smith, 2005; Valente, 2011) and each contributed to documenting the lived experiences of children categorized as disabled.

Another disciplinary field that appears highly compatible with DSE is sociology. Many topics were present within a sociological framework such as the violence perpetuated on disabled people worldwide. Beratan (2012), for example, focused on the underreported incidents of failed transition programs that leave youth at increased risk of arrests and incarceration. Continuing along this sad trajectory Garnett (2012) presented on the ambiguous position of individuals with disabilities within the criminal justice system. Taken together, connections among restrictive educational policies, placement practices, and post-school options emerge and present a bleak picture for many children identified as disabled in the education system.

In closing this section, I would like to reiterate how the conference has always served as a fertile ground for doctoral students to "grow their academic wings," as well as seasoned scholars to "put out there" their interests and troubles that would not have a "safe space" in traditional special education venues. An example of the former was Smith and Millstead's (2012) presentation. They write:

On moral grounds, in part because of this [eugenicist] history, and in part because of the ways in which disability studies in education scholars have unpacked the ventriloquizing tools of objectivist, modernist science, they must reject the use of analytic statistics in their exploration and understanding of the ways in which disability plays out in schools and other educational settings (p. 43).

The field of special education would be indignant by Smith and Millstead's claim for anarchy in its fierce unequivocal rejection of all that special education knowledge and research base is built upon—analytic statistics—however, many in DSE would not be startled in the least. As this example illustrates, there can be polar opposites in the belief systems of special educators and DSE scholars in regard to the concepts of disability and education.

**DSE Facing Forward**

Age twelve at the time of initially writing this paper, and now almost fourteen, the DSE conference has grown into adolescence, a time in which contemplation and self-reflection occur in a transitional phase of self-consciousness about one's purpose and identity. Experienced by many as a time of simultaneous hope for the future, insecurity within the present, and a desire to leave past traditions, DSE in adolescence finds itself looking in the mirror with a variety of questions, among them: Where do I fit in? Who are my peers? How will I change? What will the future hold? At the end of every conference, a Town Hall event is held in which attendees share their thoughts about the most meaningful aspects of the conference, explaining why and, based upon our collective experience, decide our next steps going forward as an informal network of scholars, educators, and activists. In sum, this "conference wrap up" space helps synthesize new thoughts, ideas, and directions.

However, at the 2012 conference Town Hall, Susan Gabel posed some difficult questions drafted by herself and Phil Smith about DSE's future. Surprisingly, the open microphone was underutilized, as participants did not readily step forward to respond, and subsequently, the usual lively debate and rich conversation did not materialize as in previous years. This was, I assert, not due to lack of interest, but rather the sobering nature of questions asked—that served to channel the joy of ending three productive days together with a critical self-look in the mirror. From viewing DSE as the proverbial glass as half-full, the focus was abruptly shifted upon the same glass as half-empty. Following their instincts, Gabel and Smith suggested that the questions articulated may better be suited for posting on the DSE listserv to allow people to participate after having more time to think and formulate responses.

The following is excerpted from Smith and Gabel's (2012) email to the DSE listserv. Including Smith's commentary in italics:

*When we started the DSE conference, we all had a sense of a new frontier — a feeling of excitement and possibility — a belief that we could change the world. We wanted to make an impact. Since then, we have faced significant resistance and barriers.*

Question 1: What has been the impact of Disability Studies in Education?   
   a. Can our impact be measured? By what metrics?  
   b. What has our impact been in terms of theory?   
   c. What significant, broad-reaching initiatives have we accomplished with practice and policy that can be implemented and understood by those outside of those who know and understand the meaning of Disability Studies in Education?

*For some of us, there's a feeling that we've become just another conference that builds people's vita. We don't create white papers about policy and disseminate them. We don't speak to the public about our concerns. We are a bit cloistered. We "speak to the choir" every year. We haven't grown in any meaningful way — although new people come and go. Our old-timers are the same for the most part, and we haven't developed very many new-timers who stick around. In other words, it's pretty much the same central people coming every year, with the same number of new participants who don't come back*.

Question 2: How do we — as a philosophy, a movement, a conference — grow in a meaningful, strategic, and sustainable way?   
   a. Where do the new folks go when they leave us?   
   b. Why do they go?

*We get charged up at our annual conference and then slack off all year until we charge up again. While rejuvenating our energy serves a good purpose, we don't make use of our numbers throughout the year*.

Question 3: How can we sustain our momentum and energy throughout the year, so that we can accomplish significant and real change?

Question 4: What is our purpose — as a philosophy, a movement, a conference?   
   a. Are we clear about what our purpose and goals are?   
   b. Do we like what we have become? Do we agree with it?   
   c. Do we want or need to rethink who we are, what we are about?

Question 5: Looking ahead, what projects, ideas, narratives, or spaces do we want to engage?   
   a. What do we want to accomplish in the next three years? Five years? 10 years?  
   b. Who do we want to become? How do we want to transform ourselves?   
   c. How do we want to transform this thing we call education?   
   d. Understanding that shared commitment requires joint action, what are our commitments?

**Highlights from The Open Discussion**

Although only about a dozen people actively participated in the online discussion during fall 2012, their responses were open and thoughtful, inviting of further comments. In regard to the sub-question 1c about DSE initiatives accomplished, Owen (2012) writes,

I think we should not underestimate the impact some of us have in bridging DSE, practice, and policy… Many of us are part of other professional organizations or on state policy boards. We are at the tables. We have influence and impact on the conversation and the outcomes. It's often helpful, however, to have rationale and research to support stances we take…I would go a step more and add the formulation and publishing of DSE resolutions on policies and practices, updated from time to time with current research or to reevaluate relevance, as actions that would be very helpful.

Here, she calls attention to ways in which many DSE scholars do many things that are effective and promote change yet, unfortunately, these academics usually operate in isolation. So, although their locus of control is acknowledged, they are motivated and satisfied with their contributions.

Broderick (2012b) reminded us that several conferences have been staged collaboratively with partners in the form of local networks, resulting, for example, in Ghent University's focus on parents and their disability-knowledge. A welcome complication to the discussion was the introduction of whether, as DSE scholars, we should develop our own journal, and if so, what it might look like, and whom it should benefit. She pointed out how a U.S journal that conceptualized inclusive education broadly would be a major contribution, as current and newly proposed venues still adhere to limited, positivistic framings.

In returning to answer the questions he originally posed, Smith (2012) shared his own thoughts about the significance of DSE:

I think that our impact has been limited — partly by the unwillingness of the field of special education to recognize the eugenicist foundation on which it is built and continues to be maintained, and partly by the lack of will in the broader field of education to see itself as a political project, and to engage in it as such. This is partly our fault as well — we see ourselves primarily as academics, and don't take on the kinds of political and activist work in which we need to engage. While we have made substantive contributions to theory, that theory is only poorly understood and explored beyond those in the DSE closet.

Furthermore, Smith shared favoring a less institutional definition of DSE, lest it supplant existing regimes that it could inadvertently morph into. In thinking about inclusion, he lamented it as "an essentially failed project" and the subsequent need for "a much more powerful transformation of Western, modernist (and even post-modernist) culture," stating, "I think that we need to engage in some conversation and dialogue about what it would look like to move BEYOND inclusion." And, after about several weeks, our collective asynchronous conversation wound down, leaving us with more food thought about what DSE has been, currently is, and could be…

**Reciprocity: How Does DSE Inform Disability Studies, and How Might DSE Inform DS?**

Although DS has always been interdisciplinary, the field of education took a long time to engage with DS. Conversely, it could be said that DS was wary of education as a field, given that disability was monopolized by special education. Regardless, to state the obvious, without DS there would be no DSE. As the parent organization field, DS has produced the theories and practices that have been applied to education, allowing critical special educators to become DSE-oriented and create new ways of thinking and doing. We have utilized the ideas of DS scholars such as Len Barton, Brenda Bruggemann, Jim Charlton, Thomas Couser, Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Simi Linton, Robert McRuer, David Mitchell, Michael Oliver, Tom Shakespeare, Tobin Siebers, Sharon Snyder, and others, bringing them into our own world of teaching and learning, classrooms and schools, teacher preparation programs and professional organizations, policy and politics.

In little over a decade, scholars in DSE have made a significant contribution to the field of education by forcing it to engage in conceptualizing disability in more progressive—even radical—ways. Shifting the focus away from medicalized, psychological, scientific, and legalized understandings of disability toward social, cultural, historical, and intersectional understandings is a major undertaking that involves swimming upstream for our entire professional careers. As Smith (2012) points out, there is so much work to be done, and changes occur at a much slower pace than we would like. The Behemoth of institutionalized special education that exists, reified through interlocking ideas, systems, institutions, disciplines, is formidable. As a loose network of critical special educators, we realize our current limitations—yet have no choice other than challenging the status quo in which disability is devalued and negated to uphold overlapping notions of normalcy, desirability, and acceptability.

Coming together at the annual DSE conference with the specific focus on disability and education has served to galvanize a group of academics committed to promoting social change and provided a safe place in which ideas are shared, debated, and then acted upon. As such, it has served as a "minority space" where members who share an aspect of their professional identity can be with one another without perpetually explaining their differences to those with a majority ideological status. Some people may justifiably wonder: Is the DSE conference indulgence or necessity? I would argue that it is both in that the synergy from shared ideas has created a movement within education, and pushes us to grow as we think best; there is no map except the one we make. At the same time, without wishing to sound overly dramatic, this conference has meant emotional sustenance for far-flung educators in institutions where they can be misunderstood or marginalized because of their beliefs. Strategies have been created to mobilize and support one another via institutional means such as the tenure and promotion process. Book projects have been hatched, special editions of journals developed, and problems discussed and solved. On a personal note, the DSE conference has kept me grounded, informed, hopeful, motivated, equipped, stimulated, and challenged in terms of *my job*: teaching educators how to work with all children.

In the USA, although initially emerging as understanding disability within a minority model, DS has seen its largest impact within the Humanities including wonderful contributions that help further shape our thinking about disability (Snyder, Brueggemann, & Garland Thomson, 2002). At the same time, DSE needs to be an *applied* field, and our challenges—reflected so clearly in Smith and Gabel's questions to our network—propel us toward envisioning systems, structures, practices, institutions, and disciplines that do not devalue, deficitize, and denigrate human differences we have come to call disabilities. Our work is cut out for us. The degree to which we can and do influence our own classrooms, institutions, professional fields, and related disciplines (including science, psychology, medicine, law) is continuously open to discussion as we negotiate our role and commitment to what can be achieved.

Realism is recognizing the current world we live in; idealism is what we imagine and strive toward; and activism is a means between them. As we go forward in DSE, it is helpful to keep grounded in all three *isms*—as they are inextricably connected, and must be balanced with each other as we move toward creating change for a more socially just education system that prepares citizens for a more socially just world.

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* Young, K., & Luttenegger, K. (2012). *Inclusive unit and lesson planning: Putting theory into practice.* Paper presented at the 12th International Disability Studies in Education Conference, Hunter College, City University of New York.

Author note: *I would like to thank Susan Peters, Susan Gabel, and Valerie Owen for updating the history of DSE, some of which is featured in this article. For a complete history, please see:* [*http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/conferences/dse-2012/history-of-disability-studies-in-education*](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/conferences/dse-2012/history-of-disability-studies-in-education)

*The 14th Annual International Conference will be held in Melbourne, Australia, at Victoria University, July 25-27.* <http://www.vu.edu.au/news-events/news/disability-studies-in-education-conference-2014>

**Endnotes**

1. Among the recognized international scholars on the program were: Len Barton, Sally Tomlinson, Roger Slee, Julie Allan, Keith Ballard, Lous Heshusius, Mel Ainscow, Marit Stromstead, Kari Nes, and Tony Booth. Americans included Thomas M. Skrtic, Ellen Brantlinger, Linda Ware, Kim Reid and Mara Sapon-Shevin.   
   [Return to Text](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4257/3597#endnoteref01)
2. Conference presentations are listed in APA format. Quotations within this paper are from the printed conference program:12th Annual Second City International Conference on Disability Studies in Education. Contemplating Dis/ability Studies in Education Throughout Life: In School, and Beyond. May 25-27, 2012. Hunter College, City University of New York. Conference abstracts: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/conferences/dse-2012/abstracts>  
   [Return to Text](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4257/3597#endnoteref02)
3. See landmark federal court cases: <http://www.kidstogether.org/right-ed.htm>.  
   [Return to Text](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/4257/3597#endnoteref03)

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