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“I don’t like to be told that I view a student with a deficit mindset”: Why it Matters that Disability Studies in Education Continues to Grow

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Abstract

In this article I use personal narrative to provide a commentary on the value of Disability Studies in Education (DSE). Through a mixture of recollections, observations, and descriptions, along with engagement with scholarship in the fields of both special education and DSE, I highlight ways in which I and other scholars have utilized the latter in our daily professional practices. First, I describe the point in my educational career when I came into contact with Disability Studies (DS). Second, I share the beginnings of how DSE came into existence through the work of a coalition of critical special educators. Third, I provide instances of DSE in action, highlighting a recent in-service presentation and other examples. Fourth, I explain why DSE is needed to protect and develop conceptualizations of disability outside of the traditional special education realm. Fifth, I illustrate the benefits of DSE’s interdisciplinary nature. Finally, I assert that DSE provides a visionary lens for improving educational practices for students with disabilities. In closing, I advocate for DSE’s continued growth in helping change deficit-based understandings of disability that continue to pervade education and society.

Keywords

Disability Studies, Disability Studies in Education, Disability, Special Education, Narrative, Commentary, Professional Development, Sociocultural, Teacher Preparation

Introduction

As I sit contemplating the value of this special edition of *The Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* that focuses on "Theories and Practices of Disability Studies in Education: A Call to Action," I reflect upon how it was exactly two decades ago that I was introduced to Disability Studies, and how it changed the world of education for me. In 1999 I started a doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City. At the time, I'd worked in the public school system for over a decade, first as a high school special education classroom teacher, and then as a professional development specialist for the superintendent's office that oversaw all the of the high schools in Manhattan. As a teacher, I'd seen first-hand what I considered the inequities and unfairness in separate classrooms, and the impact it had upon students. Almost all were students of color, and approximately half of them would "drop out" (or be "pushed out," depending upon your point of view) before the end of twelfth grade. Only a few would receive a "regular" diploma and the majority a diploma based upon completion of goals stated in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP), ineligible for college entry. The IEP document is a tenet of US federal laws that guarantee a "free and appropriate" education for all students identified as disabled. It is developed within the local education authority, usually at the school site. While based on the best intentions, the IEP has historically been critiqued as a predominantly technocratic process that alienates both students and families (Skrtic, 1991; Cavendish & Connor, 2017).

As a staff developer, part of my role was to support administrators and teachers in schools to increase inclusive practices. In this position, I experienced a mixture of responses, ranging from deep resistance, to relative indifference, to genuine commitment. I became

fascinated with educators' understandings of disabilities, where students identified as disabled belonged, how they should be taught, and who should teach them.

From my own perspective, I saw a bifurcated education system that separated people into two types of human beings, non-disabled and disabled. I also noticed clear demarcations along the lines of race, social class, and gender, as to which students received which labels. It was far more likely that an African American male student would be labeled as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) and placed in a more restrictive setting when compared to any other demographic. Likewise, as I sat in IEP meetings for a research project, I saw middle class families steer the IEP committees to get exactly what they wanted. For example, parents could easily obtain the label of "language impairment" (LI) rather than an arguably less palatable "learning disability" (LD), and receive a private school placement at public expense. To complicate matters, while my Master's Degree in Special Education did provide me with excellent tools for teaching students identified as LD, I often viewed these "special" approaches as examples of thorough, thoughtful, customized teaching—ways that could benefit *all* teachers and their students. Troublingly, I was well aware that the social, cultural, and historical experiences of disability were barely covered in graduate school, and the default of almost all university courses in special education was an unquestioned medical model for interpreting human differences. In other words, the official party line in special education was founded upon deficit-based understandings of children and youth viewing them as disordered, dysfunctional, and deficient. The accompanying disability labels defined students' school existence, where they were placed, how they were taught, how they were viewed by themselves, their families, and peers. Perhaps worst of all, no one every directly spoke to children and youth about their disability, how they could understand it, and how they could self-advocate.

I came to see the unjust structures within the entire education system, along with the inadequacies of pre-service education programs and shortcomings of in-service professional development. As a teacher, I had advocated for my students to be "mainstreamed" as much as possible. When paired with general educators—both of us without any preparation—to pioneer team teaching mixed classes of non-disabled and disabled students, we strove to re-make classrooms into more inclusive spaces. In brief, I saw inclusive education as a progressive movement, a way forward that would address many of the inequalities that I'd seen. When I entered my doctoral program, it was initially to study co-teaching in depth as I could see great potential in the model. At the same time, co-teaching was being undermined by the politics of education, turf wars between factions of general and special camps—from individual teachers and administrators, teacher unions, teacher education programs, and academic leaders in the fields (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Ironically, such significant pushback against inclusive education verified to me exactly why the work had to be done.

I share this abbreviated history of early experiences teaching both students and professionals in public education settings to explain why I pursued doctoral studies seeking improved ways to support inclusive practices. By pure luck, I was to study with faculty members Dr. Beth Ferri and Dr. D. Kim Reid, both of whom taught Learning Disabilities through a socio-cultural lens and introduced me to the academic discipline of Disability Studies (DS). It is no exaggeration to say everything then clicked into place. All of the ideas, feelings, observations, half-baked notions, emerging thoughts I had about natural human differences, the confining—even disabling—nature of schools, the limited information about disability in teacher education, now all had a framework in which to live. I'd found an academic home for my ideology.

Disability Studies + Critical Special Educators = Disability Studies in Education

In retrospect, I believe I had the fortune of being at the right place at the right time. During my formative years as an educational researcher, in addition to Beth Ferri and D. Kim Reid, I encountered a group of critical special educators who actively sought an alternative ideology through which to view *disability and education* than was offered by special education. They saw disability not as an abnormality, but part of natural human variation, and sought greater access to all aspects of society, including education. These scholars also advocated for adapting pedagogy and creating flexible classroom environments, while resisting the arbitrary, culturally-defined standards imposed upon on all students. Many critical scholars had worked in isolation, and it was not until around the turn of the last century that critical special education scholars within the USA coalesced at first into an informal network, and then into an established group. Without wishing to be repetitive of previously published accounts of how DSE emerged (Connor, 2014), it is worthwhile to note some important events to acknowledge how the sub-discipline of DSE began.

(1) The goal of a small international conference in 1999 funded by the Spenser Foundation, hosted by Linda Ware, was purposefully designed to broaden the critical special education discursive community by bringing together international scholars of disability. At this event, attendees challenged the ways in which ideology explicitly and implicitly shapes inclusive and exclusive education practices.

(2) A panel presentation at the national conference of The Association for Severely Handicapped (TASH) in Chicago was coordinated by Scot Danforth, adopting the name of Coalition for Open Inquiry in Special Education. His co-presenters included Ellen Brantlinger, Lous Heshusius, Chris Kliewer, and Phil Ferguson, asking 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? Panelists were highly critical of special education's unquestioned acceptance of positivism as the foundational paradigm of the field, and its reluctance to embrace diverse forms of knowledge and research methodologies.

(3) After much discussion about what the coalition group should be called and with whom it should affiliate, Susan Gabel and Linda Ware urged affiliation with Disability Studies. At the same time, Gabel informed those assembled that she had already submitted an application with that name to AERA to form a Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group (DSE-SIG). The group subsequently met for the first time in 2000.

(4) The discipline of Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) developed steadily from its informal beginnings, in part, through an annual DSE conference. This conference grew to be international, with early attendees coming from Australia, Belgium, Canada, New Zealand, and Scotland, and along with representation at AREA, scholars continued to explore questions about dis/ability and education, consciously seeking new narratives about disability. Questions we grappled with grew exponentially, and included: Who decides who is normal and who is not (and by implication, is abnormal) in schools? In what ways are notions of normalcy related to academic, social, and emotional expectations within schools? How and why do certain groups of people become identified as disabled more than others? Who benefits from the current status quo and who does not? Who is included and excluded? Who has a sense of belonging—to school, and by extension, to society—and who does not? Which knowledge paradigms do we draw from when considering these and other questions? How can we forge different ways of thinking about

disability and education without defaulting to the limited—even dangerous ways—of special education?

These events that provide the background from which DSE emerged are highly concentrated and, as such, cannot do justice to all who have been involved in its growth. It is also important to acknowledge that critical special educators who pre-dated the development of DSE, and those who helped establish and nurture it, faced attacks from the field of special education. Nevertheless, they were resolved to create a more inclusive, humane way of conceptualizing human differences. These scholars paved the way for others, such as me, to follow our instincts in using DSE in our daily work. In the following section, I share some ways in which DSE has been a useful tool in creating ways to engage people around issues of disability.

DSE in Daily Practices: Growing the Field

I believe we can use DSE in our daily work as educators, whether we are teachers (Lalvani & Bacon, 2018), professional development specialists and/or academics (Ware, 2004). To illustrate this point, in this section I describe several examples of my own work and those of my DSE colleagues, including in-service presentations, pre-service presentations, graduate courses, research, and writing.

In-service Presentations

The first in-service presentation I did using DSE was to a group of principals charged with implementing inclusive education. While ostensibly asked by my superintendent to teach them the concept of co-teaching and the benefits it could bring, I explained I would happily do this if—for the first half of the presentation—I could respectfully challenge their beliefs about disability, where their beliefs came from, and how these beliefs will impact their attempts at

inclusive education. This agenda allowed me to create a form of critical engagement around disability as a civil right in a society that had developed their schools into segregated spaces. As anxious as I was in facing that audience, I saw DSE providing me with a powerful lens to help people *unlearn* many damaging assumptions about disability, rethink business as usual, and justify equal access to a quality education for students with disabilities (Connor, 2004).

Recently, I was invited to present at part of a series of discussions on Critical Conversations created by the Equity and Advocacy Committee at Hunter College in New York City. I'd been a member of this group before retiring, supporting its initiatives, and was therefore pleased to see disability featured along with race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. These public gatherings usually consist of approximately eighty people within the larger education community, from high school students to college professors, graduate students to experienced teachers. The theme of this year was "Freedom Dreams." Objectives included to (1) openly discuss issues of equity and advocacy related to dis/ability, and (2) openly grapple with ways ours and our students' identities play out in urban schools. Furthermore, the ongoing aim of the group is to discuss ways we can create safer educational settings for our students where their lived experiences are accounted for and where they feel represented and included. In contemplating students with disabilities, I prepared three rounds of topics. For each round, I shared some thoughts, observations, experiences, statistics on students with disabilities, before posing a question for people to discuss at their tables. For example, Part 1 was titled "Unpacking What We Think About Disability." Before conversations began, some of the topics I raised included (a) the need to consider all disabilities in our conversations, (b) challenging deficit based assumptions, (c) "flipping the script" and seeing disability as normal, (d) the universality of disability as it cuts across all other markers of identity such as race, class, gender, and so on,

and (e) the need to spotlight ableism. The last point gave rise to a rich, whole group discussion about defining ableism, recognizing its many manifestations, and the need for us to always be cognizant of, and reflect upon, attitudes, structures, and systems within in our society. Questions posed for Round 1 group discussion were: (1) What privileges do able-bodied people have in society? (2) What do they not have to be aware of? (3) What do they not have to think about in terms of people's attitudes, physical structures, and social systems? As I moved from table to table, alternatively listening and contributing to focused, earnest conversations.

Subsequently, the focus of Round 2 was "Contemplating Schools as Enabling or Disabling Environments," where I raised issues of: where students with disabilities can be found in schools and classrooms; where disability is taught in the curriculum, and: where voices of students with disabilities are heard. The question for groups at their tables to consider was: What are the ways and places that ableism can be found in schools, classrooms, and the curriculum? (Noting it is helpful to think in terms of attitude, structures, systems).

Finally, the focus of Round 3 was "So What (Can be Done)?" Here, I was able to raise the issues of building a community in which everybody belongs, the need for flexible pedagogy, accurate representations of disability in the curriculum, challenging stereotypes, and—importantly—teaching disability in progressive ways. At this juncture, I mentioned the value of DSE, conveying that it undergirded everything we were striving to do at this event, and the need to constantly listen to, and be informed by, the voices of people with disabilities. The final questions for discussion at tables were: (1) What are some ways—big and small—to counter the very things you have identified as barriers to understanding and integrating people with disabilities in schools, classrooms, and curriculum? (2) What are ways in which schools can be structured to support the dreams of children and youth with disabilities?

Some written artifacts from the session included observations such as "Able-bodied people often go through a day without obstacles or restrictions. They're simply not confronted with them." Participants wrote about the need to "interrogate ourselves," and be active in "interrogating representations within our texts," realizing, "It is *our* responsibility—all of us," "We need to be proactive," "open-minded," "suspend judgment," recognizing they need to "get to know our students and understand the student's perspective," to cultivate "empathy." They also noted, "Ableism does not end in the classroom," "The importance of [disability-related] language," and the practical nature of the discussions, one stating, "What helped me in collaborating with other professionals was sharing and pinpointing strategies that can help support working with students with disabilities." All in all, the event appeared to a worthwhile, informative, and useful experience—what every teacher/presenter wants. Along with the "warm feedback," there was also "cool feedback," designed to give the event organizers and/or presenter food for thought with view to improvement next time around. I've been accustomed to these terms for years and think they're a useful tool.

In all of the pages of feedback, there one sentence made the biggest impression on me. It read: "*I do not like being told that I look at a student with a deficit mindset*." In reflecting upon why it kept buzzing around in my brain like trapped fly, I came to realize that it served to symbolize so much of the work those of us in DSE engage with. When we respectfully confront people about their beliefs and how they understand disability, it can be a jarring experience for them. Hence the defensiveness. When much of the information DSE scholars share is from people with disabilities themselves, and the unintended consequences of special education are presented in critical ways, a form of dissonance occurs. The first engagement with DSE, after all, asks individuals to seriously consider another paradigm of thought. When this happens, all

knowledge that has been built upon certain foundations is now called into question. At the same time, the DSE spaces we attempt to open up are places in which the pedagogy of discomfort can be a productive site for personal and professional growth (Boler, 1999). On a related note, the sentiment of not wanting to hear about alternative conceptualizations of disability is the same response the field of special education expresses toward invitations to engage with DSE. This is an important topic taken up in greater detail later in this article.

Pre-service Presentations

Throughout my career, colleagues, usually in general education courses, have asked if I'd be a guest presenter on a particular aspect of students with disabilities. Schedule permitting, I usually oblige, and take the opportunity to introduce them to DSE regardless of the specific topic requested—disability history and laws, co-teaching arrangements, inclusive pedagogies, or the IEP. I find engaging with—and challenging—undergraduate and graduate students' thinking about disability, especially when tied to civil rights and intersectional issues makes for fascinating discussions. They begin to see the complexities involved and to what degree we are all implicit in maintaining structures and systems that continue to oppress people with disabilities. Should students with various disabilities openly self-identify, sharing their experiences and insights is greatly encouraged. Also, providing a one-page hand out of suggested books, articles, YouTube clips, and webpages helps those interested in finding out more social model-based understandings of disability.[1]

Transforming Courses

As academics, even in what sometimes can seem like restrictive, overly state-determined material, we have still have choices to decide what constitutes appropriate content and pedagogy,

[1] Readers can email David Connor for a copy of this handout dconnor@hunter.cuny.edu.

including assessments. I have previously documented how DSE can be integrated into a required course on inclusive education taken by all students in teacher education programs within my institution (Connor, 2015). Recently, I redesigned another course, *The Study of Learning Disabilities in Children and Adolescents*, because I wanted to make sure learning disabilities were not being taught as a universal experience, nor in a race or class evasive curriculum, but rather as context-based experiences depending upon multiple aspects of identity. While space limitations prohibit a detailed account here, one major premise of the course was always to balance the research of "experts" equally with the voices of people whom they were representing/describing. Thus, the constant juxtaposing of traditional special education and DSE framings give rise to engaging with multiple—often contradictory—perspectives, asking students to contemplate and be accountable for their own beliefs. In sum, while teaching in a special education degree program, it is still possible to be critical and provide progressive alternatives to unidimensional, deficit-based thinking.

Research and Writing

Perhaps one of the most satisfying aspects of being a DSE scholar is to understand the vibrancy of the field, its openness to creative and novel ways of conceiving research, centering people with disabilities, developing new methodologies, presenting data, and discussing the relevance of findings (Gabel & Danforth, 2008). DSE is as expansive as the current field of special education is restrictive. To be part of an international network of DSE scholars who are constantly pushing its boundaries has been professionally invigorating and a deeply satisfying experience. By confronting ableism in all spheres of life, my DSE colleagues have—among other things—advocated for increased access for students with disabilities to mainstream schools and classrooms, helped parents of children and youth with disabilities to navigate the often

unfriendly school bureaucracies, used assistive technology and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), disrupted normalcy, created a dynamic and accessible curriculum, taught disability as a natural part of human diversity, recognized disability as an ethical responsibility, connected international concerns of disability and schooling, provided alternatives to medicalized histories of disability, forged interdisciplinary alliances, developed innovative qualitative methodologies, examined ideologies embedded within language, challenged the knowledge base of special education, reimagined possibilities within policies regarding disability, advocated activism in the policy domain, focused on the overrepresentation of students of color in disability categories and more restrictive environments, linked medicalized discourses to eugenics, and utilized the power of law to advocate for greater equality for disabled citizens. In sum, DSE has invigorated explorations around the broad area of disability and education in numerous ways, a welcome contrast to the stilted, barely moving pace of developments in theory, research, and practice within the field of special education.

DSE Engagement with (Special) Education: Defending Our Beliefs and Choices

One of the first critical works I encountered was Ellen Brantlinger's (1997) open critique of how prominent researchers within the field of special education served as epistemological gatekeepers within the field's major publications. Soon after I came to know the work of other critical scholars who persuasively argued against limitations of the field's mechanistic ways of conceptualizing disability and implementing instruction (Heshusius, 1989), reification of human differences through organizational structures (Skrtic, 1991), and overemphasis of scientific methods and related knowledge claims (Gallagher, 1998). In retrospect, these—and other—critical scholars helped pave the way for the growth of DSE.

Within DSE's formative years, open critiques of special education, coupled with DSE's innovative ways to rethink and reframe disability, immediately came under attack from leaders of special education (Kauffman, 1999). These attacks have remained constant over the years, devolving into unscholarly commentaries more akin to rants (see, for example, Kauffman & Badar, 2018). The main target for leaders in special education are socio-cultural understandings of disability, perceived to undermine the seemingly solid scientific conceptualizations born of medicine and psychology and their adherence to deficit-based understandings of human differences. Within the last decade, a coordinated spate of articles by leaders in the field have been published multiple times in established special education journals and closely related fields. Each of these articles follows a broadly similar pattern that: (1) rigorously champions a scientific framework as the singular knowledge base of Special Education, (2) unanimously rejects knowledge based upon the social model of disability and, (3) vociferously critiques alternative ways of knowing within the disciplines of DS and DSE. Undergirding all of these attacks is the same notion expressed by the participant in my recent presentation: *"I don't like to be told that I view a student with a deficit mindset."*

According to prominent special education researchers, scholars identifying as social constructionists "share an antirealistic view of both the living and the social world…" (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, p. 373) and possess a "hostile ideological attitude towards special education" (p. 380). In brief, they believe that "the social model of disability represents an extreme form of cultural determinism, because it denies the role of biology and is thus opposed to the actual experience of many people with disabilities" (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013, p. 452). Critics of DSE challenge the notion of contemplating disability as a social construction, linking such an act to "moral depravity" (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, p. 374),

elaborating, "…for some of today's social constructionists potentially anything is socially constructed, from the taste of honey to the Holocaust, quarks, and the planet Mars" (p. 374). Continuing in a patronizing tone, the authors write, "The Zeitgeist includes, apparently, the notion that theorizing about disability by recounting personal experience (rather than rigorous scientific study) gives strengths to one's ideas" (p. 368). Of course, here they mock a goal of DSE's to "privilege the interest, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability/disabled people" (DSE, AERA). I contend what drives such mockery is actual fear of losing what leaders perceive to be solid ideological ground, and the erosion of academic gravitas for special education as a legitimate stand-alone field. In short, they fear a waning of the power and influence of their ideas, writing:

> We fear that these new ideas—the constructionist model, which has now become orthodoxy—will not be a liberating force. In fact, the constructionist model of disability may contribute not only to a zealous pursuit of inclusion at the expense of effective instruction but also to the demise of special education. (p. 368).

Great anxiety exists as the thought of tangible losses on many fronts, revealed in the comment "Special education is losing its identity—its visibility, distinctiveness, budget, and basic functions are all at risk" (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Michail, 2014, p. 139).

Notwithstanding the hyperbole of special education leaders, and admittedly being facetious, I'd hazard a guess that those of us working in DSE *wish* our ideology were orthodoxy. However, until then, special education as an institution will continue to dominate the educational landscape because of interlocking federal laws, polices, bureaucratic structures, teacher education programs, and so on. In other words, special education is here to stay. However, the inclusion movement and DSE have significantly impacted the general discourse of *disability and*

education so it is no longer in the sole purview of special education; the monopoly has been broken. This diminishment of influence is why the field of special education is angry about DSE, continuing to attack it rather than respectfully engage in a scholarly debate about the issues raised by our field (Connor, 2019).

It is important to recognize that scholars in both special education and DSE share the same concern about providing the best education possible to children and youth with disabilities. Questions of where (settings), how (pedagogy), why (justifications of reasoning), and who ('types' of teachers) all come into play within differing ideologies and can be productive sites for mutual engagement. At times, however, ideas can be diametrically opposed, and that is born of necessity. Take for example, the field of special education's recent negation of the overrepresentation of students of color in special education, based upon publications by one research team (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2012). This knowledge flies in the face of fifty years of research on this well documented topic, leading critical special educators and DSE scholars to conclude that special education continues to indulge in "race evasiveness" (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017, p. 147). It refuses to see how we conduct research, a form of cultural practice, can unwittingly contribute to the problem. Unfortunately, a result of special education's embrace of Morgan et al.'s work (2012) is the suspension of federal funds to investigate the phenomenon of overrepresentation. It is therefore imperative that educators working in DSE continue to call attention to longstanding issues and continued dangers caused by the willful neglect of special education.

DSE and Interdisciplinary Work: Engaging with Other Fields

One of the tenets of DSE has been its desire to engage with other fields of study. At the annual Society for Disability Studies conference, education is featured along with a host of other fields such as sociology, fine arts, literature, history, medicine, law, and so on. Scholars have collaborated with colleagues across disciplines to enhance our understanding of education through each of these, and other, lenses. DSE Scholars have also taken up established ideas within education such as Universal Design for Learning and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) to "cross pollinate" with view to creating accessible, culturally relevant classrooms (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). I contend that engagement with other disciplines to develop new ways of better understanding education in the context of our complex world—from new theories to practical applications in curriculum and pedagogy—is both a form of professional growth and academic activism.

In other examples of interdisciplinary work, approaches to understanding disability as it intersects with other markers of identity provides us with more nuanced insights about intersectional experiences. For example, the hybridization of DS and Critical Race Theory (CRT) into Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) allows for new kinds of analyses of familiar topics such as overrepresentation, labeling, the school-to-prison pipeline, legal interpretations of disability issues, the achievement/opportunity gap, and so on. In acknowledging research is being conducted in the context of a history of both racism and ableism in the United States, such work raises larger questions that includes rethinking how, why, and for whom we do research? Through the work of DSE, it has become increasingly clear that the field of special education, as epistemologically configured, has framed many of its "problems"—overrepresentation just being one of them—in ways that it cannot resolve, leaving us to call for a much needed change in how we conceive of research.

DSE as Visionary Lens: Improving Education

Having spent a career of over three decades in education, I am often wary (not unlike many seasoned teachers as they sit in mandated professional development situations) of "the next thing" held up as "the answer" to longstanding challenges in schools and classrooms. I even deliberated upon the use of the word "visionary" in the subheading above in case it smacked of dangling promises that cannot materialize. Throughout my career I strove to resist cynicism and defeatism. The former is far too easy to slip into, and the latter serves no function at all, except to look for an exit. All that to say, like every other educator I've known, I have experienced struggles in trying to understand, and work within, the institutional machinery of education and its forever morphing complexities. When discussing these feelings with Sonia Nieto, a highly respected educator whom I have long admired, she spoke quite simply of the need to always have hope. I found myself agreeing. At the end of the day, no matter what happens, it all boils down to maintaining *hope*.

I share these thoughts because I think teachers and scholars who use DSE carry hope. They use DSE not to sell like a bill of goods to others, proselytize to convert people into a different religion, or think its grounding and approaches are the best things since sliced bread. I believe that we, working in DSE, do believe it to be a more humane way to conceive of and appreciate human differences than we were taught within our traditional special education programs. That we embrace inclusive education and strive to figure out how to do it rather than stating why it can't be done, is important. That we seek to expand ways of teaching, rather than reducing them into repetitive, mechanistic tasks, is important. That we seek to expand ways of examining what constitute disabilities, according to whom, is important. That we seek to dissolve

exiting harmful notions of normalcy, is important. That we seek to make environments accessible to all, is important. It is therefore natural to share our philosophy in all kinds of venues, including dialogues with other professionals, parents, children and youth with and without disabilities, in classrooms, in schools, in a variety of university settings, and in journals, reports, blogs, and newsletters.

DSE-grounded educators understand that there is still much work to be done in terms of including information about students with disabilities across the curricula of teacher education programs and within schools. At the recent presentation described earlier, in a table discussion an accomplished colleague stated, "I have three professional degrees in education and I have never taken one course on students with disabilities." I found myself asking: How could that possibly be? His comment verified that the work of DSE scholars is formidable and ongoing. We need to work harder and influence where and how disability is taught in teacher education programs. We need to advocate for all teachers to be inclusive educators. We need to cultivate teachers who feel confident to create classrooms in which issues of social justice, including access to a quality education for all students with disabilities, is the norm. This is the visionary lens we use in our attempts to make the world of education, and by extension the world at large, a better place.

Conclusion

In this article I have used personal narrative to provide a commentary on the value of DSE. Through a mixture of recollections, observations, and descriptions, along with engagement with scholarship in the field of both special education and DSE, I highlighted ways in which I and other scholars have utilized DSE in daily professional practices, illustrated why we need to continue engaging with—and pushing back on—special education while cultivating our own

work. In addition, I urged the continuation of our working relationships with other disciplinary fields and claimed the value of being grounded in a DSE philosophy to do both practical and theoretical work. When we engage others and hear, "*I don't like to be told that I view a student with a deficit mindset*," it may surprise, even disarm, the speaker by empathizing with them for being placed in that position. For it is imperative that we continue to engage with all educators and keep growing our field.

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