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**Reconceptualizing "Special Education" Curriculum in a Bachelor of Education Program:  
Teacher Candidate Discourses and Teacher Educator Practices**

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**Abstract**

This paper identifies dominant perceptions neophyte teachers have about students with special needs and/or identified as having a learning disability in order to reconceptualize curricula that may provide them with opportunities to critically deconstruct established notions and extend practices they make available for these students. This is accomplished by examining teacher candidates' responses to surveys they completed before and after their Bachelor of Education program as well as during focus group interviews. The paper specifically addresses how instructional practices designed for teacher candidates in "special education" classes can ensure that they remain focused on a definition of disability that reinforces and reifies deficit-oriented perspectives of disability. The researchers' processes and critical reflections are offered as a way of demonstrating how they were implicated in replicating dominant discourses that universalize and fossilize disability. They also offer their attempts to revise curricula and their practices in ways that address this replication.

**Key Words**

disability; special education; teacher education; learners with special needs

### **Reconceptualizing "Special Education" Curriculum in a Bachelor of Education Program: Teacher Candidate Discourses and Teacher Educator Practices**

Critical and transformative approaches to teacher education stress the importance of deconstructing the ways in which various deficit-focussed dominant discourses such as ableism and developmentalism shape student-teacher interactions in an attempt to prevent the re-inscription and furthering of inequitable and coercive relations of power (Cummins, 2001). Iannacci & Graham (2010a) specifically recognize how these specific discourses shape how practicing teachers relate to and provide for students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability. These "relations of ruling" (Smith, 1987, p. 3) have reinforced norm-based disabled/abled binaries and processes of pathologizing that manifest in limited and confining "identity options" (Cummins, 2005) and instructional practices being made available to students with special needs and/or identified as having a learning disability (Iannacci & Graham, 2010b).

Within the context of a specific pre-service teacher education program, it is therefore essential to identify dominant perceptions neophyte teachers already have about students with special needs and/or identified as having a learning disability<sup>1</sup> in order to reconceptualize curricula that may provide them with opportunities to critically deconstruct previously established notions and extend practices they make available for these students. This paper examines teacher candidates<sup>2</sup> responses to surveys they completed before and after their

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<sup>1</sup> Children who have not been formally identified as learning disabled but have been characterized in schools and in the education literature as "at-risk", "struggling readers", "non-readers", "reluctant readers", "cognitively, linguistically, culturally deprived" or "disadvantaged" etc. (McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Teacher candidates are enrolled in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program which certifies them to teach. The B.Ed. is a degree and a qualification that is a necessary requirement for teaching in Canadian public schools.

Bachelor of Education program as well as during focus group interviews in which they participated.<sup>3</sup>

This paper builds on previous research (Iannacci & Graham, 2010a; 2010b) that documents teacher candidates' understandings and constructions of students with special needs and/or students identified as having learning disabilities before and after they completed their initial Bachelor of Education certification by examining the following questions:

- 1) What understandings do teacher candidates have about students with special needs and/or students identified as having learning disabilities prior to beginning and at the end of experiencing a Bachelor of Education program?
- 2) What do these understandings suggest about dominant teacher education practices and curricula with respect to "special education" professional development within a specific Bachelor of Education program?<sup>4</sup>
- 3) What processes enable these findings to impact teacher educator practices in relation to special education focussed curricula within a Bachelor of Education program?<sup>5</sup>

We specifically address how instructional practices and curricula we designed for teacher candidates ensured that they remained focused on a definition of disability that reinforced and reified deficit-oriented perspectives as opposed to contextualizing what disability means (Danforth, 2009) by exploring its significance to a child and his or her context and highlighting notions of epistemological diversity. The process we underwent as we developed our critical reflections regarding our practice is offered as a way of demonstrating how we as teacher educators and course coordinators responsible for developing and teaching curriculum are also

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<sup>3</sup> This research received ethics approval from the Trent University Research Ethics Board who use the *TriCouncil Policy Statement* (TCPS) as a principal reference for granting ethics approvals.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that when and if a Bachelor of Education program offers a course focussed on learners with exceptionalities, it differs from courses offered in cultural or disability studies departments. Although dis/ability focussed B.Ed. courses can be informed by sociocultural and critical understandings of dis/ability (such as the one the researchers aspire to offer teacher candidates at their institution), faculties of education have been and continue to be heavily influenced by perspectives of dis/ability found in educational psychology.

<sup>5</sup> The B.Ed. program participants in this study were enrolled in was roughly nine months long. The "special education" course component of the program occurred during the first 2/3 of the program. The last third of the program was devoted to practicum placements.

implicated in replicating dominant discourses that universalize and fossilize disability and those who have one. How we attempted to revise curricula and our practices in ways that address this replication is also offered.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical disability theory, which has forwarded the notion that "disabled" identities are socially constructed and negotiated, informs this study. Research from the critical disability studies field has specifically been concerned with interrogating the language used for those identified as disabled and in the context of dis/ability. This interrogation examines the impact of normative discourses (e.g., able/disabled binaries) and how these binaries reproduce/evoke/draw on other discourses (e.g., developmentalism) (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). As such, disabilities are conceptualized as being created from what we as a society do, what we consider worthy of doing, and are therefore "approached best as a cultural fabrication" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 323) instead of as something inherent within people.

In response to this positioning of disability, new approaches to students with special needs and students who have a "learning disability" within school contexts are emerging (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008). These ways of seeing and responding to these students are asset-oriented and reject "at-risk" discourses while positioning students as "at-promise" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). An asset-oriented approach recognizes, responds to, and builds on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) and therefore views learners as able, possessing literacies and social, cognitive, artistic, emotional, cultural, linguistic, affective, epistemological etc. resources. Rather than seeing students as lacking or as deficient, this perspective positions students as capable, whole and full of possibility based on their ways of knowing and coming to

know as opposed to how well they conform to and perform taken for granted normative ways of producing and understanding knowledge within educational environments such as schools.

An asset-oriented approach is informed by critical disability theory as it views disability as being "made by culture" or as a text that can be read and investigated. In this way disability can be seen as an important "space to reread and rewrite a culture's makings" (Titchkosky, 2007, p. 6). The theoretical framework for this paper therefore draws attention to the language assigned to children deemed "special needs" and to those who are identified as having a "disability". Using these perspectives allows for an examination of the ways that specific terms and concepts compromise countless students' personhood and how they reify and universalize their identities in relation to limited definitions and measured "deficiencies". Ultimately, the theoretical framing and focus of this study offers a critical examination of the language embedded in dominant understandings teacher candidates have about dis/ability, the ways in which these understandings are challenged, disrupted and re-inscribed by teacher educator practices and curricula designed to address teaching learners with special needs, and finally how these curricula can be reconceptualised in ways that disrupt dominant discourses about dis/ability.

### **Methods of Inquiry**

This study utilized critical discourse analysis (CDA) tools and perspectives and provides a deconstructive reading and interpretation of the ways that social power, dominance, and inequity are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk (Van Dijk, 2001). CDA was commensurate with the theoretical approach of this study as it suggested language use is a social action, a situated performance, and tied to social relations and identities, power, inequality, and social struggles. As argued by Slembrouck (2007), CDA can act as an inroad into understanding social phenomenon, which, in the case of this study, meant providing critical insights into the

social phenomenon known as dis/ability. Collected data (the surveys and focus group transcripts) were read with an attention to identifying recurring themes and discourses using these tools in relation to this critical lens. Therefore, once themes and discourses were identified, they were then re-examined with an eye to highlighting inconsistencies, contradictions and tensions. Triangulation therefore not only served to compare information to determine corroboration and further a process of cross-validation (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006), but also to make explicit complexities within the data (i.e., competing and contradictory discourses). Data was then analyzed in relationship to larger social contexts (i.e., contextualizing or "nesting", Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) by looking at various macro dynamics in relationship to initial teacher candidates' understandings of special needs learners or learners identified as having a learning disability. This level of analysis revealed some of the ways that teacher candidates had engaged with the theories presented in their courses, as well as how the courses simultaneously helped disrupt and reinforce their initial understandings. Analysis revealed curricular changes needed to further challenge dominant discourses about students with special needs or identified as learning disabled within initial teacher certification.

### **Data Sources**

During an initial information session held before the onset of a Primary/Junior (Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6) Bachelor of Education program in Ontario, 240 teacher candidates were given a consent form attached to a letter describing the research study. To give teacher candidates time to review the information and provide informed consent, they took the permission form and letter away with them. Further, to ensure they did not feel pressured to take part in the study, it was clearly stated verbally and in writing that: (1) they could complete and submit the form indicating whether they wished to take part; (2) the study was not mandatory;

(3) non-participation would not affect grades since the data generated would be given to the researcher who was not their course instructor; (4) a pseudonym would be assigned to all participants' data for anonymity purposes; and (5) focus group interviews would be conducted by the researcher who was also not their course instructor. In addition, teacher candidates knew that they could withdraw from this study at any time without penalty of any sort and could decline to respond to any questions that they preferred not to answer. All primary/junior teacher candidates were to submit the consent form to their "Special Education" course instructor in a class three weeks later indicating whether they wished to take part in the study. 61 (49 females and 12 males) or 25% of the 240 teacher candidates volunteered to take part in the study.

Data were produced in three distinct phases. Phase one occurred before teacher candidates attended their first 'Special Education' class in late August at the beginning of their B.Ed. program. They completed an initial on-line survey that required them to articulate their own understanding of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability and how to program for students who they would be tutoring individually during the "special education" course<sup>6</sup> as a baseline of their knowledge without using external resources. The surveys of teacher candidates who volunteered to take part in the study were collected for a preliminary analysis of the ways in which students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were conceptualized and understood by them at this time.

In the second phase of the research, teacher candidates completed an end of course on-line survey which was altered from the original to reflect that the 'Special Education' course taught by the researchers, the mandatory three-week classroom practicum and the compulsory

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<sup>6</sup> The 11 week tutoring practicum is a unique feature of the 'special education' course/B.Ed. program the researchers teach and work in and not something usually offered within most "special education" focussed courses in B.Ed. programs.



eleven-week literacy tutoring practicum associated with the course was completed. At this point teacher candidates had finished approximately 2/3 of their B.Ed. program. Once again, teacher candidates were asked to complete the survey and to answer the questions by reflecting on what they had ascertained from the course, the tutoring practicum, and the three-week classroom practicum about students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability. Surveys completed by teacher candidates participating in the study were collected for analysis at a later date.

The third and final phase of data generation took place when teacher candidates had nearly completed the entire B.Ed. program. Researchers met with small focus groups consisting of four-five research participants who again, were not their own students to have the opportunity to further question teacher candidates about their survey responses and to allow them to share narratives from their tutoring practicum, the 13 weeks of classroom practicum they had recently completed, and/or personal learning experiences that spoke to their understanding about students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability. They were also asked to identify any influence the course and the related tutoring practicum had, if any, on their understandings of children with special needs and/or identified with a learning disability. Further, participants were asked to discuss a particular example such as a specific incident or interaction that furthered or consolidated their understanding about students with special needs and/or learning disabilities or led to an asset-oriented way of knowing the students. These focal group conversations were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis.

Ten months after the focus group conversations were held, which was well after teacher candidates had graduated, the initial course survey was revisited and the final course survey and transcribed focus group sessions were read to identify dominant themes and discourses which

were then re-examined for inconsistencies, tensions and contradictions. Data were also analyzed in relationship to larger social contexts by examining macro factors relating to teacher candidates' understanding of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability.

### **Findings: Initial Survey**

Initial survey results showed that teacher candidates understood a learning disability to be an undesirable and stereotypical condition as indicated by their extensive use of deficit-oriented terminology such as "disorder"<sup>7</sup>, "obstacle", "impairment", "barrier", and an "inability" which would "hinder", "impede" and "handicap" children in being able to "learn, process and retain information" in school. Learning disabilities were conceptualized using only negative constructs.

A teacher candidate for example wrote:

A learning disability is the inability to learn – read, write, comprehend, pronounce etc. – there are a variety of different learning disabilities that hinder children, as well as adults' capability to learn . . .

Students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were situated in terms of their inabilities and limitations rather than their abilities or potential. Instead of being seen as "at-promise" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) these students were deemed to be "delayed", "challenged", "at-risk", and "slow" who learn and perform well behind and well below the norm with the norm being the rest of the class and students of the same age or in the same grade. In addition, medical labels were used synonymously with learning disabilities and as the defining identity of students who were referred to as *being* "ADHD" (Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder), "ADD" (Attention Deficit Disorder), "O.D.D." (Oppositional Defiant

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<sup>7</sup> All words in quotes throughout the paper about survey and focus groups results were taken directly from teacher candidates' responses.

Disorder), and "Dyslexic". Students who were in the process of learning English were also considered to have special needs and/or a learning disability and labelled and defined as "ESL", English as a Second Language learner. It was interesting to note that even the teacher candidates who identified themselves as having experience with students with learning disabilities as Educational Assistants (EAs) or classroom volunteers constructed these students in these ways. It was obvious that teacher candidates believed that the identified conditions associated with learning disabilities were inherent<sup>8</sup>.

This sense of disability as an inherent condition was communicated by teacher candidates as they attributed special needs and/ or learning disabilities on the survey as being primarily the result of: (1) physical, neurological, biological and genetic factors and (2) motivational, behavioural, and emotional factors such as low self-esteem and confidence; and less so a result of (3) familial, social and economic factors. When familial factors were identified, a lack of home support for school by parents not reading to their children or helping them with homework; changes in family life such as divorce and new living arrangements; emotionally abusive parents and students having witnessed traumatic events and abusive family relationships were mentioned as contributing to special needs and/or learning disabilities. Poverty and hunger, teachers, instruction, and the educational system were rarely named as contributing factors. Dis/ability largely remained a psycho-genetic rather than sociocultural phenomenon.

When asked to predict the type of literacy instruction that students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability required, teacher candidates' responses centred on quantitative factors and the affective qualities of teachers. Students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were seen as needing more of

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<sup>8</sup>This notion has historical roots in the field of learning disabilities. For more on this see Danforth, 2009.

everything- "more time", "more one-to-one", "more attention", "more support", and "more instruction". Important affective teacher qualities that were pinpointed included teachers being: "patient", "positive", "encouraging", "committed to the students", and "going above and beyond" regular teaching. It was clear that students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were perceived to require a great deal of teachers' time, energy, and commitment that went beyond regular teaching duties and responsibilities.

### **Final Survey**

Data from the end of course survey, written after teacher candidates had completed the eleven-week tutoring program, a three-week classroom placement, the "Special Education" course and their other Bachelor of Education courses, many of which were also informed by sociocultural and critical perspectives, indicated a slight shift in thinking towards asset-oriented understandings of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability in some areas. Some teacher candidates began to conceptualize learning disabilities as epistemological and ontological differences instead of an inability to learn. Despite these differences, norms and binaries continued to reify and dominate how students with special needs and/or learning disabilities were constructed and identified. A teacher candidate wrote:

A learning disability is someone who has different abilities. It means that they learn differently than other people.

The language used in the quote above indicates that this teacher candidate continued to view the learning disability as the identity of the student instead of viewing the student as a child with a learning disability. Despite having had 'People First Language'<sup>9</sup>(Snow, 2005) modeled

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<sup>9</sup>Snow and others contend that people first language was created to ensure that individuals not be defined solely by their disabilities and that using language that highlights personhood can foster a paradigm shift in understandings

throughout the "Special Education" course, teacher candidates continued to see a disability as a way of defining personhood. Language use found in the above quote and within a great deal of the end of course survey data was not clear on what "different abilities" meant. What was clear was that a learning difference was in diametric opposition to norms represented and demonstrated by "others". As such, normative understandings of dis/ability remained predominantly unchallenged.

A learning disability was still described by teacher candidates using deficit-oriented language such as "disorder", "impairment", "inability" and "barrier". Teacher candidates also adopted language from the Ontario Ministry of Education's definition of a Learning Disability found on the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training website and the Special Education Companion on the Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner (OCUP, 2002), which had previously been distributed provincially to all teachers in service and to our teacher candidates who referenced it for "Special Education" and other B.Ed. program course assignments.

Ontario Ministry of Education definition of learning disability:

A learning disorder, evident in both academic situations and social perception/interaction. Learning disabilities may also cause difficulties with organizational skills. LD involves one or more of the processes necessary for the proper use of spoken language or the symbols of communication, and is characterized by a condition that:

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about dis/ability. Critiques of people first language (see Vaughan, 2009) claim that it is cumbersome and awkward. Further, it does not account for the fact although many people who have a disability advocate and benefit from its use, others self-identify with and are empowered by terms and labels they have reclaimed. Critics also ponder whether people first language can address the larger societal inequities that marginalize people who have disabilities. With respect to both arguments, the course being examined and this research are informed by critical understandings and use of people first language that see language as *one* of a myriad of factors that contributes to the problematic ways that dis/ability has been constructed, understood, and responded to by society. Grammar aside, we see its use as not about political correctness for its own sake, but rather as one strategy that can be used to destabilize dominant and limiting perspectives about dis/ability.

a) Is not primarily the result of:

- impairment of vision;
- impairment of hearing;
- physical handicap;
- developmental disability;
- primary emotional disturbance;
- cultural difference.

b) Results in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability with deficits in one or more of the following:

- receptive language (listening, reading);
- language processing (thinking, conceptualizing, integrating);
- expressive language (talking, spelling, writing);
- mathematical computations; and

c) May be associated with one or more conditions diagnosed as:

- a perceptual handicap;
- a brain injury;
- minimal brain dysfunction;
- dyslexia;
- developmental aphasia (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002)

The following statement written by a teacher candidate illustrates how this Ministry-based language and understanding of a learning disability was adopted:

A learning disability has to do with the brain and how it processes various types of information, it's like a weakness in the brain's processing system. It is an umbrella term that covers a range in severity and can affect listening, speaking, understanding, reading, writing, math, organization and social issues. It helps me to understand a learning disability when I think of what it is NOT, it is not mental retardation, emotional, laziness, cultural, socio-economic, lack of ineffective teaching etc.

A shift in thinking between the first and last survey was evident in the ways in which the labelling of learners with special needs and/or learning disabilities as synonymous with "ADHD", "Dyslexia", and "ESL" etc. was much less prevalent. Rather, the cognitive abilities of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were

predominately identified as assets, although rather unclearly and once again, in relation to norms.

The following quote written by a teacher candidate in the final survey demonstrates this normative default:

People with LDs are often misunderstood; they often think and act differently but are not necessarily less intelligent or competent.

Despite the consistent use of norms to define disabilities, the basis of comparison for students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability shifted from their rate of learning and achievement as compared to their peers to their ability to meet provincial grade level expectations as identified in the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum and high-stakes standardized literacy and numeracy assessments from the Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO) which is an "arm's length agency of the provincial government" (EQAO, 2008). The deficiencies of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were also gauged according to literacy norms specified in the mandated "PM Benchmarks" reading assessments, which are commercially produced running records mass purchased by school boards. Students were now described in terms of their inability to meet provincial and school board standards and labelled according to their numeric reading level of ability using the PM Benchmarks running records system. A teacher candidate shared the following as an example:

I tutored two grade two boys. Neither of them was officially diagnosed with a learning disability but both of them were in the process of being identified. Both of my students scored very low on PM Benchmark testing. One has never tested above a level 0 and the other one started at a level 1 and finished at a level 2.

Although learning disabilities were understood as being multi-faceted, asset-oriented and about different ways of learning, the same factors in the same order of ascension stated in the

initial survey analysis were re-iterated as contributing to the formation of learning disabilities. In keeping with the initial survey, genetic, neurological, biological and physical factors remained predominant in conceptualizing learning disabilities. This was demonstrated in the final survey by a teacher candidate who wrote:

Some learners have special needs due to genetics. Others may possibly be slower at tasks and take more time. However I do think it is in the genes and comes from family history and from the parents themselves i.e. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Instruction for students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability shifted from being about the quantity of instruction and teacher attributes, to the need for quality individualized instruction and individualized accommodations based on students' assets. This shift was demonstrated by another teacher candidate who wrote:

I think learners with a Learning Disability or with a special need need instruction that focuses on their interests, skills and then on their needs. Instruction needs to focus on their interests to engage them and then on using their abilities to help further their knowledge and understanding.

This shift in perceiving students with special needs and/or a learning disability as having assets was encouraging. We felt confident that once having completed their thirteen week practicum and gaining additional experience working with a variety of students, we would see even more growth in the teacher candidates' adoption and internalization of asset-oriented perspectives. Although growth was eminent between the initial and final survey responses, contradictions, tensions and replication of initial understandings was also present in data collected during the focus group sessions.

### **Focus Groups**

In the third and final focus group phase of the research, teacher candidates indicated that they continued to conceptualize a learning disability as being about a "different way of learning".



Interestingly, however, this was now understood as something that could be managed instructionally by the teacher. The teacher's role was identified as being "sensitive to, noticing and making individualized accommodations" based on the learning modalities that were perceived as assets of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability. Other assets besides learning styles were identified but, contradictorily, they were not readily incorporated into the teacher candidates' instructional practices. Teacher candidates' responses with respect to students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability (like the one below) often demonstrated a specific pattern in that: (a) a student's deficits were named; (b) attempts were made to identify a student's assets; and (c) the remainder and majority of the response focused on what the teacher candidate did instructionally, but this was not always clearly linked to the asset that had been identified in the same response.

I also had a student who could not get anything down on paper and he was seen as having a learning disability but he wasn't actually categorized yet. Because he was seen as that, he had people who could scribe for him and do things for him. So you're getting what he's thinking down on paper but otherwise it would be completely missed. So, I think it's good to know where different people can excel, because maybe for example, he's really good at hands-on things. And so where he may be seen as having a learning disability here, at another place he might totally excel.

Although the student in the statement above was identified as having a potential kinaesthetic strength, the teacher candidate did not translate this into an opportunity for him to use this modality to demonstrate his learning by constructing a product, doing a demonstration, making a presentation, role-playing etc. Further, frequent disconnects between an identified asset and accommodations in place for students was never noticed or critically challenged by teacher candidates during the focus groups sessions.

Examples of an event that informed study participant teacher candidates' asset-oriented understandings of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning

disability were often not focussed on the students themselves, but rather on what teacher candidates did instructionally and what the school or school system could do to "fix" the students. Interestingly, the language used during these responses incorporated Individual Education Plan (IEP) and Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) discourse and statements. For example, even with cueing and prompting from the researchers, teacher candidates often defaulted to genetic, cognitive and physical factors when asked about the nature of learning disabilities. One teacher candidate who participated in this study, for example, began to contemplate the social construction of disabilities during one of the focus group sessions by stating:

And a learning disability according to who or to what? What is the standard of people that don't have a learning disability? What are we comparing these children to that have a learning disability? Who are we comparing them to?

However, instead of extending this line of dialogue, teacher candidates quickly returned to a discussion about "traditional learners", the Ministry definition of learning disabilities and genetic factors. As in the end of course survey, there was once again minimal engagement with the social construction of a learning disability. Instead there was a general acceptance that it resulted from "a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability" which was a primary notion found in the Ministry definition teacher candidates knew and returned to frequently.

Teacher candidates indicated that they were aware of how their own and others' use of deficit-based Special Education language was detrimental to and promoted reification of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability. Examples were given of the negative connotations of using the words "retarded" and "ADHD" in social contexts when referring to themselves or others (e.g., "I'm so ADHD today." and "That's retarded.").

Sensitivity to language was evident when teacher candidates were discussing learning disabilities specifically, but this did not extend to other categories of exceptionalities. For example, instead of using People First Language, teacher candidates spoke about the "autistic child", "special needs kids" and the "behavioural student". In addition, individualized programming and official special education processes were used by teacher candidates to identify students in ways that referred to those who had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as the "IEP students". This further replicated the notion that students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were deficient and deviated from expected norms as demonstrated by the following quote from a teacher candidate during one of the focus group sessions:

My last class was a five/six class but there were twenty five IEP students out of the twenty seven students and a lot of them were very low level readers, they were just learning.

## **Discussion**

At first we did not understand why teacher candidates who participated in this study had not fully internalized the asset-oriented theoretical perspectives and language that had been modeled for and incorporated by them during their "Special Education" course and the accompanying tutoring practicum. It became obvious through the focus group discussions that these once predominant course understandings seemed to be abandoned when teacher candidates were immersed in school cultures that entrenched institutionalized ways of defining and knowing students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability in ways that reiterated their initial understandings as identified in the first survey they completed before the B.Ed. program had begun. Teacher candidates saw firsthand and understood that schools in Ontario are required to measure students' abilities and progress using Ministry set curriculum expectations, provincial assessments and school board designated literacy assessments. They also

observed how schools are mandated to use the Ontario Ministry of Education's definition of a learning disability along with official IPRC policies and procedures in order for students to be tested by the school board or outside agency personnel and formally identified as having a learning disability in order to determine an accompanying placement and subsequently have access to resources and funding. As is the case with people apprenticing into new social practices, teacher candidates became complicit with the set of values and norms and world view presented by the schools' "Special Education" discourses. (Gee, 1990).

In addition to adopting the dominant special education discourse perpetuated in schools, teacher candidates also came to accept some of the myths about special education that supposedly prevents teachers from supporting children with individualized instruction *before* they have been tested by the school board or outside agency personnel for IPRC identification and placement purposes. This myth is present in the following teacher candidate's statement offered during a focus group session:

What I understand of it (a learning disability) is that everyone, the parents, the teachers, the school, have to be on board. All on the same level. Because, we had one student who was identified . . . There were different professionals that were coming in to help this student out but it could have been done a couple of years prior, but the parents didn't want to. Maybe they did want to but they didn't understand the process. So this child was so left behind and by two years because the parents said that they weren't fully explained why their child needed to be tested, and now it's almost playing catch up...

Responses such as this one show that teacher candidates who participated in this study came to understand that students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were only recognized and responded to if the official IPRC procedures and the accompanying documentation (e.g., IEP), were in place. If parents did not understand or agree with or to this process, their child would be "left behind". This notion contradicts legal and

ethical responsibilities all teacher candidates became aware of and the asset-oriented perspectives they were exposed to throughout the "Special Education" course they completed. Such notions specifically undermine the idea that students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability are able, full of possibility and possess social, cognitive, artistic, emotional, cultural, linguistic, and affective assets and legacies (Delpit, 2003) that must be addressed. These notions also undermine teachers' legal responsibility to recognize and use these assets to promote and further all students' learning and well-being despite not having been tested for an official identification. Since teacher candidates were mentored and assessed by practicing classroom teachers expected to conform to the Special Education system in place, it is not surprising that they would also accept and replicate these beliefs.

We wondered how we could ensure that teacher candidates' understandings of students with special needs and/or students identified as having a learning disability were ingrained in theoretically sound asset-oriented perspectives and language so that the dominant deficit-based Special Education school culture was not a source of on-going contradiction. By critically examining our own practices with regards to course assignments, content and curricula, we discovered that we, too, were also responsible for inadvertently promoting and propagating a deficit-based model of Special Education.

Teacher candidates had completed a major assignment for the "Special Education" course by selecting and researching one type of exceptionality, examining multiple definitions of the exceptionality, critically analyzing how the definitions contributed to the social construction of the exceptionality, identifying the spectrum of the exceptionality and stating assets that students with this exceptionality could bring to the classroom. Teacher candidates were also required to

select instructional, environmental, and assessment accommodations that would be beneficial for students with this exceptionality to have.

Throughout our analysis of the data, we began to revisit this assignment to help contextualize our findings. During this process it became apparent that we asked teacher candidates to concentrate on a disability instead of keeping the focus on a child with a disability. The disability rather than the child was, therefore, the focal point and, as such, one of the reasons why so many dominant notions remained unchallenged in so far as teacher candidates' understandings of dis/ability. In addition, teacher candidates were referred to and expected to use the deficit-oriented Special Education Companion found on the Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner (OCUP) as a principal source as they contemplated definitions of a learning disability and identified accommodations in response to it. This resulted in teacher candidates assimilating the Ministry of Education definition and selecting generic and broad-based accommodations in response to the disability. Once again, the exceptionality rather than the child was dominant and remained the focus of the teacher candidates' gaze.

The curricular trajectory of the course was re-aligned so that asset-oriented perspectives and People First Language was presented during the very first class, reviewed and consolidated throughout the course, and specifically revisited before the Special Education assignment was introduced. The assignment was rearranged so that an asset-oriented case study approach built around a student with an exceptionality was used as a model to help teacher candidates better understand that the student was first and foremost an individual rather than a series of characteristics and conditions. The entire focus of the assignment was reconceptualised in order to combat the notion that exceptionalities were simply lists of deficits that needed to be located in students and responded to generically. The revised assignment now requires teacher

candidates to create student-centred asset-oriented case studies that focus on a student with an exceptionality by first identifying the student's assets and a few needs based on some of the characteristics of the specific exceptionality. Using the student's assets, teacher candidates are now asked to select instructional, environmental and assessment classroom accommodations that are respectful of and responsive to the student's assets to address their needs.

The course was further altered so that the student-centered case studies were introduced in advance of official Ontario Special Education policies and procedures regarding the IEP and IPRC so that teacher candidates understood that students did not need to go through the IPRC process in order to receive accommodations or an IEP and that it was their ethical and legal responsibility as teachers to begin to immediately instructionally respond to students who need additional classroom academic support regardless of students' institutional identities within schools.

### **Conclusion**

We acknowledge and understand that the changes made to our "Special Education" course will not fully address the replication, tensions and contradictions we discovered throughout this study. It is difficult for teacher candidates to reject dominant discourses with respect to dis/ability and internalize asset-oriented perspectives within the confines of a B.Ed. program since the powerful and official government documents they are required to read and use contain limiting ideas about learning disabilities, position students with disabilities as being deficient and utilize language that promotes inequity and limits students' identity options.

Heydon & Iannacci (2008), demonstrate how there have been few inroads in the field of curriculum studies in examining constructions of dis/ability and students deemed to be disabled which "has meant that there are limited spaces in education that trouble what it means to be able

or disabled or that question the curricula of disabled students" (p.48). Since the curriculum field has supported the special education/regular education binary, current special education models and pedagogy have been left mostly unchallenged. We believe that all teacher education practices and curricula need to ensure that teacher candidates understand the implications of dis/ability for individual students rather than a reified definition of an exceptionality and the official policies and processes associated with defining and perpetuating its deficiencies. Special Education curricula for teacher candidates must be informed by and commensurate with sociocultural and critical perspectives in order to challenge, resist and disrupt the dominance of institutional deficit-oriented discourses with respect to disability. We offer our own critically reflective processes and subsequent practices as an invitation towards this reconceptualization of special education curricula in teacher education.



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