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# Deconstructing Disability

## *A Philosophy for Inclusion*

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### ABSTRACT

**T**HIS ARTICLE OFFERS DERRIDA'S DECONSTRUCTION AS A PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICAL STRATEGY THAT CHALLENGES THE ASSUMED, FACTUAL NATURE OF "DISABILITY" AS A CONSTRUCT EXPLAINING HUMAN DIFFERENCES. THE APPEAL OF DECONSTRUCTION LIES IN THE CONTRADICTORY PHILOSOPHY CURRENTLY ARTICULATED BY THE INCLUSION MOVEMENT, A PHILOSOPHY THAT SIMULTANEOUSLY SUPPORTS THE DISABILITY CONSTRUCT AS OBJECTIVE REALITY WHILE CALLING FOR STUDENTS "WITH DISABILITIES" TO BE PLACED IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS DESIGNED FOR STUDENTS CONSIDERED NONDISABLED. THIS ARTICLE PROPOSES DECONSTRUCTION AS ONE COHERENT PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION FOR INCLUSION, AN APPROACH THAT CRITIQUES THE POLITICAL AND MORAL HIERARCHY OF ABILITY AND DISABILITY. A DECONSTRUCTIONIST CRITIQUE OF DISABILITY IS EXPLAINED AND DEMONSTRATED. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR THE UTILIZATION OF DECONSTRUCTION BY SPECIAL EDUCATORS ARE OUTLINED.

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**L**EADING VOICES IN THE INCLUSION MOVEMENT have taken a position of philosophical contradiction that may impede the movement's ability to convince other educators of the value of ending segregationist practices. During the past 15 years, inclusion leaders have advocated for the rights of disability-labeled students to be treated as "full-fledged human beings" (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987), lamenting that many educators hold stigmatizing and negative attitudes toward students "with disabilities" (Gartner

& Lipsky, 1987; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996a; Stainback & Stainback, 1984; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1988; Wang & Walberg, 1988). As the national proponents of inclusion have created the foremost progressive edge of disability advocacy, their writings have contributed to the common assumption that specific conditions of behavioral and learning limitation or deficiency exist "in" identified students. Assertions that certain students "have" handicaps or are "with" disabilities have been stated in the midst of arguments striving to convince educators to accept such students into general education settings (e.g., Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996a; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996b; for a non-example, see Kliewer & Biklen, 1996). By failing to question and contest the disability construct as universally true and real, inclusion advocates have unintentionally worked against their own integrationist and civil rights purposes, supporting the devaluation and stigmatization of students "with disabilities" while decrying the same.

Where the inclusion movement has erred is not so much in developing techniques for integration or in championing a moral direction for educators but in articulating a logical and consistent philosophy that supports the nonexclusionary education of all students. Continued support of the commonly accepted concept that physiological or psychological disabilities exist in specific individual students no longer supports the philosophical and practical purposes of inclusion advocacy.

A philosophy that opposes and subverts the disability construct in practical and scholarly work is necessary if inclusion is to move forward to a status of general acceptance. The intellectual work of creating such a philosophy is no short order. The authors of this article do not claim to

satisfy this philosophical need for all time and for all special educators. Philosophical issues are not quickly and decisively handled with a single paper. A deep and thoughtful conversation among the multitude of concerned parties is best.

What is proposed is one contribution to that conversation, one philosophical orientation through which special educators who support the inclusion of all students in general education settings may contest and overturn the disability construct. The philosophy we offer is called deconstruction. Based on the work of literary theorist Jacques Derrida (1976, 1979; Brooke, 1989; Buck & Osborne, 1990), deconstruction is an aggressive, political mode of critical analysis that strips conventional and assumed truths down to their logically insubstantial bare bones (see Note 1). In this essay, we will explain deconstructionist philosophy, provide an example of deconstructionist critique of the commonly assumed disability construct, and set forth some suggestive guidelines for deconstructionist special education work.

## DISABILITY AND CHOICE

After my 4-year-old daughter had been attending the Jowonio school—a preschool program that includes students classified by the State as “severely handicapped” and “nondisabled”—for more than half a year, she asked me, “what’s handicapped mean?” She had overheard me use the term. . . . She had attended this school for more than six months and not learned the meaning of *handicapped*. Apparently that was because the school staff studiously avoided using the term. Although the staff struggled for alternatives, sometimes using the not altogether satisfactory terminology of *special needs*, *labeled*, or *severely involved* to describe the children to others, in the classroom, they referred to them by name, not by ability or disability. The school does not organize students into ability groups. The teachers and administrators had judged the idea of “handicap” unhelpful, indeed harmful. (Biklen, 1993, p. 173)

In the foregoing example, the professor’s daughter speaks at the precipice of accepting the disability construct as assumed reality, the obvious and natural. In doing so, she would join most Americans and special educators in knowing the “factual nature” of the disability construct in our world. Her question provides a salient glimpse at the initiation of the sociocultural process through which a child identifies and assimilates what is taken later to be plainly “real” and unquestioned. This moment in a child’s life, an instant when the common sorting of human difference into distinct categories of “able” and “disabled,” “nor-

mal” and “abnormal” is first discovered by the young mind, displays how disability is individually and socially constructed, how disability as a reality is made by people in words, thoughts, and social interactions. Furthermore, it demonstrates the element of choice. The child in the example is not yet a believer in disability as a reality, as an obvious way of encapsulating the lives and actions of certain people. She stands at the threshold of a decision of moral and political implication: Shall I believe in disability?

Although perhaps unable to spin personal clocks back to reexperience such childhood learnings, educators are able to approach the same border of ability/disability to experience a similar opportunity of choice. Deconstruction pries open the binary logic that supports the daily sorting of children into moral and political categories based on “ability” and “disability.” It invites educators to implicate ourselves in the continued social making of disability, to analyze the way our words, actions, and ideas contribute to the daily reaffirmation of the humanly contrived categories of “ability” and “disability.” It invites us to no longer assume and accept disability as a reality beyond human thought, volition, and decision. Like the child first experiencing the term *handicap*, deconstruction invites educators to think and choose.

## WHAT IS DECONSTRUCTION?

Deconstruction is a critical process for the transformation of assumed relationships of power in everyday life. The emphasis within this process is the unearthing and democratic reconfiguring of social inequalities that exist within the lives of children, a vital emphasis of the inclusion advocacy agenda in the field of special education.

Derrida’s (1976, 1979) concept of deconstruction focuses on displaying and overturning hierarchical relationships. In this article, we address the hierarchy of “ability” over “disability.” This hierarchy can be seen in the way the abundant social value accorded the first term is negatively mirrored in the corresponding devaluation of the second term.

Deconstruction provides a broad philosophical framework and a process for reading and critically analyzing both written texts and everyday-life contexts, opening up each realm to the possibility of social change. The word *text* is used in the broadest sense possible, referring both to written material and to lived contexts, daily situations and activities through which meanings and identities are produced, reproduced, and contested.

Originally, Derrida (1976, 1979) sought to open up a text to reveal covert layers of assumed “truth,” displaying the logocentricism of the text, the way the language constructs, reifies, and often conceals alternative realities through subtle but pervasive workings of power. There are conversations, voices, and possible meanings that apparently innocent texts close down and suppress. For exam-

ple, feminist scholars have utilized deconstruction to expose and contest the assumption of the moral and political hierarchy of man over woman in Western literature, media, and everyday life. This effort has contributed to a broad cultural reconstruction of the understandings of the abilities and roles of women in many spheres of society. Each term—*woman* and *man*—and the meanings attributed to that term are changed as the relationship between the two is deconstructed.

## DECONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

In the previous example of Dr. Biklen's daughter, the language and meanings of social constructionism served to examine and explain her dilemma. To help special educators relate to and understand deconstruction, we will briefly connect it to the tradition of social constructionism in special education. Be aware that Derrida and other deconstructionists in the area of literary theory (e.g., Brooke, 1989; Thaden, 1988) would probably balk at a simple alliance of social constructionist and deconstructionist thought, calling such a coupling an oversimplification of Derrida's work. For our purposes of translating the work of a foreign discipline to our own field of special education, the social construction–deconstruction linkage is practical and helpful.

The term *social constructionism* has been used to describe positions claiming that what is assumed and understood to be objectively real by persons in the course of their activities is more accurately said to be constructed by those persons in their thoughts, words, and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992; Gergen, 1985, 1994). Social constructionism emphasizes the centrality of language, thought, interaction, politics, history, and culture in the making of human meaning in lived contexts. Those beliefs and understandings taken to be factual in conversation and interaction are merely constructs that are granted privilege over alternative explanations.

Social constructionist work in special education has typically focused on the way that the reality of a given disability diagnosis or category gained the status of reality, how the "real" came to be considered real (e.g. Bogdan & Taylor, 1989; Mercer, 1973; Sapon-Shevin, 1987; Sleeter, 1986, 1996; Tomlinson, 1996). Disabilities have been explained primarily as political and social artifacts, realities created in broad sweeps of social activity by professionals and others.

Mercer (1973) scrutinized the criteria and social processes through which persons were labeled mentally retarded, exposing the sociocultural and situational dimensions of diagnosis. Her study brought to light the professional and cultural norms and practices that provide the boundaries for classification, emphasizing that mental retar-

ation is not so much an internal condition as it is a social assignment occurring within the judgments and defined terms of the professionals who are responsible for label categories.

Sleeter (1986, 1996) explained the rise of the learning disability category from relative obscurity to assumed factuality. Her brand of social constructionism relied on an analysis of the operation of political forces over time, presenting a recent history of the growth of the learning disability diagnosis within power relationships on both an international and domestic basis. In her analyses, learning disabilities arose as a politically acceptable means of differentiating the poor academic performance of White, middle class students from the school difficulties of poor, non-White students.

These and other social constructionist works within the field of special education have either implied or actively directed professionals to take political action to oppose the furthering of unjust categorizations for children. Essentially, that which is socially constructed in an unjust manner can be socially constructed in a more respectful and egalitarian way if enough people actively steer the momentum of sociocultural activity in that new direction. Many special educators make this assumption daily as they advocate for the rights and human value of persons "with disabilities" in a world that often does not grant human rights and value to such persons.

The weakness in the brand of social constructionism that has been articulated in special education is that it has depicted the forces of the social making of disability as enormous and unassailable, looming like unmovable mountains beyond the small scope of concern and practicality of the professional at work. The forces that have made learning disability or mental retardation what they are seem incredibly large and almost unpeopled, waves of history and public policy that a classroom teacher can hardly influence.

When possibilities of social change have been addressed, they have been often cast in broad sociological terms. For example, Sleeter (1996) stated that her political analysis of learning disabilities as a social class phenomenon "reaffirms the need to deal directly with racism and classism at a broad social level" (p. 162). Even though the emphasis on the operations of social power in educational work is greatly needed in special education, this form of analysis remands the social making of disabilities to the far-off reaches of society and culture, somewhere away from the public school and special education program. Seemingly, the actions of one teacher or a handful of teachers at one site could hardly make a dent in changing "the way it is."

Like social constructionism, deconstruction assumes that the various forms of "disability" are not physical absolutes but social designations that are made by people in interaction and relationship. But deconstruction diverges from the previous social constructionist work by offering a

strategic, political means to promote local change in daily professional work. Deconstruction does this by placing language—the things professionals say and write—at the center of the social construction of disability. As Edwards (1991) explained in his work on the linguistic bases of categorization, human types that are taken to be “real” are created and maintained in words, in the continuous exchange of language that makes up human interaction. To deconstruction, the maintenance and furthering of a given disability condition relies on the spoken and published words of professionals and nonprofessionals. For example, if our society (professional and nonprofessional realms) suddenly lost the vocabulary of mental retardation, somehow relinquishing terms such as *intelligence*, *normal*, *disability*, and so on, the constructed reality of mental retardation would no longer continue in its present form. New terms and concepts of description would emerge, because people seem to inevitably rely on schemes of categorization to explain the actions of individuals. Yet the change to new terms could be for the political and moral better, allowing those previously labeled persons to be viewed and treated in a more respectful way.

An example of this sort of shift can be seen in the changed construction of gender within corporate America. The typical American corporate office of the 1950s was inhabited by two types of workers, casually described as *girls* and *men*. These were the terms used by the employees to name themselves and one another. The subordination of female employees to child status through language corresponded with the common power gap between the two genders. Not surprisingly, as the gap has narrowed in recent years, an important aspect of that political shift has been the gradual replacement of the term *girl* with the higher status term *woman*.

Similarly, by emphasizing the role of language as the central element in the daily construction of the reality called “disability,” deconstruction offers a strategic, small-scale means for practitioners to contest the social construction of disability in their work with students, other professionals, and parents. The final section of this article briefly delineates some practical approaches for the incorporation of deconstruction into the daily work of special educators.

This discussion now shifts to the application of one specific form of deconstruction. This method is called dissecting the hinge (Brooke, 1989). It will be briefly explained and then demonstrated in a critique of the common special education term and construct *learning disability*.

### DISSECTING HINGES IN THE TEXT

Deconstruction involves unearthing weaknesses in reasoning in the text, presenting counterreasoning to the presumptions and hidden assumptions of the text vis-à-vis differences and hierarchical systems within the rhetorical

weaving of the material. Dissecting hinges involves seeking out and exposing the places where the prevailing logic tends to undercut or dismantle itself. It is a method of revealing contradiction, thereby allowing the apparently firm “truths” to unravel into confusion.

The hinge is the point of entry, the place where one can most easily access the faulty logic of the text. Brooke (1989) explained the hinge as

the place where the text “breaks open” because it is the place where the words hinge, where they fold, admit multiple meanings, work against themselves—a deconstruction of a text begins with a search for hinges in the seemingly coherent organization, purpose, meaning and argument of the text. (p. 406)

Brooke pointed out that instead of assuming that the ideas and purposes of a text are transparent and easily grasped by following their official organizing statements, deconstruction “would assume that the ideas and purposes of these texts are problematic, open to discovery, and quite possibly hidden by the text’s official statements” (p. 406). The goal is to identify those ideas or passages necessary to the development of the stated, purposeful arguments but which simultaneously subvert or undermine those very arguments. This deconstruction critique seeks such anomalies as spaces of opportunity.

How does this hinge technique apply to the disability construct? To address this question, we turn to an educational example of deconstruction.

### DECONSTRUCTING DISABILITY BETWEEN CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES

The ability–disability dichotomy serves as a useful conceptual and practical hinge. The border of ability/disability is the place where the assumed differentiation of the human categories “ability” and “disability” (of “normal” and “abnormal”) collapses on itself, where the practical logic of sorting children into distinct and meaningful types breaks down.

The most accessible place where the ability/disability hinge is put into practice is the familiar special education diagnostic process. A student referred for learning or behavior problems is evaluated to answer the essential question, Does the child have an educational disability? As the diagnostic process answers this question, it serves not merely as a mechanism that distinguishes “ability” from “disability.” It makes that distinction “real” in a practical, lived way. The very authenticity and realness of the disunity of the “ability” and “disability” constructs relies on the enacted logic of the diagnostic evaluation as the means of distinction.

Therefore, the goal of the following deconstruction of disability is to dismantle the logical scaffolding supporting the diagnostic process, demonstrating the inherent faulty reasoning of that procedure. The result is the disruption and invalidation of the assumed rationality of the common practice of sorting of students into categories of ability and disability.

This critique does not merely target the process of diagnosis. The following is not merely another complaint about the inaccuracy of assessment instruments and procedures. It is not simply a statement that the current methods of diagnosing disabilities are in need of improvement. The diagnostic process serves as a convenient means for deconstructing the entire distinction between "ability" and "disability" that is made in schools today. Diagnosis is the site of this analysis, but the critique goes far beyond issues of how to make "accurate" diagnoses.

Taylor's (1991) *Learning Denied* offered a unique textual arena for our critique of the hinging diagnostic process. This text is ideal because of Taylor's detailed and full documentation and because of the familiarity of such a school-parent conflict to many readers. In this case study account, Taylor described a conflict between a school district and one student's parents over the educational diagnosis and placement of young Patrick. At issue is the question of a reading disability.

The school district, relying on norm-referenced intelligence and reading achievement test scores, claims that the child meets the state criteria based on a measured difference between intelligence and achievement scores. Therefore, Patrick has a learning disability in the area of reading. Opposing this determination are Patrick's parents and their son's reading tutor, a whole-language literacy specialist.

On one level, one could say that the two sides disagree about the quality of Patrick's literacy skills. The school personnel see a boy who struggles to handle the basal and phonics reading activities in his second-grade class. At home, his parents and his tutor see a boy who reads age-appropriate materials with comprehension and writes complex stories and reports. Looking deeper, the conflict appears as not merely a difference of opinion about how well or how poorly young Patrick can read and write. Nor is the rift due to one side or the other denying the validity of the disability construct (as we might advise them to do).

The school district and the parents disagree on the disability diagnosis because they do not agree about *what reading is*. They view and define the complex array of skills, behaviors, and interactions called "reading" from widely divergent and incommensurable perspectives. To borrow from Kuhn (1970), they are operating within conflicting educational paradigms, each a framework answering questions concerning the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge making, and the workings of power in human interaction.

The school's concept typifies what may be called a positivistic, skills-based philosophy of reading (Cheek, 1989). It describes reading as the rational acquisition of fragmented language behaviors, the mastery of discrete linguistic parts. The young reader progresses step by step within a technical framework of sequenced skills, vocabulary, and sound-symbol relationships (Shannon, 1989).

Patrick's school's skills-based curriculum defines reading as a definite sequence of behaviors, a series of distinct decoding and comprehension skills that can be accurately assessed with a standardized, norm-referenced instrument. The school offers reading instruction that emphasizes rote memorization of sound-letter relationships, round-robin oral reading in basal reading texts, and the completion of workbooks and ditto sheets. "Good reading," from the perspective of the school paradigm of reading, equals high achievement in these classroom activities and on the standardized reading test.

The family's paradigm of reading originates in the whole-language philosophy of language and literacy (Goodman, 1989; Weaver, 1991). Altwerger, Edelsky, and Flores (1987) have explained this construction of reading as following five conceptual premises:

- (a) Language is for making meanings, for accomplishing purposes;
- (b) written language is language—thus what is true for language in general is true for written language;
- (c) the cuing systems for language (phonology in oral, orthography in written language, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) are always simultaneously present and interacting in any instance of language in use;
- (d) language use always occurs in situations;
- (e) situations are critical to meaning-making. (p. 154)

From this view, reading is not seen as the acquisition of a sequence of discrete skills. Instead, all language activities are seen in terms of a natural process of individual development. The child is a meaning maker who encounters, produces, and utilizes linguistic symbols and sounds in lived experiences. The child experiments, tries, fails, adjusts, tries again, and gradually constructs words, sentences, and meaning to suit the specific requirements of her or his world. Children, whether reading, writing, speaking, or listening, engage with words to make meaning, to address the practicalities, concerns, and intentions of their own lives.

The deconstructionist purpose does not entail an evaluation of which party holds a "better" paradigm of reading. The issue is not the determination of a correct definition of what reading is or how reading should be taught to students. The key point for this critique is that these two opposing definitions of reading throw a paradigmatic monkey wrench into the process of diagnosing a reading dis-

ability. How can a disability in a specific academic area be diagnosed if the very definition of that academic area remains open to diverse interpretations?

Within the confines of the school definition, Patrick is a very poor reader. He lags behind his second-grade peers in the quality of his work in classroom reading activities. He scores poorly on the standardized measure of reading achievement. In contrast, the whole-language literacy specialist evaluates his abilities and finds no evidence of a reading disability. According to the concept of reading (or literacy) held by this evaluator and the child's family, Patrick is an able constructor of complex and functional language forms.

In *Learning Denied*, the incommensurability of the definitions of reading held by the two parties leads the diagnostic process to a dead end. The school system presses for a disability label and placement. Facing the continuing struggle of due process hearings, Patrick's parents pull him from public education in favor of home schooling. The diagnostic process crumbles into disarray when the field of evaluation remains paradigmatically divided between the two participant factions.

One might be tempted to sweep aside this *Learning Denied* case as a strange anomaly in an otherwise smooth diagnostic procedure. Often, in meeting with school personnel to discuss the possibility of a learning disability, parents do not voice a contradictory interpretation of reading or math or even appropriate behavior. Many parents accept the school district's construction of these activities, establishing the necessary agreement or consensus of concepts and terms required for the diagnostic process to progress to a determination of "disability" or not. In fact, the entire distinction between "ability" and "disability" relies on a consensus of participants concerning what constitutes able or disabled performance in a specific area of activity. The case of Patrick questions the very possibility of such a consensus when it comes to decisions made within the confines of bureaucratic dominion. If consensus is defined as a mutual accord shared by freely choosing parties, consensus becomes questionable considering the role and application of power in a bureaucratic system.

On further examination of the *Learning Denied* text, the reader will find ample evidence that the school seeks not to build amicable consensus with the parents through discussion and compromise. Instead, school personnel repeatedly invoke their authority, prodding Patrick's parents toward compliance with their definition of reading. They do this by directing Patrick's parents toward rigid adherence to bureaucratic procedure. One teacher speaks of the need to follow a "strict process" (p. 46). The special education director tells the parents that "we've got to follow special education procedure" (p. 70). Repeatedly, Patrick's parents make efforts to open the process up to a more open and flexible discussion of how Patrick's educational needs can be met. These attempts are thwarted by

school district advice concerning the necessity to proceed according to the prescribed bureaucratic steps. What the parents view to be a practical and even moral process is treated as a ritual of bureaucratic conformity by the school district.

Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy provides instruction here in regard to the school district's conflation of procedure and consensus. Weber described a bureaucracy as a network of "rational-legal domination," a hierarchically structured organization in which the power resides at the top (Mouzelis, 1979, p. 18). This power is applied along lower regions by various personnel acting in accordance with clearly defined laws, stringent codes of conduct, and strictly controlled regimens of procedure and sequence. Moral action, in such a system, equals adherence to procedure. The task, through the eyes of bureaucracy, is not one of deciding how to educate a boy. It is not one of discussion and collaboration with parents who make extreme efforts to be involved in their child's education. It is a set, straight line of cookbook steps and preordained outcomes requiring neither creativity nor sensitivity. Power is simply applied, and coerced consensus is expected.

The legitimacy of the diagnostic process depends on a consensus, a common understanding of what reading is, or at least a common faith in a process of discussion and compromise. Lacking that consensus, assessments of "ability" and "disability" are lost within a conflict of perspective-based interpretations standing in opposition to other interpretations.

Within the hierarchical power scheme of a bureaucratic organization, consensus is not agreement but a moment of leveraged conformity. Thus, the common ground held by school district and parents is not formed from freely chosen understandings. It is based on the amoral and often subtle application of bureaucratic power, the assertion of the school district's mode of thinking and acting over the parents' position.

Without genuine consensus between freely choosing parties, the diagnostic process no longer performs its function. The hinge of diagnosis that links and separates "ability" and "disability," explaining conceptually and practically how each category varies from the other, is thrown into jeopardy. If the "objective" diagnosis arises from the instance of social coercion, then the sorting of students into groups based on "ability" and "disability" is not an act of ideologically neutral evaluation but a political act, an application of power. Consensus and diagnosis thereby rely on coercive adherence to the bureaucratic rationality. The diagnostic process as an unbiased means by which a condition of "disability" is objectively discovered fails in light of the political nature of the process. The diagnosis does not provide a reflection of the student's abilities. It does reflect the bureaucratic system's requirement that students be defined and processed within a power network of procedures and formulae.

## DECONSTRUCTION AS PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

How can the complexities of a philosophy of deconstruction be utilized by special educators? Implications will be briefly explored in three areas: teacher education, research, and practice.

### Teacher Education

In the area of teacher education, university special education students may be first taught how special education disabilities are socially constructed. Readings may be drawn from social constructionist writings in special education (e.g., Mercer, 1973; Sleeter, 1986; Sapon-Shevin, 1987; Bogdan & Taylor, 1994; Ferguson et al., 1992) and psychology (e.g., Gergen, 1985, 1994; Kollock & O'Brien, 1994). Additional activities and discussions are necessary to help the students fully comprehend what social constructionism is and how it plays out in the daily reification of disability constructs.

One helpful assignment involves students in researching the way that mental retardation (could be any disability) is constructed and maintained in the talk of persons in their everyday life. The students keep journals in which they note any incident beyond the professional circles (university courses, public school internships) when a term referring to mental retardation was used. Common terms are *retard* and *idiot*. This data collection activity brings the students to focus closely while walking around the mall, attending a baseball game, conversing with family and friends, or even when reading a magazine. The data collected consists of a wide range of spoken (and a few visual, nonverbal) references to mental retardation that occur in everyday discussion and media (TV, movies, newspapers). From gathering and analyzing the data, the students become aware of the various meanings that mental retardation has in society. They notice how persons casually construct mental retardation as a stigmatized condition, the bearers of which are often feared, ridiculed, and avoided.

Once students understand the way that people construct disabilities in their interactions and words, the next step is to teach them how to actively deconstruct the many categories of disability. Typically, the very act of learning how disabilities are socially constructed leads most students to begin to deconstruct the same disabilities. They begin questioning their own ways of describing persons and interrupting their friends' descriptions in everyday conversations. The social act of saying who a person is becomes morally and politically problematic.

Deconstruction may also occur in response to the standard college texts. Students may learn the traditional research and theoretical content about disabilities as supplied in the standard college texts in order to then deconstruct the social identities proffered in those texts. The traditional literatures assume learning disabilities or

mental retardation or behavior disorders to be "real" and "true" as the explanation for why some children do not learn or behave as expected. Once students comprehend this material, they may then apply deconstruction techniques such as dissecting the hinge (for more techniques, see Thaden, 1988; Crowley, 1989) that unsettle the seemingly firm ground on which these disability constructs rest.

Additionally, readings from Finlan (1994) and Taylor (1991) provide support for critical explorations in the area of learning disabilities. Bogdan and Taylor (1993) and Rhodes (1977) may serve similar critical purposes for work in the areas of mental retardation and emotional disturbance. For a thought-provoking literary deconstruction of disability, see H. G. Wells's (1928) short story "The Country of the Blind."

### Special Education Research

Researchers can follow the lead of Bogdan and Taylor's (1994) twin biographic studies of two persons labeled mentally retarded. This research sets aside professional knowledge in favor of client or student knowledge, allowing the individuals considered to have disabilities to speak on their own behalf. What comes forth are insightful and often critical words from perspectives rarely valued in special education research (see Danforth, 1995; Duplass & Smith, 1995).

Seeking, hearing, and taking seriously the words and ideas of the persons served by special programs, although seemingly innocent enough, is often disruptive. The current furor over facilitated communication (FC) makes for a good example of the way that "expert" dialogue among professionals may be challenged by the words of the served population. The professional battle over the value of FC as a means of bringing forth the words of persons typically assumed to have no words or language capacity clearly demonstrates the agitating effects of professionals' efforts to allow voice to those considered to have disabilities (e.g., Biklen, 1990; Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Crossley, 1994; Green & Shane, 1994; Jacobson, Mulick, & Schwartz, 1995; Simpson & Myles, 1995).

To read the FC debate only as a standard professional struggle over the effectiveness of a professional practice would be to remain nearsighted to the dramatic political implications of what the supporters of FC are doing. Perhaps no other professional group in special education is making a more concerted and controversial effort to fully hear, publish, and take seriously the words of persons considered to have disabilities. These professionals take these typed words so seriously that they allow the statements of the "disabled" clients/students to override and overrule the scientific disability accounts that declare those very persons incapable of such language feats in the first place.

While the effectiveness of FC as a professional practice remains the subject of heated debate, educators can

look to published FC products (e.g., Biklen, 1990, 1993) as examples of written texts in which the standards of modern social science are bent or broken to make space for the very persons special education claims to serve. In this way, FC can be seen as a method of knowledge production that puts deconstruction into action, challenging standard images of what persons considered to have autism, mental retardation, and cerebral palsy can do and be.

### **Special Education Practice**

Finally, for the special education practitioner, applying deconstruction in daily activity is most difficult. To question what is assumed to be true in a public school setting is to risk seeming unreasonable. Deconstructionist special educators who provide quality educational services while proclaiming nonadherence to disability language and meanings often stir incredulity on the part of many of their colleagues.

The deconstructionist teacher may use a variety of strategies in communicating with colleagues.

**LANGUAGE.** The general goal of the deconstructionist teacher in regard to language use is the strategic disruption of patterns of spoken and written communication that continue the usual hierarchy of ability and disability (see Note 2). Working from the assumption that many of the common educational terminologies and explanations for student learning and behavior support social inequality, the deconstructionist teacher seeks linguistic spaces from which to leverage alternative accounts that counter hierarchical schemes of student characterization.

For an example, consider a common scene in a public school: the problem-solving meeting. An occurrence has prompted concerns among the professionals and a meeting is called. A handful of professionals—teachers, administrators, support staff—gather to discuss and propose solutions to “the problem.” The teacher who called the meeting speaks first, offering an initial description of “the problem.” Others add their own words to the dialogue, creating a continuous layering of verbal description. Perhaps one speaker offers a divergent view, a different way of framing “the problem.” The group responds. Maybe they say, “Yes, that’s it! You have it right.” Maybe they say, “No, of course not. It’s not that way at all.” Gradually, in the play and ritual of practical discussion, a set of characterizations and explanations gains the solidity of reality. The words of the various speakers construct “the problem.” Once this is achieved, the meeting shifts to a discussion of proposed solutions that fit “the problem.” Soon there will be a solution.

The deconstructionist teacher is cognizant that “the problem” as stated in this meeting or in any linguistic communication is built of words. It is a practical and illocutionary fabrication, a sociolinguistic product of the communication between the meeting participants. Yet, “the problem” as framed in the meeting is not an inconse-

quential fiction, for it quickly becomes the basis for a solution, a specific action to be taken. Perhaps a student will be suspended or expelled from school. Perhaps a student will be called to speak to the principal or the guidance counselor. Perhaps a student will be referred for assessment and possible special education placement.

Operating from a heightened awareness of the power of language to construct “the problem” within a dialogue of school personnel, the deconstructionist teacher is concerned with the ways that “the problem” as constituted in the meeting may depend on and therefore reify disability constructs. Whether the deconstructionist teacher participates in this meeting or in the postmeeting discussions that ensue among colleagues, her or his focus is the practical disruption of conversational streams that assert student identities of disability and continue school patterns of segregation.

Often, in the most practical sense, this teacher activity consists of repeatedly offering plausible alternative explanations that recast “the problem” as a problem or situation not involving disability. This recasting claims that it is not a problem of disability but a problem of another sort entirely. Perhaps what had been attributed to the deficiencies of a student “with a disability” may then be explicated as a need for the improvement of pedagogical processes and structural arrangements, a reconsideration of previously unexamined practices and procedures. If the deconstructionist educator is successful, a *new problem* lacking schemes of hierarchy and inequality is constructed and a new solution soon follows.

**ADVOCACY.** Advocacy for individuals “with disabilities” can focus on the universal human need for assistance. Everybody needs help sometimes. Even human needs should not be sorted into categories of “normal” and “special.” Why should a 15-year-old public school student who needs assistance with a diaper change be described as having “special needs” yet another 15-year-old’s need for tutoring in geometry is considered a normal (not special) need? Each is an authentic need that may be addressed by school personnel. Seen in this light, the reason for receiving assistance is that each person is human. Disability is not a reason for assistance.

Through an appeal to this human need, deconstructionist educators can advocate for services and arrangements without relying on the disability explanations for student behavior or learning. For example, a colleague explains that a student is doing poorly in social studies “because of his learning disability.” This form of common and socially accepted explanation quickly appropriates the deficit construct as ready reason for the child’s performance. This merely reaffirms the “reality” of the concept of a deficit in the child while providing no practical insight or guidance about how to address the student’s difficulties in social studies. The deconstructionist teacher either confronts this reasoning outright or quickly negotiates past it



to get to the more practical and specific nitty-gritty of discussing what is going on and what might be done to help the student. Direct confrontation may spark a discussion about the "realness" or "actuality" of LD. Spurring such discussions among colleagues is important work to be undertaken when teachers have ample time and trust for such serious considerations. The strategic teacher seeks these discussions at opportune moments and with colleagues who seem willing to question their own assumptions and thinking. Often, owing to time and practicality, one must slip past the disability explanation to seek the more crucial goal of solving problems. A student and teacher struggling in the teaching/learning of social studies need help, an activity that has nothing to do with the use of disability terms and explanations.

## DISCUSSION

To some readers, the philosophy and strategies of deconstruction may sound like odd ideas. To other readers, the task of opposing the daily construction of disability identities has long been an important part of their work. We hope that this paper has stirred the imagination of the former and provided conceptual support to the latter.

Inclusion itself began as a strange idea, a mixing of seemingly unmixables. It has grown to widespread notoriety if not predominant acceptance. In this essay, we have offered deconstruction as one coherent philosophy in support of inclusion. Our hope is that dialogue among professionals about suitable philosophical orientations for inclusion advocacy does not end here. Deconstruction is not the only possible philosophy that can be applied to the task of furthering the inclusion movement. We invite others to join in a thoughtful conversation about inclusion philosophy that supports the improvement of life and learning possibilities for persons considered to have disabilities. ■

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## NOTES

1. The term and practice of *deconstruction* has been effectively utilized by Skrtic (1986, 1991, 1996) in his various postmodern critiques of the organizational culture and knowledge base of special education. The general goal of these critiques has been the creation of democracy within education and special education. We view our paper as an intellectual and political work operating in alliance with these and other critical writings (e.g., Danforth, 1995; Franklin, 1987; Sigmon, 1987; Tomlinson, 1996). Skrtic (1996) uses the term *deconstruction* to broadly describe critical

writings that "expose the inconsistencies, contradictions, and silences in the conventional outlook" (p. 50) on special education knowledge, policy, and practice. In this paper, we attempt to retain Derrida's original emphasis on the linkage of power, social reality, and language.

2. More broadly, one could say that a teacher employing deconstruction would oppose the continuation of all forms of social injustice within the school. This would include contesting not only the hierarchy of ability and disability but also inequalities based on race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual preference.

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