

# “Crippling” the Curriculum Through Academic Activism: Working toward Increasing Global Exchanges to Reframe (Dis)Ability and Education

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This article illustrates a work in progress about why and how a small yet growing network of international scholars have forged alternative frameworks for understanding what is termed “disability.” First, we discuss the definition of disability calling attention to its social contexts, including schools, and the hegemony of special education. Second, we critique the knowledge base of special education as insufficient for understanding the lived complexities of people identified as disabled. Third, we describe Disability Studies in Education (DSE) as an example of academic activism that counters the master narrative of deficiency. Fourth, we illustrate the global exchanges around disability explored through DSE. Fifth, we consider implications for DSE in theory, research, policy, and practice. Finally, given that DSE’s academic activism is rooted in social justice, we discuss some of the tensions, paradoxes, and unresolved questions that broaden what constitutes diversity within classrooms.

## SEPARATE IS NOT EQUAL<sup>1</sup>

The enormous energy society expends keeping people with disabilities sequestered and in subordinate positions is matched by the academy’s effort to justify that isolation and oppression. (Linton, 1998, p. 3)

Linton points out above that the academy is not exempt from matters of oppression. To the contrary, she charges that various knowledge bases within academia and the structures they uphold serve to enforce injustices. Examples of this charge can be seen in the academy’s historical understandings of what “disability” means: an undesirable difference, a shameful thing, something to be fixed, cured, or remediated in a quest to shape humans into the rarely questioned mold of normalcy (Davis, 1995; Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010; Terry & Urla, 1995). If normalcy fails to be achieved, then the “fault” lies within flawed individuals, making them a burden within families, educational institutions, and society at large. In sum, separate spaces and places have

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We thank Sue Baglieri, Deborah Gallagher, and Jan Valle for sharing their ideas that have influenced this article.

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been created throughout history in which children, youth, and adults are educated, housed, and employed, thereby reinforcing notions of normalcy through a system of dis/ability apartheid. Majority consensus has traditionally been, “They do not belong with us.”

The history, evolution, and significance of “special education” are of interest to all educators because each educator is implicated in sustaining a system that divides humans into two clearly defined groups: the disabled and the non-disabled. Until fairly recently, special education has held a monopoly on educators’ thinking about the paired concepts of “disability” and “education.” However, such a system is fraught with tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions at all levels, ranging from the field’s assumed knowledge base (Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004) to what constitutes most effective teaching methodologies (Deshler, Schumaker, Harris, & Graham, 1999), from how to best measure and define differences among humans (Brantlinger, 2004) to creating and implementing national policies (Hehir, 2005).

Although special education ensures a free and appropriate education for students and youth with disabilities, in many cases it falls short of the equality of opportunity assured within federal laws (Skrtic, 1991; Skrtic & McCall, 2010). For example, in comparison to their nondisabled peers, students in the special education system are likely to have low graduation rates (Advocates for Children, 2005), high drop-out rates (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002), a lengthier time completing school (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), less likelihood of entering college and more chance of leaving prematurely (Gregg, 2007), underemployment or unemployment (Moxley & Finch, 2003), and higher rates of incarceration (Cass, Curry, & Liss, 2007). Within school systems, students continue to experience segregation according to disability, with children of color and those from linguistic minorities being overrepresented in disability categories and more restrictive settings (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

The roots of these interconnected phenomena are long and tangled, beyond the scope of this article, and have been examined elsewhere (Connor & Ferri, in press). However, what directly relates to these sobering outcomes is the ongoing notion of how special education continues to be predominantly conceived as a distinct and separate entity from general education. To counteract the notion of special education as synonymous with separate education, the inclusion movement emerged in the late 1980s, remaining influential to this day and providing a counter-discourse of “separate is not equal” (Ferri & Connor, 2006). However the current era of high stakes testing and the federal thrust of Response to Intervention, a three-tiered process of academic intervention authorized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, are undermining progress made by the inclusion movement by promoting the return to a more traditional notion of separate places and/or pull out services (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor, & Valle, 2011; Ferri, 2012). The hegemony of the special-general education bifurcation, therefore, is very much alive and, in turn, continues to reinforce the Hegemony of Normalcy—a concept that has been used in oppressive ways to segregate, marginalize, devalue, and abnormalize children.

We assert the relevance of social justice to reframing disability. Instead of deficit-based conceptualizations of what has come to be known as “disability,” we believe cognitive, physical, emotional, and sensory differences among humans can be understood as natural human variation.

By “cripping” academia and teacher education, we trouble notions of what McRuer (2006) calls “compulsory able-bodiedness”<sup>2</sup> (p. 1), a phenomenon that passes as the natural order of things. In doing this, we call attention to everyday practices, the beliefs upon which they are

predicated, and where we (academics, teacher educators, teachers) position ourselves in relation to them.

This article illustrates a work in progress about why and how a small yet growing network of international scholars have forged alternative frameworks for understanding what is termed “disability.” First, we discuss the definition of disability calling attention to its social contexts, including schools, and the hegemony of special education. Second, we critique the knowledge base of special education as insufficient for understanding the lived complexities of people identified as disabled. Third, we describe Disability Studies in Education (DSE) as an example of academic activism that counters the master narrative of deficiency. Fourth, we illustrate the global exchanges around disability explored through DSE. Fifth, we consider implications for DSE in terms of theory, research, policy, and practice. Finally, given that DSE’s academic activism is rooted in social justice, we discuss some of the tensions, paradoxes, and unresolved questions that broaden what constitutes diversity within classrooms.

## DISABILITY AND THE HEGEMONY OF NORMALCY

Pressures to deny, ignore, normalize, and remain silent about one’s own disability are both compelling and seductive in a social order intolerant of deviations from the bodily standards enforced by a quotidian matrix of economic, social, and political forces. (Garland Thomson, 1996, p. xvii)

The notion that there is an ideal American citizen has remained remarkably constant over time, and this ideal excludes disability. In his groundbreaking study on stigma, Goffman (1963) notes, “In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (p. 128). The term “all American” still conjures almost the exact same picture in the mind’s cultural eye, maintaining most, even perhaps all, of these characteristics. The concept of an ideal citizen assures full status within normalcy, guaranteeing admittance (and usually acceptance) into all domains of society. Such idealization is profoundly challenged by disability.

The pursuit of the slim, well-muscled body is not only an aesthetic matter, but also a moral imperative . . . It hardly needs saying that the disabled, individually, and as a group, contravene all the values of youth, virility, activity, and physical beauty that Americans cherish, however little most individuals may embody them. (Murphy, 1995, p. 153)

Notions of an idealized citizen mirrored in a flawless, Greek god-like body undergird our society (Davis, 1995). Outside these boundaries, disability is viewed as an undesirable deviation, an aberration. Yet, placed outside of the social norms, people with disabilities have rightfully asked: Who (re)creates that norm? Why has it been reproduced? Where was it reproduced? When was it reproduced? Where do we stand (or sit) in relation to that norm? Who are positioned as the “insiders” and who are the “outsiders”? Who becomes advantaged and who becomes disadvantaged by this arrangement? Indeed, we come to see that just as the world is racialized, gendered, and sexualized, it is also profoundly normalized. Davis (2002) points out:

Whether we are talking about AIDS, low birth weight babies, special education issues, euthanasia, and the thousand other topics listed in the newspapers every day, the examination, discussion, anatomizing

this form of “difference” is nothing less than a desperate attempt by people to consolidate their normalcy. (p. 117)

What, then, are educators to make of the hegemony of normalcy within schools? Inflexible school operations, such as standardized norms, ability tracking, age- and grade-level “appropriate” expectations, ritualized behaviors, and heavily bureaucratized practices around the documentation of disability are all interlocking cogs in the machinery of normalcy, leading Baker (2002) to conclude that practices are mobilized toward “the hunt for disability” (p. 663). The increasing number of students labeled<sup>3</sup> is evidence of an obsession within education to locate, and then often relocate, children who are viewed as insufficiently normal in behaving, learning, focusing, following instructions, speaking correctly, and so on.

In contrast, we believe that instead of seeking alleged “intrinsic deficits” within children and youth, more can be gained by holding a mirror to the institution of schooling and its commonplace practices. By doing so, Garland Thomson (1996) notes what becomes revealed is “the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations [and] determine the varying degrees of disability or able-bodiedness, or extra-ordinariness” (p. 7). She believes all of us have degrees of disability, able-bodiedness, and extraordinariness, depending upon the context, task, and interactions. This fluid interpretation of dis/ability is in stark contrast to the “fixed” notions associated with normalcy on which current educational practices are built.

Of great interest to us is that normalcy (or able-bodiedness) is rarely recognized as an integral part of identity. Like whiteness, normalcy conveys power and unacknowledged privileges to people who live in a world configured for them—without recognizing the barriers facing others. The constellation of privileges afforded non-disabled people creates a world that at best chooses not to see disability, and at worst, seeks to be rid of it (Terry & Urla, 1995). Bearing this point in mind, we note the words of queer theorist Michael Warner (1999):

Nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is to be abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all. Especially in America where [striving to be] normal probably outranks all other social aspirations. (p. 53)

Here, Warner aptly captures the relentless force of how notions of normalcy play a significant role in society, valuing some people while devaluing others. By questioning the very concept of disability, we are forced to question the concept of normalcy and ultimately to view it as a social construction that is subject to many cultural influences. When contemplating how people’s bodies interact with the environment, the dominant medical model of disability utilized in special education clearly proves to be inadequate.

### A SOCIALLY JUST REFRAMING OF DISABILITY: DSE AS ACADEMIC ACTIVISM

The body is never a physical thing so much as a series of attitudes toward it. (Davis, 2002, p. 22)

Over the decades, scholars critical of special education<sup>4</sup> have questioned its foundations and the practices they undergird, including segregation (Dunn, 1968; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg,

1986); institutionalization (Bogden & Taylor, 1989); professionalization (Skrtic, 1991); structuring (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987); overly-prescriptive, mechanistic pedagogies (Heshusius, 1989, 1995; Iano, 1986, 1990); and labeling (Carrier, 1986). These scholars paved the way for other critical special educators whose critiques of special education have encompassed its unquestioned basis in, and tenacious adherence to, positivism (Danforth, 1999; Gallagher, 2001); its narrow, self-imposed range of “approved” research methods (Connor, Gallagher, & Ferri, 2011); the medicalization of disabled people (Abberley, 1987; Barton, 1996); segregation based on disability (Allan, 1999); an overreliance on interventions aimed at deficits (Hehir, 2005); intelligence testing (Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010); and the professionalization of school failure (Ferguson, 2002). When combined, these powerful critiques reveal limited, oppressive conceptualizations of disability within the master script of special education.

In their desire to broaden understandings of disability in education, critical scholars looked toward the interdisciplinary field of disability studies (DS), a phenomenon that arose to examine the construction and function of “disability” in social, cultural, historical, and political terms (Linton, 1998). The origin of Disability Studies, therefore, is rooted in social activism. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, led by African Americans, demanded the recognition of inequalities among its citizens based upon race and the need for social change. Subsequently, women called attention to the discrimination they faced and pressed for equal rights; Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer people (GLBTQ) demanded recognition and basic human rights; and people with disabilities, along with their allies, marshaled their resources and applied pressure to pass bills, change laws, claim rights, and define themselves, with a view to increase access to all aspects of society (Fleisher & Zames, 2001). In sum, the disability rights movement was fueled by the recognition that people with disabilities experienced similar circumstances to other groups. Hahn (2002) noted that disabled people “have been plagued by . . . high rates of unemployment, poverty, and welfare dependency; school segregation; inadequate housing and transportation; and exclusion from many public facilities that appear to be reserved exclusively for the non-disabled majority” (pp. 171–172).

Of importance was a desire to call attention to, and challenge, multiple manifestations of ableism. Rausher and McClintock (1997) describe ableism as

A pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional, and physical disabilities . . . Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities . . . fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable. (p. 198)

In countering the medical model as the master narrative of disability, DS scholars around the world have developed eclectic ways of conceptualizing and representing disability, including sociological, historical, cultural, philosophical, religious, arts-based, and humanities-based. Such openness of inquiry influenced scholars who had based their work along the lines of the following questions:

- What is the nature of disability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Bogdan & Taylor, 1989; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Shakespeare, 1994; Sleeter, 1986)?
- What are appropriate teaching practices to use for students with disabilities (Heshusius, 1984; Iano, 1990; Poplin, 1988)? and

- What counts as research in the field of special education and why (Brantlinger, 1997; Danforth, 1999; Gallagher, 1998; Heshusius, 1989; Iano, 1986; Poplin, 1987; Skrtic, 1991)?

During the 1990s, critical special educators in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. continued to align their focus in disability research within a DS framework, using non-positivist and critical theory methodology. These same academics coalesced in an organization named the International Council for Inclusive Education (ICIE). In June, 1999, with the support of a Spencer Foundation grant, Linda Ware organized an international conference in Rochester, New York that brought many scholars from other countries together for the first time in the U.S. The conference encouraged a continued global engagement with Disability Studies and education (Ware, 2004).

In December of the same year, at the national conference of The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH), Scot Danforth chaired a panel titled *Ways of Constructing Lives and Disabilities: The Case for Open Inquiry*. Centering their presentations on the social and political value of current trends and developments in disability research and scholarship, the panelists explored the importance of open inquiry in addressing the social valuation and inclusion of education of people with disabilities. In brief, they made the case that expansion and diversification of what is considered legitimate and valuable research and scholarship should be welcomed in special education journals, conferences, grant-facilitating institutions, and university classrooms.

At the same conference, a group of 30 disability researchers from around the world gathered with the purpose of forging new alternatives to traditional special education research. They explored innovative ways of imagining, talking about, and writing about the lives of people with disabilities. The group agreed that the kind of work they were discussing was best described as “disability studies in education,” and a new Special Interest Group (SIG) was formed within the American Educational Research Association (AERA). This marked the establishment of, at least in a formal sense, the now thriving field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) (Danforth & Gabel, 2007; Gabel, 2005).

Interest and involvement in questions concerning how various conceptualizations of disability affect theory, research, policy, and practice continued to grow. In June 2001, a small conference hosted by National Louis University entitled, *Disability Studies in Education: Critical Reflections on the Themes of Policy, Practice, and Theory*, was held in Chicago, Illinois, attracting scholars from across the U.S. The success of the conference resulted in it becoming an annual event that attracts a growing numbers of researchers, academics, teachers, and others who actively seek a more pluralistic approach toward theory and practice in educational (and rehabilitation) services for people with disabilities.

## GLOBAL EXCHANGES ABOUT DISABILITY AND EDUCATION

The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives. (Goffman, 1963, p. 137)

The international evolution of DSE has afforded opportunities for ongoing conversations about ways to conceptualize disability and how to act to provoke change as a result of that understanding. Several editions of DS journals have been dedicated to education and disability (see, for example: *Disability Studies Quarterly* [Connor & Ferri, 2010; Valle, Connor, & Reid, 2005]; *International Review of Disability Studies* [Connor, Valle, & Hale, 2012; Conway, 2005]), and education has

been a consistent topic of interest in *Disability & Society* (Danforth, 1999; Gabel & Peters, 2004; Gallagher, 2001; Graham & Grieshaber, 2008; Lesseliers, Van Hove, & Vandevelde, 2009; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2010). In addition, the annual DSE conference, while largely based in the U.S., has been held in Belgium (2010) and is scheduled for New Zealand (2013) as it continues to increase its number of international participants. Furthermore, the conference has been held several times as a prelude to the annual AERA meeting in an attempt to maximize opportunities for international scholars to attend.

The desire to further cultivate global dialogues can be seen in journal publications such as the special double edition of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008) in which scholars from Ghana, the U.S., New Zealand, and Ireland shared their work on the theme of Disability Studies and Inclusive Education. Similarly, the DSE book series, Gabel and Danforth's (2008b) *Disability and the Politics of Education*, contains 33 chapters by scholars from Africa (3), Asia (4), Australasia (3), Europe (12), South America (1), and the U.S. (12). The editors' introductory chapter outlines international agreements on the right to education, including the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) that proclaims:

Children with special needs [must] have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting those needs, [and] regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes . . . building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. (Section 2)

However, Gabel and Danforth (2008a) observe that while the missions of various international organizations are well intended, they usually fall drastically short of their goals, noting "millions of the world's disabled children cannot obtain a basic childhood education, particularly [in] countries with limited resources" (p. 4). The authors also call attention to how "even in the wealthiest countries many disabled children are educationally segregated from nondisabled children" (p. 4). Even in the United States, often admired for its federal regulations regarding special education, inclusion for some students with cognitive impairments has been decreasing (Smith, 2010).

## IMPLICATIONS: THEORY, RESEARCH, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

Nothing about us without us. (Charlton, 1998, p. 1)

The examples of conferences and publications in the preceding section exemplify how DSE scholars from various parts of the globe are united in their interest to improve the quality of education for children with disabilities in their own countries and others around the world. In this section, we look at the four areas of theory, research, practice, and policy, each containing a selection of highlights and examples from the work of DSE scholars. These are followed by a brief discussion about the continued need to crip multiple curricula across K-20 in general.

### Research: Expanding Questions, Pluralizing Methods

While broad, even eclectic, the work of scholars within DSE is united by a common desire to unlearn long-standing stereotypes through critiquing the status quo. Scholarship within recent

years includes challenging the knowledge base of special education (Gallagher, 1998); linking medicalized discourses to eugenics (Smith, 2008); providing alternatives to medicalized histories of disability (Danforth, 2009); investigating social policies and litigation about disability (Bjarnson, 2008; Morton, 2009); advocating activism in the policy domain (Gabel, 2008); disrupting normalcy (Mutua & Smith, 2006); confronting ableism (Danforth & Gabel 2007); unraveling the myth of the typical child (Baglieri et al., 2011); narrating lives of children and youth with disabilities (De Schawer, Van Hove, Mortier, & Loots, 2009; Mortier, Desimpel, De Schawer, & Van Hove, 2011); teaching disability as a natural part of human diversity (Connor & Bejoian, 2007); teaching about disability as an ethical responsibility (McLean, 2008); demanding increased access to mainstream schools and classrooms (Brantlinger, 2004); creating a more dynamic, accessible curriculum (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004); using assistive technology and universal design (Brown & Brown, 2006); helping parents of children and youth with disabilities navigate unfriendly school bureaucracies (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2006; Van Hove et al., 2009); connecting international concerns of disability and schooling (Gabel & Danforth, 2008b); focusing on the overrepresentation of students of color (Ferri & Connor, 2006; Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khader, & Albee, 2009); examining ideologies embedded in language (Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008); developing qualitative methodologies (Narian, 2008); and forging interdisciplinary alliances (Ware, 2008).

This recent burst of activity around disability and education has been a welcome change to what was once monopolized by the institution of special education. This scholarship has broadened perspectives about human differences, making these broadened perspectives available as viable alternatives to dominant models of disability. The plurality of perspectives now circulating within education (and beyond) has obliged the field of special education to acknowledge and engage with these ideas as productive sites for epistemological, ontological, and methodological discussions (Connor et al., 2011). This engagement is progress as critical special educators have traditionally been blocked from professional journals, their positions dismissed as “scurrilous” (Kauffman, 1999, p. 245) and their professional work as “foppery” (Kauffman & Sasso, 2006, p. 109) by powerful scholars in the field. However, critiques about the social model of disability are still prevalent in traditional journals, with ominous lamentations about the impending “demise of special education” (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, p. 368). However, representation both within and outside of traditional special education journals has established DSE as a viable field of study in which notions of disability and difference are expansive, rather than reductive.

### Practice: Promoting Access, Supporting Flexibility

Scholars within DSE are conscious of how their work is relevant to everyday life in schools. Christensen (1996) points out that “schooling itself is disabling, that its lack of flexibility in accommodating a diverse range of learners creates disabled students” (p. 65). By focusing on the overall system rather than on the child as the site of responsibility, teachers and scholars in the field of DS engage in combating structural ableism that is embedded in the everyday arrangements of schooling. This perspective is in keeping with anti-oppressive education in that it seeks to foreground how educators must analyze the systems in which they work to identify and change commonplace oppressive practices (Kumashiro & Ngo, 2007). Everyday examples include teachers and students discussing the meaning of normalcy in relation to disability, how

this manifests within school structures and the relations they shape (Keefe, Moore, & Duff, 2006), the absence or misrepresentation of disability across the curriculum (Ware, 2001), and by exploring ways to respond to ableism with view to transforming schools. This stance can be as simple as respectfully challenging students and teachers when they utter the ubiquitous phrase, “That’s retarded!”

Most scholars in DSE are inclusive educators, meaning that they wish to see all students integrated into general classrooms. Several scholars have researched ways in which children with and without multiple disabilities interact with one another and adults in the classroom by using symbolic interactionism (Bentley, 2008) and narratives (Narian, 2008). Others, such as Baglieri and Knopf (2004), emphasize the need to value all students and that “educators normalize difference through differentiated instruction, and the school culture reflects an ethic of caring and community” (p. 525). The primacy of community is echoed in the book title of Sapon-Shevin (2007) who has steadfastly urged that inclusive classrooms are the most powerful places to “widen the circle” of acceptance and understanding and that it is within the power of our imaginations to reinvent the world in a way that we desire, using lessons that have been learned so far.

Other DSE scholars have focused on teaching methods within inclusive classrooms. All agree that employing the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) helps teachers be proactive in creating environments that consider all of their students’ abilities, instead of “retrofitting” accommodations or modifications “on the spot” or for the next lesson (Burghstahler & Corey, 2008). According to Schwartz (2006), “Inclusion may not be easier, but it is better” (p. 33) for numerous reasons, including the use of innovative and diverse strategies for learning. Several DSE scholars have written user-friendly books that highlight a wealth of teaching strategies for educators to use in inclusive classrooms. For example, Udvari-Solner and Kluth (2008) provide a range of strategies to engage students and promote student interactions. Likewise, Valle and Connor (2010) seek to explicitly bring DS into inclusive classrooms by dedicating ten chapters to common teacher questions about the whys and hows of creating, sustaining, and developing inclusive practices. Finally, the work of all scholars mentioned here is compatible with popular pedagogical approaches to inclusive education, such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) and collaborative team teaching (Friend, 2005), that are taught in both general and special education university courses.

In addition to their responsibility of creating welcoming classes based upon UDL, we believe educators must move beyond the acceptance of disability as diversity, and actively teach about it, including its history, its culture, and the ways in which many people are disabled by physical and attitudinal barriers. For example, teachers can consider which representations accurately portray disabled people’s lives, which reinforce stereotypes, and which are available at each grade level (Ayala, 1999; Blaska & Lynch, 1998; Connor & Bejoian, 2006). Art educators, for example, have many opportunities to incorporate disability representations and disability culture into the curriculum. Not so long ago in Washington, DC, people debated about whether or not to depict the revered former president Franklin D. Roosevelt in a wheelchair, despite his life-long maintenance of a public persona without a disability. Another example could be the stunning autobiographical paintings of Frida Kahlo, explicitly chronicling her life with physical disabilities, asking: In what ways does disability inform an artist’s work? The question could also be posed in relation to Vincent van Gogh, Edward Manet, Toulouse Lautrec, Beauford Delany, Robert Raushenberg, and Chuck Close. Social studies teachers could use biographies of the artists, such as those listed, as well as other famous people including Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Stevie Wonder,

Temple Grandin, or Adrienne Rich. Social studies is also a good content area to learn about various ways disability is socially constructed by inaccessible schools, intolerance of difference, and social segregation. While we acknowledge that for some social justice scholars, the “add and stir” approach to including disability is far from ideal because it does not sufficiently challenge the fundamental form of the curriculum, we also acknowledge that accurate representation of people with disabilities is important, and for some educators, can serve as a beginning steps toward changing this realm.

There are K-12 teachers who have adopted a DSE lens and integrated disability into their curriculum in innovative ways, including the development of lessons that adhere to state standard performance outcomes while featuring materials selected by the educator along with creative methods of instruction (Dinaro, 2006; Kates, 2006; Stolz, 2006). Furthermore, there are many resources that teachers can access, ranging from Syracuse University’s website Disability Studies for Teachers to grassroots webzines such as the *Ragged Edge Online* (see Gabel & Connor, 2009, for more resources and suggestions).

### Policy: The Ultimate Challenge?

Having found their voice during the last decade, scholars in DSE acknowledge that it has not, to date, sufficiently focused on policy. A major obstacle to policy work in DSE is that U.S. educational policy uses a medical model of disability (Finkelstein, 1996). If policy is used as an attempt to find solutions to social problems resulting from disabled people living in challenging conditions, the medical model does not produce desired solutions. Longmore (2003) notes, “Cure or correction has been viewed as the only possible means by which people with disabilities could achieve social acceptance and social assimilation” (p. 217). This patronizing orientation has been critiqued by DSE for relegating disabled people as subordinate to clinical experts and caretakers (Ferguson, 2002) and effectively inhibiting other forms of understanding disability.

For example, Donoghue (2003) calls attention to how groups advocating for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990, 2008) desired policy interventions that would transform social conditions through eliminating discrimination in jobs, programs, and facilities. However, because the federal definitions of disability as a medical condition are used, attempts to move forward through litigation have been severely stymied. Given that many impairments are intermittent, unpredictable, and invisible, they do not meet strict medical guidelines used in law. As a result, many litigants have found themselves declared legally nondisabled, without protection under ADA. This point exemplifies the great need for DSE scholars to focus their energy on issues of policy that influence the lives of so many citizens.

In some cases, DSE scholars have been able to push the envelope and impact larger systems and structures. For example, core members of the DSE-SIG wrote a white paper, *Toward Increased Accessibility and a Culture of Inclusion*, at the American Educational Research Association’s Annual Conference (Gallagher et al., 2007) that was prompted by having been repeatedly given inaccessible space for their meetings and sponsored presentations. The terse dialogue that initially occurred between DSE-SIG members and AERA’s administration, ultimately give way to constructive conversations that resulted in ideas being implemented, such as a list of presentation requirements for all speakers (Educational Researcher, 2011), a comfort/resting room, a shuttle bus among hotel venues, an annual pre-conference site inspection by a researcher or educator

who uses a wheelchair, and an invitation to be a two-year member on the organization's Social Justice Action Committee in which disability was welcomed as an addition that had previously been overlooked. While AERA still has a long way to go, it has moved to make and maintain these changes. We are still urging, however, for many other possible changes, such as the use of closed captioning at main presentations and space between roundtables for people to physically maneuver and hear better.

Recently, and on a larger scale, Allan (2012) has described ways in which she brings ideas of DSE into various European projects involving policymakers and politicians. For example, for a Council of Europe Project (that included Ministers of Education from across Europe) on Policies and Practices for Socio-Cultural Diversity, Allan writes:

Key ideas from Disability Studies in Education (principally informed by the work of Derrida, 1993, and Levinas, 1969) were infused with the dialogues with administrators and Ministers and strategies for interrupting the hegemony of difference as deficit . . . were deployed, whilst working within a familiar (and possibly obligatory) context of teacher competencies. (p. 14)

Her work is pioneering in its pursuit of an ethical approach to teaching a diverse student population. In sum, Allan urges for teacher education programs to cultivate thinkers who are responsive to student differences that will be constantly present throughout their careers. She writes, using the notion of an aporia, a double contradictory imperative (Derrida, 1992a) deployed as a strategy,

Ministers were encouraged to understand that decisions were not necessarily resolvable or reducible to one single choice and indeed that it was the very process of keeping two apparently oppositional questions open that was at the heart of justice. Derrida (1992b) argues that it is the point at which decisions are made, when only one option is selected, that closure is created and injustice is produced. (p. 20)

Ultimately, Allan's accounts of engagement with these ideas and strategies as well as administrators and politicians' responses to them suggest "an openness and receptiveness to rethinking difference and identities and a recognition of the importance of assisting student teachers in becoming confident in responding to difference, rather than training them to manage difference competently" (p. 14).

Finally, while recognizing both DSE's successes and current shortcomings in policy, we propose four areas that can be addressed to promote a social justice agenda toward change. These areas are: (a) research agendas that highlight the limitations and inherent problems with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and other educational legislation policy applied to education (such as No Child Left Behind [2002]; Response to Intervention; Race for the Top [U.S. Department of Education, 2009]); (b) disseminate descriptions of efforts by local educators who build and maintain inclusive classrooms, and promote the use of universal design in all schools; (c) disseminate policy alternatives that protect equal access and a free appropriate public inclusive education that adhere to a social model of disability; and (d) collaborate with the disability rights community and DS researchers to implement these first three suggestions.

## TENSIONS, PARADOXES, AND QUESTIONS UNRESOLVED

Current efforts to reform schools have not centered on concerns about diversity. (Banks, 2001, p. 191)

Teachers and scholars who identify with social justice issues exist in the liminal space between what currently is (the actual state) and what is considered more preferable (the desired state) within education. Banks (2001) stated 12 years ago that schools do not sufficiently center upon diversity, and while he largely referred to issues of race, we would also add disability, along with ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. And yet, the population within classrooms has arguably never been as diverse as it is now. The increased inclusion of children, youth, and adults with disabilities into schools and colleges has benefitted them, their peers, and teachers greatly (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). At the same time, the pressure to teach such a variety of learners has created many tensions, illuminated paradoxes, and prompted questions that are unresolved.

### Tensions

The competing demands placed upon teachers are formidable. The educational establishment is currently based upon high-stakes testing designed to raise standards, but instead appears to seek standardization among the population. For example, in New York City, students are identified as “being” a 1, 2, 3, or 4 (from lowest to highest), embodying the rubric measurement scale created by the Department of Education, thereby influencing grade retention, tracking, school applications, program placement, disability classifications, and so on. The assumed uniformity toward which all children are striving does not adequately honor diverse abilities or multiculturalism, although these values are often openly stated in policy and educational literature (Tomlinson, 2001). At the same time, a lock-step, fast-paced curriculum does not provide opportunities for learning concepts in-depth or meaningful differentiated instruction. When students do not perform on state examinations at the desired/expected level, punitive measures and penalties occur. Of concern to us is how educators have come to see students with disabilities as “liabilities” to their own professional careers, a potential threat to job security.

### Paradoxes

Traditional discourses of disability—the scientific, medical, psychological—are constantly invoked for many reasons, from creating laws to calling “experts” to testify about disability. Such use legitimizes the framing of disability in these problematic ways. The very legal discourses that are intended to liberate individuals with disabilities simultaneously serve to disempower them (Russell, 1998). In addition, who holds expertise about disability is often a contested notion between professional “experts” and those upon whom they practice. However, from a historical, social, and cultural perspective, individuals with disabilities are considered to be the experts about their own lives (Keefe et al., 2006). This perspective opposes traditional forms of research in special education that have been predicated upon “objective” procedures, disconnected from the knowledge of people with disabilities (Gallagher, 1998).

The issue of who owns expertise about disability continues to divide schools of education into two programs that teach collaboration to support inclusive classrooms, but who do not necessarily practice what they preach (Young, 2008). As long as disability continues to be framed within deficit-based scientific, medical, and psychological understandings of difference, progress toward more expansive, holistic understandings of disability as human variation will be inhibited. While critics of the social model within special education are alarmed by the field's "demise" (Anastasiou & Kauffmann, 2011, p. 368), scholars in DSE see a desirable shift in power from one knowledge base to another.

### Questions Unresolved

The work of DSE scholars continues to ask questions that do not have easy, immediate answers, yet are seen as opportunities for furthering growth of how we engage with human differences signified as disabilities. Some of these questions include: What is lost and gained by using disability labels? To what degree, by its very definition, does the term "disability" enforce the hegemony of normalcy? In what ways can disability be a source of pride, like other markers of identity? In what ways do intersectional analyses of disability and other markers of identity provide more complex, subtle understandings of our response to human difference(s)? How can a social model of disability include medical understandings of disability that are non-oppressive, such as managing chronic pain? How can teachers come to know disability in non-medical framings so they can better understand the diversity among students in their classroom everyday? As is evident, the range of areas reflected in this small cluster of questions points to their continued exploration.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the greatest progress toward the integration of people with disabilities has appeared in the U.S. public schools. (Longmore, 2003, p. 26)

Longmore's optimistic comment above reveals the importance of schools in simultaneously reflecting and shaping society at large. While much progress has been made, we still have far to go. Politically relevant scholarship has a long history, dating back to the Progressive Era in the United States (Piven, 2010) and perhaps farther in other countries. For over 30 years scholars in Disability Studies have engaged in what many would call academic activism by "cripping" the curriculum of primary, secondary, and postsecondary education. This work has entailed shining a light on able-bodied privilege; confronting notions of diversity that exclude disability; and challenging educational structures that sort and rank students, labeling some students "special" and resulting in segregation and exclusion from full and equal participation in education. Activist scholars have served as "intellectual lookouts," opposing orthodoxy "to uncover and elucidate, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power" (Said, 2002, p. 29).

Scholars in Disability Studies have also taken their activism outside the academy and impacted national and international audiences as public intellectuals and consultants, focusing their efforts

on what is at issue in local or global contexts. For example, Tom Shakespeare, a UK scholar, recently contributed to the World Report on Disability (World Health Organization, 2011), the first report of its kind, in which the social model of disability and disabling educational, economic, political, and social structures are addressed. In Belgium, Geert Van Hove and his students plan research in conjunction with disabled people and their families with the goal of influencing education and rehabilitation structures for particular individuals (e.g., Mortier et al., 2011; Mortier, Hunt, Desimpel, & Van Hove, 2009; Van Hove et al., 2012). Their work has had impact on inclusive education in Flanders, the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium, where most disabled children are sent to segregated schools as young children. In New Zealand, Missy Morton has been engaged in constructing the New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Students with Special Needs (Morton, 2012; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009), in which she uses tenets of DSE to assess student learning within the general New Zealand curriculum.

Crippling the curriculum is a form of social justice pedagogy. In essence, Disability Studies continues to claim its freedom or “right to heresy” (Hook, cited in Berubé, 1997, p. 18) as imperative for continuing in the tradition of those activists and scholars who founded the field. In this article, we have attempted an abbreviated and admittedly all-too-Americanized version of the academic activism in DS, and its offspring, DSE. We hope to see future work that extends and improves upon what we have produced here and encourage scholars from around the world to continue chronicling academic efforts that call for—and enact—social change toward a more inclusive and just society.

## NOTES

1. We acknowledge that some children and youth with “disabilities” prefer to have separate locations, including those who are Deaf (in their own terms, linguistically different) and those identified as having autism (to manage sensory overstimulation). This acknowledgment does not conflict with the belief that all children and youth should have a legitimate choice.
2. We use the term “able-bodied” as a general catch all phrase to represent all forms of non-disability.
3. Labels include behavior disordered (BD), emotionally disturbed (ED), learning disabled (LD), cognitively impaired (CI), having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Speech and Language Disorder (S & L), Autistic Impairment (AI), and so on.
4. Many scholars who identify as working within DSE also self-identify as critical special educators.

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