Truth and Consequences

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Ideas, including those influencing teacher education and services to children with disabilities in schools, have palpable, far reaching consequences. Recently, several authors have taken special education to task for relying on practices established through the tenets of Western science, proposing instead the antidote of postmodern thought to redress the alleged positivistic failure of special education. While offering obtuse rhetoric couched in the politically correct vernacular of power relations, oppression, and the denial of disability, they offer little for what teachers should do in classrooms. We briefly address some issues they raise and note what this means for everyday teaching practice. We conclude that what these postmodernists have to offer is a regrettable step backwards in what it means to educate and support people with disabilities.
Truth and Consequences

Education means helping people understand how to do things more effectively than they could have before being educated. Absent a demonstrable change for the better, education cannot be considered good, successful, or effective even if it could be argued that it occurred. Indeed, education can be misused, becoming miseducation, a corrupting influence on thought and behavior whose consequences, deliberate or inadvertent, are, at best, irrelevant and wasteful; at its worst, evil. Thus, “Universal education is probably a good thing, but you could teach bad as well as good—you [could] teach falsehood as well as truth” (Feynman, 1999, p. 113). The consequences of miseducation are negative and can be severe for both individuals and societies, as has been demonstrated repeatedly by effective miseducation in malevolent, totalitarian states, by inadequate preparation of students for independence and work, and by misrepresentations fostered by various religions, cults, hucksters, quacks, and a variety of misanthropes (see Conquest, 2000; Feynman, 1999; Shattuck, 1999; Shermer, 1997, 2001 for examples), as well as among researchers in general and special education (see Kavale & Mostert, in press).

However, any educational practice, no matter how irrational, is based on one idea or another with different levels of significance and impact either in spite of, or because of, the quality of the idea. At the core of what we teach teachers and students, therefore, are realms of ideas with their extensions in the real world of the classroom. What separates more useful from less useful ideas are the methods we use to establish, as far as humanly possible, the relevant from the irrelevant, the benign from the dangerous, and the effective from the ineffective (see Mostert, 2000; Mostert & Kavale, 2001).
Miseducation, therefore, is best neutralized by teaching teachers and students to
discriminate good ideas from bad, to distinguish between truth and falsehood, to recognize the
difference between reality and fantasy, understanding and acting upon the notion, however
quaint to some, that words and the ideas they represent have important, often tangible
consequences (Mostert, 1999). We believe, therefore, that an important goal of education is
helping teachers and students understand the implications of ideas, to be able to see where ideas
lead, and to comprehend the consequences of accepting and acting on ideas and their underlying
ideologies. We therefore attach great importance to the matter of how ideas are generated and
related to educational practices and what the consequences of these ideas in practice mean for
people with disabilities. Essentially, the question we ask is: How do we know what we know that
will most benefit children and youth with disabilities?

After briefly summarizing the hallmarks of Enlightenment ideas in practice and where
they lead, we scrutinize some current notions of postmodernism as they have been applied to
special education by Danforth and Rhodes (1997), Gallagher (1998), Brantlinger (1997), and
Smith (1999), and how those ideas might impact people with disabilities in the real world.

*The Enlightenment and Ways of Knowing*

The Enlightenment happened for a number of reasons, chief among them attention to
what ways of thinking would most further human progress, especially in emphasizing
individuals’ experiences in the world. Ultimately, this world-view provided unprecedented
frontiers for reason and social justice, including in special education (see Feynman, 1998, 1999;
Gould, 2000; Shermer, 1997, 2001 for discussion of Enlightenment science; see Wilkins, 2001,
In science, the rise of empiricism stipulated that knowledge of an actual and mechanistic universe was uncoverable via disciplined observation and description that would eventually build, through experience, sets of theories, laws, principles, and foundations of knowledge in all fields of inquiry. Equally, empirical science separated out different fields of inquiry, understanding that different phenomena operated in different ways. It acknowledged, for example, that the laws and evidence in medicine were different from those in astronomy, in rhetoric different from architecture, thereby allowing the rapid advance of knowledge in every field. However, while different laws, evidence, and theory characterized every field, the manner in which knowledge was generated and verified remained the same—via the scientific method, a culmination of how people knew what they knew.

For centuries, uncovering evidence relied on a number of ways of knowing. Frankael and Wallen (2000) describe a useful hierarchy of these ways. First, there is knowing by relying on sensory experience, a practice that is inherently unreliable, unpredictable, and incomplete (see, for example, the Milgram experiments). Second, evidence might be known by checking how obtained knowledge agrees with other sources, problematic because others may or may not be wrong, and the extent of the accuracy of their knowledge may be suspect (see, for example….). Third, evidence can emanate from expert opinion. However, even experts can be mistaken (e.g., ??). Fourth, evidence can be established by the use of logic, which can only be effective and unassailably functional when the major and minor premises are true, and such truth might be difficult to verify or describe (e.g. the proponents of Facilitated communication, who falsely
assumed that communication was coming from the subject, not the facilitator). Finally, the scientific method overcomes the abovementioned difficulties by testing ideas in the public arena by (a) acknowledging the existence of a problem, (b) defining the problem, (c) discovering information to solve the problem, (d) organizing the discovered information, (e) analyzing the information, and (f) interpreting the findings of the analysis. It is this process alone that creates, the impossibility of complete objectivity, notwithstanding how knowledge should be uncovered: through objectivity, generalizability, and replicability (Gall, Borg, & Borg, ).

Further, Empiricism was also a radical intellectual metamorphosis stipulating that knowledge of how the world worked could be gained in a methodical and repeatedly verifiable way that did not rely on superstition or recourse to metaphysical beliefs. Instead, the scientific method decreed several absolutes. First, the systematic gathering of evidence to reliably establish differences between observation and expectation, or differences among observations themselves. Second the difference between observation and expectation to uncover the properties of data, especially in magnitude (i.e., the quantitative calibration supporting the experimental claim). Third were the differences and magnitude which would undergird the articulation of comprehensible detail to draw logical conclusions. Fourth, logical conclusions would allow for generalization as the breadth of applicability in the real world (see Kauffman, Brigham, & Mock, in press, for discussion of science versus ideology in behavioral disorders).

Ultimately, enlightenment science showed that careful experiments were and are able to provide empirical analysis to credibly change beliefs (Abelson, 1995). It is difficult, we imagine, if not impossible, to develop antibiotics, build automobiles, fly airplanes, build computers, or
explore the realms of outer space, for example, by anything other than this approach to the world.

We contend that empirical research based on the scientific method offers, by far, the greatest opportunity to establish intervention efficacy for people with disabilities. While the knowledge bases of special education are hardly complete, there is increasing consensus on a number of issues related directly to practice. In sum, these issues clearly show, via scientific investigation, that some interventions (e.g., direct instruction, phonics-based reading instruction, applied behavior analysis) are far more effective than others and also that some interventions are both useless and potentially dangerous (e.g., perceptual-motor training, the Feingold Diet, facilitated communication). Succinctly, the scientific method is fulfilling its promise of distinguishing belief from evidence in special education research.

It is the issue of belief that concerns us, given current trends in special education to embrace the premises of postmodern thought. Postmodernism is, surely, a world view that eschews hard boundaries between belief and evidence. Indeed, perhaps most perplexing is the assumption that belief is evidence, should therefore be accepted and acted upon, and that by default all ideas, their supporting ideologies, and their real-world consequences should be unquestioningly accepted as different but equal (see Danforth, 2001). We contend that this is a misguided but deliberate and even malevolent application of a radical egalitarianism that potentially negates significant progress in the field (see also Kauffman et al., in press).

The fact that we give postmodern ideas close scrutiny should not be mistaken for a desire to curb free expression, or, in Smith’s (1999) terms, to “otherize” (p. 119). We underscore the right of researchers to put forward whatever ideas they wish about special education, even those
we consider silly, disingenuous, or perverse. However, we do assert our right to respond to such ideas, and we do see danger in the failure to argue or demonstrate the negative consequences of such ideas. Bad ideas—even perverse ideas that most people abhor—often prevail simply by default where those who see their negative consequences say nothing, do nothing, teach nothing.

*The Postmodern Fallacy*

Marxism as radical intellectual chic is somewhat past its prime because its analyses were fundamentally flawed by visions of a non-existent world (Conquest, 2000). Even so, this misguided ideal has not been dislodged from discourse in special education by logical and rational argument. Many Marxists, not overly inhibited by their own ignorance, have turned instead to postmodernism as a liberation tool against traditionalist chains that they argue bind people with disabilities. Postmodern liberation of those with disabilities promulgates the fallacy that disability conditions do not exist independent of social context, the tension of social forces, and negotiated cultural understandings. As we illustrate below, special education has increasingly focused on a warped and dangerous concept of social justice, especially in opposing the classification of people with disabilities. The emphasis on this bastardized idea of social justice over empirical evidence has, we believe coerced the field into becoming inherently and increasingly political. Marxists and Postmodernists ignore the historical and practical reality of special education categories because they view such classification as exclusively representative of social and economic functions. Thus, for Marxists and Postmodernists, the category creates the disability.

A revealing example is in the application of postmodern “lenses” to the category of specific learning disabilities (SLD), a “disability” allegedly invented for societal reasons. Such is
the stance of Carrier (1986), who suggested that SLD “might be explicated as a set of beliefs which legitimate capitalist inequality and social relations” (p. 124) and is a set of “mental and behavioral attributes [that] conflict with those required for the smooth and profitable operation of American economy and society . . .” (p. 91).

Sleeter (1986) went further, saying SLD was a form of racial discrimination because in the 1950s’ “rising of reading standards, coupled with social expectations that schools help America’s cold war effort” (p. 48) led to greater failure which, in turn, led students to be sorted into four categories (slow learner, MR, E/BD, culturally-economically deprived). By the late 1960s, a new option was provided in SLD, but this new select group was overwhelmingly white and middle class. Although SLD “probably was not consciously established just for white middle class children . . . White middle class parents and educators who saw their failing children as different from poor or minority children pressed for the creation and use of this category” (p. 50). In contrast, minority and low-SES students were distributed between mental retardation (MR) and emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). This implies that such exclusions are discriminatory and should be redressed by the ostensible achievement of “social justice.”

It becomes quickly apparent that we wish to neither “see” or “hear” any postmodern drivel that begins by accusing us of being “accomplices in creating and maintaining bureaucracies and other structures that contribute to the current injustices of ‘ableism,’ racism, and classism” (Poplin, 1995, p. 393). Further, we see little use in assuming that present SLD theory as unacceptable. We oppose notions that SLD should “seek to assert the value of difference in ways that apply not just to marginalized ‘others,’ but also to those whose difference
is effaced within the category of normal” (Dudley-Marling & Dippo, 1995, p. 413). Further, we
discount the assumption that this goal can be achieved by “work[ing] daily to remove the stigma
of difference, to create classrooms in which relationship and dialogue, as opposed to treatment
and training, are central, and to create a conception of community based not on normalcy,
competitiveness, and ‘just deserts,’ but rather on diversity, mutuality, and social justice” (p. 413).

Postmodernism is now a powerful force in special education. Its proponents should be
held accountable for what this leads to in schools.

*Postmodern Ideas*

Recently, postmodernism in special education and related disciplines has been challenged
(e.g., see Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Krueger, 2002; Locke, 2002; Sasso, 2001 for discussion of
postmodernism). Our purpose here is to give some postmodern ideas articulated by their
representatives in special education some scrutiny to see what they have to offer and where they
lead us (e.g., Brantlinger, 1997; Danforth & Rhodes1997; Gallagher 1999; Smith, 1999.). We
address only some of the more obvious shortcomings of their views.

*Danforth and Rhodes: Caution--Deconstruction Ahead*

Danforth and Rhodes (1997), relying on the assumption that ideology is truth instead of
the precursor to truth or nontruth, think disability is a contrivance. That is, they argue that “…
disability is only … a reality made by people in words, thoughts, and social interactions” (p.…).
Thus, they suggest, disability is a perception conjured up by using some words and not others.
Indeed. Were this so, perhaps we should all stop using nouns that might be seen by some as
threatening or negative, such as tornado, illness, mental illness, crash, accident, and so on.
What does this mean for children with disabilities in school? If we take Danforth & Rhodes seriously, we should be able to do away with disability simply by not using words that make people disabled and replace them with words to undo what was previously done. For example, we should refrain from stating that Sally has severe mental retardation. Perhaps we can call her “intellectually precocious” instead, thereby instantaneously ensuring that Sally has a very good chance of becoming class valedictorian and receiving a full scholarship to an Ivy League university. Absurd? Not to Danforth and Rhodes, assuming that good postmodernists insist that words mean something while saying they mean nothing at all. But such self-contradictions or cognitive cul de sacs do not seem to inhibit the writing of postmodernists, as Kauffman (2002) has observed.

Further, Danforth and Rhodes propose a radical revolution, to “. . . contest and overturn the disability construct.” Deconstruction, they intone is, “. . . an aggressive political mode of critical analysis that strips conventional and assumed truths down to their logically insubstantial bare bones” (p. …) in order to counter the traditional notions that disability actually exists.

What of deconstructing deconstruction, which has already deconstructed the reality of disability? Is not deconstruction itself a conventional and assumed truth for postmodernists like Danforth and Rhodes? By their definition, deconstruction itself may in essence be made of insubstantially logical bare bones. To avoid such difficulties, the easiest way to deconstruct disability is simply to assert that it does not exist. Shattuck (1999) has analyzed the use of such perversion in literature, education, and the arts.

Danforth and Rhodes would have teachers acting, teaching, and interacting with all students without regard to anything save that each child is not any other child, thereby raising
two opposing dilemmas: Should teachers teach everyone in the same way (by making everyone the same by using some words to describe them and not others that would make them different, assuming such a word exists? Or should every child be taught differently, understanding that difference is an illusion that has, or should have already been deconstructed?

However, Danforth and Rhodes, despite their tortured explanations, are not interested primarily in ideas, but in power to make the rest of special education see the world the way they do. Asserting a hierarchy of ability over disability, they claim that this distinction automatically makes the (illusory, to them) disability inferior to ability. “Continued support of the commonly accepted concept that physiological disabilities exist in specific individual students no longer supports the philosophical and practical purposes of inclusion advocacy” (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997, p. 357).

Thus, for Danforth and Rhodes, not only must somewhat subjective words like “learning disability” or “emotional disturbance” be banished because children become what they are called, but even medical diagnoses must now bend to the will of “philosophy” and “practice.” For the postmodernists, Down syndrome does not exist; neither, we therefore assume, does fetal alcohol syndrome, quadriplegia, blindness, or autism. Or, if they do, advocates of postmodern beliefs assume that they can be ameliorated by calling them all “unique,” thereby rendering their alleged disability characteristics inconsequential for what teachers teach and how students learn in schools. To us, this sounds much like a slogan, “Inclusion uber alles.”

Acknowledging the paucity of substance in their argument, Danforth and Rhodes resort to their only possible exhortation--propaganda: “A policy 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” (Danforth & Rhodes, 1997, p. 357). Couching their ideas in the vernacular of guerilla movements the world over, they see acceptance as more important than reason. This is a somewhat fragile histrionic, we suggest, with some unseemly potential. Opposition for opposition’s sake, irrespective of the consequences, is not a good idea and not a way of achieving true social justice.

It is this very issue that has caused a fairly widespread backlash against full inclusion among general educators. “Accept full inclusion – or else” seems to be the motto. Dissent about full inclusion, no matter how legitimate, is seen as opposition that must be removed--a stance that strikes at the very heart of democratic education.

Danforth and Rhodes’s position is best divulged in their reasoning about how reading as measured in schools is a “positivistic, skills-based philosophy of reading” (p…). They find this view of reading quite pedestrian, opting rather to redefine reading as all kinds of activities that involve language, thereby giving credence to whole-language reading instruction. All reading paradigms, Danforth and Rhodes assert, are of equal value, that is, none is better (i.e., more effective) than another. What we do with children in schools, therefore, should be negotiated, all-inclusive, and reconstructed as uniquely necessary through the interests and needs of each set of stakeholders. In other words, their view of social justice is the imposition of egalitarian parameters on interventions irrespective of their relative worth or effectiveness. Danforth and Rhodes’s radicalism reaches its zenith with a fawning deference to the “cutting-edge” process of facilitated communication--an idea then, as now, only clung to by the most nearsighted and naïve (see Gould, 1997).
Gallagher (1998) took special education to task for reliance on what she saw as the misuse of scientific approaches to establish efficacy in special education. Charging that “. . . we most often seek resolution by invoking a particular version of empiricist science,” which, she insists, is, at best, imperfect. Hardly a revelatory assertion. However, Gallagher goes a step further in questioning the entire knowledge base of special education, essentially dismissing decades of “empiricist” research as something close to nonsense. Quoting a string of critics of empiricist science, she concludes that “. . . one central point of these critiques is that such a scientific knowledge base is unobtainable” (p. ).

While we agree that searching for empirical answers in special education is clearly different from such pursuits in the natural sciences, to assert that we are unable to obtain at least some truths that benefit people with disabilities goes beyond being irresponsible—it seeks to impose an anti-science will on the field in the best traditions of oppression and intellectual colonialism, which postmodernists are so fond of leveling at others (see Nanda, 1998). Accumulated special education knowledge is imperfect. We must understand, as Gallagher fails to do, that special education research is a very young but maturing field, but that there are areas of research with accumulated value that cannot be overstated. For example, after almost a century of deliberate and careful investigation, there is little doubt, empirically, about the most effective and efficient way to teach reading (see Chall, 19?? ); that facilitated communication (FC) is a macabre joke (see Gould, 1997; Mostert, 2001); that mnemonic instruction is an extremely useful teaching tool (see Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1994; Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Whedon, 1997); that social skill training is not all it’s purported to be (see ); and that applied
behavior analysis is still one of the most powerful, albeit currently unpopular ways to change behavior (see Alberto & Troutman, 2003). Practically, for teachers in classrooms, which is the better alternative: using what has been shown to be more rather than less effective (at least with most students under certain conditions), or, like Gallagher, to assume that effective teaching tools, if they exist, cannot be explained, and therefore should not be used, or used haphazardly at the whim of students and teachers after a “moral” decision?

Further, this ideological assertion barely disguises the real reason for Gallagher’s radical egalitarianism: If what most researchers know to be effective cannot truly be called effective because the effectiveness is not present in every single case of its use, and even when effectiveness cannot be explained, then ineffective interventions are just as useful as ineffective interventions. In short, all ideas and interventions are equally flawed and, therefore, equally useful or not useful. Thus, Gallagher argues, reliance on the tenets and results of empiricist science are unwarranted and probably misleading.

Again, we ask, what is the alternative? What do teacher educators teach teachers about intervention efficacy if they adopt Gallagher’s views? Are we to conclude that phonics-based reading instruction and whole-language approaches are equally effective? Should we assume that the Feingold Diet is as effective in controlling behavior as medication? Are we morally superior if we assume that telepathy is as effective as direct instruction? In Gallagher’s world, the answer appears to be yes. In the real world of teaching, such views potentially foment unmitigated pedagogical disasters.

Like Danforth and Rhodes, Gallagher then betrays the underlying issue of her ideology “. . . science and scientists are granted a great deal of deference because the methods they employ
afford them access to knowledge that is unavailable to the layperson.” (p. ). The obviousness of this statement is only superceded, for Gallagher, by its utility to turn research from and “elitist” way of knowing to more populist accessibility about what we should know about special education. While the notion of “power to the people” has lost a great deal of its rhetorical glamour, it is a common thread to views of the world where notions of equality supercede logic and freedom. So, we ask: Is all knowledge accessible to all people? Can it be? Is all knowledge useful, or helpful, or equally good? What knowledge do teachers need in special education? Is some of that knowledge more helpful than other knowledge? Who decides which knowledge is appropriate? For Gallagher, it appears that any knowledge is fine as long as it has not been generated by positivistic, empiricist science, although she fails to say what that knowledge is. But for many others, including those neither Western nor antiscientific, the conclusions of Nanda (1998) offer a sensible alternative to postmodern nonsense: “We prefer the cold, objective facts of science to the comfortable, situated knowledge of our ancestors for the simple reason that we refuse to subordinate what is good to what is ours” (p. 299).

Aside from casting aspersions on the scientific method as elitist and being in the hands of power mongers, Gallagher further claims that the very law-like relations found in the hard sciences are impossible when dealing with unique human beings in education. Again, this is hardly an astonishing assertion, seeing that the scientific method has long accepted such a premise, which is why the vast numbers of experiments in education can only be labeled “quasi-experimental” (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

Gallagher then offers a number of less than practical recommendations. First, she notes that all researchers should retreat from empiricism to a more interpretive framework.
Knowledge, therefore, is defined by negotiation, slavishly rigid attention to power relations, a
deeahosizng of effectiveness in favor of acceptability, and a celebratory, if delusional,
obesciano to all voices and all “lenses” (except those of empiricist science). Gallagher paints for
us is a grim world in which ideologues are determined to make everything average at any cost.

Second, Gallagher offers a grand, if somewhat slippery suggestion that we
look elsewhere than the scientific method for what we do in teaching--preferably to moral rather
than scientific sources. Thus, she arrives at a new “lens” for determining the effectiveness of
instruction: doing what is morally right versus what is empirically sustainable in helping educate
the most people with disabilities most of the time, or, in Gallagher’s terms, “. . . that the
“objectivity of science, premised on the unsustainable notion that we can separate facts from
values (with facts being superior to values as a basis for decision-making) has relegated moral
discourse to the periphery” (p. 501). The shortcomings here are obvious: whose morality? Whose
notion of right? Who mediates what is morally right? How do classrooms teachers choose their
“morality of practice”? Can the morality of a practice be determined in the absence of evidence
of its effectiveness? Unfortunately, as with Danforth and Rhodes, Gallagher deconstructs special
education research but proposes no better or more workable solution. She fails to answer her own
question.

Smith: Bon Voyage--Maps or Spam?

Smith (1999), like Gallagher, suggests new ways of looking at disability, making a case
for eschewing scientific discourse, which he sees as oppressive, to other metaphorical “maps” of
discourse that are more empowering for people with disabilities, allowing them stronger, and
therefore more significant cultural contributions to the study of disability. Couched in the
flowery vernacular of the postmodernists, Smith, agreeing with Danforth and Gallagher, views positivism as the dominant means of disability discourse at the expense of other, equal, or more legitimate forms. Further, he immediately sets the stage for an ideological power struggle of the victimizers and the oppressed:

The story told about disability have been spoken by professional voices, the persons trained to deliver human service technologies to clients, the voices of person who assume that they know what is right, and good, for others. Here are other voices, however, voices often discounted and marginalized, unheard by the rest of us: voices of persons labeled as having developmental disabilities. (p. ).

We agree that special education’s history is replete with instances of people with disabilities being ignored, but to charge that this is the case for the whole field denies the equally prominent efforts of professionals to help and support those with disabilities (see Winzer, 1993). As a whole, unless one takes an extremist view of all professionals as Svengalis and people with disabilities as cowering and helpless, a convincing argument can be made that efforts to help people with disabilities have, historically, far outweighed efforts that have not.

However, what does it mean to include the voices of people with disabilities? Does it mean, as far as possible, including them in decisions about their lives and treatment? (We agree that they should be). Does it mean allowing their voices prominence even when it is clear that, given their disability, they are not making decisions in their own best interest? (We disagree, although Smith would probably agree). What does this imply for teachers? Do we allow students with disabilities to decide what they wish to learn? Do we concur if they assert their right not to learn? Do we facilitate their struggle with something they may want to learn that is obviously
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beyond their developmental or intellectual ability? Is responsibility for learning always shared equally between the student and the teacher? How would this play out in the general education classroom?

Predictably, Smith takes his point one step further, suggesting that “... those with privilege, those holding power, are holders and creators of knowledge” (p. 119), and that people with disabilities, traditionally marginalized, should create their own knowledge for asserting their own power. To Smith, the theme of misuse echoes Gallagher by asserting that the mistake is applying the medical model to disability, rather than a cultural model anchored in social perception and power relations. As a bonus, Smith situates his comments by applying labels which he himself abhors, namely, that Western science, particularly the idea of IQ, is Eurocentric and phallocentric (p. 124). We agree that IQ was devised in Europe by persons with penises. However, the denigration of European ideas strikes us as racist, and the denigration of the penis as sexist. Further, the near-hysterical clamor to excise the demon IQ betrays a misunderstanding of its purpose and utility, especially its status for over 100 years as the best available single predictor of school achievement ( ). Indeed, Smith verges on the paranoid when suggesting that “In the world of special education, intelligence is a code word used by educators, psychologists, and other human-service workers to explain the current distribution of benefits from publicly supported programs” (p. 128). Would Smith himself prefer to have no intelligence attributed to him? Or would he prefer only to have no intellectual status conferred on him by special educators?

Not content to point out the supposed evil of IQ, Smith attributes it to the larger evil of western societies, which “... devalue some groups because of their appearance ... a masculinist,
Colonial gaze . . . that transforms dark-skinned informants into scopic sites of sexualized, racist mythology – a white mythology grounded in an imperial specular epistemology and perspectivalism.” (p.) While we would certainly not charge the Hutus, the Taliban, the Khmer Rouge, or the Abu Sayef with devising the theory and applicability of the IQ construct, Smith’s loathing of things Western must be seen as central to, and the fatal flaw of his arguments.

As with Danforth and Rhodes and Gallagher, Smith eventually joins his fellow postmodern travelers in calling for special education to “. . .step away from its positivist, eugenicist, scientist roots to explore the terrain of values that it inhibits, and instead interpret its dominating, privileged landscape as a textual map.” (p check this quote.).

After a labored attempt at using the metaphor of cartography, Smith offers even less for the real world of the classroom. We wonder of what practical use a “radical cartography of developmental disabilities” has for teachers in public schools facing students who, whatever the philosophy of disability, cannot do things that schools and curricula require. We submit that these professionals would be much better off with what Smith dismisses: A “scientist” view of what works with people with disabilities in schools and what does not.

*Brantlinger: A Cultural Tradition with Antagonist as Victim, Detractor as Offender*

Brantlinger, claiming to be afraid of retribution from the colleagues she critiques, labels several “traditionalists” as scholarly offenders because they fail to toe the inclusion party line as she defines it. Perpetuating the myth of knowledge as power held by some and denied to others, Western science becomes the province of “. . .professionals [who] are the chief beneficiaries of (scientific) knowledge; by controlling its circulation they create an indoctrination that solidifies and privileges their own status” (p.  ). Knowledge, therefore, especially in the forms generated
by Western science, divides the world into those who have knowledge and those who do not, those having knowledge the powerful and those not having it the powerless. We agree that knowledge is power (see Koertge, 1996; Nanda, 1998). It is difficult to be empowered for change without knowledge. Where we differ with Brantlinger is not whether knowledge bestows power, but what the power is used for. For Brantlinger, in special education the power of knowledge generated by Western science and held by the “traditionalists” she critiques is used as the instrument of the oppressor to deny those with disabilities power and legitimacy. How does a classroom teacher, viewing him or herself as an oppressor (and according to Brantlinger, they should view themselves thus, given that they possess a great deal of knowledge that their charges lack), go about liberating the oppressed children with disabilities they see before them? What academic skills for children with disabilities does such liberation involve? What teaching interventions are oppressive, which emancipatory? Is teaching the alphabet oppressive? If so, to whom, and what should it be replaced with? Is teaching the scientific method oppressive? If so, how? Surely using an alphabet originating in ancient Europe is just as Eurocentric and phallocentric as Smith’s take on the notion of IQ, and, following this logic, must surely be offensive to many people. Some people, such as Koertge (1996, 1998) and Nanda (1998), see knowledge of science as liberating.

We also wonder how people with disabilities can be deemed oppressed, or the traditionalists oppressors, when Brantlinger believes that disability does not exist in the real world, but is merely a cultural construction. If this premise holds, then all disability can vanish via cultural change. However, what if, as a cultural construction, a disability is prized or revered by some cultural group because of the forms of knowledge and power it generates? In this
context the person with the disability would be the oppressor (i.e., possessor of certain knowledge and powers that others do not have) and those valuing the disability the oppressed. We doubt that Brantlinger would apply the same standard for the same purposes to the knowledge held by shamans or those who adhere to sacred tribal customs such as female circumcision or fervent religious beliefs allowing for dismemberment or death by stoning. If she did, she would be bound to call for their deconstruction, in the process making her the conduit of the very oppression that she finds so odious in others.

Further, contrary to assertion, we do not assume that “. . . technical research is apolitical and nonideological” (p. ). Neither is her rhetoric of power relations and fictional oppressions. What we do assert is that among a variety of ways of knowing, “technical research” for the purposes of serving people with disabilities provides the best alternative for establishing efficacy. It is “technical research” that has provided what answers we do have in special education. Given that all knowledge is at some level political and ideological, Brantlinger is calling for replacing one political slant and ideology with another--in this case full inclusion. However, whatever the shortcomings of ”technical research,” they are far fewer in terms of intervention efficacy that their replacement. Retreat from empiricism can only be to a more diffuse, less organized, and, in our minds, patently catastrophic state of affairs for how people with disabilities, especially those in schools, are supported.

Brantlinger takes her neo-luddite argument even further, noting that “traditionalists” operate under false assumptions “(a) that disability is an agreed upon, innate ‘condition’ which necessarily requires unique treatment, and (b) that the natural place for students with disabilities
is some form of separated setting or treatment” (p.). In this regard, Kavale and Mostert (in press) noted:

We are hard pressed to explain how many disabilities, such as profound mental retardation, blindness, or quadriplegia, are not innate. Indeed if disabilities are socially constructed, they should be amenable to deconstruction. That is, social forces should be able to restore such persons to average or above average intelligence, 20/20 vision, and full and normal control of their limbs. Further, following Brantlinger’s logic, hospitals should not house patients (medical practice assumes that hospitalization—a deliberate societal separation—is in the best interests of the patient) and that diseases should not be named, described, and symptomatocized as a first step in effective intervention. (p)

Unwilling to quit while behind, Brantlinger uses her rhetoric to blame the middle class as the gatekeepers of all power, which they use to oppress the underclasses, including people with disabilities downtrodden and at the mercy of labels, powerlessness, and “. . .euphemisms and silences” (p.). The culmination of Brantlinger’s position is her grandiose if immediately impractical observation that “Inclusionists’ ideology can be considered organic, in that it dwells on emancipatory or transformative ideas for eliminating oppression from social structures” (p.).

As with her colleagues, Brantlinger offers nothing to replace the findings of the science and “technical knowledge” she so deeply rejects. What are teachers to do after homeroom every day to reject “technical knowledge?” Which technical knowledge? What of other forms and sources of knowledge? Are the laws of mathematics technical knowledge? If so, according to Brantlinger, they should be “transformed,” at the very least, within the curriculum. Perhaps, as she and others have suggested, an alternative cultural component of knowledge should
predominate. Let us reject the laws of science in favor of superstition, the rules of grammar in favor of babble, and decree that all things are equally beautiful, equally ugly, equally informative, equally abhorrent, equally desirable! We concede the ridiculousness of this illogic, yet, plainly, it is taken seriously by some, even many, in the field. Such notions, by their very nature, are anti-intellectual, totalitarian, and cruel.

Consequences of Postmodernist “Truth”

We do not claim to have presented an exhaustive critique of our four colleagues above. We have simply highlighted some of their more obviously vacuous views. Fundamentally, we return to the notion of education and miseducation and their relation to ways of knowing. What do postmodernists’ ideas mean for education? Several levels apply. At the level of intellectual discourse, how best to educate has a long and sometimes distinguished history. Charges of oppression, elitism, class, victimization, and social justice are and should be raised. It is the responsibility of leaders in the field to examine every issue, no matter how contentious, in the interests of the children we all purport to serve. We doubt that at this level there will ever be consensus or broad agreement.

At another level, very few intellectual arguments remain circumscribed and sterile. The nexus between these ideas and what happens in classrooms resides in teacher training and what is promulgated as effective teaching practice. Here is where preservice teachers must assimilate and use acute skills in discriminating between effective and ineffective practices. Historically, effective practices have been defined as those which most benefit the largest number of students in meeting their school needs via demonstrably valid and replicable evidence obtained through the scientific method. This view is now waning in favor of the ideas promulgated above. If, as
some of our colleagues claim, (a) disability is contrived, (b) Western science is a morally indefensible choice, (c) education is all about oppressors and the oppressed, (d) teacher educators and teachers must consciously and constantly undermine any teaching practice found effective via empirical evidence, (e) power is more important than literacy, (f) unless we know everything about teaching efficacy we know nothing, (g) effectiveness is only in the eye of the beholder, (h) cultural perceptions are more important for teaching practice than empirical evidence, (i) only the middle class is evil, and (j) only the oppressed classes are pure, then we have reached a point where the idea and term “teacher education” is an oxymoron.

Good teaching means that teacher educators and teachers must make judgments about efficacy. Until recently, this has been an obvious, settled matter. No longer. Inappropriately hijacking the vernacular of “social justice,” “equality,” and “multiculturalism,” many in the field are now perpetuating the miseducation of preservice teachers, with serious ramifications for schools. For example, no longer can we assume that preservice teachers will be taught the efficacy of mnemonic strategies, applied behavior analysis, or direct instruction. Instead, they may well be subjected to the following:

Stylized movements have been characteristic of African American development. A cultural emphasis on the interweaving of movement, rhythm, percussion, music, and dance has been central to the psychological health of African Americans . . . [including a cultural stylized movement known as] . . . a “stroll” . . . characterized as a deliberately swaggered or bent posture, with the head held slightly tilted to the side, one foot dragging, and an exaggerated knee bend (dip). . . Teachers might also perceive the walking styles of African American adolescents as inappropriate behavior that
compromises their success in the general education classroom. . . . This study explored teachers’ perceptions regarding African American males’ aggression, achievement, and need for special education assistance based on their cultural movements (i.e., stroll).

(Neal, et al. 2003, p. 50)

We find such words racist, perpetuating the worst possible and completely unjustifiable stereotype that all African-Americans “have rhythm,” a cultural marker Neal, et al. celebrate and then assert may be used to improperly classify minority students for special education. Utilizing stereotypical cultural markers as a means of identifying children in school seems, to us, less than useful, and that similar ideas about cultural markers, stereotypical or otherwise, can be dangerously negative (see Mostert, 2002).

Largely bereft of any certainty that what they do in classrooms is effective or ineffective (for example, if a child walks a certain way, does he need help with reading?), many teachers soon become cynical about whether anything works at all. They are, in essence, vulnerable to every addlebrained idea foisted upon them for feel-good solutions to complex problems.

Two other areas are significantly affected: parents and children with disabilities. Generally, parents assume that teachers, like other professionals they consult, are competent, use the most effective professional interventions appropriately, and are sources of up-to-date developments in their area. Let us assume that this perception is accurate. Developments in special education over the last several years have clearly shifted toward entertaining many ideas and interventions in terms of their acceptability rather than their efficacy, a disaster for needy children in schools. Parents are none the wiser, and often unwittingly complicit because they
assume that teachers are implementing an intervention based on efficacy, not necessarily acceptability.

Of greatest concern to us, however, are the consequences for children with disabilities in schools. Given the limited time these children are in school and the nature of their disabilities, it is paramount that they receive the most effective interventions uncolored by political correctness or the nihilistic pomposity of postmodernism. Instead, the full inclusionists have imposed their will on the field in spite of mounting evidence that many children with disabilities are not succeeding in the general education classroom (Kavale & Mostert, in press). Ironically, it is they, the postmodernists, who have become the gatekeepers and powerbrokers in the field, clearly becoming, by their own definitions and rhetoric, the oppressors of teachers, parents, and children alike.
References


