

From Dialogue to Bakhtin's Dialogue: A Critical Review in Learning Disability Research

Waseem Mazher, M.A.

Teachers College, Columbia University

&

Jong-Gu Kang, Ed.D.

Daegu University

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of dialogue used in peer-refereed research articles related to learning disabilities (LD) and instruction. We attempted to evaluate the quality of dialogue in these articles through a lens that Bakhtin and various disability studies scholars offer. In addition, we suggest that disability scholars' concepts and uses of dialogue provided a way for us to frame our Bakhtinian critique in the broader context of theorizing the social model of disability. From a critical review of these articles, we identified various limitations in ways that dialogue is used to conduct the studies and also in the ways that dialogue is represented by the authors. The studies often minimized the voices of the students labeled as LD. We offer many suggestions for how to present their voices in research and how to improve teaching through conceptualizing learning in a different, more sensitive way as informed by Bakhtin's notion of dialogue.

**Key Words:** learning disability, dialogue, Bakhtinian

Editor's Note: This article was anonymously peer reviewed.

Some authors in the field of special education, including Learning Disabilities (LD), have pointed out the need for researchers to engage in and report dialogue with students labeled as LD (Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004; Reid, 1991; Reid & Button, 1995). Although there are several scholars who engage in dialogue with students labeled as LD, these students' voices are still hard to hear.

Gallagher (2003) proposes that academics should engage in discourse that considers the moral nature of positivist and other research. She urges researchers to have more dialogue with those participating in research to make "our research encounters human encounters" (p. 10). Including the voices of students labeled as LD is important because studies should eventually serve the interests of the students themselves. If researchers do not include the voices of students labeled as LD, it will be difficult to claim that current studies reflect the variegated considerations and interests of students so identified. Similarly, if researchers do not explore the dialogue between students labeled as LD and their teachers, it will be difficult to achieve a nuanced understanding of the human processes that occur between these two groups, because we might end up considering students from teachers' and researchers' perspectives.

In light of the contentious history of LD as a field, it is surprising that we have rarely heard the students labeled as LD through unstructured interviews, phenomenological studies, and thick descriptions (Reid & Button, 1995). Researchers seem afraid to get closer to students labeled as LD by talking to them informally, openly, and deeply. The problem is rooted and epistemological, and very likely related to a fear of subjectivity and emotions that stems from the

writings of Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (see Boler, 1999; Dewey, 1929). As Moore, Beazley, and Maelzer (1998) show, researchers are often “afraid” of subjectivity. In this regard, Foucault might draw attention to the problem of science as discourse (Foucault, 1972; 1977). Nevertheless, some authors in the field of special education, including LD, have recently pointed out the need for researchers to engage in dialogue with students labeled as LD (e.g., Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004; Reid, 1991; Reid & Button, 1995).

In order to include students' voices, it is necessary to explore how scholars discuss dialogue because they may approach it in various ways in connection with disabled people. For example, Thomas (1999) discusses the importance of dialogue through sharing narratives about pain in a disabled person's life. She mentions the importance of disabled people's right to express their humanity fully and subjectively. However, she also points out political aspects of dialogue, which concern language used to signify pain as it becomes oppressive to people who are different, as in “disabled.” And unlike Thomas's inclination to call the body “impaired,” Shuttleworth (2002) prefers to situate pain in a more discursively conscious body, a body that is vigilant about what it is called and aware of the implications of power that names capture, as in bodies called “different,” “disabled,” or “impaired.” Through his concept of dialogue, Shuttleworth attempts to account for poststructural expressions of contradictory identities that give power to voice and action and help to debunk myths about what the disabled can and can not do.

As Thomas (1999) and Shuttleworth (2002) have their own interpretations of dialogue, articles related to dialogue concerning LD pose various problems in relation to understanding what sort of dialogue is used among the participants and how that dialogue is represented. Thus, it is useful to interpret dialogue related to LD from a lens that considers the play of power and perspective. Such analyses may help to understand how dialogue related to LD may be interpreted and very importantly, how dialogue can become more itself.

## The Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Soviet philosopher and linguist who devoted much of his life to understanding the aesthetic function of dialogue and alterity (human differences) (Clark & Holquist, 1984). We attempt to connect Bakhtinian aims with the academic literature related to LD. We also make connections between disability studies scholarship and parts of the research literature concerning LD. We find disability studies scholarship germane to our efforts because such writings help us understand disabled people from a variety of sociopolitical perspectives.

In our article, we attempt to respond to two questions through a Bakhtinian/disability studies scholarship lens. We hope our answers spur more questions. Our research questions are the following:

- 1) What does a Bakhtinian/disability studies approach to dialogue tell us about the nature and functions of dialogue?
- 2) From such perspectives and understandings of the construct of dialogue, how can we critically re-imagine aspects of the studies we review in the field of LD to improve the quality of their dialogue?

## Research Method

Since we wanted to understand the nature and functions of dialogue in the standard research literature connected with LD, we selected articles related to LD through an Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) search with the following descriptors: "learning disabilities" and "dialogue." We found 20 refereed works noted in the ERIC search, and reviewed these works carefully. However, it was difficult for us to narrow the search concerning dialogue and LD to such a small number of articles. Therefore, we tried to find more articles. For example, when we found Englert and Mariage's (1996) article and reviewed it, we found that these authors extensively discussed dialogue-related pedagogy in LD.

The constructivist oeuvre is rich in analyzing dialogue through the use of qualitative, but positivist methodologies (for a review see Swanson, Harris, & Graham, 2003). We thoroughly examined reference lists of seminal articles concerning constructivism and LD, as well as related works about strategy instruction and LD (for a review see Wong, 2004). We also came upon bodies of literature in LD involving the question of dialogue among researchers and teachers (the so called "research-practice divide") (see Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998; Malouf & Schiller, 1995; Stanovich & Stanovich, 1997) and theoretical debates between critical theorists in LD and the dominant school of positivist psychology (see Reid & Valle, 2004; Walker et al., 1998).

After considering such bodies of literature related to several debates undertaken within fields related to LD in which dialogue is written about, we settled upon the constructivist perspective in which dialogue is talked about as a means for investigating various forms of situated learning. We decided to focus on 12 articles from mostly the constructivist perspective in the LD field to analyze further by using a Bakhtinian/disability scholarship theoretical lens. We felt these articles were appropriate for our needs because they helped us understand the role and limitations of dialogue, as currently conceptualized and represented in the research base. However, there is no question that these articles model a sliver of one type of explicitly-stated, dialogue-related research in the field of LD. We wanted to choose representative articles from the constructivist oeuvre to focus our analysis so that we could understand clearly the pedagogical and research implications of practicing and representing dialogue specifically in the context of learning situations involving students labeled as LD.

We settled upon 12 articles that we felt represented approaches, concerns, and research designs found in a range of other articles related mostly to constructivist pedagogy and LD. The authors of these 12 articles were Dudley-Marling (2004), Englert & Mariage (1996), Englert, Rozendal, & Mariage (1994), MacArthur (1998), Mariage (1995), Mariage (2001), Leshowitz, Jenkins, Heaton, & Bough (1993), Smith & Griffin (2002), Valle & Aponte (2002), Wong (1997), Wong, Butler, Ficzer, & Kuperis (1996), and Wong, Butler, Ficzer, Kuperis, Cordon, & Zelmer (1994).

When reviewing the 12 articles, we concentrate our critical attention on parts of the articles that lend themselves to a discussion of the representation and use of dialogue. In our writing, we do not summarize the articles that we reviewed, but instead provide some background in each case for the reader to understand our critique of the dialogical aspects. We analyze the dialogue involving students labeled as LD and their teachers from a Bakhtinian/disability studies perspective.

As far as picking disability studies scholars whom to reference in our discussions of conceptualizing dialogue, it was difficult to settle on how to approach the huge field of related writings. In particular, it was difficult to include some scholars as disability studies scholars because they may not consider themselves as such. Thus, we mostly chose authors who contributed books or articles related to disability studies such as “Handbook of Disability Studies” and “Disability Studies Quarterly.” We realize that our determination to this effect can be questioned because disability studies scholarship may include sociologists, linguists, and historians who write about issues such as poverty, alterity, and marginalization, but do not consider themselves specifically to be disability studies scholars.

### A Bakhtinian Conception of Dialogue

We can understand dialogue in the context of the term *discourse*, which Bakhtin (1984) defines as "language in its concrete living totality, and not language as the specific object of linguistics" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 181). Through his descriptions of the concept of the sign, Bakhtin emphasizes discourse and the word as living, changing, and forever becoming--never complete. Understanding meaning through signs involves less the act of recognizing a fixed quality or identity, and more recognizing novelty because each word is unique in its position relative to other words and uniquely real in time and place. Each word is a specifically located human production (Volosinov, 1986). Bakhtin provides a powerful lens to interpret disability-related literature as he emphasizes context and the concreteness of the dialogical event. Understanding contextual specificity is useful for understanding ways social forces construct the experience of being disabled.

Bakhtin also attempts to integrate visions of human culture (e.g., as depicted in works of literary art) according to values that capture cultural pluralism related to historicity and alterity. About pluralism, he mentions Dostoevsky's dialogues as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 6). Throughout Bakhtin's analyses of Dostoevsky's works, Bakhtin infuses his own voice and suggests a need for a sensitive approach to interpreting art, which he finds in Dostoevsky's literary works, to understand qualitative aspects of human worth, a Dostoevskyan and therefore, Bakhtinian vision. Such a vision suggests that rather than changing and dominating people as they are, great art supplies spaces for them to exist in an unfettered state, fully, and contrapuntally (to use a musical metaphor that Bakhtin also cites). Bakhtin emphasizes the need for multiplicity and recognition through dialogue.

In addition, Bakhtin (1984) notes, "There is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing second hand definition" (p. 58). In this sense, the Bakhtinian conception of the human being as ultimately and deeply subjective, as incomplete, as continually developing through talking and expressing, become compelling as we explore the articles considered as cultural products.

### Disability Studies Scholars' Conceptions of Dialogue

Numerous disability studies scholars refer to the importance of dialogue but some also problematize speaking about disability (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002). For example, Allan (1999) points out various disability discourses (e.g., charity and corporate discourses) that define culture that engender real concerns about their libratory value for disabled people. She asks whether these discourses, as forms of pastoral coercion, are fundamentally good for disabled people. And on a microscopic scale, Goodley and Rapley (2002) show how dialogue with disabled students can be used to produce acquiescence on their part. Thus, these authors point out the treachery of dialogue for people with disabilities, especially when it favors the needs of the nondisabled. In the social model of disability, we often explore such macro and micro level plays of power to understand how disability is socially constructed (Linton, 1998).

Bakhtin is a master of qualitative analyses, as demonstrated by his critique of complex works of art and artists. The concept of dialogue is a useful tool to analyze cultural artifacts. We apply the concept of dialogue to see how various social interests are portrayed and allowed to communicate and question power or not through the practical and representative aspects of the research process. The point of using a Bakhtinian conception of dialogue is ultimately to open vistas in disability-related research that permit greater communication among producers and consumers of research and in a broader sense, among purveyors of disability culture, which might be culture itself writ large. In this section, we point out ways scholars in disability studies tried to characterize and use dialogue in their work. By describing how disability scholars have characterized and used dialogue, we also situate our Bakhtinian critique of research artifacts within a disability studies framework.

Peters (2002) suggests that a key criterion for judging inclusion of disabled people is to ask to what extent the definition of culture used to define community and society allows disabled people access. With a limiting definition and, therefore, limited access, we can only engage in limited dialogue. Focused on education, Gallagher (2003) proposes that academics consider the cost of “mis”recognizing science as objective, which she points out often results in silencing other perspectives. She urges researchers to engage in dialogue with those participating in the research process to make “our research encounters human encounters” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 10). Moore, Beazley, and Maelzer (1998) suggest that researchers and the disabled populations they study should confront prejudices about disability by talking together and aiming to meet the needs of disabled people through research rather than simply finding out about them. In turn, Fleischer and Zames (2001) trace a history of legal struggles that show the importance of dialogue as political resistance. These authors describe the resistance of the Boston University LD students who rebutted the university administrator’s verdict instead of accepting it--that some students’ claims of having LD were spurious and opportunistic. Such dialogue helped instigate a countrywide movement to shape the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990.

In a more theoretical vein, Goodley and Rapley (2002) suggest the potential of disrupting the dichotomy between being with and without disability by problematizing dualisms between dependence and independence. These authors suggest that poststructural conceptions of selfhood can reinterpret identity as a more expansive and situated subject. Such conceptions can help mitigate fears of interdependence in society. Disability studies scholars resist the threat of limiting dialogue among and with disabled people. They can help to counter the sometimes

expedient reticence of those who resign themselves to fixities and unsung prejudices when conducting inquiry.

In addition to visions that encourage the celebration of human pluralism, some disability studies scholars emphasize the historicity of human knowledge and experience. Garland-Thomson (1999) states, for example, that “all terms resonate, of course, bearing long histories and summoning whole discourses” (p. 4). In writing this, she refers to words as objects, and as having historical contexts and impacts which make using them in dialogue political acts of historical significance. From a different register, Artiles (2003) critiques the scholarship of minority overrepresentation in high-incidence disability categories. He believes that instead of focusing on relatively static components of such students’ profiles such as dialect, language preference, and language style, scholars in special education should consider the full scope of the history of Latin America. Such inquiries can bring insights into the perseverance of students and their families within a context of historical adversity. Both Garland-Thomson and Artiles argue for more dialogue and a historically informed approach to the consideration of words we use to communicate and conduct inquiry.

Other disability studies scholars address the representational complexities of understanding experiences related to alterity. For example, Kudlick (2003) suggests that when disabled veterans returned from war, they often asserted leadership in garnering rights for disabled people. But, they did not readily associate with disabled people who were not victims of the war --that is, with those who were considered “naturally” or congenitally disabled. Kudlick’s point raises the specter of difficulties in representing alterity and the multiple qualifications needed to account for varieties of oppression. Moreover, Carrier (1986) points out the problem of the binary (culture versus nature) that permeates the conceptualization of LD as a construct throughout modern history. Carrier asks researchers to consider which pole they favor, nature or culture, in conceptualizing LD as an operational construct. He points out the suppressed assumptions of talking about LD throughout its history.

Furthermore, Shakespeare (1994) refers to the concept of liminality (i.e., belonging neither here, nor there) to explain nondisabled people’s discomfort with disabilities. He believes that embedded in that discomfort is the fear of the animal other. Such theorizing of alterity is important to our understanding of dialogue because these theories relate to the problem of who has the power to speak and who can be spoken about in what ways. The kind of dialogue a person individually engages in influences the level and position that she is allowed to embody in society.

Coming from a poststructural perspective, Mitchell and Snyder (2000) analyze the privileges that society appropriates to its members through its discursive constructions. These authors state that language often strains and stretches to meet human conceptual barriers summed up in limits between normal and abnormal: disabled bodies posit and prosthetically stretch with the help of language to create meaning (e.g., the meaning of Captain Ahab’s leg and the visage of the whale in Melville’s *Moby Dick*). Mitchell and Snyder suggest the need to resist through analyzing and critiquing the way language becomes a prosthetic for oppressive meanings. Further, an area of contention among some scholars is the impact of language, both intended and

not, that people use to convey emotions and describe them for theoretical purposes (see Shuttleworth, 2002).

In this and the previous section, we introduced Bakhtinian and disability studies scholars' perspectives on dialogue, and noted its importance in promoting awareness, change, and the understanding of the socially-constructed nature of disability. Bakhtin and disability studies-related scholarship can be used to analyze elements such as cultural specificity, historicity, power, and the representation of dialogue in disability-related research artifacts. We can use Bakhtin's concept of dialogue to closely examine how research is conducted with students labeled as LD, and how that inquiry is presented for consumption of other researchers. Such a critique can build bridges among communities of researchers by locating the critical analyses squarely within the field of disability studies scholarship, a field that continues to theoretically and politically grapple with dialogue as an important ingredient for liberation. Such a critique can also help to create grounds in the LD field for integrating new sensibilities into its fold. Hence, based on the perspectives offered from a Bakhtinian/disability studies theoretical lens we review how dialogue concerning LD has been addressed.

### A Critique of Dialogue in the Research Articles

We discovered that the authors of the articles reviewed, tend to be monologic and prescriptive of the way dialogue should occur in classrooms. The authors often measure dialogue for its effectiveness in promoting understanding in students. Even when dialogue is presented for inspection by the reader, the presentation tends to shut out the world in which the dialogue occurred. Authors often fail to reveal the context, the inner feelings, and the power relations that were a part of the dialogue among the research participants. However, we also reviewed articles that achieve more of a Bakhtinian sense of dialogue among the participants in that they reveal the qualitative aspects of dialogue's functions in the classroom. Most of all, we found that authors often emphasize describing the process of dialogue and highlight certain elements of it, which they synchronically isolate, but which prevent exploring meaning in a holistic sense of chronicling the effects of dialogue among participants. We first begin by reviewing Englert and Mariage's (1996) article about constructivist pedagogy.

Englert and Mariage's (1996) article is about the effectiveness of a sociocultural approach called the early literacy project (ELP) used to teach students labeled LD. The developers of the ELP put particular emphasis on the interactive element in learning, their theory being based on Vygotsky's work of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Englert & Mariage, 1996; Vygotsky, 1986). In the article, the excerpts of dialogue reflect the monologic viewpoint of the researchers who wish the readers to see that there are (a) conversations among students, (b) conversations among students on the researchers' desired topics, and (c) discernible patterns in the ownership of the conversations being slowly transferred from the teacher to students. The dialogue scripts never seem free of the dominance of the teachers' or the researchers' viewpoints. Englert and Mariage (1996) write, "The social interactions that unfold have the *flavor* of conversation [emphasis added]" (p. 158).

We think that the authors of the article might have made the conversations more dialogic if they first presented the students in their own words. This might require the inclusion of a

narrative technique that takes into account and presents ethnographic information. However, no less important to the realization of a dialogue, we believe, might have the researchers consider curricular content and its meanings *to* the students. Like many other authors in psychology, the authors of the article seem to focus on process over content. For example, Englert and Mariage (1996) note, "An examination of the entire transcript from the lesson shows that students were acquiring many *skills and processes* related to writing [emphasis added]" (p. 164).

Bakhtin might say that it is not enough to confine presentations of dialogue to the realm of form. The presenters of dialogue must also write clearly about the effects of the content. To take the example of the student who "improved," readers may see the vision of the teachers dominating in terms of the student's text better meeting the guidelines of what the teachers consider good writing. This is an example of the monologue of the written text.

It seems that there is no discussion about the talk expressed in the student's writing. The authors' judgment on the student's text seems finalizing (i.e., the judgment does not consider the student's perception of his own writing in relation to the content of his life and his learning). We suggest that the researchers might arrange their study in such a way as to have the students talk about their own texts and researchers talk about the text with the student. From a Bakhtinian perspective, such reframing and contextualizing can make the content of the dialogue in the study more itself, that is, more dialogic.

Similarly, some articles concerning ELP (e.g., Englert, Raphael, & Mariage, 1994; Englert, Rozendal, & Mariage, 1994; Englert, Tarrant, Mariage, & Oxer, 1995) imply similar limitations as those in Englert and Mariage's (1996) article. Among the articles on ELP, Englert, Rozendal, and Mariage's (1994) article about Adam is particularly interesting. The authors seem to give some time and space to the narration of how Adam improved his writing over the course of an academic year. It would seem, *prima facie*, that the article has more potential in achieving dialogicality since Adam, as a person, becomes better known through the study. However, we believe that the presentation of Adam too suffers from the monologism of the other articles.

For example, Englert, Rozendal, and Mariage (1994) write that, "In September [before the intervention], he [Adam] refused to generate any texts independently; in fact, he threw his chair across the room when he was asked to write" (p. 190). The authors go on to discuss details about Adam's writing in September. However, such a striking fact (i.e., a boy throwing a chair across the room) should not escape further commentary from Adam and the authors. We need more information about Adam that might help us understand his feelings in school. We need to hear from Adam why he reacted in such a way when asked to write. Adam's comments might then suggest his feelings about writing and schooling. We need Adam to talk retrospectively about the earlier incidence of his throwing a chair, so that we can gain a clearer sense of what writing has done for him and, more generally, how competent intensive instruction from others (e.g., the researchers and the teacher together) has helped him. Once again, the authors seem to miss an opportunity to allow the readers to get closer to Adam's discourse, which we can know to be reflected only through his own words.

Other articles address the role of dialogue in writing instruction; they too fall short of achieving dialogue in a Bakhtinian sense. One such article is about Morning Message (Mariage,

2001), which is a dialogue-based interactive writing session that involves the whole class guiding and sometimes directing a student seated in the front of the classroom with the teacher seated beside her or him as a scribe. The researchers focus on aspects of the teacher's verbal behavior that make her effective. The study is a linguistic analysis of the teacher's side of engagement in dialogue. For example, the authors write, "... The total number of [conversation] turns across the five events was divided by the number of lessons the student participated in to arrive at the average number of speaking turns per event. Participants were rank-ordered by the average rates of participation..." (Mariage, 2001, p. 177). Bakhtin might say that such a quantitatively driven study misses the artistic quality of human interactions and reduces such interactions to their most external facts through an analysis of components of performance and not their holistic effect.

A Bakhtinian study might attempt to reveal the students' and the teacher's personalities and have them engage in classroom talk. In such a scenario, the authors might attempt to reveal contexts and meanings around such talks through thick narrative descriptions. The authors might point out how the classroom talks move to reflect the interpenetration of the participants' consciousnesses. Bakhtinian conversations might reflect without resolving or fusing people's differences in personality and perspectives how each approaches the topic of a conversation.

Our review of two other articles (Wong, 1997; Wong, Butler, Ficzero, & Kuperis, 1996) on teaching writing through genre-specific strategies (e.g., teaching the reportive essay, the opinion essay, and compare and contrast essay) may also imply a limited conception of dialogue. Wong and her colleagues seem to explain the role of dialogue in the students' pairing up and then collaborating through think-aloud and peer critiques. However, we think that both articles stress process over content, which makes the dialogue less from a Bakhtinian perspective.

To illustrate our point, in Wong's (1997) article she writes, "When adolescents with LD are the target subjects, one has the added problem of motivation. Invariably, when that occurs, the intervention researcher faces total cognitive shutdown in the adolescent with LD, and has the unenviable task of cajoling him to apply himself [sic]" (Wong, 1997, p. 156). Bakhtin might inquire dialogically about the conditions that lead to a loss of motivation among students instead of passing a verdict, as the author seems to, which finalizes the existence of problems as perhaps an implicit part of having LD. In this article, the authors suggest the parameters of boredom without revealing the specific curricular circumstances of content that lead to such a state for the student.

In contrast with Wong's (1997) study, Wong, Butler, Ficzero, and Kuperis (1996) examination of teaching writing through the genre of opinion essays seems quite a bit less dialogic. Even though the authors mention in the procedures section that the planning and the revision phase involved dialogue among paired students, the authors fail to represent and reveal the dialogue among the students. They exclude any samples of how the students talked and failed to achieve dialogue. The authors pose research questions to determine the effectiveness of the opinion essays and by default, end up forfeiting any reason to include samples of actual student dialogue --as such, an epistemological move might fall outside the purview of questions posed within a quantitative framework. When describing classroom dialogue during the study, the authors depict scenarios that imply monologism and not dialogism. For example, in the revision

phase the authors note that they told the students in pairs that each would alternate between being a critic with her peer. The authors write:

“The student-critic's (student A's) role was to spot ambiguities in the partner's, student B's, opinion essay.... After this student critic (student A) had finished critiquing student B's opinion essay, the teacher-researcher would go through ambiguities that she had found in student B's essay and seek clarification on them” (Wong, Butler, Ficzere, & Kuperis, 1996, p. 203).

In the sequence of the editing described in the excerpt, the teacher's editing operates as the standard to which the students aspire as they peer edit. The student first tries her hand at critiquing and editing, and then the teacher implicitly fills in any gaps in the essay the student has not pointed out. Such a process constitutes a fairly stringent standard for considering the essay "adequate" and reflects the vision of the teacher. A student's role as a peer editor is constrained by the teacher's vision of what a good essay should be. In this sense, the authors want that students' judgments should aspire to be more like the teacher's, which is the heart of monologism. Researchers might facilitate instruction so that students become aware that the comments they make on their peer's essays will not be judged on the basis of the authoritative voice of the teacher.

In addition to writing skills, some authors address reading instruction through a comprehension strategy known as POSSE (an acronym for predict, organize, search, summarize, and evaluate) to help students labeled as LD read better (e.g., Englert, Rozendal, & Mariage, 1994; Mariage, 1995). Mariage's (1995) article seems to compare verbal performances of high with low-gaining student teachers. The author seems to analyze the transcripts of dialogue through POSSE to discover patterns of differences that the two categories of teachers demonstrate. The author states that high-gaining teachers more often used such techniques as teacher initiation statements, teacher evaluative statements, and teacher scaffolding statements.

As in the other study we reviewed by the same author, in another article Mariage (2001) seems to single out external features of the high-gaining teacher's speech that may have "caused" the superior academic results of students. The author does not present the students' dialogue, but instead lists the frequency counts of the teacher's speech during POSSE and also tallies the teachers' statements isolated from their dialogical context in which not only teachers, but also students spoke in class.

Bakhtin might question Mariage's extraction of the teacher's words from their embedded streams of conversation. It is as if a linguist has uprooted for inspection the teachers' words from their organic context. From the author's presentation of the teachers' bits of speech grouped into high and low-performing categories, readers can no more than speculate about what happened during the dialogue. From a Bakhtinian context, without including the students' words, the author fails to present even the rudiments of dialogue in the article. Conversations are multisided events that cannot be artificially fragmented and homogenized of their sociopolitical contexts without losing their meanings in the classroom.

MacArthur's (1998) article is further testimony to the problem of being somewhat oblivious about the talk around interventions in the classroom. He writes about the effects of a computer program that allows students labeled as LD to use speech synthesis to write legibly in student-teacher dialogue journals. MacArthur uses a multiple-baseline alternating design to study whether moving students from traditional writing exercises (i.e., writing on the word processor) to a word processing program equipped with assistive technology increases legibility or the ability of the reader to make sense of what the student has written.

We point out that the author seems to be wholly devoted to the process of how he arrived at the results of his study. The article indicates very little about the content of the dialogue, except in one place where the author writes about the students' difficulties with finding something to write about, "... Students wrote to the teacher [in the dialogue journal]. If they had trouble thinking of what to write or if they wrote fewer than three sentences, they were prompted to write more using standard prompts suggesting that they answer the teacher's question, ask a question, or tell something that they did in class or at home" (MacArthur, 1998, p. 156).

We would like to know what the students thought about the writing assignment and not just what they thought as reflected in the author's summary found in the "Social Validity" section. In addition, we would like to hear from the students on an ongoing basis, so that their thoughts do not fossilize and become silent through time. We would like to see another layer of information regarding student commentary on the assignment and counter-commentary from teachers. We would especially like to hear what the students have to say about the purposefulness of the assignment, what parts of it they find meaningful and relevant, and in what ways. Also, we wish to hear students talking about the content of what they are writing, which can add to our understanding of the meaning of dialogue between each student and the teacher. When the researcher talks mostly about the process of inquiry in a limiting way and neglects to write about the talk around content, that is, about the dialogic experiences of the participants, Bakhtin might suggest that such a way of writing research ignores, diminishes, and finalizes dialogicality, an inherent part of conducting research.

Our examination of two articles by two groups of authors (Leshowitz, Jenkins, Heaton, & Bough, 1993; Wong, Butler, Ficzer, Kuperis, Cordon, & Zelmer, 1994) further implies the problem of dialogue without representation. Wong, Butler, Ficzer, Kuperis, Cordon, and Zelmer (1994) conduct a positivist study about dyadic interactions among students labeled as LD. They do not discuss how the dialogue functioned in these dyads. Similarly, Leshowitz, Jenkins, Heaton, and Bough (1993) do not discuss how dialogue between a teacher and students labeled as LD leads to superior results in critical thinking. Both groups of authors present statistical results to indicate the efficacy of dialogue for instructing labeled students, but they fail to discuss through a contextually sensitive analysis *how* the dialogue functioned in their studies.

We think that these authors pay scant attention to representation as a vehicle for communicating qualitative aspects of human interaction. Both groups of researchers might arrange their studies so as to allow the students not only to speak, but also to be heard by readers. The researchers might also present samples of talk and counter-talk between students and teachers to further dialogize their study and improve the ability of the reader to hear the students' discourses. For example, Dudley-Marling (2004) explicitly illustrates samples of talk and

counter-talk between teachers and students. He shows how two teachers use a different pattern of talk with their students. The talk between the first teacher and a student labeled as LD is not as interactive as the second teacher and her students. Moreover, Dudley-Marling notes about the first teacher, "... In this nearly dysfunctional interaction between Regis and Mrs. Stroh, while maintaining the assumption that there is something wrong with Regis..." (p. 486). The pattern of talk between the second teacher and her students with academic difficulties is very different from the first case. When the second teacher talks with a few students with language difficulties, she provides them with plenty of chances to talk and take positions, and justify points that help them engage actively.

Regarding the second sample of talk, Dudley-Marling notes that, "In particular, rather than positioning himself as someone on the lookout for deficits in need of remediation, the teacher established himself as an interested listener..." (p. 488). As these two samples of talk illustrate students' interactions with teachers, the talk presented between teachers and students labeled as LD helps readers understand the spirit or the holistic tone of the participants' discourses. But on this score, the authors could provide more narratively-constructed details to help us vividly see and hear the contexts in which these conversations took place in their respective classrooms.

Smith and Griffin (2002) conduct a study about teaching incarcerated juvenile delinquents labeled as LD. The authors visit a prison to teach juvenile offenders how to engage properly in dialogue. In the treatment section of the study, the authors (researchers and language-speech pathologists) seat the adolescents around a table and monitor and prompt them to find out how they talk on given topics. Raters score the adolescent's conversational skills through such criteria as appropriate transitions, responsiveness, and feedback events. We believe that such conversation trainings may reflect the interests of researchers more than those of the adolescents labeled as LD who are jailed. Researchers seem to make no attempt to represent the dialogue that occurred during these sessions. Nor do they provide any context for understanding the people they research.

The authors do not tell readers about the participants' social class and ethnic backgrounds beyond the teenagers' psychometric profiles, ages, and genders (all males). The authors fail to mention and explicate the implications of the teenagers' racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. The study fails to develop any sense of historicity, a sense of community from which the teenagers came. The subjects of research seem to cease to exist. The study takes on a distinctive feel of Pygmalion. The researchers seem to want to teach the teenagers the "art" of talking, which may be quite removed from the context of the society from which the children came, a society steeped in poverty and violence that affects the lives of inmates throughout their lives.

Finally, we review Valle and Aponte's (2002) article that does well a lot of what we point out as weaknesses of the other articles. Valle and Aponte (2002) present a narrative about the dialogue between the mother of a student labeled as LD and the special services professionals she meets in the school concerning the needs of her child. Through the structure of the article Aponte, the mother, emerges as a person with a particular accent and position in the world that she articulates through her own words. What we feel can be improved in the article, however, has to do with the professionals that Valle and Aponte address in their article. Bakhtin might say

that we need to hear from the professionals too about what Valle and Aponte are thinking and saying. To heighten the ongoing nature of talk and the creative aspect of seeking knowledge, we think that adding another layer of cross-talk between professionals and the parent and the researcher might enrich the insights the study has to offer and at the same time, make the findings less finalized, less abrupt.

### Theorizing Dialogue from the Learning Disability to the Learning Person: Points of Further Dialogue

In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1968) finds in the writings of Rabelais, the novelist, signs of a fundamental shift from a vertical world of relatively fixed hierarchies to a horizontal plane, where carnivals functioned to dissolve the power differences into a commonly shared event cleansed with uncrownings, unmaskings, profanations, and laughter. Thus, Bakhtin traces a basic change in people's thinking informed by a newfound sense of bodily and mental freedom in the time of European Renaissance. In describing this historical shift, Bakhtin (1968) writes:

“[S]uch concepts as becoming, the existence of many seeds and of many possibilities, the freedom of choice, leads man toward the horizontal line of time and of historic becoming. Let us stress that the body of man reunites in itself all the elements and kingdoms of nature, both the plants and animals. Man, properly speaking, is not something completed and finished, but open, uncompleted” (p. 364).

If there had been a relative suspension of hierarchies during Renaissance, then, as Davis (1997) points out, belief in hierarchies crept back into being in the enlightenment age that followed the period of the renaissance. Foucault (1970; 1972) argues that we have perhaps never left the enlightenment age, as apparent in ways we obey the call of and at the same time, avoid confronting and critiquing science.

Eskin (2000) writes that of all the other theorists of dialogue, Bakhtin is the only one who emphasizes the function of authorship and the central role of art in dialogue. Bakhtin's notion of the importance of art in accounting for and understanding human experience may be considered antithetical to the impulses of enlightenment science. He imagines a truly different world order in which every person harmonizes with everyone else based on differences and not similarities. In such a transformed world, we listen to students labeled as LD and indeed to all students, unhindered and let students speak more freely. This is in juxtaposition to the often stringent world we live in, where, as Dudley-Marling and Dippo (1995) demonstrate, differentiated instructions that schools provide to students labeled as LD often reveal a concern for sameness, streamlining, and seldom, for differences. This is an oppressive, authoritative discourse of the “regular,” nondisabled child in school.

In such a transformed world, we might treat each student as an individual through supporting classroom practices in which teachers arrange broad plotlines through dialogue with students, so that students speak and reveal their emerging points of view; classroom practices in which the teacher is unafraid to debate with and question students and to challenge them (without imposing of course), and be challenged by them. In such a world, we might see

classrooms where the teacher is unafraid to hear them (i.e., each disabled person in the classroom) over and above a fear of the unknown. For each person labeled as LD is unknown. What we know of each student he must tell us.

Michalko (2002) tells a story about his meeting with a blind girl named Jenny and her trainer named Cheryl. In the story, Michalko brings up a striking point that we think has potential for explicating the implications of limitations we came to realize that exist in the articles we examined. Michalko writes that from the outside of a person's inner life, we can never really understand what the person is thinking or feeling. We might add that from the outside, we cannot understand what a student labeled as LD knows or feels inside her or himself. As a sensitive observer, Michalko understands this basic point - the impossibility of crossing the boundary into Jenny's world. However, Cheryl, Jenny's trainer, is less wary about the implications of imposing her own sense of the world upon Jenny. She would like to support Jenny in the world, to help her.

We observed a similar emphasis in our articles, placed on supporting students labeled as LD. From our review of the articles we came to believe that researchers need to dedicate more time and resources to have students engage in dialogue and through it, allow for the emergence of their unique thoughts and feelings, their discourses, which can help them learn and perhaps even more importantly, help them figure out the implications of learning for their own lives.

**Waseem Mazher, M.A.**, is a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Jong-Gu Kang, Ed.D.**, the corresponding author, graduated from the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. He may be reached at [jgkang@daegu.ac.kr](mailto:jgkang@daegu.ac.kr)

## References

- Allan, J. (1999). *Actively seeking inclusion: Pupils with special needs in mainstream schools*. London: Falmer Press.
- Artiles, A. J. (2003). Special education's changing identity: Paradoxes and dilemmas in views of culture and space. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 164-202.
- Bakhtin, M. (1968). *Rabelais and his world*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Carrier, G. (1986). *Learning disability: Social class and the construction of inequality in*

- American education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Clark, K., & Holquist, M. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Corker, M., & Shakespeare, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Disability/postmodernity: Embodying disability theory*. London: Continuum.
- Davis, L. L. (1997). Constructing normalcy. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 9-28). New York: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1929). *The sources of a science of education*. New York: H. Liveright.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2004). The social construction of learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(6), 482-489.
- Dudley-Marling, C., & Dipbo, D. (1995). What learning disability does: Sustaining the ideology of schooling. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 28, 406-414.
- Englert, C. S., & Mariage, T. V. (1996). A sociocultural perspective: Teaching ways of thinking and ways of talking in a literacy community. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 11(3), 157-67.
- Englert, C. S., Raphael, T. E., & Mariage, T. V. (1994). Developing a school-based discourse for literacy learning: A principled search for understanding. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 17(1), 2-32.
- Englert, C. S., Rozendal, M. S., & Mariage, M. (1994). Fostering the search for understanding: A teacher's strategies for leading cognitive development in "Zones of proximal development." *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 17(3), 187-204.
- Englert, C. S., Tarrant, K. L., Mariage, T. V., & Oser, T. (1995). The early literacy project: Connecting across the literacy curriculum. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 18(4), 253-275.
- Eskin, M. (2000). *Ethics and dialogue in the works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fleischer, D. Z., & Zames, F. (2001). *The disability rights movement: From charity to confrontation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: The archaeology of the human sciences*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language* (A. M. S. Smith, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.

- Foucault, M. (1977). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977* (C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham, & K. Soper, Trans.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. (1998). Researchers and teachers working together to adapt instruction for diverse learners. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 13*(3), 126-137.
- Gallagher, D. J. (2003). All research is a story: On method, methodology, and disability inquiry. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Disability Studies, Bethesda, MD.*
- Gallagher, D. J., Heshusius, L., Iano, R. P., & Skrtic, T. M. (2004). *Challenging orthodoxy in special education: Dissenting voices*. Colorado: Love Publishing Company.
- Garland-Thomson R. (1999). The new disability studies: Inclusion or tolerance? *ADFL Bulletin, 31*(1), 49-53.
- Goodley, D., & Rapley, M. (2002). Changing the subject: Postmodernity and people with 'learning difficulties.' In M. Corker & T. Shakespeare (Eds.), *Disability/postmodernity* (pp. 127-142). New York: Continuum.
- Kudlick, C. (2003). Disability history: Why we need another "other." *The American Historical Review, 108*(3), 763-793.
- Leshowitz, B., Jenkins, K., Heaton, S., & Bough, T. L. (1993). Fostering critical thinking skills in students with learning disabilities: An instructional program. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 26*(7), 483-490.
- Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity*. New York University Press.
- MacArthur, C. A. (1998). Word processing with speech synthesis and word prediction: Effects on the dialogue journal writing of students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 21*(2), 151-166.
- Malouf, D. B., & Schiller, E. P. (1995). Practice and research in special education. *Exceptional Children, 61*(5), 414-424.
- Mariage, T. V. (1995). Why students learn: The nature of teacher talk during reading. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 18*(3), 214-234.
- Mariage, T. V. (2001). Features of an interactive writing discourse: Conversational involvement, conventional knowledge, and internalization in "morning message." *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 34*(2), 172-196.
- Michalko, R. (2002). Estranged-familiarity. In M. Corker & T. Shakespeare (Eds.), *Disability/postmodernity* (pp. 175-183). New York: Continuum.

- Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2000). *Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Moore, M., Beazley, S., & Maelzer, J. (1998). *Researching disability issues*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Peters, J. (2002). Is there a disability culture? *Disability and Society*, 15(4), 583-601.
- Reid, D. K. (1991). Individual differences in the self-image of adolescents with learning disabilities: The roles of severity, time of diagnosis, and parental perceptions. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 24(2), 602-11, 629.
- Reid, D. K., & Button, L. J. (1995). Anna's story: Narratives of personal experience about being labeled learning disabled. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 28(10), 602-614.
- Reid, D. K., & Valle, J. (2004). The discursive practice of learning disability: Implications for instruction and parent-school relations. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(6), 466-482.
- Shakespeare, T. (1994). Cultural representations of disabled people. *Disability and Society*, 14(5), 283-299.
- Shuttleworth, R. P. (2002). Defusing the adverse context of disability and desirability as a practice of the self for men with cerebral palsy. In M. Corker & T. Shakespeare (Eds.), *Disability/postmodernity* (pp. 112-126). New York: Continuum.
- Smith, L. L., & Griffin, J. K. (2002). Conversations with delinquents: The mingling of meager dialogues: A pilot study. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 53(4), 127-130.
- Stanovich, P. J., & Stanovich, K. E. (1997). Research into practice in special education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30(5), 477-481.
- Swanson, H. L., Harris, K. R., & Graham, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook of learning disabilities*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Thomas, C. (1999). *Female forms: Experiencing and understanding disability*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Valle, J. W., & Aponte, E. (2002). IDEA and collaboration: A Bakhtinian perspective on parent and professional discourses. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 35(5), 469-479.
- Volosinov, V. N. (1986). *Marxism and the philosophy of language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- Walker, H. M., Forness, S. R., Kauffman, J., Epstein, M. H., Gresham, F. M., Nelso, C. M., et al. (1998). Macro-social validation: Referencing outcomes in behavioral disorders to societal issues and problems. *Behavioral Disorders, 24*(1), 7-18.
- Wong, B. Y. L. (1997). Research on genre-specific strategies for enhancing writing in adolescents with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 20*(2), 140-59.
- Wong, B. (Ed.). (2004). *Learning about learning disabilities*. San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Wong, B. Y. L., Butler, D. L., Ficzero, S. A., & Kuperis, S. (1996). Teaching low achievers and students with learning disabilities to plan, write, and revise opinion essays. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 29*(2), 197-212.
- Wong, B. Y. L., Butler, D. L., Ficzero, S. A., Kuperis, S., Cordon, M., & Zelmer, J. (1994). Teaching problem learners revision skills and sensitivity to audience through two instructional modes: Student-teacher versus student-student interactive dialogues. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 9*(2), 78-90.