

## Forum Guest Editors' Introduction: Disability Studies in Education "At Work"

David J. Connor, Jan W. Valle, & Christopher Hale  
City University of New York, USA

**Abstract:** This introductory article serves as the springboard for a greater discussion of the question: *How applicable are the ideas of Disability Studies in Education to educational policy and the practice of teaching?* As guest editors of the special forum of RDS, we illustrate how DSE continues to inform educational theory, research, policy, and practice. First, we chronicle the rapid growth of DSE over the past decade. Second, as educators of teachers, we raise three topics to contemplate further for our field: (1) improving the relationship between science and ethics, (2) better connecting knowledge, beliefs, and values to practice, and (3) determining the position of DSE scholars within the field of special education. Third, we briefly highlight the four featured articles from Belgium, New Zealand, Scotland, and the USA that constitute this special forum. Finally, we urge the field of education to be more critical of special education practices and continue to be receptive toward DSE.

**Key Words:** disability studies, education, practice

### Introduction

It is with great pleasure that we introduce this special forum on Disability Studies in Education (DSE), a discipline that has grown exponentially over the last decade. DSE began when a group of critical special educators united in their desire to reframe disability sought to counter limited and oppressive understandings of disability promulgated within traditional special education research and pedagogy (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). Their contention stemmed from the foundational knowledge of special education being deeply entrenched in science, medicine, and psychology, all of which positioned disability as a deficit, disorder, dysfunction, abnormality, or aberration. Rejection by these scholars of special education's monopoly on the concepts of *disability and education* drew them to the interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies, in which social, cultural, and historical interpretations are used to define disability primarily as a phenomenon determined by culture and context. From this grass-roots movement initiated by a small number of scholars, DSE has come to offer radically different ways of conceptualizing disability within theory, research, practice, and policy (Gabel, 2005; Gabel & Danforth, 2006; Ferguson & Ferguson, 2000; Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004; Ware, 2004).

In the pivotal year of 2000, the establishment of both the DSE Special Interest Group (SIG) within the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the inaugural annual DSE conference hosted by National Louis University provided "official" recognition and space for scholars to engage in a dialogue about disability issues. Over time, these venues grew to attract and nurture a variety of established and emerging scholars who offered alternative perspectives of disability that were all outside of the proverbial (special education) box. After several years of debate and a year-long online discussion among these groups, the tenets of DSE were formulated and published to provide a clear definition of principles to guide scholarship within the newly founded sub-discipline of DSE (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008).

In addition to these developments, scholars writing within DSE guest edited special editions of journals, published numerous articles in “mainstream” education publications, engaged the field of special education within traditional journals, generated texts within DSE book series, contributed to anthologies of multiculturalism, established disability issues within the larger domain of social justice scholarship, and called attention to ableism within organizational structures. As outlined above, the trajectory of DSE as an emerging discipline reflects increasing numbers of like-minded scholars around the globe contributing to a growing body of knowledge. Although DSE tenets remain outside mainstream special education literature for the most part, the rising incidence of DSE critique in special education literature as well as recent appropriation (and somewhat frequent misuse) of the term “disability studies” by special educators validates its presence as a *tangible* counter-narrative to traditional framing of disability. As a result of the scholarship generated in the last decade, DSE can rightfully claim status as a legitimate (albeit often contested) academic discipline. However, despite these significant accomplishments, there still exists the lingering question of some critics: *How applicable are the ideas of DSE to educational policy and the practice of teaching?* In other words, what does DSE look like “at work” and “in action”?

Taking up this question, we became interested in contemplating how DSE is used throughout K-adult classrooms, curriculum, educational institutions, and teacher education programs in the USA and around the world. In doing so, we seek to be realistic about DSE’s influence yet still cultivate optimism about the possibilities it offers. Given our professional role within traditional teacher preparation programs, we seek to highlight ways that DSE scholars who work within institutionalized dominant discourses of disability are able to infuse their pedagogy with ideas from DSE. Such scholars disrupt typically unquestioned practices within general and special education to respectfully challenge the status quo. We believe the work of DSE scholars, informed by an interdisciplinary humanities-based core of Disability Studies *applied* to educational issues, expands our knowledge about disability and “difference” within education—countering a range of harmful practices, from the entrenched pseudo-scientific foundations of special education that dominate its research agenda to the current zeitgeist of student standardization through “evidence-based practices.”

This special edition of RDS explores ways in which DSE continues to grow in practical ways, illustrating how it has influenced educational theory, research, policy, and practice. Each of the authors featured within the international forum bring a unique *application* of DSE to their work from within the global contexts of New Zealand, the United States, Belgium, and Scotland. Collectively, the articles illuminate the power of DSE to affect change within various connected domains of education, exemplifying academic activism and providing evidence of DSE “at work.” Together, they also raise further issues to consider in relation to teacher ethics, values and beliefs, and resistance to enculturation into dominant discourses of disability and education. Before introducing the four articles featured, we pause to share some of thoughts triggered by their authors.

Must Science and Ethics Remain Strange Bedfellows?

We three co-editors recently were asked to participate on a panel about DSE for a graduate school of education. The audience was comprised of doctoral students and professors from various disciplines within education. Each panelist spoke about the growth of DSE over the last decade and its particular

impact upon his or her work in special education. During the talk-back, the panel received the rather unsurprising question: “We get all that about DSE’s critique of special education, but what is *the solution?*” Within the current climate of evidence-based accountability, it is a hard-sell to suggest that the solution lies with asking ethical questions about the consequences of a singular commitment to science in the name of education, special or otherwise. Moreover, posing philosophical questions in the face of data-driven practice predictably evokes the usual disdain for ivory tower mentality. It appears then that DSE, having succeeded in establishing itself as an emerging discipline, faces the central challenge of securing a legitimate “seat at the table,” where ethical questions are considered as important as perspectives defined by science—and equally applicable to the educational setting.

For those DSE scholars who work within traditional teacher education programs, the decision to infuse DSE into pre-service and in-service curriculum is far more about ethics than academic freedom. In preparing teachers to enter the context of public schooling, it is from a moral standpoint that DSE proponents challenge what is considered “right and natural” about the current response to students with disabilities—for to fail to do so is to fail teacher candidates (and ultimately *their* students) at a fundamental level. From our collective perspective as teacher educators, the presentation of a DSE perspective validates what pre-service and in-service candidates already “know to be true” about what they see in schools, provides a frame for better understanding the current system of special education, and prepares them to work within the inherent complexities of public schooling.

If we encourage teacher candidates to think about disability as an aspect of human diversity rather than human pathology, it follows that such a philosophical framing will influence classroom practice in significantly different ways. After all, philosophy leads practice. This is not to dismiss the contribution of science (past or present) to the field of disability. It is science that provides a frame for identifying, categorizing, and comparing phenomena so that we can make sense of “what is.” But it is ethics that evokes responsibility and action for the *meanings* that we attach to “what is.” We would argue that it is at the *nexus* of science and ethics that solutions emerge. The inclusion of an ethical framing of disability has the potential to move the conversation beyond a (futile) pursuit for absoluteness toward a *process* informed by responsiveness, reflection, and collaboration. If scholars and educators ask different questions, different answers emerge—as evidenced by the work described in this special issue.

### How Can We Better Connect Knowledge, Beliefs, and Values to Practice?

As teacher educators working within large institutions that at times resemble teacher factories pumping pipelines of ready-made professionals into the American public school system, we are concerned about how teacher candidates become variously enculturated into the separate worlds of special and general education. In particular, those who enter special education become automatically immersed in laws, regulations, mandates, and practices that revolve around organization and compliance rather than teaching, learning, providing access, and accepting diversity. Introductory courses to special education and their attendant glossy textbooks (Brantlinger, 2006) create artificial representations of the realities most teachers face in their daily lives, sugar coating a segregated system that traditional special education willfully chooses to downplay or ignore (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). However, refusal to sufficiently acknowledge the failures of special education does not make them go away.

For example, in comparison to the nondisabled peers, students and youth in the American special education system are likely to have high dropout rates (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002), low graduation rates (Advocates for Children, 2005), a lengthier time completing school (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), underemployment or unemployment (Moxley & Finch, 2003), less likelihood of entering college and more chance of leaving prematurely (Gregg, 2007), and higher rates of incarceration (Children's Defense Fund, 2007). Within the existing system, students continue to experience segregation according to disability, with children of color and/or from linguistic minorities being overrepresented in subjective disability categories and more restrictive settings (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

The results of being placed within special education for working class, poor, racial and linguistic minorities in America point to the likelihood of difficult futures for children and youth being served. This harsh reality remains unacknowledged within the scholarly and educational field of traditional special education. In comparison, DSE acknowledges the “bleak” trajectory of many children and youth with disabilities in schools because it takes to task the social, historical, and cultural forces that shaped the structures of contemporary education systems. The DSE story of *who* is labeled disabled, *why* and *how*, is a very different narrative than told in typical *Intro. to Special Ed.* courses.

A great irony here is that individuals who gravitate to the profession of special education are desirous of working with children and youth who often, but not always, require teachers to think differently from an omnipresent but usually untroubled “norm.” However, special education's foundations staunchly adhere to deficit-based thinking, emphasizing disability as an intrinsic personal dysfunction (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). It is, therefore, incumbent upon DSE to continue to describe disability in multiple ways, ways that privilege the experience and voices of those *defined as disabled* rather than the definers. In all disability-related courses, teacher candidates should be afforded the opportunity to rigorously examine their own beliefs and values, explaining why they think the way they do about disability, locating their sources of knowledge, determining whose interests are served—and consider the implications for their own practice. Introducing them to DSE and explaining *why* it evolved is imperative. Asking teacher candidates to connect the ideas of DSE to everyday classroom practices of teaching and learning for K-adult levels demonstrates its value (Valle & Connor, 2010). In sum, by explicitly connecting the dots between how sources of knowledge shape personal beliefs, personal beliefs shape professional values and, in turn, how professional values shape pedagogical practice, teachers can see their ability to create changes in education. This way, in their conscience, they can honestly answer the question about educating children and youth with disabilities: *Am I part of the solution—or part of the problem?*

Placed in Special Education, Where Do We Position Ourselves?

The theme of this special edition of RDS reflects a growing sense of urgency within DSE. Marginalized within the field of education, we can only achieve greater influence by demonstrating that we can apply our theoretical understandings and principles to meaningful effect. We must show that we can influence practice in K-12 classrooms and beyond, have a voice in curriculum development, and influence education policy. This is a tall order. We are few in number, and we face seemingly insurmountable competition in the field of educating children with disabilities. Before the hegemony of special education, fortified by its institutional

legitimacy, legal authority, and historical inertia, it can be difficult to see ourselves as players on that field and not mere theoretical dissidents.

So, how can we demonstrate the practical value of our scholarship? What can we do to make our mark and enact tangible change? The four articles presented here illuminate pathways that veer away from questions of competition or recognition. They emphasize transforming language, reframing questions, and raising consciousness, but in ways that have real potential for making concrete changes. We all have the ability, within our grasps, to follow their lead. Most of us are part of it, important parts of it. Many of us work as professors in special education teacher programs. We are integral parts of the operations that contribute to molding special education teachers and, as such, are actually in potentially powerful positions at a vital point in the production line.

Rather than struggle against special education, we can subvert from within. Most likely, we are already doing so. The most practical, realistic, and immediate way to make concrete contributions that embody the principles of DSE is to focus our efforts on influencing the hearts and minds of our university students. We can, through our students, contribute to changing the culture within special education. No matter how rigid the structures (laws, regulations, procedures), their enactment is an act of interpretation and subject to the dispositional characteristics of those who interpret them. The principle of “least restrictive environment” within the mandated Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act has no fixed meaning. Its enactment is a matter of interpretation. Whether or not the special educator who enacts it works from a deficit perspective or a strengths-based model, he or she determines everything. The greater the number of special educators shaped by, and grounded in, DSE, the greater will be our impact on the current deficit-based culture of special education. It follows that, as these teachers influence other teachers and eventually become administrators, the principles, values, and understandings of DSE become further embedded, contributing to a gradual cultural transformation. Thus, the fruit of our efforts increases exponentially over time.

#### Facing Forward

We realize the issues raised so far are highly political and deeply personal for scholars working within DSE. Many seek alternative programs to special education altogether, such as working in inclusive education and/or within general education. It is important to note that we do not assume to speak for all DSE scholars, but must also acknowledge the reality of many who work in special education departments that reflect varying degrees of interest in and receptivity toward DSE. The authors in this special edition serve as beacons within this conundrum, showing how they have managed to maintain their integrity by staying true to themselves, while using DSE toward influencing educational policy and practice. To whet the reader’s appetite, we take this opportunity to briefly introduce contributors a sample of the ideas shared.

#### Four Examples of DSE “At Work”

In this age of accountability, it is a frequent lament among educators that policy reform is driven by elected and/or appointed officials who claim expertise outside of education and/or who understand the purpose of public education as a data-driven enterprise. This lament is most often

accompanied by a sense of malaise about our capacity to do much to disrupt the hijacking of educational direction except learn to live within it. In *Difference in Policy and Politics: Dialogues in Confidence*, Julie Allan offers us a model for productive dialogical exchange with politicians and policymakers based upon the work of a recent Council of Europe Project concerning teacher competencies for socio-cultural diversity. In her role as Expert Adviser to the Council of Europe, Allan, a noted DSE scholar, recounts the process by which she presented an *ethical* approach to competencies to the Ministers.

Allan's engagement with top-level stakeholders reflects how the introduction of a DSE perspective on difference frames new questions that yield different answers. Relying upon key ideas from DSE (and informed by the work of philosophers Derrida and Levinas), Allan was able to explain how the application of standards to diversity results in "the management of, rather than engagement with, difference" and why a competence framework rooted in ethics requires teachers to do more than perform discrete skills within diversity-related standards. The Ministers were encouraged to consider Derrida's notion of *aporia* (i.e., the belief that the act of keeping two seemingly contradictory questions open leads us closer to justice than the pursuit of absolutes) and to apply Levinas' 'framework of ethics' to teacher competence for diversity. Such a dialogue opened space for the ethical framework of competences to be presented not as a solution to the *problem* of diversity, but rather as a framework within which a teacher's *responsibility* with diversity—and with the Other—is its own solution.

Next, in *Using DSE to "Notice, Recognize and Respond" to Tools of Exclusion and Opportunities for Inclusion in New Zealand*, Missy Morton shares progress in advocating for humanizing processes utilized to track and project the learning of children identified as disabled. In the first part of her paper, Morton discusses the contributions of deficit perspectives and individual assessment to New Zealand's history of excluding children with disabilities from public education until 1989. In the next section, she describes her participation in a state curriculum assessment project that reflects the principles of DSE in broadening the scope of assessment from focusing on individual deficits and the educational structures and practices that disable children to one that encompasses individual strengths. The project she describes is informed by the principles of narrative assessment, applying phenomenological and interpretivist approaches. Morton demonstrates how such assessments enable teachers to 'notice, recognize, and respond' to children's competencies. She notes how the act of listening to students' stories has a transformative effect on teachers' perspectives and practices. By focusing on actions and relationships, narrative assessment allows teachers to see student learning in a wider context, beyond static and narrow measures of individual performance. It encourages teachers to be reflective, cognizant of their role in constructing student (in)competencies.

With Morton's input, The New Zealand Ministry of Education project developed formative assessment tools (curriculum exemplars), designed to assess authentic student work. Informed by the principles of narrative assessment, the exemplars facilitated the assessment of key competencies. This approach to assessment contributed to broadening teacher perspectives, fostering student identities as learners, and improving relationships with families by providing them with stories that focused on the children's learning rather than stressing inabilities. In her

final section, Morton stresses the importance of continued vigilance against policies that encourage individualizing assessment practices. The recent adoption of IEPs in New Zealand risks narrowing the focus of assessment and curriculum to the individual, to the exclusion of contextual considerations. Also, in New Zealand, as in the USA, results of individual assessment with reference to national standards are being employed to enforce the accountability of teachers and schools.

Moving from policy in practice to classroom practice, Nirmala Erevelles' "*What... [Thought] Cannot Bear to Know: Crippin' the Limits of 'Thinkability'*" takes the reader inside a class she teaches in leadership for nurse educators. She describes their discomfort and disequilibrium when the course content and her teaching style destabilizes security in their own knowledge, along with their belief in a tidy, predictable, scientifically-determined world. Erevelles reveals the administrators' own professional socialization into authority-based practices tied to positivist claims of evidence-based practice, and requests that they become open to different ways of knowing. In brief, she asks them to simultaneously consider *knowledge of bodies* and *bodies of knowledge* in relation to each other and the nursing curriculum.

Using humanities-based texts and guided by the work of several queer theorists, Erevelles troubles the limits of thinkability within nursing, a profession based upon interactions with bodies and minds that frequently "do not fit the mold." Rather than capturing precise, clinical answers that negate personal consciousness and involvement, she steers students to ponder what can be known through contemplating competing and contradictory "truths" via open-ended explorations of a particular issue or theme. In contrasting the clinical with the carnal, students come to see their initial view of cripp and/or queer bodies as "distorted images of the norm," ultimately shifting to view them as manifestations of humanity in their own right. Throughout this process of contrasting knowledge(s), nurse educators become aware of how the physical and cultural characteristics of patients have political implications, representing the imbalance of power and knowledge between "professional" expert and "patient," similar to teacher and student or teacher and parent.

In many ways, Erevelles' pedagogy that focuses on limits, ignorance, and "reading" (of knowledge) practices within the traditional academic field of nursing symbolizes the position of many scholars in DSE and the students they teach. However, rather than viewing the use of Disability Studies as a risk that could cause potential dilemmas when not "sticking to the script" of "appropriate" professional knowledge, she chooses to see it as an opportunity, a way of showing people how they can, and should, be open to crossing what are, in essence, artificial boundaries. Propelled by the desire to bring people closer together in understanding one another, Erevelles uses Disability Studies and DSE to convey the power of one instructor in one classroom.

Finally, in *Supporting Graduate Students toward "A Pedagogy of Hope": Resisting and Redefining Traditional Notions of Disability*, Geert Van Hove and colleagues at Ghent University, Belgium describe their process for enculturating graduate students into a DSE perspective within an educational context that is increasingly focused upon "instrumental rationality." Moreover, Belgium's strong reliance upon segregated placements for students with disabilities significantly promotes the notion of "disability as pathology" and segregation as "right and natural." In the face of such cultural adherence to traditional notions of disability, this

graduate program relies upon DSE tenets and the application of philosophical ideas (e.g., Paulo Friere, Gilles Deleuze) to challenge students to rethink disability as an opportunity for ethical response and action.

Van Hove and colleagues provide a working model for “what DSE looks like” within the university curriculum. They describe teaching “a pedagogy of hope” (a definitive nod to the work of Freire) in which problems, solutions, and roles are defined differently. Much like Allan’s model, Van Howe and colleagues reframe disability not as a problem but as an opportunity for dialogical action and reflection. The authors contend that such opportunities occur within the moment-to-moment interactions between teachers and students. To illustrate, the authors relate five key incidents that occurred with graduate students as examples of teachable moments that facilitate intellectual growth—and as such provide us with examples of moving conversations beyond pursuit for singular solutions and toward a *process* informed by responsiveness, reflection, and collaboration. Here we see how the study of disability becomes a fundamental social project with a human rights discourse at its heart.

### Conclusion

These four articles exemplify DSE in action, each contributing to our knowledge of how DSE “works” in practice. We are grateful to these scholars for sharing creative ways in which they have utilized DSE for the benefit of educating politicians, educators, children and adults with disabilities, and their families. We challenge special and general educators, guided by the tenets of DSE, to rethink how they “do business.” In doing so, we believe they will recognize the importance of an interdisciplinary knowledge base that sustains and improves inclusive education, cultivates critical thinking within all educators, and promotes active participation in a social-justice approach to disability. By moving in this direction, we have far more to gain than to lose.

**David J. Connor** is an Associate Professor at Hunter College, City University of New York.

**Jan W. Valle** is an Associate Professor at City College, City University of New York.

**Chris Hale** is an Assistant Professor at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York.

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