

BOLD VISIONS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

From Exclusivity to Exclusion

The LD Experience of Privileged
Parents

Chris Hale



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From Exclusivity to Exclusion

Bold Visions in Educational Research
Volume 33

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Books on *teaching and learning to teach* focus on any of the curriculum areas (e.g., literacy, science, mathematics, social science), in and out of school settings, and points along the age continuum (pre K to adult). The purpose of books on *research methods in education* is **not** to present generalized and abstract procedures but to show how research is undertaken, highlighting the particulars that pertain to a study. Each book brings to the foreground those details that must be considered at every step on the way to doing a good study. The goal is **not** to show how generalizable methods are but to present rich descriptions to show how research is enacted. The books focus on methodology, within a context of substantive results so that methods, theory, and the processes leading to empirical analyses and outcomes are juxtaposed. In this way method is not reified, but is explored within well-described contexts and the emergent research outcomes. Three illustrative examples of books are those that allow proponents of particular perspectives to interact and debate, comprehensive handbooks where leading scholars explore particular genres of inquiry in detail, and introductory texts to particular educational research methods/issues of interest to novice researchers.

From Exclusivity to Exclusion

The LD Experience of Privileged Parents

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DEDICATED TO:

ANGELA AND SERENA, THE LOVES OF MY LIFE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
1. Orientation and Contextualization	1
2. Hopes and Expectations.....	23
3. A Narrative of Exclusion	53
4. Intelligence and Effort	79
5. Methodology.....	93
6. Conclusions, Implications, and More Stories	107
References	115
Appendix A	117
Appendix B	119
Appendix C	121
Appendix D	125
Appendix E	129
Appendix F.....	133
Appendix G	135
Appendix H.....	139

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

GRADUATION AND INSPIRATION

I sat in the back of the gymnasium as people settled into rented folding chairs. The smells of new paint and plaster and a thin layer of dust covering every surface spoke of new construction. This was my first year at the school and I had never seen a graduation. But it was not simply a graduation this year. It was a celebration of 38 years as a school for children with learning disabilities and the inaugural event at the school's new home, a newly constructed building of elegant, high concept architecture. This was a big step up for the school, a product of tireless fundraising and the accumulation of years of enthusiastic support from one of the highest strata of Boston's society. The construction had been almost entirely paid for through contributions from the wealthy parents, alumni and supporters of the school.

The ceremony had begun on the street in the front of the building. The street had been blocked off. A stage had been raised with rows of chairs set up before it. Sound equipment with giant standing speakers competed with traffic noises, trying to fill the open air with the sounds of inaugural speeches and music. The city councilwoman gave a speech. The founders, now elegantly-dressed, grand old dames, told the story of the school's rise from its humble beginnings in someone's apartment in 1968, through its 38 years in a dusty brownstone to this momentous occasion. The beginning of the story had the feel of a resistance cell combined with a MASH unit as these two women took in refugees from mainstream schools, children misunderstood and even abused for their learning differences, and did miracles with them. The school grew as the refugees poured in, fleeing persecution at the hands of ignorant, insensitive educators who failed to see their potential.

The ceremony moved to the gym for the actual graduation. There were more speeches, many by alumni and parents of past and present students and, of course, there were also speeches by the graduates. As the proceedings lurched and lumbered in a combination of formality and casual familiarity, I sat there, ill at ease. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. I was new to the school and felt isolated and alone. I was not familiar with the lay of the land, the characters or the customs. Consequently I had not asked anyone what to wear that day. To my horror, I had arrived underdressed; a short-sleeve Hawaiian shirt, while everyone else wore suits and jackets, even the teachers! I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable, yet part of me was smugly dissident. I, at least, was not wearing the uniform of business, the flag of uncaring capitalism. As the ceremony ground on, I was increasingly repelled by the pomp and the self-gratulatory hype. I was settling into a grumpy stupor when my ears pricked up. Beneath the veneer of polish and power, there were stories that

CHAPTER 1

touched my heart, stories similar to my own, as a struggling learner, stories of failure, estrangement, and disenfranchisement. These were the refugees the grand old ladies had been talking about, the children and the parents of the children who had taken refuge in a school that understood them, nurtured them, and healed them of the insults of prejudice and misunderstanding. They had fled mainstream schools, humiliated victims of insensitivity and prejudice. There were poignant moments, heartbreaking disappointments and blossoms of hope. There were great successes, incredible successes. Children who could barely read when they came to the school went on to college, established careers, and soared to the zenith of their professions (mostly business and finance). This string of individual successes all led to this triumphant occasion, the opening of this beautiful school and the graduation of yet another crop of future captains of industry.

I realized that I was hearing an enormous contradiction. These were not the *hoi polloi*, the unwashed, the dispossessed poor, struggling for a piece of the pie. These were the elite, the wealthy, the movers and shakers. They were entitled to the entire pie yet they struggled. They, the natural winners, spoke the language of losers, the language of victimization, the language of the oppressed. The contradictory messages clashed within me and struck two radically different chords within my being. I was repelled by the ostentatious wealth and pretense yet moved by tales of alienation and despair. My personal response aside, I began to wonder. What does this conflict look like from the inside? The speakers' words spoke of dual identities, one privileged and one oppressed. How did those two worldviews reconcile themselves within a single mind? How did this contradiction inform a life? Enticed, I set off on this research.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is an ethnographic study, involving the privileged parents of a child who attends Samuel Griffin (heretofore referred to as Griffin) a private school for children with learning disabilities (LD). Their privilege is an important focus of this research, as is their experience of their son's dyslexia, a specific form of LD. As discussed above, it is the interaction of these two features of their experience that provides the impetus for and represents a major focus of this study. The emphasis is on the tension between these parents' efforts to reproduce their privilege through their son's educational achievements and the obstacles they face as a result of their son's academic failure. The narrative on which this book is based is derived from the primary participants' (the parents, Lawrence and Elizabeth) retelling of the three years their son (Simon) spent in an exclusive Jewish private school, Ahavat Chesed (heretofore referred to as Chesed). The story of their struggle to succeed there is one that elicits consideration of the mechanisms of the reproduction privilege, the segregation of difference, and personal transformation.

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THIS BOOK

For the most part, this book will reference theory and research on an as needed basis. The analysis and discussion will dictate their application. Having said that, it

is important at this point to discuss some general topics that will provide a backdrop for the discussion to come.

Society and Difference

American Society has little tolerance for difference. People whose appearances or abilities diverge from societal norms suffer many forms of oppression. Some of these people have disabilities. When most “able” or “normal” people encounter others with clear physical impairments (e.g., blindness, cerebral palsy, etc.), they experience what could be called a Hallmark moment: “Oh, that’s so sad. Her life must be so hard.” While the sentiment may be real, emanating from a true source of human compassion (combined, of course, with fear for our own threatened normality), it is also an oppressive expression of intolerance. Even sympathy functions to cordon off people with disabilities from the mainstream of society. Other expressions are less outwardly benevolent. They often lead to barriers to access and forms of segregation.

The media are important conduits of societal biases. Media portrayals of those with disabilities reveal much about societal beliefs and attitudes relative to difference. They reinforce the binary systems of normal/abnormal and able/disabled that determine individual and group status and serve as gatekeepers to inclusion. Movies, as one of the most popular and influential media, have a powerful role in the process. Darke (1998) explains how cinematic representations of disability use images of “abnormal” (impaired) characters to reinforce the social hegemony of normality. In what he terms the “normality drama,” normality is emphasized by the juxtaposition of non-impaired characters with a central impaired character and further highlighted by the impaired character’s rejection of her impaired self. Able-bodied/minded audiences pay to see this popular genre of film expecting confirmation of their own normality and reaffirmation of socially dominant, “common sense” interpretations of disability as a medically based, organic problem to be “cured” or overcome. Cultural representations of disability function to rationalize the social construction of those with disabilities as Other. Normality dramas are a feel good genre in that they allow the “normals” to leave the theater basking in a belief in their own tolerance and relieved to be “whole” or “normal.” Disabled characters in this type of movie behave in prescribed ways that serve their ideological function. They might be initially bitter or angry, later to come around, as in *Born on the Fourth of July*, bravely struggling to become normal as in *Pride of the Marines*, or fighting for the right to end their blighted lives as in *Whose Life Is It Anyway*. These characters’ rejections of their “abnormality,” while different in appearance, are in truth glorifications of normality. Connor and Ferri (2006) describe the normalizing function of the “bravely struggling” character who strives “against all odds” toward normalcy. One of the most common storylines in literature, film, television, and children’s stories, it represents a cultural schema that reinforces the societal beliefs in the hierarchical relationship between “normal” and “disabled.” Accepting society’s judgment, the impaired individual seeks to overcome difference while seeking conformity and acceptance. It is up to the marginalized individual to conquer intrinsic deficits in

CHAPTER 1

order to blend in and be more “normal.” The barriers to normality are assumed to be inherent within the individual and the effects of contextual, external structures and schema go unquestioned.

Disabilities, such as LD, are different than other disabilities, in that they are invisible most of the time. However, in certain contexts they are as obvious as a physical impairment. McDermott (1993) describes school as the major theater of exposition for children with LD. Disabilities are socially constructed, existing at the nexus of societal attitudes and beliefs, impeding structures, and individuals’ impairments. LD is as much the product of school related structures as a child’s learning related impairments. The more contextual structures demand academic skills and dispositions the more children with learning impairments become learning disabled. In “real life” their LD is invisible. They go to movies, play alone, play with friends, or just hang out and it is as if their “disability” does not exist. But when they get to school or have to perform school-like behaviors their learning differences become LD. They become LD in the eyes of the other children, their teachers and their parents.

LD, Ideology, and Class

Any research that addresses the relationship between social class and LD must address the ways in which LD discourse functions to support class privilege and dominant ideologies that underlie schooling. When I refer to LD discourse in this study, I mean what people associated with the field of LD (i.e., parents, teachers, researchers, etc.) say (or write), what they do, their values, their beliefs, and their social identities. Like all discourses, LD discourse is based in certain ideologies, representing certain values and viewpoints about relationships among people and the ways social goods should be distributed (Dudley-Marling & Dipbo, 1995).

LD theory and educational ideology. Dudley-Marling and Dipbo (1995) describe how the ideological assumptions of schooling and the discourse of LD form a reciprocally constructive symbiotic relationship. LD theory and practices function to support commonsense assumptions that underlie schooling. One of these assumptions is that effort and capacity are all that is necessary for academic achievement. LD theory supports schooling in resolving the anomaly of children who appear to have capacity but do not succeed, even with effort. The theory of LD, understood as a discrepancy between ability and achievement due to neurological dysfunction, explains this anomaly by adding disability to the achievement equation. LD theory also places responsibility for school failure within the individual, absolving schools of responsibility. By attributing the failure of apparently bright kids to causes intrinsic to them, schools are able to avoid blame for having failed to serve them. In this way, LD reinforces schooling’s claim that the failures of others are also due to intrinsic deficiencies, associated with race, class, culture, gender, and ethnicity. LD theory also supports beliefs about the role of individual differences in school. Special programs in schools for students with LD support claims that schools recognize, accept, and accommodate individual differences yet contradictions in