Luigi Iannacci

and

Bente Graham
Trent University

Mind the Gap: Destabilizing Dominant Discourses and Beliefs about Learning Disabilities in a Bachelor of Education Program

This study explores teacher candidates' understandings of children with special needs and learning disabilities; the effect of a special education course supporting a tutoring practicum; and how curricula can critically deconstruct and disrupt dominant, inequitable notions and practices. Data were collected through initial and end-of-course questionnaires and focus groups that took place after the course and related practica had ended. Theory-practice gaps addressed are transferable to teacher education contexts where the focus is on developing future teachers' understandings of and responses to dis/ability in early childhood education learning environments.

Cette étude porte sur les connaissances des stagiaires quant aux enfants ayant des besoins particuliers et des troubles d'apprentissage; sur l'effet d'un cours en éducation spécialisée à l'appui d'un stage sur le tutorat; et sur la mesure dans laquelle le programme d'étude peut déconstruire et dérégler de façon éclairée les notions et les pratiques dominantes inéquitables. La cueillette de données s'est effectuée au moyen de questionnaires avant et après le cours, et de groupes de consultation suivant le cours et les stages. Les écarts entre la théorie et la pratique dont nous traitons sont transférables aux programmes de formation des enseignants qui reposent sur le développement des connaissances et des réactions des stagiaires quant aux (in)capacités dans les milieux d'enseignement à la petite enfance.

Critical and transformative approaches to teacher education stress the importance of deconstructing how dominant discourses shape student-teacher interactions in order to prevent the reinscription and furthering of inequitable and coercive relations of power (Cummins, 2001). Heydon and Iannacci (2008) specifically recognize how dominant discourses shape how practicing teachers relate to and teach young children with special needs[1] or formally identified as having a learning disability. These "relations of ruling" (Smith, 1987, p. 3) have reinforced a disabled/abled binary and processes of pathologizing that manifest in limited and confining instructional practices and "identity options"

Luigi Iannacci has taught mainstream and special education in a range of elementary grades in Ontario. He is an associate professor in the School of Education and Professional Learning, where he teaches and coordinates the Language and Literacy course and the Supporting Literacy and Learners with Special Needs course.

Bente Graham has taught mainstream and special education in a range of elementary grades in Ontario. She is a former elementary school principal and is currently an instructor in the School of Education and Professional Learning, where she teaches and coordinates the Language and Literacy course and the Supporting Literacy and Learners with Special Needs course.

(Cummins, 2005) being made available to these children (Heydon & Iannacci). This has specifically been demonstrated by a pedagogocial determinism present in early childhood education (ECE), which has meant that learners with special needs and students identified as having a learning disability are often assigned and resigned to fragmented, rote-oriented, context-reduced curricula (Barone, 2002; Delpit, 2003; Iannacci, 2008). Limited understandings of dis/ability have also resulted in society's denial of literacy and personhood for people perceived as disabled (Kliewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006). Essentially, these processes, confinements, and practices necessitate disruption and raise questions that require a critical examination of what prevents and is involved in fostering links between and blurring what has been deemed the "theory/practice divide in Early Childhood Education" (Taguchi, 2009) as it relates to learners with special needs and students identified as having a learning disability in ECE.

This study specifically explores teacher candidates' dominant understandings and constructions of children with special needs or children identified as having a learning disability before and after they complete a Bachelor of Education (BEd) that certifies them to teach in early and later childhood learning contexts (kindergarten-grade 6). The intention of this exploration is to identify how dominant discourses and notions shape teacher candidates' initial understandings of children with special needs or children identified as having a learning disability, and the specific effect of a Special Education (not the official name of the course) focused course that they take during their BEd informed by critical disability theory and designed to aid them in supporting these learners during a tutoring practicum in which they participate while taking the course. The purpose of this examination is also to generate future curricula in order to provide teacher candidates' opportunities that address and blur the gap between theory and practice through a critical deconstruction and disruption of dominant and inequitable notions and practices as they relate to "Learning Disabled" and "Special Needs" children. The questions the study asks in relation to this article are as follows:

- What initial understandings do teacher candidates have about young children with special needs and/or children identified as having learning disabilities before beginning their Bachelor of Education program, a special education-focused course, and tutoring practicum they are required to complete?
- What prevailing discourses inform these understandings?
- What is the impact of the course and the tutoring practicum aligned with the course on teacher candidates' understandings of children with special needs or identified as having a learning disability in relation to their initial understandings? How (if at all) has their thinking shifted?
- How can these understandings inform future special education curricula?

These questions are pursued with the hope that destabilizing dominant notions of dis/ability allows teacher candidates to reevaluate and further develop their understandings and pedagogical orientations about children with special needs or identified as having a learning disability. Further, it is hoped that the process will reveal what curricular work needs to be done to further the above-mentioned goal. These questions informed by an understanding of

dis/ability as socially situated and constructed have been recognized as a goal for researchers and activists working in critical disability studies to pursue.

> Critical attention to how disability is and is not read and written today is one way to participate in the disability studies project of destabilization. Such attention can lead us toward reading and writing disability differently, and provide for the possibility of developing new relations to the cultural values that ground the various appearances and disappearances of disability in everyday life. (Titchosky, 2007, p. 5)

Unfortunately, these goals, aims, and foci have been neglected in educational research and practice. This article contributes to the growing body of literature that is beginning to work at destabilizing the monolith of disability as it appears in and is significant to educational contexts such as ECE.

Background and Context

Heydon and Iannacci (2008) have demonstrated how few inroads have been made in the field of curriculum studies insofar as examining constructions of disability and children deemed disabled. They conducted a content analysis of 10 years of issues of four prominent, peer-reviewed, international curriculum studies journals and found that the journals merely included between one and five articles that directly and/or peripherally referred to issues of dis/ability or to curriculum for disabled students. This exclusion "has meant that there are limited spaces in education that trouble what it means to be able or disabled or that question the curricula of disabled students" (p. 48). The field has, therefore, continued to support the special education/regular education binary that has led to unchallenged special education models and pedagogy.

A large-scale analysis of four major electronic databases that were searched using the term *reading disabilities* (Moffatt, 2006) revealed similar findings. Of the 760 abstracts published between January 2000 and mid-October 2005 that were found in the search, 99% accepted the concept of *reading disability* and did not challenge it from a critical perspective or consider *reading disability* as a social construct. Instead, 92% of the abstracts conceptualized intelligence/learning as things that can be easily assessed through standardized assessment tools. The dataset also demonstrated how 40% of the abstracts conceptualized reading disabilities as connected to phonological awareness. The idea that reading dis/abilities are the result of biomedical deficits/gifts was present in 25% of the data, thus reinforcing the idea of dis/ability as something in a child's body. Literacy learning was also conceptualized as the result of teachers' methods of instruction in 16% of the data. Finally, 25% of the articles located difficulties/success with literacy learning in students' family histories, nutrition, motivations for reading, orthographic awareness, physical health, school attendance, socioeconomic status, and available learning materials (Moffatt). Although some of these factors begin to grapple with the social construction of disability, they do not represent the "symbolic complex": a constellation of terms, concepts, practices (Danforth, 2009) and "cultural analysis" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995) required to consider issues related to dis/ability fully in the context of ECE. Although such thinking is at the preliminary stage of informing these fields as a result of the influence of postfoundational perspectives, the need for further work in this area is great considering

the number of students in schools who are considered special needs or learning disabled.

In the province of Ontario alone, more than 190,000 students were identified by an Identification Placement Review Committee (IPRC) as exceptional pupils during the 2004-2005 school year (the most recent figures available). Further, 99,000 students who were not formally identified were provided with special education programs and services during that same year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). These numbers necessitate that research pay attention to how these students are conceptualized, provided for, and understood as curriculum, relationships, and pedagogy have been primary factors that have framed how these students have been constructed and positioned in ECE (Triplett, 2007). This is especially important in the present context as the "hunt for disability" has become increasingly focused on young children (Baker, 2002, p. 678). Perspectives from critical disability theory are helpful in reframing thinking about dis/ability and are, therefore, essential to consider, as what to teach or how to teach can never be adequately addressed without an understanding of who the students are. As Heydon and Iannacci (2008) have pointed out, questions of dis/ability are prerequisites for all educational conversations.

Theoretical Framing

As mentioned above, this study and the course that participants took as they tutored students are theoretically informed by critical disability theory, which is situated in a postmodern paradigm. This paradigm has brought forward the notion that identities are socially constructed. Research from critical disability studies has, therefore, specifically been concerned with interrogating the language used in relation to those identified as disabled and in the context of dis/ability. This interrogation examines the effect of normative discourses (e.g., able/disabled binaries) and how these binaries reproduce/evoke/draw on other discourses (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). As such, disabilities are conceptualized as something created from what we as a society do, what we consider worthy of doing, and therefore "approached best as a cultural fabrication" (cited in McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 323) rather than something inherent in people. Padden and Humphries (1988) argue that "being able or unable … does not emerge as significant in itself; instead it takes on significance in the context of other sets of meaning to which the child has been exposed" (cited in McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 325). Titchkovsky (2007) further explains:

> "Disability" … is a process of meaning-making that takes place somewhere and is done by somebody. Whenever disability is perceived, spoken, or even thought about, people mean it in some way. The ways that disability comes to have meaning have something to teach us about our life-worlds.
> Understanding disability as a site where meaning is enacted not only requires conceptualizing disability as a social accomplishment, it also means developing an animated sense of that which enacts these meanings. (p. 12)

In short, "Disabilities are less the property of persons than they are moments in a cultural focus" (McDermott & Varenne, p. 323). It is important that so much of the "disability discourse serves something other than the interests of disabled people … [as it] is made viable as a metaphor to express only that which is unwanted and that which is devastatingly inept" (Titchkosky, 2007, p. 5). In

response to this troubling positioning of disability, new approaches to learners with special needs and learners and students who have a learning disability in the context of ECE have begun to develop asset-oriented (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008) ways of seeing and responding to these students that are also informed by critical disability theory. An asset-oriented approach rejects *at-risk* discourses while positioning students as *at-promise* (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). Further, this approach recognizes and builds on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) and views learners as able, in possession of literacies and social, cognitive, artistic, emotional, cultural, linguistic, affective, epistemological, and so forth resources rather than lacking literacy and deficient.

As disability is "made by culture," it is also understood as a text that can be read and written about and a "prime space to reread and rewrite a culture's makings" (Titchkosky, 2007, p. 6). The language assigned to children with special needs/identified as having a disability and how this language compromises their personhood and reifies and centers their identities in relation to their defined and measured deficiencies is, therefore, also a central concern of an asset-oriented approach and the theoretical orientation that supports it. Curriculum informed by these theoretical points and approaches was present in the course that teacher candidates participating in this study took. Before beginning this course and their BEd (they began at the same time), they were given a survey that accessed their initial background knowledge about students with special needs and students identified as having a learning disability. The course then provided them with opportunities to reevaluate these initial understandings as they examined case studies in order to identify and respond to assets that students' possessed and discuss how and why these children had been positioned and read as deficient. Further, students explored the history of special education and the dominant discourses that have shaped how disability has been conceptualized and how people with learning disabilities have been understood and provided for over time.

Throughout the course, students were given opportunities to identify current agencies, texts, discourses, institutions, processes, and so forth that shape who is understood to be learning-disabled and how they are constructed as a result of the factors they identify. Teacher candidates were also exposed to a variety of documents and information that frames learning-disabled students in limited and limiting ways (informed by medical and psychometric perspectives). Students were asked to examine these constructions critically as they researched a variety of exceptionalities. One of the most important and continual tasks in which teacher candidates engaged was assessing the learners assigned to them (usually grades 2 and 3 students, a few in grade 1) in ways that identified their assets and capitalized on these assets as they planned individualized sessions for these learners. Throughout the course, students also examined the variety of semiotic forms that learners use to create and understand texts and their surroundings. These texts were discussed in relation to the texts that schools privilege and sanction in terms of knowledge demonstration.

Methodology and Design

Methodologically, the study is informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA) and focused on providing a deconstructive reading and interpretation of how

social power, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social/political contexts (Van Dijk, 2001). CDA is commensurate with the theoretical approach of the study as language use is understood and positioned as a social action; as situated performance; and as tied to social relations and identities, power, inequality, and social struggles. CDA acts as an inroad into understanding social phenomena (Slembrouck, 2007), which in the case of this study means providing insights into the social phenomenon known as disability. Importantly, discourse (much like text) is not confined to one semiotic form, and as such,

> Not only a way of talking and writing, but a way of thinking and acting.
> Discourse is embedded in the world view of particular social groups and is
> therefore tied to a set of values and norms. As people apprentice into new
> social practices, they become complicit with this set of values and norms, this
> world view. (Gee, 1990)

The discourse specifically being analyzed, and thus the social phenomena being critically examined in this study, focuses on teacher candidates' initial understandings (collected before beginning the BEd and the course discussed in this article) and subsequent understandings (collected after the course as well as after most of the BEd had been completed) of students with special needs or identified as learning-disabled.

Again, the first form of data that teacher candidates completed before beginning their BEd program and the special education-focused course was an on-line questionnaire. This accessed their initial background knowledge about students with special needs, and students identified as having a learning disability. Once research participants had completed the course and the tutoring program described above, they were asked to complete a similar on-line questionnaire that asked them once again to articulate their understandings about students with special needs and students identified as having learning disabilities. Only surveys by teacher candidates who agreed to participate in this study were collected and analyzed. Analysis of these data took place 10 months after they had graduated.

Three months after participants had completed their course work and fulfilled most of the practicum requirements of the BEd, they attended a focus group session where they were asked the following questions.

- What do you now understand about children with special needs and/or children identified as having a learning disability?
- What impact did the course have on your understanding of children with special needs or children identified as having a learning disability?
- Provide an example from your tutoring placement or a personal learning experience that informed your understandings about children with special needs or children who have a learning disability (e.g., a moment or interaction etc. that either furthered or consolidated your learning or led to an asset-oriented way of thinking about these children).

Essentially, teacher candidates were given an opportunity to share narratives from their tutoring placement, classroom placements, and/or personal learning experiences from the course that spoke to their understandings about children with special needs and learning disabilities. Again, researchers began to analyze these data 10 months after participants had graduated.

When both sets of questionnaires and audiotaped focus group conversations were analyzed, they were triangulated in order to identify recurring and central themes and dominant discourses present in the data. Once these themes and discourses were identified, they were reexamined in order to ensure that inconsistencies and contradictions were apparent rather than being concealed. Triangulation, therefore, not only served to compare information to determine corroboration and further a process of cross-validation (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006), but also to make explicit complexities in the data (i.e., competing and contradictory discourses). Data were then analyzed in relation to larger social contexts (i.e., contextualizing or "nesting," Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) by looking at various macro factors in relation to initial teacher candidates' understandings of students with special needs or identified as having a learning disability. This level of analysis revealed factors that facilitated and constrained how influential course theory was in informing teacher candidates' understandings and practices in relation to students with special needs or identified as learning-disabled as well as what curricular changes needed to be made to the course to further address and coalesce theory/practice gaps.

Participants

Of the 240 students enrolled in the Primary/Junior BEd program during the year this study was conducted, 61 (49 female, 12 male) agreed to participate (a 25% participation rate) by signing a consent form that was attached to a letter given to them during an initial information session in August. Teacher candidates took the form and letter with them in order to reread the information and contemplate participation and then submitted their forms to their instructors during subsequent classes. Not all the course instructors were researchers (in this study *researchers* refers only to ourselves; the study employed no research assistants), and the form allowed teacher candidates to indicate whether they were willing to be involved in the study in order to avoid any public pressure to agree to participate. Consent forms were submitted by mid-September in order to give teacher candidates time to make an informed decision about participation. Almost all the nonparticipants simply did not return forms. As the participants were enrolled in a consecutive BEd program, they had already achieved an undergraduate (usually honors) degree as this is an admission requirement to the program, and had accomplished academic records as admission is capped at 150 despite the 1,000 applications seeking entrance into the program. Further, acceptance into the BEd is contingent on a strong file that requires applicants to describe their experiences (volunteer or otherwise) and how these relate to teaching. It is, therefore, not surprising that teacher candidates enrolled in the program and who agreed to participate in this study were generally in their late 20s.

The study received university ethics approval and is in full accordance with the *TriCouncil Policy Statement* on research ethics. Every effort was made to foster collaborative power relations and ensure that results and participation were not biased.

For example, several measures were used to ensure that participants understood that they had complete freedom to decline participation. During the information session, it was made clear that the project was by no means mandatory and that not participating would have no effect on the students'

grades. Further, teacher candidates were clearly told orally and in writing that data generated from the study would be given to a researcher who was not their instructor. They were also told that that instructor would then assign a pseudonym to each participant so that their identities were completely protected. Focus groups were also organized so that they were conducted by a researcher who was not the participants' course instructor. Once again, this instructor assigned these participants' pseudonyms during questionnaire data-collection, organization, and analysis. Focus group sessions took place after the course had ended and final grades had been submitted. Focus group data were given to an independent transcriber who did not know the participants and had no affiliation with the BEd program. Focus group data analysis began 10 months after the teacher candidates had graduated from the program and occurred in conjunction with the analysis of the surveys.

As mentioned above, teacher candidates involved in this study completed a practicum placement that required them to tutor two students who had special needs or a learning disability as they took a course grounded in critical disability theory. This was designed to provide them with continual opportunities to apply and make sense of theory and practice explored in the course. Participating schools nominated children from grades 1-3 to participate in the tutoring program and acquired parents'/guardians' permission for their children to take part. Teacher candidates attended the class once a week for two hours and provided one-to-one literacy-focused tutoring to two children separately for 45 minutes twice weekly at the children's school.

Findings

The first survey that teacher candidates completed before beginning the BEd program revealed print- and decoding-centric conceptualizations of literacy. Many teacher candidates specifically wrote about reading as being about sounding out words and decoding print. This is significant, as a learning disability was often conceptualized as synonymous with print literacy decoding difficulties and deficits. Children who had special needs or were identified as learning-disabled were synonymously understood as having difficulty with phonics and having poor phonological awareness.

The dominant view of a learning disability was deficit-oriented and often named as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyslexia, and also attributed to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners. Teacher candidates often used terms such as *delayed, challenged*, and *at-risk* to describe learners who had special needs or in reference to a learning disability. A learning disability was also frequently defined as a disorder, an obstacle, an impairment, or an inability. Further, it was understood to be the result of (in descending order): physical, neurological, biological, genetic, motivational, behavioral, emotional, familial, social, and economic factors. When familial factors were mentioned as something that resulted in a learning disability, they included (in descending order): the amount of reading supported and encouraged at home, changes in family life such as divorce or new living arrangements, emotionally abusive parents, a child having witnessed a traumatic event, abusive family relationships, and poverty/hunger. A learning disability was also understood as being about a child's slower pace in

learning things and poor performance compared with the norm. The norm was often characterized as being the rest of the children of the same age and grade.

The support that teacher candidates anticipated having to provide to learners with special needs or identified as learning-disabled focused on instructional responses that were quantitatively focused. Special-needs or children with a learning disability were understood as being in need of more of everything that included: more time, more one-to-one, more attention, more support, and more instruction from the teacher. Teacher candidates' anticipated instructional responses also focused on the affective qualities of the teacher. They often cited the need for teachers to be patient, to be positive, to encourage, to go "above and beyond," and to be committed to helping children succeed who had special needs or a learning disability.

The second survey that teacher candidates completed at the end of the special education-focused course after the tutoring and two thirds of their classroom practicum placements were completed revealed different conceptualizations of literacy that were now meaning-making focused. Teacher candidates understood that meaning-making involved a variety of resources that the students had. These were often defined as a variety of cueing systems (e.g., semantic, syntactic, critical, graphophonemic, pragmatic) that students used when constructing meaning from texts. Texts were no longer exclusively print in nature, but recognized and understood as being beyond written formats (e.g., not just about books). This is significant to their understandings of disability because teacher candidates no longer characterized a learning disability as synonymous with print literacy decoding difficulties and deficits as they had in the first survey. A learning disability was often conceptualized as a "learning difference" as opposed to a difficulty with phonics and poor phonological awareness. However, deficit-oriented language taken from the special education companion of an Ontario Ministry of Education (2002) document that defined a variety of exceptionalities was often used to qualify statements. As such, the learning difference teacher candidates referred to was still defined as an impairment, a deficit, and/or a disorder. This contradictory conceptualization and language regarding disability was further pronounced in the survey as interestingly, asset-oriented perspectives were more present. Teacher candidates were more aware of students' funds of knowledge than they had been in the first survey, but often named assets as strengths that were primarily cognitive in nature (e.g., reading strategies). The understanding of a learning disability as synonymous with ADHD, ADD, dyslexia, and being attributed to ESL learners was significantly less prevalent.

Although a learning disability was now being understood as multifaceted and about varied ways of learning, teacher candidates named the same factors when they mentioned reasons for the existence of a learning disability. These factors also follow the same order of dominance found in the first survey. As such, physical and neurological bases for having a learning disability were cited most often. The understanding that a learning disability is about learning at a slower pace was not as prevalent as in the first survey. However, teacher candidates were more apt to focus on discussing a learning disability in comparison with norms that were linked to the Ministry of Ontario's grade-level curriculum expectations, school board-mandated evaluations such as a com-

mercially prepared and mass-purchased reading running-record system that defined what levels of student achievement are normal for each grade, and standardized, province-wide testing as required by an "arm's-length agency of the provincial government" in Ontario known as the Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO, 2008).

Teacher candidates no longer focused on quantity of instruction as it related to supporting children with special needs or a learning disability, but rather the quality and nature of instruction insofar as its ability to capitalize on learners' assets. They demonstrated this by specifically discussing the need to address various modes that students access when learning and providing them with individualized accommodations to allow students to use these modes to demonstrate knowledge. However, like the first survey, there was little engagement with the social construction of disability. A learning disability remained something that was identifiable in relation to norms.

The focus groups conducted three months after the course and most of the teacher candidates' practicum placements had ended revealed an overarching theme that was present in both the first and second survey: limited engagement with the social construction of disability. Specifically, teacher candidates conceptualized a learning disability as a learning difference, but beyond this, responses tended to focus on instructional strategies. When cued and prompted about the nature of a learning disability, they often defaulted to focusing on physical, cognitive, and genetic factors that they believed determined a learning disability.

Although students were asked during the focus group sessions to address what they understood about students with special needs and/or children identified as having a learning disability, the effect (if any) of the course they had taken on their understanding of these students and to provide a concrete example of an event throughout the year that informed their understandings about these students in ways that were asset-oriented, their responses were most often not about the students, but rather about what they did and what the teaching profession and school system does/can do to what some of them referred to as "fix" students. Their responses about students fell into three categories. Focusing on deficits was most often the first thing that occurred in responses that addressed a learner or learners whom teacher candidates encountered. The following example taken from the focus group session is indicative of this focus.

> My first classroom only had two kids that were identified and had difficulties, and the rest of the kids were pretty good. Then I went to a grade 6 classroom where they were everywhere. Like everybody needed something.… this class that had a lot of behavioral issues.

Some of the responses attempted to identify a child's assets. This was often demonstrated as teacher candidates discussed their practicum placement experiences as in the following example.

> My first placement was in a grade 3 classroom and there was only a few special needs, but this one student who had a learning disability and it was processing information I think. He was doing a test and I was scribing for him and I suddenly realized that he knew everything. He couldn't write it down and he needed someone to write it and I was just blown away. And I was like, "this is

what a learning disability is." Like he had the information and he just couldn't get it out on paper. And that was a really big moment to see what it really is.

The rest and most of the responses focused on what teacher candidates did instructionally, but it was not always clear how this instruction was responsive to an asset they may have previously identified. The following example demonstrates this unclear connection and also how teacher candidates' responses were sometimes structured in ways that combined the previous two types of responses as they began by focusing on deficits, then attempted to identity an asset before an unclear instructional connection to an asset was discussed.

One of the girls I was tutoring, she had a lot of trouble at first. Working with her the first day, she told me she hated reading. She didn't want to do anything. You know it took a while to hook her into … she was very fidgety and would move around a lot. She liked humor a lot.… I would make some cards and we would walk around the school and I would be like, "find the card, then read them to me" … I don't know what you call it … hide the thing around the school.… [scavenger hunt].

Although humor is identified as an asset that the teacher candidate's student possessed, it is not clear how a scavenger hunt instructionally responded or was used to capitalize on the learner's asset.

When teacher candidates occasionally critically contemplated learning disability, they quickly defaulted toward institutional discourses and redirected their responses toward the Ontario Ministry of Education definition of learning disability. The following interaction between four teacher candidates during one of the focus-group sessions demonstrates how this default option prevented discussion from pursuing critical interrogations of the nature of disability (all names are pseudonyms).

Francesca: A learning disability according to who or to what? What is the standard of people that don't have a learning disability?
Sue: Yeah.
Margaret: That's why I use the word traditional learner …
Sue: Yeah, yeah.
Margaret: and I don't like, "sit at your desk, be quiet, write on your sheet," type thing like, "read that" and I don't know, that's to me the traditional …
Sue: Uh huh.
Margaret: type and I think more and more I don't think most kids learn that way, at all. I know I didn't. I hated doing it. I think I coped. I got through it but I didn't learn as if I was doing it. I don't know I'm getting off topic …
Jeff: I'm confused about the Ministry category. I don't know that I know what the definition is. What the Ministry …
Sue: Yeah. I don't think …
Jeff: definition says the definition is.
Sue: I don't think I know it either.
Francesca: I know what I think it is now. I mean I have a general idea but if someone wants the Ministry definition I would have to go to the book … …
[OCUP Special Education Companion, 2002].
Sue: Yeah.
Francesca: and find it out. I don't know the Ministry definition.

During the focus groups, it also became clear that institutional discourses mediated the degree to which theory became manifest in practice. Inclusionary

practices involving accommodations for learners, for example, were viewed suspiciously as a result of understandings and misnomers about Ministry and Board policies, practices, protocols, procedures regarding dis/ability, and the Individual Educational Plan (IEP, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). Before the following piece of transcript, a teacher candidate, Sarita, mentioned that one of her students would benefit from using a calculator as the student could successfully complete problem-solving questions on a test, but would spend so much time on each question that she could not complete the test as she would forget computational procedures, but understood which computations were necessary for solving the problem. The teacher candidate, therefore, wished to provide this student with a calculator, but questioned whether it was appropriate to do so.

> Sarita: I asked the teacher, but she said unless she's on an IEP I can't give her one because she's not on an IEP and she said, "If you are on an IEP. There are a couple of students that are, and they can use calculators. But she's not on one." So she said that she can't have one.

Throughout the focus groups, there was much discussion about how schools where the teacher candidates were placed during their practicum focused on improving students' abilities to infer (a skill that comes up frequently in reference to the EQAO literacy test that children are required to complete in grades 3 and 6 in Ontario). In speaking about this focus on inferring, teacher candidates raised concerns about the amount of importance placed on demonstrating inferences through writing.

> Tasha: I find a lot of school was really focused on inferring. And in most classes that I was in, the students could do it verbally extremely well, but when it came to writing it was a huge challenge. I know probably it's just practice and practice. It was interesting when I was in the placement to note. I felt like everyone kept saying [to students], "You know you do it verbally really well, but we need you to practice the writing element of inferring." Like them being able to write down their inferences. You shouldn't have to be like that right? It shouldn't have to be.

Discussion

Tensions in the data between competing and contradictory discourses and critical engagement with the construct of disability speak to the complexity of addressing the theory/practice divide in programs designed to prepare and accredit teachers to work in early childhood education classrooms. This complexity extends well beyond notions of the divide that conceptualize theory-practice as a binary. For example,

> The theory-practice connection is no better served than when it is lived … Our challenge is to create a community that educates all of us, those in the university and those in the schools, a community that expands our relationships with one another and, in so doing, our knowledge and our effectiveness. (Lieberman, 1992, in Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 790)

This binary, which assigns geographic positions to where theory and practice are located, is insufficient in recognizing how a variety of discourses mediate

the divide and, therefore, how power influences how, when, and why theory/practice is lived, subjugated, perpetuated, and controlled.

Notions about the reasons for disability expressed by teacher candidates in the first survey and reiterated in the second survey and focus groups, for example, reflect a popular and longstanding view of disability as located in persons deemed disabled. This meme, a "contagious idea that replicates like a virus, passed on from mind to mind" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 37) has historical roots in dominant understandings about disability that have been shaped by the field of learning disabilities. The field has explained and continues to explain childhood learning difficulties as "expressions of faulty internal psychology and/or neurology" (Danforth, 2009, p. 19). As evidenced by the data, these notions continue to prevail in teacher candidates even when critically interrogated in the scope of a course designed to encourage this interrogation.

Some of the factors that perpetuated the maintenance of this meme can be explained by how prevalent these ideas continue to be in information that is available to teachers (preservice and experienced). The *OCUP Special Education Companion* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002) that teacher candidates accessed throughout the year, for example, reflects these notions. Although teacher candidates were critically prepared to interrogate the discourse embedded in this document, its official status and power as a text that defines disability often became a reference point for teacher candidates to rely on when they would begin to experience the uncertainly that comes with critically contemplating and destabilizing notions of disability. This is most apparent in the interaction between Francesca, Sue, Margaret, and Jeff.

As teacher candidates researched exceptionalities, they accessed a variety of special education texts. Again, although they were provided with several opportunities to examine critically notions that conceptualized disability from a medical, psychometric, and deficit orientation, most of these special education texts are informed by these perspectives. Research and theory coming from educational psychology available to teachers, therefore, remains steeped in traditions and notions that inadequately theorize disability and problematically position people with disabilities as deficient in their ability to meet norms. Limited understandings of dis/ability present in these bodies of research, therefore, continue to live in current theory and practice as it relates to ECE and children with special needs or identified as learning-disabled. These dynamics are far more complex than the idea that theory is value-free, inherently good, and something that can be transferred from one site to another in the interest of "expanding knowledge and effectiveness."

Ultimately, contextualization of what a learning disability is and who children with special needs or a learning disability are is missing from the learning disabilities field. As Moffat's (2006) findings demonstrate at the beginning of this article, it has also been missing from educational research in general as it too has constructed learning disabilities as predominantly psychometric and biomedical in nature. Further, as stated above, Heydon and Iannacci (2008) pointed out that the curriculum studies field has been remiss in addressing disability.

Perspectives that contextualize and destabilize the notion of disability continue to have marginal status and visibility in the field of education. The lack of attention placed on child poverty, for example, as a factor that contributes to who is deemed disabled and why disability presents itself received inconsequential attention in both surveys and Moffat's (2006) findings. This is occurring at a time when "over one million Canadian children live in unsafe housing, face hunger or poor health, and have limited opportunities" (Toycen, 2007, p. 2). Instead, what remains is an understanding of disability as something innate that presents itself when deviations from culturally bound "normal" abilities that are psychological, neurological, and measurable occur. This tautology with its circular and flawed logic is not destabilized as long as the symbolic complex and cultural analysis mentioned above remain exterior to our understandings of disability.

Another level of power relations was also operating in the maintenance of dominant views of disability. As was evident in the case that Sarita described, disability is constructed and recognized as something that is made official by documents and that renders responsiveness to students valid as opposed to a form of cheating when made available to those who have not been documented as in need or disabled. These dynamics further the positioning of instructional responsiveness toward students with special needs or identified as having a learning disability as subordinate to "normal," as opposed to a way of enabling students to demonstrate knowledge in ways that are respectful of and responsive to the various processes, modes, and semiotic forms that students engage in to demonstrate knowledge. This sense of what are privileged and sanctioned ways of demonstrating knowledge was also evident in the limited ways that children were expected to demonstrate their ability to develop inferences as noted by Tasha. This dynamic may help to explain why teacher candidates were able to be much more asset-oriented in their discourse in the second survey and the focus groups, but tended to focus on and privilege assets that were cognitive in nature.

Although these messages were being communicated to teacher candidates by associate teachers, it is essential to note that these practices and notions are not inherently located in associate teachers. They too receive strong messages about who is dis/abled, what they are "allowed," what knowledge is valued, and what modes are privileged in demonstrating knowledge. Practices and discourses used by associate teachers are, however, also replicated by teacher candidates as associate teachers are evaluating whether the teacher candidate is successful in the placement. These power dynamics also contribute to how memes, practices, and problematic beliefs about disability are reproduced.

In analyzing teacher candidates' notions of dis/ability, we began to take a more focused look at and question our own practices, course content, assignments, and curricula designed to help teacher candidates develop a critical understanding of dis/ability and to respond to students with special needs or identified as having a learning disability. We discovered that our own practice in relation to a major assignment that students were expected to complete in the course both replicated dominant practices in the field of special education and notions of dis/ability. Despite our focus on an asset-oriented approach, the assignment called for students to research an exceptionality, to look at multiple

definitions of the exceptionality, to critically discuss how differing definitions contribute to the idea that disability is socially constructed, to communicate the variance of the exceptionality, and to identify what assets students who have been identified with this exceptionality may bring to classrooms. Further, we asked that students demonstrate environmental, instructional, and assessment accommodations that students identified with the specific exceptionality they are researching may require.

As we analyzed the data and the gaps inherent in the theory/practice we engaged in with teacher candidates, we discovered that this assignment contributed to rather than destabilized dominant notions of dis/ability by ensuring that the teacher candidates' gaze was focused on a decontextualized definition of disability as opposed to what the disability meant and its significance to a child. An abridged, reduced, static, two-dimensional, generic, reified, stereotyped, textbook depiction of a learning disabled child (Danforth, 2009) was exactly what we were propagating through this assignment. To some teacher candidates' credit, they still managed to remain asset-oriented and critically engage depictions of disability in the material that they read and used for their presentations. However, without significantly revising this assignment, it would be impossible to expect teacher candidates fully to develop any critical sense of dis/ability.

We have, therefore, redesigned the assignment so that students are creating case studies that focus on a child who has a disability. As such, researching the disability is still important, but students will critically assess and use the information to consider a variety of factors when writing their case study, which focuses on a child with the disability and so requires that they contextualize the child about whom they are writing. Teacher candidates will be specific about what this exceptionality looks like and means in relation to the child. From this information, they will determine what assets the child has and link programming and accommodations so as to consider fully and capitalize on these factors and assets. At the center of the teacher candidates' gaze will remain a child rather than some obscure notion of his or her disability and reified identity.

Conclusion

Although this research project has contributed to our ability to address theory/practice gaps in our context, we know that this process and the knowledge it has produced are also transferable to other teacher education contexts that also focus on developing future teachers' understandings of dis/ability and the knowledge of how to respond to students who have special needs or are identified as having a disability. As stated throughout this article, we realize that these perspectives and approaches have yet to destabilize dominant discourses and beliefs about dis/ability, but are beginning to be recognized. Therefore, we urge fellow teacher educators to engage in dialogue about these perspectives and attempt to organize practices in their courses and programs informed by these perspectives. Considering the power dynamics and tensions that are documented throughout this article, it is also imperative that these perspectives not remain the domain of one geographic location (i.e., the university). The current dominance of limited and limiting notions of dis/ability and their effect on children in early childhood contexts and many other learning

environments necessitate that faculties of education have far more influence in developing ministry and school board policies, procedures, protocols, and curricula because it is this gap and the power relations it sustains that are by far the most profound and difficult to address.

<div align="center">*Note*</div>

1. Children who have not been formally identified as learning disabled but have been characterized in schools and in the education literature as *at-risk, struggling readers, nonreaders, reluctant readers, cognitively, linguistically, culturally deprived,* or *disadvantaged,* etc. (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). As some of the learners with whom the teacher candidates worked had not been (and may never be) formally identified, this term is used in this study to identify and distinguish these learners.

<div align="center">*References*</div>

Baker, B. (2002). The hunt for disability: The new eugenics and the normalization of school children. *Teachers College Record, 104*, 663-703.

Barone, D. (2002). Literacy teaching in two kindergarten classrooms in a school labeled at-risk. *Elementary School Journal, 102*(5), 415-441.

Clandinin, J., & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cummins, J. (2001). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society.* Los Angeles, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Cummins, J. (2005, April). *Diverse futures: Rethinking the image of the child in Canadian schools.* Paper presented at the Joan Pederson Distinguished Lecture Series, University of Western Ontario.

Danforth, S. (2009). *The incomplete child: An intellectual history of learning disabilities.* New York: Peter Lang.

Delpit, L. (2003). Educators as "seed people" growing a new future. *Educational Researcher, 32*(7), 14-21.

EQAO. (2008). *About EQAO.* Queen's Printer. Retrieved October, 9, 2009, from: http://www.eqao.com/AboutEQAO/AboutEQAO.aspx?status=logout&Lang=E

Gee, J.P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* London: Falmer Press.

Heydon, R., & Iannacci, L. (2006). Biomedical approaches to literacy: Two curriculum teachers challenge the treatment of dis/ability in contemporary early literacy education. *Language and Literacy.* Special edition.

Heydon, R., & Iannacci, L. (2008). *Early childhood curricula and the de-pathologizing of childhood* (pp. 32-45). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Iannacci, L. (2008). The pathologizing of culturally and linguistically diverse students in early years classrooms. In R. Heydon & L. Iannacci (Eds.), *Early childhood curricula and the de-pathologizing of childhood* (pp. 46-81). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Kliewer, C., Biklen, D., & Kasa-Hendrickson, C. (2006). Who may be literate? Disability and resistance to the cultural denial of competence. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*(2), 163-192.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: changing knowledge and classroom learning.* Milton Keynes, UK, Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

McDermott & Varenne (1995). Culture as disability. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 26*, 323-348.

Moffatt, L. (2006). *(Dis)abling readers: Discourses of literacy and learning in research on "Reading disabilities" 2000-2005.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia.

Moll, L. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice, 31*(2), 132-41.

Oliver-Hoyo, M., & Allen., D.D. (2006). The use of triangulation methods in qualitative educational research. *Journal of College Science Teaching, 35*(4), 42-48.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2002). *Ontario curriculum unit planner: Special education companion.* Retrieved October 20, 2006, from: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/ocup/

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2004). *The individual education plan (IEP): A resource guide.* Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2007). *Overview: An introduction to special education in Ontario.* Retrieved November 15, 2007, from: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/ontario.html

Pinar, B., Reynolds, W.M., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P.M. (1995). *Understanding curriculum*. New York: Peter Lang.

Pothier, D., & Devlin, R. (2006). Introduction: Toward a critical theory of dis-citizenship. In D. Pothier & R. Devlin (Eds.), *Critical disability theory: Essays in philosophy, politics, policy, and law*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Smith, D.E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

Slembrouck, S. (2007). *What is meant by "discourse analysis"?* Retrieved October 26, 2007, from: http://bank.ugent.be/da/da.htm

Swadener, B.B., & Lubeck, S. (1995). (Eds.). *Children and families "at promise": Deconstructing the discourse of risk*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Taguchi, H.L. (2009). *Going beyond the theory/practice divide in early childhood education: Introducing an intra-active pedagogy*. UK: Routledge.

Titchosky, T. (2007). *Reading and writing disability differently*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Triplett, C.F. (2007). The social construction of "Struggle": Influences of school literacy contexts, curriculum, and relationships. *Journal of Literacy Research, 39*(1), 95-126.

Toycen, D. (2007). *Living below the poverty line*. Retrieved October, 9, 2009, from: http://www.worldvision.ca/Programs-and-Projects/Canadian-Programs/Documents/Living%20Below%20the%20Line.pdf

Van Dijk, T.A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, & H. Hamilton (Eds.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352-371). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.