25 Impediments to Social Justice
Hierarchy, Science, Faith, and Imposed Identity (Disability Classification)

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In this chapter, I discuss how school hierarchy and imposed disability identity are products of a (social) science that refuses ethics as a grounding for actions. Observing that the special education faith community touts the science of classifying children and applying evidence-based practices as an enhancement of classified students’ lives, I counter that such scientific “progress” interferes with social justice for students caught in the burgeoning and sticky web of disability labels and specialized placements. I take a hard look at what science actually does as it tinkers in the realm of reifying student distinctions. I explore the historical braiding of science and disability, and challenge professionals who fixate on science to understand that for there to be social justice in school and society, they must infuse a social reciprocity morality into their practice. I briefly review evidence of the historical dangers of relying on science without considering the ethics of practice. I account for how traditional scientists can lose their intellectual edge in understanding authentic human problems. I also focus on theories of hierarchy production and social class to explain how stratified school and social class systems affect identity formation and democratic governance.

Eying the Prize: Infusion of Social Reciprocity Ethics in Social Actions

Based on his meta-analysis of anthropological studies, Brown (1991) concludes that social hierarchy is a human universal; that is, people in all societies construct stratified social relations around such characteristics as race, gender, appearance, and family affiliation. Although Brown points to hierarchy’s intractability, he more optimistically reports that the universal people also proclaim a social reciprocity morality that encompasses the virtues of mutual respect and social equality as their ideal. That “all men (sic) are created equal” and should be treated equally infuses official governmental documents and legal codes.

At the risk of condemnation by postmodernists and poststructuralists, I tout social reciprocity as a universal human ethic that should always guide people’s lives (Brantlinger, 2001, 2004a). I contend that critical theorists and disability studies scholars hold the same view, although they rarely state this explicitly. At the macrolevel, Rawls (1971) extols the benefits of a distributive justice in which resources are divided equally, except he insists that the greatest portion should go to those with the greatest needs. In terms of basing public policy on reciprocity principles, societies would have universal health care, free public education from daycare through university, equivalent funding for all schools and school districts, desegregation and inclusion at all levels, Social Security and Medicare for the elderly and infirm, accessible public transportation (perhaps similar to the efficient interurban streetcar system that was bought and then closed down by capitalists intent on selling cars), and fairly equalized salaries for all workers. Reciprocity morality
encompasses protection of the natural environment, which would require immediate and drastic change in human/material relations to combat global warming and vanishing habitats for creatures at risk of harm and extinction, including human beings.

Societal systems that promote democracy and social justice are built on social reciprocity ideals. Social justice requires a shared worldview that recognizes that peaceful and productive social interdependence is built on mutual respect, fairness, recognition of self-defined identity, and sense of community (Kittay, 1999; Koggel, 1998). Observing teachers who effectively created inclusive and supportive learning communities, we found the following shared attitudes and behaviors: they facilitated student self-determination and social-responsibility; enabled success and positive identity; supported inclusive and respectful social relations; were sensitive to feelings and expressed needs; provided space for the expression of diverse opinions; engaged interest in local to global issues; created opportunity to articulate opinions and defend personal positions; enhanced group goal-setting and sense of accomplishment; inspired students to seek solutions to authentic social problems; enhanced literacy and knowledge; and developed commitment to democratic ideals (Brantlinger, Morton, & Washburn, 1999). Emancipatory pedagogy encourages students to engage—rather than avoid—the controversial (Brantlinger & Danforth, 2006).

Although socialism, the political system most aligned with social reciprocity morality, is dismissed as un-American, religious faiths are more consistent with socialism’s social reciprocity morality than with the competitive and divisive ethos of capitalism. Unfortunately, prevailing hegemonic ideology reinforces neoliberals’ fantasy that unfettered capitalism will automatically and wisely regulate the market and shape policy for the public good; as a result, even people who receive piddling amounts of trickle-down rewards appear convinced of the validity of capitalism. Capitalism, in turn, constructs desire for status as well as resource and opportunity hoarding; that is, the enactment of social hierarchy.

Disability Studies: Endorsing People’s Right to Name Themselves and Tell Their Stories

Disability studies, in contrast to special education, was founded on collective opposition to imposed labels and social segregation. Disability study scholarship centers on preventing the damage caused by disability constructs and hierarchical and segregating practices in schools. Ferri and Connor (2006) “problematize soft labels” that have “expanded the meaning of disability and facilitated containment and exclusion” (p. 176, 179). Disability studies scholars eschew the technical-rational science of mainstream special educators who pursue practices that continue to label and separate children on the grounds of disability. A rule that arose from African-American, feminist, and queer studies initiatives is that people have the right to name themselves and have their names respected by others. Similarly, disability studies scholars advocate for children’s and adults’ right to declare whether or not they have a disability and participate in determining how their needs might be met.

Related to the idea of self-determination, Moyers (2007, January 12) claims that people are entitled to tell their own stories. In regard to learning to understand oneself and speak one’s own stories, I fondly recall my senior English class in a rural Minnesota high school in 1957. Mrs. Deutsch had students envision the “good life” and describe it to classmates. She was a strict, no-nonsense teacher, so we had to be honest, respectful, and supportive in sharing our identities and ideas about the future. It is odd that we were comfortable doing this with Mrs. Deutsch, a product of East coast Ivy League schools and generally
intimidating due to her style and high expectations. My class of almost 40 had attended school together in the same building for 12 years. At least two classmates could not read at all and others were not academically accomplished, nevertheless, they were included in the activity and everyone listened to, and respected, their stories and dreams. After imagining our futures, we spent the year deciphering what various authors conveyed about their ideas, or their character’s ideas, of living a good life. It was a much-needed consciousness-raising experience that forced us to think about our values and goals. The activity brought the class closer together, perhaps falling into the category of “dialogue” (encounter of true words between people) envisioned by Freire, who argues, “dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world” and “cannot exist without humility and hope” (cited in Hudak, 2001, pp. 70–73). Based on that brief overview of the implications of social reciprocity morality, I next discuss the current tendencies that interfere with its realization.

The Mechanisms and Purposes of Hierarchy Production

Apfelbaum (1999) theorizes about the mechanisms of, and rationale for, the creation of hierarchy. She observes that dominant groups shore up distinction and advantage by creating myths about features related to race, class, gender, ability, and competency. They promote their own traits as superior by circulating evidence (often based on science) that only members of the mainstream embody important standards. Outsiders, and their attributes, are marked, labeled, branded, and stigmatized. Apfelbaum points out that names imply within-group homogeneity and between group difference. Dominant groups hold maximum power when the distinction between “us” and “them” is perceived as a fundamental, irreversible asymmetry, with groups having little in common. Yet, hierarchies are not purposeless, passive rankings but, rather, are based on interdependent status relationships. Domination depends on subordination. Winners need losers. Superiority needs inferiority. The status, role, and perhaps even raison d’être of dominant groups depend on the existence of subordinate others. In creating imaginary, symbolic distinctions that reify difference, powerful insiders project onto outsiders what they disdain. If the central group considers itself normal and able, “Others” become abnormal and disabled. Said (1978) posits the “Orient” portrayal of Muslims as a phobic projection of Western imaginary. Similarly, Nietzsche (1967) observes that “one becomes good by constructing the Other as evil” (cited in McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 225).

Capitalism structures societal hierarchy, but schools are the key institution that reproduces social stratification (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Meritocratic schools are instrumental in producing merit (social capital valued for future exchange) and structuring privilege. For example, creating advanced courses for advantaged students means Others with less power are relegated to an oppressive substructure of low tracks and special education segregation. The damaging impact of meritocracy’s subordinate creation is generally underestimated and ignored (Young, 1965). As with other critical theorists and disability studies scholars, I maintain that the lessons learned about self and Others within meritocratic schools are so lethal to the involved individuals and to democratic community that they are not justifiable.

Researchers who confront school stratification tend to focus on victims—the children shunted aside and devalued. Although I agree that children from nonadvantaged families suffer most in meritocracies, the winning typically associated with elite students must be questioned. Intense within-class competition is debilitating. Regardless of their own insistence on privilege, school hierarchy poses risks for dominant class students (see Brantlinger, 1993, 2003, 2004b, forthcoming a, b). To understand why meritocracies
develop despite not benefiting anybody, I look at how science, perhaps unwittingly, provides the framework and tools for school stratification.

My discussion in this chapter relates mostly to students in “high-incidence” or “mild” disability categories (learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, emotional disturbance, attention deficit disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; that is, LD, MiMH, ED, ADD, ADHD). As Mercer (1973) observes, children with these labels tend not to be seen as disabled by their families, so their “disability” surfaces primarily within the school context. It is no coincidence that children classified as failures are disproportionately from families who are poor and of color (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Oakes, 2005). While the negative repercussions of imposing damaging labels and school segregation of special education must be recognized, it is not the only stratifying system that inflicts harm. Ability grouping, tracking, ethnocentric curriculum, personal prejudice, and lack of enforcement of prosocial behavior also interfere with the creation of inclusive, democratic learning communities. Furthermore, despite the lack of evidence of academic and social gains from student sorting and ranking, these have intensified over time (Caplan, 1995; McNeil, 2000). Because schools are structured to produce differentiated outcomes for diverse students, the resulting failure cannot be considered unintentional (Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

Earlier I stated that everyone has the right to name themselves and tell their own stories (determine their life conditions). Yet, anyone who has watched students resist labels understands that social justice is not served by a special education system that bases “services” (educational funding) on “disability” classification. I recently witnessed an adolescent, whose care-provider tactfully suggested that she be tested for a learning “condition,” scream at the top of her lungs “I am not ADHD!” During years of teaching special education and supervising field settings, I noticed the pain and humiliation experienced by classified children. I watched them sneak into special education classes early or late so their destination could not be detected by schoolmates, insist that teachers cover windows to the room so that nobody could see them there, and carry big wrapper-covered books in the hallway so they would appear smart—not stupid and “special education.”

Nevertheless, instead of seeing this rejection and disgrace, professionals and policymakers—middle class people generally—see special education as beneficial for classified students. I argue that it is the people who gain employment by “meeting Others’ needs” who are the primary beneficiaries of the system (Brantlinger, 2006). While labeled students tell of personal shame and ineffective self-contained (segregated) programs, individuals with the power to create categorical labels, classify children, and determine their treatment and placement are rarely positioned to identify with, or even listen to, labeled children and their families (Hudak & Kihn, 2001; Stoughton, 2006). Just as powerful individuals evade fighting in wars they create, those who structure stratified schooling are rarely positioned at the bottom rung of school hierarchy.

In Successful Failure: The School America Builds, Varenne and McDermott (1998) explore how the failure identity built into a [meritocratic] school structure inflicts systemic cruelty and symbolic violence. Davies (2004) identifies the “maldistribution of resources that effects psychological, emotional, cultural, and intellectual integrity” as political violence (p. 11). It is puzzling—and unforgivable—that in a purportedly democratic country, children are forced to take part in compulsory schooling that begins to bestow the status of winner and loser on them from an early age. Students struggle to deflect the failure identity imposed on them during their school years. Interviews indicate that years after leaving school low-income parents are still intensely emotional in describing their resentment of disparaging labels, rejection, and isolation from “respectable kids” (Brantlinger,
Kaufman (2001) poignantly recalls her own struggle to retrieve a positive identity years after she suffered the indignity of being held back in first grade. The reach of disability classification is not restricted to the school years—it has “staying power” (Hudak, 2001, p. 9). It is likely that classification “continues to have meaning after the label is no longer relevant” because disability identity is “construed as innate and stable,” something inherent in individuals rather than a by-product of school structure (Taubman, 2001, p. 186).

**Official Imposition of Damaged Identity**

Identity formation is both “voluntary and involuntary” (Fuss, 1995, p. 10). When voluntary, “people tell Others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3). When identity is voluntary, people experience autonomy and control, however, the imposition of negative identity causes various reactions. The healthiest response may be to reject the despised label, its implications, and even the educational system responsible for producing the label. In contrast, those who internalize the involuntary identity and passively comply with “the system” often succumb to self-hate and loss of agency. Either way, labeled students are alienated from the settings where naming takes place. Clearly, identity develops in the midst of power relationships: “Most struggles over social justice are about the domination, silencing, oppression, and marginalization of specific identity groups” (Dimitridis & Carlson, 2003, p.18). Focusing on colonialism’s neurotic structure, Fanon (1952) notes the ravages a racist society inflicts on Black Americans’ identity. In racial classification, minority status inevitably equates with inferiority and stigma (Peshkin, 1991). “Many constructs [labels], unreflected upon, carry the messages of power: they demean; they exclude; they create stereotypes (Greene, 2001, p. xvi). In Stigma (1963) and Asylum (1961), Goffman was among the first to describe the profound impact of disability labels and institutionalization. Although the application of derogatory labels and ostracizing placement translates into emotional trauma and social stress for a large number of children, Apple (2001) claims, “the ‘helping’ language of schools at times makes it hard to see the very real hidden social effects of the social and psychological labels used by educators” (p. 261).

That school routinely imposes unflattering and counterproductive identities on students is evident in an inspection of grading and testing practices. As I read Kate Atkinson’s (2004) novel, Case Histories, I was struck by an observation of a main character, Jackson, a private eye, when someone used red ink to designate males in a report of a criminal investigation. He mused, “It made the boys stand out and look more dangerous, or incorrect somehow” (p. 149). The red ink triggered a “sudden image of his essays at school, spider-webbed with the angry red-ink annotations of his teachers.” Jackson confides that it was “only after he left school and joined the army that he discovered he was intelligent” (p. 149). Fortunately, Jackson overcame the stigma of failure and avoided the lasting effects that damaged identity usually has on postschool life.

**Science’s Tight Grasp on Social Life**

Disability studies is replete with accounts of personal suffering, so my aim is to show how dominant individuals depend on science to structure school and societal hierarchy. In addition, I address how science-driven practice refuses ethics as a grounding principle for practice. Specifically regarding special education, I discuss how societal hierarchy, school meritocracy, the nature of science, and unquestioning faith in (special) education
science result in a proliferation of problematic classifications for a burgeoning number of students.

The Eminence and Overreach of Science

In the past few decades, a host of scholars have contributed to knowledge about the nature of science and the results of various scientific enterprises (Aronowitz, 1988; Burroughs, 1912/2007; Danforth, 1999; Feyerabend, 1976; Foucault 1978, 1979; Gallagher, 1998, 2001; Harding, 1987; Kuhn, 1962; Popkewitz, 2004; Willinsky, 2005). Because my overview must be brief, I refer readers to these scholars for a fuller understanding of the nature and influences of science. It is clear that “science is the big game in town” that has “amassed social capital as a marker for what it means to be modern” (Styers, 2001, p. 235). One cannot fail to appreciate the comforts and conveniences of modern life that result from science and invention, yet there is increasing recognition that advances are counterbalanced with such repercussions as dwindling supplies of fossil fuel, pollution and destruction of natural resources, global warming, and problematic side-effects of medical treatment. My concern here is with the human waste incurred by a social science that imitates hard science’s thinking and overgeneralizes its techniques to encompass human domains.

The Drift to Technical-Rational Agendas for Social Life

In 1912, Burroughs predicted that the growing primacy of science would be accompanied by an increasingly mechanistic view of the world. In reference to psychology, Capshew (1999) explains that although the study of the mind began as a humanistic enterprise, it has become so objectified and decontextualized that subjects’ humanity is scarcely recognizable. Intentionally abstract and complex rhetoric (jargon) distracts attention from, or obfuscates, a humanistic—and realistic—portrayal of people’s lives. Foucault (1978) argues that disciplinary discourse and technologies of power (examination, hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment) produce certain identities. In special education, examination is enacted through formal testing, and disability is reified through hierarchical observation as children are matched with disability categories. Normalization is enforced by prescribing appropriate cures for “abnormal” students.

Social Position of Scientists and Science’s Objects

Because education, science, and progress are conflated in people’s minds in modern society, problems result from (undue) respect for the educated. Situated squarely in the middle class, most scientists are further endowed with White and male privilege. This “determinate societal position” organizes their conceptualization of problems and choice of subject matter methods (Smith, 1987, p. 91). Scientists/professionals see themselves as singularly enlightened, intelligent, and informed as they monopolize the production of “objective and universal” truth. They feel entitled to make decisions for themselves and Others. Despite thinking themselves morally superior, Davies (2004) reminds us that highly educated people have been responsible for a host of major atrocities. Indeed, considerable wrong has transpired through scientists’ intention to improve society by fixing, or eliminating, individuals.

Power discrepancies are evident in who (scientists, professionals, educated people) make decisions and the poor children and children of color who are the objects of naming. Local knowledge is disregarded and replaced by scientific evidence. Scientists, most
obviously those who directly influence institutional treatment, are implicated in a reductionism that only recognizes their own findings and points of view. Yet, traffic between the scientific and the institutional, and the scientific and the popular, belies the possibility that social scientists could be the noninterfering, truth-telling, outside observers they claim to be (Holland et al., 1998). Naming the source and sustenance of power, Aronowitz (1988) observes: “The scientific community ritualistically denies it alliance with economic/industrial and military power even though the evidence of links is overwhelming” (p. 20). I address these connections later.

Special education expertise has produced and maintained a hierarchy between those providing services and those served (Brantlinger, 2004b). Special education scientists tend not to respect the subjectivity (feelings and preferences) of children who struggle in meritocratic schools. The view that science is neutral allows insiders’ perspectives to be ignored and ethics dismissed on the grounds that attending to such factors contaminates research. For example, when labeling a child, only the fit between individual traits as measured by objective tests and the label definitions are considered. Given the deliberate suppression of subjective or moral factors, subordinate children are bound to receive subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 2005). Identities, and school careers, are spoiled by imposing disability classifications on a burgeoning mass of poor children and children of color and relegating them to lesser school circumstances.

Epistemology is a “theory of knowledge” that Harding (1987) examines as she questions “what passes as legitimate knowledge” and “whose knowledge counts” in science (p. 3). Her observations of “the virulence of white men’s hostility to women learning how to speak and organize” (p. 5) is reminiscent of mainstream special education scholars’ ridicule of TASH3 and inclusion advocates as being singularly subjective and ideological (Brantlinger, 1997). Practice in the field of special education is, and always has been, grounded in demands that scientific evidence be used to cure or control certain individuals. However, recently pressure to fund, disseminate, and utilize only scientific evidence-based research has intensified.

Science Is As Science Does

Unfortunately, special education science has been implicated in providing rationale for various inhumane practices. Since the science of disability first emerged, proclamations based on scientific grounding (validated tests, verified classifications) rendered some children to be uneducable—a status that justified exclusion from public schools. After these children broke the exclusion barrier to become a legal part of public schools, scientists developed sorting mechanisms to declare who did and did not belong in mainstream schools and classrooms. Experts coined terms and attached them to objects (children), thus exacerbating educational disparities. Regardless of students and families’ resistance to derogatory and ostracizing labels, scientists rarely focus on the feelings of those classified. To some extent, labeling and treatment evolved in response to educators’ concerns about children who do not respond to instruction with “normal” progress or to discipline with good behavior—special education science does provide the magic of a disappearing act for undesirable children.

One scientific enterprise that is touted as an advancement is the development of objective tests to identify disability. From the turn of the 20th century, scientists have created tests that magically distinguish superiority in public school students from mediocrity and inferiority. In turn, derived scores justify giving children humiliating names and educating them in lesser circumstances. It is important to acknowledge that constructing certain Others as outside the norm has never been based on radical humanism or a social
reciprocity morality. Such differentiation is part of a scientific technical–rational agenda based on the assumption that experts know what is best for Others (Brantlinger, 2004b). The history of disability reveals that immoral actions often rely on the justification of science.

Concern about the overrepresentation of poor children and children of color among the ranks of the disabled has existed at least since Dunn (1968) wrote that special education might have a negative impact. Yet, despite rhetoric of “meeting needs” and providing an “appropriate education,” the impact on those receiving labels has never been a major concern of those who determine professional practice. Ferri and Connor (2006) document that after Brown vs. Board of Education mandated racial desegregation, schools maintained racial separation by placing huge numbers of students of color in special education classrooms and low tracks. This practice was rationalized by tacit acceptance of the belief that Black children are less able than their White schoolmates and by knowledge of inferiority/disability demonstrated by objective tests. Ferri and Connor conclude that, “special education played a role in the failure of Brown to achieve racially desegregated classrooms” (p. 4) and that “tracking and special education inevitably resegregate children along racial lines” (p. 43).

School level choices may seem naive and unrelated to science; however, the decision making of local personnel is shaped by their training and it takes place within the elaborated classification framework designed by scientists. The array of specific tests and treatments are endorsed—but rarely verified—by science. Efficacy studies are nonexistent and the few that exist do not confirm the positive social and academic impact claims of traditional special education professionals. Regarding disability’s reification, Gallagher (2001) observes, “it is the meaning we collectively bring to difference and the social, physical, and organizational arrangements built on our interpretations that make a person’s difference a disability” (p. 3). Again, these meanings are produced in the scientific discourse of the times by the powerful, educated people who control schools. The blatantly insulting classifications of imbeciles, idiots, defectives, and retardates have been replaced by such euphemisms as “children with substantial needs” or “children with cognitive disabilities.” “Person-first” language is meant to convey respect for those labeled; however, harmful naming and sorting practices continue regardless of new and improved classifications.

Science has also caused havoc outside school doors. Medical expertise justified placing young children in institutions by advising parents to give disabled children up at birth so they would “not get attached” and so “knowledgeable state hospital personnel could provide special care for children.” Eugenics science established a hierarchy of human traits and societal values that were evoked to justify incarceration and sterilization in the United States, and genocide, euthanasia, and use of disabled people as human guinea pigs in experiments here and abroad. From the slavery era to the present, science condoned unethical medical experimentation on African Americans and various institutionalized populations (Washington, 2006).

Reliance on scientific expertise is part of the American history of disability. Goddard (1914) draws on his own scientific wisdom to denigrate lay people’s perceptions:

Mary is a splendid illustration of that type of girl that is most dangerous in society. Pretty and attractive and with just enough training to enable her to make a fair appearance she deceives the very elect as to her capacity. [If left at large] Responsibilities would be placed on her which she could never carry. In institutional life she is happy and useful. Unprotected she would be degraded, degenerate, and the mother of defectives. (p. 93)
Fernald (1896), founder of an institution for “dysgenic” individuals, clarifies:

The feebleminded are a parasitic, predatory class, never capable of self-support, or of managing their own affairs. Feebleminded women are almost invariably immoral and if at large usually become carriers of venereal disease or give birth to children who are as defective as themselves. Every feebleminded person, especially the high grade imbecile, is a potential criminal, needing only the proper environment and opportunity for the development and expression of his criminal tendencies. (p. 67)

These are dramatic examples and, granted, a century old. Nevertheless, scientists still call the shots. A blatant example is the push to restrict funding and dissemination only to random sample research and mandate that only evidence-based practices be implemented in schools. This movement affects academia in distinguishing individuals who use the “right” scientific methods from those who supposedly do not. Another hierarchy in higher education divides scientists’ knowledge from that of school personnel. Scientists eschew the contextualized and practical knowledge produced by teachers, school administrators, and parents.

**Struck Dumb by Science and Overachievement**

People are ranked according to whether they are among the highly educated, with advanced degrees from distinguished institutions, or among the least educated who drop out of failing urban schools. The process of interpersonal comparisons is perpetual and purposeful in meritocratic systems. The extent of affiliation with science is part of the picture in hierarchy development. Mathematics, chemistry, and physics professors are judged to be brighter and more important to progress than faculty in the social sciences and humanities (Hatch, 2006). In their ties to education’s failures, special education teacher educators are among the lowest of the low. Perhaps to improve their status and sense of worth, (special) educational professionals strive to imitate the discerning and labeling habits of the “hard” sciences—hard in this case might mean either “difficult” or “as dense as a rock.” Aware that word usage is significant in identifying and discussing disability, critical scholars study the meanings of language, including their underside or reverse interpretation of terminology; semantics are essential when studying special education.

Critical thinking and expression of agency in behalf of personal ideals are the responsibility of all citizens; nevertheless, various pressures constrain those activities. Referring to academia’s “disciplined minds,” Schmidt (2000) equates the “system” with “hierarchical organization” of bosses and employees in the production of social, economic, and political practices (p. 12). According to Schmidt, closed systems “require strict adherence to an assigned point of view,” hence are not intellectually challenging and constrain creativity (p. 15). Schmidt argues:

Professional education and employment push people to accept a role in which they do not make a significant difference, a politically subordinate role. These working professionals face intense pressure to compromise their ideals and sideline their commitment to work for a better world. (p. 2)

In discussing the role of the “shrink,” Schmidt notes that: “Many mental problems originate not in diseases of the brain but in deficiencies of society” (p. 34). These deficiencies include “the arduousness of living with unfulfilling work, financial insecurity,
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arbitrary bosses, lack of solidarity and insufficient personal power, together with the anguish caused by racism, sexism, ageism, lookism, ableism, and all the other oppressive hierarchies that plague this society” (p. 35). Hence, Schmidt argues, attempting to adjust people to the unhealthy society that caused the problems is not the best approach for the individuals or society.

Schmidt claims that it is “on the job that professionals display ideological caution.” They are “very much at home playing by the rules,” and feel “no pressing need to question the social structure in which they do their work,” indeed, they “fear any suggestion of not playing by the rules” (p. 12). Schmidt criticizes “liberal professionals [who] smugly conclude that they are the force for social progress,” yet because they like the prominence and control related to professional status, they “will not hear a word in favor of a more democratic distribution of power in society” (p. 13). Schmidt contends that professionals are “fundamentally conservative” although “liberalism is the dominant ideology in the professions” (p. 4). He observes that left-leaning or oppositional professionals have remained relatively small (5%), while the “vast majority continue to share the views of corporate business executives on most basic issues” (p. 15).

Dweck (2002) adds a twist to the story of dumbing down elites, claiming that current practice, “makes people dumb by telling them they are smart.” If people think they are smart, “they give up trying to learn and understand” (p. 87). Her argument is in line with White privilege theory that maintains that powerful people are guided by a sense of entitlement and consider themselves to be immune from the consequences of their behavior. Sternberg (2002) conceptualizes stupidity as the oppositive of rationality, claiming that a continuum of mindfulness to mindlessness exists in human thinking (p. 3). He posits stupidity at the level of individuals and social systems. Grigorenko and Lockery (2002) characterize special education as “an indicator of society’s thinking ‘stupidly’ about problems of those who have a temporal, content, and/or sequential difficulty with learning” (p. 160). They contend that the field is riddled with overidentification (p. 161), the fallacy of intuition (pertains to judgments made without preliminary reasoned cogitation or ones that are counterintuitive) (p. 163), and the cure fallacy (p. 171). Feyerabend (1976) compares socialization in science to training a pet to obey, claiming “well-trained rationalists” obey the mental image of their master as they conform to the standards of argumentation learned. Apparently, they are incapable of realizing that what is regarded as the “voice of reason” is but a causal after-effect of the training received (p. 25). Feyerabend concludes that habits of mind and the reductions they permit become natural sources of blindness into the reality of circumstances.

Rethinking Science

Aronowitz (1988) observes that science actually does rely on local knowledge and that “scientific norms can be traced to…historical and discursive presuppositions” (p. viii). Certainly the “science” of the eugenics movement was influenced by personal worries about the dangers presented by diverse Others as well as on the discourse of what constitutes good families, worthy people, and healthy races/ethnic groups (Gould, 1996). Aronowitz illustrates how science is embedded in or infused with the myths and magic that scientists (and their followers) bring to their practice. Pursuit of profit and the absence of humanistic interests also are evident in various scientific pursuits. Certainly, the creation of disability sells pharmaceutical products. It is no coincidence that the growth of the organization Children with Attention Deficit Disorders (CHADD), sponsored by drug companies that prescribe their pills as a cure, evolved along with the burgeoning identification of ADD and ADHD children. As I peruse magazines and watch popular television
Ellen Brantlinger shows, I see ads that describe symptoms for new diseases and recommend medicines to cure these manufactured ailments. In examining such phenomena, it is necessary to ask Antonio Gramsci’s (1929–1935/1971) essential question: “Who benefits?”

**Neoliberal Ideology and Hierarchy**

One response to the question of who benefits from the exclusion of morality and local knowledge in determining social life is the corporate world. The corporate-controlled media’s successful dissemination of neoliberal (atavistic faith in the free market) and neo-conservative (belief in the superiority of European-American traditions and knowledge) ideologies, means that professionals and the general public see the purpose of school as centered around strategies that contribute to the economy or at least do not threaten corporate control of social life. The public is socialized to see the particular knowledge produced through schooling as necessary to themselves and society. Moore and Young (2004) criticize both the neoconservative tradition in which curriculum is a given body of knowledge that schools are to transmit and the “technical-instrumentalists [neoliberals] whose interest is the needs of the economy” but operate “under the guise of promoting the employability of all students” (p. 238). People are subject to positioning by the powerful discourses they encounter (Holland et al., 1998, p. 27). Promotion of capitalism and class distinction dominates American discourse. As a result of rightist trends, school structures have become increasingly stratified and conditions for children of different social classes more and more disparate (Apple, 2001; Gabbard, 2003; Giroux, 2003). “Neo-liberals view students as human capital—as future workers who need the requisite skills and dispositions to work efficiently and effectively” (Apple, p. 263). Apple claims that neoliberal and neoconservative ideological movements have transformed America’s common sense so that egalitarian ideals are threatened.

Luke and Luke (1995) argue from a structuralist and neo-Marxist perspective “premised on the assumption that systematic distortions and misrepresentations of social facts and economic and political realities serve identifiable class interests” (p. 368). They argue that under rightist reform, “children are socialized into a regime of boredom, mapped onto a psychometric grid of classification, and relegated to deskilled, classed, and gendered occupations” (p. 272). Beane (2005) identifies an emerging (technical-instrumental) literature that is “dominated mostly by ways to work with(in), adapt to, or address things like standardized testing, scripted curriculum packages, overly prescriptive content standards, and other policies that are actually antithetical to a progressive vision of education” (p. xiv). Writing about his teaching career in New York City schools, McCourt (2005) asks: “What is education, anyway? What are we doing in this school?” (p. 253). McCourt’s questions are in line with Beane’s concern that only a few progressive educators “attach themselves to any large and compelling social vision that might elevate its sense of purpose, attract more advocates, and help sustain the concept against its critics” (p. xiv).

**Faith in Science, Capitalism, and Progress**

In contrast to science’s purported reliance on observable evidence and verification of findings, faith consists of beliefs not necessarily grounded in any hard reality. Faith typically is spoken of as relating to organized religions. Indeed, those who believe in religious tenets often deny the need for the backing of scientific rationality. Some dismiss scientific evidence, as is the case with evolution—the “intelligent design” that Darwin delineated
is garnered as evidence of creation by a supreme being. Faith also comes in secular forms that allow people to affiliate with certain political parties and endorse particular public figures. Political faith typically expresses itself uniquely in people who occupy various strata in the social hierarchy. As noted earlier, neoliberals, who tend to be well-healed, put faith in the “free market,” or an economic agenda. Due to the circulation of hegemonic ideologies, people in Other social positions may be duped into supporting the neoliberal agenda even if they have little to gain from their faith.

It is not the negative aspects of religious and political faith that concern me here, rather it is the faith that extends outside spiritual and political boundaries. Contention between people of various religious faiths and political loyalty is ubiquitous; however, most Americans are part of the faith community that worships science and education. Since the Enlightenment, when faith in science caught up with religious faith, modern people trust that a trajectory of social improvement necessarily results from the discoveries in science and the accumulation of academic knowledge. An important legacy that dominates social thought is, “the inscription of progress as a foundational assumption of intellectual knowledge” (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 6). The mainstream faith community has confidence in the efficacy of education, including the validity of tests and current school practices. Their faith in disability labels and traditional special education services is so deep that disability is reified to the status of being an essential, all-encompassing aspect of particular human existence. To return to the topic of this chapter—the lack of justice for people identified as having disabilities—it is clear that most people are part of the faith community that sees special education as helpful and benevolent, regardless of evidence to the contrary.

One aspect of faith is that it is always accompanied by doctrine and texts. The science of disability classification has become increasingly inscribed in local and federal law. Faith in the system undergirds Introduction to Exceptionality and other special education textbooks (Brantlinger, 2006). These texts construct what appears to be a credible matrix of disability classifications and offer a smorgasbord of services that socialize unsuspecting preservice teachers into thinking classifications are real and it is necessary to know about specialized treatments to effectively educate children. Textbooks are packaged in an authoritative style that is replete with facts based on scientific evidence. There are no caveats that suggest the reality that disability categories fluctuate and are rarely blessed with clear-cut parameters. Special education is grounded in a legal language, hence labels, treatments, and placements appear not only justified but mandated. The assuredness of textbook presentation indicates that school personnel should not defy the system by avoiding labels or using their own choice of pedagogies and, most importantly, should not challenge the wisdom of the scientific and professional system.

My experience with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and special education colleagues is that their ideologies center around the assumption that the development of new disability classifications and specialized treatments mean progress in the field. This observation is consistent with what is revealed in an inspection of the presentations at annual CEC conferences, the manuscripts published in special education journals, and the textbooks faculty select for their special education courses. Special educators are not alone in accepting prescriptive, but unjust, systems, almost all school personnel perpetually rank and sort by grading, testing, and complying with tracking arrangements.

After teaching in low-income schools, and having studied the impact of social class status on the nature and quality of students’ schooling, I have a clear mental image of school hierarchies and their confluence with racial and ethnic status. I try not to despair about the resilience of within-school sorting of students and between-school disparities
in educational resources. Hence, I was puzzled by an exchange with a colleague who asked me to provide feedback on her “critical ethnography” manuscript. Her main concern was the leveling phenomenon in the Mexican school she studied. She was bothered at the school’s lack of academic push and that students of differing abilities were all treated as equals and educated together—a goal I have always desired. As I read her manuscript, it was evident that her ideological perspective endorsed meritocratic schooling replete with its ubiquitous competition between students and internal stratification. However, when I suggested that her study was not grounded in a critical perspective so it would be wise to take that claim out of the introduction, she took offense. That she thinks in terms of competition and hierarchy also is evident in her descriptions of certain colleagues as “exceptionally bright” and “rising stars,” and her dismissal of others as not worthy of association. A conversation with a special education faculty member with a declared interest in social justice, revealed that his professional goal was to bring the United States’ special education system to Mexico. When I asked if that meant he would transport all the testing, labeling, and segregating routines, he seemed surprised that I did not share his goal. To him “the system” means progress, whereas to me it means oppression.

Rethinking Science, Progress, Hierarchy, and Disability

Disability study scholars, parents, and students join a quest to quit assigning disparaging names to individuals and stop excluding them from mainstream settings. Gallagher (2001) observes “an impasse between the empiricists, who champion [what they call] a neutral and scientific resolution to the [inclusion] debate” and those for whom inclusion is a “struggle of conscience [to be achieved] through free, open, and informed moral discourse” (p. 651). Although the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group has grown considerably since its creation in 2001, it still would match Schmidt’s (2001) conclusion that oppositional groups represent minority status in most fields. Perhaps this is because disability studies scholars have the audacity to challenge the themes of scientific expertise and social progress that dominate special educators’ thinking. According to disability studies scholars, Ferri and Connor (2006), “because we are studying exclusion rather than inclusion, our work runs counter to traditional progress stories of the field. Our approach focuses on what was left unsaid, masked, obscured, and silenced in stories of inclusion and desegregation” (p. 6). Dimitriadis and Carlson (2003) suggest that schools return to an earlier mission “to socialize [students] into a common culture and a common conception of the public good” (p. 22).

Due to the unshakeable faith in science, the outsider status of those who receive services, and the intractability of deeply ingrained stratifying systems, meritocracy retains a tight hold on schooling. It is laudable that the editors of this volume include disability as a social justice issue. Like the field of special education generally, disability studies scholars have mainly been isolated from others who are concerned about inequities in education. They have worked on their own as outsiders to both general and special education professional communities. It is clear, however, that formation of disabling identities is only one of the many damaging consequences of meritocratic schooling. Therefore, it is essential that progressive educators from all subject area backgrounds join hands, heads, and hearts to combat all dimensions of hierarchical schooling and engage in collective efforts to democratize schools and establish a social reciprocity morality to bring social justice within schools’ doors.
Notes

1. A social reciprocity moral code appears in world religions: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary” (Judaism). “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful” (Buddhism). “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself” (Islam). “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Christianity). “Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself” (Baha’i Faith).

2. Meritocracies are competitive systems that seek to identify merit in some so they can advance in school and post-school life. As they select the worthy, by default or intention, those judged less worthy are given derogatory names and are relegated to lesser school circumstances.

3. TASH (The Association for Severely Handicapped) is a disability organization that tried to see things from the perspective of labeled children and their families. It was among the first professional organizations to endorse full inclusion.

References


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