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# Disability Studies in Education: past, present & future?

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**ABSTRACT – Disability Studies in Education: past, present & future?** In this article we: provide a brief overview of the genesis and growth of DSE over the past quarter century; describe ways in which it has impacted the four interconnected realms of theory, research, practice, and policy, providing examples of DSE in action including research within classrooms, teacher education programs, and interdisciplinary developments; and share emerging trends within DSE that inform our hopes for the future. By narrating the conceptualization of DSE, its subsequent trajectory, and discussing interrelated issues it seeks to address, our intention is to provide readers with an overview of its contributions to educational thought and the opportunity to engage in with them.

Keywords: **Disability Studies. Special Education. Critical Disability Studies.**

**RESUMO – Estudos da Deficiência na Educação: passado, presente e futuro?.** Neste artigo oferece-se um breve panorama da gênese e do crescimento dos Estudos da Deficiência na Educação (EDE) ao longo do último quarto de século; descrevem-se as maneiras pelas quais impactaram os quatro domínios interconectados da teoria, pesquisa, prática e política, oferecendo exemplos de EDE em ação, incluindo pesquisas em sala de aula, programas de formação de professores e desdobramentos interdisciplinares; e compartilham-se tendências emergentes nos EDE que embasam esperanças para o futuro. Ao narrar a conceituação de EDE, sua subsequente trajetória e discutir questões inter-relacionadas que procuram abordar, a intenção é fornecer aos leitores um rápido panorama de suas contribuições para o pensamento educacional e a oportunidade de se envolver com eles.

Palavras-chave: **Estudos sobre Deficiência. Educação Especial. Estudos críticos da deficiência.**

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## A Brief Overview

We begin by thanking scholars Marivete Gesser and Anahí Guedes de Mello for the honor and opportunity to contribute to the special edition of *Educação & Realidade* dedicated to the academic field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE). We have a fondness for Brazil, having participated in conferences there, and were delighted when our practitioner-centered book *Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices* (2011; 2019) was published in Brazil as *Ressignificando a Deficiência: Da Abordagem Social às Précticas Inclusivas Na Escola* (2014). We also have a fondness for our academic field of DSE, having started our careers teaching students with disabilities while becoming aware of the limiting options schools provided for their education and community integration. In many ways, when we met in our doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University, we were fortunate to have found ourselves "in the right place, at the right time." Our mentors there, D. Kim Reid and Beth Ferri, were critical special educators who actively questioned the foundational knowledge – and many of the commonplace practices – within the field of traditional Special Education, including its resistance to inclusive practices (Kauffman; Hallahan, 1995). They also provided our entrée into meeting fellow likeminded scholars who, in turn, evolved into a critical collective determined to challenge limited, deficit-based, oppressive, and therefore harmful conceptualizations of disability pervasive within educational discourse, while seeking alternative ways of understanding disability as a natural form of human variation.

## Before DSE Had a Name

There had always been educators interested in disability who found many aspects of the field of Special Education to be problematic. Perhaps one of the most influential publications was Dunn's (1968) article, *Special Education for the Mildly Retarded – Is Much of it Justifiable?* in which the author questioned the nascent field writing, "much of our past and present practices are morally and educationally wrong" (Dunn, 1968, p. 5). In his exploration of the critical roots of DSE, Taylor (2005) traces Dunn's conclusion to developments within sociology that differentiated between clinical models of disability and labeling people into groups imposed upon them by our social systems (Mercer, 1965). He cites Becker's (1963) concern that by labeling people as deviants, they become "outsiders":

> [...] *social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance*, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." The deviant is one to whom that label has been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (Becker, 1963 apud Mercer, 1965, p. 9).

In her book, *Labeling the Mentally Retarded*, Mercer writes, “Whom we call mentally retarded, and where to draw the line between the mentally retarded and the normal, depends upon our interest and the purpose of our classifications” (Mercer, 1973, p. 1). In these works, we a see nascent emergence of a significantly different paradigm about disability. Namely, that instead of automatically conceptualizing disability as a deviance, deficit, or disorder, it is more useful to conceive of it as, rather, a social inscription, a construction illustrating how human differences that deviate from the socially established norms are responded to in our society (Davis, 1995). Another influential work that still reverberates with us today is Goffman’s (1963) exploration of stigma through discredited identities within society. Among other things, he observed the disabled population was not fully accepted in society and were disqualified by differences perceived of as deficits – be they physical, cognitive, sensory, or behavioral. Disability, therefore, became a feature that “spoiled” them, denying full humanity, creating a psychologically complex existence of perpetually negotiating attitudinal and physical barriers preventing access to, and social acceptance within, all aspects of society. Managing a so-called “spoiled identity” meant being explicitly and implicitly compared to a “normal” human being with a standard bodymind[1]. The social construction of “normal” evolved, in part, through the use statistics to help define average (and therefore desirable) citizens (Davis, 1995).

## Early Critical Special Educators Leading the Way to Alternative Perspectives of Disability

Dissatisfaction with Special Education’s conceptualization of disability and how that impacted all aspects of the field, including problems identified, research questions asked, research methodology, analyses, findings, implications, and their collective impact on pedagogical recommendations, existed among some scholars in the field. However, these scholars’ perspectives were often viewed as “outliers” of thought and only occasionally published in traditional journals. For example: Iano (1986) critiqued how elevating the natural science-technical model applied to teaching and learning was extremely limiting; Biklen (1988) confronted the myth of purely clinical judgment in the evaluation and placement of students; Heshusius (1989) called attention to the mechanistic nature of special education and its subsequent circumscribed vision of instruction; Skrtic (1991) wrote about the paradox of special education becoming a barrier to laws intended include students with disabilities; Gallagher (1996) questioned the scientific knowledge base of the field; Brantlinger (1997) illustrated leaders in the field’s non-acknowledgement of their ideology that motivated, propelled, and shaped their work, and; Slee and Allan (2001) analyzed constraints exerted by both fields of special and general education that purposefully inhibited the growth of inclusive education. These scholars, and others, represented unease and discontent with the meta-narrative of special education grounded in a form of positivist science that claimed to transcend culture, society, and history

(Kauffman, 1999). Moreover, these critical scholars were concerned with Special Education's resistance to the inclusive education movement, its self-imposed academic isolationism and rejection of knowledge deemed unscientific (according to its own version of science).

Finding Special Education not only lacked a desire to fully engage with the issues they raised, but also practiced concerted "gatekeeping" i.e., a rejection of their work in professional journals, some disenchanted critical disability scholars engaged with field of Disability Studies (DS). As an academic discipline, the roots of DS can be traced to the original civil rights movement, pioneered by Black Americans who sought social equality in all aspects of life including freedom of movement and speech, education, employment, housing, recreation, and travel. Other oppressed people in society observed how a country resistant to change could be confronted by, and engaged with, a minoritized group that had galvanized, strategized, and mobilized. The Women's Rights group followed demanding equality, and the Gay Liberation Movement advocating for an end to harassment and violence, seeking the protection of equal rights within law. Disabled citizens recognized they, too, could forge a civil rights movement (Fleischer; Zames, 2011), advocating for access to all aspects of society enjoyed by non-disabled people (Shapiro, 1994), and re-write the script of what it means to be disabled (Heumann; Joiner, 2021). Subsequently, because of these far-reaching changes happening in society, corresponding academic fields emerged including Black Studies, Women's Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Disability Studies.

In the 1970s and 1980s, DS developed in both similar and contrasting ways in the UK and US, ultimately nurturing the inception of the field with its desire to explore, rethink, reframe, and better understand the broad concept of disability and what it meant to be disabled in society. In the UK, the lineage of DS can be traced back in the UK to the proclamation by the Union of the Physically Impaired (UPIAS) in 1972 that sought to resist the medicalization of disability. In their subsequent publication, *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, UPIAS emphasized the social experiences of disabled people:

> In our view, it is society which disabled physically impaired people. Disability is something that is imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. It follows from this analysis that having low incomes, for example, is only one aspect of our oppression. It is a consequence of our isolation and segregation, in every area of life, such as education, work, mobility, housing, etc. Poverty is one symptom of our oppression, but it is not the cause (UPIAS, 1972, p. 3-4).

In brief, UPIAS argued that because of their bodymind impairments, society actively disabled them to exist the margins of society. Many of the first academic writings were published in a new journal launched in 1986 called *Disability, Handicap, & Society*, that subsequently changed its name to *Disability and Society* in 1993.

In the USA, a minority group model emerged, influenced by other civil rights movements, in which disabled people called attention to life experiences of stigmatization, marginalization, discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion – and the desire for equal rights (Hahn, 1988). In 1982 the Section for the Study of Chronic Illness, Impairment, and Disability was established, four years later renaming itself as the Society of Disability Studies (SDS). This interdisciplinary scholarly organization was dedicated to the study of disability and remained the core of DS scholarship for over four decades with its journal, *Disability Studies Quarterly* (DSQ).

Both critical stances of the social model and minority model of disability that undergirded the development of DS developed can be seen as two relatively fluid, compatible streams of thought whose crosscurrents nurtured the other's perspective. Over time, these models have overlapped, extended, morphed, been refined and redefined by scholars who utilize them in different ways. What has remained constant, however, is the forceful desire to understand disability in multiple, varied, eclectic, contradictory, intersectional ways that sought exponential understandings in contrast to clinical, medicalized, prescriptive, and ultimately reductive ways of disability that disabled people find oppressive. Of great importance was that DS provided opportunities for the disabled to self-define, participate in discussions and decisions that impacted them, reflected in the mantra of "Nothing about us, without us" (Charlton, 1998). (For a more detailed description of the inception of DS, see Gabel, 2005)

## Contrasting Models of Disability

As DS is an interdisciplinary field, a major aspect has been the exploration of different models of disability including medical, social, religious, identity, human rights, cultural, economic, charity, and embodiment (Retief; Letsosa, 2018), as well as others, including philosophical dimensions (Wasserman; Aas, 2023). These models rarely "stand alone" as the disability experience can potentially encompass all of them during a person's life, and several of them in any given context. That said, each model contributes to, and has implications for, complicating and expanding our understanding of human variation. Every model is grounded in a distinct ideology about how certain physical, sensory, cognitive, and emotional differences are viewed, revealing the processes that determine who is disabled and who is non-disabled/able-bodied. Moreover, each disability model reflects varying societal beliefs that are based upon distinct foundations of knowledge that convey a specific discourse on disability. Furthermore, these multiple discourses are based in certain values that inform us *how to think* about disability, shaping our perceptions that, in turn, influence our actions – playing a vital role in creating both personal and professional identities.

While all the disability models are worthy of extensive engagement (and we must remember that many occur simultaneously), in this article we emphasize two – the medical and social models, as they illustrate profound differences in world views, impact how scholars interested in "disability and education" approach every aspect of their work. A traditional special educators' worldview is undergirded by the medical model, viewing disability as a biological impairment within an individual in need of treatment via medicine, rehabilitation, or remediation. We have written elsewhere (Valle; Connor, 2011) about the medical model of disability's colonization of Special Education, reflected in its assessment, eligibility, and placement procedures, and reinforced by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004):

> The 'patient' (student) presents with 'symptoms' (educational problems). The 'scientific expert' (school psychologist) performs an 'examination' (psycho-educational assessment) in order to conform or rule out a 'diagnosis' (disability). Once a 'diagnosis' (disability) is identified, a 'prescription' (Individual Education Program, or IEP) is written with recommendations for a 'course of treatment' (special education placement and individualized instruction) intended to 'cure' (remediate) the 'patient' (student). A 'follow up appointment' (annual IEP review) is scheduled to evaluate the effectiveness of the 'treatment plan' (special education services) (Valle; Connor, 2011, p. 41).

Clearly, the presence of the medical model is deeply ingrained in everyday special education practices. Of concern is that the medicalized understanding of disability *always* casts disabled people as intrinsically flawed. Moreover, this is the most widely utilized model as the basis of many fields of study – including science, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and special education, that overwhelmingly shapes the knowledge of disability in societies (Linton, 1998). Additionally, disabled activists and scholars have called attention to how such professional fields have historically excluded the perspectives of disabled people (Charlton, 1998; Oliver, 1996; 2013), oftentimes ironically maintaining oppressive beliefs and practices that benefit professionals over the disabled people they serve (Meekosha; Dowse, 2007). In sum, the medical model of disability is problematically entrenched in ableist assumptions, i.e., the belief that disabled people are inferior, and therefore less valuable, than non-disabled people.

In contrast, the *social model* of disability was developed by scholars within DS that views people with disabilities not as intrinsically flawed but, rather, *created* by external forces, namely historical and contemporary disabling attitudes and pervasive practices within cultures towards people whose bodyminds do not fit into the "norm." In brief, by foregrounding the socio-cultural processes in societies, the social model asserts that disability is a natural part of human diversity and should be recognized and welcomed as such (Andrews, 2019). Over time, the social model has been debated, refined, and expanded, providing a constant and vital counterpoint to the dominance of medicalized understandings of disability (Barnes *et al.*, 2019) while also noting that its political potential remains unfulfilled (Oliver, 2013).

Among other things, the social model questions the concept of "normalcy" as a construct that permeates all aspects of society, including the ways in which it is employed to sort, label, and classify people within everyday cultural practices that interlock (e.g. "acceptable" ways of speaking, moving, looking, engaging, etc.), organizations (e.g. schools), and systems (e.g. social security disability insurance), significantly shaping how society is structured into who is in/excluded across various spaces. And while proponents of the social model acknowledge significant differences among bodies do exist in physical, sensory, emotional, and cognitive realms – it is not these differences that matter per se, so much as *our reaction* toward them.

## Changing the Dialogue about Disability in/and Education

In the late 1990s, engaging with many of the ideas of Disability Studies, particularly the social model of disability, critical special education scholars continued to "push back" against conceptual, philosophical, historical, and methodological aspects of the field, overwhelmingly grounded in positivist science. My colleagues and I have written elsewhere about our collective engagement with DS and, ultimately, the inception of DSE (see, for example, Baglieri *et al.*, 2010; 2011; Connor *et al.*, 2008; Connor; Gabel, 2023). However, we will provide an abbreviated version for the purpose of this paper and readers who are new to the concept of DSE. There are several key events that helped determine the conception and growth of DSE. One of them was a small international conference in 1999 in Rochester (upstate New York) funded by the Spender Foundation, where Linda Ware brought together critical special educators with scholars of disability for the first time to discuss the ideology of special education through examining exclusion of students with disabilities across multiple education contexts (Ware, 2004).

A few months later, Scot Danforth submitted a proposal for a panel to the national conference of TASH (The Association for Severely Handicapped) in Chicago under the name of Coalition for Open Inquiry in Special Education (COISE). The session was called "Ways of Constructing Lives with Disabilities: The Case for Open Inquiry," and co-presenters were Ellen Brantlinger, Lous Heshusius, Phil Ferguson, and Chris Kliewer. The panelists asked questions such as: Why should a person with a disability, a teacher, or a parent care about what academics say in their research and writings? Why should they care about the seemingly distant and esoteric writings in research journals and university textbooks? What is happening in these worlds that make a difference? Using these topics a springboard for discussion, the authors foregrounded the political and social value of developments and trends within disability research and scholarship, arguing for the greater valuation of people with disabilities and their inclusion into all aspects of society. Appealing to the field of Special Education for more "open inquiry" that diversified and expanded what was considered legitimate and valuable knowledge within traditional journals. They also openly critiqued the positivist foundational paradigm of special education, entrenched in an ideology and a version of science that imitated practices within the natural sciences, i.e. the belief in objectivity and use of quantitative measurement to find truth. Panelists believed that the "hard science of disability" reinforced troubling assumptions in the field of Special Education such as: (1) disability is primarily a bio-physical phenomenon consisting of a deficit condition existing within an individual; (2) service professionals know better than persons with disabilities and family members what is best for a served individual; (3) diagnosed or labeled individuals should be separated from the mainstream population for purposes of treatment. To counter these phenomena they explored different, interdisciplinary ways of talking about, writing about, and envisioning possibilities for disabled people, culling from political science, sociology, anthropology, spiritual traditions, humanities, the arts, and so on.

As a small constellation of scholars had united towards this goal, the timing appeared right to take a leap and formalize the creation of a new academic discipline. Discussions ensued about which organization this new group should seek affiliation with – The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), TASH, or the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Both Linda Ware and Susan Gabel urged a primary affiliation to be with Disability Studies – thereby purposefully stepping outside of the special education realm. Around the same time, Gabel shared with those assembled that she had already applied to AERA to form a Special Interest Group called Disability Studies in Education, and the group met for the first time in 2000.

Having gathered some momentum, the small group of scholars launched its inaugural conference in Chicago at National Louis University. As doctoral students, we attended to present our research on teachers with learning disabilities (Valle *et al.*, 2004). Although small (there were approximately forty participants), we loved the intimacy afforded by the conference in which critical special educators from across the country explored their thoughts and research. For the next fifteen years, this conference served as a crucible for professors, researchers, teachers, and community members (students, parents, activists, etc.), many with disabilities, to engage with one another, push our own and each other's thinking, and develop new research projects (Connor, 2014). Of great importance was the intellectual rigor, camaraderie, and humor as we envisioned ways forward in rethinking and reframing disability towards socio-cultural understandings within education. Many attendees worked in academic isolation in their universities, so these conferences helped provide connection with similar minded people.

It is important to note that at the early DSE conferences, we grappled with how best to articulate a vision of education and disability that was a valid alternative to the master narrative of special education. Our desire was *not* to impose a restrictive way of thinking about disability that would be rigid and dogmatic. This meant we took time to commit to developing a definition and DSE tenets. What motivated us was becoming aware that the phrase "Disability Studies in Education" was being co-opted by some scholars using it as if it were a trendy academic "makeover" of special education without fundamental shifts in thinking that challenged its knowledge base and practices. Subsequently, DSE conference participants agreed to have a year-long online discussion that worked towards crafting a document that defined the tenets DSE, outlining its purpose and possibilities. When reconvening in person the following year, we collectively debated and refined the tenets before adopting them for AERA and publishing them in a special edition of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* dedicated to DSE (Connor *et al.*, 2008). The purpose of the tenets was twofold. First, to provide an organizational framework to stimulate the exchange of ideas among DSE educational researchers. Second, to help increase the influence – and visibility – of DS among all researchers in education. Ultimately, the framework's grounding is intended to "provide advocacy for, as well as the viable approaches for enacting, meaningful and educational inclusion" (Connor *et al.*, 2008, p. 447).

## *Tenets*

- The tenets of DSE center on engagement in research, policy, and action that: contextualize disability within political and social spheres;
- privilege the interests, agendas, and voices of people labelled with disability/ disabled people;
- promote social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labelled with disability/ disabled people; and
- assume competence and reject deficit models of disability.

## *Examples of approaches to theory in DSE*

As a deliberatively evolving field, DSE encompasses a variety of theoretical approaches. Below, we outline what we currently hold as examples of these approaches. DSE theory does the following:

- Contrasts medical, scientific, psychological understandings with social and experiential understandings of disability.
- Predominantly focuses on political, social, cultural, historical, and individual understandings of disability.

- Supports the education of students labelled with disabilities in non-segregated settings from a civil rights stance.
- Engages work that discerns the oppressive nature of essentialized/categorical/ medicalized naming of disability in schools, policy, institutions, and the law while simultaneously recognizing the political power that may be found in collective and individual activism and pride through group-specific claims to disabled identities and positions.
- Recognizes the embodied/aesthetic experiences of people whose lives/selves are made meaningful as disabled, as well as troubles the school and societal discourses that position such experiences as 'othered' to an assumed normate.
- Includes disabled people in theorizing about disability.

## *Examples of approaches to research and DSE*

As an expanding field, DSE encompasses a variety of approaches to research. Below, we list what we presently hold as examples of these approaches. DSE research does the following:

- Welcomes scholars with disabilities and non-disabled scholars working together.
- Recognizes and privileges the knowledge derived from the lived experience of people with disabilities.
- Whenever possible adheres to an emancipatory stance (for example, working with people with disabilities as informed participants or co-researchers, not 'subjects').
- Welcomes intradisciplinary approaches to understanding the phenomenon of disability, e.g. with educational foundations, special education, etc.
- Cultivates interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the phenomenon of disability, e.g. interfacing with multicultural education, the humanities, social sciences, philosophy, cultural studies, etc.
- Challenges research methodology that objectifies, marginalizes, and oppresses people with disabilities.

## *Examples of approaches to practice and DSE*

As a growing field grounded in the daily lives of people with disabilities, DSE reflects a variety of practical approaches. Below, we delineate what we currently hold as examples of these approaches. DSE in practice includes the following:

- Disability is primarily recognized and valued as natural part of human diversity.

- Disability and inclusive education.
- Disability culture and identity as part of a multicultural curriculum.
- The Disability Rights Movement is studied as part of the civil rights movement.
- Disability history and culture and the contributions of disabled people are integral to all aspects of the curriculum.
- Disabled students are supported in the development of a positive disability identity.

These tenets were always intended to be flexible, fluid, and subject to change in keeping with shifts in education, culture, and society. In sum, they offer an alternative way of conceptualizing all things “disability and education” rooted in a social model, purposefully engineered to challenge the longstanding and pervasive hegemony of the medical model.

## Expanding Our Horizons: The Growth and Development of DSE over Time

In this section we illustrate examples of the growth of DSE in the interconnected realms of theory, research, practice, and policy, and by illustrating a wide array of contributions from both established and emergent scholars of DSE, as well as interdisciplinary alliances. What unites this scholarship is how DSE shifts the object of remediation from the individual with an impairment to the larger context of classroom dynamics, school practices, educational systems, and society at large.

### *DSE Theory and Research*

Having established DSE as a Special Interest Group and convened for the first time at the 2000 American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting, the next step for the emerging field was to seek a publisher for a book series. Peter Lang took on the DSE project with book editors Scot Danforth and Susan Gabel at the helm. The inaugural volume of the series, *Disability Studies in Education: Readings in Theory and Method* edited by Susan Gabel, launched in 2005. Among the contributors in this volume were DSE founders and major scholars, Julie Allan, Ellen Brantlinger, Scot Danforth, Susan Gabel, Deborah Gallagher, Susan Peters, and Linda Ware, whose writings appeared together and informed one another in a new scholarly space. Since 2005, The Disability Studies in Education series (Peter Lang) has published 24 volumes on a wide array of topics, such as student narratives about disability and special education, interrogation of school policies and practices, social and political aspects of disability discourse, the intersection of race and disability in special education, inclusive education, teacher and teacher educator narratives, school culture, mother narratives, the hegemony of the normal curve, representations of disability in young adult literature, and DSE in practice. The most recent volume, *Understanding the Lived Experiences of Autistic Adults* by Snera Kohli Mathur and Adam Paul Valerius, appeared in 2023. Peter Lang's endorsement of DSE as an academic discipline led to future publications with other publishing houses, such as Teachers College Press, Routledge, McGraw-Hill, Palgrave, and Lexington. It is worth noting that many books published by these houses originated from the increasing number of dissertations that draw upon DSE theory and research.

In offering critiques of traditional special education (as well as general education), DSE scholars recognized that the work needed to expand beyond DSE-friendly venues to well-established and respected disability studies journals and special education journals. In 2004, Scot Danforth and Susan Gabel brought DSE to the fore in their guest edited special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* entitled "Disability Studies and Education." In contrast, gatekeepers to special education journals presented more specific challenges to DSE scholars who pursued submissions; however, Kim Reid and Jan Valle (2004) had the opportunity in 2004 to guest edit a special issue of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (a mainstream special education journal) using a DSE perspective. Shortly after, Kim Reid and the authors (2006), as co-chairs of the 5th annual national DSE conference, guest edited a subsequent special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* based upon four conference papers about race and disability. We invited two contributors (scholars, junior scholars, and graduate students from DSE and related disciplines) to "engage in conversation" with each of the four cornerstone articles (yielding eight additional papers) to reflect the dialogic culture of DSE conferences. In 2011, the authors along with DSE colleagues Sue Baglieri, Lynne Bejoian, and Alicia Broderick guest edited a special issue of *Teachers College Record* (a mainstream "high impact" education journal) entitled "Inviting Interdisciplinary Alliances around Inclusive Educational Reform." The following year, the authors along with Chris Hale (2012), guest edited a special issue of *Review of Disability Studies: Special Forum* entitled "Using and Infusing Disability Studies in Education: Where and How?" Subsequent DSE articles and special issues have appeared in many mainstream academic journals over the years – confirming DSE's place as a legitimate academic discipline; however, as discussed elsewhere in this paper it is also the case that resistance to DSE manuscripts persists in some publishing venues.

Not only did DSE scholars begin submitting work to traditional academic journals but also to special education conferences. For example, we submitted a panel presentation paper along with DSE colleagues Sue Baglieri and Deb Gallagher, "Disability Studies in Education: The Need for a Plurality of Perspectives on Disability," that was accepted for the 2008 Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) national conference – a long-established and respected bastion of special education research. The paper was well-received and later appeared as an article in the special education journal, *Remedial and Special Educa-*

*tion* (2011). Akin to striving to publish in special education journals, DSE scholars continue to submit proposals and present at special education conferences, although not always without tension.

In the early years of establishing an academic discipline, scholars gathered at an annual DSE conference hosted yearly in various U.S. cities (e.g., Chicago, IL, New York, NY, East Lansing, MI, Ruston, LA). As interest in DSE grew, our international colleagues hosted the DSE conference in Australia, Belgium, and New Zealand. With growing recognition of DSE as an academic discipline compatible with interdisciplinary approaches to education, the conference is no longer held; however, DSE scholars can be found presenting work in conference venues such as the Society for Disability Studies (SDS), the American Education Research Association (AERA), Access for All (Miami University), the World Education Research Association (WERA), Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability and Diversity, Annual World Disability and Rehabilitation Conference, International Disability Studies Arts Forum, World Academy of Science, Engineering, and Technology, and the International Conference on Disability Studies, Arts, & Education. In addition, various countries, have hosted conferences on DS in which DSE has been an integral part, such as Brazil's *First International Symposium on Disability Studies* in São Paulo (Connor *et al.*, 2014).

An additional marker of an established academic discipline is the presence of book series. As noted elsewhere, Peter Lang was the first publisher to offer a DSE book series. There are now several book series that publish a wide range of topics on disability studies/disability studies in education include Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Series (Routledge), Advances in Disability Studies (Routledge), Disability Studies in Education (Peter Lang), Disability, Culture, and Equity book series (Teachers College Press), Critical Perspectives on Disability (Syracuse University Press) and Autocritical Disability Studies (Routledge).

As DSE evolved as a discipline, a new and related branch, Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), emerged from the work of scholars. DisCrit draws upon DSE and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to interrogate intersections of race, class, and disability toward the goal of social justice in education. Extending upon the earlier work of critical special educators, such as Alfredo Artiles, Bernadette Baker, Wanda Blanchett (2010), Carol Christensen, Curt Dudley-Marling, Beth Harry, Alan Gartner, Jeanette Klingner, Elizabeth Kozleski, and James Paton, as well as drawing on scholarship about intersectionality (e.g., *Racial inequality in special education* by Daniel Losen and Gary Orfield (2002); *Reading resistance: Discourses of exclusion in desegregation & inclusion debates*, by Beth Ferri and David Connor (2006); *Urban narratives: Portraits in progress*, by David Connor (2008); *Disability theory*, by Tobin Siebers (2008), *Why are so many minority students in special education? Understanding race and disability in schools*, by Beth Harry and Janet Klingner (2014)). Additionally, David Connor, Beth Ferri, and Subini Annamma (Eds.) (2016) developed, coined, and published *DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education* in the Disability, Culture, and Equity book series (Teachers College Press). Contributors to this influential volume included important scholars in DSE and CRT who tackled topics such as law and policy, the impact of school reform through the lens of race, class, and disability, the achievement/opportunity gap, and the school-to-prison pipeline, and overrepresentation of students of color in special education. Since its publication, scholars have taken up the tenets of DisCrit to produce new and exciting work. For example, Subini Annamma (2017) published *The Pedagogy of Pathologization: Dis/abled Girls of Color in the School-prison Nexus*, winning the 2018 National Women's Studies Association Alison Piepmeier Book Prize and the 2019 AESA Critics' Choice Book Award. In 2022, Subini Annamma, Beth Ferri, and David Connor (Eds.) contributed a second DisCrit volume in the Disability, Culture, and Equity book series, *DisCrit Expanded: Reverberations, Ruptures, and Inquiries*. This volume features contributors who use DisCrit theory to trouble issues of language, citizenship, and post-secondary education, interrogate disability experiences as multi-layered and complicated, apply DisCrit theory across disciplines, geographies, and temporalities, and represent people with disabilities as knowledge generators who actively resist racism and ableism.

## The Call for Intersectionality: A Moment of Reckoning

Writings about the intersection of race and disability and the overrepresentation of students of color in special education (especially in subjective disability categories) pre-date the discipline of DSE – although later work about these topics would be taken up by DSE scholars. It is worth noting that prior to the emergence of DisCrit, Chris Bell (2006), a self-identified gay Black disabled scholar, called out the field of disability studies (and, by extension, DSE) in his chapter, "Introduction to White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal" (*The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd edition, Lennard Davis), asserting that "White Disability Studies, while not wholeheartedly excluding people of color from its critique, by and large focuses on the work of white individuals and is itself largely produced by a corps of white scholars and activists" (Bell, 2006, p. 275). He went on to give numerous and specific examples in publications and at events and conferences to illustrate his point. Bell concluded:

> If Disability Studies as a field had taken a reflexive look at itself at some point, particularly with regard to its failings in examining issues of race and ethnicity, there might not be such a glaring dearth of disability-related scholarship by and about disabled people of color… Disability Studies claims to examine the experiences of a vast number of disabled people, yet the form that representation takes is, far too often, a white one (Bell, 2006, p. 278).

Bell's justifiable critique continues to resonate within the DS community. Among other scholars, Leonardo Zeus and Alicia Broderick (2011) reflected Bell's concerns in their article, "Smartness as property: a critical exploration of intersections between whiteness and disability studies," that appeared in a special issue of *Teachers College Record*. Bell's (2011) posthumously published and groundbreaking anthology, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*, a collection of essays on the African American experience of disability from a wide variety of disciplines, is the first anthology of its kind. Despite movement forward on the issue, Angel Miles, Akemi Nishida, and Anjali Forber-Pratt (2017), calling themselves as Radical Disabled Women of Color United, wrote "An Open Letter to White Disability Studies and Ableist Institutions of Higher Education" that appeared in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, calling for increased and rapid attention to the persisting problem of White disability studies:

> We believe that in order for disability studies (DS) to be most relevant, it must accurately address the interests of the full range of people with disabilities… Hence, we are advocating for a critical *intersectional* disability studies that centers the needs, perspectives, and interests of marginalized people with disabilities and enables the advancement of disability justice (para.1).

In the time since that publication, a diverse group of DS/DSE scholars began contributing to an active and fast-growing discipline described below.

## Emergence of Critical Disability Studies

Out of these scholarly tensions arose yet another disciplinary branch of DS called Critical Disability Studies (CDS) defined as

> […] an interdisciplinary academic field that expands the understanding of disability from a health science perspective to consider it as a civil and human rights issue, a minority identity, a sociological formation, a historic community, a diversity group, a category of critical analysis in culture and the arts (Garland Thomson, 2019, p. 12).

In other words, intersectionality is at the heart of CDS, engaging theorists from such disciplines as feminist studies, queer studies, crip theory, black disability studies (including anti-blackness), and critical race theory. The goal of intersectionality "is to avoid a white, patriarchal, hetero-normative, ableist viewpoint that disguises itself as a universal point of view" (Davis, 2019, p. 11). Extending upon Minich's (2016) article, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now", Schalk (2017) argues that CDS is a methodology (not a study of subjects) by "scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attitudes in particular populations" (para. 1).

In response to the rapid expansion of CDS scholarship, Goodley *et al.* (2019) offered five questions for the field to consider: 1) the purpose of CDS; 2) how inclusive CDS is; 3) is disability the object or subject of studies; 4) what matters or gets said about disability; and 5) how do we attend to disability and ability (Goodley *et al.*, 2019, p.

972). Moreover, anti-ableism and scholarly activism are stated CDS goals, thereby reflecting the value of social justice in this work (Goodley *et al.*, 2019). *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method* by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (2023) is a good example of multidisciplinary research (humanities, social sciences, education, arts, and design) grounded at the intersection of disability studies and activism, covering such topics as mad Black writing, public scholarship for disability justice, decolonial research methods for disability studies, crip theory, and aesthetics and access.

Additionally, the field has come under criticism because of the large number of scholars writing about disability from the perspective and context of the Global North (Meekosha, 2011; Meekosha; Shuttleworth, 2009), prompting Goodley *et al.* to assert that "there is an urgent need to trouble the self-referential elitism of Western European and North American scholarship" (2019, p. 976). Thus, increasing attention has been given to the work of scholars writing from the Global South perspective, such as *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts* by Nirmala Erevelles (2011); *Disability in the Global South* by Shaun Grech and Karen Soldatic (Eds.) (2016); *Inclusive Education and Disability in the Global South* by Leda Kamenopoulou (2018); and *Education and Disability in the Global South: New Perspectives from Africa and Asia* by Nidhi Singal, Paul Lynch, and Shruti Taneja Johansson (Eds) (2018). In 2021, Alex Padilla, a self-described blind brown scholar and activist from the Global South, contributed a Latin DisCrit perspective in his book, *Disability, Intersectional Agency, and Latinx Identity. Theorizing LatDisCrit Counterstories.*

To conclude our discussion about theory and research, we draw upon the following words:

> When theory works well it has the power to capture inequality and articulate hope. The appearance of Critical Disability Studies scholarship should not be viewed as a rejection of disability studies theory that went before. The arrival of Critical Disability Studies is testimony to the maturity of a field that has built upon foundational knowledge and recognizes that complex socio-political times require an apposite response (Goodley *et al.*, 2019, paras. 31, 32).

As is evident by the trajectory of DSE just described, it is a discipline that pulsates with energy, passion, and commitment, allowing space and conversation at each stage in development for new theorizing and research to emerge.

## Documenting DSE Practice

What differentiates DSE from DS is its focus on the application of DS theory to education. As American public schools began in earnest to shift away from segregated special education classrooms to models of inclusive education at the dawn of the 21st century, the development of inclusive pedagogies for the general education classroom (e.g., differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, heterogeneous grouping, co-teaching) contributed to new framings of disability that challenged deficit-based conceptualizations and traditional educational approaches to disability. Given that DSE theory is compatible with inclusive pedagogies, literature linking the two emerged in the first decade of the new century.

As students with disabilities moved into general education contexts, DSE scholars began to write about ways to expose all students to disability meanings and experiences by infusing disability into curricula. As early as 2001, Phil Ferguson outlined eight reasons for teaching students about disabilities along with 17 creative ways to include disability within instruction and across grade levels in his article, "On Infusing Disability Studies into the General Curriculum". David Connor and Lynne Bejoian (2006) followed with "Pigs, Pirates, and Pills": Using Film to Teach the Social Context of Disability" and "Crippin' School Curricula: 20 Ways to Re-teach Disability" (Connor; Bejoian, 2007). Ben-Moshe (2006) explores how teaching the novel, *Blindness*, created a context for teaching her students about disability ("Infusing Disability in the Curriculum: The Case of Saramago's *Blindness*"). More recent examples include "'Cripping the Curriculum through Academic Activism: Working Toward Increasing Global Exchanges to Reframe (Dis)Ability and Education'" (Connor; Gabel, 2013) and *Undoing Ableism: Teaching about Disability in K-12 Classrooms* (Baglieri; Lalvani, 2019), a text that provides teachers with tools for engaging students at all grade levels in learning and thinking about disability, anti-ableism, and inclusive communities.

Working within an emerging discipline required DSE scholars to develop texts for teacher education programs as well as teachers working in the field. Examples of texts that integrate DSE theory with inclusive classroom practices include *Rethinking Disability: A Disability Studies Approach to Inclusive Practice* (Valle; Connor, 2011; 2019), a volume directed toward students learning to be teachers and experienced teachers as well as *Disability Studies and the Inclusive Classroom: Critical Perspectives for Embracing Diversity in Education* (Baglieri, 2012; 2017; 2022) and *Becoming a Great Inclusive Educator* (Danforth, 2014). In the edited volume, *Practicing Disability Studies in Education: Acting Toward Social Change* (Connor; Valle; Hale, 2015), DSE scholars write about their day-to-day work in theory, research, practice, and policy. In 2017, Srikala Naraian published, *Teaching for Inclusion: Eight Principles for Effective and Equitable Practice,* a text that recognizes teachers as contributors to inclusion (rather than technicians) and offers inclusion strategies that uphold equitable practices within classroom contexts. Other recent contributions to the Peter Lang Disability Studies in Education book series include *Dismantling the Disabling Environments of Education: Creating New Culture and Contexts for Accommodating Difference* (Smagorinsky; Tobin; Lee, 2019) and *Disrupting Schools: The Institutional Conditions of Disordered Behavior* by Rod Kippax (2019), who addresses institutional patterns of exclusion for students labeled with emotional and behavior disorders.

Additional documentation of DSE practice appears in the work of DSE scholars who collect narratives from practitioners about their experiences in the field. In *Both Sides of the Table: Autoethnographies of Educators Learning and Teaching With/In [Dis]ability*, Phil Smith (2013) shares stories from educators who write about how disability in their own lives or within the lives of family members inform their relationship to disability in the classroom. *Narratives of Inclusive Teaching: Stories of Becoming in the Field* (Naraian; Schlessinger, 2021) provides insight into the development of teachers on their way to becoming inclusive practitioners. And DSE scholars share their understandings of disability as informed by their teaching experiences in David Connor and Beth Ferri's (2021) edited collection, *How Teaching Shapes Our Thinking about Disability*.

Beyond the classroom, DSE scholarship has interrogated how the medical model of special education, operationalized within IDEIA, impacts the capacity of parents and guardians (especially mothers) of students with disabilities to collaborate with school professionals regarding their child's education – despite their legal right to do so. No discussion about scholarship on parents of children with disabilities is complete without acknowledgement of the influence of Phil Ferguson's early work, e.g., Ferguson and Asch (1989) "Lessons from Life: Personal and Parental Perspectives on School, Childhood, and Disability", *Teachers College Record*, upon DSE scholars writing about parents. Maya Kalyanpur and Beth Harry (1999; 2012) broadened scholarship on parents of children with disabilities with their book, *Culture in Special Education: Building Reciprocal Family and Professional Relationships*, in which they posit that special education is a culture that families are expected to understand and accept, offering ways for professionals to recognize and embrace family culture toward the goal of developing reciprocal relationships. *What Mothers Say about Special Education: From the 1960s to the Present* (Valle, 2009) presents a cross-analysis of narratives from 15 mothers of children with learning disabilities representing three eras of special education whose stories reflect a shared perception that legislation has done little over the years to alter persisting power dynamics between school professionals and families, identifying race, class, and gender as contributing factors. In 2014, Gay Wilgus, Jan Valle, and Linda Ware published, "Algorithms of Access: Immigrant Mothers Negotiating Resources and Services for their Children" (*Review of Disability Studies*), in which they present experiences of three immigrant mothers from different countries along with an analysis of factors contributing to their success or challenge in negotiations with school professionals. A special issue of *Learning Disability Quarterly*, "Parent Voice in Educational Decision Making for Students with Learning Disabilities" features DSE scholars who describe the complexities of parent/school relationships and offer practical suggestions for effective collaboration (Cavendish; Connor, 2018). Priya Lalvani's collection of mother autoethnographies, *Constructing the (M)other* (2019), speaks to the impact of ableist attitudes and structures upon mothers of children with disabilities and how they exercise resistance. Janet Sauer and Zachary Rossetti's (2019) book, *Affirming Disability: Strengths-Based Portraits of Culturally Diverse Families*, offers portraits of six immigrant families and their children with disabilities including their cultural histories and experiences with special education. In 2020, Beth Harry and Lydia Ocasio-Stoutenberg's published *Meeting Families Where They Are: Building Equity Through Advocacy with Diverse Schools and Communities* (2020) that interrogates the enduring stigma that results from conflating racism, classism, and ableism with disability and offers a working model of "co-constructed advocacy" to promote an inclusive vision of parental advocacy.

## DSE and Policy

Given that disability rights, services, and resources are regulated by law, policy is an area of ongoing study for DS/DSE scholars. For example, Gregg Beratan (2006), a disability scholar, advocate, and policy analyst, used a DS/DSE lens in "Institutionalizing Inequity: Ableism, Racism, and IDEA 2004" (*Disability Studies Quarterly*) to argue that insidious and unexamined forms of ableist and racial discrimination exist within the policies of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – thereby greatly diluting the intent of the law. Susan Peters (2006) supports Beratan's claims in, "Response to Beratan: Creating Equity through Challenging Ableism and Racism in IDEA" (*Disability Studies Quarterly*), extending this argument by revisiting earlier court cases and policies to identify successful tactics to challenge the institutional inequity that Beratan identifies. In "A Disability Studies Framework for Policy Activism in Postsecondary Education" (*Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*), Susan Gabel (2010) applies theories of DS and the social model of disability to policy activism. Using a case study as an example, Gabel shows how she grounded "The 3C project to Provide Students with Disabilities a Quality Higher Education" (a federally funded development grant) within these theoretical frameworks.

Other examples appear in *Practicing Disability Studies in Education* (Connor; Valle; Hale, 2015) that includes a policy section with chapters by three scholars who write using DSE theory to reimagine policy. In "Critiquing Policy: Limitations and Possibilities," Julie Allan (2015) laments the limited degree to which educational policies are formally critiqued in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Using DS/DSE as a tool, Allan considers societal inequities, the role of policymakers, and the need for criticality of policies as akin to "a duty of sorts" (Allan, 2015, p. 239). "Using Disability Studies in Education to Recognize, Resist, and Reshape Policy and Practices in Aotearoa New Zealand" by Missy Morton (2015) describes recent tensions in New Zealand resulting from a push for national inclusion against a powerful neoliberal agenda. Encouraging teachers to resist harmful policies, Morton presents New Zealand's student-centered individualized education program as a model of "collective resistance to standardization translated into national policy" (Morton, 2015, p.

240). In “A Disability Studies in Education Analysis of Corporate-Based Educational Reform: Lessons Learned from New Orleans,” Kathleen Collins (2015) critiques the opportunistic privatized school reform in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, using a DSE lens to expose discourses of exclusion for students with disabilities within this reform, including analyses of individual and family testimonies in a class action lawsuit related to the reform.

*DisCrit: Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory in Education* (Connor; Ferri; Annamma, 2016) likewise addresses policy (in a section of the book entitled Race, Disability, and the Law) in two chapters by authors who argue that the promise of civil rights, with grounding in equal protection under the law, is susceptible to bias within a society that privileges dominant culture in naturalized ways. In “A DisCrit Perspective on *The State of Florida v. George Zimmerman:* Racism, Ableism, and Youth Out of Place in Community and School,” Kathleen Collins (2015) relies on DS/DSE theory as a tool in analyzing materials related to the highly publicized case *The State of Florida v. George Zimmerman* (e.g., media accounts, court documents, videotaped trial testimony). Collins deftly connects her case analyses to past and current instances of state violence toward those both perceived and positioned as possessing intersecting deficits. Zanita Fenton’s chapter offers historical and legal evidence to reveal how societal responses to disability and race have been deployed through law (e.g., eugenics, pseudoscience). Echoing Beratan’s earlier assertion about ableist and racial discrimination within federal special education law, Fenton argues that law “though often seen as tool for civil rights (or educational access) has been used as a tool for rendering groups (based on race, class, gender, and disability) as disposable” (Fenton, 2016, p. 219). In *Intersectionality in Education: Toward More Equitable Policy, Research, and Practice* by Wendy Cavendish and Jennifer Samson (editors) (2021), contributors address ways in which systems (e.g., education, law, medicine, and juvenile justice) impact those with intersectional social identities and offer frameworks for addressing inequity in educational spaces. Moreover, readers are encouraged to consider the mechanisms for developing and enacting education policy as well as the impact upon individuals for whom it is intended.

Writing from the field of social policy, Roni Holler and Yael Obayon (2022) acknowledge the absence of disability as a framework in the development of social policies (*Understanding Disability Policy Development: Integrating Social Policy Research*). In this volume, they argue for conceptualization of disability as a socio-political category as well as the integration of disability studies and social policy so that social policy scholars can recognize political and institutional factors underlying disability related policy. Based on their review of submission criteria for the top US special education journals (“Expanding Law and Policy Relevant Discourse within Special Education Research”), Natasha Strassfeld, Kevin Brady, and Cynthia Dieterich (2023) urge the field of special education to solicit more research about the impact of disability law and policy upon students with disabilities and their families and encourage greater dialogue among academics, practitioners, and policymakers.

We conclude our discussion of DSE and policy with the words of Catherine Kramarczuk Voulgarides, Susan Larson Etscheidt, and David Hernández-Saca (2023) ("Educational Inequality and the Paradox of dis/Ability Rights in a Schooled Society: Moving Towards an Intersectional Discursive, Material, and Emotive Approach") who trouble the persistence of educational inequalities by proposing an alternative policy framework:

> First, we challenge the assumption that human and civil rights frameworks are sufficient for ensuring the rights of students with disabilities are protected. We assert that a paradox of rights in a "schooled society" allows for the inequality to persist under the guise of legal protections. Second, we argue that current legal frameworks do not adequately recognize constructs of ableism and the intersectionality of culture, affect, language, race, and ethnicity within special education – which results in inequities…Lastly, we argue that a misguided focus on technical compliance and procedural monitoring of dis/Ability rights is dismissive of the lived experiences, emotions, feelings, and affects of students (Voulgarides; Etscheidt; Hernández-Saca, 2023, p. 1).

## Conclusion: looking towards the future of DSE

We have shared reasons for the beginnings, formal formation, and solidification of DSE as an academic discipline, along with examples of its expansion in productive ways that have enriched and complicated the concept of *disability and education*. Like many of our colleagues, as career long educators we have been dedicated to DSE's development and heartened to witness its growth through engagement in interdisciplinary exchanges that have broadened understandings about human differences and diversity writ large. Finally, we have resisted projecting our personal (admittedly optimistic) thoughts about the future of DSE. Instead, we hope that readers recognize the value of DSE, and invite them – be they teachers, researchers, theorists, policy makers – to participate in imagining possibilities for more inclusive schools and societies grounded within its humanistic, liberatory conceptualization of disability.

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## Note

[1] The term "bodymind" is a concept embraced within Disability Studies signifying that body and mind are inseparably interrelated, i.e., physical and mental processes of the body are simultaneous and interdependent (Clare, 2021), a concept that Schalk (2017) has applied to race.

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