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# SEARCHING FOR THE GRAND UNIFYING THEORY: REFLECTIONS ON THE FIELD OF LD

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A recent overview of the field of learning disabilities (Torgesen, 2004) laid out several issues that will likely consume the field for the foreseeable future, including problems of definition and etiology, differentiation of learning disabilities from other disabilities, and issues in identification and service delivery.

There is little to disagree about here. My views on the future of the field are further informed and colored by my own research focus on social and cultural aspects of learning and motivation for individuals with disabilities and students in at-risk circumstances. Before describing this view of the future, it is useful to step back for a moment and briefly (and, admittedly, incompletely) characterize where the field has been.

It has been approximately half a century since learning disabilities were first recognized in the United States. Throughout that time ubiquitous “paradigm wars” have been a prominent feature of the discourse surrounding the field (Andrews et al., 2000; Brantlinger, 1997). The early focus on remediation of visual/perceptual and visual/motor processing difficulties slowly gave way to the behaviorally rooted direct instruction approach targeting discrete, observable behaviors. In turn, the field was transformed with the advent of the “cognitive revolution.” The focus on observable behavior gave way to trying to understand the internal cognitive processes underlying specific tasks from an information-processing framework. Later, affective factors were recognized as critical since it became evident that just because students were strategic and knowledgeable about how to successfully perform a task, it did not mean that they would do so. Psychometrics and psychological science formed the disciplinary foundation for much of this work.

Much later in the development of the field, attention came to be paid to the observation that additional factors were necessary to gain a fuller understanding of learning disabilities. Loosely termed here *sociocultural*

*factors*, they include student-related features such as language, culture, and socioeconomic status, and also non-student contextual factors such as the social organization of classrooms and the correspondence, or lack thereof, between classrooms and communities (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Torres-Velasquez, 1999). The unique constellation of information structures and processes, motivational beliefs about oneself as a learner and knower, strategies and understandings of problems, and even the meaning of academics and schooling, has increasingly come to be understood as being mediated at least in part by sociocultural factors (Okagaki, 2001; Pintrich, 1999; Spencer, 1999). The focus on these factors has been driven at least in part by the astounding increase in population diversity in the country as well as by continuing concern over equity in service delivery, educational outcomes, and overrepresentation (Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council, 2002).

## *A Personal Perspective*

My own focus on social and cultural factors was not spurred by my doctoral training in special education (primarily from a cognitive orientation), but by newly uncovered (at the time, in the late 1970s) issues of overrepresentation of African American and Latino students due to prevailing assessment and classification practices (Mercer, 1973). At the beginning of the 1980s, investigations into assessment and classification procedures were considered to be of primary importance (Mercer, Rueda, & Cardoza, 1986; Rueda & Mercer, 1985). In my case, it soon became apparent that coming up with more accurate sorting measures and procedures to figure out a more correct or accurate “box” was not the most critical issue. Not only did this focus not provide guidance on how to address the initial problem (low achievement), it became evident that early reading and literacy seemed to be the root of most early achieve-

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ment problems and referrals (Lyon, 1985), especially for students from specific ethnic/racial groups (African American and Latino), SES groups (low), and language backgrounds (nonnative speakers of English).

Over and above these sociocultural factors, the role of social context seemed to be critical as well. Intriguing examples from the literature showed how features of the social context could mediate social and cognitive performance in important ways (Cole & Traupmann, 1981; Rueda & Mehan, 1986).

Examples from my own experiences were consistent with this observation. For example, early in my graduate program, while volunteering for a community organization for Spanish-speaking families with a member with developmental disabilities, I noticed how individuals with moderate disabilities were able to switch between standard English, standard Spanish, and the neighborhood slang-laden mixture of the two languages as needed. It was not linguistic competence or intelligence that shifted in these situations. Rather, performance seemed to be mediated by context. And context appeared to be important to reading and literacy as well.

As some authors have noted, children do not learn to read so much as they learn to read *particular* texts in *particular* ways appropriate to their social group (Gee, 1990). The importance of these sociocultural factors has been recognized in recent comprehensive syntheses both inside and outside of the special education field (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; National Research Council, 2002).

### **One View of the Future**

While there will likely continue to be advances in the field in neurocognitive science and other promising areas, sociocultural factors will probably become increasingly important as well. There seems to be two issues in terms of how future work might be impacted by more systematic attention to sociocultural factors.

The first is that we need more elegant and well-developed frameworks and research methodologies for treating sociocultural factors. The research to date tends to be descriptive, perhaps in part because, by their very nature, constructs such as culture do not fit easily into experimental or even intervention-related research. Moreover, the existing work often confounds constructs (culture and ethnic group membership, for example), lacks consistent definitions and measures, and has difficulty in making constructs operational and practical such that teachers can improve their instruction. Despite promising advances in our understanding of the role of these factors in learning and development (Rogoff, 2003), there is much that we do not know, especially related to their impact on individuals with learning disabilities. In brief, we know these factors are

important, but we don't have good evidence for their influence, nor good theories about how they affect behavior.

The second and perhaps more important issue is the need for the field to develop a *Grand Unified Theory*, or a theoretically sophisticated and coherent way of tying together existing knowledge and theory. This notion comes from the domain of physics and its continuing search for a theory that can combine the fundamental forces of nature into one single equation. In the context of learning disabilities, it goes beyond a call to simply paste together what is known from different perspectives. Instead, we need a theoretically coherent way of tying disparate bodies of knowledge and theory together. We currently know a great deal about cognitive structures and processes, motivational processes, social factors, and, increasingly, the role of cultural, contextual, and even political factors in understanding learning disabilities. But overwhelmingly these exist as separate theoretical and research enterprises that do not link together. We do not have ways to think about these as dynamic parts of one comprehensive system that characterizes the unique individuals whom we are charged to serve.

The paradigm wars that have characterized the field are the best evidence that when there is separate territory to defend, conflict and misunderstanding are likely to ensue. Perhaps the increased need to serve culturally and linguistically diverse students will serve as an impetus to approach our work in a more integrative fashion in the coming decades.

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