The Cultural Work of Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Culturally and educationally, the United States specializes in the production of kinds of persons described first by their ethnic, racial, and linguistic groups and second by their supposed mental abilities. Overlaps between the two systems of classification are frequent, systematically haphazard, and often deleterious. An examination of classrooms around the country shows shifting currents of concern and tension that invite the attribution of labels for mental and/or minority group status. This paper introduces a language for a cultural analysis – a language of people interpreting the interpretations of others - and pursues an example from a classroom where both the good sense and the dangers of categories for LD and minority group status are on display.

. . . the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing . . . many readers remain touched but not moved.

Toni Morrison, Afterward to *The bluest eye* (1993)

Since about 1850, classifying humans by mental ability, accurately or not, has been a politically rewarded activity. Those with power have placed others, usually the downtrodden, into ability and disposition groups they cannot escape. The practice has prospered even if the groupings are, as usually the case, ill-defined and, as always in culture, arbitrary in the revealing sense that they could be defined differently. People who live together inside a culture must struggle constantly with the constraints and affordances of the systems of classification and interpretation used in the culture. This is so even when the identifications are selectively deleterious to many involved. In a badly divided society, bad effects can appear to be the very purpose of the classifications.

Consider the case of Learning Disability (LD) labels in the politics of mainstream educational institutions and minority groups in the United States. Three patterns are well known: (1) a higher percentage of minority children than white children are assigned to Special Education; (2) within Special Education, white children are assigned to programs for reading disabilities and minority children are categorized disproportionately as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed; and (3) the data -- uneven by methods of diagnosis, treatment, and funding -- make the overall system difficult to describe or change (Donovan & Cross 2002; Losen & Orfield 2002). A half-century of ethnographic studies has shown that American education is compulsively competitive. In American classrooms, every child not only has to learn, but to learn better or faster than his or her neighbors (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). As such, American education is well organized to make hierarchy out of any differences that can be claimed, however falsely, as natural, inherent, and potentially consequential in school. By the same means, American education is well organized to have the problem of mixing and matching LD and minority status.

For an illustration, we describe a group of boys adjusting to the demands of moment in a mathematics classroom where their behavior is fodder for the cultural practice of interpreting and explaining children as disadvantaged, deprived, at risk, slow, LD, ELL, ADD, emotionally disturbed, etc. Their behavior is quite normal in two ways: one, the children make sense as a response to the environments given by their adults; and two, the same behavior can be found in most classrooms around the country. The labels are less facts about specific children than a mirror to what happens in classrooms run by the survival-of-the smartest impulse of American education. Because it is always possible to celebrate or disparage another person's cognitive abilities, and because schools magnify and record for eternity – in file cabinets, anyway -- the pluses and minuses of every child, LD labels are as much resources in struggles over access to credentials as they are descriptions of a child's inner properties. Add to this the ambiguities of racial, ethnic, and linguistic labels and the competitive and politically consequential agendas for which the labels are made relevant, and the ties between LD and minority status become both intertwined and systematically unsteady enough for political intrigue (Artiles, 2003). The same cultural arrangements and tensions that make racial and linguistic borders into variables correlating with school success are also background for the fast growth of the LD industry.

Our goal is to present a way of thinking about LD as a cultural preoccupation and production. We present no original findings on specific LD children and no new arguments based on available demographic trends. We stress so heavily the cultural world in which LD designations live, we actually try to say as little about individual children as possible. As per the opening quote from Toni Morrison (1993: 211), we are not as interested in spotlighting the child as their adults, not as interested in LD behavior as in the preoccupations – as seen from the level of classroom organization - of all those professionally poised to discover LD behavior. We limit our description to classroom events in which the explanation of children as LD, ADD, low IQ, at risk, culturally deprived, and so on, might come alive.

A cultural analysis takes individuals seriously by focusing on their environments and rarely allows a single person to bear the undue burden of being targeted, accused, labeled, explained, worried about, remediated, and even rehabilitated without an account of the conditions in which he or she lives. A

cultural approach to LD does not address LD directly, but instead addresses arrangements among persons, ideas, opportunities, constraints, and interpretations—what others call the discursive practices of LD (Reid & Valle, 2004; Artiles, 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2004)--that allow or even require that certain facts are searched for, discovered, measured, recorded and made consequential as label relevant (Varenne, 1983; McDermott & Varenne, 2006). Responses and interpretations are the primary foci. The individual child can be the unit of concern, but not the unit of analysis.

Anthropologist Conrad Arensberg (1982: 109) identified the analytic biases behind disciplinary approaches to the description of behavior: for psychology, the minimal unit of analysis is one person doing something; for sociology, the minimal unit is two people interacting; and for anthropology, the minimal unit is three – two people interacting and one person interpreting them. It takes constant interpretive work for people to create the grounds for certain behaviors to stand out in ways consistently and institutionally consequential. As a cultural fact, LD demands more than just some children with learning difficulties and more than just some adults to notice, diagnose, and remediate them. The cultural work of LD is embedded in the concerted activities of millions of people engaging a surveillance system of professionals -- doctors, psychologists, lawyers, educators, and parents are all involved and at the ready before the children show up -- looking for and producing evidence of LD in educational settings designed for symptoms of LD to become visible.

LD is a newcomer to the stock of identified cultural selves. One could not be LD in 1900. One could be a "laggard" in an American school or a "lazy idle little loafer" (Joyce 1916:51) in an Irish school. By 1940, it was possible to suffer from strethosymbolia, an early term for what, by approximately 1960, became dyslexia and, by 1970, became the more generalized LD. All these terms are part of a larger preoccupation with mental capacities as a determinant of both school and social success. For 150 years, the West has been rife with rumors about intelligence, primitive minds, and inherited genius all differentially distributed across kinds of people by race, class, gender, and national character. The rumors have encouraged oppression by explanation: some can, some cannot, and this is why some have, and

some have not. Contemporary parents, teachers, and researchers are recipients of a preoccupation with mental incapacities.

When the National Research Council published a helpful volume (Donovan & Cross, 2002) on the difficult to analyze data on minority and LD labels, they called for better data--with more controls-- but they did not ask cultural questions, for example: What is the importance of LD that researchers produce and settle for so much bad data? What are the classroom conditions that make educators desperate to label children LD? Will new data solve the problems? Instead of more data on individual LD, why not data on conditions that make LD look promising as a way to save children? Can new data help change classrooms enough that LD would not be a necessary fact? A cultural analysis focuses less on minds and their moments and more on moments and their minds. At any given moment in a cultural arrangement, just what interpretations are available and called into use?

We circumscribe a cultural analysis of LD with a portrait of the modern West as a machine shop for the production of ever-shifting labels for kinds of mind. Around 1700, for example, "genius" was transformed from a guiding spirit (a tradition starting in ancient Rome) to a stable property of creative persons in market economies. Shakespeare, Galileo, Pascal, and Newton were celebrated tokens of type, and modern exemplars were hailed for making knowledge subordinate to procedural rationality, science, and strategic planning. A century later, full-sail colonialism tied biological definitions of race to emerging ideas of intelligence and personality (Baker, 1998; Smedley, 1993). Francis Galton (1865) lit this conceptual fire with claims of inherent genius, especially for upper class, white, British males, a perspective eventually fueled by genetics. Kinds of mind defined by ability began to define kinds of person by race, gender, language, and even sexual orientation. Genius became a display board for indignities imposed on those deemed inherently not smart enough, usually women or people of African descent (from eugenics to current victims for whom the bell curve tolls), or those deemed inherently too smart, usually homosexuals or Jews (Elfenbein, 1999; Gilman, 1995). Even good ideas about creativity can turn dangerous. For better and often worse, genius and LD are labels with which students, teachers, and researchers must make their peace (DeNora & Mehan, 1994; McDermott, 2005).

A thumbnail history of LD in the U.S., like the history of genius in Europe, says more about American culture than about schoolchildren, more about the interpretations available for talking about children than about the children themselves. After decades of neurological speculation on dyslexia, the very idea of selective disabilities found a niche in the 1960s as an explanation of why children of privilege and intelligence could not learn to read as expected. Based on flimsy diagnostic criteria, LD became a convenient fiction applicable to almost anyone and consequential by the demands of the latest trends in diagnosis and record-keeping. By 1980, white children were labeled LD and, with an ugly lack of cross over, minorities were labeled emotionally disturbed or retarded. Legal briefs were filed, government warnings rendered, and LD was momentarily spread more evenly across groups (Coles, 1987). Schools were quickly overrun with LD children and budget deficits for their care. With increasing competition, LD found a new use in the 1990s in securing more time for labeled children on examinations. Mediating smart versus slow, LD became a defense against threats to sustained high prestige, and it now serves the wealthy with legitimate escape routes from low test scores. Those without access to best schools, whether labeled as disabled and forgotten, or not labeled and forgotten nonetheless, remain stuck in place. As Artiles (2003) says, "false positives and negatives are equally problematic" (p. 174). Attempts to measure, diagnose and treat LD have aided the production of inequities.

Across decades of classroom research, we have never set out to study LD, but classroom practices make interpretations of LD sometimes a thing to notice. We have generally found children called LD more capable than claimed. By a play of rumors, facts, and concerns, in real classrooms, LD children have to spend their time arranging not getting caught not knowing something. Facing the double job of doing school tasks while arranging to not look incompetent, children ripe to be categorized as LD often have their struggles magnified. The same thing happens to children spotlighted by racial and linguistic categories. Under current conditions, the search for LD documents mostly what many children cannot do, and parental claims for individual children to learn unconstrained by demands to do better than everyone else have been remade into tools for the suppression of their children.

A Problematic Success

The easy assumption that children are LD requires work by many people systematically not attending to what children can do (Hood, McDermott & Cole, 1980; McDermott, 1993; Mehan, 1993, 1996). We offer, instead, an account of schoolchildren knowing and doing more than a glance, a test, and a label might reveal. Our example erases simplistic questions about what is wrong with children and initiates complex questions about how American classrooms organize occasions for children to look bad and then to blame their behavior on disabilities inside their heads and/or incapacities brought on by their race, gender, language, or social class.

We observed a middle school classroom for three months as part of field testing a reform-based, technology integrated mathematics curriculum (Goldman et al. 1998; Greeno et al. 1999). Observations focused on three boys, each with an LD story sometimes told, sometimes not. We intentionally withhold the labels applied to the boys for three good reasons: one, although the teacher had access to their files, she tried to forget everyone's official diagnosis, and just who is called what is not a factor in their classroom; two, we are trying to keep the reader focused on the classroom as a site for invoking LD stories; and three, we are trying to keep the analysis of LD more open than is possible once labels stand in as proxies for complex and multilayered behavior across persons over time.

Boomer was a high intelligence "star" on entry to middle school, but had a focus and "attitude" problem that kept him from high achievement. In class, he alternated between yelling at teachers and tackling academic questions. Teachers who worked with him talked about making an "investment." They tried to keep him in class, but he was often on "office suspension" where office staff would sit with him while he did school work. In a wealthier district, Boomer and his teachers might have had more assistance.

Hector was "a nice kid," but in trouble academically. He stayed away from teachers, and they perhaps from him. He never raised his hand in a class discussion, rarely volunteered an answer, and spent as much time as he could visiting the pencil sharpener. He did not hand in assignments or keep work

papers. He was sociable and expert at teenage banter, but he was usually missing at performance relevant moments. Ripe for several interventions, he received no services. The teacher said she could not remember if he was LD or low IQ.

Ricardo was a model student at first glance, sitting quietly, socializing appropriately, and working. He was soon transferred to another school for sending a death threat to a teacher. Officially and unofficially, the boys were sometimes described and treated as kinds of minds and ability sets. Unofficially, they were also talked about in terms of their home cultures: Boomer was African American, and Hector and Ricardo were immigrants from Mexico.

Teachers called the boys "at risk." What did "at risk" mean *in situ*, in the actual unfolding of any child's behavior in relation to other children, to teachers, or to school psychologists? We ran the "at risk" stories against our daily video records enough to question, reject, or verify each story. New stories emerged. We saw Hector, the "unengaged" student, working hard, organizing group activities, and mastering new math concepts and operations. We saw Ricardo paying careful attention despite his upcoming removal from the school. We saw Boomer, the "promising" student, performing smartness for the teacher and building his academic image at the expense of Hector and Ricardo. Then we saw Hector, no matter how hard he worked, avoiding official and public assessment. His image as slow and unengaged remained, even as he successfully completed assignments. We videotaped for six weeks as the boys completed a simulation-based math unit requiring that they design, heat, and finance a research station for scientists in Antarctica. Hector and Boomer did everything required. Hector became expert at the modeling software and created a floor plan for his group's research center. Boomer and Hector worked on a proficient analysis. The misfit between their behavior and the school's story about them invited a more careful look. Although their teacher was happy the boys were working steadily, the particulars of their achievements were hardly noticed.

We watched the video carefully and saw how the boys handled their assignments. The students had a scale problem imagining a meter length as they designed a research station for scientists in Antarctica. One meter in the world was surprisingly bigger than one meter measured by dots on paper or

tiny lines on a computer screen. After the boys created a 6x6 meter room on paper, Hector went to get a ruler for a comparison. He put the stick on the ground, and marked the floor to designate each meter until he had six lengths. Meanwhile his group mates worked on floor plans at their desks. Boomer looked at Hector and asked, "Is that six meters?" The answer came quickly, but in a difficult exchange. Hector led a monologue for three:

> Hector: Here! [stands up]. Six!
>
> Boomer: That's big enough.
>
> Hector: From that thing [points to where he started at door]. That's BIG!
>
> Hector: That's bigger than my whole house! [laughs].

Back at their desks, Hector counts meters on his paper, picks up the assignment, reads it, and writes on his paper. Ricardo looks at Hector's writing.

> Hector: They're going to sleep in an area 6x6. That's big! [Gestures "big" with
>
> his hands.]

Ricardo asks about how many rooms are modeled in their floor plans. Hector joins the conversation, but seems more concerned that the rooms are too big:

> Hector: This was a living area. No mas una. Puerta grande.
>
> Boomer: [Boomer looks over] Everybody should have their own room.
>
> Hector: Eh. . . so I made a big room. [The boys talk quietly among themselves].
>
> Hector: 4 and a half . . [Boomer is looking at his own work]
>
> Hector: I'm going to leave it like that [plays with a pen on his desk and looks at
>
> Ricardo's paper].
>
> Hector: Pues, una grande, ja!
>
> Researcher: We need to start cleaning up.
>
> Hector: This time I'm gonna make little small rooms. [picks up a towel to erase

the board and reworks his design].

Hector: That's good. Look [turns to Ricardo with his paper, then to the camera].

Ricardo doesn't look at the paper. Hector moves closer to get his attention, puts his picture on the desk, and closes his pen.

Hector: Now we clean this up. [to a researcher] We erase everything we did to this, right?

Researcher: No, no, no, no. [He leaves the design on the desk].

Hector carried the lesson, investigating the scale details with more accuracy than the other boys, and yet offering to erase his work before it would be seen. As the work went on, he became the group's expert on measurements and scale translations, compared meters on paper with meters on the floor and at home, and convinced his group to make bedrooms smaller than 6x6 meters. He and Boomer interrogated their data, made graphs of insulation values and heating costs, and realized how they varied inversely. Hector learned to graph data and mastered the software and input all floor plan requests for the group. Modeling and revising the station took six classes, and most of the work was based on Hector's model. We saw both boys engaged, but only after we tracked tasks over time did we discover the negative relation between Hector and assessment.

Hector hid his learning, and Boomer announced his. Twice Hector had to report his group's work, and twice he avoided success. With both Ricardo and Boomer suspended and absent, Hector was asked to give a tour of his group's research station--his specialty--in a class-wide design review. He pointed at the monitor displaying the research station, but gave little information and even claimed to not know much about it. He made jokes. The class laughed hysterically, and Hector sat down. At the final presentation, Boomer did most of the talking, and he called Hector "stupid" a few times. When classmates noticed a mistake—a three-meter bed—Hector left the front of the room to fix it. The computer crashed. The presentation unraveled. The teacher tried to help. While Hector worked on the computer, Boomer continued to call Hector names, and six weeks of good work evaporated. Boomer's charts and graphs

were the only project materials handed in, even though we saw Hector ask Boomer to safeguard his papers.

Across weeks of work, the teacher assumed the group's achievement belonged soley to Boomer. When she visited their table, Boomer did most of the talking, and the teacher oriented to his papers and ignored Hector's correct contribution. Hector was not seen as working capably even when he was accomplishing classroom work. While watching tapes with us, the teacher saw Hector's accomplishments. She gave him an "A" for the project--the first unit he passed that year. Hector's brief success gave way when he was placed in remedial algebra for high school. Boomer was assigned to college bound algebra.

The American classroom is well organized for the production and display of failure, one child at a time, if possible, but group by group if necessary. The groups can be made up of kinds of person by race, gender, or class, and/or kinds of minds by simple contrasts like smart/dumb or gifted/disabled. Even if the teacher manages to treat every child as potentially capable, the children can hammer each other into negative status positions, and even if teacher and children can resist dropping everyone into predefined categories, the children's parents can take over demanding more and more boxes with which to specify and proliferate kinds of kids doing better than other kinds of kids. In such a classroom, if there were no LD categories, someone would have to invent them.

The Illusive LD Compromise

To counteract the cultural inclination to focus on what is wrong with individual children, we must seek data showing children more skilled than schools have categories or time to notice, describe, diagnose, record, and remediate. Even this is an incomplete goal, for such data can leave us still embedded in the assumptions and practices of the culture we are trying to change, the culture of people institutionally preoccupied with a measured success or failure for individual children. When we show children knowing more than expected, personal disability disappears as an object, but the arrangements that defined the problem and invited the LD interpretations stay in place. Guaranteed, in other cultures, in other times,

arrangements were different, and so was educational research. By our stand, gone is the disability, not because human beings are all exactly the same, not because some can't be found learning things more easily, but because LD comes to practical existence inside a school system designed to measure how much faster or slower various children learn. Change the school, and LD becomes less relevant. LD is made consequential by gatekeepers assigning children to fixed positions. Without an institutional apparatus for measuring individual differences and kinds of mind, research into the consequences of misidentification would be superfluous. Without an apparatus for measuring individual minds, demonstrations that "failing" students are "really" attentive and knowledgeable might not be taken as still another call for better assessment tools or teacher training.

The political logic of LD and minority status is clear in the inverse cases of minority LD and upper class LD. If the market separates adults with access to resources from those without, grades, degrees and diagnoses do the same to their children. If people complain about the injustice done to lower class and minority children by any category, it can be extended to a wider, and whiter, population with the proviso that those with resources must have a higher echelon label. This division can be so thick that upper class white children now seek the diagnosis of LD for its extra allowances. Who gets called LD, when, by whom, and with what results is organized by demographic and political conditions. LD is less a kind of mind, and more a method for differentiating people and treating them differently. Being treated differently can be good, or dangerous, depending on the cultural preoccupations with which they get aligned.

In a cultural analysis, isolated facts are rarely as important as the preoccupations that elicit them and give them consequence. In 1850, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1850) used a question and answer to initiate a cultural analysis. Question: "…is not the fact but the rumor of some fact?" Answer: "A fact is only a fulcrum of the spirit. It is the terminus of past thought, but only a means now to new sallies of the imagination and new progress of wisdom" (p. 177). For 50 years, American education has been rife with rumors about LD; built on the anxieties of parents and teachers of children in trouble, the "fulcrum of the spirit" has run ahead of research and practice and made LD a common possibility in classrooms. In an

early ethnography of schooling, Jules Henry remade the Emersonian point: "School metamorphoses the child, giving it the kind of Self the school can manage, and then proceeds to minister to the Self it has made" (1963:292). LD is a kind of self that American education knows how to produce, and so too are supposed selves from named racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Varenne, 1998). American schools are not always better off for their careful attention to kinds of children, but they do relentlessly create conditions by which rumors of disability and disadvantaged backgrounds are attended to and their persons counted, theorized, explained, and remediated. It's rumors all the way down.

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