



The Cultural Work of Learning Disabilities

by Ray McDermott, Shelley Goldman, and Hervé Varenne

Culturally and educationally, the United States specializes in the production of kinds of persons described first by ethnic, racial, and linguistic lines and second by 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 article 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 learning-disabled and minority-group status are on display.

Since about 1850, first in Europe and then in the United States, classifying human beings 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 that they cannot escape. The practice has prospered even where the groupings are, as is usually the case, ill defined and, as is always the case in human cultures, arbitrary, in the revealing sense that groupings could be defined differently. People who live together in a culture must struggle constantly with the constraints and affordances of the systems of classification and interpretation that are used in the culture. This is so even when the identifications are selectively deleterious to many involved. In a badly divided society, the bad effects can appear to be the very purpose of the classifications.

Culture Against Children

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: (a) A higher percentage of minority children than of White children are assigned to special education; (b) within special education, White children are assigned to less restrictive programs than are their minority counterparts; and (c) the data—driven by inconsistent methods of diagnosis, treatment, and funding—make the overall system difficult to describe or change (National Research Council, 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 has to learn better or faster than his or her neighbors (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Hence American education is well organized to make hierarchy out of any differences that can be claimed, however falsely,

to be natural, inherent, and potentially consequential in school. By means of the same competitive impulse, 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 the 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 (English Language Learner), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), emotionally disturbed, and so forth. Their behavior is quite normal in two senses of the term: One, their actions make sense as responses to the environments provided by adults; and, two, the same behavior can be found in most classrooms around the country. The labels are not so much facts about specific children as they are mirrors to what happens in classrooms run by the survival-of-the-show-off-smartest logic 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 measured 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.

Units in a Cultural Analysis

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 heavily stress the cultural world in which LD designations live, and we try to say as little as possible about individual children. In Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she portrayed an African American child put-upon and abused in every way imaginable and left with only a deep desire for having blue eyes. Decades later, Morrison critiqued her own effort:

... [T]he 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. (1994, p. 211)

In keeping with Morrison's complaint, we are interested in spotlighting not so much the children as their adults, not so much minorities as the larger system of which they are a part.¹ We are not as interested in LD behavior as in the preoccupations—as seen

from the level of classroom organization—of all those adults who are 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. We are less interested in the characteristics of LD children than in the cultural arrangements that make an LD label relevant; we are less interested in minds and their moments than in moments and their minds.²

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, or 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 (Artiles, 2004; Dudley-Marling, 2004; Reid & Valle, 2004)—that allow or even require that certain facts be searched for, discovered, measured, recorded, and made consequential as label relevant (McDermott & Varenne, 2006; Varenne, 1998). Responses and interpretations are the primary focuses. The individual child can be the unit of concern, but not the unit of analysis.

Anthropologist Conrad Arensberg (1982, p. 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 ground where certain behaviors stand out in ways that are 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 in a surveillance system consisting of professionals—doctors, psychologists, lawyers, educators—and parents, all of whom are involved and at the ready before the children show up. All of these people are looking for and producing evidence of LD in educational settings designed to make symptoms of LD visible.

LD as a Kind of Mind

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, 1916/1956, p. 51) in an Irish school. By 1940, it was possible to suffer from *strepshymbolia*, an early term for what, by approximately 1960, became *dyslexia*, which in turn, by 1970, became often subsumed by the more generalized LD label. All of 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 cultural preoccupation with mental incapacities.

When the National Research Council produced a helpful volume (2002) on the difficult-to-analyze data on minority and LD

labels, it called for better data—with more controls—but did not ask cultural questions. For example: What is the rhetorical importance of LD such that researchers are paid to produce and then to 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 students, why not search for data on conditions that make LD look promising as a way to save children? Can new data help to change classrooms enough that LD will cease to be a necessary fact? A cultural analysis focuses less on LD minds and more on LD situations. At any given moment in a cultural arrangement, just what interpretations are available and called into use?

Genius and LD as Kinds of Mind

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 the 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 minds defined by ability began to define kinds of persons 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 past victims of eugenics to current victims for whom the bell curve tolls), or those deemed inherently too smart, usually homosexuals or Jews (Elfenbein, 1999; Gilman, 1996). 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, 2006).

A thumbnail history of LD in the United States, 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, a new use for LD was found in the 1990s—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 the 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—the ones on our classroom videotapes over the past 30 years—to be far more capable than claimed. By a play of rumors, facts, and concerns, in real classrooms LD children have to spend their time avoiding getting caught not knowing something. Facing the double job of doing school tasks while arranging to not look incompetent, children who are ripe to be categorized as LD often have their struggles magnified (Hood, McDermott, & Cole, 1980; McDermott, 1993). The same thing happens to children spotlighted by racial and linguistic categories. Under current conditions, the search for LD results in documentation mostly of what many children cannot do. Parental demands that individual children be allowed to learn unconstrained by pressure 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 that many people systematically fail to attend to what children can do (Hood, McDermott, & Cole, 1980; McDermott, 1993; Mehan, 1993, 1996). In this article, 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 the children and initiates more complex questions about how American classrooms organize occasions for children to look unsuccessful, 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 3 months as part of field-testing a reform-based, technology-integrated mathematics curriculum (Goldman, Knudsen, & Latvala 1998; Greeno et al., 1999). Our observations focused on a group of three boys, each with an LD story sometimes told, sometimes not. We intentionally withhold the labels applied to the boys for three good reasons: (a) Although the teacher had access to their files, she tried to forget everyone’s official diagnosis; therefore, who was called what was not a factor in this classroom; (b) we are trying to keep the reader focused on the classroom as a site for invoking LD stories; and (c) 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,” with staff members watching him while he did schoolwork. 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 in teenage banter but 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, all three 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.” Just what does “at risk” mean in situ, in the actual unfolding of any child’s behavior in relation to other children, teachers, or special needs personnel? We studied the “at risk” stories in comparison with our daily video records thoroughly 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 unchanged, even as he successfully completed assignments. We videotaped for 6 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 finished the required task. Hector became expert with the modeling software and created a floor plan for his group’s research center, and they produced a proficient analysis. The mismatch between their behavior and the school’s story about them invited a more careful look. Although their teacher was happy that 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 when imagining a meter length in the real world as they designed the research station for scientists in Antarctica. One meter in the world was surprisingly larger than one meter measured by dots on paper or by tiny lines on a computer screen. After the boys created a 6-by-6-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 and goes to the spot.] 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 his desk, next to the other boys, 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 six-by-six. That's big! [Gestures "big" with his hands.]

Ricardo asks how many rooms are modeled in their floor plans. Hector joins the conversation but seems more concerned that the rooms are too big. (*R* is a researcher.)

Hector: This was a living area. No mas una. Puerta grande.

Boomer: [Boomer looks over at Hector.] Everybody should have their own room.

Hector: Eh. . . so I made a big room. [The boys talk quietly among themselves.]

Hector: Four 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!

R: 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?

R: No, no, no, no. [Hector leaves the design on the desk.]

Hector carried the lesson, investigating the scale details with more accuracy than the other boys, yet offering to erase his work before it could be seen. As the work went on, he became the group's expert on measurements and scale translations, compared meters on paper and in the software with meters on the floor and at home, and convinced his group to make bedrooms smaller than 6 by 6 meters. He and Boomer interrogated their data, made graphs of insulation values and heating costs, and realized how the graphed quantities varied inversely. Hector learned to graph data, mastered the software, and entered 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, and only after we tracked tasks over time did we discover the negative relation between Hector and assessment.

Children Against Their Culture

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 not to know much about it. He made jokes. The class laughed hysterically, and Hector sat down. At the final presenta-

tion, Boomer did most of the talking, and he called Hector "stupid" a few times. When classmates noticed a mistake—a 3-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 6 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 that the group's achievement belonged solely to Boomer. When she visited the boys at their table, Boomer did most of the talking, and the teacher turned toward his papers and ignored Hector's correct contribution. Even when he was accomplishing classroom work, Hector was not seen as working capably. This was so even when the teacher was intentionally trying to avoid treating students by their classifications. 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 consist of kinds of person by race, gender, or class, and/or by kinds of minds described through simple contrasts such as 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 both 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 that we are trying to change, the culture of people institutionally preoccupied with 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. We can be sure that in other cultures, in other times, arrangements were different, and so was education research. By our analytic position, gone is the disability—not because human beings are all exactly the same, not because some cannot be found learning things more slowly or with great difficulty, 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 minds, 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, then 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 categorization, the category 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 parents now seek the diagnosis of LD for the extra allowances it offers their children (Sireci, Scarpati, & Li, 2005). 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 it is 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 (1850/1995) used a question and answer to initiate a cultural analysis. Question: “[I]s 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, p. 292). LD is a kind of self that American education knows how to produce, and so too are the 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 under which rumors of disability and disadvantaged background are attended to and their persons counted, theorized, explained, and remediated. It’s rumors all the way down.

NOTES

The authors wish to thank Deborah Stipek for commenting on this article.

¹See Morrison’s analysis of American racism based on peripheral African American characters in the novels of major White American authors.

²We alter here a phrase by Goffman (1967), who wrote of “moments and their men.”

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Manuscript received June 8, 2005

Revisions received March 12 and May 30, 2006

Accepted June 5, 2006