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## Are learning disabilities discovered or constructed: The unintended consequences and failures of realism as the philosophical basis of learning disabilities theory

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**Are Learning Disabilities Discovered or Constructed: The Unintended Consequences  
and Failures of Realism as the Philosophical Basis of Learning Disabilities Theory**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The historical and current conceptualization of learning disabilities was analyzed in terms of its underlying assumptions and guiding paradigms. It was determined that since its beginning, the field of learning disabilities has been dominated by the traditional realist perspective under the mechanistic paradigm. It was argued that such a perspective is inadequate in the field of learning disabilities. A nonrealist perspective as part of a holistic paradigm was suggested as more appropriate for the conceptualization of learning disabilities.

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**Abstract**

The historical and current conceptualization of learning disabilities was analyzed in terms of its underlying assumptions and guiding paradigms. It was determined that since its beginning, the field of learning disabilities has been dominated by the traditional realist perspective under the mechanistic paradigm. It was argued that such a perspective is inadequate in the field of learning disabilities. A nonrealist perspective as part of a holistic paradigm was suggested as more appropriate for the conceptualization of learning disabilities.

## Are Learning Disabilities Discovered or Constructed: The Unintended Consequences and Failures of Realism as the Philosophical Basis of Learning Disability Theory

Since its conception, educators and other professionals have struggled to understand the term learning disabilities, to formulate a meaningful and operational definition, and to justify the use of the term for identifying a viable category of special education. Currently, far from settling the debate, professionals in the field of learning disabilities have come under increasing public scrutiny, and the credibility of the category of learning disabilities has been questioned (Franklin & Skrtic, 1987, 1991). In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the field is in a crisis which professionals must resolve in order to move forward and lead the field of learning disabilities in a productive direction. The author proposes that this current crisis in learning disabilities is due to the fact that the traditional conceptualization of learning disabilities is illogical, inadequate, and even dangerous. The traditional theory of learning disabilities is plagued with assumptions, logical tautologies, and contradictions. The resolution of this crisis, then, requires professionals to construct a more logical and humane conceptualization of learning disabilities. They must find a new perspective from which to make sense of why some children are not successful in school.

### Historical Perspectives

Since Samuel Kirk coined the term “learning disabilities” in 1962 (Bender, 1995, p. 7), educators and researchers have been investigating the question “What is a learning disability?” Considering the crisis the learning disabilities field finds itself in today, asking this question is no longer sufficient. Rather, professionals must be working to answer the question “What is the process by which we have come to conceptualize and justify the category of learning disabilities?”

By examining this process, educators can understand how the history of the field of learning disabilities has been dominated by a single perspective-- realism. Once this is recognized, professionals can then evaluate the appropriateness and adequacy of that perspective. They can determine the future usefulness of clinging to the old way of explaining the phenomenon of learning disabilities, and they can explore the possibility of new ways of seeing. As professionals gain this historical perspective of the process by which learning disabilities have been conceptualized, they will be able to revise their understandings and make informed decisions about the future.

#### Realism as the Dominant Perspective

It is no surprise that realism has dominated the field of learning disabilities since its beginning in the 1920s (Bender, 1995) because realism has dominated much of Western thinking for the last three centuries (Heshusius, 1989). Understanding the philosophy of realism is fundamental to understanding the larger context in which learning disabilities are defined. The philosophy of realism, however, must also be understood as part of the comprehensive paradigm known as the mechanistic paradigm. A paradigm is an entire set of beliefs and assumptions which guide interpretations of and decisions about reality (Heshusius, 1989). By analyzing learning disabilities as being dominated by realism under a mechanistic paradigm, educators can understand the entire process by and context in which the field has evolved.

The philosophy of realism defines social reality as being objective, measurable, and separate from the observer (Heshusius, 1989). It implies that truth exists, separate from human interpretation, waiting to be discovered. According to Adelman (1992), humans adopt this perspective of reality because it meets their need for order and

certainty. Furthermore, the proclaimed objectivity of realism implies that rational explanations are available for all phenomenon (Skrtic, 1991).

As mentioned, realism is part of the larger mechanistic paradigm. Acceptance of realism implies acceptance of several other theories belonging to the mechanistic paradigm. As suggested by its name, the mechanistic paradigm, or world view, explains the world in terms of a machine and problems in terms of inefficient functioning of the machine (Heshusius, 1989). This metaphor includes the reductionist theory of knowledge, the behaviorist theory of human behavior, and the empiricist theory of inquiry (Heshusius, 1989). Reductionism is the idea that the whole is best understood by reducing it to and studying its individual components (Poplin, 1988). Behaviorism aims to reduce human behavior to simple actions which can be measured, predicted, and controlled (Bender, 1995). Empiricism, or the natural science/technical model, studies phenomena in terms of single variables to discover laws by which to control outputs (Iano, 1986). As part of the mechanistic paradigm, these sets of beliefs have had implications for the field of learning disabilities as it evolved in the realist perspective.

That realism has dominated learning disabilities is evident in the history of the field, beginning with the earliest research. Even the history of learning disabilities itself has been chronicled and interpreted from a realist perspective. That is, most professionals generally accept the same realist interpretation of the history of the field as given by Wiederholt in 1974 (Sleeter, 1988). His account of events interprets learning disabilities as a discrete, identifiable condition which was scientifically discovered through empiricist methods, beginning with the research of Goldstein and Werner (Carrier, 1986).

Goldstein and Werner studied and categorized thought processes according to

what they considered to be normal (abstract, civilized) as opposed to abnormal (concrete, natural) (Carrier, 1986). Their work reduced abnormal thought to pathology of individuals. Carrier refers to this as the beginning of the naturalization of mentality by which thought processes were attributed to intrinsic characteristics of individuals (1986). Differences in thinking were interpreted as real differences located within the brains of individuals. From the time Goldstein and Werner naturalized mentality, learning disabilities were also conceptualized as real differences located within the brain of individuals. Their work was furthered by Strauss who conducted clinical research in non-school settings (Bender, 1995). His studies of head injured soldiers and retarded children culminated in his delineation of two types of mental retardation: exogenous retardation due to brain injury and endogenous retardation due largely to heredity (Carrier, 1986). Strauss attributed exogenous retardation to abnormal mentality and perceptions, thus naturalizing and internalizing the behavior of such individuals and reducing the behavior to pathology (Carrier, 1986). Based on his observations of exogenously retarded children, Strauss developed seven criteria for identifying exogenous retardation: perceptual disorders, perseveration, thinking disorders, behavior disorders, slight neurological signs, history of neurological impairment, and no history of endogenous mental retardation (Bender, 1995).

According to the realist history of learning disabilities, then, exogenous retardation was discovered. It represented a real, observable, measurable, objective condition which was attributed to intrinsic characteristics of the individual. Naturally, this discovery was attributed to the capabilities of empiricist science, and the prescribed interventions were very reductionistic. Strauss recommended teaching techniques for the exogenously retarded which included a sterile environment, short concrete tasks, and a reduction of stimuli; such interventions were considered



appropriate given Strauss's conclusions that the exogenously retarded learned differently than others (Carrier, 1986). This was the birth of learning disabilities theory.

Bender provides an account of the researchers who followed Strauss and continued his work as well as those who translated his conclusions into classroom practices and interventions (1995). An examination of Bender's account reveals that throughout the rapid evolution of the field of learning disabilities, many of the fundamental premises and assumptions (including brain injury or dysfunction) did not deviate from the conclusions of the early neuropsychiatrists. Heshusius describes the theories of Werner and Strauss as becoming a prototype for all theories thereafter (1989). Carrier explains how the researchers following Strauss continued to attribute the behavior of individuals classified as retarded to natural defects. They explained the problems of children with normal IQs by the following model: the occurrence of brain injury created problems with perception and abstractions and resulted in mental and behavioral problems (1986). Because of this model, the term minimal brain dysfunction (MBD) was developed and replaced exogenous retardation (Carrier, 1986).

The realist interpretation of the history of learning disabilities acknowledges the medical origins of what was considered to be the discovery of learning disabilities. In fact, the medical definition of MBD was criticized because scientists were not able to pinpoint the exact clinical cause, nor was medical etiology of interest or relevant to educational psychologists and special educators (Carrier, 1986). As a result of this criticism, the medical model which had persisted until the 1950s was replaced by the psychological process model of the 1960s (Poplin, 1988). It was during this period that Strauss's medical definition of and criteria for MBD was replaced with an educational definition-- unexplained underachievement (Carrier, 1988). Kirk also

coined the term learning disabilities and it was included in the Federal Register (Bender, 1995). In addition, parents were described as demanding services for the newly identified learning disabled (Poplin, 1988). This change in the field from neurology to education was seen as one of scientific discovery and progress toward a solution for a medical and psychological problem (Poplin, 1988). The educational interpretation of learning disabilities did not, however, abandon the realist philosophy inherent in the medical model (Carrier, 1988). Rather, the philosophy was extended to naturalize and internalize school failure in addition to mentality and behavior.

Once learning disabilities became a psychological/learning problem as well as a medical problem, the field again evolved in the 1970s (Poplin, 1988). At this time, experts in the field adopted the behavioral model in an attempt to teach academic behaviors and mainstream learning disabled students; this model was replaced by the learning strategies model of the 1980s which tried reteaching learning and thinking processes (Poplin, 1988). In recent decades, then, educators have seen significant changes in interventions for students with learning disabilities, but there have been no fundamental changes in how learning disabilities are understood, explained, or defined. The realist philosophy of social science has gone relatively unchallenged and learning disabilities continue to be understood as neurological dysfunctions within the learner's brain. In other words, the medical/neurological model is still very much a part of the current understandings of learning disabilities as evidenced by the inclusion of ". . . brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction . . ." in the current federal definition (Bender, 1995, p. 18).

To summarize, the history of learning has been both dominated by and interpreted through the realistic perspective. The earliest research and practices in the field were based on realist principles including the naturalization of learning problems.

These assumptions have largely remained unchallenged in the field. Furthermore, when the history of the conceptualization of learning disabilities is retold, it is portrayed as an objective, scientific discovery conducted by experts.

#### Philosophical Weaknesses of Realism-- Flaws in the Logic

That the theory of learning disabilities has been so firmly grounded in the realist perspective since its conception has influenced much of what has happened in the field to date. That the realist foundation of learning disabilities has not been well recognized nor critically evaluated is even more significant given the faulty logic and misguided assumptions which were applied to learning disabilities research under the realist philosophy. In fact, much of what is believed to be true about learning disabilities relies upon the conclusions of Strauss; these conclusions, however, were mere assumptions about neurology, not scientific truths (Carrier, 1986). Strauss could not positively identify brain injury. Rather he could only infer the existence of MBD by relying on "soft signs." His hypotheses were, nonetheless, accepted as scientific truths instead of neurological assertions (Carrier, 1986). Furthermore, much of Strauss's work was conducted with adults in clinical, institutional settings (Bender, 1995), and that his conclusions were applied to children in schools without question represents the fact that his conclusions were accepted for truths rather than assumptions about a particular population.

Not only were Strauss's assumptions accepted as fact, but they were also plagued with faulty logic (Carrier, 1986). First of all, Strauss conducted empiricist research which, by definition, requires that variables be identified and operationalized in order to be studied; when studying characteristic behavior of a population, then, the outcomes would be predetermined (Iano, 1986). This being so, Carrier explains how Strauss had to first identify and operationalize the variables of MBD, for example

perceptual difficulties. He did this by observing the characteristics of those he had identified as having presumed MBD. He used these characteristics to formulate a definition of MBD and then used the definition to identify individuals as having MBD. In other words, he used his label to generate his definition and his definition to prove his label (1986). This kind of circular logic can be illustrated by the following: A (MBD) causes B (perceptual problems), so all cases of B are caused by A. This logical tautology seriously weakens the validity of Strauss's conclusions.

This kind of illogical, circular thinking is not only problematic in the work of Strauss and subsequent researchers but also in the theory of IQ (Bane & Jencks, 1976). This is significant because the definition of learning disabilities includes a discrepancy between achievement and potential, or IQ (Bender, 1995). That IQ theory has also been criticized as a logical tautology furthers the dependency of learning disabilities theory on circular logic (Carrier, 1986). Given the inherent ambiguity of IQ theory, then, the discrepancy between IQ and achievement as postulated by learning disability theory is arbitrary (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983). In fact, learning disability theory has no valid, scientific basis when considered independent of IQ theory (Carrier, 1986).

Not only has the conceptualization of learning disabilities been dependent on faulty logic and misguided assumptions, but professionals in the field have also accepted several inherent contradictions without question. For example, empiricist researchers are by definition concerned only with observable and measurable events, yet they have been willing to accept and perpetuate the notion of presumed (i.e. not observed or measured) MBD or central nervous system (CNS) dysfunctions (Poplin, 1988). Another contradiction is the field's adoption of behaviorist interventions for learning disabled students during the 1970s despite the fact that the learning

disabilities was attributed to natural, internal, problems (Carrier, 1986). One final, but very pertinent, contradiction is the complete realist orientation of the field. While realism has been useful in the natural sciences, the realist perspective and subsequent reductionism is not appropriate in the social sciences because it is impossible to try to understand complex human behaviors in terms of simple, discrete, single, observable, measurable parts (Poplin, 1988).

Realism, then, has been the dominate philosophy throughout the conceptualization of learning disabilities. Once realism has been identified and understood as such, it is important to examine the implications of realism, the reasons why it persisted despite faulty logic and contradictions, and alternative perspectives from which to conceptualize learning disabilities.

#### Implications of the Dominance of Realism-- Unintended Consequences

As mentioned before, because the learning disabilities field has been largely shaped by realism, it has naturally been defined by the mechanistic paradigm including reductionism, behaviorism, and empiricism. The implications of reductionism are illustrated by task analysis which is used to teach isolated skills step by step (Iano, 1990). The implications of behaviorism are evident in the behavior modification programs for which special education is noted (Bender, 1995). And empiricism has created false standards of knowledge and progress (Iano, 1986). That is to say that educators have appeared scientific, certain, and unquestionable.

Furthermore, because of the field's origins in neurology, the medical model has become a fundamental part of learning disability theory. This medical model explains learning disabilities as a condition which can be positively assessed and diagnosed as well as remediated through prescriptive interventions (Blomgren, 92). However, unlike doctors, educators are not held responsible for the successful implementation of

the diagnostic/prescriptive medical model because learning disability theory ultimately places ownership of the problem (CNS dysfunction) within the student by naturalizing mentality; in other words, if the medical model fails, then professionals can blame the victim (Blomgren, 1992).

These Implications have had devastating, unintended consequences for both the field and individuals. First of all, the naturalization and internalization of the failure of learning disabled students has had the unintended consequence of leaving the social and psychological factors involved in learning unexamined (Carrier, 1986). Furthermore, teachers are trained to treat only the child, and the curriculum and environment are not considered (Carrier, 1986). Another unintended consequence of the medical model has been the emergence of a deficit driven model within the field of learning disabilities. This model focuses on remediating weaknesses; as a result, learning disabled students do not receive individualized instruction according to talents but rather receive “intensive regular education” according to deficits (Poplin, 1984, p. 133). Inherent in a deficit driven model are more unintended consequences including the need to efficiently categorize, track, and control students in order to fix them (Blomgren, 1992) as well as the diversion of funds from education to technical control (Iano, 1986) and the transformation of teachers into technicians (Iano, 1990). Rather than “help” students as originally intended, teachers aim to “fix” students by viewing them as objects to be tested and remediated (Blomgren, 1992).

The consequences for individuals who find themselves identified as problems within the bureaucratic, mechanistic world of learning disabilities suffer unintended, yet unforgivable, consequences. They are subjected to an inhumane system which views them as problems in the educational machine (Blomgren, 1992). They find themselves humiliated, engaged in unmeaningful activities, without encouragement in

their areas of talent, and facing bleak futures (Murphy, 1992). The reductionistic teaching techniques to which they are subjected only perpetuate the failure of minority and poor students who lack background knowledge to make meaning of decontextualized information (Iano, 1990). Ultimately, students learn to feel inadequate, alienated, and helpless and to develop low expectations (Blomgren, 1992).

While these unintended consequences are of great concern, the bottom line is that the field of learning disabilities has suffered one of the most dangerous unintended consequences imaginable-- stagnation. Problems in the field have been attributed to poor implementation of mechanistic principles (Kauffman, 1994), leaving the principles themselves intact. As a result, all previously implemented reforms in the field have occurred at the methodological level only, never at the theoretical level where effective change occurs (Poplin, 1988). This failure to make effective changes and authentic progress has brought the field to its current crisis state.

#### The Current Crisis in the Field of Learning Disabilities-- The Failures of Realism

Skrtic describes how anomalies, or irregularities, in a paradigm are uncovered, creating ambiguity, uncertainty, and an impetus for change (1991). In the field of learning disabilities, and indeed in special education as a whole, nagging anomalies, contradictions, and unintended consequences are being identified and criticized by what Gergen and Gergen have referred to as the "family of malcontents" (cited in Heshusius, 1989, p. 406). These professionals have come to understand that the crisis which learning disabilities is facing is inevitable given the inherent faulty logic of learning disabilities theory. The crisis is due to the inadequacy of the realist perspective when applied to the problem of students who are not successful.

How have these anomalies manifested themselves as a crisis in the field of

learning disabilities? Realism has failed to accomplish all that it has promised, and as a result, professionals are confused (Skrtic, 1991). Realism, as part of the mechanistic paradigm, promised to reduce to a simple understanding the complex problem of why some children don't succeed at school. To accomplish this, professionals have struggled to develop operational definitions, logical systems of categorization, and effective interventions aimed at remediating abnormal neurology and perceptual skills. After nearly a century of these efforts, however, realism has not delivered the simplicity and certainty of a diagnostic/prescriptive model which appeal to many professionals (Poplin, 1984).

In relationship to definitions, Hammill cites eleven different definitions which are prominent in the field today (1990), and while he claims that a consensus is possible, Sleeter points out that the debate has not come close to being settled in the past twenty-five years since the term learning disabilities was coined (1988). Kosc labels the definitions as diffuse and their meanings unclear (1987). Poplin further argues that research does not indicate that it is possible to develop objective criteria for the identification of learning disabled students (1984). It is simply impossible to reduce complex behaviors and problems down to a definition from which a checklist of criteria may be developed. Learning disabilities can never be defined as an independent variable because it is not a diagnostic term; it does not express symptoms, etiology, or interventions but merely labels a heterogeneous group of students (Kosc, 1987). Professionals have, however, felt the pressure to formulate a concrete definition for learning disabilities and as a result have made it more complex as opposed to questioning the concept (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1983).

Despite the ambiguity of the definition of learning disabilities, professionals have developed criteria for identification and categorization of learning disabled



students. Such efforts to differentiate categories for learning disabled children represent the mechanistic need for order (Adelman, 1992). The criteria developed, however, are not always congruent with the definitions (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982). Furthermore, placement decisions are often made independently, even contradictorily, from the criteria according to professional judgments (Ysseldyke et al., 1982a). Different professionals may even apply the same criteria to the same group of students yet identify different subgroups as learning disabled (Sleeter, 1987). The result is a system of categorization which groups students according to similar labels, not common needs (Adelman, 1992). In fact, data suggests that there are few differences between students labeled learning disabled and low-achievers; there is just as much homogeneity between groups as there is within (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982). The conclusion made from this data is that the definition of and criteria for categorization of learning disabled students is too ambiguous to be accurate. Not only are the labels useless and uninformative, but Adelman also criticizes them as being harmful to the students who carry them (1992). Interviews of adults who had been labeled learning disabled support this assertion by describing how the label and subsequent placement often created problems of low expectations and poor self-esteem and taught students how to "act learning disabled" (Murphy, 1992, p. 122).

Because efforts in the areas of definition and categorization have not been successful, the diagnostic/prescriptive model has not proven to provide effective interventions in delivering instruction (Iano, 1986). In fact, some critics of the realist perspective argue that the field has been preoccupied with classification at the expense of developing solid interventions (Forness & Kavale, 1987). Those interventions which have been developed grew out the realist perspective in that they

assumed the internalization of the problem within the students and fail to remediate problems within a larger context (Iano, 1992). Likewise, the interventions have been reductionistic, but researchers have not produced evidence that reductionistic techniques improve learning (Poplin, 1984). In fact, such techniques remove learning from meaning which decreases generalization of learning (Iano, 1990). Murphy contends that not only are such interventions ineffective, but they are also detrimental in that they perpetuate failure and cause students to fall further and further behind (1992). Despite the lack of evidence supporting reductionistic techniques, they have in fact become mandated by special education laws (Poplin, 1984).

Because educators have come to understand learning disabilities from the realistic perspective, they accept the ambiguities of definitions, the systems of seemingly arbitrary categorization, and the assumptions that reductionistic techniques are appropriate for learning disabled students. Professionals are, however, confused by the contradictions resulting from the inadequacy of the realist philosophy. Rather than examine the underlying philosophy, however, they redouble their efforts (Poplin, 1988) and seek to apply mechanistic principles more faithfully. The result is an even greater emphasis on definitions and categorization to the exclusion of interventions (Forness & Kavale, 1987), and the needs of students sometimes remain unmet.

Public criticism of special educators in the learning disabilities field has accompanied professional confusion. Special educators are criticized as being incompetent because of their failure to cure the learning disabilities of students with, by definition, average or above average IQ (Iano, 1986). The public is alarmed by prevalence figures which have jumped from 2% of school aged children or 29% of the special education population being identified as learning disabled in 1978 to 4.5% and 40% identified as such in 1990 (Bender, 1995). Because of the costs involved in

special education programs, tax payers are questioning the existence of learning disabilities and are demanding educators produce absolute criteria for determining who does and does not have learning disabilities (Hammill, 1990). The present crisis in the field of learning disabilities threatens to undermine public faith in and support of special education services for the learning disabled (Hammill, 1990). This threat makes resolution of the crisis even more urgent.

The “family of malcontents”, then, has begun to criticize realism and the entire mechanistic paradigm as being the cause of the turmoil in special education (Heshusius, 1989). Carrier asserts that realism has created an entire theory of learning disabilities which is based on assumptions, not facts, and claims subjective decisions as scientific discoveries (1986). Poplin goes even farther by claiming that the reductionistic practices, as associated with realism, “categorize otherwise normal students as disabled (1987, p. 74). Apple argues that the realist conceptualization of learning disabilities fails to recognize the functions of schools within the larger society, and as a result, social, political, and economic factors are ignored (1979). As these anomalies are uncovered and examined, realism will lose its dominance in the field of learning disabilities, and professionals will begin to redefine the guiding assumptions in the field as they form a new perspective from which to see (Skrtic, 1991).

#### Nonrealism as an Alternative Philosophy

Despite the criticisms of the realist philosophy, the philosophy is not necessarily incorrect. Rather, it is an impossible and incomplete philosophy as applied to the field of learning disabilities because objective truth cannot be discovered independent of interpretation, human behavior cannot be predicted and controlled, and the whole of educational experiences cannot be understood in terms of individual pieces (Heshusius, 1989). It inappropriately isolates variables and removes the problems of

students from context (Iano, 1986). It ignores the social, political (Carrier, 1986), and economic factors involved in learning (Apple, 1979). The alternative philosophy of nonrealism attempts to overcome the limitations of realism by examining learning problems within the larger context.

As realism is part of the comprehensive mechanistic paradigm, nonrealism must be understood as part of the holistic world view (Heshusius, 1989). While realism defines reality as being objective, measurable, and separate from the observer, nonrealism defines reality as subjective and constructed by the interpretation of the observer (Heshusius, 1989). Nonrealists assert that no subject within the social sciences, including learning disabilities, can be studied independent of human interpretation because no independent reality exists (Iano, 1986). Teaching and learning can only be studied and interpreted within the larger context of social interchanges (Heshusius, 1989). In terms of learning problems, then, nonrealists do not internalize all behaviors as intrinsic, natural dysfunctions within the learner; rather, they explain learning problems as socially constructed or invented phenomena (Carrier, 1986). The conceptualization of learning disabilities as a way to explain such problems represents decisions, not discoveries, about the nature of learning (Poplin, 1986). It is necessary to note, however, that nonrealists do not ignore neurology, as critics such as Kronick have suggested (1990). Neurology is simply regarded as a possible contributing factor in learning disabilities.

Such an explanation of reality fits into the holistic paradigm, a world view which explains phenomena in terms of relationships (Heshusius, 1989). Included in this paradigm is the belief that the whole cannot be understood by reducing it to its components (Poplin, 1988). Likewise, scientific inquiry in the holistic paradigm is driven by purpose, not data, and therefore requires studying the whole social context

in addition to individual, measurable behaviors; it is concerned with complexity, not simplicity (Heshusius, 1989). In other words, holism is humanistic as opposed to mechanistic (Heshusius, 1989).

When the history of learning disabilities, from the time of conceptualization, is reexamined from the nonrealist perspective, learning disabilities are understood as constructed, rather than discovered. The naturalization of learning disabilities was justified as scientific progress and perpetuated as being in the best interests of students. But a nonrealist interpretation of history reveals that the theory of learning disabilities was constructed as another way to sort children to meet the needs of a bureaucratic system (Ysseldyke et al., 1982b). Such an interpretation is necessary to resolve the crisis in which the field of learning disabilities currently finds itself in and has important implications for the future.

#### The History of Realism as the Dominant Philosophy-- From the Nonrealist Perspective

It has been established that the philosophy of realism has dominated the field of learning disabilities from the earliest research to the current interventions. The case has also been made that the realist philosophy is inherently illogical and has resulted in unintended consequences. Given the failures of realism, then, why has the realist perspective continued to define learning disabilities? What were the historical circumstances which allowed, even perpetuated, a realist conceptualization of learning disabilities? The nonrealist interpretation of the history of learning disabilities identifies several complex issues which facilitated a realist conceptualization of learning disabilities including the following: the dominance of the medical model in education (Murphy, 1992); the efforts of researchers in the field to achieve legitimacy by appearing scientific (Skrtic, 1991); national pressure to increase standards (Sleeter, 1988); the way in which schools were/are structured (Sleeter, 1987); the

need to find a "management strategy for avoiding a far broader issue-- school failure" (Murphy, 1992, p. 125); the social climate in which the influential were seeking to justify social inequities (Carrier, 1986); and the function of schools within the larger political and social context (Apple, 1979).

The adoption of the medical model for understanding learning disabilities served to absolve educators from the responsibility of student failure (Murphy, 1992). Because learning disabilities were attributed to neurology and internalized in the students, educators could not be held ultimately accountable for their failure to succeed in school (Carrier, 1986). Not only did the medical model lessen the guilt of educators, but it also helped obscure bigger, more complex issues through preoccupation with individual dysfunction (Murphy, 1992). Applying such a medical model fit the prevailing mechanistic world view that "if the shoe doesn't fit, something must be wrong with your foot" (Murphy, 1992, p. 120?).

The realist philosophy of defining learning disabilities as an identifiable, naturalized, intrinsic condition also served to provide researchers with the respectability of scientific objectivity. As explained, the mechanistic paradigm values positivistic, technical data collection, and certainty. Those who studied learning disabilities, then, were interested only in those factors which they could observe and measure, and their conclusion were presented as scientific truths because admitting uncertainty would have damaged their credibility as scientists (Carrier, 1986). In addition, educators were also struggling to establish professional credibility and accepted the realist diagnostic/prescriptive model because of its seemingly medical, scientific, and therefore professional nature (Skrtic, 1991) The realist model appealed to educators because it promised professionalization through the natural science/technical model of scientific inquiry (Iano, 1986). Finally, scientific credibility

was important in order for proponents of learning disabilities theory to secure legal and financial recognition from the legislature (Carrier, 1986).

Public pressure to raise literacy standards in order to meet the demands of international competition in the 1960s was accompanied by public criticism that schools were not tough enough on underachievers (Sleeter, 1988). This pressure to raise achievement scores encouraged ability grouping and tracking of students who were unable to keep up with the increased demands. Those students who could not keep up but who also did not meet the criteria for mental retardation presented classification problems. Those from middle class families could not be placed in the existing programs for the culturally deprived, and so the situation encouraged the emerging learning disabilities theory to provide a socially acceptable explanation for middle class students who were not keeping up with increasing standards (Sleeter, 1988). During the standards movement, the IQ/achievement component of disabilities and the neurological basis of learning disabilities defined learning disabled students as bright and having promising futures while sparing parents from guilt and stigma.

The realist conceptualization also served the educational institutions in which it was operationalized. These schools, functioning in the mechanistic paradigm, viewed teachers as transmitters of basic knowledge to students who were to learn it with little variation or individualization (Sleeter, 1987). In such schools where efficiency was critical, reading and writing skills were relied upon; those students whose strengths were not literacy represented problems for the system (Sleeter, 1987). Their failure seemed inexplicable, they required more teacher time, and they were seen as resistant (Blomgren, 1992). The realist conceptualization of learning disabilities, complete with the naturalization of mentality, internalized the problem to the students who could then be blamed and removed in order to preserve the structure of the

schools (Sleeter, 1987). Consequently, the realist interpretation of learning disabilities, and of special education in general, not only absolved teachers of responsibility, it also allowed educators to avoid real cause of school failure (Skrtic, 1991). By classifying learning problems as pathological, educators could maintain the rationality of the education system and deny the need for change. "The objectification of school failure as student disability through the institutional practice of special education . . . prevents the field of general education from confronting the failures of its functionalist (realist) practices and thus acts to reproduce and extend these practices" (Skrtic, 1991, p. 44).

The bureaucratic structuring of schools and the realist interpretation of learning disabilities served larger functions of education-- to preserve the current distribution of wealth (Apple, 1979) and to justify the resulting social inequities (Carrier, 1986). By naturalizing mentality, educational performance, achievement, and subsequent life chances also become naturalized and social inequities could be blamed on intrinsic dysfunction or natural differences (Carrier, 1986). In fact, the theory of cultural deprivation (poor educational achievement attributed to environment) was colonized by learning disabilities theory; that is, cultural deprivation was explained as being the natural result of learning disabilities, again attributing social inequities to neurology (Carrier, 1986). In other words, learning disabilities became a way to justify poverty, blame the victim, and maintain the status quo by delivering reduced curriculum which further disadvantage the already disadvantaged (Carrier, 1986). Thus, while it was originally a middle class concept, learning disabilities soon became a category of low socioeconomic students (Carrier, 1986). The category of learning disabilities was also conceived as part of an entire categorization process which served the interest of the upper class and industry by justifying as instructional interventions teaching



techniques which taught students repetition and obedience (Lily, 1990).

The realist conceptualization also served the interests of the white majority. In the early history of the category, learning disabilities became the disability of choice for middle class white children. Their parents advocated for recognition of and services for learning disabilities because they saw it as a more acceptable, less stigmatizing category of special education than mental retardation or emotional disturbance (Carrier, 1986). During the civil rights movement, however, learning disabilities became a category for minority children who had previously been over-identified in the other special education categories (Carrier, 1986). Thus, a realist interpretation of learning disabilities rationalized discriminatory practices in schools.

The social context in which learning disabilities was conceptualized has not changed dramatically. Learning disabilities are still being interpreted from a realist point of view and still serve political, social, and economic functions. Therefore, even if the historical dominance of realism is understood, the implications are examined, and a nonrealist perspective of learning disabilities is explored, it is not enough. Educators must revise their thinking and redefine their understandings of learning disabilities. The field is at a crossroads. It is time for fundamental change and authentic progress for the benefit of all students.

#### Learning Disabilities-- At a Crossroads

While the realist philosophy of learning disabilities is inadequate, and the label of learning disabilities is socially constructed, it cannot be disputed that some students have problems in school (Kronick, 1990). How professionals chose to understand, explain, and approach these problems, however, is critical. At the present time, researchers and educators have two choices: to continue working toward an objective, certain, infallible diagnostic/prescriptive model or to construct a new

perspective from which to examine the social context of learning problems.

Should professionals choose to maintain a realist orientation, they will be limiting the possibilities for progress. Realism and the mechanistic paradigm has brought the field as far as possible; more of the same is futile (Poplin, 1988). It is impossible that realism will ever deliver all it has promised. Granted, natural science/technical research has provided teachers with useful information, and future empiricist research can surely provide future insights (Carnine, 1987). However, when such research is limited by the scope of realism, researchers will merely be collecting new data for the same old theories (Kavale & Forness, 1987). The danger is that while the new data appears scientific and progressive, the field is merely stagnant, and changes are made only at the surface level (Poplin, 1988). Such changes may address symptoms but not causes. As Blomgren explained it, continuing efforts within the realist perspective represent effort to “repair a structure that is moving in the wrong direction” (1992, p. 244). It may be easier for professionals, but given the unintended consequences of realism already apparent, is it enough?

It seems, then, that the choice of continuing efforts in the realist vein may not be a wise choice. Realism may never allow the field of learning disabilities to progress any farther given the limitations of the philosophy. Furthermore, would professionals really want realism to accomplish all that it has promised? What additional unintended consequences would the field and students experience? A recent article in Time reported scientific breakthroughs which have possibly located the area in the brain where learning disabilities may be manifested (Alexander, 1994). Such a discovery creates the possibility of a future medical test to determine the definite neurological presence of learning disabilities. Should this occur, what if thousands of students, currently identified as learning disabled, did not test positive for learning disabilities?

Likewise, what if students who were not experiencing problems in schools did test positive for learning disabilities? Furthermore, how would the testing information be helpful to teachers? Attempts to separate “real learning disabled” students from students with similar problems is arbitrary since the consequences of the label are the same regardless of neurology (Murphy, 1992). Such efforts are similar to the age-old, but futile nonetheless, nature versus nurture debate. Carried to its logical conclusion, realism does not promise to be the most productive model for professionals to follow.

The only solution for negotiating the crossroads, then, seems to be for the field of learning disabilities to formulate a new perspective from which to conceptualize learning disabilities. Doing so would require several changes in how professionals think about not only learning disabilities, but also about learning, teaching, schools, and society. Such changes will be possible only from a nonrealist perspective as part of the holistic paradigm.

What is the possibility that such changes can occur? Admittedly, theories in special education are difficult to change for several reasons. First of all, changes in fundamental beliefs require professionals to first recognize their own belief and then find the courage to move beyond them (Heshusius, 1989). This is an enormous obstacle given the investments of time and effort professionals have made in the realist perspective. An entire area of speciality and thousands of careers have been built on realist principles, and professionals instinctually want to protect that foundation. In addition, theories in special education are difficult to change because inquiries are restricted to that which is observable (Kavale & Forness, 1987). Finally, the bureaucratic nature of schools and the deep entrenchment of tradition are formidable obstacles of change (Hurn, 1978). Skrtic acknowledges these barriers to change but offers hope that they can be overcome and that effectual change can

occur. His proposal is for professionals to develop a dialogical discourse between existing theories and paradigms in order to achieve a hermeneutical understanding. In addition, he encourages educators to develop an adhocratic spirit, as opposed to a bureaucratic mentality, in order to act like problem solvers (1991).

Given that the barriers can be overcome, the adoption of a nonrealist perspective will result in several changes. Changes would include new methods of inquiry which would explore contexts and relationships, not predetermined variables, in order to generate genuine, progressive data which will be useful in the field (Iano, 1986). Educators would also develop a new view of teachers as real educators, not technicians following prescribed, reductionistic procedures (Iano, 1990). In turn, new methods of teacher preparation would be developed to teach educators to clarify ideals and explore possibilities as opposed to drilling them over technical skills (Iano, 1986). Additionally, genuine progress would require that professionals develop a new definition of what it means to help students. Such a definition would recognize that teachers do not have all the answers and cannot cure students but rather can work as partners and affirm the dignity of all students (Blomgren, 1992). Providing such help would require new models of service delivery which are integrated, community-based, less medicalized, and focused on the entire educational system, not just the individual (Murphy, 1992). The interventions would be implemented without labels to all students having difficulty according to skill needs in real world settings (Murphy, 1992). New educational aims would be formulated that "provide to many the same quality of education presently reserved for the fortunate few" (Lily, 1992. p. 89?) To achieve such lofty aims, new structures for education would be necessary to truly address the needs of students and stop trying to change them to fit social needs (Sleeter, 1988). The entire system of special education would be deconstructed in order that then

entire system of general education might be reconstructed to meet the aims (Skrtic, 1991). Carried to its logical conclusion, nonrealism promises to be more productive for the field of learning disabilities than does realism.

### Summary and Conclusions

The realist construction of learning disabilities is plagued with unfounded assumptions, logical tautologies, and contradictions. As a result, the field of learning disabilities has suffered unintended consequences and now faces confusion and criticism. An alternative, more comprehensive and more humane philosophical basis has been suggested. This nonrealist philosophy examines not only neurological factors of learning disabilities but also sociological, environmental, and structural factors. Only such an multi-faceted understanding can provide educators with a truly meaningful definition of learning disabilities as expressed by Poplin:

the result of some unfortunate interaction between students' neurology, previous experiences (both in and out of school), their expectations, interests, personalities, aptitudes, and abilities AND the experiences, expectations, goals, physical characteristics, personalities, interests, and abilities encountered at school (1984, p. 132).

Realism and nonrealism are two opposing philosophies from which one can choose to view reality and explain phenomena such as learning disabilities. Neither philosophy is inherently correct or incorrect, nor can they be complementary philosophies as suggested by Kronick (1990). To view the world from the realist or nonrealist perspective is a choice-- one which educators must make only after careful examination and critical reflection given the influence a chosen philosophy has on all subsequent decisions and actions. To date, this decision has been made haphazardly, without assumption of responsibility, and with empty references to the

best interests of children. It is time that professionals in the field of learning disabilities reexamine their choice and consider a new philosophy, nonrealism, by which they conceptualize learning disabilities.

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