



## Toward Ending Cultural and Cognitive Relativism in Special Education

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## ARTICLES

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# Toward Ending Cultural and Cognitive Relativism in Special Education

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Postmodernism, by whatever label, is intellectually bankrupt. It cannot be reconciled with a scientific view. If taken seriously, it leads to catastrophic consequences for any field of study, including special education. It also leads to malpractice in special education. Whole language instruction, radical multicultural education, and facilitated communication are areas in which it has led to serious compromise of clear thinking and best practice. We urge special educators to resoundingly reject postmodern ideas, as they are poisonous and can lead only to regression.

The philosophical/political program called *postmodernism*, whether referred to as “science studies,” “poststructuralism,” “hermeneutics,” “critical theory,” “cultural studies,” “deconstruction,” or other label, is intellectually bankrupt. It considers attempts at disinterested or objective research to be naive because it believes all forms of knowledge are exercises in power and hence all scholarship is political. It claims to provide the intellectual underpinning for various identity group politics that have emerged in the last 3 decades, especially those of feminism and multiculturalism.

Proponents of postmodernism say that science is merely a social construction. Therefore, the findings of science are not objectively or universally true. This thesis provides support for their claim that different cultural communities will do science differently and come to different conclusions. Hence there can be feminist science, or indigenous science, or Islamic science, or creation science, all of which can produce their own

knowledges that are just as valid as what were once regarded as the universally applicable findings of Enlightenment Western science.

One of the risks of defending science and traditional forms of scholarship is to be branded simply as right-wing, knee-jerk reactionaries. In fact, a favorite ad hominem attack used by nearly all postmodernists is to refuse to answer direct and specific points of argument, but instead question the motives and politics of the arguer. Thus, two postmodern assertions often made about the growing disgust with their doctrine are that these arguments primarily represent generational and political conflicts. We take each of these claims in turn.

Postmodernists argue that critiques of their beliefs are little more than middle-aged academics' defense of the remnants of science and their attempts to stem a rising tide of fresh and invigorating ideas from the younger generation (those challenging orthodoxy, e.g., Gallagher, 2004). They often describe their work as if it were new or cutting edge. Nothing could be more misleading. This movement is not the work of any younger generation. The majority of academics in the United States who are pushing these ideas are either well into their 50s or older. The Continental gurus who initiated the movement in the 1960s are now either in their 70s or are, like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel de Certeau, dead; as are their American counterparts Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Herbert Marcuse, and Paul de Man. The founders of cultural relativity, Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, are long gone. The movers and shakers of postmodernism are no longer moving or shaking.

The claim that criticism of the postmodern, cultural studies movement is nothing more than a vicious right-wing ruling class offensive perpetrated by politically conservative administrations is wishful thinking. In fact, the far right, like the far left, uses postmodern tactics profusely in its propaganda. Time is running out for postmodernism—a philosophy that reduces all things to discourse according to such writers as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Lyotard. Dissatisfaction with this movement has redoubled as academics on the left of the political spectrum perceive the connection between flawed methodological premises and hollow, dogmatic findings. An active, determined, scholarly movement now seeks to return fields of study to sanity and expose postmodern propaganda (e.g., Gross, Levitt, & Lewis, 1996; Koertge, 1998; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). Postmodernism, which has relied on being new, shocking, and destabilizing, is now the ruling dogma in many academic areas. Its effect in special education has been uniformly negative.

Many special educators have been reluctant to oppose postmodernism. Philosophy—or what currently passes for it—is not our area of study, and we have tended to credit (falsely) the postmodernists with sound intellectual tools and a sense of responsibility in using them. Because postmodernists have aligned themselves with words like *justice* and *liberation*, any criticism of their ideas is made to sound like a criticism of these concepts. As postmodernism has become dominant in universities, politics, and the work place, many have found their reputations and even employment in jeopardy if they did not at least pay lip service to the “new religion” (Bruce, 2001; Kors & Silverglate, 1998; Young, 1999). Hence, intimidation has been a major variable in the spread of relativist dogma. However, it is also becoming clear that many special educators find postmodern notions abhorrent and damaging to children (Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Sasso, 2001). It has

been easier to stay silent in the hope that postmodernism would simply go away. This has not happened; postmodern nonsense is attempting to colonize special education in much the same way that it has taken control in other disciplines, and it is time for us to engage in what can be called *boundary maintenance*.

Although we cannot expect to be rid of the muddle that postmodernism has made in education, we can at least expose the damage its beliefs have had on students with disabilities. Postmodern thinking is particularistic, chauvinistic, primitivistic, and deeply at odds with the analytic requirements of any serious discipline. And, whatever the view from inside departments of cultural studies, it is obvious that the leaky ark of postmodern theory is sinking fast, wallowing as if its crew has a lust for self-destruction. We are currently witnessing the discipline of cultural anthropology expire as a serious scholarly enterprise due to the invasion of postmodernism and, having seen its own relativism triumph within the humanities, it is dragging down these programs as well.

The oft-heard dismissal, that postmodern ideas have little effect, that they are totally insignificant outside the Academy, that they are harmless fun, should not be upheld to let the postmodernists off the hook. Postmodern ideas already have had adverse consequences in muddying the waters, in their antieducational effects on students who are force-fed on them, in dictating what research can and cannot be conducted, and in the resources they consume elsewhere. The most damaging effect in special education, however, is that postmodern pessimism about finding truth or effective methods of intervention undermine efforts to see that teachers can contribute to a more equitable life for people with disabilities through the effective application of willed effort and objective thought (Mostert, Kauffman, & Kavale, 2003).

### WHY WE CANNOT JUST ALL GET ALONG

A suggestion we encounter frequently is that we should be tolerant of others and accept alternative views of truth. We believe that others are entitled to hold whatever views of truth they may wish. We do not want to squelch the rights of others to speak their minds. However, we reserve our right to speak ours, and we feel it is incumbent on us to point out the probable consequences of postmodern philosophies. Failure to warn others of an anticipated disaster makes one complicit in that catastrophe.

Many people appeal to those with postmodern views and those with scientific views to find common ground. But in some cases there is no common ground except the scorched earth of extremists who insist that their view is always and absolutely correct and will entertain no qualifiers. The postmodern view is one of unwillingness to back away from the position that truth floats or is always constructed to suit the interests of those in power, especially in education or any other applied social science.

Postmodernism urges the rejection of science as the most useful tool of special educators. Postmodernism includes, as one of author Kauffman's postmodern e-mail correspondents expressed it in 1999, the idea that objectivity is simply unbelievable, that science has no particular advantage as a way of thinking about or investigating things, and that the general effectiveness of *no* professional practice can be determined (see Kauffman, 2002, pp. 214–215). It supports the notion that adherence to the scientific

method is irrelevant, if not harmful (see the discussion of “methodolatry” and other condemnations of Enlightenment science applied to the study of special education by Heshusius, 2004). Total rejection of Enlightenment science leaves no possibility of common ground. Argument that science has its limitations leaves room for debate about what those limitations are; argument that science has no particular advantage over other ways of knowing does not.

Finding common ground is sometimes nonsensical. It makes no sense to argue that common ground must be sought between those who believe in a heliocentric system of planets and those who take a terracentric view of the same system. It makes no sense to try to find common ground between those who believe that HIV/AIDS is caused by a virus and those who believe it is caused by other entities. Sometimes common ground can only be found by compromising (undermining) truth and promoting nonsense.

Lest we be misunderstood as calling for all postmodernists to abandon their beliefs, we urge readers to consider that virtually everything—including social attitudes, political persuasions, religions, philosophies, or substances related to health—is tolerable *at some level* in most environments. However, this does not mean that everything is tolerable at all levels or at the same levels in all environments. Many chemicals are tolerable at detectable levels as parts per million or parts per billion, yet have grave health consequences or are lethal at higher doses. Rodent hair is tolerable at some detectable level in many prepared foods but is not acceptable and presents a health risk at some higher level. Nazism, anarchism, and various other political or social philosophies that most of us find extremely distasteful are tolerated at low levels by free societies, although any such ideology is a significant threat to a society if it is dominant. Minor misbehavior is tolerable at some low level, but at some higher level it is wise to intervene. Letting misbehavior spin out of control before attempting to stop it is not sound practice from a philosophical, empirical, or practical standpoint. Most religions are tolerable outside of government policy; theocracy is not tolerable to a free people.

Extremist ideologies, whether religious or philosophical, lead inevitably to power struggles, especially if they are adopted by large numbers of citizens. Many people are rightfully opposed to the extremism known as scientism—the notion that science can provide answers to everything. But the opposite extreme—the idea that science provides clearly superior answers to nothing—is a retreat from knowledge and understanding that also creates justifiable opposition. Our argument is that science offers answers to many questions, not that it can answer all questions, and that failing to understand, pursue, and apply scientific knowledge to those issues in which it can be obtained is surely as self-debasing as scientism (Kauffman, 2002; Sasso, 2001). Ideological poisons exist in both religions and academic pursuits, and we see postmodernism as one such poison. The best antidote to this ideological poison is science in its Enlightenment tradition, not scientism.

We do not want to fall into the postmodern morass by assuming that any level of doubt justifies radical doubt, that risk is unacceptable at any level, or that postmodernism should be eliminated entirely because it is venomous. Yet three things seem clear to us. First, at some level a risk becomes unacceptable, and the public needs to be warned of such risks. Our society considers it negligent not to warn people explicitly of many significant risks. Second, we want certain attitudes and political philosophies to be domi-

nant in our society. For example, we want people to have an attitude of reasonable skepticism based on the principles we call Enlightenment science; we want people to work for social justice; and we want people to embrace democracy and reject totalitarianism. We want these ideas about science, social justice, and democracy to be dominant in our society. Third, some things are unacceptable even if they occur only once. Many crimes against people fall into this category. Incompetent or hurtful practices fall into this category. People are free in our society to believe whatever they wish, but they are not free to hurt other people by putting false ideas into practice (e.g., by marketing medicines through false advertising).

Postmodernism has definitely become the dominant view in some disciplines, such as literary criticism and philosophy (see Crews, 2001; Dworkin, 1996; Kernan, 1999; Shattuck, 1999), and there is danger of its becoming de rigeur in education. In fact, historian Diane Ravitch (2003) suggests that the “silent censorship” of educational tests and curricula has become de rigeur in education, that it has become deeply internalized to the point that it no longer needs to be explained or defended. “The language police believe that reality follows language usage” (p. 158) and that if we can purge our language of offensive words and phrases we will purge our thoughts and actions of the unseemly.

There are two basic reasons that we cannot all just get along, find common ground, or allow postmodernism to proceed without vigorous protest. The first is the catastrophic consequences of postmodernism for education if it becomes dominant. Its dominance results in malpractice. The second is that the postmodern and the scientific views of reality are simply incommensurable. They share no common ground; they are incompatible and irreconcilable, and trying to mix them always results in nonsense.

### CATASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCES

The postmodern idea of truth is that it varies, that there are no constants or objective facts against which we can verify things. The writer of a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* said, “All history is written from a point of view. That is what makes it interesting. Therefore, we should not expect ‘accurate history.’ There is no such thing” (Baron, 2003, p. WK 8). The denial of historical accuracy gives demagogues freedom to make up history as they wish (see Wilkins, 2001). Postmodernism invites demagoguery and oppression by its denial that truth exists independent of the power to “invent” history, events, facts, or relationships. It poisons the well of knowledge and makes disinformation reputable. It gives a free pass to those who ignore the needs and rights of others, regardless whether their ideology is labeled liberative or anything else. The argument that all claims to truth are equal sets up any social agency for catastrophic collapse and fosters a return to the rule of “might makes right” (Sasso, 2001).

We see catastrophe ahead if postmodernism becomes the dominant view—a disaster of educational practice, which inevitably means also a moral tragedy. The catastrophe created by postmodernism is as certain as that which would follow the release of anthrax spores into a crowded building. Others have noted that the consequences of postmodernism are severe: “Like anthrax of the intellect, if allowed into mainstream psy-

chology, postmodernism will poison the field” (Locke, 2002, p. 458; see also Mostert et al., 2003). Postmodernism will be catastrophic for educational practice simply because it can provide no clear guidance for choosing one method over another. One proponent of postmodernism stated in an e-mail to coauthor Kauffman (February 15, 1999) that the effectiveness of *no* educational procedure can be established (see Kauffman, 2002, p. 215). If this proposition is taken seriously, as is urged in many postmodern writings, then anything goes—except, of course, that which is proscribed by some authority figure. Any method can be touted as useful or successful, regardless of the data—or simply on anecdotal data or personal testimony accepted as convincing evidence.

The predictable catastrophic consequences of postmodernism for educational practice were described by Polsgrove and Ochoa (2004):

Unfortunately, the ideological rift in special education is not just a debate among academics. It is significantly affecting the course of educational programs for children with all types of disabilities. The repeated argument in the literature that disabilities are mere “social constructions,” that empirical practices are ineffectual, and that current special education services should be dismantled has generated considerable confusion among practitioners, administrators and policy-makers and is contributing to the endorsement and adoption of questionable practices and services. This atmosphere of uncertainty also has fostered the general impression in the field that any intervention is acceptable without the need for documentation of effectiveness (p. 165).

As a function of the “alternative” (to evidence-base) movement, practitioners are being widely encouraged in the special education literature to adopt vaguely defined alternative interventions that have little or no research bases. Poplin (1988, 1996) has repeatedly urged teachers to use what she terms the “liberatory pedagogies” (1996, p. 4): critical education, sociocultural constructivism, whole language instruction, (despite its abysmal instructional effectiveness) and feminist analyses. The effectiveness of these strategies, she indicated, will be based on “classroom tales” told by teachers (Poplin, 1996, p. 6). Along similar lines, Skrtic and Sailor (1996) assert that practices should be based on “correct choices.” “Because there are not objective criteria for making these decisions, values provide the grounds for judging the merit of our choices” (p. 276); however, Skrtic and Sailor fail to reveal what criteria will be used to determine the best values and who will ultimately decide which values take precedence over others. (p. 168)

One psychologist stated that postmodernism is nothing but parlor games (Krueger, 2002). Another psychologist commented:

A denial of objective reality is no friend to moral progress, because it prevents one from saying, for example, that slavery or the Holocaust really took place. And as Adam Gopnik has pointed out, the political messages of most postmodernist pieces are utterly banal, like “racism is bad.” But they are stated so obliquely that viewers are made to feel morally superior for being able to figure them out.

As for sneering at the bourgeoisie, it is a sophomoric grab at status with no claim to moral or political virtue. The fact is that the values of the middle class—personal responsibility, devotion to family and neighborhood, avoidance of macho violence, respect for liberal democracy—are good things not bad things. (Pinker, 2002, p. 416)

Postmodernism is the rejection of the fact that education requires applying science to problems in teaching and learning. This puts education in the same category as religion, and the consequences are similar—indoctrination, not education. Moreover, attempts to extend concepts of the “new physics” (e.g., the Heisenberg uncertainty principle) to education are ridiculous almost beyond belief (see Rhodes, 1987 for an example; Kauffman, 2002, pp. 109–116, 149 for refutation).

Postmodernism allows patent nonsense to corrupt the applied science of education. The consequences for the practice of education and for moral judgment about educational matters as well are predictably catastrophic. Following is part of an e-mail response of coauthor Kauffman (October 17, 2002) to a student who wrote him via e-mail requesting an appraisal of the credibility of postmodernism and qualitative research (recall that postmodernists support the belief that all ideas have equal merit, that none should be privileged, as espoused in special education by Danforth, 2001):

Are all statements of equal value, all positions equally valid? Should no idea be privileged over another? If so, I don't know why you are asking me anything. If you believe all ideas are equal, then you should ask yourselves the questions and answer your own questions. Then you should not believe anyone (including me or Danforth or your instructor or even yourself). Then you should doubt everything, including, of course, the proposition that everything is in doubt. Then make that the basis for your work. Where does that leave you? How does that help you or anyone else?

Postmodernism leaves us in an intellectual and moral morass. It is worse than unhelpful, as it denies the help available from scientific evidence in decision-making. It substitutes self-absorption and useless mind games for the practical help that teachers and others who are serious about helping students with disabilities need most desperately.

## INCOMMENSURABILITY

Kauffman's e-mail response (October 17, 2002) to the student inquiring about how postmodern and scientific perspectives might be bridged included this statement:

First, I do not think it's really possible to reconcile modern and postmodern ideas. I think they are incompatible, irreconcilable ways of looking at the world. I tried to make clear why this is so in my most recent book [Kauffman, 2002]. Some ideas cannot be “bridged” in any meaningful way (e.g., the idea that you are a figment of my imagination and the idea that you actually exist independent of my imagination). If I understand postmodernism, it is antiscientific; it opposes modern science. Some opposing ideas are, actually, incompatible (e.g., democracy and totalitarianism, belief in god and atheism, belief that all research should be qualitative and belief that qualitative methodology has a nonexclusive place in research, or belief in a heliocentric solar system and belief that the sun revolves around the earth). Danforth has said that he finds the idea of objectivity unbelievable. This is clearly incompatible with the notion that it is believable, albeit absolute objectivity (or absolute subjectivity, for that matter) isn't attainable. I recommend [Sasso, 2001]. Some gaps or differ-



ences are simply unbridgeable. That's just the way the world is. It's good to recognize that reality.

The student writing to Kauffman also expressed the opinion that Danforth's views (e.g., Danforth, 1997; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997) "ring true." Kauffman's e-mail response (October 17, 2002) continued:

Second, "ringing true" (if I understand what you mean) is not necessarily a good test of the truth of a given proposition. If by "ringing true" you mean that something just seems right to you, be careful. Remember that "ringing true" has a long history of misleading people. At one time, the idea that the earth is flat was "ringing true" for most people, as was the idea of a universe revolving around the earth (which was assumed to be the center of the universe). No doubt, many German citizens in the 1930s felt Adolf Hitler's antisemitism "rang true" for them, and those who did or do today teach racial superiority (whether the group assumed to be superior is white or black or any other color or is any given ethnic group) find that racial superiority "rings true" for them. Totalitarians of every stripe have relied on their rhetoric "resonating" with and "ringing true" for their audiences. So I find "resonating" and "ringing true" not to be very trustworthy tests of the truth of an idea....

I don't know what Danforth has said that resonates with you or that you think "rings true." Also, of course, the fact that something at one time "rings true" and at another is discredited is not alone a sufficient argument to reject "ringing true." I'd have to understand more about what "ringing true" entails for you. Science has been and can be wrong about things, and previous findings of scientists are sometimes overturned by more recent experiments. Nevertheless, "ringing true" as it is usually used (to indicate belief without confirmation by scientific evidence) is in my judgment an inadequate test of truth. Moreover, I think science is our best tool for trying to find truth or for approximating the truth. Of course, one can take the position (I obviously do not) that objective truth simply does not exist. One can, too (and I do not), take the position that quackery doesn't exist. I don't know what you think about any of this. I don't know what you think a quack is. Perhaps you find the idea that all ideas are equally valid and that no idea should be privileged over another to "ring true" somehow. It does not for me.

Postmodernism and science cannot be reconciled, simply because each demands a different view of reality that rejects the other. Spear-Swerling and Sternberg (2001) have noted that science is characterized by (a) evidence obtained by systematic observation and testing, (b) claims that can be demonstrated to be false (i.e., are falsifiable), (c) evidence submitted to critical peer review by the scientific community, (d) maintenance of the greatest objectivity possible, (e) evaluation of alternative explanations of data or phenomena, and (f) evaluation of a cumulative body of evidence. Postmodernism rejects these characteristics, which are essential to any science. Kauffman, Brigham, and Mock (2004) put it this way:

The field is confronted by a stark choice: either (1) the notion that closer and closer approximations of reality or truth can be obtained through scientific means or (2) the idea that there are multiple realities or multiple truths (about any given phenomenon), such that no "way of knowing" is superior or privileged (except that, according to postmodern ideology, any way of knowing that *rejects* science as the most trustworthy route to truth is superior to scientific

thinking). Some proponents of postmodernism may claim that a scientific view is not inferior but is simply no better than alternative ways of knowing, that all ideas must be treated as equal (see Danforth, 2001). Such an argument is clearly disingenuous and self-vitiating, as the person who makes such a suggestion is obviously arguing that his or her belief is superior to other beliefs about truth....

That is, the argument that all ideas are equal cannot be taken seriously, simply because the idea that all ideas are equal is obviously then asserted to be better than the idea that some ideas are better than others. The postmodern view of truth is an intellectual cul de sac from which the only possibility of exit is a reversal of argument. But some individuals have been led down this intellectual garden path without being informed by their leaders that their destination has no exit without turning 180 degrees. If their intellectual leaders are unaware of where they are going, then the old saying of “the blind leading the blind” applies. If these leaders are aware of where they are taking their followers, then we have a decidedly uncomplimentary view of their leadership. (p. 25)

Perhaps the point needs no further elaboration: postmodern ideas cannot be taken seriously by anyone who is serious about the scientific view. Bridging the differences between science and postmodernism is like trying to bridge the difference between moving toward and away from an object; the bridge cannot be built on any pragmatic ground. Surely, one might entertain the notion that, due to the curvature of space, if you were to travel an infinite (or at least unimaginable) distance away from an object you would eventually return to it, so actually you are both moving toward and away from an object no matter which direction you move. But such an intellectual observation is of absolutely no practical consequence in the world of earthbound objects, and to take such an assertion seriously in everyday life would be absurd. Yet this kind of mind game that subverts the practical and makes moral choices absurd is the essence of postmodernism.

## EXAMPLES OF POSTMODERN MALPRACTICE

Certain educational practices are recommended by postmodernists, albeit without supporting scientific data, sometimes even in the face of scientific evidence to the contrary. We discuss only three practices: whole language instruction in reading, radical multiculturalism, and facilitated communication to illustrate how postmodern assumptions lead to perfidy in practice.

### Whole Language Reading

Proponents of whole language reading instruction depict their approach as one of continuous struggle, probably referring to the struggle of holism or a holistic approach to reading (the idea that the whole of language cannot be meaningfully analyzed or taught in component parts, including the notion that words should not be segmented) against direct instruction in sound-symbol correspondence. The struggle is portrayed as one for social equity, assumed to be achievable only through a whole-language-oriented, literature-based approach to reading. Whole language is a set of beliefs or intentions, a constructivist philosophical position that a particular set of practices is best. It is pur-

ported to be based on research (although its research base will not survive careful scrutiny). Spear-Swerling and Sternberg (2001) report how one school district decided to drop explicit instruction in word analysis (i.e., phonics instruction) in spite of evidence that it was effective in teaching reading because school administrators judged it (phonics instruction) to go against their philosophy of education. Whole language reading appears to be a philosophical struggle against a phonics or phonetic code approach, but it is more difficult to define whole language as a set of instructional procedures. As one leading reading researcher noted, “Even at its most popular, whole language defied definition by those who attempted to study it objectively” (Moats, 2000). Its ideology, defiance of clear definition, and rejection of objective scientific evidence are entirely consistent with postmodernism.

Central to whole language is the idea that “reading is a process of meaning construction” (Goodman, 1992, p. 193). One of the primary proponents of whole language stated, “During my doctoral studies I became aware that philosophically I am a social realist and educationally a social reconstructionist” (Goodman, 1992, p. 192). Whole language is not easy to define; it does not say how teachers should instruct students. Whole language encompasses what Goodman sees as compatible educational concepts and movements, including:

- Process writing and the National Writing Project
- Developmentally appropriate experience
- Multigrade and family grouping
- Cooperative and collaborative education
- Language across the curriculum
- Language-experience reading
- Theme cycles and thematic units
- Literature-based reading instruction and literature sets
- Questioning strategies for students and for teachers
- Child-centered teaching
- Critical pedagogy
- Critical thinking
- Nongraded schools
- Emergent literacy
- Authentic assessment
- Conflict resolution (Goodman, 1992, p. 196)

Saying what whole language is *not* appears to be nearly as hard as saying what whole language *is*. However, it is decidedly not oriented toward typical scientific endeavors. Goodman (1992) claims that whole language reading emerged from the work of teachers. Teachers did the scientific work of discovery, he claims: “*I didn’t found whole language; whole language found me*” (Goodman, 1992, p. 188). Goodman’s is a clever use of the word *found*, and it suggests that university researchers (as opposed to classroom practitioners) play an insignificant role in the discovery of knowledge. But science does not typically emerge from the work of practitioners, whose primary task is applying the scientific evidence found by others. Consider that the notion of every physician being a research psychopharmacologist is ludicrous. The idea that every mechanic is a mechani-

cal engineer may offer a flattering title to mechanics, but we recognize immediately that the title does not confer engineering research expertise. Much the same could be said of other professions. Not only is it totally unrealistic to expect teachers to be competent researchers, it is difficult to get them to apply the findings of others' research (Tankersley, Landrum, & Cook, 2004). Education has a long history of rejecting the application of scientific evidence to practice (Hirsch, 1996). Besides, "it is unrealistic to assume that individual teachers, working independently, can implement and sustain the host of research-based practices that we know are necessary to prevent reading failure" (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2001, p. 69).

Teaching children to read has long been controversial (Chall, 1967, 1989). The empirical data unequivocally suggest that most children must be taught explicit phonetic rules for decoding words if they are to learn to read (see Coyne et al., 2001; Moats, 2000; Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 2001; Vaughn et al., 2003). However, the whole language philosophy is that children learn to read as they learn to speak, naturally, without explicit instruction, through emersion in a literate environment where they see others reading and are exposed to good literature. Defenders of whole language see "oral and written language as alternative forms of the same process" and that reading must be evaluated only in authentic sociocultural contexts (Bialostok, 1997, p. 624).

Learning how to articulate certain sounds is a byproduct of learning how to say what you want to say, but it's the life in the home and the learning to live there that's the important thing. And just as a child learns to talk by living immersed in the language of the home, so I found that children learn how written language works by living in the real worlds they and their teachers created in these classrooms...

Written language is so much a part of living in these classrooms that children have opportunities to learn to read and write the way they learned to speak—by constant, meaningful, authentic use. (Eeds, 1994, pp. 8–9)

The empirical data are ignored by postmodernists in favor of a philosophical or ideological view that speaking and reading are different sides of the same coin and things must be taught as a *whole* (hence, *whole language* in reading). Holistic education suggests that material analyzed into its constituent parts is meaningless (hence the term *holism*; see Heshusius, 1994; Iano, 1986; Lamon, 2003; Poplin, 1988). Disciplines outside education—particularly anthropology and philosophy—provide much of the theoretical foundation for this view, which is based on the notion of constructivism.

Constructivists argue that learners create or construct their own knowledge and perspectives on the world. They believe that educational tasks must be *authentic* and *socially mediated*. Therefore, they argue, the key to teaching reading is to get children to construct their own knowledge of written language in authentic social situations. A concrete example of this, provided by Eeds (1994), is the way in which invented spellings are handled in typical whole language classrooms:

Dear Mary I wit up to Venna I sad we er going to mak a pictchr of hallaween today. She sad wats hallaween? i sad hallaween is win you dras up in a costum and tri to skar people and the nakst theg I neoo...(p. 8).

Researchers do understand that invented spellings are typically seen as children learn to spell, but unlike proponents of whole language they use the misspelling to gauge instructional level and to direct appropriate instruction toward correction of the student's mistakes. Certainly, proponents of direct instruction may see a place for groups varying in age but homogeneous in level of performance in what is being taught, and peer tutoring can be compatible with direct instruction when such tutoring is teacher-directed. However, the proponents of whole language seem to assume that whether or not a reader can decipher an invented spelling is irrelevant; what is relevant is the writer's construction and expression of experience and meaning. Moreover, they seem to assume that children will learn from each other simply by being together in multi-age classes. Multi-age classrooms are commonly a part of the whole language approach (see Griffin, 1994).

One of the most important concepts underlying constructivism is a rejection of behaviorism and the refusal to analyze the separate components of tasks. Constructivist or holistic theory defines learning as the opposite of such reduction, suggesting that

The task of schools is to help students develop new meanings in response to new experiences rather than to learn the meanings others have created. This change in the very definition of learning reveals principles of learning that beg consideration in designing classroom instruction (Poplin, 1988, p. 401).

A central tenet of constructivism is that the student is more than a repository for information. Constructivists try to "portray the student as a thinker, a creator, and a constructor" (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 126) and "[operate] under the assumption that everybody is smart and that everybody knows incredible things if you can get at it" (Eeds, 1994, p. 9). Many constructivist educators recommend the following:

- Complex, challenging learning environments and authentic tasks
- Social negotiation and shared responsibility as a part of learning
- Multiple representations of content
- Understanding that knowledge is constructed
- Student-centered instruction (Hoy, 2003, p. 679)

The fact that the whole language philosophy finds very little support in large-scale scientific studies has not deterred those who prefer ideology to science. In fact, a common tactic of proponents of alternatives to direct instruction is to attack it as ideological (e.g., Allington, 2005). Moats (2000) describes the constructivist approach:

In order to justify its love affair with whole language in the face of little or no evidence for its positive results, the field of reading education began to disavow scientific methodology and objective measurement ... Instead of acknowledging that objective assessments were proving them wrong, many reading-education researchers rejected objectivity itself ... Attitude, not achievement, became the outcome of concern ... The goal of teaching became love of reading, not the ability to read.

A few children do learn to read without apparent explicit instruction. Anecdotal reports of their learning to read have been taken as evidence that all or nearly all children will learn to read without explicit instruction in decoding words. Anecdotal reports of classroom experiences by teachers are taken as evidence that whole language is valid. The assumption that children will learn literacy at home is not a safe assumption. Moreover, reading comprehension and literature are not ignored by proponents of teaching children the phonetic, code-breaking skills they need to become fluent readers. Finally, no instructional approach, including direct instruction, works for every single child, albeit some instructional approaches produce better outcomes than others.

Project Follow-Through, the largest and best-designed comparison of various approaches to teaching yet completed, clearly indicates the superiority of Direct Instruction (a carefully scripted and tested and more traditional, teacher-controlled approach to teaching and learning) over alternative ideas (Becker & Gersten, 2001; Tashman, 1996; Watkins, 1996). Direct Instruction produced better gains not only in oral reading but in reading comprehension and self-concept. The data strongly indicate that Direct Instruction is among the most effective interventions available to special educators (Forness, 2001; Forness, Kavale, Blum, & Lloyd, 1997). Furthermore, the approaches favored by proponents of holism and whole language instruction have been shown to be faulty (i.e., not supported by empirical evidence) and to be prescriptions for the certain failure of special education instruction (Heward, 2003; Heward & Silvestri, 2005).

Direct Instruction is particularly important for children who come to school with little skill in understanding sounds and words and how sounds are represented by letters.

Phonemic awareness—the sense that words are composed of separate sounds and that sounds are combined to say words—in kindergarten and first grade predicts literacy in later grades. If children do not have phonemic awareness in the early grades, direct teaching can dramatically improve their chances of long-term achievement in literacy. (Hoy, 2003, p. 681)

Proponents of philosophical or religious positions on science or instruction often choose words that make their ideas seem more palatable to the unsuspecting. For example, *intelligent design* is now a term used in place of *creationism* to inject creationist ideology into the science of evolution (see Shermer, 1997, 2001). *Balanced instruction* is now used as a term to replace *whole language* in some instances.

In policy circles, the storm over reading instruction would seem to have calmed. State agencies, large school districts, and the U.S. Department of Education all claim to embrace *balanced* reading instruction. The concept of balance implies, in turn, that worthy ideas and practices from both whole-language and code-emphasis approaches to reading have been successfully integrated into an eclectic mix that should go down easily with teachers and kids. Educators who wish to take no stand in the reading wars may safely embrace a little of each perspective and claim that what they are doing is both based on “the latest research” and grounded in a philosophical synthesis between two previously warring positions.

Appearances can be deceiving, however, and painless solutions are often wrong. Unfortunately, many who pledge allegiance to balanced reading continue to misunderstand reading development and to deliver poorly conceived, ineffective instruction. In fact, despite nu-

merous claims by people in the field, the deep division between reading science and whole-language ideology has not been bridged. Probably it cannot and should not be. In my view, a marriage of these perspectives is neither possible nor desirable. It is too easy for practitioners, while endorsing “balance,” to continue teaching whole language without ever understanding the most important research findings about reading or incorporating those findings into their classroom practice. (Moats, 2000)

Whole language and its variants have become very popular in education in many school districts, in spite of the lack of reliable research data supporting such notions. It is an approach to reading that rejects scientific evidence (Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 2001), yet claims to be based on “both research and theory” (Coles, 2003, p. 10) and to be based on evidence rather than on ideology (Allington, 2005). But it asks teachers to choose instruction that research now clearly indicates produces more failures instead of instruction that produces fewer failures. Its advocates argue for the autonomy of teachers in deciding how to teach, even in the face of research showing the *general* effectiveness of direct instruction in reading (e.g., Allington, 2005). Others have noted that we would not tolerate such nonsense in areas of our lives outside of education.

Approaches to teaching beginning reading provide a good example [of rejection of empirical evidence]. It would seem practicable to select the teaching method that produces the lowest rate of reading failure among students in general, which happens to involve phonics. In spite of the accumulated empirical evidence on this issue, schools continue to invest in a variety of less effective approaches to teach children beginning reading. The social and human costs of this failure are reflected in the 4 out of 10 beginning readers who need structured assistance and teaching to master the complexities of reading (Lyon, 2002). This is analogous to a surgeon choosing to perform a procedure that has a 19% mortality rate over one that has a 10% rate because (1) it is easier to do, (2) the surgeon is trained in it, and (3) the surgeon simply likes it better. Given the stakes involved, it is not possible for medical personnel to operate in this manner, yet such a practice continues in many of our schools today. It is likely that this practice is driven by such factors as educators not being trained in more effective intervention or instructional methods or being invested in philosophical approaches that are counter to more effective approaches and that account for their rejection. (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004, p. 52).

All teachers, especially special educators, need the most effective instructional tools available. The denial of objectivity, the notion that efficacy can not be determined (except that we should accept on faith that holistic and whole language instruction are superior because their philosophy says they should be), the idea that tasks can not be analyzed into component parts—all the ideological positions of the postmodernism adopted by the holistic and whole language approach to instruction in reading—serve only to deny effective help to struggling readers (see Moats, 2000).

### Radical Multiculturalism

We want to make clear that we fully support understanding cultures other than one’s own and the fair, unbiased treatment of all people to the greatest extent possible. We under-

stand that there is strong evidence of past and continuing unfair discrimination against various minority groups in our nation, and we do not condone it. Demeaning expressions and attitudes have no place in our view of a just society. Moreover, we see multiculturalism in its best sense as necessary to achieve social justice. Multiculturalism may be, as one scholar put it, “the price America is paying for its inability or unwillingness to incorporate into its society African Americans, in the same way and to the same degree it has incorporated so many groups” (Glazer, 1997, p. 147).

Nevertheless, the term *multiculturalism* has taken on new meanings and attracted zealous promoters who have warped its objectives with postmodern ideology and jargon. Ravitch (2003) opens her book with a quotation of U. S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis: “The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding” (p. 3). She explains how zealous promotion of an ideology in the use of language in tests and textbooks has turned into something like an obsessive–compulsive disorder:

Initially, these practices began with the intention of identifying and excluding any conscious or implicit statements of bias against African Americans, other racial or ethnic minorities, and females, whether in tests or textbooks, especially any statements that demeaned members of these groups. These efforts were entirely reasonable and justified. However, what began with admirable intentions has evolved into a surprisingly broad and increasingly bizarre policy of censorship that has gone far beyond its original scope and now excises from tests and textbooks words, images, passages, and ideas that no reasonable person would consider biased in the usual meaning of that term. (Ravitch, 2003, pp. 3–4)

Much the same extreme and unjustified ideas now plague multiculturalism, usually under the guise of postmodern ideology. The idea of multiculturalism has probably “won,” as Glazer (1997) puts it: it is here to stay. However,

Multiculturalism has now become a contested term, an epithet to some, a banner to others. Multiculturalism of some kind there is, and there will be. The fight is over how much, what kind, for whom, at what ages, under what standards. To say one is “for or “against” multiculturalism without going through all this effort is not to say much. (p. 19)

In language that meets the multicultural standards or expectations of most publishers today, we find the curious practice of stereotyping for the ostensible purpose of undoing past stereotypes, an inconsistency that some have noted with alarm (e.g., Ravitch, 2003). Multiculturalism seems now to represent the absolute proportional representation of every possible group in every possible role (except, of course, women, for example, may not be represented in their “stereotypical” roles of wives and mothers), the portrayal of all people in only positive terms, and the scrupulous avoidance of giving any possible offense to any possible person or putting any person at any kind of disadvantage (even to the point of excising references to animals a child may find objectionable, to weather or geographical features that a child may not have experienced personally, and so on; see Ravitch, 2003). But, again, the most disturbing aspect of multiculturalism as it is most often promoted today—and fostered under the banner of postmodernism, post-



colonialism, poststructuralism, and similar terms—is the way people are chosen, valued, or described by their *group* identity, not as individuals. The assumption that persons are defined by their gender, ethnic origin, disability, or other group marker rather than their individual characteristics is stereotyping. Such assumptions are to us no more justified in the pursuit of someone's idea of a multicultural society than is someone's attempt to justify revenge killing in the name of social justice.

Multiculturalism in its legitimate form recognizes that although all cultures have contributed important aspects to various endeavors, not all have done so equally in every way. Moreover, in the sciences as well as in the arts the legitimate multicultural view is that ideas of value transcend the culture in which they were produced (Pinker, 2002). True multiculturalism denies neither the achievements and value of any given culture nor the evils thereof, including the culture of the United States of America (see Pinker, 2002; Ravitch, 2003). Multiculturalism that is defensible recognizes cultural differences but emphasizes as more important the common humanity of people of all cultures. And effective multicultural education begins with good instruction (see Bateman, 2004; Engelmann, 1997 for descriptions of good instruction) and produces measurably superior outcomes that are not a function of students' cultural heritage. Although the outcomes of good multicultural teaching will vary, depending on what the student brings to the lesson, the outcomes are determined by the student's prior learning of the material being taught, not the student's group (cultural) identity. These principles of effective multicultural education hold whether the student is receiving general or special education.

The postmodern brand of multiculturalism represents all cultures as having equal merit, so that no cultural practice or belief can be said to be wrong or inferior, just as truth is said to depend on the power to construct it and assertions cannot be disproved by evidence. Moreover, in its postmodern guise, multiculturalism assumes that ideas and discoveries are necessarily hallowed or tainted by the identities of the persons who stated or discovered them. Thus, what we have known as science is actually Western European, male, heterosexual science, and the knowledges constructed by people of different identities (different from those named) have at least equal if not superior validity. Moreover, social constructs, such as intelligence, academic achievement, and appropriate behavior, may be defined differently by any cultural group according to ethnic origins, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and so on. The result of such extremes of cognitive and cultural relativism is the collapse of competent instruction and behavior management. It is, in fact, the collapse of intellectual life and of literature as something inspiring (Pinker, 2002; Ravitch, 2003) and of moral judgment (Dworkin, 1996). Ravitch has commented that "If all texts are of equal value, it hardly matters if some are neglected or bowdlerized" (p. 125), and "Writing is text; text is text. Everything is treated as literature, just because it happens to be printed" (p. 128).

Some have seen and noted the detrimental effects of such cultural relativism on individuals whom such projects are supposed to empower with new knowledge (see de Montellano, 1991, 1992; Koertge, 1996; Nanda, 1998). Nanda stated, "We prefer the cold, objective facts of science to the comfortable, situated knowledge of our ancestors for the simple reason that we refuse to subordinate what is good to what is ours" (1998, p. 299). Commenting on the pseudoscience pawned as actual science in Portland

Oregon's *African-American Baseline Essays*, dating from 1987, de Montellano (1991) commented:

Egyptian religion and ethics can be taught in comparative religion courses or in social studies, but that is quite a distance from teaching that Egyptian religion is essential to Egyptian "science" and that it is superior or equal to "Western" science. Teaching morality and ethics is compatible with teaching science. Ethical principles like honesty, truth, and respect for others are involved in science. Science also involves others, such as justice, quality, and avoidance of harm to others, in evaluating the consequences of research. These factors, however, do not apply when explaining and understanding scientific phenomena, when only natural laws may be used. The Second law of Thermodynamics does not have a supernatural or an ethical component. Its application in particular cases might have consequences that raise moral and ethical questions, and these might require discussion, but that is quite different from teaching that supernatural (or transmaterial) causes are acceptable explanations in science. (p. 18).

Minorities pay the biggest price for misinformation about science foisted on the unsuspecting under the banner of multiculturalism. The ostensible beneficiaries of multiculturalism end up being scientifically illiterate and are denied opportunities because they are taught falsehoods under the guise of cultural relativism. Reducing language to the insipid and the inaccurate serves no one well (Ravitch, 2003).

But the malpractice of multiculturalism does its gravest damage in special education. For in special education accurate identification and effective instruction are paramount concerns. Among the most obvious postmodern commentaries on special education is an attempt to apply multiculturalism to the misidentification of students with emotional or behavioral disorders (see Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Patton, 1998). Neal and colleagues first state that the movement patterns of African American males is based on their cultural heritage and that such movement patterns include a manner of walking that they call the "stroll," which is "characterized as a deliberately swaggered or bent posture, with the head held slightly tilted to the side, one foot dragging, and an exaggerated knee bend (dip)" (Neal et al., 2003, p. 50). They go on to suggest that "teachers might also perceive the walking styles of African American adolescents as inappropriate behavior that compromises their success in the general education classroom" (Neal, et al. 2003, p. 50). Their data show that both White and African American boys were more likely to be perceived by teachers as lower in achievement, more aggressive, and more likely to need special education if they walked with the described stroll than if their walk was standard, but that teachers attributed *higher* academic achievement to African American students than to European American students regardless of how they walked. They found no interactions between ethnicity and styles of walking, nor did they find ethnic differences in ratings of aggression or need for special education.

In short, Neal and colleagues (2003) attempted to make the case that ostensibly culturally based ways of walking may result in misidentification of African American students for special education. Their data do not support that conclusion. Rather, by ascribing cultural status to a walk—one that is not necessarily characteristic of African American males—they both suggest a denigrating stereotype of African American males

and cast doubt in the minds of educators about the significance of carrying oneself like a “gangsta” or a youngster behaving in a way that might suggest he is likely to be antagonistic toward school and learning. Actually, using a postmodern interpretation, Neal and her colleagues could interpret *any* differences appearing in their study as evidence of racism. Perhaps the anticipated outcome indicating racism in thinking about behavior would have been a perception of ethnic differences favoring European American students. The finding that teachers (mostly European American) rated non-African American students walking with the stroll lower in achievement than African American students walking with the stroll was interpreted by Neal et al. as evidence that the non-African American students walking with the stroll were perceived to be “acting Black” (p. 55), a racial pejorative and an indication of racial bias.

The postmodern use of multiculturalism is perverse, treating research with contempt, equating social justice with the indiscriminant treatment (i.e., acceptance) of all behavior, and supposing that any criticism of anything under the banner of multiculturalism or diversity is unjustified. Hendershott (2002) has detailed how such cultural relativism is now used to deny the deviance of nearly any behavior. The Neal et al. (2003) report is but one example of how multiculturalism can be misused in special education. Others include the denial of disability or the portrayal of people with disabilities as having no disadvantage (see Kauffman, 2002; Kauffman, McGee, & Brigham, 2004; Mostert et al., 2003; Ravitch, 2003 for additional examples). Worst of all, perhaps, is the use of race or ancestry as a proxy for academic achievement or behavior. Different interventions may, indeed, be effective for children differing in behavior or academic performance. The fact that race or ancestry may be correlated with behavior or performance must not lead us to assume that we can use race or ancestry as a proxy for performance or behavior, as that is the viciousness we call racism.

### Facilitated Communication

Inability to communicate is perhaps the most disabling condition. It is understandable that parents whose children cannot talk are deeply concerned. Parents whose children cannot speak by middle childhood feel robbed of one of the great joys of parenting—being able to have a conversation with your offspring. Thus it is not surprising that many parents of children with disabilities who cannot talk are desperate to find some means of communication with their child.

Enter facilitated communication (FC), a method (ostensibly of communication) developed by Rosemary Crossley in Australia and brought to the United States by Douglas Biklen (1990, 1993; see also Biklen & Schubert, 1991; Jacobson, Foxx, & Mulick, 2005). Facilitated communication involves an individual with disabilities typing with one finger with the assistance of a facilitator who provides emotional and physical support. FC has resulted in dramatic “discoveries” of unanticipated literacy in children and adults with autism, mental retardation, and other developmental disabilities. Mute children and adolescents were suddenly assumed to be writing amazing messages, often marking verb tense correctly, often achieving mostly correct spelling. Using FC, people with severe mental disabilities began writing poems, stories, and all manner of messages, including praise for Biklen and others who believe in FC, condemnation of those who

doubt FC, and accusations of sexual abuse at the hands of parents, teachers, or other child-care providers. At first, the media tended to portray FC as a breakthrough in communication. Later, it became clear to both researchers and the media that FC, as scientist Stephen Jay Gould, the father of a young man with autism put it, is a “poignant but truly unreasonable hope for communication” and “a ‘harmless’ sop to hope turned into a nightmare” (1997, pp. xi-xii; see also Shane, 1994b). The nightmare is the false accusation of child abuse by parents, relatives, and teachers of youngsters using FC. It involves not only false accusations and false hopes but also important decisions made on the basis of unreliable communication regarding medical treatment, placement, and relationships and squandered resources of time and effort that could have been put to good use in helping children with disabilities.

Among the most sublimely ridiculous claims made by FC proponents is that children with autism are using it to communicate with each other telepathically (see Haskew & Donnellan, 1993, pp. 22–23). The absurdity of the following statement should give pause to those who do not see FC as a nightmare in the making (we are reduced to Dave Barry’s riposte: *No, we are not making this up!*).

It has been estimated that sexual abuse rates for children with disabilities are four to ten times the 25 percent rate for the general population. That means, claims Nora Baladerian ..., that there is a better than 100 percent likelihood that a disabled child will be molested before he or she is eighteen. Facilitated Communication is confirming those statistics. We can safely assume that other forms of abuse are at least as commonplace. (Haskew & Donnellan, 1993, p. 31)

Biklen has founded a Facilitated Communication Institute at Syracuse University, and he and his colleagues who believe in FC have continued to support its use. Shane (1994b) notes that FC is unlike any other movement ever encountered in the fields of communication disorders and augmentative or alternative communication and that it “spread like wildfire” (p. 299). In fact, FC has become a worldwide phenomenon, with adherents in many nations other than the United States.

One enthusiastic supporter of FC stated, “Facilitated communication can be looked at as a post-modern idea ... It is social constructivism in communication” (quotation from Jacobson, Mulick, & Schwartz, 1995, p. 759). Danforth (1997) defended the use of FC because “postmodern philosophers propose that the sources of hope in the field of mental retardation services erupt from precisely those mouths and writing (or typing) that do not speak the language of science” (p. 104). But FC is perhaps the most demeaning of hoaxes because it ascribes words to individuals who did not author them. It is a clever pretense of communication by the person who is nonverbal.

Only anecdotal descriptions (sometimes purported to be qualitative research) support FC. Attempts to establish the authorship of messages through credible scientific study have shown that the facilitators, not the individuals with disabilities, are creating the messages (Gardner, 2001; Jacobson et al., 1995, 2005; Mostert, 2001; Shane, 1994a; Simpson & Myles, 1995). FC is supported by faith in the face of evidence that contradicts its validity as a means of communication by individuals with disabilities.

The term *postmodern* may well describe FC; so do the terms *quackery*, *fad*, and *fraud* (see Worrall, 1990). Jacobson et al. (2005) referred to FC as the ultimate fad treatment. Perhaps most troublesome of all is that FC represents the pretense of communication, and such pretense suggests that children with disabilities are valued for what they are fantasized to be rather than respected as the people they are (see Shane, 1994b). It assumes competence in communication that simply does not exist. FC is the kind of perversion that is produced by the retreat from knowledge and by the assumption that truth is constructed for someone's convenience willy-nilly. It is the kind of postmodern fashionable nonsense to which Sokal and Bricmont (1998) refer.

## CONCLUSION

A long-standing proposition of both liberals and conservatives is that if we are interested in social justice then we should speak truth to power—that truth gives power but does not emanate from it. That is, truth is not created by power but is an effective challenge to power that is based on or asserts falsehood. Postmodernism asserts that truth is simply made by the powerful for their convenience. Thus it deprives any opposition of the powerful of the most effective tool for social justice, whether the opposition is politically liberal or not. Others (e.g., Sokal & Bricmont, 1998) have made similar observations, but some see special irony in postmodern advocacy for the powerless:

It is ironic that a philosophy that prides itself on deconstructing the accoutrements of power should embrace a relativism that makes challenges to power impossible, because it denies that there are objective benchmarks against which the deceptions of the powerful can be evaluated ... Without a notion of objective truth, intellectual life degenerates into a struggle of who can best exercise the raw force to "control the past" [a reference to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, in which a government agent explains that whoever controls the past, through the deconstruction and reconstruction of history, controls the future]. (Pinker, 2002, pp. 426–427)

If knowledge or truth is simply defined by the power to make it, and especially if no idea should be privileged over another and objectivity is unbelievable, then the only hope of overturning what is perceived to be injustice is a putsch—the overthrow of the weaker by the stronger. As various totalitarian regimes have demonstrated repeatedly, that is the kind of political event that brings the opposite of social justice because it merely substitutes a new totalitarianism for the old or replaces a regime capable of social justice with one that is not. Even in the fields of fiction and literary criticism—in which postmodernism first found advocates—its horrifying political consequences have been recognized by some (e.g., Shattuck, 1999). Franzen (2001) says of one of his fictional characters, Chip, who had taught literary criticism and feminist studies and was at the time working in Lithuania,

It warmed his Foucaultian heart, in a way, to live in a land where property ownership and the control of public discourse were so obviously a matter of who had the guns. (p. 441)

We must be on guard also about the notion that truth is determined by who makes a statement. Some may be tempted to conclude that if a liberal makes a statement, then it must be misleading or that if a conservative says something it must be a lie (or vice versa). The truth of a statement is not determined by who makes it but how it corresponds to objective evidence. Jerking knees, liberal or conservative, are unreliable tests of truth.

Various newspaper columnists have noted how empirical evidence is sometimes abandoned in favor of ideology, how an authority figure's pronouncements are assumed to make things true (e.g., Cohen, 2003a, 2003b; Meyerson, 2003). It seems not to matter to proponents of postmodernism that their appeals for social justice through democratic epistemology or other philosophical contrivances that deny objective, empirical data are self-defeating and invite totalitarianism. Arianna Huffington is said to have explained how ideology can be recognized: "the utter refusal to allow anything as piddling as evidence to get in the way of an unshakable belief" (Raspberry, 2003, p. A17). Postmodernism is an ideology that eschews evidence in favor of belief, and its consequences are deception and powerlessness (except that power may be grabbed by force). One columnist noted, "As our newly liberated friends [in Eastern Europe] would remind us, the truth matters" (Ignatius, 2003, p. A17). However, the truth does not matter much if the truth does not exist at all or we assume that there are multiple, equally valid truths and one single truth is a chimera. Compare the statement of Ignatius to this one of postmodernists:

But the significant thing is that in postmodernity uncertainty, the lack of a center and the floating of meaning are understood as phenomena to be celebrated rather than regretted. In postmodernity, it is complexity, a myriad of meanings, rather than profundity, the one deep meaning, which is the norm. (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 10)

No doubt, some proponents of postmodernism are believers without reservation in the postmodern view of truth. But credulity is no compliment, whether the credulity is about things political, scientific, or educational. The unintelligibility of postmodernism is darkly funny (Kauffman, 2002). In his editorial cartoon for February 2, 2005 *Washington Post*, Tom Toles skewered postmodern notions without using the term *postmodernism*. The cartoon is a send-up of the idea of privatizing science, such that all are entitled to set up their own personal science facts, including their own personal facts regarding habitat, heavy metal poisoning, evolution, global warming, and so on. Likewise, in *Zippy the Pinhead* cartoons for February 1 and 2, 2005, cartoonist Bill Griffith points out the absurdity of postmodern cant. On February 1, Zippy claims to have superpowers allowing him to juxtapose unrelated ideas to create new paradigms that are comprehensible only to sophisticated, enlightened people. On February 2, Zippy helps a poor person who has become addicted to linear thinking and tells him how to combine the ideas of homeland security and Donald Trump's hair so that he can appoint Trump's hair as the head of the Office of Homeland Security. That is, Zippy tutors someone in postmodern nonsense, and the cartoon is hysterically funny in its send-up of ideas that postmodernists take seriously.

Self-deprecating humor seems not to be a part of postmodernism, perhaps because any attempt to poke fun at postmodern ideas reveals all too clearly that they are thor-

oughly laughable. Perhaps for this reason, postmodernists typically portray themselves as victims of those who see science as offering reliable answers to many questions (see Gallagher, 2004). Being victimized is not funny. For example, if manuscripts promoting postmodern views are rejected for publication, they might be rejected because of conceptual or linguistic flaws rather than because of the machinations of reviewers (see Heshusius, 2004). One might entertain the notion that the person submitting the manuscripts was not, actually, a hapless victim of science.

Where does postmodernism lead us? How does it help us in special education? It makes no difference whether it is associated with the political left or the political right. What matters is its consequences, how it is used by both the political left and the political right to deny objectivity, truth, and justice by making up reality as is convenient and substituting belief for empirical evidence. That the political right is doing it just now is not something that discredits political conservatism. What is discredited is the postmodern cognitive relativism that allows abuse by the right *or* the left. After all, Ravitch (2003) has noted in the case of language censorship that the guidelines prohibiting the use of certain words and phrases are “a form of preemptive capitulation” (p. 33) to pressure groups of all kinds and “combine left-wing political correctness and right-wing religious fundamentalism, a strange stew of discordant influences” (p. 32). Neither the political right nor the political left has a lock on extremist rhetoric or censorship and repression in the name of virtue.

Most of all, postmodernism leaves us without a moral compass. Postmodernism is described by Dworkin (1996) as both a danger to our moral judgment and a tedious distraction from careful thinking.

We want to live decent, worthwhile lives, lives we can look back on with pride not shame. We want our communities to be fair and good and our laws to be wise and just. These are enormously difficult goals, in part because the issues at stake are complex and puzzling. When we are told that whatever convictions we do struggle to reach cannot in any case be true or false, or objective, or part of what we know, or that they are just moves in a game of language, or just steam from the turbines of our emotions, or just experimental projects we should try for size, to see how we get on, or just invitations to thoughts that we might find diverting or amusing or less boring than the ways we used to think, we must reply that these denigrating suggestions are all false, just bad philosophy. But these are pointless, unprofitable, wearying interruptions, and we must hope that the leaden spirits of our age, which nurture them, soon lift. (Dworkin, 1996, p. 139)

As we and others have shown, postmodernism leaves us at the mercy of the most vicious human impulses (see also Gould, 1997; Kauffman, 2002; Kauffman, Brigham, & Mock, 2004; Kauffman & Landrum, 2006; Mostert et al., 2003; Pinker, 2002; Polsgrove & Ochoa, 2004; Sasso, 2001). To assume that there is no single truth to be found, that meaning floats, is to abandon all hope of actually achieving social justice, including the hope of effective services for students with disabilities. We want no part of such postmodern relativism, and we encourage others to work toward exposing its wearying fraudulence. Over the last decade, the intellectual dishonesty represented in the various forms of cultural and cognitive relativism has been repeatedly and persuasively refuted

in the professions of medicine (McDonald, 1998; Satel, 2000), law (Farber & Sherry, 1997), the hard sciences (Dawkins, 1998; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998; Tallis, 1999), philosophy (Blackburn, 2005; Eddins, 1995; Haack, 2003; Lilla, 2001), psychotherapy (Held, 1995) and education (Chall, 2003; Ravitch, 2000;). It is time for the field of special education to expel any vestiges of this form of posturing and move on with the business of helping our students to learn and adapt; to evidence measurably superior outcomes. In paraphrased e-mail correspondence with one of the major proponents of relativity in special education, author Sasso ended all correspondence with, "We have limited time for such nonsense; your time is up." We suggest that time is up for the entire enterprise of postmodernism.

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