IDEA and Collaboration:
A Bakhtinian Perspective on Parent and Professional Discourse

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Abstract

In accordance with the Bakhtinian framework of this article, the text represents a dialogue between practices documented in the literature: the first author's perspective as a teacher, evaluator, and consultant; Bakhtin's theories of language; and the lived experiences of the second author, a parent whose child has been labeled as having a language learning disability. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grants parents the right to be involved in educational decisions about their children, we argue that the routine disqualification of parents' voices by school professionals is a major obstacle to authentic collaboration. Bakhtin's theories of language serve to illuminate the discourse between parents and professionals in special education committee meetings. We conclude with our vision for a mutual dialogic exchange between parents and professionals.

I was called in to school for the results of my third-grade daughter's triennial evaluation. The school psychologist and the education evaluator handed me the evaluation. We were interrupted constantly by knocks on the door. I was nervous. I was hoping to hear that my daughter was doing better. The psychologist started quoting scores. I had no idea what it meant. At that point, I became so nervous that I couldn't focus. So I asked her to explain what it meant. I remember that one of the scores was a 72. She said that was borderline mental retardation. She was looking at me straight in my eyes and smiling at me. She said, "It will be okay." This terrible news?! I stopped them. I flashed forward to the future. I wanted to know about the future. I asked, "Can she go to college?" She smiled and said, "Anybody can go to college. But it will be better for her to do a technical type of thing. She is not going to be a scientist, but she could be a receptionist. She could do something not too demanding." I was perspiring, tears welling up in my eyes, a lump in my throat. They were trying now to choose their words. I said, "Okay. Okay. Thank you." I left. I was shaking in my clothes. I thought, "If I don't get out of here, I will fall over." It was almost time for school to be out. I went to my daughter's classroom to get her. We went home. I went to bed. I lay in the dark. I stayed there for four days. Then, I got up and called a private center where I had had my daughter evaluated at age four. I had her reevaluated there. That psychologist was wonderful. He had a lot of hope. It was not as dreadful as it seemed, but we will have to work hard. I still had to go back for the IEP meeting. They sit there like they mean to intimidate you. All of these people are looking at you. It's like you know nothing, but we hold life and death over your child. It's like, you're a parent, you are not objective. I knew they didn't know my child. They had to look through their papers to know who my child was. The table was covered with papers. Most of the time, they were shuffling papers. The school psychologist was smiling at me. I felt so patronized, so angry. They told me that my daughter should be placed in a self-contained class next year. I told them that my school would be trying inclusion next year and that that was what I wanted for my daughter. I did not want her excluded. They didn't want to put inclusion on the IEP. They left the room to call the school to verify that what I said about inclusion was true. I had to control my temper. I didn't want to come off as an emotional parent. They put inclusion on the IEP. You don't get the sense that all of this is in the best interest of the child. I really hate this whole process. It is so impersonal. I won't let them push me around. I know little. What about those parents who know less?

—Elsie Aponte
(mother of a child labeled as having a language learning disability)

More than 25 years ago, Congress passed the hallmark Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandating a "free and appropriate education for all handicapped children." This revolutionary law—since renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reauthorized in 1990 and 1997—has long been recognized as one of the greatest steps forward for people with disabilities in our country's history. The law not only ensures access to public education for children with disabilities but also grants parents the right to be involved in educational decisions about their children.
Given the law’s origin in the work of parent advocacy groups, the passionate voices of parents resonate in the due process guaranteed under IDEA. IDEA assures parents the right to be informed, the right to be knowledgeable about the actions to be taken, the right to participate, the right to challenge, and the right to appeal. What a victory these rights represent for parents! Or do they?

In 1978, I entered the field of learning disabilities—the same year that Congress mandated the full implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. In the more than 20 years since, I have walked through the intricacies of this law with scores of families, both as a public school special education teacher and as a private educational evaluator/consultant. Alongside families, I have experienced the process of accessing the law—from within the system as a public school teacher and from outside the system as an independent agent. We are far from realizing the spirit of collaboration envisioned by Congress more than 2 decades ago.

Certainly, there are families whose experiences of collaboration are successful. The purpose of this discussion is neither to overgeneralize nor to negate any positive results of IDEA. Rather, it is to explore the persistent difficulties of many families in interfacing with school personnel on behalf of their children. Because my work is focused on children with learning disabilities, this population will be the center of discussion. It is noteworthy, however, that special education literature reflects similar themes among parents regardless of the nature of the child’s disability (Engel, 1993; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

A review of the learning disability literature points to the routine disqualification of parents’ voices by professionals as a major obstacle to authentic collaboration—a conclusion consistent with my experience. In a first draft of this article, I organized an argument around these reported findings, primarily generated from large-scale surveys and quantitative observational studies of Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. My dissatisfaction with this earlier draft arose from a recognition of the irony in grounding an argument regarding the disqualification of parents’ voices in studies that primarily reported third-party information about the experience of parents. In light of the paucity of research that foregrounds parents’ voices within IDEA collaboration, I turned for clearer understanding to a mother who had recently shared her experiences in navigating the special education process.

Elise Aponte, who requested identity disclosure, enthusiastically agreed to share the story that appears at the beginning of this article. Following a conversation with Ms. Aponte about her profound reaction to the initial draft of this article, I suggested a version in which we could capture her reactions and lived experiences. Ms. Aponte agreed to tape-record her spontaneous internal dialogue as she read through the text a second time. Thus, Ms. Aponte’s voice, transcribed and italicized, appears interspersed within the text, in dialogue with the professional literature, Bakhtinian theory, and my own lived experiences as a special education professional (see Note).

A Bakhtinian Framework

In exploring the collaboration between parents and professionals under IDEA, I draw on the theories of Mikhail M. Bakhtin as a tool to better understand the dynamics present in the discourse of special education. Moreover, Bakhtin’s theories of language are consistent with the value placed on the interplay of discourses critical to this article.

My intention is not to present a comprehensive review of Bakhtin’s theories; rather, I wish to highlight those aspects that are relevant to understanding the dynamics that occur between parents and professionals. Central to Bakhtin’s (1986) theory of language is the identification of the utterance, oral or written, between persons as “the real unit of speech communion” (p. 67). Of the utmost importance to Bakhtin are the following questions: Who is doing the speaking, to whom is the utterance addressed, and in what context? Thus, the essence of a functional utterance is its addressee-its quality of being addressed to someone in a way that assumes the listener’s needs (Wertsch, 1991). The speaker, beyond the intention of making him- or herself understood, “presupposes not only the existence of the language system he [or she] is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his [or her] own and others—with which his [or her] given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another” (p. 70). The listener, Bakhtin argued, constructs understanding through active response to the speaker’s utterance. As a consequence, meaning emerges only within the dialogue. If we conceive of parent-professional collaboration under IDEA in terms of Bakhtin’s formulations of utterance, questions about addressee-become primary—who is doing the speaking? to whom is the utterance addressed? in what context?—as do questions about the nature and quality of dialogue within the special education decision-making process more generally.

Language, conceived in this way, is much more than a system of grammatical structures. For Bakhtin (1981), language cannot be separated from ideology. Although ideology in English implies something propagandistic, Bakhtin used ideology to mean a socially determined idea system. He distinguished between a nation’s unitary language and its stratification into dialects and various socio-ideological languages (past and present) among social groups. This differentiated speech, which Bakhtin termed heteroglossia, includes the everyday language of different social groups as well as the language used by various professional groups (Vice, 1997). Bakhtin (1986) referred to the spheres in which these social languages exist as speech genres. Speech genres, with their respective
norms for language, provide the venue for a speaker’s performance within a particular genre. The special education committee meeting can be understood as a discourse arena in which heteroglossia is present in the differentiated speech genres of the parent and the professional.

Bakhtin (1986) contended that speech genres do not exist as isolated spheres of language. On the contrary, dialo-
gism—the way in which these languages intersect and interact with one another—necessarily informs the way in which we construct meaning. Bakhtin acknowledged two types of discourse—authoritative and internally persuasive. Bakhtin (1981) described authoritative discourse as demanding that we acknowledge it... It binds us... We encounter it with its authority already fused to it... Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language... It demands our unconditional allegiance... It is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority. (pp. 342-343)

In contrast, the internally persuasive discourse is “denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society” (p. 342). Nevertheless, it is this latter form of discourse that is dialogic—that enables people to go beyond internalizing dogma to infuse the message into their own understanding and, hence, to collaborate in the construction of true communication. As opposed to having a fixed meaning, the internally persuasive word “is halfours and half-someone else’s... It is not finite, it is open... and able to reveal ever new ways to mean” (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 345-346). This tension between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse influences the “degree to which one voice has the authority to come into contact with and interanimate the other” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 78). Discourse that is authoritative, then, must be embraced without question; discourse that is internally persuasive, on the other hand, invites the mutual construction of knowledge.

In this article, following a review of the learning disability literature regarding parent-professional collaboration under IDEA, I apply Bakhtin’s notions of discourse and dialogism to the accounts of parent-professional interactions as reflected in the literature. This analysis will also extend to Ms. Aponte’s ongoing dialogue with the text.

Parent-Professional Collaboration Under IDEA: A Review of the Literature

In light of the unprecedented emphasis on parental involvement under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, researchers in the late 1970s and early 1980s began to study the integration of parents into the special education decision-making process. The results of these studies consistently exposed less than optimal participation of parents. Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, and Kaufman’s (1978) interviews of parents of children with mild handicaps revealed that in all phases of decision making, parents demonstrated accurate perceptions of team decisions only about 50% of the time. Parents consistently indicated confusion or lack of knowledge about their rights under IDEA.

At the first IEP conference I ever attended, I did not know what to expect. I only knew that they were going to recommend placement for my daughter. I did not know what the evaluations contained. Was it good news or bad news? Had I read the parent handbook, of course, but it didn’t mean anything.

Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry’s (1980) observations of IEP conferences consistently documented unclerar explanations of psychological testing, lack of parental questioning for clarification, and the presentation of pre-prepared IEPs. Minimal attention was given to parental rights, future collaboration, or recommendations for working with the child at home. Furthermore, Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, and Mirkin (1982) reported that 79 of the 100 surveyed directors of special education acknowledged that team meetings for the purpose of discussing eligibility and placement were held before meeting with the parent. These directors also confirmed that IEPs were mostly completed without parental input.

At my first IEP meeting, I was trusting that as members of a committee on special education, they would know better than I what was in their best interest. They obviously had seen all of the paperwork that they had put in front of me before the meeting began. But this was the first time I had seen it. Was I expected to absorb all that information in five minutes while they all stared at me? While they wanted ever so patiently? Since this was my first experience with this sort of thing, I simply agreed. Thinking they knew what they were talking about.

Sonenschein’s (1981) study of the quality of collaboration between parents and professionals showed that parents’ opinions were not given weight equal to that of the professionals. He asserted that “too frequently, observations and suggestions made by parents are given little weight and concerns are dismissed without appropriate investigation” (p. 64). Rockowitz and Davidson (1979) further identified the alienating influence of professional jargon in special education committee meetings, pointing out that “dwelling on technical data that do little to enhance parents’ understanding of their child’s disorder is nothing but an exercise of professional brimmanship” (p. 12).

I did not know that they (the staffing committee) were going to sit around talking to each other about their findings, as if they were talking about a lab experiment and the conclusions they had drawn. They spoke in monotoes, as if they were reading from a list. Suddenly, they turned to me and asked if I had questions. I was still trying to figure out what they were saying.
And what of the parents' right to challenge, as guaranteed under the law? Authors such as Sonnenschein (1981) and Lipsky (1985) suggest that the response of professionals to parents who challenge is to label the parent in negative terms. Sonnenschein (1981) explains that parents who disagree with a diagnosis or seek a second opinion are "denying"; those who refuse the kind of treatment that is suggested are "resistant"; and those who are convinced that something is wrong with their child despite inconclusive tests are "anxious." (p. 64)

Note that the "pathology" extends beyond the child to the parent. Lipsky (1985) states that this "belief that parents displace their anger onto the professional is a kind of 'Catch-22.'" (p. 616); in other words, the parent who challenges the professional by expressing a different opinion is taken even less seriously and often considered to be emotionally unstable. Thus, the implication is that parents are too emotional and subjective to participate meaningfully in educational decision making, despite their right to engage in the process.

I think that after all this time, I have learned more, and I have more questions. The more questions I have, the more answers I want. I get the feeling now that when certain people see me coming, they just want to run in the other direction! I am almost hearing them thinking, "Oh no! There's that damn attorney!" I was at a meeting once and was introduced by a professional as "anxious." The speech pathologist, who knew me well, corrected her and said "not anxious, concerned." With these three words, she totally disrupted the negative atmosphere that I was about to enter. I'll always remember her for that. When you hear the word anxious, it's like you have this off-the-wall person chewing on her nails and kind of wild-eyed and maybe a nervous tic or two—hay, she's a nervous type, she's overprotective, she has problems.

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This review of the early (1978–1985) literature about parent-professional collaboration under IDEA corresponds with my own observations and experiences in public schools during this time period. Perhaps the public schools' uneasiness about compliance with federal law in these new procedures in part explains the overemphasis on paperwork, to the detriment of relating to parents. Perhaps the awkwardness of sharing decision making with parents within a traditionally bureaucratic system in part explains the position of passivity imposed on parents. Certainly, a period of transition could be expected as school districts integrated the new law.

Does the literature of the last decade, however, show promise in the quality of collaboration between professionals and parents? On the contrary, there is continuing documentation of less than optimal parental participation in the special education decision-making process. In a survey of more than 100 parents of children with learning disabilities, Malekoff, Johnson, and Kappesack (1991) reported that "over half of the parents indicated that they were initially confused" about their child's diagnosis and that the test results and recommendations were "not helpful." (p. 420). Likewise, Engel (1993) commented on the parent experience in the special education committee meeting:

These professional members of the CSE [Committee of Special Education] use language to discuss disabilities that is foreign to most parents. . . . Although it is their child who is being discussed, it does not seem like their child. . . . Their own knowledge systems seem trivial and 'unscientific' in comparison to the knowledge systems of professionals. The parents sense that their comments carry less weight in the CSE meeting because they are not couched in the language of the professionals and because the parents' close relationship to their child makes them seem overly subjective. (p. 800)

I clearly remember the second conference I attended. I felt prepared. I felt good. I had done my research, and now I had experience! This was the worst conference of them all. When I walked in, it was like walking into a meeting of thequisition. But I was prepared. Or so I thought. I brought a picture of my daughter. I was determined to let them see that there was an actual child that they were sitting there discussing and making decisions about. They passed the picture around. Oh very nice, how beautiful, oh she's a dancer? I never felt more patronized in my life. I let them know that I was taping-recording the meeting. Angry glances were exchanged. One by one they launched into their (familiar to me by now) monotonous speeches. Then came the silence. For almost the entire meeting, all you could hear was the rustling of the pages of the reports in front of them. I tried to tell them a little of my daughter's progress so far. They barely looked up at me. I said I volunteered in my daughter's class with the teacher's permission. I was attacked! I was told, very angrily, that I might be harming my daughter. The evaluator leaned into my personal space, red-faced and eyes bulging. "Did you ever think that she might do better without you in the classroom?" I held my ground and disagreed, politely and quietly, knowing that there were certain times I was going to ask for and that now might have been jeopardized. I asked that she be allowed the use of a tape recorder (because she has difficulty with short-term memory) and the use of a calculator. "No, no tape recorder!" I was told. "She can have the use of a calculator, but no tape recorder." That was that. No explanation given. Right at that moment, I decided to speak directly with my daughter's teacher in the future. At least they were more understanding.

Testimonies of more than 400 parents and family members of children with disabilities heard by the National Council on Disability (1995) documented that parents continued to be presented with completed IEPs by school personnel, thereby feeling "largely left out of the process." (p. 11). Engel (1993) confirmed the largely unsatisfying experience of parents engaged in the IEP process, stating that there is an asymmetry to the IEP conference. . . . One party enters the discussion with control over resources while the other only has needs and rights. . . . The negotiating process for the parents is, therefore, a matter of attempting to bargain for resources by citing needs—a frustrating and sometimes humiliating process. (pp. 820–821)

You are sitting there at that meeting, watching one after the other slim through their re-
ports. How nice it would be if before these conferences, before conclusions are reached, we all sat down together and I was asked, "So tell us about your daughter. What kind of child is she? What do you think her needs are? What do you feel we can do?"

During the last decade, numerous studies have focused on the influence of gender, race, and class in American schools. Reflective of this research trend, Harry (1992) examined the experience of low-income Puerto Rican American families within the system of special education. The results of ethnographic interviews and observations indicated minimal parental involvement in decision making and misunderstandings about educational diagnoses and placements, as illustrated in the following scenario:

Most important to Rita [the mother] was the item "classification: learning disabled (language)," which she felt made no sense since both Rafael's English and Spanish were fluent—"in her words "normal." ... Rita concluded, "Maybe they decided to call Rafael learning disabled/language because they don't know what else to call him!" (Harry, 1992, p. 483)

Parents reported great difficulty understanding special education jargon and coping with the sheer volume of papers required in special education placement. Harry observed these parents deferring to authority out of cultural respect, but engaging in "a kind of passive resistance in hope of demonstrating their disapproval" (p. 486).

Is it that maybe some of us don't have the education so they [professionals] look down on us? Is it our race? I don't know if it's because I'm Hispanic. I don't know if it's because of the way that I speak. I don't know if it's because my eyes may be too expressive, and they know that I might bite one of their heads off.

In a 3-year longitudinal study of low-to-middle-income African American parents whose children were placed in preschool special education, Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) discovered that parents consistently described their role in IEP conferences as passive recipients who signed papers. Observations of IEP conferences conducted by Harry et al. confirmed that "parents' participation ... usually consisted of listening, perhaps asking a question (usually regarding logistical issues such as transportation), and signing papers" (p. 371). Professionals stated that they did not think that "parents really understood much of it, but simply signed anyway" (p. 371). It is noteworthy that these professionals were observed as using educational jargon with parents, allotting less than 30 minutes for conferences, and focusing on completion of the paperwork. Over the 3 years, a pattern of disillusionment emerged among parents; consequently, levels of parent participation decreased. Harry (1992) asserted that

[African American parents] are at a particular disadvantage by virtue of a "double deficit" model, by which special education's deficit view of children combines with a longstanding mainstream societal belief that African American family life is largely dysfunctional. (p. 374)

I've met a lot of people who say a lot of African American people are resistant to having their children evaluated because they feel that once their child has any little bit of a problem in class, they're going to end up in a special ed self-contained class. So people are afraid. And if you go to special ed classes, you'll see how most [students] are African American and Hispanic. They are mostly boys. At one point, my daughter was the only girl in her self-contained class.

Over the last 20 years, I have consistently observed that more mothers than fathers engage in conversations with school personnel. What impact might gender have on the status afforded to parents within the special education decision-making process? Consider the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997), in which they state that

the kind of knowledge that is used in child rearing is typical of the kind of knowledge women value and schools do not... Good mothering requires adaptative responding to constantly changing phenomena; it is tuned to the concrete and particular... In this sense "maternal thinking" differs from scientific thinking, which considers an experimental result to be real—a fact—only if it can be replicated. (p. 313)

During the last 20 years, feminist researchers have turned their focus onto education to expose the rational, male-dominated essence of schooling (Gruget & Stone, 2000). It is this narrow and biased perspective that "makes the educational activities of mothers, and by implication mothers themselves, appear nonrational, if not downright irrational" (Martin, 1982, p. 46). Thus, it appears that mothers may also contend with gender stereotypes in communicating with school personnel. It is not uncommon for mothers who voice instinctual concerns about their children's learning and behavior to be dismissed by professionals as overprotective. For example, in their handbook for school counselors, Baumberger and Harper (1999) stated, "It has been noted in the literature and in the authors' experience that mothers of children with learning disabilities tend to be overprotective, overinvolved, and even enmeshed" (p. 63).

Malekoff et al. (1991) identify the "school's denial of parental suspicions of problems... and the 'time wasted' between the time the parent raised the possibility... and when the child actually began to receive [help]" (p. 421) as one of the most painful experiences for parents of children with learning disabilities. In referring to the presence of power disparities between parents and professionals, Engel (1993) asserted that "gender stereotypes undoubtedly play a part in the construction of authority and in assumptions about objectivity and subjectivity in the decision-making process" (p. 794).

I know someone who was meeting with a teacher. The teacher and the mother were in disagreement over something. The mother was totally upset and said so, and she walked out. She sent her husband in to talk to the teacher (male) and they were able to finish the
meeting with a totally different attitude. It was clearly because the teacher was a male that the mother was seen as overprotective and hysterical.

What conclusions might we draw from the literature of the last 2 decades? Certainly the right to due process under IDEA carves out a space for parents in educational decision making that never before existed. Although parents gain legal access to the process, legislation does not guarantee the quality of collaboration between parents and professionals. Nothing in IDEA provides legitimacy for the parents' interpretation of the child (Engel, 1993). If inclusion of the parent is largely symbolic (e.g., securing signatures on documents in order to prove compliance with federal regulations), the spirit of this revolutionary law is lost. However, knowledge that is disqualified is disqualified by someone. We must consider whose knowledge of the child is given priority and who functions in the power position based on that knowledge. If we shift our focus from documenting the difficulties that parents face in participating equally and equitably in special education decision making to a Bakhtinian analysis of the discourse between parents and professionals and an examination of the culture of schools, we may gain insight into the barriers to the collaboration envisioned by Congress and parents.

A Bakhtinian Perspective of Parent–Professional Discourse

In regard to parent involvement, the literature clearly suggests that a disparity exists between the intent of the law and the realization of the law. What is the process by which parents accept authoritative knowledge over their own knowledge of the child? How do parents come to participate in the disqualification of their own knowledge?

Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of addressivity is useful in understanding the relationship between parents and professionals, as documented in the literature and by Ms. Aponte. If we ask who is doing the talking, to whom the utterance is addressed, and in what context—clearly, school personnel sit at the center of the exchange, initiating, dominating, and terminating the discourse. Within the setting of the special education committee meeting, we see the differentiated speech, or heteroglossia, that Bakhtin (1981) described. The professional dominates with the authoritative discourse of psychoeducational reports and behavioral objectives, in stark contrast to the parent’s everyday, informal language. In referring to speech genres, Bakhtin (1981) observed that

many people who have an excellent command of language often feel quite helpless in certain spheres of communication because they do not have a practical command of the generic forms used in the given spheres. (p. 80)

As Ms. Aponte explained, she read the special education parent handbook, but it didn’t mean anything. Bakhtin referred to this insider language as the password—the command of which enables one to function adequately within a particular speech genre (Casey, 1993). Without access to the professional speech genre of special education, parents enter the discourse in an unequal position. Rather than being accorded full status as a contributor of knowledge, the parent is expected to internalize the authoritative discourse—the norm by which all other knowledge is judged. Ms. Aponte describes the professionals engaged in authoritative discourse as talking to each other about their findings, as if they were talking about a lab experiment. . . . They spoke in monotonies, as if they were reading from a list. She recalls how she was unable to respond to their invitation for questions because she was still trying to figure out what they were saying. Such discourse clearly intends to elicit allegiance to professional opinion rather than to facilitate meaningful dialogue.

In his analysis of professional culture, Skrtic (1995) differentiates between “the professions” and other social groups as follows:

On the basis of the claim to scientific authority, . . . society gives professionals greater autonomy than it does other social groups on the assumption that their knowledge is valid and useful, and that they will use it on behalf of their clients and the public good. (p. 6–7)

If we locate the professionals in the special education staffing committee within Skrtic’s professional perspective, the parent who disagrees, challenges, or does not believe the professional unwittingly violates the boundaries. Thus, the professional has to defend not only him- or herself but also the practices of the entire professional community. Special education, with its emphasis on objective tests and measures, has a solid footing in scientific authority. To speculate that the parent may have valuable knowledge or insights unknown or unrecognized by the profession is to question the legitimacy of the scientific knowledge on which special education is based. The professional dismisses a questioning parent as not ready to accept the truth revealed in the scientifically based evaluation and recommendations.

If only they [professionals] could realize that we as parents don’t want to question their findings for the sake of questioning alone. It’s almost as if they feel threatened. Rather, it is because we need and have a right to understand what is going on. What better way is there than to sit at the conference and really talk about the child and his or her needs? We need to have more time to absorb the findings of the evaluations. If they could simply give us a certain amount of time to read the evaluations before the conference, then we could all sit down together and discuss what they think and what we as parents think. I find it so simple a solution. Part of the problem, I suspect, is that enough time is not given for these conferences. This is an area where parents can make a real difference.
Furthermore, we must not underestimate the significance of special education's roots within the domain of human sciences. In the tradition of human science, special education embraces a complex system of scientific, objective measures for judging what is and is not considered within the "normal" range of learning and behavior. Foucault (1975/1995) regarded such methods of normalization as a "great instrument of power" (p. 184). For example, in determining eligibility for special education services, professionals gather information about a student through classroom observations and psychoeducational testing. This profile of performance, compared to the norm, forms the basis of a written evaluation that becomes the tool for decision making. Due process under IDEA guarantees parents the right to be knowledgeable about the actions to be taken, the right to participate, the right to challenge, and the right to appeal. Yet how difficult is it for parents to challenge the written documents around which the authoritative discourse revolves?

I have never felt more of a nonentity than sitting at an IEP conference. I am not a stupid person. But nevertheless, that's exactly how I feel. When I sit at a meeting and watch them shuffle through their reports, I think of those stories that some people talk about. The ones about out-of-body experiences. That's exactly what I feel like. Like I am floating around watching events unfold over which I have no control.

In his discussion of the authoritative discourse surrounding examinations in the human sciences, Foucault (1975/1995) suggests a significant relationship between power and knowledge:

This turning of real lives into writing . . . functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection . . . . The examination as the fixing, at once ritual and "scientific," of individual differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity . . . clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the "marks" that characterize him and make him a "case." (p. 192)

Foucault's notion of the relationship between power and knowledge is relevant to our understanding of the dynamics inherent within special education committee meetings. Foucault (1978/1990), like Bakhtin, located sources of power and knowledge by focusing on who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. (p. 11)

Thus, it is the professional who speaks about and circulates written documents (e.g., cognitive testing, educational evaluations, observations, report cards, behavioral records) among committee members. It is the professional who represents the child in these written documents. Eligibility and placement decisions primarily emerge from this compilation of authoritative knowledge about the child. In this sense, the professional voice dominates the discourse of eligibility and placement team meetings. It is also a clear example of Foucault's notion that power creates truth. Once professionals capture a child within a written document, that characterization of the child becomes the truth by which all other interpretations are measured.

It occurs to me that when all of these findings are put into a child's permanent record, they are there forever and are regarded as truth unless challenged by the parent. They are there for future schools to look at and determine whether this is the child for their school. There is nothing about parental involvement, about the care and nurturing of that child. There is simply, or not so simply, the results of tests. There is nothing about the whole child. Observations are made where? In a classroom. Psychological, educational, etc., tests are given. Was the child having a bad day, did she have a sleepless night? Is the child coming down with some illness?

[This was the case with my daughter the day she was being evaluated. She had a temperature of 104. It turned out she had an ear infection. I knew she was acting differently. I even told the examiner. She talked to me a little about the testing. I knew my daughter knew some of what was being asked of her and wondered why she didn't demonstrate that. I am sure the results would have been different had she been tested on a different day.]

The parent does not enter the special education committee meeting with a written document, nor does the parent communicate in the scientific language of the professional. The parent's oral contributions appear informal and lower in status than the professional's presentation. The practice of eliciting information from the parent does not represent equal status in the collaborative process (Mehan, Herweck, & Meihls, 1986).

So you figure like you're inserting footnotes, if they listen to you at all. Because they look at you, they bob their heads like those toy dogs with spring-coiled necks as if they really understand, and you get the feeling they're not listening. They are just nodding their heads. They listen very politely, but you get the feeling that they don't care what you have to say. This is the paper, this is what it says, just sign it and get on with it. "These are our results; here are our conclusions."

To consider any knowledge out of its context, past and present, may result in distortion. Ms. Aponte speaks about the absence of context within the authoritative discourse about her daughter. There is nothing about parental involvement, about the care and nurturing of that child. There is simply, or not so simply, the results of tests. There is nothing about the whole child. Privilege is given to the kind of monologic, acontextual thinking that Bakhtin (1986) criticized as inherent to the human sciences. Bakhtin, like Foucault, expressed concern about the power of such discursive practices to influence our language, knowledge, and beliefs (Bloom, 1992). Ms. Aponte echoes this concern when she states that it occurs to her that when all of these findings are put into
a child’s permanent record, they are there forever and are regarded as truth unless challenged by the parent.

Such privileging of professional knowledge is the antithesis of the collaboration envisioned by IDEA. A parent may exercise the legal right to engage in the discourse; however, the spirit of authentic collaboration and of internally persuasive discourse cannot be mandated. In this posture of professional dominance, the eligibility and placement meeting becomes, in reality, a dogmatic discourse (Mehan et al., 1986). The view of parents as token participants who must be convinced of what is best for their child by the benevolent professionals is both disempowering and condescending. The omission of parent contribution as part of the formal agenda reflects a blatant lack of regard for the value of parent knowledge. Authoritative discourse allows only for the response of parents to the professional’s more highly valued knowledge. Ms. Aponte refers to this process as inserting footnotes.

I’ve realized that the people who have had positive experiences are the people who have been savvy enough to bring lawyers with them to the meetings. I remember once, my husband and I were sitting in the waiting room of the Committee for Special Education. They were running late, and we had been waiting for a while. Across from us was another couple, and sitting with them was a well-dressed man with a briefcase. Someone kept coming out to them and apologizing for making them wait. Finally, as I watched, introductions were being made, and it turns out the person with the couple was a lawyer. I said to my husband, who would they need a lawyer? Surely, now I know.

Despite arguments for an enhanced scientific foundation of learning disabilities (e.g., Kavale & Forness, 1998), the reality of learning disabilities persists as a complex, often conflicting profile of characteristics that impede learning. It does not appear that the “nature of the beast” can be tamed only through the rigid application of scientific principles. As Bakhtin would maintain, it is nonsensical to consider

learning disabilities apart from the context in which they are manifested. Then why do we persist in devaluing the parental voice, which can contribute the most valuable contextual information about the child?

Over the span of more than 20 years, my experience confirms that mothers are often reliable and accurate diagnosticians of their children. Given their perspective of the child from birth and the intimacy of the parent-child relationship, mothers provide knowledge of the whole child in all contexts of life. It is knowledge that no professional can obtain. It contains all of the subtleties, inconsistencies, and intuitions that come with the kind of knowing that mothers often possess about their children. And yet this knowledge is routinely excluded or dismissed by professionals.

The child is represented by the information in these written documents. They only tell you at what level she’s reading. They only tell you what level she’s at in math. They tell you a little bit about her. She’s a nice kid, she’s well mannered and well behaved, she’s calm for her age. Surprise! She is not a behavior management problem, as is the stereotype of the LD special ed child. That’s it. That’s not my child. That’s not all of her. That’s a very, very small part of her.

Evident throughout Ms. Aponte’s ongoing narrative is Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism—the interplay between competing discourses. Given that social languages are unequal (as represented between professionals and parents), “the prestige languages try to extend their control and subordinated languages try to avoid, negate, or subvert that control” (Vice, 1997). Bakhtin described this dialogic tension as a “constant struggle between the centripetal forces that seek to close the world in system and the centrifugal forces that battle completedness in order to keep the world open to becoming” (Clark & Holquist, 1984, pp. 79-80). Ultimately, this continual interplay between competing discourses shapes the individual’s consciousness. Ms. Aponte’s internal dialogue within the text reflects a shift in consciousness from adherence to authoritative discourse to resistance grounded in an internally persuasive discourse. For example, early in the text, Ms. Aponte tries to appropriate the authoritative discourse by reading the parent handbook, but it didn’t mean anything, and she trusted that the professionals would know better . . . what was in her best interest. Later in the text, we see evidence of Ms. Aponte’s active resistance to the authoritative discourse. She asks more questions of professionals and recognizes that in doing so, she is transgressing the bounds of that discourse. For example, she comments that she gets the feeling that when certain people see me coming, they just want to run in the other direction! She begins to reflect on whether her gender or race contribute to the disqualification of her knowledge.

Eventually, Ms. Aponte’s resistance destabilizes the authoritative discourse. For example, Ms. Aponte brings a photograph of her daughter to a conference for the purpose of contextualizing her child within the decontextualized special education committee meeting. She internally mocks the professionals’ response to the photograph. They passed the picture around. Oh very nice, how beautiful, oh she’s a dancer! I never felt so patronized in my life. In describing the professionals at a meeting, Ms. Aponte recalls watching them shuffle through their reports—certainly a parody of the all-knowing authority. In another example, Ms. Aponte pictures the committee members as bobbing their heads like those toy dogs with spring-coiled necks as if they really understand, and you get the feeling they’re not listening. In her parody, Ms. Aponte effectively strips the authoritative knowledge of its stranglehold on power and begins to assert her agency. To what does Ms. Aponte attribute her shift in consciousness? She credits her evolving sense of agency to self-education through extensive reading, along with serious self-reflection about her lived experiences in special education committee meetings.
Toward Dialogism

The special education literature abounds in strategies for parent advocacy (Fisher & Ury, 1991; Mlawer, 1993; Siernberg, Taylor, & Russell, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Parent advocacy training promotes navigation skills within the present system and its cadre of professionals; it does not address why parents continue to need such training to access a system that exists to guarantee a free and appropriate education for their children. If we merely instruct parents in strategies for accessing the present system, the status quo is maintained. Advocacy training enables the individual to function more efficiently within the existing system, but it does not address the efficacy of the system or its representatives. It requires adaptation on the part of parents to the authoritative discourse; it does not require professionals to engage in authentic, meaningful communication that moves the construction of meaning to dialogic interactions, hence enriching both speaker and listener. We must acknowledge that advocacy training represents yet another example of monologic thinking. We provide parents with the skills we perceive that they lack in order to operate within our world—the world of expertise, scientific language, objective measures, and legal requirements.

Through authoritative discourse, professionals present the truth about the child in a spirit of paternalistic benevolence. When professionals believe that what they are doing is in the best interest of others (buoyed by compliance with a federally mandated law), it becomes more difficult for them to perceive and acknowledge the parent perspective. Certainly, it is not the intent of professionals to inflict emotional pain on parents. What is notable is the lack of recognition on the part of professionals that pain has occurred as a result of their disqualification of parents' voices.

The education evaluator did manage to make me doubt myself. But I didn't listen to her. I listened to myself, which I have not always done. I used to put all my faith and trust in professionals because I thought they had the best interest of my child at heart. But no more.

Rorty (1989) cautioned about the significant consequences of disqualifying another's knowledge—of "making [one] incapable of having a self because [one] becomes incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief" (p. 178). He urged us to

[increase] our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves... It is the process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them." (p. xvi)

In a similar spirit, Heshusius (1994) addressed the "alienated mode of consciousness which sees the knower as separate from the known" (p. 15) within the context of educational research. Heshusius challenged the traditional notion of professional distance in the study of human behavior. She embraced a "participatory mode of consciousness" as

the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known. An inner desire to let go of perceived boundaries that constitute 'self'—and that construct the perception of distance between self and other—must be present before a participatory mode of consciousness can be present... It involves letting go of the idea of being-separate and-in-charge altogether. (pp. 17-18)

If we apply Heshusius' notion of a participatory mode of consciousness to our collaboration with parents, we can examine how we may alienate parents by assuming a stance grounded in authoritative discourse. We must recognize that authoritative discourse strangers the very dialogue needed for active engagement and understanding on both our parts. How might the dynamics shift if parents had priority on the agenda to present their understanding of the child? How might we validate other ways of knowing in addition to the objective tools and measures of special education? How would our understanding evolve if we embraced parent knowledge as crucial to the evaluation and placement process? Current research efforts of sociocultural theorists give us glimpses into the potential power of the other ways of knowing that parents bring (García, Perez, & Ortiz, 2000; Hughes; Schumm, & Vaughn, 1999; Sanchez, 1999).

Heshusius (1994) challenged professionals to "temporarily let go of all pre-occupation with self and move into a state of complete attention" (p. 17). Consider how differently parents might engage in collaboration if the focus shifted from the completion of our paperwork and timelines to an intense interest in how their knowledge, views, and opinions could contribute to the process. We must challenge ourselves to consider what purpose our professional stance serves.

In letting go of the power of knowledge over the other, we reap the benefits of enriched knowledge and shared experiences. This is not to imply that the act of understanding is reductionistic. On the contrary, it leaves intact the markers of difference and promotes creative, emerging dialogic exchange (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 1998). It means "becoming more aware of the diversity of horizons in discourse, and of the danger of reducing what is known to a single consciousness, rather than a multiplicity of voices" (Greene, 2000, p. 269).

We must open the dialogic spaces and engage in "not a dialectical either/or, but a dialogic both/and" (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 7). Meaning is generated between us, rather than transmitted from one to the other. Within the constant and changing interactions of such dialogic spaces, parents and professionals can construct new and transformative meanings.

Together, within dialogic exchange, we can move closer to realizing the spirit of this revolutionary law.
It has not all been bad. I have known a few "angels" in the public school system. Thank-fully, they were teachers. They made time for me and my daughter as much as we needed. I was able to observe them and learn from them. They taught me, and I taught them. They answered my questions, and I answered theirs. If we could clone them, I'd be a happy woman!

A Closing Word from Ms. Aponte

I am thankful to have been given a space for my voice to be heard. My hope is that each person who reads this—as an evaluator, a social worker, a psychologist, a parent, or a teacher—will accept and understand their responsibility for their part of the process. In advocating for our children, we ultimately shape the future of our world, and for that we are all responsible.

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AUTHORS' NOTES

1. This article won the 2001 Walter Sindlinger Writing Award at Teachers College, Columbia University. The authors express appreciation to D. Kim Reid, PhD, who read and responded to multiple drafts of this article.

2. In keeping with the Bakhtinian framework of this article, Ms. Aponte is recognized as an author. Although she did not contribute to the writing of this article in a conventional sense, we share authorship in acknowledgement of the tremendous depth that Ms. Aponte's dialogic voice brings to the overall text. I believe that to represent Ms. Aponte as less than an author would diminish our argument for mutual dialogic exchange between parents and professionals. It should also be noted that Ms. Aponte read, discussed, and affirmed my Bakhtinian analysis of her dialogue.

NOTE

Ms. Aponte's dialogue was initially transcribed verbatim (with speech disfluencies) from the tape in written text. With subsequent revisions of the article, Ms. Aponte edited her comments into an idealized version. The text now appears exactly as she wants it.

REFERENCES


(continued from p. 468)


