Cultural Reciprocity
in Special Education

Building Family–Professional Relationships

by

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Section

I

Cultural Reciprocity

Working with Families

In this section, we present the process of cultural reciprocity as a means to facilitate a process of introspection that ultimately results in the empowerment of professionals and families alike by gaining a better understanding of each other's cultural values. This process allows both sides to collaborate in making informed choices or decisions. We do this by examining taken-for-granted assumptions in the legal and epistemological underpinnings of definitions of disability and in the way in which professional expertise and language are conceptualized. We also analyze these cultural assumptions embedded in professionals' recommendations to parents regarding parenting styles and in professional interactions with parents around issues of goal setting for students. We introduce each chapter with a personal anecdote that highlights the impact that unstated cultural assumptions can have on people who do not share those assumptions.
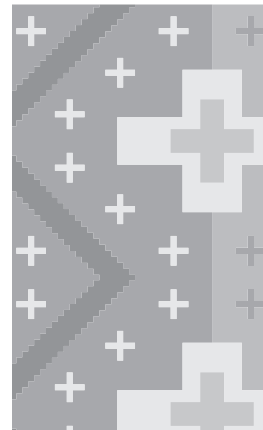
Chapter 1

Cultural Underpinnings of Special Education

Beth's Story

On a trip to Albuquerque in the middle of winter, I had the disconcerting experience of boarding a plane at the Baltimore/Washington International Airport and, within minutes, being asked to deplane. Back at the departure gate, I waited with other anxious passengers for some information regarding the status of the flight. After about a half an hour's wait came the following announcement: "Passengers on the flight to Albuquerque—please be advised that we will be boarding in about an hour's time since a new piece of equipment will soon be arriving from Philadelphia."

Being a very phobic air traveler and knowing nothing about the mechanics of any kind of vehicle, I reacted to this announcement with some consternation. I thought, "A new piece of equipment? What could it be? A wrench? A new steering wheel? Some new radar equipment? Does this mean that we'll have to wait while they fix it or replace some part? Shouldn't they just give us a new plane?" I went to the desk and asked the attendant what the announcement meant. The attendant replied, "It said they're sending a new plane."

This was about 12 years ago, and I still remember vividly my annoyance at what seemed to me the use of language as a subterfuge. Since then, I have repeated this story to many people, asking for their impression of the meaning of this language event. Although many people are now more accustomed to hearing the term *equipment* used in this way in airports, everyone agrees that it is a prime example of jargon, in which a group of people who belong to a particular field of work use language in a way that differs from the way that it would be used by the population at large. It also is an example of how people use jargon that is specific to their field without even being aware that they are doing so.

My main concern is the effect that such language might have on the uninitiated. This depends on the perspective that any individual has regarding airplane travel. For me, connotations of the word *equipment* compared with the word *airplane* reflect my fear of flying; therefore,

the following associations with the word *equipment* come to mind readily: a tool, a large class of technical items, something neutral, or something made and manipulated by human beings. Associations for the word *airplane* rush in just as quickly: something that takes you up into the sky, defying the laws of gravity; something huge and powerful that carries large numbers of people at once; or something that can come crashing down to earth and kill those large numbers of people. Thus, to refer to an airplane as a "piece of equipment" is to minimize, neutralize, and mitigate the features that, for me, are dominant: its power and its danger. A piece of equipment is, after all, within human control—simply a tool at our disposal; an airplane, however, in its totality, somehow seems more than the sum of its parts. Someone who finds flying safe and exhilarating might have interpreted this kind of communication quite differently. My point is that language is more than denotative. It is connotative, and connotations evoke emotions that are beyond rationalization.

In the departure lounge at the Baltimore/Washington International Airport, the language of the announcement reflected a technological culture with which the airplane experts probably identified. Within that culture, such use of the word *equipment* is probably commonplace and not thought of as having any particular effect. As an anxious passenger, however, I was a total outsider to that culture.

In much the same way that the language of airplanes was "foreign" to Beth in this story, we, the authors of this book, have felt like outsiders to the culture of special education in the United States. We had not, of course, expected to feel this way. In our home countries, Jamaica and India, we had assumed that disabilities were factual phenomena and that special education for people with disabilities would somehow reflect a universality of meaning, of affect, or, at the very least, of value. That is not to say that we thought that we already knew the answers or even all of the questions. Certainly, we expected to be introduced to new theories and new instructional approaches, but neither of us had conceived of the coming experience as a cultural event, the underpinnings of which would take several years for us to "unpack."

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS

What do we mean by the *culture of special education?* In its larger meaning, the term *culture* denotes the shared implicit and explicit rules and traditions that express the beliefs, values, and goals of a group of people. Consider, first, the meaning of *cultural identity* and *acculturation*.

Children are raised within a cultural framework that imposes rewards and sanctions for efficient learning of the group's norms and expectations. According to the traditional view of culture, most individuals have been brought up within one such framework. The process of acculturation involves being introduced to a new system and gradually accommodating to it. Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder defined acculturation as the following:

> The process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact.... Cultural changes include alterations in a group's customs and in their economic and political life. Psychological changes include alterations in individuals' attitudes toward the acculturation process, their cultural identities…and their social behaviors in relation to the groups in contact. (2006, p. 305)

Various versions of the acculturation process have been offered that view acculturation on a spectrum. For example, Ramírez and Castañeda (1974) described acculturation as a series of stages ranging from traditional to dualistic to atraditional. Leung (1988) specified *marginality* as the transition between traditionalism and biculturalism and conceived of the fourth stage as *overacculturation,* whereby the elements of one's original culture have been totally rejected. Going further, Red Horse (1980) added a fifth stage, which he called "pan-renaissance," in which a group seeks a revitalization or revival of the traditional culture, such as that sought by African Americans in the 1960s or by some North American Indian tribes in the United States and Canada.

The foregoing spectrum or stage theories suggest that cultures are somehow discrete, that acculturation is a process of change over time, and that an individual can be no more than *bicultural*—a state that often is metaphorically described as "walking in two worlds" (Henze & Vanett, 1993, p. 116). Rather than identifying points on a spectrum, Berry and colleagues conceptualized the outcomes of acculturation as representing "the degree to which people wish to maintain their heritage culture and identity; and the degree to which people seek involvement with the larger society" (2006, p. 306). In a study of data on immigrant youth from 26 different cultural backgrounds living in 13 different countries, Berry and colleagues identified four predominant acculturation patterns: *assimilation* (little maintenance of the original culture), *separation* (some cultural maintenance with avoidance of involvement with the mainstream), *marginalization* (neither cultural maintenance nor involvement with the larger society), and *integration* (a balance of both cultural maintenance and involvement with the larger society).

More akin to the view of Berry and colleagues (2006) is the perspective offered by Banks and McGee Banks (2010), who described a more fluid and less discrete way of thinking about cultural identity. Banks and McGee Banks's view is applicable to multicultural societies such as the United States that consist of "a shared culture as well as many subcultures" (p. 7). They described a complex picture of macro- and microlevels of culture in which the macrocultural framework is an overarching national frame that includes many microcultural groups, each of which participates to varying extents in the macroculture while simultaneously retaining varying amounts of its original cultural traditions. Thus, the cultural identity of any individual may reflect features of the macroculture, of one's original microculture, and of any other microcultural groups within the society. Factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, language, social status, and geographical location are key ingredients in the pattern of identity that emerges.

The challenge of responding to the need to acculturate also applies to other aspects of identity besides ethnic and national identity. Individuals may develop affiliations with professional or personal interest groups that have their own norms and rules; these features also feed into cultural identity. As Banks and McGee Banks (2010) noted, each individual belongs to several groups at the same time and may experience stronger or weaker identification with the tenets of one group as compared with another based on the extent of socialization that is experienced within each group. It is also interesting to note that a group may be identified explicitly as such by means of well-defined beliefs and practices such as a particular religion, but it also may be a group by virtue of a particular experience such as being the parent of a child with a disability. Cultural identity, then, is multifaceted and highly individualized.

Both of us, the authors of this book, can cite readily affiliations with several microcultural groups while simultaneously participating in the American macroculture. These affiliations are strong enough to require sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes conflicting sets of rules for conduct. Both of us identify with the academic community, with women, and with other parents; however, Beth, in particular, feels affiliated to other parents who have children with disabilities. Beth's primary ethnic affiliation is Caribbean and also black in a broader sense, whereas Maya identifies herself as Indian and Hindu.

SPECIAL EDUCATION AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION

What does it mean, then, to say that an individual shares membership in the culture of special education? We begin by viewing the special education system as a subsystem within the social institution of education. Bullivant (1993) explained the powerful relationship between the larger macroculture and the social institutions that carry out the cultural program of a society. First, he identified such institutions as "major interrelated systems of social roles and norms (rules) organized to satisfy important social and human needs" (p. 31). These institutions include the nuclear family, the education system, the legal system, and so forth. Bullivant explained the following:

> The distinctive pattern or style of an institutional agency's operation is determined by its charter or ideology. A charter consists of a collection of beliefs, values, and ideas about what the institutional agency aims at (its ends) and how it will arrange its structure and organization (the means) to carry out its aims. (p. 32)

> Much as a computer is programmed by software containing instructions, so an institutional agency's ideology, organization, structure, and operation are programmed by instructions and information that enable it to function properly. They also provide people in the agency with the necessary knowledge and ideas about which behaviors are appropriate and which are not, together with the rules and routines to follow. All these instructions, knowledge, and information are selected from the society's culture. (p. 33)

According to this analysis of social institutions, it would be expected that the special education system will reflect the "beliefs, values, and ideas" regarding both the ends and the means of education, which in turn reflect those of the national macroculture. Several powerful analyses of the historical development of U.S. public schools have emphasized that the education system's main charge has been transmission of the essential cultural tenets of U.S. society. Spindler and Spindler's (1990) classic analysis asserted that all American cultural dialogue, whether it be public speech such as editorials, public policy, campaign speeches, and classroom discussions or private speech such as parent–child interactions, is facilitated by a tacit understanding of core American values. They identified five such core values, all of which refer most directly to individual rights:

> Freedom of speech (and other forms of personal freedom); the rights of an individual (to be an individual and act on his or her own behalf); equality (as equality of opportunity and including sexual equality); the desirability of achievement attained by hard work (and the belief that anyone can achieve success if he or she works hard enough); and social mobility (the assumption that anyone can improve social status because the social structure is open and hard work will get you there. (p. 23)

On a more political level, Banks and McGee Banks added to this list expansionism, manifest destiny, and capitalism, which they describe as revealing "the less positive side of U.S. national values" (2010, p. 10).

In their analysis of the historical development of public schooling in America, Tyack and Hansot (1982) placed the Protestant ethic and capitalism at the core of that history. These authors described the early 19th-century efforts to establish a common school system as a "crusade" whose charge was to combine the Christian virtues of a "generalized Protestantism," such as hard work, literacy, temperance, and frugality, with "a work ethic and ideology favoring the development of capitalism" (p. 28). Along with this was the ideal of *equity*, one of the cornerstones of American democracy.

The latter half of the 19th century saw two powerful movements that further influenced the direction of the public school vision. The first movement was *industrialization,* as a result of which the vision became increasingly secular and, driven by a growing faith in science and scientific management, incorporated the Protestant ethic into what Tyack and Hansot referred to as "the gospel of efficiency" (1982, p. 121). The second force directing the charge of education was the vastly increasing and changing nature of the immigrant population. Concerns about the socialization of non–Anglo-Saxon immigrants resulted in the drive to "Americanization," which by the 1930s and 1940s was considered essential to combat the evils of urbanization, poverty, and cultural differences that were consistently interpreted as deficits of character and capability (Fass, 1989). As many scholars (e.g., Fass, 1989; Gould, 1981) have shown, beliefs about cultural and racial inferiority were fueled by the development of "mental testing" and were applied both to immigrants and to native-born minorities.

As Skrtic (1991) pointed out, equity is a difficult goal to achieve because of a conflict between the rapidly increasing heterogeneity of the school population and the drive for a bureaucratic uniformity in schools. As school leaders turned more and more to the IQ test as a means of sorting students into the manageable units required by the gospel of efficiency, the concept of individual impairment became institutionalized. This was the cornerstone on which the special education system was built, and the fact that this system still serves a disproportionately high percentage of minorities ought not be surprising. In summarizing and extending his analysis of this relationship, Skrtic described the constructs of student disability and special education as follows:

> Institutional categories created by a perfect storm in the historical development of public education—the fateful convergence of a dramatic increase in student diversity and the extensive bureaucratization of schools in the first half of the 20th century…a legitimating device, an institutional practice that, in effect, shifts the blame for school failure to students through medicalizing and objectifying discourses, while reducing the uncertainty of diversity by containing it through exclusionary practices." (2005, pp. 149–150)

Beyond a historical analysis, structural analysis also reveals the cultural charge given to the institution of education. Skrtic (1991) and Skrtic and McCall (2010) offered a detailed explication of how the epistemological and organizational bases of general education became interpreted and institutionalized within the professional culture of special education and subsequently became increasingly resistant to change. In essence, Skrtic and Skrtic and McCall argued that the field of education has been

dominated by the positivist tradition of *knowledge,* which, with its assumption that reality is objective and unchangeable, has led to a mechanistic model of services ("a machine bureaucracy") and to a view of teaching that is based on a model of technical rationality (see also Schön, 1983). Special education, Skrtic argued, has been expressed as a "more extreme version" (1991, p. 105) of that model, and the special education teacher, "even more so than the general education teacher, is conceptualized as a technician" (1991, p. 106).

Hall's (1981) now famous classification of "low-context" and "high-context" cultures is helpful in understanding the cultural basis of the positivist tradition. Hall asserted that the emphasis on objectivity occurs most frequently in what he termed "low-context" cultures, in which "bureaucratic ranking systems" are based on the belief that when both action and agent are stripped of their contexts, or "decontextualized," the action can be conducted by anyone anywhere and, conversely, still have the same meaning in all contexts. He gave the example of the American legal system, which, in allowing "only established facts, stripped of all contextual background data, as admissible as evidence," is, he stated, "the epitome of low-context systems" (p. 107). A caveat to Hall's classic analysis was offered by Kittler, Rygal, and McKinnon (2011), who warned that the low- and/or high-context concept has been applied with too broad a brush to many societies, not taking into account the nuances of within-group variability in any society. Nevertheless, special education law, in its requirement for categorical classification of children's disabilities, reflects exactly this kind of abstracted, low-context language as contrasted with a more "high-context" approach that would accept or even encourage conclusions that tolerate greater ambiguity.

According to Skrtic (1995b), the low-context culture of technical rationalism results in an uncritical approach to the underpinnings of special education. Skrtic's answer to this is "critical pragmatism," which does the following:

> Approaches decision making in a way that recognizes and treats as problematic the assumptions, theories, and metatheories behind professional models, practices, and tools; it accepts the fact that our assumptions, theories, and metatheories themselves require evaluation and reappraisal. (p. 44)

FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

In this book, epistemological and organizational aspects of professional culture as they relate to parent–professional relationships and Skrtic's point about an uncritical approach are essential to our own arguments. We use a critical pragmatist approach to examine the underpinnings that form the value base of special education—in particular, the core American values of equity, individualism, personal choice, and hard work (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010; Spindler & Spindler, 1990). Furthermore, we place our concern within the context of the inevitably multicultural nature of the United States and the challenge that special education professionals face in collaborating with families and individuals whose implicit and explicit values base may be radically different from their own. Thus, the bulk of this book addresses the issue of how the ideals of the U.S. macroculture are represented in special education and the resulting implications for cross-cultural communication.

At this point, however, it is important to specify the book's central argument: Professional knowledge is largely acquired by an implicit process that needs to be made explicit and conscious if school personnel are to become effective collaborators

in a multicultural society. Critical pragmatism makes that process explicit (Skrtic, 1995a). Our "process of cultural reciprocity," which is outlined in Chapter 2, facilitates professionals' engagement in this process to bring about effective parent–professional collaboration.

BECOMING A MEMBER:
THE IMPORTANCE OF EMBEDDED BELIEFS

How does an individual gain membership into the institution of special education? First, each individual brings his or her own complex of macro and microcultural frameworks and the belief systems that he or she espouses. The process that prepares the individual for membership in this particular institution, however, draws most heavily on the macrocultural belief systems on which the field is built. Because most professionals who come into this field have demonstrated through their success in the education system considerable mastery of the belief systems of the overarching macroculture, it is clear that the implicit and explicit beliefs of the macroculture are not new to them. Induction into special education, then, is accomplished by building on the implicit knowledge base of the macroculture through formal instruction in the theoretical and applied knowledge of the field and, finally, through practical experience in schools (Skrtic, 1991).

Our central point is that new members often learn the approved goals—and means of attaining those goals—without having to specify explicitly their cultural basis. In most situations, the rules of a cultural institution may never be taught explicitly to the inductee precisely because the insiders themselves may not be aware of the rules. Indeed, Apple (2003) argued that the teaching of social and economic norms and expectations to students in school is a covert or tacit process that creates the valued canon of knowledge based on the society's values and commitments. In considering the effect of such hegemony, Bowles and Gintis (1976, 2002) argued that it is not only that the knowledge being transmitted succeeds in reproducing the societal status quo but also that schools are structured so as to replicate different levels of workplace environments, which in turn socialize students into behaviors that will prepare them for levels similar to those of their families of origin. Giroux (2006) called for schools to counter these hegemonic processes by creating curricula that build on students' cultural resources.

Illich (1971) became famous for his analysis of educational practices that increasingly engaged in the "deskilling" of teachers, leaving them with little choice but to perpetuate the kind of indoctrination previously described. Since that time, criticisms of this approach have continued, yet many believe that the trend has only intensified with the advent of high-stakes testing under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (PL 107-110; Provenzo, Renaud, & Provenzo, 2008), resulting in more and more scripted programs that encourage fragmented and decontextualized learning that disempowers teachers and reduces their ability to be critical consumers or engage in critical pedagogy.

This kind of professional preparation appears to have two unfortunate consequences. First, the fact that school professionals are not made aware of the cultural underpinnings of their fields and the implicit values and beliefs that are specific to the dominant macroculture means that they can operate only as technicians. Second, students who belong to a minority group may lack access to the "cultural capital," or

the tools for success in the mainstream, and may need to be taught those rules and strategies explicitly, in a way that students who have grown up in the mainstream do not need to be taught (Delpit, 1995).

In special education, personnel preparation programs explicitly teach the policies and practices of the field, explications of which can be found in any textbook or any course outlines used by teachers' colleges. As Skrtic pointed out, this process of socialization is a vital part of professional induction:

> When students can demonstrate that they have internalized the profession's knowledge, skills, norms, and values—how to think and act as professionals—they are duly certified as professionally competent by the professional school, admitted to the professional community by the relevant professional association, and licensed by the state to practice the profession. (1995b, p. 11)

However, the beliefs that underlie these policies and practices often are not made explicit and are conveyed to the initiate in forms that are so embedded as to be un-acknowledged, even unrecognized, by those who teach them. Bowers (1984, 1995) referred to this knowledge as the "taken-for-granted" beliefs that are experienced as "the natural order of things" (1984, p. 36) rather than as a set of values that have been explicitly learned. Special education is full of such embedded beliefs.

REIFICATION OF DISABILITY CATEGORIES

An embedded belief that has received considerable attention is the way that the concept of disability becomes reified—or made into a "thing" that an individual has (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995; Stein, 2002). According to this belief, the disability is a feature of the individual's constitution and exists as objective reality.

The reification perspective is particularly controversial regarding specific learning disability (SLD), which, Mercer (1997) argued, reflects a factual phenomenon that exists within the brain of an individual and may be caused by a particular structural anomaly of the brain. A line of continuing research by Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004, 2009) has extended this explanation by using brain scan technology to study brain activity during the process of reading. This research indicates that there are different patterns of brain activity and differential usage of areas of the brain by struggling readers compared with accomplished readers; it also indicates that with effective instruction the struggling readers' patterns can change. Although the authors of that research argue that these differential patterns reflect built-in neurological differences between struggling and accomplished readers, this explanation is debatable because, as Hruby and Hynd observed, the poor readers' brain activity patterns could reflect "not neurophysiological destiny, but a lack of literacy preparation in optimal contextual circumstances" (2006, p. 550). In other words, the correlation between reading efficiency and brain activity does not indicate the direction of the effect. It is not appropriate to assume that brain activity patterns result in efficient or inefficient reading. Rather, it is possible that efficient preparation and practice result in one kind of pattern while inefficient reading behaviors result in a different pattern.

In contrast to the biological interpretations, social constructionists counter that a learning difficulty is a disability only when it is in an area of learning that is so valued by the society that its absence places the individual at a significant disadvantage. Sleeter (1986, 1998, 2010), for example, argued that after the launching of Sputnik in

1957, the growing demands of a technological economy led to a raising of reading standards, which contributed to the establishment of the learning disability category; this was supported by parents of white students, who wanted their children's academic difficulties to be distinguished from the difficulties of minorities and children from low-income families. Similarly, Stanovich and Stanovich (1996) and Skrtic (2005) interpreted the development and reification of this category as a political solution to student diversity.

The traditional approach in special education has been to assume the reification perspective. Skrtic (1991), in his analysis of the epistemological source of this perspective, pointed out that special education knowledge is grounded in the "functionalist paradigm," in which reality is viewed as objective and independent of the human perspective. He argued that in the social sciences, the manifestation of functionalism that has most directly influenced the accepted special education knowledge base is *functionalist psychology*—in particular, psychological behaviorism and experimental psychology. Thus, in considering a spectrum of epistemological approaches from subjectivist to objectivist, Skrtic located the special education knowledge tradition "in the most extreme objectivist region of the functionalist paradigm" (p. 106).

What are the implications of this view of knowledge for teacher preparation? As Skrtic (1991) observed, because objectivists consider this way of viewing the world as the only way, the teacher preparation process, especially in special education, typically does not require students to acknowledge other theories of knowledge. Skrtic proposed that professions are guided by a hierarchy of presuppositions, from the most abstract to the most applied, as follows: metatheories, theories, assumptions, models, practices, and tools. He argued that in special education, only the more practical rather than the theoretical levels of this hierarchy are acknowledged; that is, any criticism of special education historically has centered only on "the ethics and efficacy of its models, practices, and tools, but not on its assumptions, theories, and metatheories" (pp. 55–56). So, for example, prospective teachers may be asked to examine the efficacy of a tool, such as a psychometric test, for identifying a disability but are not asked to examine the underlying belief that disabilities are objective phenomena that can be objectively and accurately diagnosed by such a test (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995). By not addressing this issue, teacher preparation programs inculcate an important principle of the field at the deepest level of belief—what Bowers (1995) called the taken-for-granted level—whereby the belief represents a premise that is so embedded as to be invisible to the learner.

There are important implications of the reification perspective's going unexamined. First, this perspective reflects the medical model of disease that has been transported into the field of special education (Mercer, 1973; Sleeter, 2010). Society's implicit faith in the medical model leads professionals to believe that what is really a very subjective process is objective and scientific. This is particularly problematic for high-incidence categories such as SLD, emotional and/or behavior disorder (EBD), and intellectual disability (ID) in the mild range, for which such misplaced faith can have paradoxical results. On the one hand, the subjectivity inherent in the classification process can lead to the overrepresentation of low-performing groups in these disability categories (Harry & Klingner, 2006; McCall & Skrtic, 2009). On the other hand, in the case of SLD, this actually can work the other way around; in its certainty that this disability represents an intrinsic impairment, the field offers an official definition that explicitly rules out the influence of environmental factors as an explanation for the student's learning difficulties. Yet, it is virtually impossible to know whether the

academic difficulties of a young student who shows no signs of developmental delay are a result of experience or of intrinsic impairment, and it has long been argued that the assessment instruments available do not convincingly distinguish between low-achieving students and students with a "learning disability" (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992). Further, as Collins and Camblin (1983) argued and Sleeter (2010) continued to corroborate, the exclusion of environmental effects in the classification of learning disability actually discriminates against children from low socioeconomic or potentially detrimental social backgrounds.

As a result of the foregoing debates, challenges to the field's traditional reliance on a discrepancy between IQ score and an academic achievement score as the main indicator of SLD have resulted in the development of the response to intervention (RTI) model. This multitiered approach aims to ensure that children receive "evidence-based" instruction tailored to their needs while providing consistent monitoring of their response to this instruction. This model does not exclude the notion of SLD; rather, it attempts to withhold application of the label until a child's achievement scores indicate a lack of response to the instruction. The absence of response is then taken as an indicator of a within-child impairment. Thus, critical scholars such as Ferri have argued that the reification assumption is still at the heart of the model, continuing the "foundational assumption that there are two distinct student types, one disabled and one 'typical' or 'normal'" (2011, p. 1).

THE REIFICATION PERSPECTIVE AND CULTURALLY VARIABLE PARAMETERS OF NORMALCY

We, the authors, offer the issue of reification to illustrate the tremendously complex belief systems that surround the concept of disability and to argue that such complexity demands an approach to professional preparation that will ensure a critical awareness of the entrenched beliefs that underlie special education practice. For us, this awareness has been an essential requirement of becoming members of the institution of special education as it is practiced in the United States. Being required to understand special education practices in a new society forced us to become aware of the taken-for-granted beliefs of our native institutions of education. For example, on the reification issue outlined previously, we did not differ, initially, from the traditional U.S. perspective. We also assumed that a disability was a factual phenomenon that someone has—until we noticed that people designated as having a disability in U.S. society often did not match our understanding of disabilities.

We came to see that the parameters that we used to define a disability were much broader than those being used by the U.S. school system. This was particularly true for the high-incidence disabilities such as SLD, EBD, and mild ID. For example, because both of our native societies operated education systems that offered advanced education only to a minority of the population, the many children who did not show an aptitude for academic skills would not be perceived as having disabilities; rather, it would simply be accepted that they should pursue career goals that are not based on advanced academic skills. Thus, difficulties in learning such skills would not be perceived as outside the norm. In our native societies, a child's difficulties would have to be quite severe before he or she would be seen as atypical. In fact, the notion of disability tended to be tied most often to physical anomalies or readily discernible impediments that interfere, in relatively gross ways, with interpersonal communication, social interaction, or basic academic skills.

We came to see that if we could change our view of who had a disability simply by changing the parameters of *normalcy,* then a disability could not be a universally recognizable or factual phenomenon. It became important to understand that the criteria for determining disability in the United States reflected a narrower view of normalcy than that to which we were accustomed. Two questions became important to us: 1) How were these parameters established? 2) What values did they represent?

As Bowers cogently stated, "The authority that culture exercises over us…is internalized in such a way that the person under its sway experiences it as part of the natural order of things" (1984, p. 36). The reason why we think it is important for professionals to examine their taken-for-granted beliefs is that the United States is rapidly becoming the most multicultural society in the world. Although the process of acculturation is a given within such a society, it is almost always the newcomer or outsider who is required to acculturate to the ways of the mainstream.

In special education, the result of such ethnocentric practice is that families who do not share or value the principles on which special education policies and practices are built are all too often alienated and excluded from collaboration in the treatment of their children's difficulties (for a comprehensive review, see Harry, 2008). When families are excluded, children suffer, and professionals' attempts at remediation and support result in minimal progress for children and in frustration for the professionals and families alike. The principle of family-centered practice now espoused by early interventionists points the way that is needed. Without cultural reciprocity, however, the ideal of parent–professional collaboration will continue to elude those who work with families from diverse cultures and belief systems.

The purpose of this book is to deconstruct the natural order of things—the values base on which the policies and practices of special education in the United States are built. The goal of such deconstruction is not to promote a laissez-faire attitude of "anything goes" as professionals work with people from diverse cultures but rather to advocate for a level of cultural awareness that can radically alter the ethnocentricity with which professionals usually approach families and communities that diverge significantly from the culture of special education. With this level of awareness, professionals can begin to develop what we the authors describe as *cultural reciprocity.*

TOWARD A PROCESS OF CULTURAL RECIPROCITY

Certain key concepts form the substance of this book; we delineate these throughout Section I of the text. As outlined in this chapter, we consider these concepts to be the underpinnings on which disability policy and practice in the United States are based. In Chapter 2, we describe and give examples of the process of cultural reciprocity, which we recommend not as a cookbook approach or a strategy but rather as a framework for transforming communication between professionals and family members. In Chapter 3, we show that these concepts are both explicit and implicit in the law itself by examining the legal and epistemological underpinnings of definitions of disability. Chapter 4 illustrates how these underpinnings have an impact on the way in which professional expertise and language are conceptualized. Chapter 5 analyzes the cultural underpinnings of professionals' recommendations to parents regarding parenting styles, and Chapter 6 applies this analysis to professional interactions with parents around issues of goal setting for students.

Section II presents three quite different applications of cultural reciprocity as practiced and modified by three colleagues who have used our previous book *Culture*

in Special Education: Building Reciprocal Family–Professional Relationships (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) over many years. First, Davenia Lea presents an intriguing portrait of her own journey of self-discovery as an African American researcher negotiating relationships with a group of African American teenage mothers whose identities diverged widely from her own. Next, Eva Thorp and Monimalika Day offer vivid portraits of their use of "cultural dilemmas" as a lens for helping graduate students develop a reciprocal understanding of the cultural differences between themselves and families. The book closes with a thoughtful analysis by Shernaz García of the meaning of cultural reciprocity as she worked to bridge the distance between her American students and herself—the multifaceted, multicultural "other."

Overall, we recommend the process of cultural reciprocity as a way of being that will inevitably be crafted and modified to suit individual personalities and complex social contexts as professionals attempt to provide services to the wide range of families that constitute the very diverse composition of U.S. society.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Beyond the four main values of individualism, independence, choice, and equity identified in the chapter, are there other core values of the mainstream culture that you can identify? Think of an everyday situation or event in your life such as driving your own car to work or university instead of carpooling or eating with a friend but not sharing your lunches and reflect on the embedded values in your actions. Could they be considered mainstream values?

2. What do you think of the chapter's assertion that most professional training programs present technical information as universal truths and do not offer trainees the opportunity to question the assumptions underlying these so-called truths? Do you think professionals should question the beliefs and values of their field? What suggestions would you have for professionals trained in the United States who might also want to work in their field outside of the United States?

3. Work with a partner to identify any processes that are considered essential practices in the field (e.g., intelligence testing, achievement testing, behavioral interventions, lesson planning). Discuss whether you have learned about the reason for these practices and the theories that underlie them or have engaged in any critical examination of the practices. Develop a list of questions about these practices that you think would help you understand them more fully.