Breaking the Language Barrier:
Promoting Collaboration between General and Special Educators

By LeAnne Robinson & Marsha Riddle Buly

The degree to which we don't understand the culture of others is the degree to which we're culturally impoverished. —Jonathon Kozol, 9/29/2005

The public school system has undergone dramatic changes within the last ten years. We have moved toward a standards-based system, implemented statewide assessments and have increased accountability for both students and educators. Inherent in all reform initiatives has been the effort to increase success for all students, including those with disabilities, in the general education setting and the general education curriculum (Nolet & McLaughlin, 2002). The increase in such inclusionary practices has increased the need for collaboration between the multiple players in the public school system. This has created challenges for both general education and special education teachers and teacher educators who have historically worked as separate entities and who may operate from very different paradigms and belief systems. No longer are special education teachers able to primarily provide one-on-one instruction in pullout settings; instead, they are expected to work in the "least restrictive environment" possible, often within a general education classroom. At the same

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time general education teachers are not able to assume that the responsibility for the education of students with special needs lies with someone else. The roles of teachers have changed and schools and school systems are being held to higher standards of accountability than ever before. At the same time current and historical service delivery models of both general education and special education have are not always effective (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003). An evolution in education is occurring and professionals in both areas find that they must work together; they must collaborate to meet the needs of all students.

Traditionally a separate culture exists between special education and general education. The two fields have viewed the world of education from different theoretical perspectives that in part stems from different legislative and experiential backgrounds. As Kozol (opening quote) comments about culture, the degree to which we don't understand the paradigms of others leaves us impoverished and unable to work collaboratively to best instruct students. When we lack shared experiences and perspectives, we have two choices—we can haplessly dismiss the perspective or paradigm of the other or we can decide to learn about another's perspective, attempt to understand what a person's beliefs are, and where the beliefs stem from. From this point, we can then establish a mutual goal of working collaboratively to improve the instruction of all students.

"Collaboration" is included in many vision and mission statements and educators are expected to collaborate with each other, with administrators, and with parents. The word is often used generically, implying that collaboration happens when individuals are working together. This broad use of the term easily gives the impression that collaboration is an easy and natural process, when the opposite is true (Friend, 2000). Collaboration, as a successful process, takes effort, diligence, and training. It is not simply working together, liking each other, or spending time engaged in a joint activity. Instead, collaboration has been defined as an interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems (Idol, Nevin, & Paulocci-Whitcomb, 2000). Friend and Cook (1996) identify several specific facets of successful collaboration including the following: parity, mutual goals, shared responsibility in decision-making, shared resources and accountability, and valuing of personal interactions.

Skills for effective collaboration, especially among general education and special education teachers, are most readily learned through modeling (Hoffman & Jenkins, 2002). The most powerful and influential opportunity for teacher modeling occurs during initial teacher preparation programs (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Malgeri, 1996). Teacher candidates need to learn how to collaborate prior to entering the profession because collaboration does not readily occur when in the field (Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996). Unfortunately, collaboration between special education and general education has not been successfully modeled in most teacher education programs, including our own.

Identifying the Language Barrier

The authors of this article are two professors from a northwestern regional university. One of us works in the special education department and the other works in the elementary education department. As we began to work together on our research and our teaching, we found that there were many communication barriers between our departments and we recognized that these same barriers are also found in the public schools where we had taught or consulted. One fundamental discovery was the realization that the two of us lacked a shared language. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say we lacked similar definitions for shared concepts. This was a surprise to both of us, as we each work successfully with students in both general and special education settings. However, we recognized that we came from different paradigms and our beliefs came from different research bases. When we shared our research base with each other we found that terms we thought we understood were actually defined differently in our respective disciplines. As our work continued we began to ask if this lack of commonality in our definitions might actually play a large part in the barriers to collaboration faced by general and special educators in both university and school settings.

To answer this question we started with our faculty colleagues. We wondered if the different interpretations of terms and concepts were unique to the two of us or if varying definitions were shared with our colleagues. Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Malgeri (1996) point out that a lack of shared language creates barriers to successful collaboration at the University level between special education and general education, creating and fostering misconceptions between members of each group and hindering the development of a common conceptual framework. Our first step was to listen to the words and ideas that were being discussed during faculty meetings, with an emphasis on terms related to literacy.

For several weeks both of us added to our individual lists and at the end of the collection period we compared notes. The common terms that arose were: behaviorism, constructivism, diagnosis, direct instruction, and fluency. When we shared how the words were being used within the meetings, we found that different faculty members in our College of Education thought they were speaking a shared language with the same definitions for terms, when, in fact, they were not.

To see if this were an isolated incident or one that was broader and more pervasive, we moved to the research literature. We did this partly to see if different definitions were used and partly because we each believed our definitions were "correct" and we wanted to teach each other. We did not find definitive answers. Rather, we found that not only did we have different definitions in our university there were also different definitions in research literature, in teacher preparation materials, and in journals, reports, and materials written for teacher and administrator audiences. The more we talked and read, the more definitional barriers we uncovered. As teacher educators we took our hypothesis, that teachers from special education and general education are using similar terminology to refer to different

constructs, to each of our respective national conferences. This included a presentation at the Council for Exceptional Children and one at the International Reading Association. We shared our concerns and provided each audience with the examples from our faculty. At both conferences, the audiences actively engaged in the discussion and offered further examples of language barriers between special education and elementary education.

What we realized through this process is that subtle differences in understanding are indeed creating a "polite polarization" between general and special education. Further, this "politeness" exists throughout P-12 and higher education, although we often choose not to identify it as a problem or even to acknowledge its existence. As educators, we tend to try to "get along." We may work side by side in a friendly collegial manger, but do not truly engage in collaborative efforts. In the P-12 setting, the general and special education teachers discuss issues at IEP meetings and then retreat to the classroom, perhaps with totally different understandings about the words used in the conversation about a particular student. At the university level, we jointly attend college or university-wide meetings. We politely listen to our colleagues from different departments (general education and special education) and then proceed to focus solely on our own curriculum, without actively seeking input or involvement of those outside of our own disciplines.

In this article, we provide several examples to serve as beginning areas of discussion for special education and general education faculties, teachers, administrators, and policy makers who are moving towards uniting general and special education teachers and teacher educators. Although it would be simplistic to assume that through these revelations alone the rift between general and special educators will dissipate, it does provide an avenue to begin discussions across the disciplines.

Problems with the Pedagogical Language:
Behaviorists or Constructivists?

Our first example comes from the underlying assumption upon which special education and general education philosophies are derived. The assumption, at least in our college, is that special education departments operate from a behaviorist paradigm while general education departments lean toward a constructivist paradigm. That a different philosophy underlies a different department is not in itself a problem. The barrier comes in the definition then applied to the label. For example, general education faculty may describe special education as rigid, overly structured and dehumanizing, with an emphasis on rewarding extrinsically with candy and other items. Special education faculty may describe general educators as fuzzy, unstructured or unfocused, with an over emphasis on 'fun' activities that lack clearly defined educational outcomes (Howell & Nolet, 2000). We found this true not only in our college but also in K-12 schools. Such misunderstanding of underlying philosophies of the two fields often spirals into a debate over constructivism and

behaviorism and methodological approaches that are purported to be inherent to each of these educational theories.

These old paradigms and false beliefs interfere with collaborative efforts to implement best practice in education. While it is important to understand where each field has its roots, it is also important to understand how the paradigms are changing. The current emphasis on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999) in teacher professional development, and teacher preparation courses, and a new focus on universal design for learning (Rose & Meyer, 2003) are helping both general and special educators shift their views of instruction. In special education, the focus has generally been on providing intensive instruction to a single individual. Now in many classrooms and teacher preparation programs, the emphasis has changed to how to intensively provide instruction to groups of individuals. A similar but reversed generalization can be made in general education; the emphasis has shifted from providing instruction to a large group to how to provide instruction that meets the needs of each individual. Neither field should rely solely on one paradigm or model of education. Clearly, if one theory or model applied to all students, then we would not have students today who struggle to read. Questions about how to provide the most appropriate instruction for the many types of learners in all classrooms remain, and it is likely that there will never be one model or approach that works for all students.

Examining Our Own Departmental Bias

Realizing that our first barrier was the way each department conceptualized the other's educational theory of learning, we created an opportunity to engage in discussions across departments. We asked key faculty leaders in our departments to select articles that described his or her pedagogical beliefs—beliefs widely shared within each department—and that at the same time would generate discussion. In the end, three articles were selected:

(1) A chapter from *Designing Elementary Education for all Children* entitled "Curriculum and Instruction for All Learners: Blending System-atic and Constructivistic Approaches in Inclusive Elementary Schools" by Judy Kugelmass and Beverly Rainforth (2003);

(2) A chapter by Sara Tarver (1996) entitled "Direct Instruction";

(3) An excerpt from *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Faculty voluntarily read each position piece and then engaged in semi-structured dialogue during an informal brownbag meeting. We were impressed and surprised by the turnout for our initial setting; over half of the faculty came prepared to sit at a table and discuss. As we discussed terms, practices that were different between our disciplines were clear, such as the fact that in special education we often find teachers working with students with very specialized needs in different

instructional settings while general education teachers often have responsibility for a large number of students at one time. What our discussion did was provide us a means to ask each other for clarification and explanation about terms and practice. As a result, participants realized that what was initially perceived as differences in pedagogy, learning theories, and assessment were actually a misunderstanding around language used within each discipline.

In fact, almost everyone (both special education and elementary education faculty) agreed with the underlying principles in each paper and recognized potential misconceptions surrounding behaviorism and constructivism. For example, someone who would consider herself a constructivist pointed to the following excerpt from *Curriculum and Instruction for All Learners* (Rainforth & Kugelmass, 2003, p.22):

> Reinforcement is provided for appropriate responses to increase the likelihood that they will be repeated and to motivate students toward greater challenges. Although tangible rewards may be helpful to engage a student who has experienced little success, the most powerful rewards are usually those that foster a sense of belonging, a sense of control over one's situation (e.g., succeeding at challenging work), or joy in the work itself.

She shared that she often equated behaviorism with tangible rewards and hadn't considered that when a special educator discussed rewards, they may be actually be considering the importance or use of intrinsic rewards. The reading and discussion group only took an hour and most participants left the initial session feeling less polarized and believing that they had a greater understanding of the perspective of faculty from the other department. It was affirming (and from our perspective, amazing) to hear one faculty member comment, "Wow. I never thought I would ever actually say I agreed with what 'they' were saying!"

Subtle Differences in Terminology: A Sticking Point

To illustrate the differing definitions in the field of education and the problems that may come from not recognizing multiple meanings, we discuss several of the terms that appear to have caused breakdowns in communication between our two departments. For this article, we selected several terms that are used, and defined in various ways, in professional literature and that are also commonly heard in interactions between general and special education.

Diagnosis

As we began to research and write together, we often found that we used the term "diagnosis" in differing ways. This seems to be because our fields often view the *purpose* of diagnosis differently. The general education professor's curricular and research focus is on diagnosis, assessment, and instruction of reading with an emphasis on culturally and linguistically diverse students. To the general education professor, diagnosis for the general education teacher most often meant conducting a curriculum-based formative assessment; assessment that informs the

teacher's instruction for the following day and/or over time. The goal of diagnosis was not to specifically label a disability or challenge. For the general educator, diagnosis meant using appropriate assessments and perhaps consulting with more knowledgeable others to then evaluate and identify a student's strengths and needs so that the teacher could make appropriate instructional decisions.

To the special education professor *diagnosis* often had more of a summative connotation. The special educator frequently viewed a diagnosis as the process of identifying an individual's specific disability. A diagnosis or diagnostic assessment is necessary when making a determination of eligibility for special education and is only the first step in determining what a potential solution may be. Unlike the general education professor's definition, diagnosis generally refers to the specific labeling of a disability. This common statement alone, "The student had been *diagnosed* with a learning disability in reading" provides little instructional information. The special educator often refrains from using the term diagnosis within the context of instructional decision-making.

Evaluation vs. Assessment

Another point of necessary clarification is demonstrated in the terms evaluation and assessment. When used as a more general term, both general and special education professors viewed *evaluation* as the act of using information to make educational and instructional decisions. Both agreed that assessment included the collection of data for the purposes of making a decision but the sticking point came when one of us used the word evaluation. To the special education professor evaluation often had two meanings and the decisions that could be made could be either formative or summative. The first meaning was the formal term *Evaluation*, which refers to a specific process that is conducted for eligibility purposes, and occurs every three years as outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Used in this arena, an evaluation includes a diagnosis or specific diagnostic information, general information—such as test scores and measures on both standardized and criterion referenced assessments—and other relevant data that may be used by the special education team when developing and individual education plan. However, evaluation could also be used as a formative term. One example is the use of curriculum based evaluation (CBE) where assessment data is used to make immediate instructional decisions. Thus, to the special education professor, evaluation could be either summative or formative. It depends upon the nature of the decision.

To the general education professor, evaluation has most often been associated with an end goal; considered synonymous with the term *summative assessment*. Examples are annual standardized tests or yearly district-mandated evaluations of learning. The goal of such evaluations is to see if students have progressed over time. These evaluations can at times be used to guide instruction, but are more often used for purposes of accountability. More recently, general educators have used evalu-

ation to describe what a teacher does with assessment data that has been gathered. In this definition, evaluation is more in line with the definition of *formative assessment*. Although not hugely discrepant, the clarification of these terms was necessary in order for us to continue with our cross discipline collaborative projects.

Explicit Instruction vs. Direct Instruction

Another misconception was highlighted during a meeting when a special education faculty member shared a 'direct instruction' lesson plan with a college planning committee. The general education professor, upon examing them stated, "These are what we call *explicit* lesson plans." This small 'ah ha' moment highlighted another problem with the use of similar terminology—we do not always make clear distinctions between Direct Instruction (note the capitals), direct instruction (note the lower case), and explicit instruction.

Direct Instruction (DI), with capital letters, refers to a specific model of instruction that has been used to create curriculum materials that can be purchased commercially (SRA, 2004). The materials follow a pre-written or scripted plan that tells the teacher how to prompt the students and what to teach. Using the same terms but with lower case letters, direct instruction refers to a model for teaching that is based on the DI model, using specific, explicit steps. Generally, direct instruction lessons are designed to assist students in meeting students' Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals. This explanation of direct instruction matches more closely with the general education teacher's description of explicit instruction.

Explicit instruction, the term used by the general education professor, involves a teacher's plan that explicitly includes declarative, procedural, and conditional understandings within a gradual release of responsibility, or heavily scaffolded format (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). The teacher models, the students do with the teacher, the students do on their own, the teacher assesses, and this is all linked to an objective that is linked to a standard.

This small clarification began to close a huge gap between two departments. General education faculty realized that special educators weren't pushing particular curricular materials or scripts and special education faculty realized that general education faculty were actually teaching teacher candidates how to design lessons based on standards and with clear objectives. The assumptions first held by the faculty can be connected back to the misperceptions over behaviorism and constructivism.

Fluency

Fluency is identified as one of the "big 5" building blocks of proficient reading identified in the report of the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000). But what exactly is fluency? The meaning depends on whom you ask. In terms of reading, in the special education department of our university, which is not unlike other departments across the country, fluency is regularly defined as the number of words read correctly in one minute. This is generally because of an emphasis on the use of

curriculum-based evaluation (CBE) and curriculum based measures (CBM) as assessment tools. One-minute fluency timings are a common CBM. In short, this type of fluency measure allows special education teachers to quickly survey a group of students and make some basic assumption about a child's comprehension skills. It also provides a means for tracking progress in reading comprehension, as these one-minute fluency checks are highly correlated with reading comprehension in the early elementary grades (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins (2001).

In the general education department, which is not unlike other departments across the nation, fluency is defined as reading that is accurate, expressive, and at appropriate rate. When fluency is assessed in general education courses, the focus is on a combination of student's accuracy, phrasing, rate, and expression and includes consideration of a student's comprehension. The term automaticity is used in general education to define accurate and fairly rapid reading. When we look at the published research on fluency it is easy to see why we have these different definitions. What general education defines as automaticity, special education labels fluency.

The report of the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) states that the words *automaticity* and *fluency* are often used synonymously. Earlier, in the same section on fluency in relation to reading, the word fluency is defined as "the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression" (pp. 3-5). According to this same report, "our understanding of what is involved in reading fluency has been altered and enlarged . . . it is now clear that fluency may also include the ability to group words appropriately into meaningful grammatical units for interpretation" (pp. 3-6), Further,

> fluency requires the rapid use of punctuation and the determination of where to place emphasis or where to pause to make sense of a text. Readers must carry out these aspects of interpretation rapidly—and usually without conscious attention. Thus, fluency helps enable reading comprehension by freeing cognitive resources for interpretation, but it is also implicated in the process of comprehension as it necessarily includes preliminary interpretive steps (p. 3-6)

The explanations of fluency provided in this influential report encompass more than automaticity. Stating that the terms are often used synonymously but then not clarifying how fluency should be defined hinders effective collaboration between special education and general education.

Interestingly, fluency has not been the only term with mixed definitions that we have found to be problematic. Educators from across the United States have shared examples that they have found to be the center or misunderstanding within their own settings. This includes such terms as differentiated instruction, inclusion, remediation, and even collaboration. And we suspect that we have only begun to uncover terms with multiple, and often misunderstood, definitions that create problems in our collaborative efforts.

Where Do We Go From Here?

These few examples of language differences that create or intensify barriers highlight the need for ongoing dialogue between general and special educators at all levels. How this may occur will differ depending on the people and the institution, as each school and university system is unique and dynamics between faculty in higher education and special education will vary. What has begun to make a difference in our College is a continued and open dialogue around terminology and concepts. (Dare we say it has actually been fun to identify how we are using terms?) Based on our experience, regardless of the format, we offer the following suggestions to consider in a move toward the identification and remediation of language barriers between general and special education educators.

1. Read To Learn

Consider our opening quote from Jonathon Kozol about being rich when we understand the culture of others—including the educational culture of our colleagues. We suggest examining multiple perspectives through shared readings. The readings allow the talk to be removed from individual beliefs. We base this idea on our dialogues about behaviorism and constructivism. On an individual level, we need to learn to examine, respect, and strive to understand situations, terminology, and beliefs from multiple perspectives. It is easy to judge. It is more difficult to see and understand. We also highly recommend briefly reviewing the professional literature from different fields. We found that few people had actually read anything by original authors or researchers from other perspectives than those in our own field. It is very easy for all of us to become married to the paradigm that we have been educated in, without having reviewed others. It is actually a challenge (or should we say issue of pride?) to openly admit that many of us didn't receive an exceedingly balanced induction into higher education. We recommend initiating a discussion with two articles, each selected by faculty from different departments and then providing a structure or ground rules (see recommendation 2).

2. Begin Dialogue

Countless opportunities for dialogue exist, but we have to be creative. Starting a reading and discussion group over brown bag meetings is one example. We recommend that initial groups start with some ground rules for discussion. We offer our list of norms not because they're perfect, but because they did work for us in our first meeting and might provide ideas for others:

Open. All questions and ideas are treated with respect. It's okay to ask anything, to say what you believe at that moment, or to ask for clarification.

Respectful. Attend and participate in the discussion with the attitude of respectfully understanding others' perspectives and of deepening your own understanding of the topic

Concise. Comment or ask questions when it will help the group to further learning, limit comments/questions to three minutes and what until all others have a turn before you take another.

Prepared. Close reading of the agreed upon readings prior to the discussion day. If you haven't read or haven't finished, please wait to add your comments until those who have read have responded.

Purposeful. First understand the reading at hand, then consider its meaning for our research and teaching.

Historical. Build upon previous discussions, fitting new readings and understandings into what came before.

3. Research and Write Together

Finding a colleague with similar interests and undertaking a small project can be invaluable. Ideas for projects include writing a small grant or setting up a limited in scope study. We have personally found that co-writing assists with the development of common understandings.

4. Attend a Conference

Agree to attend a conference regularly attended by a colleague in a different department. Both of us found it extremely insightful when each of us presented with the other at her major national conference. Not only did we have an opportunity to spend time discussing and asking questions about various presentations, our ideas and opinions were welcomed by conference participants whose background was different than our own.

5. Co-Teach

Cross-discipline co-teaching is another wonderful opportunity to grow and share. When general education and special education instructors have an opportunity to work together to create similar syllabi, share ideas, or appear as guest speakers for each other, it provides a springboard of opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

6. Program Change

Reform has to include all stakeholders in K-12 schools, so it should include them in higher education. This is a big step. However, we truly feel that it is imperative as teacher preparation programs grow and change, that players in both general and special education include each other in the planning process. This isn't easy, nor is it something that can occur overnight. However, when there is planning, administrative support for cross-college dialogue, and small steps, we argue that it is possible. One possibility for increasing dialogue and understanding might lie in carefully designed cross-department positions, co-teaching opportunities, or joint programs.

Establishing a culture of collaboration is often a long and challenging process. Although we agree that engaging in conversations to develop a shared vocabulary

is not a panacea for collaboration, it is a place to start. If nothing else, such conversations might bring to surface misunderstandings that have been festering for years. When those are resolved there is a chance to move forward. Today's classrooms require intensive teamwork. Initiatives that bring faculty from multiple disciplines together increase the likelihood that our teacher candidates will become leaders in classrooms and schools helping all stakeholders work together to meet the needs of all students. There is no better place to model this necessary collaborative practice than in our institutions of higher education, and we can start by first examining our own language.

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