

Learning difficulties and the New Literacy Studies

A socially-critical perspective

Bill Green and Alex Kostogriz

Introduction

‘Learning difficulties’, and more broadly ‘learning disabilities’ (LD), are commonly understood within the orthodox frames of cognitive and developmental psychology. For literacy education, this means all too often conceptualising them as terms of deficit or deficiency, or as deviations from a Norm. This latter is the so-called ‘normal child’ – that is, a normative literate subject, capable of reading and writing easily and readily, and of learning, without any unusual or unexpected hassles or problems. Such work all too often is characterised by a totalising normative judgement, and it is one that much be recognised accordingly as intensely problematical. An alternative stance is that of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which sees literacy pedagogy and literate practice alike expressly in socio-cultural terms, and as organised around the notion of socially-situated textual practice. This chapter first introduces the work of the New Literacy Studies, with the focus being on the links with critical pedagogy and, relatedly, the notion of ‘critical literacy’. It then presents an account of a different, more socially-oriented psychology, as a resource for understanding learning difficulties in literacy practice and development. This is the cultural–historical tradition, originally associated with and stemming from Lev Vygotsky but drawing subsequently on work such as that of Alexei N. Leont’ev and Yrjö Engeström, and also James Wertsch and Michael Cole. However, our particular focus here is on Vygotsky’s work, with a view to providing the basis of what we see as a more productive, socially-inclusive way of thinking about classrooms, learning and teaching.

How do ‘learning difficulties’ figure in new understandings of literacy studies and literacy education? How might literacy teachers most usefully and appropriately engage the learning continuum – specifically, from ‘difficulties’ to ‘disabilities’ – in managing classroom literacy programmes and working, as inevitably they do, with ‘mixed-ability’ student cohorts? How to understand the notion of ‘disability’, as a distinctive social category? What might be the possibilities here for rethinking ‘LD’ issues within a socially-critical frame? These are key organising questions, although obviously far too broad in their scope and reference to deal with adequately here. Our more limited ambition is to provide a brief account of the implications and challenges of new work in literacy pedagogy, with a view to informing the issue of student learning difficulties in school practice.

The New Literacy Studies

The focus of this chapter is the New Literacy Studies. A growing body of transdisciplinary work in literacy studies and literacy education, it is distinctive in being expressly organised and energised by what has been called ‘the social turn’ (Gee, 2000). Work of this kind and orientation is distinguished by:

- an emphasis on literacy as sociocultural practice;
- a keen awareness of the importance of social context, as well as of the reciprocal relationship between meaning and context; and
- renewed interest therefore in issues of history, culture and power.

Such work has been gathering in both momentum and explanatory value for over two decades now, and is to be conceived as in fundamental opposition to mainstream scientific–cognitivist positions in curriculum and literacy work in schools, as elsewhere. At the same time it is arguably still relatively marginal in educational policy and practice, attesting to the persistence of significant inequities and ideologies in education and society alike. Moreover, it is still far from being an integral part of *literacy* policies and programmes – although it must be said, in this regard, that the trends and signs may well be more positive in Australia than in other anglophone countries (Luke, 2000).

As noted, the past two decades have brought together a number of complementary perspectives in the field of literacy studies focusing on the sociocultural nature of literacy learning and, associated with this, our understanding of and approach to literacy learning difficulties. Revolutionary changes in our understanding of literacy as social practice have occurred in times of massive postindustrial transformations, among other things fuelling debates over what counts as literacy and learning. Sociocultural researchers of literacy have cogently emphasised that literacy learning is not just about print-processing 'skills', occurring in individual 'minds' – the 'autonomous' model (Street, 1993). Rather, it must be conceived as a socially and culturally crafted set of practices, within which individuals are mutually dependent as they participate in activities with and around texts. People learn and use literacy in specific sociocultural contexts, and the ways they use texts are associated with relations of power and ideology as these inform and underlie contextual meaning-making. What Street (1993) calls the 'ideological' model of literacy, in contrast, highlights a sociocultural view of learning as scaffolded apprenticeship to particular 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing' (Gee, 1996, p. viii; Rogoff, 1995). From this perspective, literacy learning is embedded in the practices and discourses of social groups and, as such, literacy learners are conceived as in the course of becoming knowledgeable and capable participants in and of communities of literacy practice.

In this regard, the studies of literacy practices come to constitute a distinctive 'interdisciplinary' approach interested in many issues related to the process of becoming literate in society. In contrast to the 'autonomous' model of literacy learning, the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2000; Street, 1993) emphasise the role of social interaction and networks of cultural practices in the social construction of meaning. Literacy learning is seen as occurring in multiple localities, involving particular cultural and political practices which enable some 'ways with words' and disenable others. Furthermore, literacy practices are constitutive of people's identities, as they are constantly evaluated against social constructions of normativity, correctness, and proficiency. Literacy learners experiencing difficulties of one kind or another are characteristically labelled (e.g., 'at risk', 'struggling', 'incompetent', etc.), marked out as Other. This among other things has the effect of helping *produce* those who are different as, in fact, 'disabled'. When literacy is understood as a set of autonomous skills, it is easy to focus on brain disorders and the like and to explain deviancy from the norm as a matter of individual defect. But when we conceive literacy as a matter of *social practices* and indeed, even more so, as *multiple literacies*, any notion of 'mental deviation' becomes problematic. The very existence of LD phenomena, from this perspective, is closely related to the availability of cultural technologies of identity construction and also to various 'disabling' contexts of literacy learning that are, in effect, intolerant of difference (McDermott and Varenne, 1995).

Hence, literacy practices in schools constitute a specific sociopolitical context for learning and development. Fundamental to this context is the *classification* of students – as 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'competent' and 'incompetent', 'gifted' and 'disabled', etc. This classificatory work needs to be understood accordingly as an aspect of a generalised technological apparatus working to differentiate and classify as well as to normalise or exclude (Foucault, 1977). This is what Gee (2000, p. 191) calls 'enactive' and 'recognition' work, realised as it is through textually-mediated social activity. The nature of such classifications and their consequences for students' developing identities and future life-trajectories is increasingly being recognised as problematic and contested, however and clearly it is crucial to find ways and resources to help in better understanding these issues. Within the broad context of the NLS, there are two matters we want to highlight. The first is the concept and the practice of *critical literacy*. This is a challenging and innovative development in literacy pedagogy, firmly emphasising its political and socially critical character but – importantly, and increasingly – doing so via the mainstream medium of classroom practice. In essence, critical-literacy practice involves the programmatic articulation of literacy education and critical pedagogy, with literacy teaching and learning located at the centre of a socially-critical curriculum. Key issues of debate in such work include

- the amelioration of educational disadvantage, in all its forms;
- the active promotion of social justice in and through education;
- the pursuit and furtherance of democratic principles and practices; and indeed
- a practical-pedagogic project of possibility, with regard to social transformation and change.

In this regard, it has links with the work in the critical sociology of education, although it also draws upon a wider field of reference than this, being significantly shaped and informed by a long tradition of 'practical progressivism' in classroom pedagogy. This latter point is quite crucial.

The second matter to observe here is that there has been a tendency in such work to refuse, or at least to downplay, the value and significance of *psychology*. This is partly because of the felt need, historically, to give more room on the agenda of literacy pedagogy to sociology – to sociological questions and issues, such as context or power. An associated matter is the historical contextualisation of the educational field within what has been called the *psy-complex*: those sciences of subjectivity and government that are organised around the regulation of individuals and the organisation of populations, and the care of the Soul. As well, there has been a growing scepticism in the field as to the meta-narrative claims and pretensions of scientific psychology.

More recently, however, there have been signs of an important movement, beyond a constraining ‘from . . . to’ logic (i.e., *from psychology to sociology* . . .) to one that is much more usefully organised by a ‘both–and’ way of seeing things. That is, rather than being held within a limited and limiting binary logic, the focus in literacy research has shifted now to a more complex and accommodating concern with *both* psychology and sociology. More generally, this is to be understood as a *transdisciplinary* focus, the shift in question constituting a new position which seeks to include the two without being captured by either of them. The effect is, potentially at least, quite liberating. Apropos of the new Literacy Studies, Gee (2000) has written of sociocultural (‘cultural–historical’) psychology as one of a set of what might be called adjacent fields, all of which are characterised by a new engagement with social practice and cultural politics. His reference is both to what he calls ‘socio-historical psychology’, ‘following Vygotsky and later Wertsch’, and to ‘closely related work in situated cognition [and] activity theory’ (Gee, 2000, p. 181). Although less clear about this, here at least, it would appear a logical and productive move for such work to be increasingly, organically incorporated into literacy pedagogy *per se*. In this way, opportunity is provided to problematise and critically transcend the ‘individual–society’ dichotomy that bedevils much educational debate.¹ This is the context for the following section, then, which addresses more directly the issue of LD from a reconceptualised critical-literacy perspective.

Rethinking ‘LD’

While we are witnessing drastic changes in reconceptualising literacy, however, shifts in our understanding of literacy learning difficulties and disabilities are much less dynamic. Literacy ‘disability’ is a relatively recent construction, and one that should always be contextualised by a scrutiny at both ‘literacy’ and ‘disability’, as concepts. A direct connection may be posited between the kinds of literacy most valued in society and a presumption of literacy deficiencies – that is, (in)competence of (dis)ability. To understand what counts as (dis)ability means, then, to address what counts as literacy as well as what counts as (in)competence.

Literacy education has been historically constructed on the basis of a standardised norm, linked with rules, grammar and correctness, and hence driven by an overarching logic of unification, measurement, and comparison with regard to students’ competence and performance. Competence in literacy has been generally defined in curriculum documents as a set of ‘skills’ enabling students’ reading, writing, composition and spelling. In this definition, acquiring ‘cognitive skills’ constitutes the basic competence needed to perform literacy tasks – either to decode print in order to gain access to information or to encode one’s own thoughts in written-textual form so as to communicate information to others. In this regard, literacy competence becomes socially defined, inscribed and entrained. It is not in doubt until someone exhibits evidence of failure, of failed or flawed performance. To be *seen* as a literacy-‘abled’ person, then, one should always strive to speak, read and write correctly and indeed appropriately, ‘properly’. Otherwise, any sign of incorrect or inappropriate performance may be constructed as a marker of difference, an interruption in the normal flow of things, a ‘disability’. Attribution of LD thus rests upon a social construction of what counts as ‘correctness’, generating classificatory fields of both ability and disability, and marking them as a key ‘dividing practice’.

In this sense, the basic orientation of traditional literacy education has been to teach the ‘canon’, on the one hand, and to detect and correct ‘error’, on the other hand. Emphasising correctness and normativity has provided a rationale for commonsensical judgements that deviations in reading or writing are related to individual deficiency, either perceptual or cognitive. However, a positivist logic of ‘correctness’ does not leave space to reflect selfcritically on what might be problematical about the normative structure itself (Giroux, 1997). Instead, the focus on error shifts all responsibility onto those whose performance has been already ‘disabled’, whose problems and difficulties may be bio-physiological in nature but also of a social and cultural kind. It is important to bear in mind that the standardisation/canonisation of literacy is always based on dominant cultural values and reflects relations of power in broader society that are clearly disabling for many socially disadvantaged and

minority students (Alvermann, 2001). The positivist logic of correctness in literacy education – a key means for maintaining and reinforcing social order – thus contributes to our structured incapacity to see multiple reasons for poor performance and literacy learning difficulties. Hence, when the construction of ‘disabling’ environments for literacy learning is not questioned *critically*, then the problem of ‘LD’ itself is relegated solely to the domain of clinical research.

At this point we want to briefly posit two models of literacy learning difficulties and disabilities, one ‘clinical’ in its orientation and the other ‘cultural’. The latter we shall go on to describe at greater length below. For the moment it is sufficient to highlight what we describe as *the clinical model* here, noting its pervasiveness and persistence as an explanatory and executive framework for thinking about LD aspects of literacy pedagogy. In essence this model entails a deficiency view of literacy learning and literacy learners alike, and is based on what might be called scientised forms of normative judgement. There is, if course, a long heritage of clinical work in dyslexia and related to this literacy problems, understood ‘medically’ (e.g., Hinshelwood, 1917; Orton, 1937; Galaburda, 1991). Importantly, there are links to be observed between ‘clinical’ perspectives of this kind and ‘autonomous’ models of literacy, between logics of deficiency and neuropsychological deviancy and the politics of testing and classification in literacy studies (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). The overrepresentation of minority and socially disadvantaged students in the category of ‘disability’ attests to the incapacity of clinical models to take into account the sociocultural complexity of literacy learning difficulties (Artiles and Trent, 2000). With that in mind, we turn now to what we call cultural models of LD, and in particular Vygotsky’s legacy in this regard.

Vygotsky’s legacy: towards a cultural model of LD

Vygotsky’s ideas about the social origin of the mind, the role of language and social interaction in the formation of psychological functions, and the importance of a ‘practice’ account of learning, constitute now a significant conceptual component within new sociocultural approaches to literacy learning (Lee and Smagorinsky, 2000; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Wertsch, 1998; etc.). However, his work in the area of teaching children with special needs is less known, even though this makes up a substantial part of his overall theoretical legacy (Gindis, 1995). In fact, Vygotsky started his intellectual–psychological career in the mid 1920s (in the Moscow Institute of Psychology) while being simultaneously involved in practical work with disabled children – specifically, the blind, deaf-mute and mentally handicapped. For him, this was the main empirical domain for conceptualising the principles of his cultural–historical theory of learning and psychological development (Luria, 1979).

The most fundamental concept of cultural–historical theory is that the human mind is *mediated*. Vygotsky (1978) argued that people in their practical life do not act directly on the world or on other people but rely, instead, on tools and signs. We use tools to transform the material world and conditions in which we live, as well as using signs to mediate and regulate our relationships with each other and with ourselves in social activities. Tools and signs are cultural–historical artefacts which afford as well as constrain specific practices and hence shape particular ways of doing and meaning-making. Among a multiplicity of semiotic artefacts, within which Vygotsky included written signs, symbols, graphs, maps, systems for counting, mechanical drawings, works of art, etc., language is the most powerful means used by people. During participation in social activities with others, a child internalises social language(s), funds of knowledge, cultural–technical artefacts as well as norms and modes of acting. It is then in cultural practices, in our engagement with others, that human mind evolves as cultural and social from the outset owing to its semiotic mediation by cultural artefacts.

From the cultural–historical perspective, these mediating means – multimodal literacy resources, as they might be called – function as ‘psychological tools’ changing the natural, or biological properties of mind. ‘By being included in the process of behaviour’, Vygotsky (1981, p. 137) argues, ‘the psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions’. A child learns how to use semiotic means of culture first in social practices, in communication with others, and later these social ways with words and signs become internalised and used by the child as psychological tools. Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) concluded that psychological development transpires on two planes. First, it appears *interpsychologically*, in interaction between people, and secondly, as an *intrapersonal* category within the child. By differentiating these two intersecting planes of psychological development, Vygotsky emphasises the role of society, learners’ participation in collective practices, and cultural mediating resources in shaping children’s consciousness and thinking.

These ideas enabled Vygotsky (1993) a way of looking differently at the disabled child, and disability in general. Before Vygotsky, the main focus of ‘defectology’² was on the organic or

biological nature of a handicap: deafness, blindness, etc. He turned this approach on its head, arguing that the problem is not the handicap itself but rather its effect on the sociocultural development of the child. While an organic or 'primary' disability has in many cases a biological origin, the main problem for education becomes how to compensate it *culturally*. Focusing only on biological compensation, such as by training sharpness of hearing or smell in a blind child, means for Vygotsky a training *in* disability. He calls this the production of a 'secondary' disability, one that increasingly separates a handicapped child from social life and its cultural resources, leading to her distorted psychological development and social deprivation. Vygotsky likens such clinical models of disability to the actions of a doctor who, relying exclusively on drugs, denies a patient normal food (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 71). In order to overcome the production of 'secondary' disability in children and their 'disontogenesis' in disabling practices of special education, Vygotsky proposes a culturally inclusive model of pedagogy. This new and – at that time – revolutionary position on disability was based on the idea that the cultural line of development transforms the natural–biological one. In the process of interaction between these two lines, individuals' consciousness and behaviour can no longer be explained solely in biological terms. Rather, active participation of the handicapped children in social practices is a key to the *cultural* compensation of disability.

Inclusion of a disabled child in broader social practices, for Vygotsky, is both a complex problem and a contradictory process. This requires a positive approach which focuses on a child's capacities and proficiencies and what he/she can do, rather than a negative one which concentrates on weaknesses and defects. In this regard, he criticises those trends in special education that, while emphasising weaknesses, design a curriculum of lowered expectations. However, any attempt to assimilate the disabled child into the 'abled' mainstream through normalisation is also misleading. Disability, as any form of difference, requires the construction of new social relationships in a collective of peers and an active search for alternative, non-marginalising ways of promoting the cultural development of the disabled. Vygotsky was convinced that conventional practices of 'mainstreaming' are not able to positively accommodate difference. Therefore, the inclusion of physically disabled persons needs a third way, which he calls a 'positive differential approach'. This implies the construction of specific learning environments, facilitating and building on the strengths and potential of disabled children.

Designing such environments requires close attention, first, to *multimodality* – that is, the availability of a range of means of semiotic mediation – something which would enhance internalisation of cultural knowledge, while simultaneously compensating for a particular disability. Secondly, it requires attention to the patterning of social activities in educational settings. With regard to the education of blind and deaf-mute children, for example, Vygotsky (1993) argues that the mode of interpersonal communication, be this Braille, a sign language (mimicry) or lip-reading, should not be conceived as the only means of communication, so constraining the cultural development of disabled children. These sign systems must be complemented by several forms of communication or speech modes (polyglossia). What is important here is the focus on *meaning* and not on the sign system. Inclusion of a disabled child and her acculturation can be reached, then, by multiple means of semiosis and by the quality and quantity of communication. Vygotsky (1993, 1997) put particular emphasis on the development of new technological means, which had the potential, as he saw it, to facilitate communication between disabled persons and also between the disabled and their more capable peers. With the advent of new computer technologies, literacy education of physically disabled persons through software development is more compelling than ever (see Bujarski *et al.*, 1999).

With regard to the second concern – the patterning of social practices in educational settings – Vygotsky (1993) argued that a physical handicap not only altered the child's relationship with the world but also affects her interaction with other people. For a disabled child, blindness or deafness represent normality – not a condition of illness. The child experiences the handicap only indirectly or secondarily, as a result of living and communicating with social others. In this sense, a disability becomes socially interpreted and constructed *from the point of view of the abled*. The ways in which a disabled child's identity is constructed originate out of the particular environments, and may differ according to the specific sociocultural conditions, in which a child is living. For instance, a peasant child's blindness is likely to have different social consequences for her personhood from how blindness is conceived in a rich family (Vygotsky, 1993). But notwithstanding those sociocultural differences, the general stance is often paternalistic and damaging.

In this regard, Vygotsky (1997, p. 287) describes a story of a blind musician conceived from the point of view of a sighted person as a constant 'suffering from an instinctive striving toward light and from the consciousness of his disability'. This perception is entirely incorrect from the blind person's point of view, as he notes, because 'blind people lack any sense of living in some kind of darkness'.

What is true, however, in this story is the description of self-centred suffering as a result of social construction of the blind musician's identity. Vygotsky argues that to overcome this damaging effect on consciousness, social attitudes to a disabled person should change from a paternalistic model to a broad social experience model. By accepting disability as a difference in a social person, instead of an overshadowing defect, a programme of inclusion implies the removal of those social-discursive barriers that are hindering the cultural development of students different from the mainstream.

A cultural model of disability invites literacy researchers and practitioners to focus more on the cultural construction and configuration of a 'disabled' person, and less on his/her clinically perceived 'mental' condition. To be literacy-disabled is a complex sociocultural problem, extending far beyond physical, sensory, psychological and cognitive explanations of print-processing impairments. A cultural model also involves engagement with the 'contemporary politics of difference, or the various complex ways in which exclusion and discrimination are now practiced', in order to formulate more inclusive programmes and practices compatible with the principles of social justice and democratic education (Rizvi and Lingard, 1996, p. 15). Such inclusive and enabling strategies cannot be realised, however, without the re-distribution of resources for students defined as 'literacy-disabled' and the local redesign of learning environments.

Large-scale attempts to resolve the problem of literacy disability have been largely unsuccessful because both the mainstreaming-through-normalisation and the segregation-through-exclusion strategies in special education only produce further disability. The former insists on a way of literacy learning convenient or familiar to the middle-class mainstream and does not tap into the multiplicity of cultural resources in the classroom. Many 'disabilities' have come about because of a hegemonic insistence on the literacy canon and correctness, inadequate measures of IQ and intolerance to difference. The latter enhances disability by teaching to a watered-down curriculum based on the 'breakthroughs' of 'the bad science that hurts children' (Coles, 2000). In disability-centric learning environments, students' potential remains largely underutilised.

Therefore, we argue for the local redesign of learning environments, something that would *re-able* socially disadvantaged and culturally different students currently diagnosed as 'disabled'. In so doing, we call for a shift of focus from the individual's-need-to-change to assessment of what needs to be changed in what are effectively dysfunctional learning environments. Redistribution of cultural-semiotic resources is needed to create new literacy pedagogic patterns which, by reciprocating with consciousness of students, will re-able their learning. What semiotic resources should be incorporated in local literacy learning environments may become clear as we begin to ask what might be 'normal' for the classroom community of difference and what keeps many students from becoming multi-literate. We should also change our logic of correctness to see students' errors not only as a cognitive failure but as a struggle for meaning, occurring in liminal positions imposed by a disability label and often in relation to poverty, gender, race and ethnic labelling. We need to step back and consider relations of power, and to step forward and see the challenges of living with difference. And lastly, we need a revised view of literacy success, one that rewards and celebrates the plurality of students' achievements in everyday classroom literacy events. At heart, we need a new guiding set of principles that do not encourage us to dis-able, but rather, move us to see students' potential and, by building on this, to re-able.

Implications and challenges for literacy educators

Bringing together a critical-literacy perspective and cultural-historical psychology, within the reconceptualised context of the New Literacy Studies, has enormous potential for literacy educators engaged with the issue of learning difficulties in their classrooms. In this concluding section, we outline briefly some of the key implications and challenges of such an articulated view, as we see them.

First, as McDermott and others have argued, there is an important sense in which we produce LD through our own actions and attitudes. This is not to deny that some children experience genuine learning difficulties, or that others live with significant disabilities, whether these be physical in nature or intellectual-emotional. Postmodern social life is characterised by difference and diversity, and most classrooms are always 'mixed-ability' in their composition. Managing differences, working with diversity, is a fact of teaching for many educators today – and certainly not just those working in multicultural conditions or with 'special needs' children. However, the important point is that *culture itself produces disability*. Or rather, disability is *functional* for the cultural contexts and practices that our advanced (post)industrial societies seem to value. Hence:

[E]very culture, as an historically evolved pattern of institutions, teaches people what to aspire to and hope for and marks off those who are to be noticed, handled, mistreated, and remediated as falling short.

(McDermott and Varenne, 1995, p. 336)

It is one thing to look out for LD, especially in such circumstances, and to be prepared to provide whatever forms of compensation or supplementation are deemed necessary or desirable. It is quite another to accede to the logic and politics of such a circumscribed and fundamentally divisive vision of the social world. In this regard, it is necessary that we become attentive to the various forms of enactive and recognition work we engage in, as literacy educators, and that happens all around us – even *to* us. What Discourses do we help to build and sustain, in the course and context of our literacy work? (Gee, 2000).

Second, if our goal is to help *all* students learn literacy, we need to understand that sociocultural difference is to be seen as a *resource* rather than a liability. In today's 'mixed ability' classrooms, there is an increasing need to reconsider, and re-value, difference in this way. This is an important aspect in the reconstruction of rich literacy learning environments, in which teachers and students engage in collaborative and even 'distributed' learning, mediating and assisting each other in a variety of ways. In sociocultural terms, effective literacy learning involves utilising the full social, cultural and linguistic resources of *all* participants in classroom communities-of-difference.

What does this mean for literacy educators more specifically working with what we have called here the LD continuum? How are 'learning difficulties' to be understood? How to take account of 'disability' in ways that fully acknowledge its status and significance as a sociocultural category but nonetheless provide for classroom practice that is both inclusive and productive, in learning terms? Acknowledging these particular difference-dynamics is crucial, but that does not mean pathologising them. Rather, it means generating tasks and environments that are richly predicated on difference, and that value the full range of educational outcomes, including those associated with active and critical citizenship. In this way, working with the LD continuum needs to be understood in terms both of cultural-linguistic diversity and of civic pluralism, as a practical project of critical pedagogy.

A further matter to consider here concerns the need for an adequate and congruent theory of learning and development, one that clearly and firmly emphasises their social dimension and allows for heterogeneity and difference. The New Literacy Studies is accordingly most appropriately supplemented with the sociocultural framework outlined here – that is, with specific reference to cultural-historical psychology and the Vygotskian legacy. In particular, we have only just begun to explore the full implications and challenges associated with 'tool-and-sign' mediation as a key organising principle, especially with regard to LD phenomena in classrooms and the educational possibilities of new technologies. And last, living with and within differences calls for widening the frame of learning difficulties and literacy education, and for viewing literate practice differently and more generatively. This is not just a matter of 'meaning-making' versus 'skills development', although there is certainly something important in that formulation, however simplistic it is. Rather, we need a richer understanding of literacy itself, reconceptualised in terms of events and practices, artefacts and environments, networks and mediators, repertoires and resources. How might literacy classrooms look if we were to work more explicitly and systematically with sociocultural and critical-democratic perspectives and agendas? And how might we re-think the problem of learning difficulties accordingly, in such a re-imagined world of difference and possibility?

Notes

- 1 Linked to which is a whole set of such dichotomies and dualisms: 'mind-body', 'inside-outside', 'concrete-abstract', 'process-product', etc.
- 2 'Defectology' in Vygotsky's time was a field of studies focusing on the development, upbringing and education of physically and mentally handicapped children (Gindis, 1995). It included four disciplines: *surdo*-pedagogy (education of the deaf and hard of hearing children), *tiflo*-pedagogy (education of the blind and visually impaired), *oligophreno*-pedagogy (education of the mentally handicapped children) and *logopedia* (education of speech and language impaired children).

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