



BRILL

JOURNAL OF DISABILITY STUDIES IN EDUCATION

1 (2021) 121-124

JOURNAL OF DISABILITY
STUDIES IN EDUCATION

brill.com/jdse

Reviews Essay



Linda Ware and Roger Slee, eds.,

Ellen A. Brantlinger: When Meaning Falts and Words Fail, Ideology Matters

Leiden: Brill|Sense, 2019, *Studies in Inclusive Education: Critical Leaders and the Foundation of Disability Studies in Education*, Vol. 43.1, xiv + 168 pp. ISBN 9789004402607

Abstract

Presented in this article is a review of the 2020 publication of a book edited by Linda Ware and Roger Slee commemorating the contribution of Ellen Brantlinger to the field of disability studies in education (DSE) in a new Brill series entitled *Critical Leaders and the Foundation of Disability Studies in Education*. Brantlinger the person, researcher, activist and scholar is explored across the 168 pages, in which authors from the US and UK explain the impact her work has had on their own scholarship. The review explores the contributions individually and collectively, along with the significance of the series as a recording of the field's history.

Keywords

Ellen Brantlinger – Ideology – equity – inclusive education – Activist politics

Inclusive education scholarship has benefited inordinately from the contributions of Ellen Brantlinger, who, although hailing from the United States of America, developed broad international appeal through a distinctively unapologetic form of activist research that held fast to her commitment to equity in education. This book commemorates Brantlinger the person, researcher, teacher and activist in a newly formed Brill series entitled *Critical Leaders and*

the Foundation of Disability Studies in Education, edited by Linda Ware. In recognition of the significance of the historical record of the discipline to its present, the series locates the work of “individuals who began their professional careers in the shadow of traditional special education research and practice” (p. vii) and challenged, in so doing, the exclusionary conditions that prevented equitable access and participation of students so affected. These were, in the main, solitary critical figures who came together to carve out what would become disability studies in education (DSE), which was built on the foundations of their activist scholarship. The series is subsequently aimed at keeping a historical account of the disciplinary foundations and its pioneers as a resource significant for reference. We are nothing if not products of our histories, and as such, this series promises to provide important landmarks for novice and experienced researchers alike who are concerned with equity in education.

This first book in the series starts with a rather befitting title—*When Meaning Falts and Words Fail, Ideology Matters*. Acknowledging the continued fallibility of words and of meanings, and the inadequacies of contemporary international inclusive education policy and practice imperatives, an examination of the disparities of competing ideologies certainly holds substance. It was the scrutiny of the underlying ideological values that each and every one of us holds, in which one of Brantlinger’s most influential contributions captured the attention of researchers worldwide. Across her career, Brantlinger dedicated her work to uncovering how particular ideologies were mobilised in as diverse pursuits such as special education research (1997, 2004), in the service of dominant members of schooling communities (2003), scientific discourse (2009), as well as teacher education textbooks (2006) and elsewhere. She accordingly extrapolated that a scholar’s work to reducing the barriers present in schools is never value neutral, but at once personal, professional, and political. As she persuasively wrote (2004, p. 14):

The stories we tell about ourselves, others, and the way life should be are forms of ideology that have a great impact on daily life in schools and communities. Because of ideology’s profound influence, there is a need to discern how it works in order not to be stymied by “undesireable” ideologies.

To this end, the book comprises eight chapters, which together describe Brantlinger the person, the professional, and the political adversary who was not above scrutiny of her own ideologies. Contributors comprise academics from the US and UK, in a blend of those fortunate to attend yearly conferences with her, and those who came along later. Each contribution on the whole

details how her work supported their thinking about the way exclusionary conditions are actualised, and in some cases, how she had a personal impact on those fortunate to know her. For example, we learn first-hand about Brantlinger the “role model” (Connor, p. 15); and “rarity” (Connor, p. 24); “an early and persistent advocate of listening to the voice of the marginalized and devalued in society” (Ferguson, Ferguson, Kim & Li, p. 160); and a mentor whose “absence is deeply felt” (Collins & Broderick, p. 73). These expressions importantly offer readers a snapshot of how Brantlinger oriented her work not only towards the service of eliminating barriers to schooling, but importantly, supporting the growth of others in the field.

Most of the chapters cite Brantlinger’s contributions directly in their empirical work, such as Nusbaum (pp. 102–124) who undertook research to learn how ideology meets practice amongst a group of teachers, leading her to conclude that crucial to teacher training, “inclusive education needs to be discussed and taught as an ideological commitment” (p. 102). Bacon and Ferri (pp. 125–143) also apply a critique of the neoliberal ideology of standard-based reforms in the US, which trigger the segregation of students considered unable to perform. Similarly, Annamma, Ferrel, Moore and Klingner (pp. 80–101) consider how the ghost of normalcy haunts inclusive schooling. Allan (pp. 28–45), meanwhile, offers an explanation of how ideology is a significant theory around which to frame educational research. These are important matters of particular value to students, researchers and teachers who engage with marginalised groups and exclusionary conditions in any schooling context.

Other contributions take inspiration from Brantlinger’s unique approach to knowledge development in the field of DSE. Sauer (pp. 46–61), for example, weighs up the ethical enigma of risk and consent with regard to disability research, while demonstrating the agentic capacities of young people diagnosed with disabilities. In the concluding chapter, and similarly to Brantlinger’s (2006) formative critique of what are wittily referred to as ‘the big glossies’, Ferguson et al. (pp. 144–166) present an analysis of the changing ways that families of children with disabilities are represented in special education textbooks across a 50 year period. Significant to both chapters, and those interested in the ways dominant knowledge shapes taken-for-granted readings of disability, is Brantlinger’s insistence that critical engagement must be at the core of research, teaching and scholarship in DSE.

To conclude, readers may be familiar with the substance of the book; a special edition of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* was published upon Brantlinger’s death, containing each of the chapters as papers. Readers anticipating addendums to this collection may be left feeling short-changed, as any potential additions are not included. Yet, it is refreshing to have access to

the chapters as a singular body of work that recognises the formative contributions of a celebrated scholar from the field, and the book will be of particular interest to those less familiar with DSE's early development. As the theories of inclusive education and practices mature worldwide, this book and the series from which it comes will provide an important index by which to measure their progress.

Ben Whitburn

Deakin University, Victoria, Australia,

b.whitburn@deakin.edu.au

References

- Brantlinger, E. (1997). Using ideology: Cases of nonrecognition of the politics of research and practice in special education. *Review of Educational Research*, 67(4), 425–459.
- Brantlinger, E. (2003). *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Rationalises School Advantage*. New York: Routledge.
- Brantlinger, E. (2004). Ideologies discerned, values determined: Getting past the hierarchies of special education. In L. Ware (Ed.), *Ideology and the politics of in/exclusion*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Brantlinger, E. (2006). The big glossies: How textbooks structure (special) education. In E. Brantlinger (Ed.), *Who benefits from special education? Remediating (fixing) other people's children*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Brantlinger, E. 2009. Impediments to Social Justice: Hierarchy, Science, Faith, and Imposed Identity (Disability Classification)." In *Handbook of Social Justice in Education*, edited by W. Ayers , T. Quinn and D. Stovall , 400–416. New York: Routledge.