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My daughter uttered her first word (*doggie*) at around ten months of age. A few weeks later she took her first step. My son wasn't walking or talking until he was close to fifteen months old (his first word was *kitty*). Similarly, I have known children who recognized the letters of the alphabet when they were only three years old and others who didn't learn the alphabet until after they entered kindergarten. These sorts of developmental differences are generally considered normal and usually not much is made of them, although it is likely that all parents would prefer that their children reach developmental milestones for talking, walking, and reading earlier rather than later. But most people recognize that there is an uneven relationship between early linguistic milestones and later success in school.

Once children enter school, however, much is made of oral and written language differences that were considered normal until this point. Indeed, the American institution of schooling—where everyone is expected to do better than everybody else—is organized to detect and remediate such differences (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). And when academic and linguistic differences are *discovered,* their presence is typically marked by various labels. Official labels like *learning disabilities* (LD) or *Attention Deficit Disorder* (ADD), for example, position students as significantly outside the normal range on certain behaviors or abilities, entitling these students to special services and accommodations. Similarly, unofficial labels such as *remedial, developmental, delayed*, or *struggling reader* are used to sort students for instruction on the assumption that these students require more intensive, and perhaps qualitatively different, instruction compared to what is required by *average* students. Students may also be labeled on the basis of instructional materials or levels, as in the case where teachers refer to students in terms of the leveled books they can read independently (e.g., "she

is a 'K'" or "he is a 'D'") and, again, it is assumed that this way of labeling students has instructional implications. But whatever the label, labels are never innocent. Labeling always "involves categorizing each child in relation to a significant social boundary within the school or classroom—that . . . separates 'normal' from 'deviant' pupils" (Waterhouse, 2004, p. 72). Labeling is part of a process by which differences are transformed into pathologies.

A wide variety of labels have been applied to students who fall outside the lower boundary of "normal" or are just "below average." Below-average readers, for example, have been called *retarded readers, remedial readers, slow, disabled, dyslexic,* and so on. Over the past decade, it has become common to refer to such students as struggling readers. Since 2003, over 450 books have used the term "struggling readers" in their titles. During the same period, over 300 published articles have used the phrase "struggling readers" to refer to students who are perceived as having difficulty learning to read.

The term *struggling reader*, represents a recent attempt to create an inclusive and inoffensive label for students who experience some measure of failure learning to read. Experience teaches, however, that any label attached to learning differences will eventually acquire a pejorative sense. Ultimately, labels for school failure are metaphors that shape our understandings about learning and learners and, in one way or another, commonly used labels for school failure pathologize students by implicating them in their academic failure.

In this paper, I examine the struggling-reader metaphor and the meanings about learning and learners evoked by the term *struggling reader*. I argue that labels are never harmless. Labels that position students outside the boundaries of normal readers are typically linked to impov-

erished curricula that severely limit students' educational opportunities. I also argue that the metaphorical meanings of the term *struggling reader* contradict the sociocultural theory of reading and reading instruction that informs the work of holistic reading educators. Finally, I consider the possibility of alternative metaphors for *struggling readers* that are more congenial to a sociocultural framework.

The Metaphor of the Struggling Reader

Struggling readers is a term with which I have been closely associated. I have written a number of articles and books that have used that phrase, and an ERIC search indicates that I was among the first to use it in a publication. The term *struggling reader* appealed to me for a couple of reasons. First, it didn't seem to be burdened by the deficit-oriented thinking of terms like *remedial reader* and *learning-disabled* that situate learning failure in the minds of students. *Struggling readers* also seemed more inclusive, capturing all students for whom school was a *struggle*, regardless of the labels they had been given. I suspect other reading educators began using the term for similar reasons. However, whatever labels we use, ultimately, all educational labels are metaphors, a way of "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). The term *remedial reader*, for instance, likens learning differences to an illness that can be cured (i.e., remedied). The *learning disabilities* label invokes a container metaphor in which learning failures are linked to missing skills and abilities, and instruction is a matter of filling the learner up with skills that are absent or incomplete.

In general, metaphors provide a ready means for understanding particular aspects of abstract concepts while hiding or obscuring other aspects of the same concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Taylor, 1984). The learner-as-container metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) underpinning the concept of learning disabilities, for example, highlights psychological processes that may be involved in learning while obscuring the social and cultural aspects of learning. In this way, learning metaphors structure—but do not determine—our understanding of learners and learning, playing "a central role in the construction of social and political reality" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 159). Taylor (1984) puts it this way:

> Language [does] not simply *reflect* changes in certain underlying realities. Instead . . . *it help[s] to constitute those realities,* shaping our experience and our judgments about the nature of phenomena, providing not merely the currency of circulation and exchange, but the values symbolized by that currency. (p. 4)

By "shaping our experience and judgments" about learners and learning in specific ways, educational metaphors reinforce particular models of learning and instruction that affect how teachers conceive of their work and how they interact with students (Mostert, 1996). The learner-as-container metaphor, for instance, is congenial to a behavioral model of learning that equates learning with mastery of a scope and sequence of skills. Similarly, the struggling reader metaphor calls forth a particular theory of learners and learning. Although *struggling reader* may be more inclusive and less pejorative than other labels, (e.g., the metaphor of the remedial or disabled reader), this phrase situates reading failure in the minds of individual students. Crucially, *struggling* modifies *reader*, signifying that it is the individual student who struggles with reading, not the teacher, not curriculum developers, and not educational administrators or educational policy makers. Similarly, the struggling reader metaphor represents learning as an activity that requires work or effort but more for some students—those who struggle—than for others who do not struggle. Moreover, the struggling reader metaphor gives no indication that the activity of learning to read differs for (struggling) readers, reinforcing the sense that it is individual readers who bear the responsibility for reading failure—and success.

The power of the struggling reader metaphor to obscure social, cultural, institutional, and political forces that affect learning failure and success is a good reason for whole language educators to interrogate the various meanings carried by the term.

This conception of learning, by situating failures in the heads of students, obscures social, cultural, and institutional factors that affect learning. From this perspective, there is little reason to consider the roles that poverty, cultural or linguistic differences, or curricular tracking play in producing educational failure. Overall, the struggling-

reader metaphor sits well with deficit-oriented, learner-as-container models of reading instruction that dominate federal and state educational policy. This likely explains the widespread currency the struggling-reader label has achieved among educators, educational researchers, and policy makers working from behaviorally oriented theories of reading that focus on decontextualized skill instruction. And, although many of us in the whole language community may be comfortable with the term *struggling reader,* this brief analysis of the metaphorical meaning of this label suggests that the struggling reader metaphor does not sit well with the sociocultural model of reading and reading instruction that underpins our teaching and research.

Taylor (1984) argues that much harm is done when powerful metaphors "achieve the status of literal truth" (p. 8). The power of the struggling reader metaphor to obscure social, cultural, institutional, and political forces that affect learning failure and success is a good reason for whole language educators to interrogate the various meanings carried by the term *struggling reader* or any label that situates learning failure in the heads of individual students.

In Search of Alternative Metaphors for "Struggling Readers"

Underpinning holistic reading practices is a sociocultural model of reading which holds that literacy cannot be equated with a set of autonomous skills that people do or do not possess (i.e., are deficient in) (Gee, 2008; Street, 1995). Instead, literacy is viewed as a set of social and cultural practices that "involve specific ways of interacting with people, specific ways of using language (including written language), specific sets of values for various kinds of behaviors, and specific sets of interpretations for understanding and guiding behavior" (Bloome, Harris, & Ludlum, 1991, p. 22). When we view literacy as a social practice, it becomes clear that people do not learn to read "once and for all" as much as they learn to read particular texts in particular ways appropriate to the social and cultural context (Gee, 2008). A sociocultural perspective suggests that schools acknowledge a wide range of literacy practices as a means of accommodating difference (Pelligrini, 1991). Therefore, literacy educators working from a sociocultural perspective endeavor to build on the knowledge of literacy that students bring with them to school as a means of helping students master literacy practices valued by schools (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003). Reading educators

taking this perspective on reading instruction do not ignore skills like phonics, but attempt to situate reading instruction in sociocultural contexts in which various reading practices are enacted, arguing that isolated phonics instruction is a social practice that only superficially resembles the use of (grapho)phonic skills in reading contexts where the focus is on making meaning.

Reading educators working from a sociocultural perspective are also likely to view reading failure—and success—as a collective or social construction rather than an individual accomplishment. McDermott and Varenne (1995) put it this way:

> It takes a whole culture of people producing idealizations of what everyone should be and a system of measures for identifying those who fall short for us to forget that we collectively produce our disabilities and the discomforts that conventionally accompany them. (p. 337)

The metaphor of a dance is a useful way to explicate this more social and cultural (versus psychological) take on learning failures (and successes). The teaching-learning interaction can be likened to an intricate dance to which both students and teachers contribute. Crucially, this dance is mediated by the reading curriculum, state and district assessments, school policies, the culture of the school, the physical space in schools and classrooms, and so on. Different moves by the teacher (or the student) alter the shape of the dance, potentially transforming students' learning identities. Consider, for example, whole-class reading discussions which are typically structured by the familiar Initiation-Response-Evaluation (I-R-E) pattern in which a teacher asks a question ("Why did the main character apologize?"), the student responds ("Because …"), and the teacher evaluates the response ("Do you really think so? Can somebody else answer this question?"). In this form of interaction, students are limited to producing narrow responses that can be evaluated simply as correct or incorrect. In the context of I-R-E, students' responses tend to reinforce their identities as good or poor readers. However, replacing the evaluation of students' responses with a different sort of move can have a dramatic effect on their learning and learning identities (Michaels, O'Connor, & Hall [with Resnick], 2002).

Consider, for instance, the following excerpt that was part of a discussion in a fourth-grade classroom in New

York City. This example was part of a year-long study of Shared Inquiry discussions. The class read "Cedric" (Jansson, 1995), a story about a character named Sniff who has a stuffed animal named Cedric with topaz eyes and a moonstone on his collar. Sniff gives Cedric away, which he immediately regrets "to desperation." There is a story within this story told to Sniff about a woman who had beautiful things to the exclusion of friends. She gets a bone stuck in her stomach and thinks she has only a few weeks to live. She has the idea to give all her stuff away, sending just the right thing to different people in anonymous parcels. She starts to feel better, gets nicer, and friends start to visit. Eventually, Sniff finds Cedric, but the topaz eyes have been removed and the moonstone on the collar has been lost. Sniff loves Cedric "all the same," but now "only for love's sake."

The teacher begins the discussion by asking, "Why at the end does Sniff love Cedric 'only for love's sake?'" Midway through the discussion, the teacher asks Corey, a student the school had identified as having a severe learning disability, if he has anything to add.

> **Corey:** I think . . . it's because, I think he loves for love's sake, it's because, um, on page 85, 'cause it's telling you . . . on 84 it says, "An idea . . . came and she was gonna give away everything she owned." Also, on page 85, it says, "she thought wisely and she gave what everybody would want. So . . ."
>
> **Teacher:** What does that have to do with Sniff loving Cedric only for love's sake?
>
> **Corey:** It means that, it's telling, 'cause that's how he loves Cedric for, for who he, for who he is because when he [Snufkin] told him [Sniff] that part of the story, he's telling him that, that she didn't, that she loves him for—that she um, if you love . . . . It tells me that, that um . . . she . . . that um if he loved him, then she wouldn't give away her jewels, 'cause she didn't really care about the jewels. So that means that if she—she didn't care about the jewels, she just cared, cared about her friends, the person, not the jewels.

Corey struggles to make his point but nonetheless demonstrates an ability to make a claim, cite evidence in support of his claim, and, in response to the teacher's query, attempt to explicate the link between his claim and the textual evidence. Over the course of twenty-five turns, the teacher asks Corey six different substantive questions (e.g., "So what does that have to do with Sniff?"), pressing him to further

clarify or explicate his thinking, challenging his evidence, and pressing him to link his evidence to his claim. Corey is supported by three different students, who provide bits of content and, at various times, attempt to restate his full-blown claim as Diarra tries to do in the following example:

> **Diarra:** I get—I understand what Corey is saying. Corey is saying that . . . if it hadn't been for the bone, then she would've never changed . . . her manner. And she would've never met so many friends.

With the support of his teacher and his classmates, Corey developed a highly complex, interpretive claim with warranted textual evidence. Corey based his claim on the parallel structure of the two stories, one about the woman giving her stuff away and the other about Sniff giving away his stuffed animal. This is an accomplishment worthy of the highest-achieving students. In this context, Corey, who had been positioned as "severely learning disabled," is transformed into a competent student whose knowledge is valued.

Arguably, Corey's reading problem—his struggle—doesn't reside in his head so much as in the web of relations (Gergen, 1990) between Corey, his teacher and classmates, the text, the reading curriculum, district and state reading standards and assessments, the institution of schooling, and so on. Different reading curricula, different texts, different instructional arrangements, and different interactions among students and their teacher, as illustrated above, all have the potential to transform Corey's learning identity from a "severely disabled" reader to a competent one. Similarly, the circumscribed, teach-to-the-test, skills-obsessed reading instruction Corey had received for much of his school career provided little

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opportunity for him to show what he knew about literacy as opposed to what he didn't know.

Applying the struggling-reader metaphor to Corey, by situating the problem in him, reinforces the logic of trying to fix Corey. Here Corey *is* the problem. However, from a social-constructivist perspective, Corey isn't the problem, although he certainly participates in his construction as a student with "learning disabilities." Nor are his teachers the problem, although they also played a part in the carefully orchestrated "dance" that constructed Corey as disabled. Indeed, everyone has to perform just the right "moves" at just the right time and place to construct Corey as a "struggling reader." But, from a sociocultural perspective, no one person can be identified as *the problem*. Instead, the problem is the problem. Here assessment isn't about identifying deficiencies in the student or the teacher but, instead, asking, "What's going on here?" From this point of view, the goal isn't to fix children, but to reconfigure the instructional "dance," to (re)construct students as competent—as all children certainly are.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that new metaphors have the power to create new realities.

From the perspective of the sociocultural theory of reading that informs whole language practice, the struggling-reader metaphor is grossly misleading. By situating learning firmly inside the minds of individual learners, this theory fails to capture the subtlety and complexity of student learning. An alternative metaphor would reflect this complexity and shift the gaze away from "fixing" students to constructing teaching-learning contexts that make students "smart" (Miller, 1993). Our new metaphor would capture the notion that it is schools that struggle to meet the needs of many students and to recognize the resources many children bring with them to school, particularly students from nondominant groups. It would emphasize that teachers and students need to make just the right moves, at just the right time and place to construct students as competent—or not competent—and do this without blaming teachers whose influence is limited by the myriad factors that affect student learning. We also want our alternative metaphor to acknowledge historic economic and social injustices associated with academic achievement.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that new meta-

phors have the power to create new realities. The metaphor of the dance I used above—which is an alternative to the learning-as-container metaphor—suggests that learning is situated in an intricate, infinitely complex web of relationships among students, teachers, the curriculum, the institution of schooling, and the larger society. Learning failure is not individual but a systemic or collective achievement. Metaphors such as *dysfunctional learning system*, *learning systems failure*, *institutional disabilities*, or *schooling problems* capture the culturally situated, systemic sense of learning indicated by a sociocultural model of reading, avoiding the implicit deficit orientation of the struggling reader label. But "it is by no means easy to change the metaphors we live by" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 145), since metaphors like *struggling reader* reflect fundamental societal and cultural values like individualism. Alternative metaphors that highlight the social, cultural, and institutional factors that affect student learning may sit more comfortably with the theories that inform the work of whole language teachers, but these metaphors will not easily resonate in a culture like ours that situates agency and meaning-making firmly in the minds of individual students. Indeed, my own cultural conditioning as a member of a society that valorizes individualism makes it difficult to generate metaphors that adequately capture the complexity at the heart of sociocultural theories of literacy. So, instead of proposing alternative metaphors to create new realities, I offer some suggestions for how we might live more comfortably with the struggling-reader metaphor while staying in tune with our principles.

First, as far as possible we should endeavor to refer to *readers* without adding any modifiers— not *struggling* readers or *remedial* readers or *disabled* readers, just readers. Some readers require more intensive, and, perhaps, explicit instruction, but the nature of reading and reading instruction does not change just because students are judged to be doing more or less well compared to their peers. Indeed, the presumption that some readers require "special" reading instruction often leads to decontextualized, skill-based instruction that severely limits students' reading development. As readers, all children are entitled to the rich, text-based reading instruction typically offered to high-achieving students.

If teachers find themselves in situations where they feel compelled to refer to students as "struggling" (or "disabled"), they should endeavor to remind themselves—and others—that students' *struggles* reside in the complex relations among teachers, students, curriculum and assess-

ment, educational policy, and the institution of schooling, not in children's heads. We should also focus on doing what we can to modify our teaching interactions with students (as illustrated by the example of Corey and the discussion of "Cedric") to highlight and build upon the learning competencies and knowledge of literacy that all children bring with them to school. Teachers' instructional moves are not the sole determinant of children's success or failure in school, but how teachers initiate and respond to students is one influence that is under their control.

As I argued at the beginning of this paper, labels are never innocent, and labels like *struggling reader* implicitly pathologize individual students while reinforcing deficit perspectives that are anathema to whole language theory and practice. We may not be able to completely avoid such labels, but we have an ethical responsibility to consider carefully the metaphorical meanings of terms like *struggling reader* that affect the lives of our students. ⊙

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