We propose that the articles in this special issue support an emphasis upon specific instructional and assessment practices, as opposed to broad, vague, and often emotive educational ideologies. Often, well-researched, effective practices can be associated with any ideology, as can poor, rote-like practices. The value of a particular instructional or assessment practice is probably dependent upon, at the very least, context and learner characteristics, and empiricism remains the most reliable means for evaluating practices.

The articles in this special issue suggest that a focus upon specific educational practices has far more potential for advancing the field of special (and general) education than an emphasis upon philosophies, metatheories, theories, or psychological schools that we will refer to as ideologies. It is possible, in fact, that any ideology—constructivist or otherwise—can obfuscate and impede the progress of education as a profession.

Our first example of this thesis comes from a fascinating analysis of cognitive and behavioral psychology conducted by Butterfield, Slocum, and Nelson (1992). Butterfield and his associates pointed out that some ideological differences between behavioral and cognitive schools are genuine and potentially incompatible. Specifically, behaviorists tend to play down mentalism and cognitivists play it up. In addition, the vernacular of each differs considerably. However, the phenomena each describe are often remarkably similar, particularly in relationship to notions of transference. Thus, many crucial instructional practices derived from each school’s bodies of empirical evidence are virtually indistinguishable from one another when stripped of the jargon each employs as language convention.

For example, the differences between transference in cognitive parlance and the more traditionally behavioral term generalization are practically nonexistent in terms of the actual phenomenon that each describes. And of far greater importance to practitioners, substantial cognitive and behavioral research supports essentially the same instructional conditions for achieving transference or generalization.

Our thesis—that examining practices is more fruitful than examining ideologies—is certainly not profound, when viewed as a variation on a classical set of relationships: those between the abstract and the concrete. Without even speculating upon the epistemology of abstractions, the suggestion that abstractions become clearer and potentially more functional when embodied by concrete
examples seems not terribly controversial. We better appreciate love in acts of love, kindness in acts of kindness, understanding in acts of empathy.

Butterfield et al. have made a strong case for viewing the labels that permeate our field as abstraction, both at the broadest level (cognitivist/behaviorist) and in reference to "smaller" constructs (e.g., discriminative stimulus/context statements). Although broad issues of ideology and psychology are by no means unimportant, in the final analysis, the extent to which we as special educators are able to fulfill our special moral obligations is determined by the practices we employ. For convenience, then, we will explore some possible relations between the abstractions represented by labels and concrete instructional practices.

1. Any given set of empirically supported practices can conform to multiple labels. This is the relationship illustrated most dramatically by Butterfield and his associates. Most notably, the kinds of instructional conditions that result in the broad application of knowledge (transference) can objectively be associated with any ideology. That is, any label can be associated with those conditions: radical behaviorism, social dialectology, empirical constructivism, cognitive information processing, and so on.

There is no inherent problem in this relationship. On the contrary, we should find hope and encouragement from each instance in which effective instructional practices are identified in the empirical work of diverse ideologies. The credibility of those practices becomes just that much stronger. However, such encouraging events are rarely interpreted that way in our field, possibly because of the fragile barriers that separate ideology from dogma. The following fallacious argument recurs with startling regularity in educational literature:

Premise: The research of my ideology supports instructional practice X.
Premise: Your ideology differs from mine.
Conclusions: a. Your ideology does not support that practice.
            b. Your ideology opposes that practice.
            c. Your ideology is mean-spirited.

Logically, of course, no single conclusion here is any better than any other. The fact that well-educated adults with noble intentions engage in such unproductive polemics is a testimony to the ease with which one can slip silently into dogmatism. Dogma, in turn, taints our perceptions in ways that serve no useful purpose for learners. We might embrace a popular instructional program like Reading Recovery because we perceive it as "constructivist," or scoff at it for its "phonics." We might like "behavioral phonics," but find "constructivist phonics" less savory.

Stanovich (1993) described dogmatically tainted interpretations of well-designed research in the clearest of terms: People like the results of some research and do not like the results of other research.

The articles in this special issue offer numerous examples of the extent to which a given practice can be attributed to different ideologies. For instance, Graham and Harris (this issue) point out that constructivists advocate for significantly more time to be set aside for writing than is typically set aside in "conventional" or "traditional" classrooms. That, however, is different from saying that only constructivists advocate more writing time. No ideology "owns" the idea of
allocating more time to writing as a crucial but partial means to improved writing performance.

The stages in the processes employed by adept writers were fully explicated before the widespread advent of constructivism in language arts, and were not inspired by constructivism in any case (e.g., Herum & Cummings, 1970). Neither do behaviorists or neobehaviorists own the various notions of “academic engaged time” or “opportunities to learn.” Englert (1992) attributed many of the successes of her excellent research to principles that might best be described as social constructivist, but one of her best known interventions (Englert et al., 1991) employed several practices that just as easily could be attributed to other ideologies: teacher models of the writing process, “positive” and “negative” examples of given text structures, procedural facilitators that are not much unlike behavioral cues and prompts, and so on. Englert et al. are the first to point out that their work has not isolated the relative contributions of the several elements employed in their interventions.

In the area of reading comprehension, we believe it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the work of cognitive psychologist Richard C. Anderson (1977) on the influence of prior knowledge upon comprehension was a natural extension of the work of behavioral psychologist Richard C. Anderson (Anderson & Faust, 1973) on the influence of prerequisite entering behavior on achievement. Although the former and the latter are not the same thing, one can be viewed as a natural, more specific extension of the other.

Stanovich (this issue) offers the example of a study by Cunningham in which an “anticonstructivist” subject—phonemic awareness—is taught via practices generally considered constructivist. The research Stanovich cites on phonemic awareness, moreover, seems to represent a fairly eclectic range of both ideology and practice. What informs us most clearly from that research is a focus on phonemic awareness itself, and those practices that seem to help students achieve it the most. Ideology does not inform us much.

Of all the articles in this special issue, Mallory and New’s might support our thesis most convincingly. Our own views on special education have not, frankly, been influenced to any appreciable degree by the social constructivist ideology to which Mallory and New subscribe. Yet the extent to which some of our most steadfastly held views seem compatible with theirs strikes us as remarkable—even startling. To name a few:

- The outright rejection of any notion that some children are uneducable or “incapable of benefiting from instruction.”
- The value of peer tutoring and peer collaboration.
- The urgent need to contextualize learning.
- The concept of guided participation, including especially “a gradual but inevitable shift from other-regulated to self-regulated activity.”
- The contention that “boring, repetitious, and ultimately meaningless” readiness tasks are overemphasized in special education.
- The desire to withdraw extrinsic rewards in favor of intrinsic as soon as possible.
• The practice of drawing attention to children’s errors in an intellectually thoughtful fashion.
• A deemphasis upon individual deficits, in favor of building upon the child’s capacities.

Although Mallory and New (this issue) believe the tenets of social constructivist theory can provide a much-needed common ground on which to base our collaborative endeavors, we would suggest instead that practices and concrete approaches, such as those listed, might be the real key to collaborative instructional efforts among special educators.

Neither does ideology inform assessment of instruction much. The new directions in assessment that Meltzer and Reid offer for meaningfully interrelating instruction and assessment seem to be almost uncannily similar to alternatives suggested by others who are resolute empiricists (e.g., Kameenui & Simmons, 1990). As with instructional practices, the links between assessment and ideology are frequently muddy, at best.

Teachers were telling students they had done well long before a behaviorist came along and decided to call that “reinforcement.” Teachers were seeking out and using wonderful children’s stories long before constructivists came along to formalize the practice. Teachers have long been conducting continuous, process-oriented, diagnostic assessment (as, for example, when they request that students “show their work” or ask how they derived the solution to a particular problem). Ideologies do not own effective practices.

2. Any given set of inefficient and ineffective instructional practices can be associated with multiple ideologies. Anyone who actively encourages practitioners to teach special education children in particular ways should always be a bit frightened by the unavoidable fact that any bad practice can be associated with any ideology. To describe ourselves as constructivist or behaviorist or anything else makes us vulnerable to association with other self-proclaimed ideologues whose practices range from generally poor to utterly indefensible. We, personally, are not always unwilling to identify ourselves as “direct instruction” people. But the fact is, some self-proclaimed “direct instruction people” might engage in instructional practices that we find incredibly naive, simplistic, and—most critically—detrimental to the cognitive growth of children. For instance, imagine a program of instruction that focuses upon children learning their math facts, such as $2 + 2 = 4$. The program aspires to get the same answer (4) to the same relationship ($2 + 2$), as accurately as possible, and as quickly as possible, and that is about all the program aspires to achieve. (For many children, that is quite a bit, but, of course, not nearly enough.)

In addition, the program is organized around a principle of “easy-to-hard,” and subscribes to a hierarchical view in which all facts must be mastered to a given criterion before they can be used. Therefore, students spend interminable days and weeks and months learning to remember arbitrary associations, and meaningful problem solving is postponed. For too many special needs children, this has meant never getting access to higher-order mathematics.

Research supports an alternative approach to learning math facts, an approach that takes into account that each “fact” sits in a predictable relationship to all
other facts. When facts are viewed that way, students can initially learn them generatively—as instances of generalizations instead of as rote associations. Eventually, it is quite likely—and desirable—that facts learned generatively will simply be remembered (Ashcraft, 1985). Even some constructivists seem to concede a need at some point for decidedly “nonconstructivist” practices, such as “drill” (e.g., Davis, Maher, & Noddings, 1990).

In any case, there is no well-established reason why students cannot begin applying fact knowledge immediately to problem-solving situations. In fact, we can speculate that the more problems students have the opportunity to solve, the less need there will be for any form of isolated fact practice. Mercer, Jordan, and Miller (this issue) outline three interventions for effectively teaching problem-solving strategies to students with learning problems.

Similarly, we are a bit unnerved by associations with direct instruction practices described by Warren and Yoder (this issue) that cannot maintain a high degree of child attention and interest, that do not place primary emphasis upon systematically contextualizing knowledge that is originally taught as decontextualized, and that do not ensure broad pragmatic generalization and transference. We suffer and benefit variously from the abstract nature of ideological labels, as do all practitioners and researchers.

We suspect, for instance, that many constructivists share our trepidation over the practices with which they may be associated by virtue of a vague ideological label. Specifically, most constructivists must be alarmed by “constructivist practices” that are easily as rote-like as the “drill and kill” math facts activity we described above. However insidious rote learning is, though, it may be the most insidious when it is disguised by labels suggesting something else altogether.

Constructivists, for example, must cringe at some of the reading instruction practices that are attributed to—and frequently promoted within—holistic/constructivist ideology. One of the authors spent two days observing in a constructivist Chapter 1 classroom where students virtually memorized stories from selected books, then used both the pictures and some known words in those books as cues while regurgitating the memorized stories. The teacher, whose intent was clearly to teach reading, misinterpreted the story recall as reading, in spite of strong evidence to the contrary. First, students could not read grade-level stories they had not yet memorized. Second, and perhaps more compelling, the performance of students in those classes on a district-developed, curriculum-based criterion reading test showed clearly that students could “read” stories at grade level, but not easier stories from earlier grade levels. Obviously, students who memorize stories are unable to recall—appear to read—stories they have not yet memorized, regardless of whether such stories are far “easier” than memorized stories. Inexplicably, the practices leading to such mindless, rote story regurgitation are actively promoted by some educators (e.g., Johnson & Louis, 1987).

Similarly, constructivists must be frustrated to see an early childhood computer-based program in which students presumably discover the names of colors, but in reality learn only a rote association between a color name and a single, unvaried example of a color—and learn it inefficiently at that. Or it must be infuriating to see students acquiring the spellings of words by the force of sheer rote because the words of interest to children that emerge from their authentic writing expe-
periences do not lend themselves adequately to meaningful morphemic and morphophonemic generalization.

Ideologies—any ideologies—do not ensure against the rote, mindless acquisition of knowledge and thus do not usefully inform our ongoing quest for practices that result in well-understood knowledge.

3. In the absence of specific practices, one ideology is as good as the next. Noddings (1990) made the case that all knowledge, of any sort, is constructed, and thus a crucial distinction is between “low” rote knowledge and all other knowledge (as opposed to constructed and nonconstructed knowledge). We may all be constructivists, then, in that, as far as we know, no one in the field of education actively advocates rote learning or low knowledge as a viable alternative to nonrote learning and high knowledge. Given the preponderance of rote instruction that appears to actually occur within the veils of all ideologies, one might think there is a concerted effort to promote it on someone’s part: republicans, or democrats, or socialists, or reactionaries. But there isn’t.

The spokespersons for the different ideologies do not seem inept at exhibiting their beliefs in bright lights (or at shining something less luminous upon beliefs to which they do not subscribe). We will attempt to illustrate this contention with two opposite views on a single interest of educators: problem solving.

View 1: People in this country are inept at solving authentic problems that occur in their lives in general, and their work in particular. This is the result of a faulty educational system that focuses upon the rote acquisition of knowledge, rather than upon ways to productively use knowledge in problem-solving contexts. The solution, quite obviously, is to allocate a large percentage of instructional time to problem-solving activity. It is time to stop treating school children as though they were dogs, rats, monkeys, or pigeons.

View 2: People in this country are inept at solving authentic problems that occur in their lives in general, and their work in particular. This is the result of a faulty educational system that fails to recognize that human beings are innately endowed with incredibly sophisticated problem-solving abilities that depend upon little more than a wide breadth of knowledge. The solution, quite obviously, is to allocate a large percentage of instructional time to effective practices for expanding the breadth and depth of learner’s knowledge. It is time to stop treating school children as though they were dogs, rats, monkeys, or pigeons.

This might seem to be a droll approach to educational ideology, were it not for the fact that just this sort of whimsical rhetoric seems to sway many and inspire others. The tastes of others yet are more inclined toward obscure, quasi-philosophical misinterpretations or reinterpretations of respectable schools of ontological and epistemological thought, approaches that do not, at least, unnecessarily subject us to excessive wit.

4. The efficacy of instructional practices depends upon nonideological contexts. In the abstract, how does one assess the relative value of different practices, such as discovery-oriented practices versus explicit instruction, for example? Ideologies tend to ascribe blanket, universal value to certain practices and to uniformly reject others, often leading to erroneous and misleading generalizations regarding broad instructional considerations such as discovery versus explicit learning.
There is no intrinsic merit to either explicit or discovery instruction—in the abstract. A number of additional factors influence the judicious use of either approach, including especially (a) the interactions among instructional practices and (b) learner characteristics. Warren and Yoder (this issue) discuss effective practices as both a relative and an absolute question in reference to language intervention strategies. Other articles in this special issue would suggest that we can generalize those questions across content areas.

We would think, for instance, that one would be reluctant to carry a banner for explicit instruction without an accompanying entourage of qualifications. First, the object of the explicit instruction might range from ludicrous to simply unimportant. The former possibility is amply illustrated by Davis (1990):

Koretz (1988) reports the case of a school mathematics supervisor who noticed that the state’s minimum competency test presented shaded figures to accompany questions asking that one find the area, and presented unshaded figures for questions asking about perimeter. Koretz reports that, based on this observation, the supervisor instructed the teachers to tell children to multiply the numbers in problems where the figure was shaded, and to add the numbers in problems where the figure was not shaded. This is typical of a kind of strategy that raises test scores without actually teaching the relevant concepts, skills, or understandings. (p. 102)

The farcical aside, explicit instruction might address topics of marginal value, such as Roman numerals in mathematics, or the use of ellipses in writing. But even when the focus of instruction is upon the important “big ideas” within and across content domains, there remain many constraints upon explicit strategies. Prawat (1989) suggested that a good strategy is “intermediate in generality” (p. 22). Strategies that are too narrow in scope tend to result in the rote acquisition of knowledge (e.g., “invert and multiply” as a “strategy” for solving fraction division problems). In contrast, strategies that are too broad tend to result in little functional acquisition of knowledge at all (e.g., “summarize as you read” in reading, or “draw a picture of the problem” in mathematics).

In short, there must be unlimited ways to make explicit strategy instruction ineffective. It is easy enough to criticize explicit strategy instruction simply as a polemical exercise, but as an exercise, it is more like walking very slowly than running. This cuts either way: It would require little imagination, for instance, to successfully design either a terribly ineffective explicit instruction or discovery instruction control group for a straw man “experimental” study. There is little challenge in identifying either explicit or discovery activities that result in the rote acquisition of knowledge, or in little acquisition of knowledge of any sort.

A more productive approach, we believe, is to identify those relatively narrow conditions under which a variety of approaches contribute to the accomplishment of various goals most effectively. Such an approach would, to begin with, force us to reject the rather simplistic dichotomy of discovery versus explicit learning, given the rich body of educational psychology from which we may draw. As Romiszowski asserted,

We have noted that whereas Bruner and Ausubel represent extreme viewpoints for or against discovery methods, most other writers adopt intermediate positions, accepting that both strategies may be used to good advantage and suggesting criteria for selection between them. We have also noted that discovery learning as defined by Bruner is quite different from the guided discovery approach of Gagné and that Landa’s approach is different again. (Romiszowski, 1981, p. 178)
The mechanisms by which apparently contradictory instructional practices may actually contribute mutually to desired learning outcomes may be explained in large part by the way knowledge is acquired: the instances of us knowing nothing about something and then, suddenly, instantly knowing and understanding everything is a rare scenario—if it exists at all. The meaningful learning of an individual concept, strategy, heuristic, and so forth, occurs over time (Shuell, 1990). All instructional ideologies seem to accept this observation, ranging from behaviorists talking about shaping behavior over time or constructivists talking about the assimilation and accommodation of knowledge over time.

As a consequence, were we to walk into a classroom and observe a single interaction between a teacher and student, we would have no basis for generalization. For instance, imagine that we observed a teacher telling a student something related to writing instruction, such as, “Remember to use words such as then, next, first, and finally to show the reader the order of the steps in your explanation.” Next, we see the teacher ask the student, what are some of the words you can use to show your readers the order of steps?” Finally, the student repeats back a few of the words mentioned previously by the teacher.

We can confidently conclude next to nothing from this scenario, either with respect to ideologies or practices. The exchange, to begin with, could occur within a highly structured or scripted lesson or as a completely spontaneous event during a very unstructured and child-directed lesson. Moreover, we know neither what preceded the exchange, nor what follows it. We might be tempted to write off the exchange as rote regurgitation, when in fact, preceding and subsequent instructional events reveal, overall, an instructional approach decidedly designed to bring about highly transferable, generalized writing knowledge and ability.

High also among the criteria for selecting among available instructional options are learner characteristics. Imagine, first, a 3-year-old middle class white child with two parents—one at home—playing with a discovery-oriented computer program on pre-math concepts at home. She plays only when she feels like it. When she gets into the program, she selects the things she would like to do. She plays for as long or short a time as she wishes. In due time, she clearly constructs or reconstructs knowledge. Some of those constructions are “weak” (Noddings, 1990), in that she learns associations, such as “two is the verbal representation for 2.” Some are strong, in that she induces a generalized concept of things such as triangles, without learning a definition. She does not achieve some of the program’s goals at all, such as associating the order of animal graphics with place value. And she might even inadvertently learn a few misconceptions relative to shapes such as squares, rectangles, parallelograms, and trapezoids. Incidentally, she becomes more familiar with the technology of her future, and on her own initiative, she solves problems relating to the use of the mouse and other mechanics of using computers and software.

Overall, this scenario has great appeal. A child is learning a variety of things, some that were not specifically targeted as outcomes and some not intended at all. Misconceptions are not of particular concern. There is time for them to sort themselves out, and plentiful resources in addition to the software. In fact, there is no rush to accomplish anything. This, in short, is appropriately situated discovery.
But imagine another situation, a 9-year-old boy with approximately the same knowledge as the 3-year-old. He lives in poverty with one semi-literate parent. His misconceptions are stubbornly resistant to change. Weak constructions—rote learning—not only do not get him very far, but they are also more difficult for him to achieve because memory is not one of his strong suits. He is way behind his peers, and statistics suggest that he will only get further behind. If we have one and only shot at accelerating the knowledge growth of this boy, are we going to fritter it away with the sort of dabbling that seemed so enriching for our 3-year-old? To do so would be unethical, if not criminal. Will we, rather, select appropriate instructional practices, based upon demonstrated effectiveness, rather than ideological fervor? It is an insult to human intelligence to offer simple, global, unconditional solutions to complex cognitive problems. It is dogmatic.

CONCLUSION

Well-known constructivists (e.g., Davis et al., 1990) have suggested a metaphor in which United States education is at war on two fronts. First, the performance of U.S. students is poor—their mathematics performance, in this case. “But the second front is perhaps even more threatening: There is major disagreement on how to proceed in order to make things better” (Davis et al., 1990, p. 1). Fighting on this second front are the constructivists against an enemy who is not clearly identified, but who seems to constitute the dark forces of “direct instruction.”

The metaphor is a bit muddied. More to the point, however, it is misplaced. If we were to frame our chosen field within a war metaphor, we would characterize ignorance as the enemy against which professional educators stand united to fight, even if varied in our choice of weapons, tactics, and strategies. To view the situation otherwise, as a war not only against ignorance, but among us educators as well, is to conjure up images of Protestants against Catholics, Jews against Muslims, Christians against Jews, and other dogmatic holy wars in which fringe groups, principally, battle one another ostensibly for the good of humankind but in fact to the advantage of no one, save, possibly, their own private and inscrutable interests.

Every ideology—not just constructivism or behaviorism—has its fringe elements, variously described as radical constructivists or fanatical behaviorists. When the educational fringe groups declare war, the rest of us expend precious resources responding to charges that are, when stripped of rhetorical trimmings, often groundless.

We suspect that when ideological rhetoric is set aside, mainstream educational researchers’ (and other educators’) best hope for advancing the field might be realized through our commitment to develop and verify the best possible curricular and instructional practices—best in the sense of effectively resulting in well-understood knowledge for all learners, and doing so efficiently, particularly for those children for whom efficiency is no luxury.

The traditional mechanism for determining best practices in education (and other fields) has been empiricism. As implemented in education, empiricism suffers obvious difficulties that make it susceptible to easy attack by fringe elements from any ideology: insensitive or invalid measurement devices; artificially
contrived controls, or no controls at all; poor methodological conceptualization; the statistically rigorous analysis of useless data; unrealistic experimental settings; and decidedly non-inquiry research approaches.

Some constructivists (e.g., Heshusius, 1989; Poplin, 1985) advocate the abandonment of empiricism, based (a) upon these widely acknowledged weaknesses in the application of empiricism to education and (b) upon some incredibly spurious misinterpretations of “paradigms” discussed by philosophers of science (see Stanovich, 1993). The alternative suggested by such constructivists seems to revolve around anecdotal case studies, but the extent to which our field engages in wild flurries of anecdotal jousting is the extent to which the problems of an already disarrayed educational research community are exacerbated (see Pressley and Harris, in press-a, in press-b; and Slavin, 1981, for thorough discussions of educational research). Educational research needs to become “more empirical,” not less.

The schism between empiricists and anti-empiricists seems to be deep. But again, in terms of practices, it may not be as deep as it appears to be. Meltzer and Reid’s (this issue) concerns about new assessment methods—practicality, cost-effectiveness, accountability, reliability, and validity—parallel our own, and, moreover, seem not entirely incompatible with well-established goals for empirical measurement.

The editors of this special issue advised contributors to focus upon the implications of constructivism for special education, and to do so without resorting to the polemics frequently associated with such discussions. Our thoughts here may seem polemical, but unavoidably so, we believe, and in any case, are not directed against any particular ideology. As we pondered the implications of constructivism, it became apparent to us that whatever those implications might be, they are no greater or lesser than those of any other ideology. That is, all ideologies have broad and potentially positive, if very indirect, implications for practice. And no ideology, per se, has much direct, practical implication.

If, therefore, we address directly the question of how constructivism impacts special education, then we can say that at a very broad level, the impact is positive and desirable. Some of the emphases of constructivism, if not new or profound, are urgently critical to the enhancement of educational practices. For instance, the focus of constructivists upon higher-order outcomes for all students is a reminder to everyone in special education that our students need and deserve to achieve authentic, useful outcomes as much as anyone. In addition, the criticisms constructivists make of many typical assessment tools have led most researchers to consider better, more sensitive assessment methodology, without sacrificing validity. Third, we believe that the constructivists have influenced a movement away from the proliferation of minuscule, unrelated objectives, and toward a greater emphasis upon important aspects of content knowledge. Other ideologies, no doubt, also make broad or general contributions. Case and Bereiter (1984), for example, suggested that in the movement from behaviorism to neobehaviorism to cognitive psychology, each successive moment is characterized by only small incremental changes.

This is likely to be our response to the broad implications of any well-intended, thoughtful, morally motivated ideology: It probably impacts positively, if indi-
rectly and generally. In many cases, if not most, ideologies re-emphasize "pre-" or "meta-" ideological ideas and practices, which helps nourish our desire to be modern. If, however, we address the question of how constructivism (or any other ideology) impacts special education in terms of specific practices, then we cannot respond at all. We can only respond to the practices themselves, their interrelationship to other practices, their applications in terms of learner characteristics, and some valid indication of their impact. The intentions of ideologues by no means necessarily realize themselves in practice, as we have tried to illustrate with examples of mindless, rote learning perpetrated in the names of behaviorism and constructivism alike. We would hazard the guess that many "constructivist practices" or "behavioral practices" might impact quite positively upon special education. Many more would not. But more crucially, as we identify practices that genuinely and verifiably benefit children, the ideologies that spawned them, revived them, or otherwise claimed to own them would be completely beside the point.

We educators may have many enemies in our war against ignorance and inability, but those enemies should not be one another. Historical inertia may be one such enemy. For example, many arguments in favor of given educational practices are accompanied by pejorative descriptions of traditional or conventional practices. Frequently, those practices are widespread, on the one hand, but are not advocated by anyone in our field, on the other. No one, for instance, appears to openly advocate the weekly, rote memorization of spelling words and a graded Friday test. However, the one hundred million copies of Webster’s "little blue-backed speller" may have provided more than adequate incentive to publishers for not fooling too much with this practice. We are reluctant to criticize publishers too much for publishing what people seem most determined to buy, or to criticize teachers for practices that were ubiquitous among their own teachers and their teachers’ teachers.

A general lack of focus or priorities may be another genuine enemy. We are quick, for instance, to consider all manners of restructuring the physical and organizational characteristics of schools, as if those considerations might have more direct impact upon achievement than the instructional practices we employ every day.

We may, collectively, be our own worst enemy, in that we at times seem more intent upon belittling one another than upon concerted cooperation aimed at upgrading the professionalism of our field, enacted in part through powerful lobbying efforts designed to allocate the resources necessary to developing, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating instructional and assessment practices of merit, regardless of ideological claims to ownership. Genuine, notable advances in our field, in any case, seem dependent upon most of us getting together at least long enough to decide upon just what war we are fighting.

References