When Art Meets Research: A Review of John Williamson's *The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery*

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Abstract: In this article I straddle the conventions of literary analysis and educational book reviews to evaluate "The case of the disappearing/appearing slow learner: An interpretive mystery," a doctoral dissertation by John Williamson (2015). I examine the artistic and educational research components of the dissertation. I break convention with the traditional journal article, by applying a literary analytical lens to the dissertation written as a novel. I also apply the lens of an initiate to educational research. I present an overview of the study, followed by an analysis of the study's epistemological and methodological commitments. I conclude that the dissertation is epistemologically and methodologically coherent, notwithstanding the shortcomings. Therefore, I frame my critique as what is missing in the dissertation.. Finally, I consider the learning I intend to take forward with me as a graduate student, and I offer brief recommendations regarding the value of reading dissertations, especially those that successfully break with traditional reporting.

Keywords: Interpretive Work, Hermeneutics, Understanding

Introduction

In this article I present an analysis of *The case of the disappearing/appearing slow learner: An interpretive mystery*, a doctoral dissertation by Williamson (2015). This article is the outcome of a task that was part of my graduate student residency at the Werklund School of Education during a Doctoral Research Seminar in 2017. In that seminar I had the opportunity to conduct a close study of a dissertation that used a methodological framework which was relevant to my research interests. The quest to develop the appropriate academic voice can be an intimidating aspect of the graduate student experience because "stylish academic writing is a complex and contradictory business" (Sword, 2012, pp. 9-10), and it requires ongoing practice. Even the practice of learning how to read academic writing takes time and practice. Although this is part of developing academic literacy, scholars have admitted that this is not easy to articulate because "scholars and theorists who study reading have struggled to define what happens when experts read" (Linkon, 2005, p. 249). Whether early career scholars decide to follow the route of the traditional research report, or alternative formats such as podcasting one's research (Samson, 2018), it is worth consulting an example of dissertation report to examine the epistemological and methodological coherence. It is an activity which may support one's apprenticeship in academic reading and writing.

A Story About the Pleasures of Reading Educational Research

Williamson's dissertation (2015) captured my attention very early in my graduate studies because it accomplished a rare balance of educational research written as a detective novel. I appreciated the risk that Williamson took to remain true to the conventions of the detective novel, while reporting the process and findings of educational research. Interpretive research aims at validity whereby the research rings true to the experience that it describes (Freeman, 2011). Williamson's authenticity in the use of the detective genre was a way of being true to the experience of the *slow learners*.

For this article my guiding question was: How does Williamson rigorously report his research process and findings while remaining consistent to the conventions of the detective novel? My analytical process, with the guidelines proffered by my seminar instructors, included an examination of the dissertation's epistemology, methodology, and resultant methods. For new scholars to educational research it may take a while before these terms comfortably become a part of one's lexicon. Therefore, I found myself inclined to read the dissertation as I would approach literary analysis. I was surprised at how much I could enjoy the process of reading educational research, while developing the courage to make assertions about the epistemological commitments of the dissertation. I considered Eisner's (1997) cautions about the promises and perils of alternative forms of representation, even as he has been a prominent advocate for the use of art in educational scholarship. I was briefly critical of my enthusiasm for alternative presentations of research and I wondered, "should research be this enjoyable to read?" However, I could not suppress my interest in the coherence of the novel, as research, and now I can only hope, through this review, that other early career scholars will take risks in creative dissertation reporting.

My interest in this meeting of art and research goes beyond my simple wish to enjoy reading research studies. Recently, I thought about other emerging scholars trying to break through curricular and bureaucratic conventions in reporting research (Czuy & Hogarth, 2019), and I concluded that if educational research is going to meet its civic responsibility, it should seek to communicate to a broad audience. Are there not teachers and researchers who would like to read aesthetically appealing research reports? Can compelling reports such as Williamson's study, which break with convention, be brought out of academic vaults to the reading chairs of teachers who look forward to research insights that support teaching practice? The question at hand is thus: Does Williamson's detective novel effectively communicate the process and findings of the study? My analytical process included reading through the dissertation, pausing to make notes about the evidence of epistemological and methodological statements and justifications, a process not unlike *close reading* practices in literary analysis (Linkon, 2005). I lingered over lyrical paragraphs, but I stayed on task by consulting with resources that provided some understanding of the methodological constructs in the thesis (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2015; Jardine, 1992; Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015; Reid, Kirby, & Greaves, 2017; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). Finally, I cross-referenced these constructs with the evidence of epistemological assertions in the thesis to arrive at my interpretations of the dissertation's coherence, which I present here. I begin with a synopsis of the report, followed by an interrogation and description of the epistemological and methodological commitments of the novel. Then I analyze the commitments to the manners of presentation, I consider Willliamson's research findings, followed by a discussion and a critique of the shortcomings of the dissertation. I close with recommendations for early career scholars.

Synopsis of *The Case of the Disappearing/Appearing Slow Learner: An Interpretive Mystery*

This researcher reported on a study into special education thought and practice, as well as educational classification and sorting of students called "slow learners." It was written as an interpretive research report in the form of a detective novel. It opened with a preface which explained the decision for such reporting, but as soon as I delved into chapter one, I suspended disbelief and entered the world of the creative narrative. In this story Williamson, a Diverse Learning Coordinating Teacher, hired a "hard-boiled" detective named Max Hunter to help Williamson find and save "slow learners" from disappearance (Williamson, 2015, p. 2). Disappearance is literal student attrition, as well as the lack of clarity in educational settings as to how society categorizes slow learners. The topic is serious and heavy, but I appreciated and enjoyed the layers of meaning and word-play evident from the title and the novel's exposition, particularly the characterization of the researcher and his shadow character, Max. The exposition provided a strong hook, as good novels tend to do.

The research sought to uncover the history and processes whereby the slow learner is categorized and sorted within the high school educational context in Alberta. The research problem is best summarized in Max's words, "these kids wouldn't do well if they were just thrown into the educational system such as it is and ignored," because with the students he spoke to, "this kind of inattention was where their school failure started" (Williamson, 2015, p. 311). This raised the question for Max and Williamson: where do the students who are slow learners belong?

As Max takes up the job to find the slow learners, readers are brought along a turbulent journey with detective work (research), saboteurs, a femme-fatale, numerous dangers, and rescue by social science theorists. It is a series of events too detailed to include within the scope of this article, but by the time the reader gets past the first few chapters, it is apparent why the author selected the detective novel for reporting research.

The detective novel genre is suited to interpretive work which tends to pursue the practical mystery of lived experiences. The assumption underlying the use of this genre is that educational research is about detecting and uncovering mysteries, or research problems to be solved. That problem-solving thrust might seem antithetical to interpretive research modes that speak to the need to recognize that interpretation is an ongoing process (Jardine, 2012; Moules et al., 2015). However, in this study problem-solving is not a point of discord. The study used several theoretical and methodological foundations to address the research topic. The practical problem-solving, mystery-solving context of the study suggests that the research aligned with democratic citizenship education, an educational sensibility which looks at the way that schooling helps to perpetuate inequitable social and economic structures instead of addressing these inequities (Davis et al., 2015). As such, the novel makes use of two methodological frameworks within the interpretive research paradigm: critical studies and hermeneutics.

Epistemological and Methodological Commitments of the Novel

The terms "epistemology" and "methodology" may cause some consternation to early career scholars. I have found it simple to think of epistemology as what a researcher believes to be knowledge and how knowledge is learned; and methodology as the research process a researcher uses to generate new knowledge and understanding, supported by selected theoretical frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Davis et al., 2015). The epistemological and methodological focus of this study was located firmly in interpretive research. I considered the qualities of interpretive work, the context of the research site, the research methods, and the role of the researcher to evaluate the extent to which the novel was commensurate with academic research.

The detective genre evoked the sensibility of interpretive work which seeks to interpret and understand or detect what is embedded in the life-world. The life-world is an interpretive research construct that refers to "the world of everyday things and experiences" (Moules, et al., 2015, p. 21). This is essential to the context of the study, which sought to understand how learner labels and categorizations are embedded in the life-world of an urban context. The trope of a hard-boiled detective novel with overtones of film noir fiction (Barnett, 2017; Phillips, 2015) implied that this context is marked by corrupt, dangerous practices and that there is a complex case to be solved.

The idea of the case evoked the idea of a case-study where a researcher conducts an in-depth study of a phenomenon in a localized context (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Gilham, 2011; Jardine, 1992; Stake, 2005). In this study, it was the phenomenon of the "slow learner" within the educational system. Surprisingly, the novel did not use the term case-study. In a way, this is consistent with the interpretive study. The research disrupted taken-for-granted assumptions about the research context and research itself, especially labels and profiling in educational contexts. For example, at one point, the detective character Max stated that the IQ label of slow learner does not match with what the students perceive as slow. Another disruption of my expectations was that the research questions were not stated in the traditional format of dissertation writing because the novel's chapters were laid out similar to novels with chapter numbers; not the five or six-chapter dissertation format. I inferred that the research questions were: Who is the slow learner? Where is the slow learner? What becomes of the slow learner in educational contexts? What is the proper place for the educational category of slow learners? The questions seemed simple, but they were complex, leading the characters to consult a range of sources.

The effect of a case study was also evoked by the sense of the particular context, the study's embeddedness in the historical underpinnings of a community, and contextualized meanings of the slower learner within the education system. The concept of a case also evoked the idea that the research process used a range of methods to solve the research problem. The study used interviews with students, teachers, (two schools, five teachers), and school officials, as well as a consultation with a public intellectual in the character of Smart Ass Cripple. The researcher (author) conducted critical discourse analysis of relevant literature, including documents such as programming for slow learners, a program of manual training, program evaluations, Alberta's turn of the century newspaper clippings, Department of Education policy statements, and documents in the public domain such as representations in popular culture, film, blogging, and references to events in the public media, such as a public protest where people with intellectual disabilities and other concerned citizens protested outside the provincial legislature.

The critical interpretive outlook (Reid et al., 2017; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012) in this study suggested the following epistemological assumptions:
- knowledge is contextual and socially constructed by the powerful;
- knowledge is not the same across contexts or even social classes;
- curriculum is historically constituted, built on the social construction of knowledge;
- understanding experience is a way to address injustices and inequities in educational institutions; and
- understanding has limitations and is never complete.

More explicitly, Williamson (2015) indicated that knowledge is embedded in concrete situations, context grounds truth, truth is an interpretation, and we are always a part of what we seek to understand. On the basis of this positionality I inferred that Williamson, the author, believed that learning is using the tools and resources available to move through one's world, and students who can make use of the available tools are likely to be able to attain academic success. However, epistemological commitments sometimes come with tensions and these tensions were evident in the differences and clashes between the characters Max and Williamson, who appeared to be a split of the concept of an educational researcher. This split contributed to effects which are consistent with interpretive work

(Creswell & Poth, 2017; Freeman, 2011) in terms of how: (a) the presence of the researcher, Williamson, as researcher and character, shaped the research; (b) the split pointed to the tension and unpredictability in doing interpretive work; and (c) the split highlighted the two theoretical frames used in this study: critical studies and hermeneutics.

Theoretical Commitments

The novel used the theoretical frameworks of critical disability studies, influenced by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and hermeneutic theoretical perspectives, influenced by Hans Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. The theorists are presented as characters who provide Max with some guidance to solve the case of the disappearing slow learner. As Max conducts his inquiry the theorists direct him to archives that help him understand how the phenomenon of the slow learner has been described historically. In a traditional thesis this might have been labelled as the literature review. The characterization of the theorists in terms of attire and personality traits was also revelatory about the author's attitude toward the theories. The author tended to use theories and theoretical perspectives as tools to make sense of the research process and the categorizations of slow learners, instead of using the theories to dictate how to define the slow learner. This reinforced the research perspective of giving voice to the experience of the students within the study, and the epistemological grounding of the research: slow learners are not cognitively deficient. They are struggling students with "low average I.Q." (Williamson, 2015, p. 17) and according to the character of the Smart Ass Cripple they can be thought of as needing different equipment or resources to accomplish what they need to do.

Williamson's Research Findings

My understanding of this study is that the student who is labelled as a "slow learner" has received this label as a result of the categorizations of IQ tests and disability categorizations, especially problematic, peripheral categorizations in educational institutions. These peripheral categorizations make it particularly difficult for slow learners because the nebulousness of their categorization has led to inappropriate tools and resources at their disposal. Slow learners are not learning disabled, so they do not have access to the coding and accompanying tools and resources for learning disabled students. Slow learners are a few points short of the average IQ, so tools for the categorically average students do not serve the slow learners very well. Furthermore, some of them score higher on IQ tests at other points in time in their lives, showing how the categorization via IQ can be pernicious and misleading.

Although the novel began with a theoretical framing of disability definitions, by using hermeneutics throughout the second part of the story, the author showed how Max changed. Max came to recognize that social justice perspectives which seek to promote inclusion, on the premise of treating disability with the same dignity as non-disabled, might be hurting the disabled and even more so, the slow learners, who do not get the support from being coded as disabled. A supposed justice and thrust for equity could be backfiring.

Mid-way through the novel Max's discussion with the character, Smart Ass Cripple, in conjunction with the definitions he read during his detective work, led to Max's epiphany. Max questioned if disabilities are real. Perhaps all individuals are limited in some way and they use tools and technologies to manoeuvre through the world. If one comes to understand disability as a social construct, then where does that place slow learners whose categorization is not clearly constructed? Is that the reason why they appear and disappear? By categorizing disability or slow learning as an inferior quality of a person that society has to fix so that individuals can function like able-bodied people in perceived normative categories, one runs the risk of saying society has to be fixed by removing these defective individuals. This understanding disturbed me deeply. It operated as a plot climax. Although this moment came half-way through the novel, I felt I could have stopped reading there and emerge altered in how I reframed my understanding of inclusion in education and the wider society. However, the novel had yet to address the educational research implications, or what literary analysis would call an appropriate resolution to the tension in the narrative.

In the second half of the novel, the limitations of critical disability perspectives led Max to heed Williamson's counsel, and he turned to Gadamer's recommendations to "cultivate solidarities" (Williamson, 2015, p. 327). The purpose of interpretation was "not necessarily to find agreement" (Williamson, 2015, p. 329) so by then Max was taking hermeneutics seriously for the case to be "solved." By interrogating reforms and barriers, Williamson and Max sat down to join Max's understanding with Williamson's trepidations. It showed the importance of dialogue to

address structural inequities. Dialogue was not presented as a cure-all, but a difficult hermeneutic process that takes time. By referencing Carl Honoré (2004) and the slow movement, Jacques Rancière's (1999) critical outlook, and John Dewey's (2001) pragmatic perspective, the dissertation concluded with the implication that resolutions are not simple fixes, but complex ongoing dialogues among a wide group of thinkers and actors, in the spirit of democratic citizenship education.

Discussion: The Commitments and Manners of Presentation in the Dissertation

Of note is the type of detective novel Williamson used to report the research process and findings. The hard-boiled detective novel is suggestive of several aspects about the topic, even before one reads far into the dissertation. For example, one gets a sense of the danger of interpretive work and efforts to uncover the unknown in what already seems so elaborately categorized and labelled. The study addressed a range of community perspectives on disability and slow learners within an urban setting. It raised problematic conclusions in a whistleblowing tone typical of some detective genres. In that sense, it almost operated like investigative journalism but the trope of a 1930s detective voice in the novel shielded the participants and, to some extent, the researcher.

Characterization

The novel may be seen as serving to distance the researcher from the range of perspectives in the study. Distance in this case is not an objective distancing, but a kind of protection from the disturbing viewpoints among stakeholders in education. By splitting the researcher into the characters of the cynical, smart-mouthed detective Max Hunter (hunting, detecting) and the Knowledge and Employability teacher Williamson (a thinker within the formal educational institution), the author retained some artistic leeway in being critical of the research contexts through Max's voice. The nuances of the anti-hero in noir fiction (Barnett, 2017; Phillips, 2015), especially Max's appreciation for Sisyphus, allowed Max to say things that perhaps the researcher Williamson might not have said. Max is able to be critical of educational institutions and social justice actions in the society while facing the research tensions more boldly than Williamson. By hiring Max, Williamson seems to be absolving himself of confronting the dangers of this work. Max's bravery makes him appear noble, while I could not help but feel empathy for Williamson's sense of helplessness.

The author's declaration that–the characters Max and Williamson represented aspects of perspectives toward the research–is a subtle indication of tensions within the researcher. Influenced by his hard-boiled demeanor and critical outlook, Max was brawn and morality, willing to engage with villains in his quest to fix things and solve injustices. Williamson was reserved, attentive to scholarly rigor, and concerned with conducting the research in a dignified way. The need to pace the research shows the tension between wanting to do right in the world and recognizing the responsibility to academic processes which can yield a more thoughtful result. As a "Knowledge and Employability" teacher, Williamson knew the theories and where to go, but he lacked the will to act. He needed a character like Max. As a team, they show how different viewpoints can draw out, even delay the process to understand, or solve the research problem.

Max and Williamson, as splits of the researcher, also showed how the presence of the researcher shaped the research. This split pointed to the tension and unpredictability in doing interpretive work. Max's position, as an outsider to the world of teaching, also implied in some way that the researcher is always outside of what one seeks to understand. While Williamson sought to counter his embeddedness by hiring an outsider, Max's outsider status required him to take time to understand the context. With each step toward understanding, something else was concealed or misunderstood. This is consistent with interpretive work, but Max's frustrations suggested that this frustration resided with the researcher Williamson as well. While the character Williamson was a calm presence throughout the study, Max was constantly tense and disturbed. This shows the multi-faceted, complex aspect of combining research approaches.

The Case, the Conflict, and the Quest

The case was a practical mystery to find a phenomenon which had disappeared in educational contexts and discourse. Disappearance is a trope of detective writing (Phillips, 2015). However, in this case, the phenomenon was appearing and disappearing. This appearing and disappearing is consistent with the concept of *aletheia* in interpretive work, "to simultaneously reveal one thing while concealing another" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 131). The

topic disturbed themes of disability, constructions of ability and normalcy, and critically implicated even those who meant well. That theme was consistent with the critical theory angle where the researcher interrogated power structures, language, and educational processes which claim to be offering equity. The assumption behind these perspectives is that knowledge is not fixed, but something that is defined in social contexts, understood and misunderstood; evident and hidden, even by well-wishers. As a practical mystery, the research was grounded in the belief that knowing is detecting. Knowledge is embedded in the life-world; in this research, it is the urban, modern city.

Max was selected by Williamson to be the heroic detective and find the slow learners. This implies that knowledge is something out there to be "found." Even after all Max's bizarre encounters, even after Williamson advised him to use hermeneutics to solve the case, the idea that they were trying to solve something, or fix something, suggests the underlying impulse in education is to fix deficiencies in students or educational systems. Although Max came to understand that the categorizations are not absolute, not until the end of the process did he come to understand Heidegger and Gadamer, that his efforts to find a fact of who slow learners are, to save them from injustices, is not possible in a world of categorization. Knowledge is not absolute. Max confronted the question which the reader has perhaps understood from the beginning of the research: does there have to be a "singular, objective, disembodied truth" to be found about the slow learners (Williamson, 2015, p. 313)? Surprisingly, this tension reveals the study's interpretive coherence in the belief of knowledge as a social construct that begins in the familiar lifeworld (Smith, 2008). For example, we see "slow learners," and hear from them, and yet there is much more to be revealed about the categorization than what the case begins with. Max's question and irritation that the topic is in plain view, but still a mystery, was consistent with interpretive work.

While the research questions have led Max on a quest, his discoveries disturbed his assumptions. When Max noted the discrepancies between labels and student experiences, that particular observation reiterated the risk of the pursuit of research understanding. A researcher ought to be prepared to find out things that are dark and dangerous, or simply disappointing. The history, dangers, and effects of disability and slow learner categorizations are disappointing discoveries.

The case showed a limitation of the values and principles in a supposed human rights conscious society. With all the resources available for inclusion and equity, Max noticed that the concept of disability is inherently discriminatory. The effect of this insight is that, as a reader, I felt complicit in those structures which make such discrimination possible. Furthermore, the quest to understand (and interpret) the categorization of slow learners overturns the societal belief and value of inclusion, because the slow learner is excluded on several levels. This located the research in critical studies. This was also consistent with the sense of the research being dangerous work because it implicated all of society, even those arguing for justice and equity. This finding was consistent with interpretive work which tends to raise more questions than straightforward resolutions. The work might be limited in its applicability to general situations, but the attention to the history and current peculiarities of the slow learner's experience locates the study within interpretive work which feels true to the context and the phenomenon which it seeks to describe (Angen, 2000; Freeman, 2014).

Conceptual, Methodological, and Stylistic Consistencies

The study's emphasis on categorization and Max's travels through history were consistent with interpretive work beginning from language/meaning and critical studies. The study was explicit about its examination of the way knowledge is created to reinforce power structures. However, mid-way through the mystery the character Williamson admitted that Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are not the theorists they need to pay the most attention to in order to solve the case by finding the slow learners. Williamson turned to hermeneutic phenomenology to be able to proceed more cautiously. This suggested the researcher's discomfort with the use of theory. Even the characterization of Heidegger, as an inhospitable individual, implies some latent discomfort with the use of theory, possibly because of ways theories have been used to contribute to the injustices against slow learners and people with learning disabilities.

Hermeneutic philosophy seeks to disrupt taken for granted assumptions about the life-world of participants (Jardine, 2012; Moules et al., 2015). That attempt to disrupt was also consistent with critical research approaches (Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). The novel's characters repeatedly stated that educational structures are corrupt and discriminatory and slow learners have been unfairly and inequitably regarded. The reporting genre of the hard-

boiled, film noir fiction emphasized the effort to challenge the unjust categorization of slow learners and the ways they are relegated to the lower rungs of a competitive educational system which privileges IQ levels and class. The novel advocated for the characterization of learners – interpreting, storying and re-storying lives of learners so as to appropriately identify their needs and the equipment they need to be able to meet their learning goals. The idea that "there are games of truth and games of power" (Williamson, 2015, p. 121) reiterated the critical stance the novel adopted toward the competitive discriminatory aspect of educational contexts, in which almost all participants are complicit. That is why I could not help but care for the teacher-Williamson's sense of helplessness. I began to see myself in his dilemmas. The impact of the novel drew me further into the world of the dark narrative.

The ambitious use of critical and interpretive approaches, with thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, Heidegger and Gadamer, framed the research process, in conjunction with the use of the film noir detective style. This indicated that the research process of seeking understanding and interpreting lived experiences involved significant risk. That trope of risk in detective work was almost hyperbolic when Max found himself injured, arrested, and pursued by dangerous villainous characters in his quest to find and save slow learners. The novel avoided reading like a caricature of the detective genre. It kept the entertainment value and formal reporting within a sensible balance.

Villains such as the femme fatale, or corrupt institutions are tropes of detective novels but by showing Max's prejudices and his difficulty in overcoming his pre-understandings and his smart-mouth, there was an implicit tension that the researcher might have some of the very same villainous qualities he set out to battle. Although Max was willing to dialogue with others the reader cannot help but ask: how is it Max proudly declares his self-awareness, yet at some points he is unaware of his bias? That might have been a strategical rhetorical move on the part of the author, but it could also point to a tacit acknowledgement that a researcher cannot know all their biases. It is consistent with hermeneutic sensibilities that one cannot know a phenomenon fully because whatever is revealed also contains the quality of concealment – *aletheia* (Moules et al., 2015).

Interrogating the Coherence of the Manners of Presentation

The coherence of epistemology, methodology, and resultant methods, as well as the use of theory to direct the research process was consistent to the point where I found it challenging to see what was discordant in the research even where the characters were grappling with tensions. I asked instead, what are the omissions?

The main challenge for reading this study was the description of some of the specifics of the context. Some parts were so case-specific that they alienated my understanding. A review by someone unfamiliar with the work or context could have strengthened that aspect of the reporting. It is a reminder that graduate research depends on multiple eyes to give important constructive feedback. Also, although I enjoyed reading this novel, and I valued every pedagogical page, I found the second half less enchanting than the first half. It reminded me of one of the greatest challenges in doing this kind of work: omitting even the good pedagogical material for the integrity of the work. It is not that the second half was irrelevant. It was more of a situation that the lyricism of the first few chapters and the attention to the detail of the detective genre was less apparent. Then it felt more like I was reading educational research. To help the reading of that heavy-handed second half the novel could have benefited from including clearer signposts in the absence of chapter names and a table of contents. The novel did not state why we should care about this topic, although it was implicit—you should care if you are part of an educational institutions, because there are slow learners everywhere and we are all implicated in the injustices of our institutions. It goes beyond education though. You should care once you are a part of a society that makes provisions for the differently-abled and ignores the struggling students on the margins.

Although the character Williamson spoke as a parent of a disabled child, there were few parents' voices in this study. Additionally, students were in this study, the study spoke on their behalf, but the study did not speak directly to the students it represented or suggest possibilities for their agency in their learning processes. In that regard, the critical edge of the study flounders a bit in its effort to do justice and empower slow learners. What initially seemed problematic or slightly discordant with interpretive inquiry (solving the problem) did not seem so by the time I got to a complete reading of the study. The quest to address a problem is consistent with the critical stance of the study, specifically the range of questions raised by the study's interrogation of the categorization of slow learners, amidst the imminent changes to how inclusion is framed in the province of Alberta. The study did not provide clear solutions to the series of questions and problems which the character Max raised, however, this openness to the

outcome of the study is actually consistent with interpretive work. The study did important work by uncovering complex problems, but these problems are so deeply entrenched across institutions and social structures it is difficult for an individual to conceptualize how the "I" can play a role in contributing to removing system injustices and discrimination. What can the individual teacher do, equipped with a better understanding of what a slow learner struggles with and against? The character Hans indicated that addressing injustice is not a lone savior task but individuals can "cultivate solidarities" with others (Williamson, 2015, p. 327). While that is consistent with Gadamerian philosophy (Gadamer, 1999), I imagine for a reader, or teacher not entirely inclined to such a philosophy, this idea offers little in the way of something to be able to do in the real world. The coherence of the study might not serve some readers, but as an interpretive work, what could read as a foible emerges as part of the coherence of the dissertation and strategic rhetorical moves.

Relevance of This Study

A good interpretive study has resonance and transformative value with how an audience will continue to live in the world (Angen, 2000; Freeman, 2014). I share my analysis of this study because it has influenced how I continue living as a teacher and a researcher, and it could help fellow scholars think about the role of educational research, and how to communicate educational research. I felt a shift occur after reading this novel, but it left me with more questions. What can I do in my small way to affirm my students' self-confidence when they seem to be challenged by the rigors of an educational system which renders them invisible, disappearing slow learners? The conundrum for some of us as teachers is the recognition of our students' intelligences although we are not always able to help them through formal schooling, unless, like the character of Williamson, we break a few curricular or bureaucratic rules. By reeling the specific topic back to the "dangers" of bureaucratic, institutional, curricular structures, the study showed the importance of interrogating curriculum, even when curriculum is aimed at being ethical and inclusive. Yet by framing the second part of the study with Gadamerian hermeneutics, and the need for Max to restore slow learners to the "mystery of their persons" (Williamson, 2015, p. 332), the study concluded on the complexity and possibly dangerous approach of teachers or researchers barging into students' lives, attempting to fix injustices against students, without truly understanding what students live through.

The novel form of the dissertation allowed the study to take readers on a similar internal detective quest and was open enough to invite readers to think about ways we institutionalize injustices when we do not interrogate norms and conventions in our teaching practices. It also led me to think: is the impulse "to fix" part of our embeddedness in "what education is for" such that learning is often seen as fixing what is deficient in a student's repertoire? This study provoked that question, especially with the character of Smart Ass Cripple, who reminded Max, and readers, that perhaps disability does not need fixing, just equipment that might look different and do different things for different individuals. It is an important provocation. What tools do we provide for all our students? By Angen's (2000) terms, the transformative value of this dissertation is evident in the way it has altered my thinking and possible behaviours.

Regardless of what topic one chooses in educational research, it is framed by unstated assumptions about good schooling and learning processes, and this study reminded me of the need to interrogate the assumptions on an ongoing basis. As Max showed by his questioning, even after he gained clarity in some areas, what looks like a sound ethical conclusion for education is not so for all times and purposes. The use of characters to help readers see the research dialogue with the pre-understandings/assumptions and developing understanding which challenges these assumptions, showed the importance of disclosure of the process of coming to understand. The assumptions governing the research need to be held somewhat loosely so as to let the research process teach the researcher, while the questions must be open to let understanding emerge. This is consistent with interpretive research humility (Moules et al., 2015). Instead of a convenient conclusion of "this is what I found," it is an ethic to show how the research comes to these conclusions.

Although this case is contextualized in a particular city, by presenting the "fecundity" of the particular interpretive case (Jardine, 1992) with such depth of meaning in the absence of generalizability, the work illuminates and has universal application. The study showed that whistleblowing, describing educational structures and bureaucracies as corrupt and dark entities, and critiquing institutions, places, and people must be done with utmost respect and tact. When Max referred to the education minister by using an expletive, it is done with artistic elegance that reminds one, even when one is justified in revealing something ugly, discretion is necessary. Perhaps those who

were part of the research process might be able to recognize themselves, but I thought the fiction was skillful in protecting the identities of the participants. It highlighted the ethics of doing interpretive work.

The Limits of Understanding and Recommendations for New Scholars

My interpretations of the research features within the novel are like the process of literary analysis, contingent on my level of familiarity with the conventions of doing interpretive research. At the time of this review, I was a relative newcomer to social science research. The epistemological and methodological commitments of the research were not laid out in the conventional five-chapter thesis format that would have made it convenient to identify the features of the research. Nevertheless, the fact that I was able to identify these features, while enjoying the process, speaks to the reality: rigorous reporting need not be at the expense of creating a thesis that readers can enjoy.

The intricacy of the detective genre, the theme of danger in this work, and the breadth of material consulted in this study indicates that this combination of research and creative reporting is hard work. The author's fidelity to the genre suggested that there are two layers of doing the research–the process and the re-storying, according to the selected genre. A researcher needs to be committed to the process to do this with consummate skill. In this case, I think it was successful. Not until reading this novel did I think it possible to enjoy reading and re-reading educational research with a renewed sense of the possibilities for the aesthetics of educational research. My hope for this review is that somewhere a graduate student and their faculty advisor will consider the advantage of reporting research through the use of creative methods. Perhaps they might consider a podcast dissertation (Samson, 2018). Arts-based inquiry and arts-based methods (Barone & Eisner, 2011) certainly offer ways this can be done. However, Williamson's study operated within a critical interpretive paradigm, indicative of the possibility that one does not have to be using arts-based inquiry to report research in creative formats.

Many conventions in academic discourse inadvertently censor a graduate student's risk-taking to break with convention in reporting research findings or submit a journal article like this one; a blend of literary analysis with a dissertation review. Deviations from the convention might find resistance in the academy, but I am partial to practicing a critical interpretive worldview, not unlike the characters in Williamson's novel, because I would like to read more creative research reports. Regardless of whether new scholars attempt to report their research findings in creative ways, my conclusion from this task during my graduate student residency is that graduate students may benefit from a close reading of dissertations, not unlike close reading in literary analysis (Linkon, 2005). They may pursue this task with faculty advisors or as part of a graduate student reading group. The task can be organized as follows: identify the epistemological and methodological commitments of a thesis; ascertain the coherence of these commitments; determine whether there are omissions that could have strengthened the thesis; and evaluate the manners of presentation in the style of reporting. My addition to these tasks would be: go forth and apprentice oneself to a new way of reporting findings. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) have recommended strategies one may use to begin that apprenticeship process.

Sword (2012) noted that academic writing is one of the routine tasks that most academics perform with little thought as to how things might be done differently. I would extend that to say, academic reading is routine work for graduate students and it can be enjoyable. I think Williamson's dissertation shows that. I am partial to Sword's challenge to immerse oneself in an academic style that one enjoys, for creativity and style in one's own writing. It involves risk, and the possibility of a hit or a miss, but I look forward to more risks in academic writing if it could mean that educational research would be more enjoyable to read. The artistic flair and integrity of Williamson's novel did not sacrifice the integrity of the research topic. The cover art of this novel was a playful invitation, opening to the world of the study. I observed that even an oral reading of parts of the text implied the staccato speech style of characters in 1930s detective films. The pleasure of reading a rich descriptive report did not make the reading easier, but it made the journey enchanting and confirmed this dissertation as an engaging piece of literary work. My enchantment with the genre representation did not minimize the emergent methodological themes: educational research which takes a critical interpretive approach can be thought of as dangerous work. It challenges what one holds as sacrosanct in educational and learning processes. It can be nerve-wracking to begin the research process with awareness that you may find out something that challenges what you believe and value. Nevertheless, as the "character" Williamson indicated there are some core experiences that are like "a portrait-style tattoo" etched into one's being (Williamson, 2015, p. 213). Similarly, a researcher needs to have conviction in the value of the research and choices in how one reports this research. Knowing the why of conducting the research and the ontology one carries into research is essential to critical interpretive research which has the potential to be transformative

(Angen, 2000). John Williamson's work showed that when literary art meets research, pedagogy does not sacrifice the pleasure of aesthetic engagement in reading educational research.

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