

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

Part Two: Cells of Categorical Confinement

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Abstract

This follows the events described in Part One of this narrative. Max Hunter, a West Coast private detective, still conducting an investigation to find the educational category of slow learners at the behest of his client John Williamson, meets his client to discuss the next steps in the investigation. Max engages in some incognito detective work in educational settings and then encounters an injurious interruption to his casework. He then resumes his work, now as a wounded operative, by investigating the history of disability categorization with the help of two prominent critical theorists.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, education, slow learners, psychology, diploma exams, disability history

for Jacob

V

The sun threw little daggers at me through the gaps in the dirty curtains. I rolled over and looked

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at the clock. It was quarter to eight. My head hurt and I had a kink in my neck, either from all the abuse I took the prior day or from sleeping in one corpse-like position all night. I sat up. *I felt sick but not as sick as I ought to, not as sick as I would feel if I had a salaried job.*¹ I tripped over to the window on legs as stiff as stilts. As I looked through the dirty glass with its breathtaking view of a trash bin and narrow industrial road leading out to the ugly main drag, I realized I couldn't take any more of this on an empty stomach. I spied the adjacent neon sign of a breakfast joint, its glow dulled by the winter sun. I called Williamson on his mobile phone and told him I had some questions and asked if we could meet for breakfast.

"I'm glad you called," he said. "I'm going to a district in-service for people who work in the same position as me later this morning and I want you to come along. If you like, we could meet first for *your* breakfast."

The last sentence came out with a bit of a clip to it, implying maybe he was an earlier riser, and maybe more determined in this way, than the heroic Hunter he'd hired to look for slow learners. Some payback for yesterday's wisecracks, maybe. It was a worthless consideration in my trade. It's not how early in the day you look that catches the worm; it's knowing where to look. I let him keep that one anyways. I had a more important question. "What the hell is an in-service?" I demanded.

"It's a gathering of teachers for professional development," Williamson replied.

I allowed my silence to speak to how satisfied I was with his answer.

"An in-service is when a school district gets teachers together to learn more about things like resources for courses they are teaching, teaching strategies, or in my case, how best to work with certain kinds of students. I was surprised to see that today's was about slow learners, so I made sure I signed up and thought you should come along too. Maybe we can pretend you're my student teacher."

I had a pretty good idea what a student teacher was so I didn't need to ask about this, but I still wasn't sure if I needed to go. "Are there going to be any slow learning students there?" I asked.

"Well if you heard some of the questions people ask ..." Williamson began the joke before he could catch himself, making the same lapse in correctness by using "slow learner" as an insult that he'd scolded me for yesterday. From what I could observe from talking to him, I figured other teachers probably thought he was the slow learner at such events. Then he started over, pretending he'd said nothing. "No students. But it will be a good chance to learn more about the category, and that might help you."

"I already learned about the category, at the library, remember?"

¹ See Chandler (1940, p. 44). This line is borrowed from Chandler.

“Educational psychology is an evolving field.” He was about to launch into an explanation but doubled back. “I just think it would be helpful if you came along, unless you had somewhere else to investigate right away this morning that can’t wait.”

I didn’t want to admit this, but in truth I hadn’t figured out where to begin the day’s work yet. I realized talking some more about the case with Williamson might give me some idea. “I was going to look into some leads, but I can probably put them off for a bit,” I offered. My stomach growled. “Let’s figure the rest out over breakfast.” I gave him the address of the joint across from my window.

I must have been pretty close to Williamson’s school because he told me he’d see me in fifteen minutes. That meant I needed to put some haste on getting ready. I had a quick shower and shave, and changed into the only other suit I’d brought along. I exited the hotel through the main lobby. I got out the almost maxed-out credit card, and with fingers already numbing, scraped out a sightline the size of my head on the windshield of the Buick. I started it up and drove fifty feet to the restaurant. In the short time all this took, I caught a lyric from a down-tempo song that I couldn’t tell if it was a modern hip hop song or an old blues number. A husky voice growled suggestively, “*Fast ain’t always better than slow, you know,*”² and I briefly wondered if I was hearing things before shutting off the ignition and entering the restaurant. I was already chilled and welcomed the heat.

The cook, the waitress and I made three, a crowd. I sat down, and the waitress rambled over with a menu. I ordered black coffee, bacon, toast and a four-egg omelet with extra peppers to kill anything untoward that might be lurking in the grease. I snatched an abandoned section of a newspaper from the table next to me. I read:

“Alberta’s Minister of Education refers to self as slow learner.”³

Apparently while being grilled in the legislature by opposition member Harry Chase about the use of the multiple choice format for provincial standardized exams, in the ironic form of a multiple choice question, the minister had referred to himself as a “slow learner.” I guess he was using some sarcasm of his own to suggest his opponent’s questions were obscure. That was interesting. Williamson had said “slow learner” was hidden. In this case, it seemed right out in the open, more available, in fact than other things he might have called himself to make the same point. I’m not the most politically correct guy around, but even I realized that, for a variety of reasons, no sensible politician would have chosen to call himself “retarded” even if it was to insult his opponent.

Williamson showed up looking disheveled already. The bit of alertness I caught on the phone now seemed of the frazzled sort. A lock of his hair was sticking straight up and he’d gotten off track buttoning his shirt. He was off by one and the unsettled fabric stuck out like a fat finger in the middle of his chest. I made a point of telling him he looked awful. He said he’d been up late

² Buck 65 (2003, track 10)

³ News item was actually found in Alberta Teachers’ Association (2009)

again looking for slow learners in his computer. He ordered some sort of fruit cocktail and toast, the cheapest thing on the menu.

I had planned to tell Williamson about my interview with Colleen Birdseye and my subsequent discovery that I was still being followed, but I hadn't found anything I could put into words yet to describe what these experiences had taught me about where the slow learners were. And do-gooder that he was, I was worried if he got a sense I was in too much danger, he'd simply terminate the case. As I was looking for a less sensational aspect of the case to discuss with him a question came to me then, not about what Colleen Birdseye had told me, or about my experiences during and after the interview, but about the informant herself. She had said she was labeled, or maybe mislabeled, as a slow learner, but as an adult she seemed pretty unencumbered by any of this classification business. How many students had he met that had transcended the label as adults? I asked Williamson if he knew.

Instead of answering my question, he starting griping, again about the Certificate of Achievement some of his slow learners end up graduating with instead of the high school diploma, saying how unfair it was that his kids worked so hard but only got a token sort of high school completion credential, one that wouldn't get them very far after high school. How it placed them at a disadvantage even after school was over.

I'd heard this tune already and I challenged him, "So, what if some of your K & E students, slow learners ... whatever ... graduate with a different credential, get credits in different sorts of courses, what's the big deal? If they can't handle the normal program isn't that what should happen? Besides, I thought you told me if they did well at this level they could always move back up to the regular program?" I wanted to needle him a bit and hear how he'd react.

Williamson looked to be mustering his forces for another of his moralizing salvos, but possibly remembering how I'd reacted last time he tried this, he regrouped and asked a question instead. "You remember how I told you I used to do a lot of work with the high school registered apprenticeship programs?"

I nodded. Where was he going with this?

"Well, one time I was at the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Office. I needed some more apprenticeship applications for my students and with the office being so close to my school I found it easier to go there rather than ordering them to be mailed out. There was a kid in front of me in line with his mom, a young man I mean. Not a young man like a kid, a young *man*, like eighteen or nineteen."

I loved it when Williamson lost control of his labels. He took a breath and continued.

"Anyhow, I'd overheard as I was waiting behind them that the ... son had just graduated from high school, one of the vocational schools where they have K & E, the lower tier only of regular education classes and shop classes."

I realized from this description that was probably what Colleen Birdseye meant by “K & E school” when she said it. I had figured out what bothered me when she said it was that it hadn’t made sense to me that a set of classes with such low enrolment would necessitate a whole separate school. But if it got combined with classes from the next level up as well as a lot of shop classes....

Williamson continued. “During high school, this student had been indentured as an apprentice mechanic and worked a thousand hours in the trade. He was registering for his first eight weeks of technical or college training, to complete the first year of his apprenticeship. I could hear from the conversation that he started in K & E classes, but that he had upgraded during high school, and by the time he’d left high school he’d completed the regular high school diploma. His transcript showed he’d enrolled in and passed the right level of math to be automatically accepted, providing that he had been apprenticed, into the college part of his trades training.”

“So what was the problem?” I asked, still stymied as to the relevance of any of this.

“Well the guy at the desk said with K & E courses on his transcript and considering where he went to school he should really write the entrance exam. You know the exam that apprentices who don’t have the pre-requisite courses have to write.”

“What? Hadn’t he already passed the pre-requisite math course?” I was confused.

“This was the same question the ... apprentice asked. Yeah, but the guy at the counter said K & Es have a tough time with mechanics training and before wasting a bunch of time and money in the program he should just write the exam to see.”

“To see what?”

“To see if he could handle the coursework for the program he was enrolling in, I guess.”

“So, what happened?”

“The apprentice and his mom kept asking if he really had to write the exam or if he could just register in the courses. After listening for a while, I poked my nose in and, as quietly as I could because I still needed my forms, told the apprentice and his mom that I was sure he had all the prerequisites based on what I’d heard, and that they should insist on going ahead and enrolling in the college program, without writing the entrance exam.”

“Did the guy at the counter give in?”

“Apparently it was getting close to his break time or something, and this other worker told the guy she’d take over and processed the application. He kind of shrugged and went on break. After they were done, she handled my request too, and when I couldn’t help but comment on the strangeness of the situation that just played out in front of me she told me that her co-worker wasn’t wrong. Students from K & E, in their experience, do have a rough time she said.”

“Is that true?”

“It could be. I’ve heard trade school is much harder than people tend to think. Lots of people probably flunk out. Maybe this one would have had trouble too, but he had the pre-requisite.”

“Would you have done more if the guy at the counter dug his heels in?”

“I don’t know. I needed the help of the Apprenticeship Board for a lot of things at the time and it was important to me to have a healthy relationship with them. I had a lot of students in the apprenticeship program.”

The waitress came by to refill our coffee. Williamson held out his fruit bowl instead of his cup. He really was a mess. He mentioned a few more things I should consider about the case but nothing seemed to me to connect that well with what I’d experienced so far. He then glanced at his watch and saw it was time to leave for the in-service. Williamson picked up the tab, and I followed him in the Buick to the site where the in-service was being held. It was a short drive. I felt the first shot of warm air from the heater enter the frigid interior of the Buick just as I was turning the ignition off in the parking lot of our destination.

VI

I felt the welcome pain of the heat thawing my already frozen face and hands as we entered. The sessions were being held at an old elementary school that had been renovated into a center for consultants, psychologists, supervisors, and clerical staff. Peering in the rooms on the way in, I noticed all the little desks had been replaced by adult-sized tables suitable for the new occupants of the building, but when I stopped by the washroom I observed the toilets were still at a height meant for five-to-nine year olds. Various professionals milled about. Williamson and I made our way to the room the session was being held in. Williamson introduced me as his student teacher to the facilitator, a smiling blond wearing a dark skirt and light blue blazer. She glanced at me quizzically for a moment, I wondered if she thought I looked a little too old for that role or if something else was at work, but then she welcomed me in. I introduced myself as D.B. Hoffa, my mind suddenly unable to retrieve first or last names that didn’t belong to missing persons. There was a table of refreshments in the room and even though I just ate I was already hungry again. I blamed it on the cold and the beatings. I grabbed a Danish which was good and a cup of coffee which wasn’t. Williamson bypassed the table altogether and we both sat down. I felt overdressed amidst this clique of business casual professionals, but hoped that they would consider my suit, which wasn’t in great shape, but was the only suit in the room, evidence only of an overly eager student teacher.

The speaker who had greeted us now introduced herself to the larger group as a school psychologist and, after a few opening remarks, turned on a Power Point slide show presentation. She pleasantly went through the same sorts of information about slow learners and students with learning disabilities that I had been reading about the day before. I was reminded how learning disabled students were considered to have average to above average intelligence, with discrete impairments in areas unrelated to reasoning, and slow learners were thought to be globally low average in their intelligence. I was told that intelligence scores tended not to fluctuate much over

time and that learning disabilities, though not diagnosed through physical exams or blood tests, were genetic, neurobiological deficits. Williamson whispered to me. "I've taught two students whose IQs, when they were tested in elementary school, came out low average go on to take Advanced Placement physics in high school and do fine in the course. I have another student whose IQ was borderline when they tested her. She's just finished writing a fantasy novel." I considered this.

A teacher on the other side of the room, cozily dressed in a sweater that bore his school's logo, asked the speaker to elaborate on how large the gaps between the specific areas of weakness and global intelligence had to be to diagnose learning disability. She replied there was some leeway for professional judgment, but the general guideline for diagnosing a student with a learning disability was that the standardized measure of academic achievement in a skill such as math or reading should be at least two standard deviations from where their overall IQ was.⁴

The speaker then surprised us by admitting that slow learners might sometimes demonstrate higher scores than learning disabled students on parts of an IQ test. They might score, average or even higher than average in areas including processing speed and word reading but never, by definition, in reasoning. That was interesting. If I understood the concept of 'processing speed' correctly, that meant one could literally 'think fast' but still be a slow learner. I wondered how it got decided that some of the tasks on IQ tests were considered to be tests of reasoning while others were not. My mind drifted off to something I'd learned about a long time ago, the cult of reason ceremonies during the French Revolution during which reason itself was venerated in quasi-religious ritual, as a Supreme Being.⁵ That seemed to come out of nowhere, so when I heard myself think it I bit my tongue to make myself focus on the speaker.

The psychologist then shifted gears from explaining these categorical definitions to describing how she encountered them in diagnostic practice. She admitted that she was always relieved to be able to diagnose a learning disability rather than a slow learner profile in a student, because the former label was less demeaning and resulted in more funded services for the student.

Williamson was listening attentively and I could tell from his eyes he was formulating a question. He finally blurted out, not to me but to the speaker, "When a student tests as a slow learner, how do you communicate this data in a way that doesn't suggest they are of lesser value than other students, like less valued than so-called 'normal' students or students with learning disabilities but average intelligence?"

The speaker was confused. "Communicate ... to whom. To parents?"

Williamson said, "To everyone." Then he went on. "How do you prevent the statistical measure of IQ from becoming interpreted as a global statement about somebody's worth as a learner?"

The speaker still looked confused. I couldn't blame her. I wasn't sure I got it either. But she attempted an answer. "The IQ, it is what it is. I just try to communicate the scores as tactfully as I can. But if the parents you work with are upset by these reports, or if you or other teachers

⁴ American Psychological Association (2000, p. 51)

⁵ Doyle, (2002, p. 238)

don't know how to interpret them, you can always call us to try to explain them again." Williamson looked less than satisfied with that answer and leaned forward a bit in his chair, about to reply, but then thought better of it.

The speaker went on to explain strategies for supporting slow learners. These involved: giving concise, one-task-at-a-time instructions, trying to avoid passive learning activities such as copying notes from the board in favor of more active things like games and puzzles, trying to find ways that the subject areas of learning converged with the students' personal interests, finding what the students were good at and drawing on these competencies, and using a lot of repetition when teaching difficult concepts. I saw Williamson nodding along. I asked if he tried to use these strategies, and he said he tried to, not just with students who were supposed to be slow learners but with most of students he worked with. While this speaker had given an unsatisfying answer to his previous question, she was identifying many of the same strategies he said he used with these students.

While the speaker was answering another question, I glanced over a handout we'd been given entitled 'How to Support a Slow Learner.'⁶ Most of the strategies addressed what were thought to be gaps in slow learners' reasoning abilities, how to keep content as concrete as possible and, when abstraction was necessary, to make sure they were prepared and well-supported. This advice followed logically enough from the label but when I came to a section on reading, I was surprised to see in stark print the admission that many of the strategies that worked for students with reading disabilities would also work for slow learners. I briefly skimmed over these and then I elbowed Williamson in the chest, maybe a little too forcefully as he looked up with a pained expression. But then I showed him this passage and he glanced over it too and nodded his agreement again. "If so many of the strategies for working with struggling learners are so similar, at least for reading," I whispered, "why make such a big deal over the categorical differences?"⁷ A young, but stern looking teacher to our left shot us an angry glance, fed up with our talking during the presentation.

The speaker then went on to describe a few more assessment strategies. She said slow learners tended to do better with assessments that allowed them to affirm what they knew instead of assessments that 'tricked' them into exposing their deficiencies in knowledge. She said that they tended to struggle, for example, with math problems with irrelevant information, or "red herrings," I thought, packed into the questions. She said they tended to struggle with multiple choice testing when the distractors, or incorrect answers, were too close to the correct answer. She said that teachers always had to emphasize their strengths, to find the things they were actually good at, and to build on these things. She said that slow learners lacked confidence and were often embarrassed to ask for help. She then concluded by saying that due to long careers of school failure that slow learners are often highly discouraged, highly at-risk of dropping out⁸ and that they required care and attention despite the lack of resources the system made available to support them.

⁶ See Shaw (2010, pp. 12-16). This is the actual source for most of the advice in the fictional handout.

⁷ See Burgess (1990, p. 53) and Klassen, Neufeld, & Munro (2005). Both of these sources articulate the perspective Max has just come around to.

⁸ Shaw (2006, pp. 12-14)

The remainder of the session involved questions for the speaker and some sharing, between the various participants, of further strategies to support slow learners. I tried to listen, but found my mind wondering where this speaker's ideas fit in to this investigation, and where else I might look for slow learners that day. A little later, the speaker announced she was finished, and that there would be a fifteen-minute break, after which the topic for the session would change to something called Assistive Technology. There were murmurs of thanks and light applause. As the other attendees began to shuffle out towards the restrooms or over to the refreshments, I told Williamson that I thought he'd exaggerated his claims about the indifference slow learners faced in the province's educational system. There were a lot of concerned teachers at this session, I pointed out.

"There's over a hundred schools in this district," Williamson answered back, "and there are only sixteen teachers here today." I glanced at the large pile of still undistributed handouts in front of the speaker and at all the uneaten refreshments on the table. I took another Danish.

"Still," I asserted, "the speaker seemed to know a lot about this educational category and the supports these students need. Everyone who did show up seemed concerned about slow learners."

Williamson conceded this point with a shrug. "But did you hear her say anything about ways of actually changing things systemically to make things fairer for slow learners? Did you hear her response to my concern that the way the data is communicated sets the students up to be less valued?"

"The strategies that she was talking about do sound like efforts to make school fairer for slow learners. You said you use some of the same ones she described," I insisted. "Don't you think more slow learners would get through school if everyone knew more about the category and the supports these students need to be successful?"

"That's not good enough," Williamson insisted. "Something about the label still puts these kids at risk. Something about the interventions that flow from the label, even if some of them work, is contaminated. You heard her say she'd rather diagnose a learning disability than determine a student is a slow learner."

"What if slow learner *was* a disability label?" I asked. "You said that would lead to more services?"

"I said it might make it easier to access services," Williamson replied, "but I didn't think it was a good idea overall. Do you think these kids would really be that well served by a disability label that sets them even further apart, based on measured intelligence, from normal kids? The stigma of being quasi labelled is bad enough."

"Is it really that bad?" I asked. The room was beginning to quiet down again as the coffee break drew to a close. Another speaker had filed into the room and was plugging her laptop computer into the projector the previous speaker had used.

“Back when the slow learner program was called IOP or the Integrated Occupational Program, other kids and even some teachers used to sneer at it calling it ‘Idiots on Patrol’, or ‘On Parade’. And how often have you heard the words ‘retard’ or ‘retarded’ used as an insults?” Williamson asked tersely. I didn’t answer, but I reflected I heard this all the time and had even used those words in this way on occasion myself.

“Just asking,” I said, holding up my hands in a placating manner. Most of the attendees had returned to their seats by now and people were staring at us again.

“The argument is only academic anyway,” Williamson replied in a calmer, quieter voice. “The way I understand it, the overall IQ is one category too close to average for any new sort of intellectual disability label to apply. On the other hand, there is no way another category of learning disability could be opened up for slow learners as learning disabilities all depend on big discrepancies, and once the overall IQ starts to get a little lower it’s harder to find that big of a discrepancy.”

I remembered reading something about this categorical impossibility in the library, and hearing Williamson explain it to me now, with uncharacteristic clarity, seemed to exhaust the topic for the time being. I couldn’t think of anything else to talk to my client about, at least nothing worth continuing to disrupt the in-service over. While there was still a chance to make a getaway, I asked Williamson if he thought there would be much for me to detect in the session that was about to start. He shook his head. I whispered that I was going to check on some more leads and would call him that evening. He reminded me to be careful.

VII

Back in the Buick, I sat shivering in a frozen vinyl seat and considered the next steps to my investigation. I wasn’t exactly lying when I told Williamson I had leads to follow up; I just didn’t know what they were yet. He had told me about a couple of other K & E teachers he respected at a different school in the district, though he said he didn’t know them as well as he knew Colleen Birdseye. He’d talked to them for a while at a convention one time and didn’t even remember their names, only the school they came from. Still, he thought maybe I should talk to them. Colleen Birdseye had been an open, forthcoming informant from the first words we spoke. I think I struck her as a straight shooter which I can be when a case doesn’t require deception, but I doubted this level of trust would be typical of every informant. I needed to talk to these teachers as an insider.

I made a plan to pose as a substitute at a school other than Williamson’s, and try to engage some teachers in a conversation about K & E. I considered the looks I got at the in-service and thought maybe I needed some help to blend in better. To get in character I stopped at a department store and picked up some beige corduroy pants. I grabbed a pre-packaged frozen stir-fry dinner too. Consulting a city map, I realized the teachers Williamson had suggested I speak to worked at a school on the other side of town from his. It took a while to drive there. I had never worn corduroy in my life and between the car’s heater finally warming the interior and the texture of my pants, I felt like my legs were being squashed by a Panini press. I parked in a ‘visitor’ stall and made my way into the school. A bell schedule posted in the hall told me that, having skipped the

next session at the in-service, I was still on-time for the school's lunch break. Trying to affect the purposeful walk of a hungry substitute teacher, I made my way to the staff room. Glancing about as I walked, I noticed this school was newer than Williamson's and had a sort of open design. Through windows and open doors, I noticed the classrooms looked more like small conference rooms with students sitting together at tables, not desks. Most of the rooms I walked by had Smart Boards. I reached the staffroom and quickly went over to the mailboxes. I observed that "Mr. Bostwick's" box had accumulated several items over the past few days, including an as yet unmarked Social Studies test on ultranationalism during World War 2. I always liked history. I figured I would be Mr. Bostwick's sub for the day.

I started to microwave my stir-fry, made a trip to the staff restroom on the other side of the room and through a door, and returned to retrieve my heated meal. I also purchased a coffee for a dollar from a vending machine in the staff room. I listened to the conversations in the central part of the room as my coffee poured. Some of the groups of teachers at different tables were talking shop while other discourses involved familiar themes of sports, politics, and gossip. I couldn't hear anything about IOP, K & E or slow learners.

Along the back far corner of the room, I saw three teachers who had been too far away to eavesdrop on. One of them was a hipster dude I figured to be in his thirties. He was sporting horn-rimmed glasses, an impressive set of sideburns, khaki-colored skinny jeans and a retro golf shirt. He had a binder of resources that bore the handwritten label Social Studies 10-4. I remembered Colleen Birdseye using a similar course number when talking about teaching K & E, and I guessed that this man and his companions were likely the teachers Williamson had suggested I interview. I asked if I could join them at their table. They seemed surprised, but not unpleasantly, to have been noticed. One looked up and smiled, a young, tall dame with dark wavy hair and a pink blazer. She took a break from punching the buttons of her Smart Phone and gestured toward one of the cushioned chairs. The third teacher, an older fellow with a proud, senatorial head of silver hair, the formal effect toned down by a plaid woodsman's shirt and faded blue corduroys, asked who I was in for and I replied "Bostwick." They digested this news pretty easily. The hipster commented that he'd been out a couple of days and had a different sub yesterday and then things fell into a casual silence for a minute.

Pointing to the binder, I asked if they were all K & E teachers. The older guy said they all taught some K & E classes, but only part time. They each had only one or two K & E classes in their teaching schedules, the hipster clarified. The older guy offered that he and the hipster had taught K & E full time before being moved over to this school due to closure of their prior school, so it looked like two of the three of them used to work with slow learners on more like a full-time basis. The hipster said that the group of teachers assigned to K & E classes liked to hang out together once or twice a week and exchange stories about the students they had in common and help each other out with strategies. I said I'd been doing a lot of subbing for K & E teachers throughout the system lately.

"I hadn't heard good things about K & E," I said, between the small bites of the bland, over-sweetened stir-fry I was pretending to be enjoying, "but the students I've been working with have been pretty nice."

“If you treat them fairly and actually try to teach them it’s fine,” offered the teacher in the pink blazer.

“It’s too bad about the Certificate of Achievement,” I opined. “If these classes were more popular, I’m sure a lot more kids could benefit from them, but no one seems to want the Certificate as a completion credential.”

“Yeah, I used to work in Ontario,” offered the hipster. “It’s different there, more flexible. Being weaker in academic skills doesn’t cut you off of the diploma. In Ontario, students who require a lot of differentiation can get a diploma with only locally developed courses geared towards helping them. It’s not just the K & E kids who suffer in the province really, Alberta is focused on such a high standard. It’s great if your kid is in the elite, but it’s a shameful place to be for the mainstream population. Only a third of students go to university; what does Alberta education really do for the other two thirds?”

“Do you think we could ever get as flexible here as you say it was in Ontario?” I asked.

“Not as long as there are diploma exams,” asserted Silver Hair. “These kinds of kids aren’t pen and paper learners. The diploma exams only test their weaknesses, not their strengths.”

I didn’t know what diploma exams were but couldn’t admit to it. “It’s so unfair for the K & E students,” I echoed, hoping to learn more.

Silver Hair nodded in agreement and said, “Even if they manage to succeed in Math and Science where the next tier up from K & E has no diploma exam either, they can’t get out of high school with a diploma without having to sit for three hours through two English exams and two Social exams worth half their marks in these classes.”⁹

From the context I took these exams to be some sort of highly weighted high stakes exit / completion exams for the province’s high school students.

“Three hours of assessment Hell,” I remarked, hoping this was apt enough to solicit further commentary.

“I don’t know what’s worse,” the hipster said, taking the bait. “The reading challenges, not to mention the stamina challenges, posed by the multiple choice components, or having to perform multiple written responses, with no real chance to collaborate or revise.”¹⁰

⁹ See Alberta Education (2015, p. 2). In a policy change implemented Sep. 1, 2015, after the completion of this novelization, Alberta Education lowered the weighting of diploma exams to 30% of student’s final grades in their courses. This change seems likely to benefit students labelled as slow learners, so I am mentioning it in the interest of fairness. To maintain the integrity of the narrative and the phenomena it describes, however, I have not incorporated this or any changes of policy made after the initial release of this work, at the end of April, 2015, in the main story.

¹⁰ See Alberta Education (2013, pp. 1-8). To elaborate on what Max has pieced together, for Alberta’s grade 12 students on the high school diploma track there are mandatory diploma examinations weighted (at the time this was written) at 50% of a student’s course grade in the following Grade 12 courses:

“Whether or not we recommend K & E often hinges on if we think the student will eventually be able to handle a diploma exam,” added the girl in the pink blazer. “And a lot of the K & E students don’t even qualify for accommodations on them.”

Even though I thought I’d already heard the answer from Colleen Birdseye, for the sake of verification I asked her why many K & E students didn’t qualify for accommodations. Her explanation echoed what I’d heard from the psychologist earlier that day; it sounded like a reasonable explanation of another unreasonable policy regarding slow learners. I still found this concept of accommodation weird. I’d always associated the word with shelter. Like the dingy hotels, including the present, that I occupied while out on cases. It sounded like slow learners were being denied shelter in a way.

“Doing better on a test with an audio CD or a scribe should be seen as a learning modality, not a disability,” asserted the hipster.¹¹

“I don’t know about that,” I responded, playing devil’s advocate. “If we just start letting everyone do tests and assignments by talking and listening wouldn’t that undermine reading and writing. We’re supposed to be all about literacy, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, reading and writing is important. We obviously need to teach those skills,” acknowledged Pink Blazer, “but they are also ubiquitous. They shouldn’t be imposed so exclusively that a K & E kid feels like ... he’s burning under a thousand hot suns every time he walks into the school,” she concluded poetically.

“Back when schools were more concerned about K & E students I was asked do an in-service for the staff on the needs of this population of students,” Silver Hair said. There was that ‘in-service word’ again. I silently reflected that this profession must have a lot of screwed up individuals in it if they all needed constant retraining, as he continued with his story. “At the in-service, I asked

Biology 30, Chemistry 30, English Language Arts 30–1, English Language Arts 30–2, Français 30–1, French Language Arts 30–1, Mathematics 30–1, Mathematics 30–2, Physics 30, Science 30, Social Studies 30–1, and Social Studies 30–2. While there are tiers of Math and Science on the high school diploma track that do not require completion of diploma exams, to receive a high school diploma students are required to write diploma exams in either English Language Arts 30–1 or English Language Arts 30–2 and either Social Studies 30–1 or Social Studies 30–2. The English and Social Studies examinations are both divided into multiple choice and written response parts.

¹¹ See Alberta Education (2013). Unlike this informant, Alberta Education takes a very cautious approach to providing accommodation on standardized testing, seeing their potential over-use as a threat to the validity of the assessments. “The goal of accommodation is not to optimize performance but to level the playing field by removing obstacles to performance that are inequitable. Consequently, accommodations are neither intended nor permitted to: alter the nature of the construct being assessed by an exam, provide unfair advantage to students with disabilities or medical conditions over students taking examinations under regular standardized conditions, or compensate for knowledge or skill that the student has not attained” (p. 12).

everyone to write down what their weakest commonly used skill in life was. You know how staff are at these things.”

I didn't but rolled my eyes in feigned solidarity.

“Teachers are often the least cooperative students,” he continued, “but I didn't go on until I saw everyone had actually done it. Then I told them to imagine for the next eighty-five minutes everything we did would involve that skill. It was only hypothetical of course, but you could have cut the tension in the room with a knife.”

We all chewed on that, and our lunches for a while. Finally, I broke the silence. “I've only been doing some subbing in K & E,” I asserted, “I'm not really a K & E teacher, but do you really think it's that bad? Every high school I've worked at has these amazing shop classes. Seems like there's a lot of hands-on learning.”

“Yes and no,” Pink Blazer said. “In our CTS classes in mechanics, as an example, students are asked to complete three thick booklets and a written safety test before they even get to touch anything on the car.¹² For many K & E students, this turns them off, they lose all motivation. This is all backwards. They should get the hands-on learning first and if they really need to do some of the written theory at least do it only after they've actually had the hands-on experience. You know, to help them make sense of it.”

“So,” I thought, “*even the classes these overly concrete learners are supposed to be able to excel at are often inaccessible for them.*” I tried, instead to fish out more optimistic sentiment in the conversation. “At least you have your actual K & E core classes to give them some practical chances for concrete learning in these areas.”

“We had more chances when it was IOP,” the older gentlemen informed me. “The curricula for English, Math, Social and Science were all geared towards giving the kids a more practical experience. They were shorter than the classes that were the next level up too. The -4 K & E classes are now the same length of time as the next level up and in terms of content are pretty much a watered down version of the -2 classes, which are themselves a watered down version of the -1 classes.”

“Why did it change?” I asked.

A lot of schools were saying IOP was too different to offer at their facilities. So the curriculum writers were trying to align it better with the so-called regular program, and make it easier for schools to timetable it and for students to schedule it along with their non IOP classes, but they ended up nearly killing it.” He sighed as he uttered this last statement.

“I don't get,” I pressed. “How did aligning the classes better with the diploma route nearly kill K & E?” Here was another mystery to solve.

¹² See Alberta Education (2010). This acronym stands for Career and Technology studies classes which include “shop” or industrial arts classes in welding, carpentry, mechanics, cooking and cosmetology, as well as classes in legal studies, management and marketing, accounting, and computing.

Silver Hair began to explain, “Well, even if not all schools were embracing IOP, some of the schools that did were using the emphasis of the classes and format of the program to do some really innovative things. I heard about one school program at the time that routinely engaged its IOP students in building houses, as a part of their IOP classes.”

That sounded pretty exciting. I made a note to try to follow up on it. Silver Hair continued, “Before I started working in this high school, I was at a vocational school. We weren’t quite as ambitious as the house-building school, but things went pretty well. In the core area we had IOP classes and the lower academic tier of classes; sometimes we combined the two levels in the same classroom. It had great labs, and shop teachers who really focused on hands-on learning.” His face transformed into a wistful expression as he explained this last bit.

The hipster jumped in with his own story, “Where I used to teach we just had a large IOP population in a regular school. We often relied on off-campus education - work experience placements with community employers - to get the kids through the vocational requirements for their IOP certificates. By the time most of our kids reached grade twelve, they’d worked at several school-arranged jobs and they’d learned how to communicate with employers, how to conduct themselves in a place of business, how to work hard, and so on. One of the non-IOP teachers in the school said he could always tell who my kids were, not because their skills were weak but because they were so much more polite than the other students. At least they graduated ready to function on a job; now they leave knowing no more about this than any of the other students do. They gutted the program.”

“Isn’t this all a bit nostalgic?” I challenged. “Things couldn’t have been going that well or they wouldn’t have changed the program. Besides, isn’t education supposed to be getting more inclusive?”

“Inclusion into what?”¹³ The hipster spoke up. “If all inclusion means is putting K & E students back into some of the same rigid classrooms they’ve struggled in throughout, without offering additional support, they’d be better off in separate classes that are at least designed to meet their needs.”

“Inclusion has meant taking things away for K & E kids, not putting things in,” Silver Hair agreed. “Our district’s interpretation of inclusion has meant shutting down the vocational settings where K & E was being offered. Inclusion was seen as you don’t need discrete schools. Maybe there were problems with the previous model but no one in this district has proposed a meaningful alternative, schools were just given another teacher or two and a bunch of K & E kids and told to figure it out. Once again, the actual K & E students were the afterthought, or afterbirth.”

I found this to be a rather harsh metaphor and expected his companions to shudder or appear offended in some way, but they all calmly accepted the truth of the statement. This was all rather depressing. I could see why no one else was sitting with these three. Then, once I got over the

¹³ Allan (2008, p. 48)

shock of the metaphor, the reality he described set in and I blurted out, “But how? How can a district be so careless with such a vulnerable category of students?”

They all looked at me quizzically and I thought I’d blown my cover with such a naïve question.

“You haven’t worked in special programs much, have you? I mean before the subbing gigs in K & E?” asked the teacher in the pink blazer. I don’t think she had any idea how completely she was rescuing me with that remark. I was so grateful I considered proposing marriage.

“No, I’m just starting to learn my way around that corner of education.” I thought I might as well admit to this, but tried to follow up with some kind of observation to show I wasn’t completely out to lunch. “But from what I’ve seen in the little experience I have with it, I mean from the classes I’ve been in, it seems that schools don’t always follow the criteria for K & E real closely either. I’ve heard that K & E is supposed to be for slow learners, you know, behind in school, low average IQ and so on. It seems more like it’s often used for anyone who doesn’t fit into the regular program.”

“It’s not a big surprise schools have to look for alternatives for a variety of students. The regular program can be pretty brutal, curricularly. It leaves a lot of complex learners out in the cold. Diploma exams loom large over the classroom experience, governing not only what is taught but how it’s taught,” she explained.

“Why is it a bad thing that classroom teachers model most of their assessments on diploma exams?” I asked, now embracing a naïve persona.

“They don’t test a whole range of skills, or knowledge,” she asserted. “Take English Language Arts. The program of studies indicates students should be taught and assessed on their ability to do process-oriented writing, produce multiple drafts, restructure first draft writing, and shape texts according to audience and purpose.”

“Uh-huh,” I replied. I felt like she was lecturing us, but thought I’d bear with her to see where it went.

“Well, where is the opportunity to do these things on a diploma exam, or on a time-limited in-class essay that is modeled after the diploma exam? These skills from the program of studies are basically bypassed while skills like writing under pressure, coming up with ideas quickly, and producing a polished first draft, that aren’t even on the program of studies get added as *the* major skills being assessed.”¹⁴

“Sounds like a game show,” I remarked. “Some kind of beat the clock thing.”

“Yeah, a sick, high stakes game show, with mandatory participation.” Pink Blazer agreed. “Kind of like in that movie *The Hunger Games*.¹⁵ Teaching to the test sometimes is bad enough, but this

¹⁴ See Slomp (2008)

¹⁵ Williamson & Paul (2012, p. 6)

literally turns teaching into the test. The course becomes a one hundred twenty-five hour diploma exam.”

“More like three hundred and seventy-five,” Silver Hair suggested. “The grade ten and eleven courses pretty much work this way too, even though the diploma exam isn’t until grade twelve. You know, just to keep it consistent, they say.”

“Isn’t that overstating things a bit,” I asked, winning a shrug of concession from the teacher in the pink blazer. “Besides,” I added, hoping I had a line of argument I’d picked up from in the news in my own country right, “don’t these tests also hold schools accountable for teaching students the curriculum,¹⁶ for giving students reasonable marks, and so on. Don’t they help it all from becoming a big free-for-all?”

“You’re not expressing a very high opinion of the work we do if you think that’s what would happen without these tests,” scolded Silver Hair.

Chastened, I changed the topic, reframing the statistic I’d read about low provincial enrolment in K & E as a personal observation and follow-up question. “K & E numbers are pretty low at the schools I’ve been working at. Are they low here too?”

“I only have five students in my K & E social class next period,” Pink Blazer confirmed. “I can’t see any administrator putting up with numbers that low for very long. They’ll probably just dump the K & Es in with the lowest tier of the high school diploma level class, the -2s, next year and have me teach that, just to make everyone else’s numbers a little lower.”

“Oh? Will that make things even worse for slow learners?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, “Maybe.” I was about to ask her to elaborate when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a tall, broad-shouldered, bearded man, legs so thick his brown corduroys rubbed together as he walked, enter the staff room. He went over to the mailbox labeled Bostwick, retrieved the contents, sat at an empty table in the far corner from where the K & E teachers and I were sitting, and began to go through them. My lunch companions were not positioned as well as I was for viewing the entrance to the staff room and, luckily, did not notice him. Still, I thought I was pressing my luck remaining in the room any longer. I thanked my ‘colleagues’ for the company and made my way out of the staff room.

VIII

I returned to the foyer, where I observed an intramural floor hockey game through the window of the gymnasium doors. I wondered if any slow learners were playing. The stands were filled with students watching the game. A team dressed in long socks, half shirts and shorts in ironic homage to 1980s fitness wear opposed a team in coveralls with the team name ‘The Mechanics’ written on their backs in felt pen. Though the uniforms were light hearted, the game was contested with a scrappy intensity that made me tired just watching. One of ‘The Mechanics’ caught my eye as he waltzed with liquid grace through three hacking and slashing opponents and popped

¹⁶ Stewart (2004, p. 185)

the ball into the upper left corner of the net before the goal tender could even move. His game made everyone else look slow; I reflected if I was playing on the other team, I'd try to inflict a well-placed elbow to slow him down.

This game ended in favor of 'The Mechanics', and the 1980s fitness stars left the court to be replaced by a group of students dressed as superheroes. As they warmed up, I realized at least a couple had Down Syndrome and it dawned on me that this whole team might be made up of students with moderate intellectual disabilities, maybe from one of the school's programs. The game began. 'The Superheroes' definitely knew how to play but were not the floor hockey equals of most of 'The Mechanics', least of all the graceful forward I had noticed earlier. Whereas the game before was hotly contested – anyone who had the ball could count on only a split second before his opponents would be all over him – in this game. 'The Superheroes' were given a little more space, a little more room to play. Just enough to keep it a playable game. With all the aggressive sorting of students I'd been reading about it was nice to see a game that included everyone. Still I was left wondering if 'The Superheroes' would still have ended up on the same team if they weren't all in the same special education program? Or, would many have found their ways on to other teams, having been invited by their friends from their various classes?

Looking back to the foyer traffic I saw, out of the corner of my eye, the teacher in the pink blazer walking towards me and it occurred to me that, even though it was risky, that this might be a good opportunity to find some actual slow learners. She had said she had a K & E social class scheduled for next period. I told her that Bostwick (who I prayed she had not noticed in the staffroom) had a spare and the office had not been able to find any other classes for me to assist with yet. I offered to teach her class. She considered for a moment and then gratefully accepted. She told me she had her class working on an ultranationalism assignment, but not to worry if we didn't get very far as they often spent a long time just talking about the content, and sometimes things only vaguely related, instead of doing written work. She told me if I had any background knowledge or experiences with the lesson to feel free to talk about them – her kids loved stories.

Weaving in and out of the traffic of a couple thousand students en route to class, I followed her down the hall and up some stairs to the classroom. We entered a large room with new tables and chairs and old motivational posters featuring Charlie Brown, Garfield, photographs of orangutans, and trite advice. Apologizing for the room's lack of personality, she told me that due to her varied schedule in the school she taught in different classrooms most of the day she wasn't allowed to change the class decorations. A pair of students entered the room, then another student, and then the last student. The last one deposited a pungent, grease-stained paper bag bearing the label Burgeropolis on it in the classroom trash can on the way in. Every student said hello to us as they entered, the first three rather confidently, the last student quite shyly.

Their teacher quickly ran through the names for me. She said all but one of the students were present. She explained that I would be substitute teaching the class for her and told them to keep working on the ultranationalism assignment. After she left, I told the students that before they continued with the assignment I, as a new substitute, would appreciate a chance to discuss K & E with them. I told them that this would help me in my career as a substitute. Wanting to begin on a positive note, I asked "So what do you like about being in K & E classes?"

A girl with long black hair and a *Hello Kitty* shirt, introduced to me as Hope, was the first to respond. “Just, all the nice teachers, and how they help you all.” I looked behind myself to see if her regular teacher had come back in the room and she was saying that for her benefit, but no - it was a genuine statement. I chided myself for my own cynicism.

Another student, the bearer of the Burgeropolis bag, jumped in. He was a thin, sandy haired boy by the name of David who looked young for grade eleven. He more or less repeated what the girl had said.

I acknowledged these observations and moved on to asking how many K & E students attended their school, but none of them had any idea. Observing that this current class was pretty small, I asked if all of their K & E classes were like this or, remembering what their teacher had said about blended classes if there were some of those running too. I figured maybe some classes in other disciplines had already been blended. A couple of the students, at the same time, indicated they were in a blended science class. It combined students from the less academic tier of high school diploma level science with a handful of students taking science at the K & E level. I asked how many students were in that class and they indicated that it was around twenty-five.

“What is that like?” I inquired, thinking someone might note that it was harder to get help in the larger class.

“It was okay. Like, everybody did what they were supposed to do. Everybody worked. We could all work together,” replied Arturo, a young man with brown eyes, a round face, and an accent that I thought I recognized as Mexican.

“I liked the pace in the blended class,” David noted. “In this social class it took us two months of lessons just to be ready for the first chapter of the text book. In science there was usually a chapter a week with a test after every single week.”

I considered this for a minute and then asked, “Seeing as how you are in a class that has two different levels of science, have you had the chance to notice how often you are given different tasks or assignments than the other students?”

“They don’t really do anything different,” she asserted. “They treat you, like, the same as everybody else, and that’s kinda what I liked about it. No one knew I was in ES1, and that’s, like, um ... they asked me, and they were like... there was this one kid, and she asked me if I was in ES1 ... and I was like, ‘yeah’, and she goes, ‘I never actually knew you were, you were keeping up so well’.”

She had mentioned ES1, not K & E. I made a mental note to double check what ES1 meant, but I had a line of questioning to keep pursuing first. “Wow. That’s great,” I remarked, “but, I mean the work in the science class would be too hard at the higher level for some of you, right? Or you’d be getting higher level credits, not K & E level credits. How come you’re not getting higher level credits instead of K & E credits then?” I didn’t like to hear myself using the words ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ with these kids but I couldn’t remember all the damn numbers in the sequence and I needed some handle to get my point across.

“Because we would be doing ...” she began, but then ran out of steam. “That’s actually a really good question, and I’m really not sure about that one. You’d have to maybe ask our teacher.”

“Why are we getting K & E and not high school diploma level Science?” Arturo interjected, looking to clarify my question. At least he knew what to call the two different levels.

“Yeah, yeah!” I could barely contain my excitement.

“Because,” he explained, “K & E is for, like ... is the level where it’s ... they give you easier work, and in the high school diploma stream, you get to do what everybody else is doing, while in the K & E stream, you just ... just do the half of the work that the other people are doing.”

“I never noticed that, like ... I would work with David all the time,” Hope said. “Me and David would have the same work. So I never really thought about it, it could have been true, but I never thought about it.”

“Maybe,” I speculated, “your teacher was just so smooth doing it that you never really felt that different. You were getting handed something different, but you just didn’t notice?”

“That’s probably it,” she said and then instead of being disturbed by this possibility she smiled, “It’s just ... you do the work and they see how you do, and then see what credits you get. Then they kinda know, and then they judge about not having you answer certain questions, and how neat is that?”

I wasn’t sure if it was neat or not so I was glad her question sounded rhetorical. I observed that, by and large, what I was experiencing so far was a group of positive, optimistic students who seemed appreciative of the programming they were receiving. This did not square with Williamson’s statements that slow learners were in danger, or Colleen Birdseye’s concerns, or those of the three teachers from this very school I’d been talking to minutes ago in the staffroom. Why? Remembering Colleen Birdseye’s story of being shunted so haphazardly all over the educational chessboard during her school career, I thought I could get a better sense of the dangers these students had traversed, and maybe were still experiencing, if I asked a little about their backgrounds. I thought I’d begin with the student who’d said nothing so far. He was a tall and gangly red-haired student. “Uhh, I’m so bad with names,” I lied looking to open him up with a simple question before I asked him for his story, “and there’s only four of you I should know this by now ... what’s your name again?”

“Jonah,” he replied.

“Jonah. How did you end up in K & E Social Studies?”

“I ... have really no idea,” he answered. I could see he was going to be a tough nut to crack.

“No?” I pressed. “Well, at some point somebody must have told you what was going on with the level of classes you were going to take and maybe even asked you how you felt about it?”

“It’s all pretty, uh ...” Jonah began before shifting to a more summative statement. “I feel pretty uncomfortable with this class.”

“You’re uncomfortable with being placed in K & E Social?” I tried to clarify.

“Yeah ...” he agreed.

“Okay. Why’s that?” I asked.

“Just because there’s not a lot of people and it’s just not as, uh, fun as the other classes I’ve taken,” Jonah answered vaguely.

Understanding that this student was in grade eleven, I tried to clarify what other classes he might be referring to by going back to his earlier educational experiences. To get a better sense of this, I asked, “When you were in grade nine, were you just in regular ed. or were you already in K & E?”

“Neither,” he replied. “I was in a special class, ES1.”

It dawned on me that this ES1 was probably a class that was seen as academically lower than K & E, maybe a class for students with intellectual disabilities. Three out of four of these students described coming from ES1. No wonder some of these kids like being in K & E, I thought, they see it as moving up in the educational world.

Just as I was thinking this, however, Arturo began a lengthy story indicating that he was not happy to have been placed in either ES1 or K & E.

“I used to live in Mexico,” he began, “and I did kindergarten and grade one down there. But then they put me down to kindergarten here, and because I didn’t know the classes, I didn’t know the language, uh ... the teachers didn’t want to struggle with me in teaching me the language and they just put me in ES1 for the ES1 teachers to struggle with me. And I guess that was unfair, because it, like ... from grade three to six, I was, like, *per se*...”

I was struck by his use of a Latin expression I associated more with contracts and lawsuits than high school students but thought maybe he’d heard it one day and it tickled his fancy, maybe even became a sort of earworm for him. Arturo continued.

“I was put back from all the students, and then, at the end of grade six, I write this really, really strong letter to the school saying that I didn’t ... that I strongly disagreed for me being in this program, because I ... I knew I could do better, and I could succeed in the normal stream, and then they changed me. But then, the next year, when I arrived to normal grade seven, I don’t know anything because when I left grade six, in the ES1 classroom I was doing grade four material. And the next three years they pushed me up to grade seven, eight and nine, and I didn’t know where I was going or what I was doing, because I didn’t have grade five and six. And then

in high school, because I can't take the -1 level courses, I will not be able to go to university because of this."

I felt myself questioning the accuracy of some of his perceptions. From what I could tell from my conversations there was ES1, which was probably a level of special education for students with mild intellectual disabilities, then K & E above that for slower learners, then a more general high school diploma stream for kids who could achieve at normal levels but were not particularly strong in those subjects, and lastly a more academic, university-bound stream. It seemed somewhat outrageous for this student who had been placed in ES1 to be saying that he'd been unfairly kept out of the highest level of courses due to these experiences in early schooling. Then I remembered Colleen Birdseye's story. Maybe I didn't have any business questioning any of this. "So, it sounds," I summarized, "like you think that some of that was unfair, like you're not happy with how you were treated in some of those earlier grades, right?"

"Yeah," Arturo agreed, "because I knew I ... that I can do more, and I have more energy, and I have more effort and I can do extra stuff that just ... when I was in the ES1 program, we used to repeat the same material. They were just stalling in the same material. And, I guess I didn't feel like we were ... per se ... advancing in the program, and I was just stalled. And now I'm stuck in K & E 20-4, when I could have been in 20-1 and been able to have the courses for university. But now, because of this, I'll have to go to college because of these certain train of events."

From what I could tell from my investigation so far, Arturo had overestimated the value of the K & E Certificate as a school leaving credential and was actually in even worse shape than he thought. He would qualify for very few post-secondary pathways, college or university, unless he was able to move above K & E, but I didn't say this. Just then I heard Mr. Bostwick being paged to the office. I wondered if any of the people I'd spoken to, including the teacher whose class I was presently 'teaching' heard that announcement. How much longer would I be able to get away with this ruse? I decided I better cut to the chase.

"Uh, have you guys heard the term 'slow learner' before? They sometimes use that in the same kind of, uh, student description as K & E. What do you know about that word, or those terms?" This felt to me like a rather abrupt shift but the students seemed to take it in stride.

Arturo began, "Slow learner is ... well, a slow learner basically is that you don't learn as fast as the other students, and you need a little bit of help for you to be able to succeed. I guess, I have been a slow learner and what happened with me is that I was a slow learner, and the school didn't want to struggle with me," he repeated from his previous reply, "so they just put me in ES1 because they thought I had a 'problem', that I didn't learn because I didn't learn as fast as the other ... normal students. But I was ... I could have ... just stayed in the same level, because I wasn't that behind."

I asked another student, Hope, the cheerful and talkative girl who had answered many of my earlier questions. "Have you heard the, uh, expression 'slow learner' before?"

"I have," she replied. "My teachers, when I was back in grade, like ... half of grade three to four, they called me a slow learner and I asked, 'What does that mean?' and they told me, 'you need a

lot of time on projects, and you need a lot of time on booklets and paperwork, and you need more time on PowerPoints and copying down.’ That’s what I always think it is.”

“I’m a slow learner too when it comes to notes,” David said. “In my health class I was always a little bit slow, and then if I did try to go faster I started to become messy. Like, I kept trying to copy it down, and then I’d go way too fast and miss parts. My health teacher, he said he would print out the notes so I wouldn’t have to copy them down. He goes incredibly fast. I don’t know how the rest of the class can keep up either. It’s like five seconds on one page and then he flips over to the next page.”

This wasn’t the sort of ‘slow’ I thought educators and psychologists were talking about when they said ‘slow learner’. ‘Slow’ was shorthand for lower IQ I thought. Whatever the abstract concept of intelligence was supposed to mean, and however limited and limiting this concept was when reduced to a single number, I thought it was still a lot more complicated than how fast a kid could copy off the board. At least I thought it was supposed to be. Is this what they thought ‘slow learner’ meant? Had someone actually told them this was what it meant?

“I’m far-sighted too,” Hope broke in interrupting my thoughts, “I can’t see far. And then, like, my glasses are at my mom’s house...”

“You mean near-sighted, because far-sighted is that you *can* see far,” Arturo corrected.

“One of the two, yeah,” she replied, unconcerned. “And, um ... so, my glasses are at my mom’s, so I haven’t had my glasses for two weeks.”

I was considering if not being able to see the board made a student a slow learner too, when David, the skinny kid at the back, broke in again.

“Yeah. I’ve heard that I am a slow learner. I need lots of help with my work, and everything I do. I did curling, and my friend’s dad was the instructor. He’s tried to teach me how to keep my foot from going way up there, but it still kept going up there, so I needed a lot of help with that.”

I considered the arcane sport of rocks and brooms he’d just mentioned, one I was only familiar with from a brief viewing of it on television during a lonely night a long time ago when the Winter Olympics were the only thing on television. “*If you have to be a slow learner at anything,*” I thought to myself, “*I guess being a slow learner at curling isn’t so bad.*” Instead of offering this evaluation, in case the kid *did* think it was a big deal, I just kept quiet.

“I took dance last semester,” Hope remarked, “and my teacher was impressed on how fastly I picked up the moves. That was my first time ever taking dance.”

“I’m definitely not a slow learner at basketball,” Arturo offered.

Jonah, who had been sitting silently ever since he’d trailed off telling the story of his placement in ES 1 and Arturo had taken over with his own story, suddenly stood up and produced from his backpack three bowling pins. He began to expertly juggle them. I supposed I should say some-

thing about this interruption in routine, but then I remembered I was only impersonating a teacher and didn't really care whether they did their work or performed circus acts, so I just watched him for a while.

"That's fantastic," I remarked when he was done. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

"He just saw it on You Tube one day," David said, speaking for Jonah. "We watched it together at lunch time. That night he took some balls and figured it out in about five minutes, he showed us the next day. Then he bought some bowling pins and he's been putting on these shows for us ever since."

Jonah smiled and sat down. I've never been able to juggle anything, balls, bowling pins, relationships, money. I didn't know whether I wanted to hug him, ask him how he did it, or break his arms. I reflected on what I'd heard from the kids so far, and felt none the wiser about where the slow learners went. These students were in a class for slow learners. Most of them had even come from a program for students who were supposed to be intellectually weaker than slow learners. But many of the things they said they were slow learners at didn't really seem that central to learning. Furthermore, they often gave thoughtful, articulate answers to my questions and had showed me a few things they definitely weren't slow learners at. Everywhere I investigated, this concept of slow learner appeared for a second, and then pulled a vanishing trick. I was getting tired of this act.

I'd heard all I could process from these students. I couldn't think of any more questions to ask. Hopefully I'd be able to figure out a way to see them again if I came up with some more. They were paging Bostwick again. I needed to make a getaway. With hunched posture and a little moaning, I began to simulate a sudden onset gastric ailment. The students began to look concerned. I told them I suddenly wasn't feeling well. Then I phoned the staff room where the teacher who I'd volunteered to relieve for the period was working, and let her know I'd taken ill suddenly and was leaving. Abandoning the class that had shown me such goodwill with their answers to my questions, I began a hasty exit. In the downstairs hallway, I passed a classroom with an open door and a large man pointing to a map of 1944 Europe on a Smart Board; it was Bostwick. As I walked straight ahead past his class, I caught him regarding me curiously before resuming his lecture. Since that was all he did, I surmised Bostwick had not yet heard about his strange, unsolicited substitute, and I felt grateful that there wasn't more interdepartmental collaboration going on in this particular high school.

I pulled out of the school parking lot, passing the Burgeropolis restaurant across the road at a little strip mall I hadn't paid much attention to on the way in. Noticing the Buick was running low on fuel, I stopped at a gas station a few blocks down and filled it up, and then changed out of the corduroys in the station's dirty bathroom. As the itching in my legs subsided, I felt more myself again, but I also reflected that for a while there, when the kids and I really fell into conversation, I hadn't felt like an imposter at all.

IX

I decided to take a drive. I had nowhere to be, but it would give me something to do with my hands while I reviewed the recent developments in the case. Reflecting on my earlier realization that I wasn't sure if I'd actually met any slow learners in the class for slow learners, I also remembered that Arturo had attributed his academic troubles to language difficulties. If he was right about being misplaced in ES1 and K & E over language learning issues this made the application of the slow learner label doubly suspicious. This was indeed an elusive category of students I was looking for.

The neon sign of a greasy spoon restaurant glowed through the dirty windshield of my car. Though I'd already consumed two meals and a snack in five hours, I realized I was hungry again. My body had been constantly craving things to burn for warmth since I'd arrived in this city, and the stir-fry hadn't been very substantial. I pulled into the restaurant and walked from my car to the entrance, bracing myself against the sudden insult of a harsh wind. I sat down, and the waitress rambled over to pour some coffee for me and gave me a menu. Her hair hung in tired spirals and she smelled of potatoes and nicotine. I ordered a clubhouse sandwich and, maybe because this restaurant was almost as empty as the one I'd been to in the morning, received my food right away. There were no stacks of newspapers at this joint to entertain me as I ate but that was okay, I had my thoughts about the case to read.

I wondered if I was looking too closely at all of this, if I needed a longer view to find slow learners.¹⁷ Despite my best efforts to find them by talking to teachers and students I had yet to find one. Instead of using the category as a lens to see students who matched the description, maybe I needed to study the process by which the school system had learned to find slow learning students. How long had it been finding slow learners for? I thought about these Knowledge and Employability classes, and the Integrated Occupational Classes that preceded them. I wondered what came before IOP? I wondered if, at least since public education started, there had always been some sort of different schooling for students seen as slower. Did they always sort students into these programs by IQ? How did this all come about? Did the alternate schooling paths for slow learners always have this vocational emphasis? What called out to me just then, was the history of all of this.

I felt, then, the heat of being observed and, using a clean part of my spoon as a mirror, saw that someone had slipped into a booth a few tables behind mine and was watching me. Bending to scratch my ankle, I stole a longer glance using my seasoned peripheral vision. He wore a grey suit with creases so sharp you could shave with them and was alternating between writing in a clipboard and measuring me with unblinking, steely eyes. Everything about this guy spoke of bureaucratic conspiracy. I took a slow breath to contain my excitement. This was the break I was waiting for. I needed to turn the tables on him; tail him, and find out who he was working for. I thought if I dialed up the heat in this restaurant and upset his sense of an orderly stakeout, he might want to leave to avoid attention. I could then follow him back to wherever he came from. When my waitress returned to refill my coffee, I began to berate her about the quality of the meal, the staleness of the coffee, the rubbery bacon, the soggy toast, and the dirty table. I

¹⁷ See Heidegger (1927/1962) "The Being of the entities encountered environmentally as closest to us remains concealed" (p. 131).

demanded to see a manager. I pounded the table. The cook came out from behind the grill and began to advance towards the table. His greasy t-shirt didn't succeed in covering a large stomach or enormous meaty arms, each one the size of a ham. The bemused expression he wore suggested there was nothing he'd like more than to brace me between himself and the table with his giant gut while he drummed on my head. My observer got up and skittered out of the restaurant and, a half beat later so did I, throwing down enough cash to pay for the meal plus a generous tip and a shouted apology to the bewildered staff.

I rushed to my car, looking to follow my pursuer. He had used his head start well and was already speeding out of the parking lot in a nondescript grey van. I had to catch up or I'd lose him. In my haste, I was only vaguely struck by the novelty of a black Peugeot driving towards me. Then I was struck more intensely as it lurched into a sharp arc over the restaurant sidewalk and clipped me just below the hip. I fell to the ground clutching my thigh, the nerves in my leg a gang of jumping monkeys. Two men scrambled out of the car to see if I was okay. Under normal circumstances, an assault such as this would bring out the darkness in me and I'd fight on even with four broken limbs. Leading with my fists was, after all, one of my primary methods of investigation. But I was so surprised by the event, and the men who were jumped out of the car struck me as so odd, that my rage was short-circuited and I simply waited in curiosity and agonizing pain.

The first man approached me. As he crouched to examine me, leaning on the car that had struck me, I noted that he was not physically tall but had a tall crop of thick snow-white hair that seemed to possess a will of its own. Once he determined my life wasn't in peril, his lips turned up slightly in an enigmatic smile that might have been amusement or embarrassment, and his brown eyes took on a playful sparkle. I studied him as he inquired about my injuries in a strong French accent despite his excellent English. Under his overcoat, he wore a slightly rumpled charcoal suit brightened by a burgundy shirt and oddly patterned brown, grey, and purple tie. He seemed amicable, but shy and a little distant, alert and inquisitive, and yet haunted by a certain melancholic stillness.¹⁸ His companion was stranger still. Standing over the two of us, at first poised and ready to assist in whatever first aid was needed, and then relaxing slightly when he determined my life wasn't in danger, he had the cunning face of a fox, albeit a completely hairless one. He wore thick glasses, and though he was only slightly taller than average, the tall effect exaggerated by his thinness and striking baldness. Under his overcoat, he wore black pants, a black sport coat and a white turtleneck. He looked almost like a comic book caricature mashup; the thin body and outfit of a beatnik jazz musician with the head of Lex Luther, from the Superman comics, pasted on it.

After I assured the driver I did not think my leg was broken, the two of them helped me to my feet. It was too soon to try to stand and my leg began to throb so they had me sit sideways in the passenger side of the Peugeot. From what I could piece together from the French I dimly recalled from a boring class during a boring high school career, the bald man had begun to chastise the other for his bad driving. Though I couldn't make out most of the words, listening to him speak was like watching a skilled baker knead dough, expertly forming the strands together and then slapping the dough into its final form with petite bits of measured violence. The effect was lost on the other who just shrugged indifferently. They offered to take me to a clinic to check out the

¹⁸ Goodrich (2005, p. 814)

extent of my injury and since this was my favorite leg, or perhaps my second favorite, and I wanted to know how soon it would start working again, I accepted.

The shorter man went into the restaurant and inquired where the nearest medical center was. When he returned, despite the protests of his companion, Jacques, as I heard him addressed, got behind the wheel again and started off. He drove like it was some kind of sport. The liquor stores and sex shops and soulless restaurants on the ugly thoroughfare whizzed by my eyes like signposts on a highway to despair. At first the two made polite attempts to converse with me, taking turns apologizing and asking how my leg was feeling. When it became apparent I was too sore and too shocked to make much conversation, they began a heated debate in French and English. I gathered that the topic being debated had to do with the name 'Descartes',¹⁹ and that the bald man was named Michel, but I could not determine either of their perspectives on the topic. They seemed deeply divided on some point, whatever it was, yet in how their speaking cadences meshed, they seemed somehow inseparable. Though I never caught the overall gist, some of the weird things they were saying have stayed with me, half-remembered, to this day and still pop into my head if I'm daydreaming.

We arrived at the clinic, a box-shaped building on a small side road of the main drag and I limped in, leaning on the bald man for support. When we approached the front desk, the receptionist saw us coming and retrieved a wheelchair from a small room behind the counter. Popping her chewing gum absently, she beckoned my new friends to help me sit, and then handed me a form to fill out. She said the doctor would see me shortly. My leg was throbbing so badly that the pain radiated all over my body, and I could barely see straight enough to complete the form, so my new friends volunteered to help.

"You are to list your last name first? Does your first name then become your last name and last name your first name?" inquired Jacques, scrutinizing the form. "Writing the last name first brings to bear some formality on an event such as this, though making the last name first suggests a strange intimacy too. A formal-intimacy indeed, as you will soon be taking your pants off so the doctor can examine you!"

"And your occupation..." chimed in Michel, who was studying the form as well, "your present occupation is occupying this chair waiting to be seen. Why should your occupation matter on a form such as this? But before treatment you, through a routine exercise of power/knowledge and by the tool of this clerical technology, are to be sorted and classified by how you make your living, your gender, marital status and so on. What if you live in the spaces between some of these boxes? Without asking you, these discourses are already confirming your so-called normality or pushing you to the margins. If you are here you may be sick to be sure, but are you a 'normal' sick or an 'abnormal' sick?" He punched the last two words insinuatingly.

¹⁹ See Boyne (1990, p. 63). Descartes's views on madness became a source of tension between these two intellectuals when Derrida described madness as in Cartesian thought as internal to the Cogito and accused Foucault of simply and naively rearranging the reason/unreason dichotomy in his writings on Descartes' *Meditations*. In this parallel universe, it is still something of a sore point in an otherwise mended relationship between the two.

A nurse arrived and told me that a doctor would see me soon. She seemed vexed that between the three of us we still hadn't completed the brief patient registration form. I took it with me as she wheeled me into an inner office, leaving Jacques and Michel to continue discussing the artifact they had just seen. Despite my pain, maybe it was better if I completed the form on my own.

I waited in the inner office for some time, taking turns between checking off boxes on the form and cursing. I was laying down a familial-themed blue streak when a stern-looking woman in a white lab coat entered the room. At her bidding, I took off my pants and she subjected my leg to some painful bending and prodding as I continued to mutter profanity. I was usually more of a gentleman in mixed company, but I simply couldn't help it this time. The physician declared my wound an acute grade two soft tissue injury to the quadricep, hamstring and gluteal muscles. As I struggled into my pants, she wrote me a prescription for some painkillers, and when I objected that I was a private investigator and didn't want to be medicated during this case, she told me that I seemed pretty angry, and if I investigated this case while in such intense pain I might have difficulties with self-control. It would be good if I submitted to the need for medication. She then told me I needed to stay off my feet as much as possible for the next seventy-two hours, and that complete healing might take as long as a month. I'd never known complete healing.

The nurse returned me to Jacques and Michel. We left the clinic and they drove me to a pharmacy to pick up my pills. "Where are you planning on going next?" Michel inquired, seeming like he was enjoying this adventure.

"I don't really know," I replied. "I'm a detective," my two new acquaintances made appreciative noises, "and I lost one of my only leads this morning when you two crashed into me. This case has gone as cold as this city and now I've been disabled too. I might as well go back to my hotel and start drinking. Better yet, maybe you could take me out on a nice country road, shoot me, and leave me in the ditch."

"I have a better idea," said Jacques, "I think we can take you somewhere that will help in your investigation."

"You've done enough to help already," I grumbled. I couldn't help it; my leg was killing me.

"No, we insist. I think you will have a much easier time finding the 'slow learners' if you take this journey with us."

It took a second for this to register with me. After it had I realized that these two had been holding out on me. I felt the sudden urge to get away from them. I grabbed the inside handle on the Peugeot and shouldered the door open. I launched myself awkwardly out of the car and took four steps before collapsing in pain on the pharmacy parking lot. Michel got out and retrieved me. Feeling resigned to whatever my fate might be at this point, I accepted his help with docility and was soon settled into the back seat where I could stretch out my throbbing leg. I thought I might as well pop a painkiller. The one I got out of the box looked appealing. It was a pretty purple color with little yellow stripes and tiny white writing. It looked a bit like an Easter egg.

“We are sorry to have potentially excluded you from your own investigation in this way,” began Michel.

“You see,” interrupted Jacques, “John Williamson asked us to see if we could help you. He was worried; he said he you’d been in danger already.”

“Vehicular assault? Is that what passes as help where you come from?”

“I assure you,” Jacques asserted soothingly, “that was accidental. We saw you trying to pursue that man in grey and thought we should intervene. We got too excited.”

“You got too excited!” Michel corrected, producing another shrug from Jacques in reply.

I wasn’t quite ready to forgive, but I was calming down. The medication kicked in, and the buildings began to glide by in white blurs as Jacques turned into and sped through a long industrial district. As we began to reach the outskirts of town, I inquired where we were going.

“A special place,” answered Michel, “a private museum and archive. It is here that you will get the background you will need to crack this case.”

X

By the time we reached the structure, everything was starting to get a surreal tinge that I could not decide if I liked or not. I settled on ‘structure’ for a label because it looked more like a retaining wall than a building; it was built into a large hill that could just as easily have been man-made or natural. Michel parked, and I gingerly got out of the car with some help from my new companions. It would be a long, painful and cold walk to the entrance. Only official institute vehicles were allowed in the first several spaces in the parking lot and though the inner lot was almost completely empty, a gate and key card setup reinforced the boundary.

“Be wary. Do not approach your walk through these galleries as a journey through increasingly refined categories of disability.” Michel admonished me as we walked, with the two of them supporting me, along a sidewalk leading to the building. I wasn’t sure if his warning was distracting me from my discomfort or adding to it.

“Disability and slow learner are not, finally, scientific or theoretical discourses, they are regular daily practices. What assumptions govern the placement of slow learners on this educational track, and how does this track in turn shape understandings of the slow learner label? How did separate tracking emerge to construct slow learners as different from ‘normal’ learners? How did it come to be that ‘slow learner’ as a label was parceled out as separate from the many disability labels that get applied to individuals? What were the prior ways of addressing learning impairments and how did they construct people?”

Even through the haze of the medication, these questions caught my attention. I’d had similar ideas, but found Michel’s way of addressing these considerations particularly penetrating. I felt less a hostage and more a partner for the first time since meeting these two.

“Do not attempt to find a truth or a grounding for the idea of slow learner.” Michel continued, “Just appreciate how the systems of knowledge that produce such ideas have mutated over time. Do not be so bold as to try to fully understand past appearances of categories, just look for discursive traces, clues if you will, by which you might construct a history of the present. Then you might find your slow learners.”²⁰

“You have to analyze the history and the historicity of the breaks which have produced our current world [of disability categorization]. Out of [a certain] origin, [but] breaking or transforming this origin, at the same time,” Jacques added, emphasizing, as far as I could tell, that the transformations Michel was speaking of were rarely smooth or orderly.²¹ I thought this another fair point.

As I hobbled along, a question occurred to me. “I’m not just looking for slow learners, you know, my client thinks the ways they’ve been classified have something to do with why they’ve fallen through the cracks, or been pushed through the cracks, and he is looking to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Is there some kind of tool I can use to expose the problems with the classification systems in order to make things safer for them?”

“I have a whole toolbox designed for this sort of thing,” Michel confidently remarked,²² “but do not assume the enterprise will make things safer for your client’s students in any stable or permanent way. *Everything is dangerous.*”²³

I took this as less helpful. It sounded both cryptic and paranoid to me but before I could press him on it, we finally reached the building. A large sign above the thick wooden doors read CODRI. Looking at the black lettering on the door itself, I realized this was an acronym, and a rather stupid one in its unwieldiness. It stood for.

Classification
Of
Disability
Research
Institute

Noting the confusion in my face, Jacques remarked, *“The sign is an ill-named thing.”*²⁴ I couldn’t tell if he was being cryptic too, or just remarking on the unwieldy acronym.

We entered the facility. It appeared to be a very slow day; I saw no other patrons. Michel and Jacques signed me in as a guest at the registration desk. They insisted, due to the very recent injury they had helped me acquire, that I borrow a motorized scooter, like the kind patrons with limited mobility are sometimes lent in shopping malls, to make my travels easier. They insisted

²⁰ Tremain (2008, p. 16)

²¹ Derrida (1997, p. 10)

²² Foucault (1974, pp. 523-524)

²³ Foucault (1997a, p. 256)

²⁴ Derrida (1974, p. 18)

that we each travel through the gallery individually, arriving at our own conclusions. We could discuss things after my tour. A host standing in front of the reception desk, a smiling, sandy haired young man in an official grape-purple blazer, explained to me that to blur the lines between observer and observed, I could select a particular disability from the menu above to embody and, in my travels, I could experience how I was being treated throughout the ages as a person with this disability. He told me each disability had its own self-guided audio tour. I asked why it wasn't a good enough category that I needed a scooter to get around the museum. He said that didn't count, it wasn't one of the 'official' categories. I asked him if picking up his teeth with broken fingers was one of the categories and, as he considered this, I slammed the controller on the scooter forward, running over his toes, and then turned into the entrance of the gallery.

Glancing quickly at a floor plan on the wall I saw that the museum was set up as a series of long ovals, one on top of the next, wrapped around closed-off offices, meeting rooms and laboratories. The exit/entrance to the gallery on each floor was the only access point to the stairs and elevator to the next floor. The first floor dealt with disability in antiquity. That seemed an awfully long way to go back to find slow learners so I opted for the next floor where I could tour 'disability in medieval times.'²⁵

I took the elevator to the second floor and began the long circle through the displays. A sign near the start of the gallery informed me of the Greek roots of the word idiot, "*Idiotes*,"²⁶ meaning roughly: a layman or one ignorant of the affairs of more educated individuals. I reflected that in my early investigation of this rather specialized missing persons case and in many other things I was, indeed, an idiot by these standards. In Old English, the word came to mean an intensely private person, set aside physically and psychologically in the community, before settling into a more evaluative definition interchangeable with the concept of natural fool. In both cases it seemed to designate individuals seen as having limited intellectual capacity. This condition differed, legally, from the definition of lunatic, which involved the possibility of a restoration of sensibility. I had routinely called people idiots and lunatics, to their faces or in my own reflections, in my life and career. There always seemed to be an abundance of thoughtless, reckless, feckless, stupid people and these words were a nice all-purpose paint of disapproval to spread over them. But now, confronted by the necessity of facing these words, as words for disability, in this gallery I felt uncomfortable.

I learned that going as far back as the sixth century, as criminal law evolved, idiocy and lunacy were increasingly considered conditions that exempted one from liability for offenses, with the rationale that impaired individuals in these cases acted without intent, malice, or appreciation of consequences. I read a legal decree from the English King's Prerogative (drawn up between

²⁵ See Gould (1996, pp. 51-52); Jardine (2012, p. 8); and Stiker (2002, pp. 23-50). I chose not to make Max's decision to bypass this display an impactful one in terms of whether or not he will 'solve' this case, and did not feel there was adequate room in the narrative to take the genealogy back this far. I did want to quickly note, however, that scholars continue to point to Western antiquity for many of the ideological roots of current issues related to ableism and/or disability. Some of these roots include Socrates' notion of inborn "mettle", Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction ($X = X$), euthanasia/abandonment, Abrahamic religious dictums related to both exclusion of and charity toward people with disabilities, and the emergence of Christian charitable institutions for people with disabilities.

²⁶ Wright (2011, p. 19)

1255-1290) that superseded legal property and inheritance rights for those deemed lunatics or natural fools. In both cases the benevolent monarch would, ‘without waste’, assume custody for the property of these subjects and use any profits the land generated to pay for their care. In the case of lunatics, these rights were to be restored upon the return of their lucidity. I then saw a series of petitions, drawn up by concerned family members, applying for the guardianship of idiots and natural fools. I saw a recommendation that the courts select, when possible,

*Male relatives... sound of religion, of good governance in their own families, without dissolution, without distemper, no greedy persons [and] no stepmothers.*²⁷

The next exhibit described itself as a sixteenth century ‘IQ’ test with the first part in quotation marks in recognition of its anachronistic use.

*An idiote or a naturall foole is he, who notwithstanding he bee of lawful age, yet he is so witlesse, that he can not number to twentie, nor can tell what age he is of, nor knoweth who is his father.*²⁸

I wondered about the ‘knoweth who is his father’ part. What did that have to do with so-called idiocy? I’d helped lock up many punks of uncertain parentage who were far from idiotic in their criminal schemes. Beside this exhibit was a quote from court records:

*Indicted for stealing a silver cup, Thomas Middleton, the third of March last. The evidence against the prisoner that he lodged at Middleton’s house and Middleton’s wife missing of said cup made inquiry of the prisoner whether he knew what had become of the cup. He confessed that he had taken it and offered it to sale for 20S. But the prisoner appearing to be little less than a fool, he was acquitted.*²⁹

A further explanation below the quote noted that the reason for acquittals in these cases was termed as ‘misfortune of fate.’³⁰

Moving past this section, I read the title “Madness: Familiar Foreignness.”³¹ I detected something of Michel’s way of turning phrases in this title, and as I drove through the exhibit I saw, out of my peripheral vision, that he was watching me watching the displays and grinning. Unsure, again, of the exact relevance of any of this for slow learners, except that categories seemed much more plastic in these times, I didn’t linger in this section. I saw, as I drove past figures of Don Quixote, as well as Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Ophelia, King Lear and Lady Macbeth, symbolizing some sort of tragic madness - a madness linked with mystery, death but also, paradoxically a strange sort of wisdom. I recalled how in Shakespeare’s work, the mad always seemed to get the best lines. I read too, about palace fools, Lear’s fool and others, whose jobs involved exposing the artifice of the court and or even the sovereign, but again, who spoke from a place of unreason as making these criticisms from any other position would amount to treason. I recalled sitting in

²⁷ Ibid. (p. 22)

²⁸ Swinborne (1590) in Ibid. (p. 21)

²⁹ Old Bailey Criminal Court Session Papers (1685) in Ibid. (p. 22)

³⁰ Ibid. (p. 22)

³¹ Foucault (1988, p. 28)

the professional development session with Williamson, being struck by how much currency the professionals seemed to place on the amount of reason that a student supposedly possessed. Had this strange niche that unreason seemed to fill in older societies been filled in with cement somewhere along the way, leaving *unreason* with no place to be at all?³² Did that make any difference for slow learners? I reflected this was pretty thin as far as my own investigation went, after all slow learners were thought to have less reason, not unreason. Feeling I'd gleaned the larger sense of this gallery, but frustratingly, little of import about slow learners, I circled back to the elevator and rose to the next floor.

XI

The elevator doors opened on a section entitled 'The Great Confinement.' In a display case, I saw a dollhouse-like model of what would, blown up to its real proportions, have been a mammoth institution. This dollhouse was not for kids though; the tiny figures on the inside simulated the scenes of abject misery that characterized these institutions at the time. In the display case, beside the miniatures, two quotations from visitors to such institutions from this era testified to the veracity of the exhibit. The first described the conditions of several 'patients' in a large room in the asylum:

One of the side rooms contained about ten [female] patients, each chained by one arm to the wall; the chain allowing them merely to stand up by the bench or form fixed to the wall, or sit down on it. The nakedness of each patient was covered by a blanket only.... Many other unfortunate women were locked up in their cells, naked and chained on straw.... In the men's wing, in the side room, six patients were chained close to the wall by the right arm as well as by the right leg ... Their nakedness and their mode of confinement gave the room the complete appearance of a dog kennel.³³

A written section along the wall provided some background to the miserable scenes, detailing how unlike the prior eras which made room for madness with a strange inclusive form of exclusion or vice versa, the classical age saw an attempted total containment and silencing of madness, as well as of disability and poverty.³⁴ The economic crises brought about by war and industrialization resulted in spikes in the ranks of the unemployed, beggars, and vagrants. Declining rates of leprosy had emptied leper asylums. In the classical era, these were repurposed to contain not only the mad, but the disabled, the poor, and the criminal.

Indeed, the authorities during these times had turned on the indigent with a vengeance. I saw a painting of Parisian archers posted on the city walls shooting beggars trying to enter the gates. I saw a translation of a law at the time, done up in stylized writing and printed on parchment paper. It decreed that those caught begging in the city would be whipped for a first offense and, if they were male, hanged for a second offense.³⁵ The preferred intervention, though, appeared to be confinement. A caption below another picture of a prison noted that in 1656, one in a hundred Parisians, including those we would now call mentally ill and those we would now call disabled,

³² Ibid. (p. 202)

³³ Wakefield (1814) in Andrew Scull (1993, p. 113)

³⁴ Foucault (1988, p. 262)

³⁵ Ibid. (p. 49)

were locked up, with similar practices occurring throughout an increasingly industrializing, urbanizing Europe.³⁶ I wondered if any of them were slow learners.

I realized as I drove along the exhibits, that they were taking on a greater variety. They were now describing the orphanages, workhouses, and prisons that characterized the great confinement. Institutional categories bled into each other, like the blood of the inmates pooling on the floors, in the overarching project of confinement. I passed along paintings and models of confined workers – some apparently able-bodied, some bearing physical disabilities - digging wells, polishing glass, rasping logwood, blacksmithing, beating hemp to make ropes, and sewing. I realized that, despite the novel ‘cures’ I had read about in the previous section, the preferred “treatment” for any confined population was work.³⁷ “What is the source of the disorders of [the asylum]?” a sign asked. “Idleness,” was the reply below. “What is the cure?” another asked. “Work!” was the reply.³⁸ Or, as the enabling act of the English charity workhouse St. Marylebone spelled out the purpose the institution was:

*to admit the poor, both healthy and sick, diseased and infirm; the profligate and idle who were to be corrected; and infant poor to be educated in habits of industry, religion and honesty, the profits from their labour to be used for their own upkeep as well as for the parish.*³⁹

This idea of the formative character of work was interesting. I wondered if it was a stretch to think that I was seeing in these exhibits some vestiges of what would later appear as educational programming for all learners, but especially slow learners who were deemed to require extensive vocational programming. I read a list of rules for a ward for boys and girls under twenty-five in one of the larger ‘hospitals’:

1. *Work is to occupy the greater part of the day for all inmates with unassigned time is to be spent reading pious books.*
2. *Inmates will be required to work as long and hard as their strengths and situations will permit, it is then, but only then, that they can be taught an occupation befitting their sex and inclination.*
3. *The desire for reform will be determined by the zeal with which an inmate works.*

*Every fault will be punished by reduction in gruel, by increase in work, by imprisonment and other punishments customary in the said hospitals as the directors see fit.*⁴⁰

The next exhibit showed the blueprint of the floor plan of a large workhouse. A caption below explained how these workhouses were complicated institutions that imposed “care, control,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Armstrong (2002, p. 440)

³⁸ Foucault (1988, p. 57)

³⁹ Markus (1993) in Armstrong (2002, p. 440)

⁴⁰ Foucault (1988, p. 60)

discipline, training, religion and productivity” on the inmates.⁴¹ The culture of the workhouse, the exhibit read, was built into its very design:

In Bishopsgate Street there were 129 children (increased to 400 by the early nineteenth century)...In two 150-foot long workshops. The boys’ lodgings were located above these workrooms, the girls’ over the chapel which separated the workhouse from the prison. Boys had reading and writing lessons; for the girls sewing and knitting replaced writing.⁴²

I felt I was finally getting closer to slow learners by getting this glimpse of the rudiments of the educational pathway slow learners were often placed on even now. But it was more than just the slow learners on this pathway. During the times depicted in the exhibits, I reflected social class made one a candidate for a workshop as often as perceived intellectual potential or disability.

I wondered if vocational training in its present form was the same sort of thing as what I’d seen in these workshops. Williamson’s school was replete with various welding, carpentry and mechanics shops, as well as its kitchens and salon, but the courses offered in these shops all seemed more or less voluntary and, in fact, seemed valued in the school. It was hard to imagine the students I’d seen confidently striding the halls in their coveralls and chef’s hats as inmates or urchins. One of the teachers at my table in the staffroom of the other school had even mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to get slow learners into the shop classes because they struggled with the bookwork. Williamson had told me the story of the apprentice whose entry into the college part of his training had been discouraged by a gatekeeper who was made suspicious over the K & E courses on his transcript. That made this form of education sound faintly elitist, quite the opposite of a charity workhouse. More like a guild, the mysteries of which were somewhat guarded.

Whatever my confusions were in reconciling the two epochs of vocational training I’d recently learned about, the ‘work’ section was the last display of the confinement exhibit. I saw, to my relief that some “Humanist Reform” would be offered on the next floor. I took the elevator up.

XII

Arriving on the floor I immediately saw a display titled, “The Philosopher’s Idiot.”⁴³ A drawing of John Locke stared earnestly out at me, and the caption below explained that Locke had seized on the concept of idiocy to help disprove Rene Descartes’ notion that knowledge comes innately to humans. An idiot’s limitations or inability regarding reasoning, Locke suggested, was emphatic proof of his *tabula rasa*, or blank slate theory of human knowledge.⁴⁴ Whereas individuals of normal intelligence, over time, ‘fill’ the blank slates they are born with through sensation and reflection on sensation, the slates of idiots, who have trouble drawing conclusions from sensory experience, remain blank or at least emptier – proving his theory. I felt ambivalent about this. It seemed exploitive to characterize the capacities of this population in order to make this point. On

⁴¹ Armstrong (2002, p. 440)

⁴² Markus (1993) in *Ibid.* (p. 440)

⁴³ Wright (2011, p. 29)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (p. 30)

the other hand, the *tabula rasa* idea itself implied that under the right conditions, most have some capacity to learn and implied that the right sorts of environments were required to stimulate learning.⁴⁵ In as much as I'd been hired to look for slow learners themselves, so far I'd often ended up getting dragged into an inquiry about the best educational conditions for students in general, so the implications of the *tabula rasa* theory aroused my curiosity.

Seeing little of direct relevance in the next section - *The Philosophes* - I went through it more quickly, pausing in only a few places. I wasn't driving so quickly however that I wasn't impressed with the sea-change in thinking that the Enlightenment involved. It was true that this period overlapped chronologically with some of the abuses of the classical era, and that the same worship of reason had, in different ways, informed the confinement I saw depicted on the floor below as well as the advances I was seeing on this floor. Still, the potential impact of Enlightenment thought on how people with disabilities were seen and treated was considerable. I saw displays of scientific discoveries and moral and political philosophy suggestive of a breaking down of the barriers of "fatalism and pervasive superstition" that had been aspects of how disability was understood up until this point.⁴⁶ I saw an increasing secularism that, instead of hoping for divine intervention, spoke to the possibility of advancing individuals, classes, and all of society to a more just, free, and rational way of living. I saw a scroll of Rousseau's revolutionary complaint at the beginning of his version of the social contract, "*Man was born free, but he is everywhere in chains.*"⁴⁷ I saw, for the first time, documents detailing how the poor and infirm ought to be assisted, not, as part of Christian charity, but as a part of societal obligation, part of the social contract.

As a pre-cursor to some of the educational research I'd been exposed to since I began the investigation, I saw in the replicas of the writing of Condillac, Diderot, de l'Epee, and Periere an incredible zeal to study, empirically, how deafness and blindness impact an individual's learning and communication, and their subsequent efforts to apply their theories in devising methods of teaching children with these disabilities.⁴⁸ Concerning madness, I read asylum reformers Pinel and Tuke arguing that the madness in many inmates was, if not caused, at least aggravated by the brutal, inhumane conditions to which they were subjected. Those afflicted with madness required only the peace of bucolic settings, attentive care, detailed treatment plans, and the restrained, gentle hand of correction to overcome their disorders.⁴⁹ I saw miniature models and posters of a variety of educational/therapeutic institutions, each specializing in the treatment of something that was deemed a particular category of disorder at the time. In addition to the new corrective methods for the mind I read about, I saw replicas of 17th and 18th century orthopedic devices for normalizing the body: neck braces, Scarpa's shoe for club feet, extension beds, and corsets.⁵⁰ A sign at the end of this section summed it all up rather nicely:

*The governing ideas of today's rehabilitation are already present in [these] institutions.
The claim that the disabled can tap into the same assets as the able-bodied; the invention*

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Winzer (1993, p. 80)

⁴⁷ Winzer (1986, p. 42)

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ See Foucault (1988, pp. 242-246)

⁵⁰ See Stiker (2002, pp. 14-119)

*of techniques and pedagogies to achieve these goals; the foundation of specialized institutions to make this all possible. From this came the thought that there should only be customized institutions that were geared toward dealing with the particular situation of their client.*⁵¹

Despite my annoyance at not seeing any slow learners in the exhibit, I had to stop for a minute and marvel that all of this progress had taken place in such a short time. My imagination reached out to the free thinkers I was seeing pioneering these humane forms of treatment in admiration.

Just as I thought I was having my own moment of enlightenment, however, I felt like someone was watching me. I looked over my shoulder and saw Michel's grinning face again, peeking out from behind a portrait of one of the asylum reformers. I'd run into him in the confinement display, too. Had he been following me the whole time or was he just touring for himself? I couldn't be sure. He walked over to me and asked me what I thought about this portion of the gallery. I said I was relieved to see conditions for institutionalized people with disabilities improving so much, and to see all these efforts were underway to learn about impairment and help people with impairments. I marveled at what an improvement over mass confinement this all was. Then I said this was all very interesting, but I hadn't seen very many clues about where the slow learners were and I was beginning to worry that the rest of the facility might be equally bereft of clues.

He seemed to ignore my second concern but, in apparent response to my first warned me, "Do not allow yourself to be blinded by this enlightenment. There are games of truth and games of power afoot. There is a less apparent form of violence, but violence still: *a separation of power between those who hold it and those who do not, the production of the truth about what you now call disability rapidly accelerating, and even as conditions for the physical confinement improve, notice the proliferation of cells of categorical confinement.*"⁵²

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "What are cells of categorical confinement? Whatever your suspicions are, all I see in the real world is things getting better for disabled people, in both thought and practice, over the course of time depicted on these two floors."

"Reason, Max, consider reason, and not just in the seductive, idealist sense. Everything is dangerous." He said, repeating the advice he'd given me at the entrance. Having gifted me with this wisdom, Michel strolled away, pausing only to appreciate a display case of unusual orthopedic restraints before continuing to tour on his own. I felt incredulous that he could claim, if I understood him correctly, that these humanist reforms somehow concealed a form of violence comparable to the horrors I'd experienced on the previous floor. It seemed undeniable that the focus on increasingly specialized and individualized forms of therapy and rehabilitation were an improvement.

As I watched Michel walk away, I continued to be bothered by what he had said. My mind flashed back to the image I'd learned about so long ago in history class. Adoring crowds, all gathered in ecstatic festivals honoring a concept both abstract and provocatively embodied in a

⁵¹ Ibid. (p. 107)

⁵² Foucault (1997b, p. 45)

beautiful, thinly-clad woman: Reason. Girls in white Roman dresses and sashes dancing around the costumed Goddess.⁵³ Why was I thinking of this now?

XIII

I noticed I'd again come full circle and was back at the elevators. A sign pointed upward informing me that the "progress through measurement" section was on the next floor. I rode there. I was first confronted with a bust of a youth with medium length hair and vulpine features staring out at me with a look that might be described as atavistic alertness. It bore the inscription "Victor: The Wild Boy of Aveyron." A write-up below indicated that asylum reformer Pinel, while holding progressive views on the receptiveness to cure those deemed insane, continued to hold that 'idiocy' was hereditary and irreversible. His pupil, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard felt otherwise and, to disprove his mentor's views, took on the care and rehabilitation of a young boy of twelve who had been found running feral in southern France. While Pinel declared the boy incurable, Itard felt his condition was due to severe neglect and that he could be rehabilitated through a program of training to help him realize to use his senses and eventually learn practical skills including speech. Though he failed in his attempt to completely rehabilitate his new patient, Itard did, according to reports, realize enough success in teaching Victor to identify letters and recognize simple words to consider his approach of sensory training a promising basis of future practice.⁵⁴

I moved on to further portraits and write-ups. I read that Itard's methods were widely circulated in the French medical community and inspired Maria Montessori and Eduard Seguin. The latter became superintendent of one of the first schools, housed inside the Bicetre hospital specializing in the education of 'idiot' children. Seguin reinforced Itard's belief that intellectual deficits were attributable, at least in part, to sensory isolation or deprivation and that this could be reversed through powerful motor and tactual stimuli and adequate nutrition.⁵⁵ He strongly advocated for a specialist approach, asserting the need for intellectually disabled students to be educated/rehabilitated at different institutions and with different methods than people with mental health disabilities or physical disabilities. He also believed that every student could be taught, not just confined, and that many could return to successful participation in the larger community following the completion of their schooling.⁵⁶ Seguin published two influential volumes on his methods in France before being mysteriously fired from his position and emigrating to the United States where his influence on the field continued.⁵⁷ Seguin, his American colleagues and their students, established the theoretical basis for working with so-called 'idiots' or 'the feeble-minded' and advocated strongly for the need for specialized, separate institutions for people in these categories as an alternative to the brutal catch-all lunatic asylums that still lingered in the new world. Their advocacy was often successful; they won government and charitable funding and went on to found the new institutions they had proposed.

⁵³ Doyle (2002, p. 238)

⁵⁴ Wright (2011, pp. 35-41)

⁵⁵ Winzer (1986, p. 48)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Wright (2011, p. 37)

I wondered where the slow learners fit into all of this. I felt I was getting warmer again, as things started to get more specialized. In the earlier exhibits, it seemed likely that when so many financial, physical and intellectual states of being were defined as deficient and subject to confinement, many slow learners were probably confined. But, then again, would a phrase like ‘slow learner’ even have any meaning in an era when so many were locked up so indiscriminately? “What about in the more specialized institutions that were beginning to emerge?” I wondered.

With this question in mind I drove past a section detailing the growth of specialized ‘idiot asylums’ in Great Britain and its colonies and the rest of Europe in the mid to late 1800s. This led into a section that held no portraits, statues, floor plans, busts or miniatures. It was nothing but black and white charts, mathematical formulations and quotes from scholars.

I happened upon a chart made in 1848 by Samuel Gridley Howe, an American colleague of Seguin’s. What caught my attention was the highest functioning of his two categories of idiocy:

Fools are a higher class of idiots, in whom the brain and nervous system are so far developed as to give partial command of the voluntary muscles; who have consequently considerable power of locomotion and animal action; partial development of the affective and intellectual faculties, but only the faintest glimmer of reason, and very imperfect speech.

*Simpletons are the highest class of idiots, in whom the harmony between the nervous and muscular system is nearly perfect; who consequently have normal powers of locomotion and animal action; considerable activity of the perceptive and affective faculties; and reason enough for their simple individual guidance, but not enough for their social relations.*⁵⁸

I noticed that in 1866, Seguin, my hero of the prior exhibit, and two of his colleagues had come up with their own classification system declaring “the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect mind is ... clear,”⁵⁹ and proposing eight separate categories of unclear minds. These categories took into consideration both presumed “tissular lesions” or identifiable diseases of the 19th century tied to idiocy as well as observation of traits including intellect, willpower, and physiological functioning.⁶⁰

Then, a shiver ran down my spine as I read on, a free-standing exhibit about a category I hadn’t seen in this gallery before. The “*Enfant Arrière.*” According to Seguin, as the sign explained, this category was a borderline sort, as:

*the idiot makes little or no developmental progress compared to the ordinary child, whilst the backward child develops in degrees intermediate to the two groups. [A difference of] “arrest” rather than “retardation” of development.*⁶¹

⁵⁸ Simpson (2012, p. 546)

⁵⁹ Ibid. (p. 544)

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. (p. 545)

Had I finally, after three floors, found slow learners in this museum? Here was the backward child, the “enfant arri re” pushing back, blurring the emergent boundaries. I saw a wisp of white hair behind this exhibit. Jacques emerged and wandered over to me. “Border towns, interesting places ...” he remarked.

“Dangerous places,” I added after a second or two of thought. “You never quite know where you stand. Folks who come from border towns can’t be trusted.” My voice sounded hard-boiled as I uttered this last sentence. Maybe I was getting my edge back.

“Your slow learners have appeared on the border,” remarked Jacques. “This undecidable, the slow learner label, this nearly normal/nearly abnormal, has been shoved into a cell designated abnormal. But perhaps it cannot be contained. Perhaps it will burst out and call both judgments into question.”⁶²

I considered this. It sounded weird the way he said it, but I thought maybe Jacques was on to something. Maybe I needed to look for slow learner in the in-between places in this institution. Maybe I needed to look for the ways the label troubled these emerging categories. Maybe I needed to look for how the authorities tried to contain this trouble.

Jacques wandered away and I drove next past a shelf labelled “phrenology” which contained a collection of skulls, rulers, and “fact” cards. I didn’t get out of my scooter to examine them. I then happened upon a large photograph of a bearded man with a kind and inquisitive face and eyes alertly staring out from behind an oddly shaped pair of pince-nez. This, I read, was Alfred Binet, father of the modern IQ test. The biography beside the portrait read that Binet, the director of psychology at the Sorbonne, began his career as a dedicated phrenologist. He published several papers on the relationship between cranial volume and intelligence before eventually growing disillusioned with how inconclusive research in this area was beginning to seem to him.⁶³ Seizing on some emerging research proposing psychological determinations of intelligence instead, Binet decided to direct his research along these lines. Commissioned by a Minister of Education to develop techniques for identifying those children whose lack of success in normal classrooms suggested the need for some form of special education, Binet devised a battery of tests meant to simulate everyday reasoning tasks such as counting coins or assessing which faces in a series of pictures were prettier.⁶⁴ His contention was that a large number of these sorts of progressive tasks, administered by a trained examiner, could be used to estimate intellectual capacity and thereby flag the learning deficits he had been commissioned to find. On the second revision of his tests, he decided to assign each of the tasks in a series an age corresponding to its difficulty. From this he was able to glean composite ‘mental ages’ of the test subjects as determined by their average ages on the tasks subtracted from their chronological ages. Children whose mental ages were well behind their chronological ages were flagged for

⁶² See Simpson (2012). The author describes the backward child as one of Derrida’s undecidables and, illustratively, refers to another example of categorical undecidability. In India in colonial times between the British colonial elite and the subaltern classes there existed an ambiguous indigenous elite class. This class formed a blurred, indeterminate, and shifting boundary between the elite and the subaltern masses; sometimes part of the dominant group, sometimes part of the dominated.

⁶³ Gould (1996, p. 177)

⁶⁴ Ibid. (p. 179)

special education programming.⁶⁵ Binet, the exhibit noted, went on to develop special education classes, offering “mental orthopedics” as a means of boosting the intelligence of his pupils.⁶⁶

The now familiar concept of intelligence as a quotient was born out in a refinement of this method when German psychologist W. Stern argued that, in order to better represent disparities, the mental age should be divided by chronological age instead of subtracted from it.⁶⁷

I read, next, a list of Binet’s fears regarding potential misuses of his invention. These included:

1. Mental age is a rough empirical estimate for practical use, in reality the tasks cannot be superimposed on one another so there can be no real overall intelligence. *Low scores shall not be used to mark children as innately incapable.*
2. There is a danger of mental age being abused by schoolmasters to exclude unruly pupils and also abused as a self-fulfilling prophesy reducing the effort that is invested in teaching some pupils.
3. Mental age is best used to determine which pupils require additional help, it should not be used to rank all pupils.
4. No opinion is offered on whether the student’s performance is indicative of hereditary or environmental factors or predictive of future potential. It is the mental age at the time of testing only.⁶⁸

This all sounded eminently reasonable to me. Indeed, it was hard to see how IQ came to mean so much more than this from reading about the modest aims of its founder. I admired Binet’s cautious practicality, his efforts to provide a tool to help children and educators, combined with his insistence that this tool be wielded carefully. Then, however, I happened on the copy of Binet and co-writer Simon’s *The Intelligence of the Feeble Minded* left out on a podium for museum patrons to browse and I read a few passages:⁶⁹

*Taking account only of the practical acquisitions we find, that is of instruction, we find it an absolutely clear difference between the two subjects. The normal child of seven years can read hesitatingly; an imbecile of twenty years cannot read, and can never learn to read.*⁷⁰

As I browsed through it, I saw the book was a detailed volume of the limitations inherent in various levels of ‘idiocy’. It included many photographs of its subjects. A lengthy section discussed the almost animalistic insensitivity to physical pain in imbeciles as compared to ‘normals’. A photograph showed a subject, one of the case studies, reaching forward for a biscuit

⁶⁵ Ibid. (p. 181)

⁶⁶ Ibid. (p. 184)

⁶⁷ Ibid. (p. 185)

⁶⁸ List paraphrased from Ibid. (pp. 181-182)

⁶⁹ Binet and Simon (1916, p. 133)

⁷⁰ Ibid. (p. 133)

that had been offered him, “in animal fashion” with his mouth instead of with his hand.⁷¹ Here was a volume that not only sought to detail “*how a superior intelligence differs from an inferior one.*”⁷² It also sought to introduce a pecking order of sorts between the various levels of imbecility that it so meticulously described.⁷³ For someone whose ambitions for his tests were so cautious, Binet now appeared to boldly assert how this separate lot of humanity, set apart by measured intelligence deficits, was so very different than the rest of the species.

I next saw a urethane replica of a thick, mighty tree. Across its branches and foliage hung the banner “eugenics.” Its intertwining, exposed roots bore labels such as “Genetics, Biology, Mental Testing, Archeology, Surgery, Psychology, and Law.” An inscription read:

*like a tree eugenics draws its material from many sources and organizes them into an harmonious entity.*⁷⁴

A banner entitled “Social Darwinism” hung just a little past the eugenics tree. This section of the exhibit bore a picture not of the father of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin, but of his cousin Sir Francis Galton. A piece of trivia indicated that Galton was a polymath who pioneered twin studies in behavioral genetics, came up with the first free association psychological test, and who devised a reliable system for storing and recording fingerprints.⁷⁵ I hoped I would someday be able to use these facts in conversation at a dinner party before remembering that I didn’t get invited to dinner parties. More relevantly, Galton was moved by his cousin’s evolutionary theories, particularly those focusing on selective breeding of domestic animals, and became convinced that the human race could be improved by careful breeding too. Coining the term ‘eugenics’, he suggested that those of high merit should be encouraged, even financially awarded, for marrying amongst themselves and having children when they were still young. He presented the following vision of a social Darwinist utopia:

*The best form of civilization in respect to the improvement of the race, would be one in which ... every lad had a chance of showing his abilities, and, if highly gifted, was enabled to achieve a first-class education and entrance into professional life ... [and] where the weak could find a welcome and a refuge in celibate monasteries or sisterhoods.*⁷⁶

The last sentence caught me by surprise, and gave me the creeps. I then passed under a hanging banner quoting the bible verse:

*Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water.*⁷⁷

⁷¹ Ibid. (p. 16)

⁷² Ibid. (p. 11)

⁷³ Hall (1997, p. 19)

⁷⁴ American Philosophical Society (n.d)

⁷⁵ Gega (2000)

⁷⁶ Galton (1892, p. 362)

⁷⁷ In Gould (1996, p. 212)

That was odd. I wondered about its relevance. A short ways down I noticed I was about to pass under something else. I initially thought was an arch. Then, straining my head up and back in the scooter, I realized it was a gigantic bell curve subjecting, symbolically, any who sought further passage in the museum to an exercise in sorting. Assuming it was oriented for forward progress, I maintained a path somewhat, but not excessively right of center. I figured bright but not too bright was a good path.

An illustrated film on a monitor went over the early history of the curve, showing a figure repeatedly flipping a coin, with distribution tables scrolling across the screen below the cartoon. The video then described, with another animated sequence, how the curve also found use in astronomy, as a means of averaging out the errors in various sightings of a star when trying to calculate its location. I mentally noted that Michel would say it was almost inevitable that such a powerful tool would be turned on modernity's favorite subject of measurement – man. Indeed, the film next indicated it was an astronomer, Adolph Quetelet, who was actually the first to apply the curve to the study of humans. He felt that the statistically average man embodied values of moderation as well as the rightful political ascendance of France and Britain's middle classes.⁷⁸ "How paradoxical," I thought. "Average is suddenly great." After a few seconds, the following text, a quote from Quetelet, scrolled up over the picture:

*One of the principal acts of civilization is to compress more and more the limits within which the different elements relative to man oscillate. The more that enlightenment is propagated, the more will deviations from the mean diminish.... The perfectibility of the human species is derived as a necessary consequence of all of our investigations. Defects and monstrosities disappear more and more from the body.*⁷⁹

More tables scrolled across the screen, these ones of a variety of human traits including height, weight, strength and eyesight. I was interested to learn that the idea of 'normal' was such a recent invention, only finding widespread use with the rise of social statistics in the 1800s,⁸⁰ and agreed that in many ways it was still viewed the way Quetelet saw it, as a desired state of being. Indeed, since taking on this case, I'd often wished I was employed in a more 'normal' investigation, as if I'd ever had one. The finer points of the statistics eluded me, but as far as I could tell this idea of producing a more normal population seemed like a dog chasing its own tail. After all, the curve that created all the fuss about the desirability of 'normal' would also produce a large number of abnormals whenever it was applied, so how could you move a population towards normal by using its data? Then, I remembered a radio show I used to listen to in the Buick during long surveillance engagements, something about a town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."⁸¹ Sure, it seemed like normal was often the going concern even now, but I also wondered if somewhere along the way, 'superior' got thrown in as an even more desirable state in the populations the curve measured. I remembered glancing at the psychologist's website where I found the information about slow learners,

⁷⁸ Davis (2006, p. 4)

⁷⁹ Ibid. (p. 5)

⁸⁰ Ibid. (p. 6)

⁸¹ Keillor (2013)

way back in the library, and seeing that one of the current grades of human intelligence, as measured by IQ testing, was labelled “very superior.”⁸²

Just as I was thinking this, the video flashed back to a bell curve, on which data of human characteristics including height, strength, agility, and, most relevantly, intelligence were plotted. It explained how Galton had renamed the error curve as the “normal distribution” curve, divided it into quartiles, and ranked the extremes he saw as most desirable highest, and least desirable as lowest.⁸³ Although it was a dog chasing its tail again, all of this implied, to those amenable to interpreting it this way, that there was a way that most humans should be, that the human race was indeed perfectible, and that negative deviation from the norm was an affront to social progress.

The video advanced to a description of types of citizen unfitness that showed the trend, once the statisticians had constructed this sorting machine, to find and lump together all the deviants who threatened the health of the nation. “*The habitual criminal, the professional tramp, the tuberculosis, the insane, the mentally defective, the alcoholic, the diseased from birth or defect.*”⁸⁴ This list had been given, in 1911, by Karl Pearson, a leader of the British eugenics movement. “*How widespread were these views?*” I wondered. The next scene answered my question. Across the screen scrolled a who’s who of public supporters of eugenics. Some of the names I caught were: John Maynard Keynes, President Theodore Roosevelt, Bertrand Russell, Alexander Graham Bell, George Bernard Shaw, Winston Churchill, and H.G. Wells.⁸⁵ I’d seen enough. In solidarity with the subjects I had been hired to find, and with the rest of the deviants on Pearson’s list too, I did a U-turn with my scooter, drove back to the giant curve, and circled under it again. This time I went through on the left hand side of the center.

Passing the video on my way back to the gallery, I saw a sign that provocatively asked, “Did it work?” Was this in reference to all this curving business? It seemed a sort of a silly question without clarifying what exactly was supposed to work. Below, however, were some interesting, if somewhat confusing points about the normalizing curve. The self-same Karl Pearson who had come out so strongly in favor of eugenics itself nevertheless worried about the universality of the curve. Doing his own observations of distribution in many of the same phenomena considered textbook examples of the curve (rolls of dice, roulette wheels) he claimed to have been often unable to reproduce the normal distributions originally found.⁸⁶ I then learned that a pair of contemporary researchers had pointed out that Galton had never directly identified normal distributions in human populations when studying various traits. He had to produce his distributions through the conversion of his data to standard scores and the averaging of these scores together. This was important to remember, they suggested, because it remained unclear whether Galton’s ‘correction’ actually found the normal distribution in human populations he claimed it had.⁸⁷ Additionally, many statisticians continued to worry that many human traits and phenomena had too many uncontrolled-for variables to be randomly occurring, and were therefore inap-

⁸² King (n.d., para. 8)

⁸³ Davis (2006, p. 8)

⁸⁴ Ibid. (p. 9)

⁸⁵ see Brignell (2010a) and (2010b)

⁸⁶ Dudley-Marling & Gurn (2010, p. 14)

⁸⁷ Ibid.

propriate applications of the normal curve.⁸⁸ While the curve had enabled a practice of labelling many types of people deviant, all of these considerations left me in doubt about the meaningfulness of the concept of human normality that Quetelet had claimed to discover, or the possibility of an orderly meritocratic ranking of any human trait as Galton had claimed to discover.

The next display was a long, illustrated timeline painted horizontally along the far wall, entitled “IQ – An Institutional Journey.” I learned how the normalizing curve, despite these problems, fit well with interpretations of Binet’s work with intelligence, and the concept of a measurable hierarchy of intellectual fitness became widely popular with American psychologists. Under the energetic promotion of H.H. Goddard who brought the scale to America, and who, despite Binet’s warnings, celebrated IQ as a reified measure of hereditary intellectual fitness, intelligence testing was soon put to widespread use.⁸⁹ Goddard and other social planners believed that a single, hereditary gene was responsible for the phenomenon they understood to be intelligence, and that it could be bred for as readily as early geneticists had bred for desired traits in plants and insects.⁹⁰ They felt that the nation’s fitness depended on the careful breeding of its citizens in order to maximize intelligence and minimize ‘feeble-mindedness.’

There was a picture of soldiers in desks writing with pencils. A caption indicated that, by the outset of World War I, intelligence tests had become so popular as a tool for social planning, that psychologist R-M. Yerkes, was able to persuade the army to test a hundred and seventy-five million conscripts and volunteers at the outset of the United States’ participation in World War I. The data from this mass testing was used not only to rank soldiers for various duties,⁹¹ but also to establish a base of supposedly objective data that vindicated hereditarianism claims, and led to the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which severely limited immigration from lands afflicted by populations seen as genetically inferior.⁹²

A caption below a picture of smaller people in desks, also writing tests, indicated that during this same period, the keeping of educational statistics began to emerge as a dominant practice in schools. Lewis Terman, a prominent psychologist who’d worked for the army testing program and Columbia University’s Edward L. Thorndike, while disagreeing on the ideal types of intelligence tests to administer, felt that testing of all students was essential in determining their potential for school success and making educational decisions on their behalf based on these measures.⁹³ The social efficiency movement in education, or the idea of the mandate of the school to provide society with “socially useful citizens” informed the use of academic tracking along ability lines with the idea that these tracks would feed the students into appropriate vocational pathways suited to their “mental, moral, and physical endowment.”⁹⁴

As the timeline continued along the wall, there was a standing display of quotes and pictures to my left. It was entitled “Menace of the Feeble-Minded.” I realized that while these developments,

⁸⁸ Ibid. (p. 15)

⁸⁹ Gould (1996, p. 190)

⁹⁰ Ibid. (p. 192)

⁹¹ Noll (1995, p. 31)

⁹² Gould (1996, p. 206)

⁹³ Gavin Loss & Loss (n.d.)

⁹⁴ Terman [1914] (2013, pp. 2-3)

the one-two punch of IQ testing and genetic theory, did not bode well for people with the IQs of the students I'd been hired to find – those deemed low average – they were disastrous for the many individuals with levels lower than this. The widespread theories of innate, measurable intelligence combined with eugenics to create, in the words of Hunter S. Thompson,⁹⁵ a widespread and enduring fear and loathing of those deemed intellectually deficient, the 'idiotic' and 'feeble-minded' in the punitive vocabulary of the time. Goddard made the following comments on the different types of threats posed by people with varying degrees of intellectual impairment:

*The idiot is not our greatest problem. He is indeed loathsome... Nevertheless, he lives his life and is done. He does not continue the race with a line of children like himself...It is the moron type that makes for us our great problem.*⁹⁶

I pieced together that this 'problem' Goddard perceived actually had two aspects; so -called 'morons' or 'feeble minded' persons, though capable of marginal functioning in society, were seen as intellectually incapable of developing higher moral sense and, therefore, prone to careers in crime and, in Goddard's vast exaggeration of the potential role of heredity in determining intelligence, they were also seen as threatening the quality of the gene pool of the 'race' in general.⁹⁷ I got to the first realization by reading a series of quotations like this in the display section on Goddard:

*Not all criminals are feeble-minded, but all feeble-minded persons are at least potential criminals...Morality cannot flower and fruit if intelligence remains infantile.*⁹⁸

Beside the quote, a pair of eyes stared expectantly, as if to ask if their owner was correctly following the instructions she'd been given by the photographer. They belonged to a young girl in a white dress, primly posing for a photo. She had a cat in her lap and an open book in her hands. I saw it was the blown up cover photo of Goddard's 1916 book *The Kallikak Family*. An accompanying summary told me that it was a cautionary tale of how, during the American Revolution, a revolutionary soldier of good breeding had a dalliance with a feeble-minded barmaid. Though he subsequently married a respectable Quaker woman and had many children of good standing, Goddard claimed to have found conclusive proof that almost all of the one hundred and eighty descendants that sprang from this soldier's brief union with the barmaid were feeble-minded. Moreover, Goddard claimed that these ill-bred descendants were more prone to infant mortality, and, if they survived to adulthood, given to sexual immorality, alcoholism, and crime.⁹⁹ Goddard contrasted the bleak outcomes of the majority of the Kallikak children with the idyllic life of Deborah, a Kallikak descendent living out her life 'carefully guarded' from bad influences and from the possibility of 'breeding' more Kallikak descendants, residing in his Vineland Training School for feeble-minded boys and girls.¹⁰⁰ As described by Goddard, Deborah had an ambitious schedule of activities at Vineland including reading, writing and math lessons, gardening, woodworking, sewing and music. One could almost have said the descriptor

⁹⁵ Thompson (1998)

⁹⁶ Goddard (1912, pp. 101-102) Kallikak is a pseudonym.

⁹⁷ Ibid. (p. 190)

⁹⁸ Ibid. (p. 211)

⁹⁹ Ibid. (pp. 18-19)

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. (p. 12)

suggested she was being offered a rather thorough vocational and life skills training program were it not for Goddard's intent to keep her permanently institutionalized.

The next displays in the 'menace' exhibit suggested the pleasant conditions Goddard claimed Deborah experienced were not typical of such institutions at the time. As I saw from the pictures, the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities in some institutions resembled nothing so much as the contemptuous neglect shown towards the more generalized indigent populations during the great confinements of the classical era. These practices continued for a long time in many institutions. On this theme, the 'menace' exhibit ended with a provocative display about an American institution for intellectually disabled children. Posing the question "1846 or 1966?" it provided the following quote from an eyewitness:

*Dirt and filth, odors, naked patients groveling in their own feces, children in locked cells, horribly crowded dormitories, and understaffed and wrongly staffed facilities ... rooms with "groups of 20 and 30 very young children lying, rocking, sleeping, sitting – alone. Each of these rooms were without toys or adult human contact."*¹⁰¹

The horrific photographs, depicting such conditions, continued below the quotation. Beneath this, the answer key on the next display depressingly read "1966."

Despite my abhorred fascination with these exhibits, I realized that after Jacques' promising lead, I felt like I was losing the trail of the slow learners again. Notwithstanding the likelihood the categories constantly bled into each other, the so-called 'feeble-minded' might have tested a little below those who would now be considered slow learners. Then again, so too might some of the students I met in the investigation – the ones in the K & E class who said they were upgrading from a program for students with intellectual disabilities.

I drove away from the exhibit and back to the timeline. Back in the early nineteenth century again, I learned that as public education became the norm in Canada and the United States in the late 1800s to early 1900s, it was accompanied by massive increases in enrolments in special education (including large residential institutions like Vineland) as a separate form of education for students with disabilities.¹⁰² For these students, eugenic sensibilities informed not only their placement in separate institutions, but their treatment within these institutions.

I stopped and looked to my left, along the floor, at another brief exhibit. It was a mannequin of a masked surgeon with gleaming, but antiquated instruments. I learned from an informative plaque at his feet that, for the first half of the century onward, particularly after mass IQ testing was pioneered, it became a legally sanctioned practice in many countries to forcibly sterilize children and adolescents with diagnosed intellectual disabilities. Reinforced by a 1927 Supreme Court decision in favor of eugenics in the United States, 60,000 operations to sterilize disabled children took place in thirty states before the practice was stopped in the 1970s.¹⁰³ The Alberta Eugenics

¹⁰¹ Blatt & Kaplan (1974, p. v)

¹⁰² Winzer (1993, p. 324)

¹⁰³ Spaulding & Keith (2010, p. 30)

Board approved the sterilization of 4,725 children diagnosed as intellectually disabled before 1972.¹⁰⁴

There was a display case beside the surgeon that showed the picture and biography of a woman from Alberta named Lelani Muir. I read that Ms. Muir had, in the 1990s, successfully sued the Alberta government over her sterilization while she was institutionalized as a child. Signed over at the age of eleven by an abusive and neglectful mother to the Provincial Training School for Mental Defectives in Red Deer, Ms. Muir was sterilized as an adolescent. She was told she was being sent for an appendectomy. The institution took these actions on the basis of her tested IQ of sixty-four, which placed her, in the vocabulary of the time, in the range of a ‘mental defective moron.’ From records of the case, this single test - the results of which likely reflected a culturally impoverished upbringing - was apparently the only evidence of an intellectual disability. She was doing well in her classes in the institution, and was reported to be “talk[ing] easily and volubly” in an interview with a supervisor.¹⁰⁵

Later, after leaving the institution and benefitting educationally from the opportunity to live as an adult in society at large, Ms. Muir had another IQ test and this time scored eighty-nine, which I’d learned was highest possible score in the low average (slow learner) range, or just one point shy of a score of average range. I reflected that had she tested in this range initially, she never would have been sterilized.¹⁰⁶ I wasn’t proud of myself for thinking this, it was horrific that she was sterilized regardless of her IQ, but it did show how tentative and arbitrary such measures could be. Maybe, I thought, trying to be as generous as I could, that the scores were helpful, as Binet had proposed in his more egalitarian writing, as a tentative estimate of current functioning for the purposes of remediation. But as a justification for the state-sanctioned violation of citizen’s bodies? I wondered what Michel would have to say about that.

Another sign pointed to a sectioned off exhibit about a program in Nazi Germany titled “Aktion T-4.”¹⁰⁷ The sign warned that it was disturbing, as if the rest of the exhibit wasn’t. It was, without doubt, a part of the larger eugenics section, from these same roots, but I didn’t think I could take much more, so I didn’t enter this section, choosing to go back to following the timeline. I hoped I wasn’t leaving any slow learners behind therein.

Where were the slow learners? Lelani Muir tested in the right range, but her history of neglect and institutionalization seemed to suggest that even her best test score might have been an underestimate. There was the *enfant arrièrè* label I’d seen at the start of the measurement section, but that was before the tests were standardized. Why was I unable to find clear examples of slow learners in this section? Where was this border haunting Jacques had suggested I look out for? I reminded myself to look specifically for this as I returned to the timeline. I finally caught a

¹⁰⁴ Wahlsten (1997, p. 190)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. (pp. 192-193)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. (p. 195)

¹⁰⁷ See Wright (2011, p. 103). Aktion T-4 was a Nazi program to murder, under the euphemism of euthanasia, disabled residents of German hospitals. It resulted in the killing of between 75,000 and 95,000 adults with disabilities and 5000 children with disabilities before protests in German churches and local communities resulted in the official termination of the program in 1941, state-ordered “wild cat” killings continued thereafter.

glimpse of a possible slow learner in one of the comments of Lewis Terman regarding the concerned parent of a child who had recently tested below normal:

Strange to say, the mother is encouraged and hopeful because she sees that her boy is learning to read. She does not seem to realize that at his age he ought to be within three years of entering high school. The forty-minute test has told more about the mental ability of this boy than the intelligent mother had been able to learn in eleven years of daily and hourly observation. For X is feeble-minded; he will never complete the grammar school; he will never be an efficient worker or a responsible citizen (1916).

The child's IQ was seventy-five, currently seen as borderline, not an indication of disability,¹⁰⁸ and potentially within the slow learner category as Williamson had explained it to me. Terman's 'nevers' sounded pretty vicious. I had read in the programs of study for both K & E and its predecessor, the Integrated Occupational Program that preparing the students for responsible citizenship was a primary intent of programming, meaning that they were assumed to be capable of this. Compared to Terman's gloomy thinking, the literature I read from these programs had suggested slow learners had a lot of potential. Was I wrong when, in the library, I thought these programs sounded exclusionary? On the other hand, they were still forms of separate programming based on students' deficits in learning. Did they honor the idea that slow learners had the potential to learn, or were they merely a much gentler form of eugenics?

Just towards the end of the timeline, I saw the title, "Walks of Life." I was confronted by a few quotes by Goddard, and slowly another connection began to form in my head. The first quote was from a recanting of sorts in which Goddard had softened some of his views on the feeble-minded:

They do a great deal of work that no one else will do... There is an immense amount of drudgery to be done, an immense amount of work for which we do not wish to pay enough to secure more intelligent workers... May it be that possibly the moron has his place.¹⁰⁹

In another, he noted that, in terms of career hierarchies, "*the people who are doing the drudgery are, as a rule, in their proper places.*"¹¹⁰

In other words "*the poor are poor because they are stupid.*"¹¹¹ A sucker for the underdogs, I reflected on how all of this might function as one more way to stack the deck against 'the people doing their drudgery', not only to muse on where their 'proper places' were, but to actually keep them there. Did the IQ tests sometimes reflect the more privileged ways of knowing of their designers, and then tend to reward those test subjects more practiced in these ways of knowing? Reasonably well trained for polite society, I'd nevertheless occasionally had dispersions cast on my character for using the wrong fork for the wrong dish and, similarly, I suspected the ques-

¹⁰⁸ American Psychological Association (2000, p. 48)

¹⁰⁹ Goddard [1917] in Gould (1997, p. 108)

¹¹⁰ Goddard [1919] (2013 pp. 246-7)

¹¹¹ Erevelles (2005, p. 68)

tions that supposedly measured reasoning in isolation often got contaminated by relying on this sort of insider knowledge.¹¹²

Aside from this, I wondered, seeing as how I'd read in the library that the tests favored 'abstract reasoning', if 'abstract' reasoning really was possible and if it was, how, other than by way of privileged cultural inheritance maybe, did it come to be seen as the pinnacle of intelligence in the first place? I'd more or less solved every case I'd been hired to investigate, but I wasn't sure if I'd ever used it. My reasoning was most successful when it was good and dirty with context. My mind flashed back to the French Revolution image of the Goddess of Reason. A Goddess for all, supposedly, but who did she really serve in this case? Seeing as how more privileged students likely had experienced better life-long access to academic learning activities that developed their so-called abstract reasoning abilities, might this all not feed back into a vicious circle where privilege was presented not in a democratically unpalatable way, as a birthright, but as a reflection of merit in a mythic land where everyone supposedly got a fair shot? Was the fix in all along? I felt like I was on to something here.

Below Terman's quote, in honor perhaps of our locality, was a quote from an early vocational school program for slow learners in Calgary. It maintained its mandate was not to serve "*the bright pupils, but the dull, uninterested ones.*"¹¹³ I felt the case might be coming together again. Perhaps a new niche for slow learners, based on their perceived potential to be the workhorses of their nation's economies had emerged.

XIV

I continued to follow the timeline around the bend, learning about further refinement of IQ-based categorization and special education programming but, to my frustration, again losing the trail of slow learners. I had come pretty far, at least in distance, and thought maybe there would be only one more section of exhibits on this floor before it rounded back to the entrance. Just as I was beginning to wonder if I'd seen all the relevant history on this floor, something from above jumped into my peripheral vision and made me slam on the brakes. It was a large, hanging, silver ball with four thin protuberances sticking out like spider's legs. I wondered if my mind, unable to bear another image of oppression, had forced me to hallucinate this object. It seemed as though it belonged in a different institute. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. I was not hallucinating. I realized the object was a life size model of Sputnik, humankind's first artificial satellite. I wondered what it was doing here.

A display case below the satellite contained several magazines from the late 1950s decrying the American public education system in light of the lead the Soviet Union had taken in the space race with the launching of Sputnik.¹¹⁴ A *Saturday Evening Post* headline that provocatively asked, "Can Ivan Read Better Than Johnny?" caught my eye. The other magazines, late fifties

¹¹² See Gould (1997) in which the author demonstrates how these army assessments were culturally and economically biased. In one example, subjects were asked to analyze pictures of culturally specific activities such as tennis and lawn bowling for missing features, the absence of which would not be readily apparent to someone unfamiliar with the game.

¹¹³ Gordon [1919] in Knobbe (1978, p. 33)

¹¹⁴ Sleeter (1987, p. 215)

editions of *Good Housekeeping*, *Vogue*, *Life*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Time*, *US News and World Report*, *Look*, *Newsweek*, and *Readers' Digest* all asked similar questions.¹¹⁵ I realized that at this point in the cold war, the space race was not a friendly competition; it was a method of war by other means closely linked, by way of rocket technology, to the nuclear arms race. The panic that ensued after this Soviet display of superior technology had resulted in widespread criticism of an American education system that apparently had failed to produce scientists of the ilk of the Soviet team that built and launched Sputnik. A clipping in the display case from the magazine with the "Ivan and Johnny" title went so far as to note:

*What Russian students learn in school and what American students learn in school may do much to determine whether the free world will check and defeat Communism, or whether Communism will check and defeat the free world.*¹¹⁶

"This is all very interesting," I thought, "but what does it have to do with the previous exhibits about disabilities, or with slow learners?" Then, in another display case, I read some of the specific criticisms of the American school system at the time and about the ensuing curricular reforms that followed the Sputnik launch. I began to understand. Educational planners, fearful that lax educational standards had caused American children to fall behind, and concerned with augmenting the abilities of American students to compete on the world stage, began to develop elementary school curricula that were much more rigorous and difficult than they had been the previous two decades.¹¹⁷ Under this new curriculum it became natural for many teachers to assume that as many as a third of the students in an elementary school class would be below grade level and unable to handle the programs they were being instructed in. Achievement testing practices increased to continually evaluate if children were meeting the new, higher curricular standards. The move towards increasing rigor occurred as American schools, for the first time, were dealing with the mandate to end formal racial segregation in education.¹¹⁸ Despite the legal requirement of desegregation, minority children were often assumed to be less capable and therefore re-segregated into their newly integrated school's special education programs.¹¹⁹ As school became more demanding academically, white, middle class children, despite often being the recipients of preferential treatment in schools, struggled more frequently with the revised curriculum, and this became a concern for parents and educators. Many white, middle class parents of academically struggling students did not want their children placed in special programs with minority students, and many of the same parents were not willing to accept the application of any of the four existing academic deficit labels, **mentally retarded**, **slow learner**, **emotionally disturbed**, or **culturally deprived** to their children.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Ibid. (p. 216)

¹¹⁶ Trace [1961] in Ibid. (p. 216)

¹¹⁷ See Ibid. (p. 218). Sleeter identifies a significant change in the readability of first grade textbooks with the years 1944 until 1962 being marked by progressively easier texts and 1962 to the early 1970s reversing this trend and the texts becoming progressively more difficult. Sixth grade textbooks also became more difficult during these years.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. (p. 220)

¹¹⁹ See Erevelles (2005, p. 77). By 1968, 60-80% of students in special education programs in American schools were African American, Native American, Hispanic, non-English speakers, and/or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

¹²⁰ Sleeter, (1987, pp. 221-224) emphasis added.

I read the descriptors of what educators during these times considered to be the characteristics and predicted educational pathways for students falling into these four categories. They all sounded quite negative. I could see why parents wouldn't have much interest in the application of any of these labels to their children. I read the description of slow learner from a leading expert at the time:

*Slow learners compose the largest group of mentally retarded persons. Among the general school population, 15 to 17 or 18 per cent of the children can be considered slow learners.*¹²¹

That statement didn't surprise me much. I had already studied that bit of categorical shifting and realized slow learner was once but was no longer considered an intellectual disability category. What interested me more was the following statement:

*Preferred suburban communities where executive and professional persons reside will have very few slow learners... The subcultural areas of large metropolitan communities where the children receive little psychosocial stimulation present quite a different picture... Fifty per cent or more of the children can appropriately be designated as slow learners.*¹²²

I wondered if the same measurements existed in feudal times if the statistic might have read that ninety percent of the population was slow learners? It was an apples and oranges thing and sort of a stupid, impossible thought, but I had it nonetheless. The descriptor went on to suggest that slow learners were likely to experience regular schooling as too difficult and eventually drop out. For these reasons they were better served in a more remedial educational stream where they could gradually advance at their own rate and not hold other children back. Slow learners were to be trained for semi-skilled or unskilled occupations. Slow learners were likely to be followers instead of leaders in society because they could not understand the subtleties of the social order.¹²³ I wondered how many of these assumptions still informed current thinking about students thought to be slow learners.

I continued my tour of this section and next came to a sign that said "Learning disability - The birth of a label." A caption below explained how, since the 1900s, some physicians, psychologists and educators had been interested in the idea of an organic defect, a form of brain damage, that severely impacted people's reading abilities while having no impact on their overall intelligence or reasoning abilities. I had heard the word 'dyslexia' before, and recognized it among the list of labels that researchers were using at the time to describe this sort of disorder.¹²⁴ Other labels included 'brain injury' and 'psychoneurological learning disorders.'¹²⁵ This research had gathered steam over the fifties and sixties and had begun to receive popular attention. Both *Newsweek* and *Reader's Digest* had published articles about reading impaired but normally

¹²¹ Johnson [1963] in *Ibid.* (p. 223)

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.* (p. 224)

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

intelligent children and the interventions that were thought to hold the promise of curing them. These included exercises that were said to stimulate new brain cells to take over the role of the dead cells during reading.¹²⁶

To many parents of struggling students, particularly more privileged parents, this was a more tolerable label. It did not imply global defects in their children's intelligence and it did not suggest their children were falling behind due to deficiencies in how they, as their children's primary educators, had prepared them for school. Unlike the labels mentally retarded and slow learner, assumed to describe life-long deficits, it was thought at the time that this particular disability might be curable. Institutionally, the addition of a new disability category also reinforced a conservative agenda of locating school failure as a defect in individual children instead of questioning an educational system that, at the bidding of military and business interests, had begun to leave more and more students behind.

I toured through the gallery and saw a display chronicling the growth of advocacy groups consisting of parents of children diagnosed with this recently discovered disability. A series of black and white pictures showed people gathered at meetings, sitting in folded chairs, filling Styrofoam coffee cups from aluminum urns, and looking intent as they listened to expert speakers.¹²⁷ Further displays went on to explain that, at a large conference that brought together parents from a number of these advocacy groups, Samuel Kirk, the most prominent researcher in the field, proposed the label 'learning disabled' to describe this population of students. The label stuck. I next drove past time-faded periodicals now using the title learning disabilities, and black and white pictures of newly formed learning disability classes in schools.

An accompanying list of statistics explained that the majority of test subjects in studies of learning disabilities at the time, parents in learning disability advocacy groups, and students placed in learning disability programs in the United States were white and middle to upper class. The logic of this theory of the category's emergence very nearly overwhelmed me. It also added even more evidence to the increasingly obvious impression I had gathered so far in the case that in the impairment pecking order,¹²⁸ slow learners were less valued than students with learning disabilities.

As I was leaving this section, I heard a piercing siren followed by a low-pitched hum. The main lights in the museum went out and dimmer emergency lights painted the gallery in shadowy illumination. I smelled smoke. I kept going for a minute, figuring I was nearly round the floor, but I was driving into an increasingly thick cloud of smoke. By now the sprinkler system had engaged but it only added to my confusion about what was up ahead. I turned the scooter around to go back the way I came. I saw flames start to lick the exhibits I had just seen as I retreated from the Sputnik section and reversed my course along the timeline asking the scooter for more speed than it was prepared to offer. I made it under the bell curve a split second before it crashed to the floor. I saw Jacques and Michel rushing to find me. They told me the elevator was out of commission and we had to get to the stairs. I got out of the scooter and, supporting myself on both of them, hobbled as quickly as I could.

¹²⁶ Ibid. (p. 230)

¹²⁷ Ibid. (p. 228)

¹²⁸ Hall (1997, p. 19)

We descended the three flights, a choking, cursing journey, my leg absorbing each step with the pliability of an old dry two-by-four. We made it past the burning admission desk and out into the frozen darkness – how long had I been in the museum? The few staff members on duty were already mustered in the parking lot; it appeared we had been the only visitors. Some fire trucks arrived but it was too late to save the building, and the frozen foothill it was built into didn't need much saving. There were probably other such museums but no one would be coming back to this one. After what I had seen I wasn't sure I would have wanted to come back anyway. Wet, cold, and stinking of smoke, in the intermittent warmth of the Peugeot's heater, we watched the museum burn until all that was left was a pile of smoldering grey, like a lower row of rotten teeth in the gaping mouth of the foothill. There wasn't much to say.

Jacques and Michel drove me back to the restaurant where we had met, and did me the further kindness of driving the Buick back to the hotel for me so it might be available to me when my leg recovered enough that I could drive. My companions had been responsible for the most recent injury I had experienced on this case, but this was more than cancelled out by their saving me from the inferno. What was more, I could see they had been right. There was no way I would be able to find slow learners in this current setting without the benefit of seeing where they and their many companions in disability classification had come from. They hadn't exactly given me the straightforward break in the case I was hoping for all day, but I was finally starting to understand how complex and dangerous all of this was. I had a million questions for them but couldn't clearly think of a single one. I was tired and disoriented and needed time to think.

We planned to meet up the next morning, at the restaurant nearest my hotel, to discuss the case. They offered to help me in, but my room wasn't far from the front desk and I thought I could hobble there. It occurred to me I should warn them to be careful too. They'd been seen helping me, and between the choking in the library, being tailed, and the likelihood the fire had something to do with the case, I'd faced a lot of danger over the last two days. Unfortunately, that thought only struck me as I watched the tail lights of the Peugeot begin to fade into the darkness.

I asked for a plastic bag at the front desk, filled it with ice from the machine, and limped to my room. I peeled off the stinking suit and wrapped a threadbare blanket around myself. I took a few pills, poured a double and sat and dutifully iced my injury despite the unpleasantness of the cold. I thought hazily about the case. I must have nodded off for a while; when I woke up, I noticed I was still holding the remainder of my drink but my home-made icepack, now half melted, had fallen to the floor. Transferring myself to the bed, I slept deeply despite the throbbing pain in my leg and my growing sense that Williamson had been right to hire me – slow learners had been in danger for a long time.

To be continued...

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