

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

## **Part Four: Quaint Notions of Justice**

**W. John Williamson**

### **Abstract**

These chapters follow the events described in Parts One to Three of this narrative. Max Hunter, a private detective, is still on the trail of “slow learners,” a category of students his client, educator John Williamson, claims are continually getting “lost” in Alberta’s school system. Max encounters philosophers, fellow educators, and even students labeled as slow learners, all of whom have suggestions for finding these students in ways that attend to them as learners while resisting the rigidity of their labelling. He also encounters an agent of a sinister operation who works to ensure that slow learners stay lost, and who intends to make Max disappear too.

### **Keywords**

Slow learners, competition, labelling, Heidegger, Gadamer, hermeneutics, inclusion

*For Jacob*

**XXIV**

There were a couple of other places I’d planned on checking out that day. Talking to a former leader of programming for slow learners had been quite helpful and I wanted to pursue more of

---

**Corresponding Author:**  
W. John Williamson, PhD  
Email: [John.Williamson@cssd.ab.ca](mailto:John.Williamson@cssd.ab.ca)

these kinds of sources. The informants Summit had suggested I spring interviews on next were way across town from the airport so I thought I might make a stop along the way and try to catch up with some of the students from the K & E class I'd met a few days back. After talking to Summit, I had a few more questions for them too if I could get to them.

I wasn't sure what the fallout from my substitute imposter routine had been, but I didn't think it wise to return to the school itself. It was, however, getting to be near the lunch break and, on the day I'd played substitute, I had noticed a student from the K & E class discarding a bag from a fast food joint, Burgeropolis I recalled, on his way in. As I made my getaway, I saw that the restaurant was right across the road from the school. I thought, if I had any luck, I might see one or more of the K & E students on this occasion if I waited for them at the restaurant. If it turned out the kids had been warned to stay away from the interloping substitute, it'd be easier to make a getaway from this neutral location. I drove to the restaurant and presumed from how empty the place was that I'd arrived shortly before the school lunch break started. The restaurant itself was a pretty standard burger joint except for a series of cityscapes from all over the world hanging on the walls, each with 'Burgeropolis' scrolled across the top in neon pink handwriting. Considering this was the first restaurant of this franchise I'd ever seen, I thought this vision of world domination a little too ambitious. The tackiness didn't dull my appetite. Having skipped breakfast, I was ravenous but I only ordered a coffee for now, thinking it might be more convivial to break bread with the students if they showed up, as long as they didn't run or call the cops at the sight of me. The paper coffee cup bore a photo of the Empire State Building.

As I was waiting, I thought more about Dr. Summit. I wondered how many of the actual Integrated Occupational Programs that districts set up in schools had lived up to his vision. In his insistence that IOP was a program with a distinct approach to learning for a distinct population of students, I thought Summit could be seen by those who favoured inclusion of all students in blended learning communities as unprogressive. On the other hand, I thought the actual concept of learning he presented with IOP sounded progressive and familiar in many ways, and I even wondered if any of these same ideas would appear in the upcoming changes to special education and to education in general that Williamson had told me about, another lead I still needed to pursue.

In light of what I'd learned from Summit, I considered the ideas of one of the hermeneutic scholars Williamson had told me about, though I couldn't remember which one. As Williamson explained it, this scholar had given a speech critiquing the university experience in his times while insisting on the continuing potential of the university to disseminate a culture of intellectual freedom and solidarity between inquiring learners.<sup>1</sup> Williamson had mentioned that one of this scholar's chief concerns was that overcrowding and bureaucratic responsibilities tended to restrict the professors' abilities to work with their students in collegial relationships. He had suggested professors ideally ought to work alongside the students, with ideas, as more experienced fellow learners. He'd bemoaned the separation of academic disciplines into various departments which rarely worked together. He'd complained that instead of "living with ideas,"<sup>2</sup> the life of a student often entailed scurrying between smaller academic tasks, and that the disciplines of study were too focused on training the students in the narrow skills demanded in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gadamer (1992a, pp. 47-52)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (p. 53)

professions. This philosopher hadn't laid out a systematic program to improve this situation as much as a spirited reminder that whatever obstacles students and professors faced, that "*everyone's task to find his [sic] free space [and that] the task of our human life in general is to find free spaces and learn to move therein.*"<sup>3</sup>

Had Summit and his team been trying to create "free spaces" for slow learners and their teachers? In listening to the man's personal views, and in what I'd been able to read in the curricular documents for IOP, this desire seemed evident. It remained, however, a program for a group of students defined by academic deficits, and a program that handed out a separate and, in the eyes of most, lesser graduation credential to its completers.<sup>4</sup> It was like those perspective drawings I'd been shown so long ago in my police training, the ones they used to teach us how eyewitnesses are always seeing events from their own, biased points of view. If you looked at a picture from a certain angle, you saw one thing – in one case, an old hook-nosed witch, chin jutting creepily out of a jacket that concealed her neck and lower jaw. She was staring out into the world with cruel beady eyes. If you looked from a different angle, you saw the other thing, a young pretty fashion model type, turned coyly away from you. It was impossible to see both at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

If I looked at IOP one way, I saw a plan to create for these complex students freer spaces of learning than regular education students would have access to. If I looked at it another way, I saw a continuing agenda to separate slow learners so they wouldn't slow the class down or cause trouble, maybe even a program that, despite Summit's egalitarian intentions, functioned to groom them for entry level labour jobs occupying the bottom rung of the ladder of social class. The hag and the looker; I couldn't see both at the same time.

My thoughts were interrupted by a short sharp buzz, like a sound recording of an angry hive of hornets, dubbed over itself a few times to make it sound extra menacing. A dismissal buzzer. It was lunch time at the school. After a minute or two, groups of students milled into the restaurant. The place was packed to about three-quarters capacity in about two minutes, the small crowd better reflecting the pretensions of the restaurant's title. I was beginning to doubt my luck when two of the students I'd met, accompanied by one I'd never seen before, walked into the restaurant via a side door.

They noticed me and walked over to my table. "Hey it's the sick-in-the-pants substitute," Hope quipped, referring to the distress I'd affected to get out of the classroom. This was less than flattering, but at least suggested my cover hadn't been blown. "Seriously," she said, now wearing a concerned face, "how are you doing? We were worried after you took off so fast."

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. (p. 59)

<sup>4</sup> See Alberta Education (2004a, p. 12). One of the recommendations that came out of a series of province-wide consultations with stakeholders concerning the potential revision of the Integrated Occupational Program was that IOP completers receive a high school diploma, not an alternate credential. This recommendation was obviously not adopted in the policies governing Knowledge and Employability classes. Completers still only earn a certificate. Most of the students and teachers I interviewed considered this alternate certificate of completion a negative aspect of K & E.

<sup>5</sup> Weisstein (n.d.)

“I’m fine now, thanks,” I said. “It was just a twenty-four hour virus. It sure hit, though, I had to get out of there.” I rubbed my stomach and made a frowning face. “Sorry I couldn’t stay for longer.”

“Yeah, me too. That was the most interesting class I had all week,” added Arturo. “This is Paul, by the way,” he added, noticing that we’d not been introduced. “He was absent the day you came by.”

“Skipping class,” accused Hope, giggling.

“Not your business,” Paul retorted, but, without malice, more as a gentle reminder of courtesy.

“Nice to meet you Paul,” I jumped in, hoping to cut off further discourse on this topic. “Can I buy you guys lunch?” I then offered. “I’m still trying to learn more about K & E so I can get more subbing gigs. I have a couple more questions for you, we could eat and chat.” None of them objected to this plan. I fished some colourful Canadian money out of my wallet and sent them up the line to order for us. I thought quickly about what I wanted to ask them about.

They arrived with the food, a delicious assortment of meat, grease and cheese. We divided it amongst ourselves and ate without saying much for a while.

“What do you guys think about when you hear the words ‘slow learner’ and ‘K & E’ student together?” I asked, breaking the silence with a tough question.

“People in K & E most likely have disabilities. We can’t learn in a short period of time, we can’t process that quickly so we’re not in higher level classes,” Paul replied, pretty quickly and concisely I reflected.

“Does processing speed matter?” I asked.

“Of course it does,” said Hope. “Some people are slow, some people are fast, some people can’t remember, some people can.”

I wasn’t sure where she was going with that, so I pulled some of the disability studies I’d been learning about out of my toolbox and asked another question. “But how do things get called disabilities? Suppose a student understands something she’s supposed to read much more easily if she can hear it at the same time. What is that? Is that a disability?”

“It’s a difference,” Paul said. “If you can comprehend it by reading silently or by reading and listening to it at the same time, then either way you have good comprehension. It’s just a difference in how you read.”

“Who gets to say what a disability is?” I asked.

“Teachers and administrators get to say,” Hope replied. “When I was in grade nine I was tested. I thought I did pretty good on it – I thought I was good at math and vocabulary, but they said I had a disability.”

“When I was in grade six,” Paul said, “all the other students were doing division. I didn’t really understand it and the teacher just assigned it, she didn’t really teach it, so for pretty much the whole unit I just went over to the class computer and screwed around on it. Nobody really stopped me. Then at the start of grade seven they tested me and after that they put me in an isolated room with a few other kids for all my core classes. I didn’t even have English, Math, Social or Science grades on my report card after that. The report card just had my option classes and then said I was in the LD – learning disabled – Program. It was just called LD.” Paul’s voice was calm but his face betrayed the anger and confusion he still felt. He took a sip of his soft drink and didn’t say anything more. I thought the name of the class made it sound like class’s main purpose was to teach the kids the correct ways to be disabled but I didn’t say so, Paul seemed angry enough about it already.<sup>6</sup> I found myself questioning what I thought I’d gleaned about learning disabled always being a higher status disability. There was little to suggest this in Paul’s description of how the label had been applied to him. Maybe it didn’t always work that way. I also saw that the application of the LD label had not prevented his subsequent placement in a class for slow learners. Maybe the categories and interventions bled into each other more than I realized.

Hope broke in, interrupting my reflection. “In grade nine I got called lots of names. Actually not just grade nine, all through my life I’ve been bullied. They called me retarded.”

“Me too,” Arturo said.

Having exchanged their stories of names and labels, the students all fell silent. We all just sat sipping and eating. Finally, shifting gears, I asked, “What do you think about the K & E Certificate?”

Paul answered first. Maybe he was talking so much because he didn’t get his say the last time I visited. “I think it’s okay, if it weren’t for it we’d be graduating with nothing. With the certificate at least you can go somewhere.”

“At least we get some kind of credential when we graduate. I heard in the intellectual disability programs they don’t get anything.” Arturo said.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> see Allan (2008, p. 94). Allan describes how in special education programming students are often given “the imperative to perform ... impairment in public.”

<sup>7</sup> See Alberta Education (2016a). As a student perception of the value of some congregated programs for students with intellectual disabilities this is a troubling statement that requires consideration. On the level of “truth as correspondence,” however, the student is incorrect. The provincial government grants a school-leaving certificate for students with diagnosed intellectual disabilities who complete at least twelve years of school but whose programs do not include core classes on the high school diploma track or the K & E certificate track.

“And with the work experience part of K & E they help you find a job doing things you are interested in,” Arturo joined in.

“Yeah ... with the K & E Certificate you could get a job as a manager somewhere,” Hope added. “You don’t have to start at the bottom if you apply for a job.” I thought that the idea of this credential allowing one to start at a manager’s position was overly hopeful on Hope’s part, but I was nevertheless beginning to see the utility of helping the students find and maintain job placements as they began to explore careers. I could see where the success they’d experienced with this during high school might help them find better jobs after high school and have more success at these jobs. I thought I might have to investigate this further. Another thing that surprised me was hearing them talk this positively about the K & E certificate. I thought of a question that was similar to one I’d asked Summit to further probe their feelings.

“Do you think if regular education was more flexible there would still be a need for K & E? Could everyone take the high school diploma instead?” I asked.

“I don’t want to write diploma exams, I’ve heard they are pretty hard,” Hope said.

“Why would you make an exam like that worth fifty percent? If you’re doing well in that class like with an eighty percent and you fail the exam it could pull your mark down too much.” Arturo said.<sup>8</sup>

I’d already been over this with prior informants, so I didn’t ask any of them to elaborate on their thoughts on diploma exams. Paul spoke next, answering my question from a different perspective.

“I guess in K & E we are just doing a lot of the same work from the next level up but slowed down so maybe it’s not that different. A lot would depend on the teacher,” Paul said.

“What kind of teaching might make things more fair, or accessible, for K & E students?” I asked, going with Paul’s assertion.

“Make the teachers actually teach,” Hope said. “Don’t treat us like babies but still help us. Get teachers that know how to teach K & E students.”

“The teachers just read the textbook out loud,” Arturo jumped in. “They need to break things down with examples and tell us stories.”

“I’d like to know more interesting stuff about how the Natives lived, or imperialism, or globalization, or the Boxer Rebellion. Not just what’s in the textbook,” Paul said.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Williamson (2016a, p. 12). As mentioned in Part 2 of this serialization as of 2015 Alberta Education weighs diploma exams at 30% of students’ final course grades, but in preparing this publication I chose to depict the policies, including the 50% weighting of diploma exams, that were in place at the time of writing.

“Even at the K & E level, this other student in our Social Studies class is so lost I have to help him. I give him the answers, like ‘it was the Chinese’ if that’s what one of the questions was asking for,” Hope added.

“That’s not helping, it’s sort of cheating,” Arturo said. Hope blushed a bit.

By then we were all nearly finished eating. For a while my three companions fell to discussing matters less to do with teaching and learning. I smiled and nodded from time to time, but had little to add. Shortly before we went our separate ways, though, the topic of the talent show that had taken place at the school came up. Hope pulled out her cell phone and found a video of Jonah. Actually she had to tell me it was Jonah because he was wearing a ski mask like some sort of psycho killer in a movie. She said he always liked to wear a mask when he performed. He was juggling again, but this time it was swords (with blunted blades for the sake of safety she hastened to tell me) and riding a unicycle all to the rhythm of a frantic hip hop tune. A crowd of a hundred or so students seated on bleachers were cheering wildly. Hope told me he came in second in the talent show. I didn’t think anyone was grading on a curve.

## XXV

Getting back into the Buick after my lunch with the students, I reflected that I’d not detected anyone tailing me all morning. They probably assumed that Veronika had taken care of me, and were probably waiting on confirmation from her. But it was only a matter of time before they figured out I was still on the case. The disconnect between my two morning experiences was bothering me. It was almost inspirational hearing about the intent of IOP as Summit explained it. But then I talked to the students. I was haunted especially by the words “it wasn’t even a real class” spoken about a class for students with learning disabilities. Could the same be said about IOP and K & E classes? At a stop light, I fished Williamson’s business card out of my wallet and wrote “not a real class” on it. I’d have to pursue that idea later.

I decided to make another stop on my journey across town to meet the Curriculum Leaders Summit had suggested I see. After my conversation with the students, I realized that in order to be prepared for the interviews there were some questions I needed answered first. My client seemed as good of a source as any. I thought I’d try to catch him by email, I figured it would be faster than the school switchboard, so I drove to an internet café. It was a small and slightly run-down building sitting by itself on a side street just off the main road. It had sort of a half-hearted hippy vibe inside, prices for coffee and baked goods, along with caricatures of sixties musicians and lyrics from songs from the era were written in coloured chalk on a blackboard. Strings of beads were hung instead of a door, closing off the back hallway where the bathrooms were. The cashier was a lanky, bored-looking teen who was in no hurry to conclude the game he was playing on his cellular phone and serve me. I wished he was a student worker whose teacher might come by and chide him over his lack of manners. “Bonnie and Clyde” by Serge Gainsbourg and Brigitte Bardot was playing. I reflected that I hadn’t heard that number in twenty years. It was still too soon to hear it again. A current of empathy for the cashier, who I thought might have to endure it on a daily basis, ran through me. Still stuffed full with meat, cheese and grease from Burgeropolis, I bypassed the baked goods and bought a coffee and twenty minutes of computer time.

I sat at a desktop with tie-dye decals, logged into my account, and began composing a message to Williamson. “Williamson, it’s Hunter,” I started in case that wasn’t apparent from my email address, shamus13@operative.com. I briefly thought of telling him I felt close to having some answers for him, but a weird feeling came over me as I considered making this claim. So all I wrote was, “I have a couple questions – you available?” I hit send.

A reply to my message came back right away. “For a minute – my class is writing a test.”

“You worked under both IOP and K & E, right?” I remembered him saying this but asked anyway to open the conversation.

“Yes. Four years in IOP, the rest after the switch to K & E.”

“Were the programs very different?” I asked.

A longer pause this time. Eventually he replied. “Quite a bit. When it was IOP, the way my school implemented it, the kids spent half days at worksites for four out of their six semesters of high school. A major part of the job for me and my colleague back then involved supervising them at the jobs we had found for them. It was pretty extensive on the work experience education, sometimes too much.”

“Weren’t community partnerships recommended in the IOP curriculum?” I remembered Summit saying something about that, I also remembered one of the teachers in the staff room of the school I substituted in saying something about working at a school that ran IOP similarly to what Williamson was describing.

“Not *that* extensively,” Williamson replied, making use of italics. “The way we used to do it involved way more work experience than the IOP curriculum recommended.”<sup>9</sup>

“Why so much then?” I asked, the question being so obvious it practically asked itself. There was a long pause before I got a reply to that one.

“Basically, we couldn’t get the kids in the school’s shop facilities a lot of the time. The IOP certificate required the students do forty credits or a thousand hours of occupational courses, which was a lot. It would have meant making room for the IOP kids for half the day in the school’s shops for several of their semesters of high school. The programs of studies were different between, say, an IOP welding course and a regular education welding course, and the school often had high enrolment at the regular education level, enough to fill the classes to the cap all day long. Also the IOP kids weren’t exactly seen as the sort of students teachers would want to go out of their way to work with. So, for the most part, the IOP kids had to be sent elsewhere to get their occupational credits.”

---

<sup>9</sup> See Alberta Education (1992, p. 9). The program of studies for the occupational course component of IOP recommend that only 20% of a student’s instruction should come through community partnerships at the grade 10 level, 40% at the grade 11 level and 60% at the grade 12 level.

“That’s a damn shame,” I wrote. “The kids who might have needed the shop environment most badly being steered away like that.” I thought of the beautiful shop facilities at Williamson’s school and the slow learners who were locked out of them. Then I thought of the now-closed schools Colleen Birdseye had spoken of that specialized in IOP and how the shop classes at those schools must have been specifically designed for the inclusion of IOP students.

“It wasn’t quite as bad as that,” Williamson clarified. “It wasn’t so much a conspiracy to exclude the IOP kids from the shop classrooms. A lot of them did end up taking a class or two in one of the shops when they just enrolled in them *as* regular kids, not as IOP students. Some of them did okay, though all the bookwork that went with the courses was always a problem. It was more like an unwillingness to teach the IOP curriculum in the shops, figure out a way to teach both levels in the same place at the same time, to make getting the IOP kids through with the specific course credits they needed a priority of any sort. And, like I said, the courses were different; the IOP mechanics looked a lot different than the regular CTS mechanics,<sup>10</sup> teaching both at the same time would have been a tough balancing act. But not impossible - one time a shop teacher made an exception for an IOP kid he got along really well with. That student *did* end up working in one of the school shops for IOP course credits and it went okay. But as a rule it didn’t work out well. So, the students ended up doing the occupational component off campus mostly.”

I wasn’t sure if Williamson’s clarification consoled me or not; was failure to accommodate any better than intent to exclude? If they got one favored student through IOP using the school shops, would it really have been that hard to get the rest of them through this way too? I also wondered how much attention Williamson was paying to his class as he typed his detailed replies. They were probably hanging from the rafters by now. But it wasn’t any of my business and this was useful information he was providing. We’d exhausted that topic, so I asked another question. “How did it go doing these credits off campus, with employers?” I asked.

“Sometimes great. A lot of the students got what they were supposed to out of it. Some of the students responded really well. If we matched the kids up with good employers who really mentored them well, and found work they were well suited-to, the students gained a lot of confidence both at their worksites and back at school. Some of the students thrived so much at their worksites it was like they were completely different people than the sullen pupils we saw in the morning – they’d greet us with smiles and proudly show us around their worksites like they belonged there. With all that interaction in more adult-oriented environments, many of the students left IOP with more confidence than I think they would have had if they just stayed in regular education. Some of the kids kept on working with their employers after graduation earning full-time positions, even journeyman tickets eventually, if they were working in the trades.”

“That’s great,” I typed. Maybe there was something to this approach. “Sounds like in these cases, your school found a very effective way to work the IOP requirements around your limited resources.”

---

<sup>10</sup> See Alberta Education (2010a). 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.

A longer pause this time before the answer popped up. “Maybe I’m being too nostalgic,” Williamson admitted. “There were lots of problems too. It was hard for IOP students who wanted to do extra-curricular activities with the rest of the kids in the school because they’d have to leave at the start of the lunch break to get to their worksites on time and, typically, couldn’t make it back to the school in time for the dismissal bell at the end of the day. So it set them apart and actually reinforced the stereotype that the IOP kids were too apathetic to be involved in the school teams and clubs because those were the times when the clubs and teams met. There were some employers that, I felt, exploited the students, who they didn’t have to pay under the rules of the program. They just gave them repetitive jobs and never taught them any specialized skills they could take away from the placements. Some employers did their best but just weren’t really set up that well to deal with student workers, despite their good intentions. And, other than learning how to function in a workplace, the actual curricular learning was often pretty dubious. At the start of a placement we usually didn’t even have any idea what occupational courses we should credit the students for at the end. We’d just sort of pick the closest curriculum to what their employers ended up asking them to do at work, and, if none of them fit, we’d choose the most generic of the courses, *Business Services* I think it was called.<sup>11</sup> As an educational enterprise it was often pretty random. And some of the students just weren’t ready for the world of work. What do you do with a slow learner, appropriately placed in IOP, who is scheduled to go to work every afternoon but who keeps getting fired from his worksites?”

That was a good question. “Send him back to regular education?” I speculated.

“Where he’s already shown he can’t function? Where there are few classes offered he can have success in?” Williamson asked back. A second later I got another message, this one answering the riddle. “Every semester administration withdrew IOP students from school because they couldn’t function at their worksites, even if they were passing their on-campus classes in the morning. It was against the rules to be a half-time student in grades ten and eleven.”

“Weren’t they all half time students?” I asked.

“Half-time at school / half at work, not half-time in classes / half-time causing trouble in the halls or parking lot,” Williamson wrote back.

That seemed to me a pretty ruthless way to deal with struggling students, only offering the occupational part of the program through one mode of delivery and kicking out anyone who didn’t match up well. It reminded me of the nightmare I had about the boxing and slicing machine.<sup>12</sup> I wondered how well I would have done in IOP under this setup. I’d been fired several times for insubordination until I finally found an employer more tolerant of my wisecracks – myself. Even so, I was usually on thin ice with me too. This was all interesting, but it occurred to me we were discussing a program that no longer existed so I moved on. “Is it different under K & E?”

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (p. 3)

<sup>12</sup> Williamson (2016b, p. 20)

Several seconds went by and then an answer came back again. “Yes. They reduced the amount of occupational credits K & E students have to get and better aligned it with regular education. The K & E students can now use regular education CTS classes as part of their Certificate of Achievement,<sup>13</sup> which is a pretty good reason for the teachers to include them in these classes and try to work with them, and the shop teachers often do a good job of meeting their needs now. We use our learning centre area to help them with the bookwork and accommodate them on the tests in the CTS classes when we need to – that helps too. And even if they couldn’t do the CTS classes the new K & E occupational classes are the same amount of credits which might make it easier to teach them simultaneously, though I haven’t often experienced that as necessary.” This chafed a little against Summit’s statement that the changes from IOP to K & E were unnecessary; in Williamson’s school it seemed to have made a difference in getting the slow learners in the shops they should have been in to begin with. Then again, the prior method of delivering IOP Williamson had described as his school’s approach sounded like it fell short of fully embracing IOP as the program had been intended, so gleaning any meaning from comparison might have been unfair. I also wondered if inclusion in the CTS classes was really going as seamlessly as Williamson suggested. One of the teachers I’d spoken to earlier had complained about how bookish the courses were.

Fearful that Williamson might have to go at any minute, I shelved my follow-up questions about the CTS classes and asked for a clarification on something else instead. “So there’s no more work experience?”

Another short pause and then an answer. “There’s still a little – the Certificate still requires one hundred and twenty-five hours of work experience, which is more achievable than a thousand, I guess. But the other way we could really focus on getting them good placements and helping them keep them. The time was built into our teaching schedules. We’re too busy teaching them classes now to have time for this. Now we just have to hope they can keep ANY part-time job or volunteering gig for that amount of time to fulfill the requirement. We don’t really have time anymore to call up employers and find placements for the students, or monitor the placements very carefully to make sure the kids are learning anything. For the students who would have benefited from doing a lot of work experience with a variety of good employers, and from having a constant teacher presence to advocate for them in the workplace, I think this is a loss.”

From what I could tell from what the students at the other school said, someone had helped them find work experience positions, so maybe it wasn’t as hard to find a way to help the students with this requirement as Williamson suggested. But I didn’t want to insult him just then so I went for a more neutral question. “Why are you too busy teaching the students their classes now?”

“The length of time spent in the core classes doubled from IOP to K & E.”

“Is that for the better?”

“Maybe for some. I guess if your plan is to boost your skills and move back into regular education doing more K & E English, Science, Social or Math to get ready for the transition makes sense, but for some of the students I think it’s too much. They’ve suffered a lot in these courses

---

<sup>13</sup> Alberta Education (2013, p. 23)

already by the time they hit high school. They'd have been better off doing the shorter classes and more work experience."

I remembered what Summit had said about the core classes being on a "need to know" basis in IOP. I asked Williamson, "What are the K & E core classes like?"

A reply came back. "We always ended up teaching the student as much as the curriculum, under both IOP and K & E. I mean we end up trying to help them figure out things they are wondering about or struggling with as much as following the curriculum. But there's definitely less occupational stuff in the new K & E programs of study. And the cores make no attempt to really integrate the subject with the occupational side anymore. It's more like a watered-down version of the regular education curriculum."

"Was it healthier and safer for slow learners under IOP, or is it better under K & E at your school?" I asked, going for a big question this time.

"I don't know," Williamson wrote back. "Despite the problems with all the work experience, that transformative thing that happened – when the students sometimes really found a place to belong at the worksites – that doesn't happen anymore. Maybe K & E still improves their motivation simply by giving them classes they can have some success at, but the changes in the students aren't as dramatic. Then again, IOP, at least the way we ran it, didn't work for everyone. We lost kids who needed it, who couldn't handle the high school diploma route, but who didn't fit with our model of delivery. But we lose kids this way too with K & E, we aren't really offering an educational experience that is different enough from the one that's failed them. And it looks so similar to regular education; a lot of schools in my district seem to be questioning why it's needed at all lately. K & E is pretty much dead in a lot of schools in the district lately and, like I said, I constantly have to explain why I think it's a bad idea to combine the K & E students and kids from the next level up in the same core classes."

I wondered if I should tell Williamson that one group he'd have to explain that to were the students I'd met who said they preferred their blended science class to their discrete K & E social studies class. But then I surprised myself by remembering a technicality I'd learned – the tier of science the K & E kids were blended in with didn't have a diploma exam. The teacher probably had more wiggle room for everyone. Then again, Colleen Birdseye had said she taught English, a course sequence that ended in a diploma exam, in blended classes where students could receive credits at the IOP or the regular education level. But she'd done this at a school that specialized in IOP so maybe she'd found a way to give the IOP level students what they needed while enriching the experience for the few who could handle it. Maybe this was different than watering down a regular education curriculum for a handful of IOP students in a class.

Another message popped up. Williamson had been doing some musing of his own and now offered this statement. "IOP had problems. But everywhere I look, K & E is dying. And I'm not sure there's anything out there to replace it or address the needs of slow learners. That's why I hired you, remember?" I read that last sentence as a little cranky. Maybe the guilt of all the students he'd seen withdrawn from school was getting to him. Or maybe I was wrong on his tone. It was hard to tell with email. "I have to go," Williamson then wrote tersely, leaving me to

wonder if he was signing off to deal with a student behavior crisis in the class that his distraction with my questions had allowed. But then, as an afterthought, he sent me a few links to review so I figured he was fine. It probably wasn't the first time Williamson's K & E students had been ignored by a teacher but I hoped that, at least in the class he taught, it was a rare event.

The first link was to an article that came out right when IOP was being rolled out at a Calgary high school. Though they said they appreciated the alternative programming, parents and students were complaining about the IOP Certificate of Achievement as a credential that wouldn't take the students anywhere. A parent said it suggested the government regarded IOP students as "second-class citizens".<sup>14</sup> I was familiar with this complaint by now. What did "pull me up short",<sup>15</sup> though, were the comments that Jim Dinning, the then Minister of Education, made about the differences between the IOP certificate of achievement and the high school diploma. Seeming to confirm this parent's impression, he agreed, "they are not equal diplomas,"<sup>16</sup> and went on to imply the certificate was symbolic of an inferior and perhaps even still incomplete high school career on the part of the student:

It is like a foot race [in which] everyone works like Hell to get to the finish line but not everyone does. We as a society have standards of achievement, standards of results. And in a society which admires competition, not everyone gets the same size trophy.<sup>17</sup>

"Wow, what an asshole," I thought, at least that was how he revealed himself to me in those statements. Summit's comments to the effect of "if you treat them like dummies" echoed through my head.

A message warned me that I had only ten more minutes of browsing time. I could have paid for more but there were other corners I needed to peek in. I opened some more of the links Williamson had sent. The next article was from 1992 and described the closure of all the junior high Integrated Occupational Programs in Calgary's vocational high schools.<sup>18</sup> The chief superintendent at the time said that the current philosophy of Alberta Education was to "integrate all students into regular classrooms wherever possible be they mentally handicapped, integrated occupational students, or whatever," and that "Alberta Education [was] revamping its technological program to concentrate less on specific job skills and more on general preparation for the world of work."<sup>19</sup> As a detective I had issues with both of these statements. From what special education history I'd learned, I knew at the time the superintendent made these statements his school district had many segregated programs for students with disabilities beyond IOP that were under no threat of closure due to changes in inclusive education thought and policy. The other issue I had was that I knew from reading the IOP manual and from talking to Summit that generic work skills were always supposed to be the emphasis. I read that another trustee at the meeting suggested instead of pursuing vocational education using the school's shop facilities,

---

<sup>14</sup> Ross (1989, p. B3)

<sup>15</sup> See Gadamer (1989, p. 268). Gadamer used this phrase to describe the initially alienating hermeneutic experience of encountering a text that thwarts one's expectations.

<sup>16</sup> Ross (1989, p. B3)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ruttan (1992, p. B1)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

that IOP students should be placed with employers in the community to learn these skills instead. I remembered what Williamson had told me about the ups and downs of work experience education. I wondered if the reasons for closure really had more to do with economics than student learning and remembered the statements made in the 1920s critique of a vocational education program that it simply wasn't worthwhile to invest so many resources in such a small number of struggling students.

I opened a link to a similar but fairly recent article, one that came out twenty-eight years after the one I'd just read. This one was about the outright closure of the Calgary school district's vocational schools which I'd assumed, despite losing their junior high students, had remained open to high school IOP, and later K & E, students in the interim.<sup>20</sup> Enrolment was dropping in the schools and both were well under capacity. I could see, economically, the operating costs being a problem for the school district in this context. A superintendent stated that it cost twice as much to educate students in these high schools as it did in other high schools in the city. He also said that there was a "movement" to offer career skills training in all high schools, not just in congregated settings.<sup>21</sup> I found "movement" a vague term. Certainly there had, historically, been schools that specialized in vocational programming, but it had also seemed to me that offering career skills had been a part of the mandate of every public education school for quite a while.<sup>22</sup> If all schools were always supposed to be doing this, why was this supposed movement so recent? The article also quoted the school council chairwoman with an opposing view on the closure, "with seventy-eight percent of its students requiring special education modifications, [this school's] students are "complex learners" who may struggle in a traditional school."<sup>23</sup> She also said "It's about students with high needs that are at risk and finding a place where they feel safe. That's important. It's not just about where they can get their courses."<sup>24</sup> Colleen Birdseye had mentioned that her students had protested their school's closure and, sure enough this article mentioned that students from these schools had gathered outside the school district's head office to protest.

A student protester was quoted describing the flexible and patient approach of a school scheduled for closure, an approach the article implied, students were unlikely to encounter at other high schools. "This school gives you chances, they don't give up on you."<sup>25</sup> Another student predicted, "If they close this school, there's so many kids who are going to drop out of school."<sup>26</sup> Williamson had also sent me a link to an editorial about these school closures in which the author had opined that, in comparison to academic programming and athletics, vocational education students tend to get the "short end of the stick" when it comes to school funding priorities.<sup>27</sup> The author had also suggested the impact of these school closures on students needed to be closely studied, especially given the provincial high school dropout rate.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> McGinnis (2010, p. C.5)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Mathew (1984)

<sup>23</sup> McGinnis (2010, p. C5)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sears (2010, p. A11)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

I wondered if the student's prediction was right, if these school closures resulted in more slow learners leaving school early. I did remember something Colleen Birdseye had said about how she thought some of her K & E students did after being moved to new schools following the closures. She said she didn't think they coped well with what they saw as stricter attendance and behaviour policies at their new schools and felt lost and anonymous.

The computer warned me it was logging me off in one minute, but I'd opened most of Williamson's links and felt that I'd accomplished what I needed to. I felt closer to slow learners than I had at any prior time in this investigation. I'd seen slow learners (or students labelled as slow learners) at two high schools and read about them at other schools. I'd read about the programs that made them, by the claims of their teachers and parents, but also in their own words, feel 'at home'. I still didn't know whether slow learners were born or produced by schools, or even if much of the categorical information about them was that accurate, I'd just have to tell Williamson I'd been unable to ascertain these things. After researching these programs, the slow learners in IOP/K & E did at that moment seem to me to be a real category of students, at least in the sense that the creator of IOP, Matthew Summit had explained them to me, as an at-risk group of students with a certain pattern of school failure and deserving recipients of additional resources and attention. And, from what I could tell, despite the efforts of many of the educators I met, slow learners remained a category of students for whom these protective interventions were often half-hearted, underfunded, poorly planned, and under continual threat of outright closure. I couldn't hope that this investigation would save all of them, but I could tell Williamson what I'd learned about the nature of the danger they were in. Williamson, I thought, should keep fighting for the K & E classes that despite their problems were the best thing currently going for slow learners. I just needed to shore up a few more details on what K & E looked like right then, and figure out how things might look for this educational category in the future. I could do this by talking to the curriculum leaders I planned to see next. Then I could prepare my final report for Williamson. Another interview and then – case closed.

I logged off of the computer and made my way to the Buick. On the short walk my mind began to wander in odd directions. I felt a nagging doubt if it was as easy as this after all. Maybe IOP and K & E were like the medications they were always selling on TV, said to dramatically relieve some troubling symptoms but, then, there it comes – a list of potential side effects, long as a mile of ticker tape, scrolls across the screen.

Then a presence I'd not sensed was suddenly upon me, crashing into me, knocking me to the ground and falling with me. I wished I'd been more alert as I exited the cafe. I was overwhelmed with the familiar sour stench of my attacker from the library, and just as I was about to lash out and mount some sort of defence, a large hand holding a rag went up to my face and I tasted the sick sweetness of chloroform. As I lurched woozily for my bearings the words 'case closed' repeated in my head, and then became 'caste closed' and then 'category closed' as I replayed Veronika Sternwood's passionate and warped defense of educational sorting, and wondered if it had had a delayed effect on me. I realized there was more to this case than the simple whodunit of program closures, and I'd nearly betrayed the slow learners by forgetting what I'd learned at the museum of classification, from Smart Ass Cripple, and from a learning disabled-labelled

student I'd spoken to recently. Then the phrase became 'casket closed' as I wondered if I'd come to this knowledge too late. Shadows flitted across my world, and then the blackness was total.

## XXVI

Regaining consciousness, I slowly took in my surroundings. I had been seated, with my hands bound in front of me, on a leather couch in somebody's office. The mounted head of a white-tailed buck on the wall stared incuriously at me from above. Along the side wall stood a tableau of a stuffed grizzly menacing a stuffed muskrat which gazed glassily up at the predator. My eyes fixed on a large man sitting at a desk. His square head was just a little smaller than the grizzly's, his white crew cut hair stood up like hundreds of tiny daggers. He had a wrestler's neck and the rolled-up sleeves of his sweater revealed forearms so thick it looked like he'd had additional hunks of meat implanted under the skin. One large hand held a highball glass two fingers full of something that would have normally looked appealing to me. The other hand held a book entitled *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy*.<sup>29</sup> His piercing grey eyes scanned the pages. He made a face like he had just smelled sour gas, looked at me, and when he saw that I was awake tossed the book into a trash can beside his desk. It settled with a tinny thud.

"Nice title, stupid book. Not what I thought it was going to be about at all." He had a flat tone of voice save for bit of a growl at the end of the sentence. The hand that held the book reached into his desk and produced a bottle, which he waved at me questioningly. I shook my head woozily. I try not to drink with villains on principle, though I sometimes do in practice. This time, with the sick tickling the back of my throat it was easy to hold firm. He shrugged and put the bottle back in his desk.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I'm Maddox Paine, the Chairman of SPEHC," he said and then slowly walked me through the acronym. "Special Private Executive for Healthy Competition. The 'H' is silent."

"Why?" I asked. Even in my dazed state that sounded ridiculous.

"Sounds better, I guess. Besides, it's sort of assumed. Competition is always healthy," he replied.

"Who do you work for?"

"We work for ourselves of course, but we can be found in all institutions. Wherever competition is threatened we assist."

"To make it fair?"

"To make it healthy. Healthy isn't always fair," he said gesturing to the tableau of animals.

"Does Veronika Sternwood work with you?" I asked.

---

<sup>29</sup> Tulgan (2009)

He considered his response for a minute and replied, “Not as such but I have a lot of respect for the work her agency does. Our agendas often overlap. Categories are good for healthy competition.”

“What do you want with me?” I asked.

He looked fondly at me for a minute, which was frightening, and then spoke. “You’ve been sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong ever since you arrived here. We’ve tried to remove you from this situation several times, but you’re tenacious, and lucky. You appear to be a survivor, Mr. Hunter.”

I wanted to give credit where it was due and own up the fact that on this particular peculiar case, I had often been helped during the severest dangers. I thought, however, that might lower me in his estimation so I stayed quiet.

Paine continued. “I admire you as a competitor, Mr. Hunter, but enough is enough. The game is up, and you’ve lost. The education system, like every system, needs winners and losers. Slow learners function, necessarily, as the losers of educational categorization. We need you to stop interfering with the natural order of things. You’ve investigated your last case.”

I didn’t like the sound of that for a variety of reasons. “I’m not interfering. I’m just looking for slow learners,” I protested.

“Please Mr. Hunter,” he chuckled. “Have you ever taken a case in which your original purpose *wasn’t* overtaken by your quaint notions of justice?” He poured some liquor into his sneer to reward himself for that question.

He had me there, if he wanted to see it that way, so instead of responding, I took the offensive. Like Veronika Sternwood, this was a talkative villain, and I was hoping to use that to my advantage. “What do you mean, slow learners function as the ‘losers’?”

“There’s the battle of the labels, for example. Quite the cockfight,” he replied.

“The impairment pecking order?” I echoed, recalling the phrase. I looked around the room out of the corner of my eye and saw we were the same distance to the door so there was no use making a quick break for it. I assumed even if I made it, he had a monster on the other side waiting for me.

“Exactly,” he confirmed, staring hard at me to redirect my gaze to him. “As soon as there was any distinction between the labels, the slow learners had already lost out to learning disabled students. In the battle for academic accommodations slow learners lose out. Learning disabled students are thought to have at least average intelligence, often above average. Some learning disabled students are even gifted.<sup>30</sup> Slow learners by definition are not average. Learning disabled is wiping out slow learner in the prestige game and the accommodation game – look at how

---

<sup>30</sup> Alberta Education (2004b, p. 35)

often the differences between the two labels are pointed out – always at the expense of slow learners.”

I thought of the in-service Williamson and I had attended. I felt sick and not just from the chloroform hangover.

“But why does one label have to be better, why does there have to be a battle for accommodations?” I asked.

“Resources are limited. Categories have to vie for the title of most deserving. And when it comes to reasoning, slow learners are less capable, not differently capable like the learning disabled, so accommodations would give them an unfair advantage. And giving them more resources to support their learning would be a waste. Like buying a five gallon pail you could only ever fill to three gallons.” This was the most inclusive villain I’d ever met in his acceptance of learning disabilities and the need for academic accommodation, but that didn’t make the social Darwinist landscape he was including them in sound any less depraved to me. Still, I’d read similar statements about slow learners. Before I could comment on his statements he introduced another example.

“In the battle for completion credentials, the slow learners in K & E don’t even make the final cut. They don’t write diploma exams so they don’t get high school diplomas. They’re first out in the round robin. They are eliminated, so they get the lesser certificate, and they’re lucky to get that.”

That sounded a lot like the “foot-race” quote from former Education Minister Jim Dinning, I thought. I needed to offer up something in rebuttal. “I thought diploma exams were about maintaining teaching standards not fostering competition,” I said.<sup>31</sup> By now I knew better than this, but thought I could draw out more conversation by taking this position. Whatever he was planning to do to me, he couldn’t do it when we were still talking.

“That might be part of it, Mr. Hunter,” he responded. “Certainly the results can be an excellent stick to flog teachers with, to ensure they are doing their best to keep the system competitive worldwide.<sup>32</sup> But you are naïve to think that’s all of it. Look at how the results are announced, doesn’t it all remind you of other cultic competitions like the Academy Awards, March Madness, quarterly market reports, heavyweight title fights, the Stanley Cup Playoffs, the Superbowl, or the Olympics? Look at how schools are ranked by the Fraser Institute and in the media based on these results. This series of exams is an annual competition, the announcing of the results an annual spectacle!”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Stewart (2004, p. 177)

<sup>32</sup> See Melnyk (2012, p. 1). In 2010 then Education Minister Dave Hancock issued a press release indicating the Ministry of Education was concerned and would be investigating a drop in student achievement in the written portion of the English 30-1 diploma exams.

<sup>33</sup> Graham and Neu (2009, p. 27)

“Those other things you mention are explicitly competitions. Aren’t the exams simply supposed to encourage all students and schools to achieve better?” I asked, repeating my query in other words.

“This may be the stated purpose, Mr. Hunter, but think about how students classified as below average, average, and above often internalize and continue to reproduce these results.<sup>34</sup> The competition teaches the students where they belong. In the case of your K & E students who don’t even write the exam, they are below the below-average grade,” he sneered.

“But K & E isn’t supposed to be about ‘sorting’, it’s supposed to be about providing a more practical educational alternative for students who struggle. It’s about finding career paths for students who learn better when working with their hands.” I knew I was just parroting the program descriptors I’d read on this, but wanted to hear what Paine had to say about it.

He smiled his ugly smile and replied, “Your slow learners are losing the battle for careers too. There isn’t a single trades program for which the K & E certificate or any of the -4 classes are mentioned as pre-requisites.<sup>35</sup> Someone from the building council the other day was telling me he thought with trades becoming so technical ‘if students can’t make the cut to go to university or community college, maybe we’re a little doubtful that we want them either.’<sup>36</sup> There’s even a credential called ‘Tech Prep’ that students can be granted on their high schools diplomas that certifies that they have extensive training in a career area. Students who only have done academic coursework at the K & E level are not eligible for the Tech Prep Credential. It was deliberately planned to leave them out.”<sup>37</sup>

There was little I could say in response to that, it was consistent with what many of my other sources had indicated. It seemed when K & E programming was effective it boosted students’ confidence, which was promising for future employment. And if a K & E student was fortunate enough to obtain meaningful work experience placements, or connect well to one of the careers courses on-campus, that seemed promising too. But when it came to the programs Paine had mentioned, the system was too rigid to make a place for them. I remembered Williamson’s story of the apprentice registering for his technical training, how his way was almost barred because his transcript was tainted with K & E credits.<sup>38</sup> Things *were* stacked against slow learners in this way. It was sick that Paine found this a good thing, but there wasn’t much for me to say. Fortunately, Paine didn’t require my input just then. He was on a roll.

“As I mentioned, with limited resources your slow learners are losing the battle for funding too. Various programs and populations of students compete at every level to be funding priorities. How do you think K & E does in this battle?”

“Tell me,” I said, though in truth I already had a sense.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. (9)

<sup>35</sup> Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training (2015)

<sup>36</sup> Taylor and Lehmann (2002, p. 151)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Williamson (2016a, p. 5)

“K & E barely survived the transition from IOP. In the middle of the program reforms, the Department of Education sent a letter to principals saying it was scrapping the curriculum writing project for the new K & E courses.”<sup>39</sup>

I had a rebuttal for this. “But they must have changed their minds because they *did* eventually follow through and release the new series of classes, I’ve seen them. Besides, K & E students are still funded for more per credit than regular education students.”

“So what?” he sneered again. “Aside from that top-up on credit funding, which doesn’t amount to much with so few students taking K & E, it’s barely funded at all. Other than a brief honeymoon period when IOP first came out, it never has been.<sup>40</sup> I’m sure you saw the recent history on K & E schools being closed, you saw the statistics on how few students enroll in K & E. The program is losing on every level. Even when there is a little money available for districts to develop resources or offer teacher in-servicing for K & E, it often isn’t spent.<sup>41</sup> Slow learners are not a priority.”

“If you are working to close down K & E,” I said switching topics, “I’m not a strong threat to you. I’m still unsure what should happen to it myself.”

“Hunter!” he barked, “you haven’t been listening. I don’t want to close down K & E, I want to keep it exactly like it is. *Somebody* has to lose at this game. For the concept of priority to have any meaning you have to have low priorities. In a bureaucratic system one has to choose between requests to approve and requests to, *regrettably*,” he said that last word sarcastically, “decline. That’s how you show restraint. The profile of an educational category depends as much on who you exclude from it as it does on who you let in. The dropout rate is troubling and *regrettable*,” more sarcasm on those last two words, “but it also shows the system is tough enough, that we’re not letting *everyone* through. At every level someone has to lose.”

“It’s public education,” I objected. “Every student is supposed to be a priority.”

“Every student gets a shot,” he replied. “We set up contests of merit and sort out the winners and losers. This is all sanctified in the Department’s latest statement on the direction it is taking education in. *Inspiring Education* says that all of tomorrow’s students need to be entrepreneurial and competitive.<sup>42</sup> What do you suppose that means?”

This was the first I was hearing of this initiative and I thought I’d have to investigate it further if I was able to escape, but there was no way I was going to admit that to Paine. I shifted the topic again instead. “But privilege interferes with the competition; some slow learners lack the social

---

<sup>39</sup> Skytt (2002, para. 6)

<sup>40</sup> Taylor and Lehmann (2002, p. 146)

<sup>41</sup> See Central Alberta Regional Consortium (2010, p. 5). In 2009 / 2010 a consortium of central Alberta school districts, supported with funding from Alberta Education and the Alberta Teacher’s Association, set aside \$10,000 for professional development and in-servicing of K & E teachers. None of it was spent. Conversely, \$15,000 was set aside for professional development for special education teachers with expenditures of \$39,577 significantly exceeding this allocation.

<sup>42</sup> Alberta Education (2009a, p. 6)

capital to thrive the way the system is set up. So does discrimination about learning styles. Some of them learn in ways that are undervalued,” I pointed out.

“Some of my colleagues are reluctant to admit it, but the truth is that privilege is part of merit, competitively speaking. So is having at least normal ability for the most part. So is learning in the ways that are the most valued,” he said simply.

“But diversity is healthy,” I protested. “How do you get it under the conditions you’re talking about?”

“If a difference is good enough it will find its niche, maybe even become the new normal,” he insisted.

“That’s still not diversity!” I protested.

“It’s what works – competition – it sorts and purifies.” He was raising his voice as he shortened his sentences.

“You’re demented,” I blurted. I’d lost patience too, despite myself. “Why would anyone hire you?” I had to ask.

“I didn’t say we worked *for* institutions. We work *in* them and *on* them,” Paine replied with a sigh. Then he glanced down at his meaty wrist and consulted a large, Swiss Army-looking timepiece that had so many dials on it I had no idea how he could make out the actual time of day. He downed the rest of his drink. That seemed like a bad sign. I have no more time for you, Hunter,” he announced. “I thought you were a worthy competitor, deserving of some hospitality even in defeat. But you just don’t get it.” With that he pressed a button on his desk and a huge trench-coated figure walked into his office. It was my assailant from the library. The smell left no doubt.

“This is Xeno, I believe you’ve met,” he said. “He’s something of an anomaly. He has a rare disorder that badly inhibits the sloughing off of skin.<sup>43</sup> He’s only a medium-sized man under there, but as you’ve noted carrying around all that extra dermis has given him awesome strength. He used to work as an entertainer at carnivals performing mighty feats and extreme piercings on himself, but he’s something of an introvert and never much liked it. When I met him in Shanghai, I told him if he came and worked for us I’d have our lab try to develop an antagonistic bacteria that might help him overcome his disorder.”

Xeno did indeed seem introverted. He’d said nothing when Paine was introducing him. Verbose as he was, Paine probably liked a quiet assistant. Xeno had other qualifications too. I could verify the claims to his strength and his loose, fleshy, shapeless face would make any witness that reported his appearance sound crazy. And I doubted his outer layer of flesh would yield much for fingerprints.

---

<sup>43</sup> This ridiculous combination of symptoms and resultant super powers are not meant to resemble any known impairment or disability. It is meant to address the sorts of implausible and monstrous conditions that authors often inflict on villainous henchmen in pulp fiction and comic books.

At Paine's bidding, Xeno yanked me up from the sofa, leaving my arms tied. Paine got up and left his office and Xeno shoved me ahead, following Paine. We were on the top floor of a building that, aside from Paine's aggressively developed office, was still under construction. It looked like it had been in this state for some time. It smelled of drywall dust and was illuminated by temporary floodlights but no one was working. Paine led us down the stairs and Xeno shoved me along with just enough force to remind me who was boss and just enough care that I didn't tumble away from him.

Noticing that Paine was far enough ahead to be out of earshot of whispering and desperate to gain any possible advantage, I harnessed what I had learned from my travels in the disability museum and from Smart Ass Cripple and began to tell Xeno how badly I thought he was being exploited in his thankless and stereotypical role as a disfigured henchman. It was a long staircase, and while my legs did not appreciate this, it allowed me the opportunity to harangue Xeno at length with this whispered opinion. All the while, Paine did a determined and oblivious march down the stairs ahead of us. All I was hoping for was a little distraction, enough to surprise and briefly overtake my captors, an effort I suspected would be in vain but that my code told me I had to try. Xeno had a surprise of his own, though. I wasn't even sure he'd been listening, but he suddenly stopped in the middle of the staircase; the way he was looking at me, I was sure he was going to throw me down the rest of the way, but he simply said, "I'm not comfortable with my role in the story." Then, without another word, he walked down ahead of us and out of sight. He was apparently only literally thick-skinned, I reflected, or maybe he'd been having similar thoughts all along and my words were the tipping point. Paine and I watched his departure in disbelief. His loud, heavy steps continued; I heard a door slam shut and I knew he was gone.

It would have been better for me if, instead of leaving the scene altogether, the disfigured henchman had a dramatic change of heart and used some of his strength and indignation to save the hero, but I supposed he might not be comfortable with that role in the story either. It looked like it was up to me. I recovered from my surprise more quickly than Paine and threw myself, like a bowling ball at the back of his legs. He fell back, cracking his huge head on one of the stairs and I fell forward, wrenching my shoulder as I rolled. Paine lay in a stunned lump, moaning loudly and cursing, but I had the good fortune of being able to get to my feet. I grabbed the railing on the stairs for balance and took a risk with my injured leg by kicking his cruel face, following through like it was a football at kickoff time, all teed up just for me. A jolt of pain shot through my leg, but it felt good anyways. Paine stopped moaning. He just lay there rasping. I stepped carefully over him, and despite the old wound on my leg and the new one on my shoulder from the tackle I had thrown, I ran down the rest of the stairs. I had to put some serious distance between me and Paine. I knew I'd still be no match for him when he recuperated enough to pursue me.

I made it out of the building and tried to figure out where I was. I saw from the warehouses and a junkyard to the West of the building that I was in some sort of industrial district. It must have been on the outskirts of the city, because to the East, a two-lane, poorly paved road was all that stood between me and a dense forest. I ran across the road and into the forest, following a vaguely trafficked trail. Risking the loss of a second to look back, I saw I wasn't leaving much for tracks on the frozen ground so felt it safe to stay on the path. I continued running as well as I

could with my injuries, stumbling painfully from time to time on stones and tree roots and slipping on ice and loose snow. When I was too exhausted to run, I fell to walking, and then I neared a point at which even walking was difficult. Despite the recent improvement in temperature, there was still enough winter cold to get to me. I saw a cleared section of the forest that revealed a little hill upon which, I was surprised to see, sat a cabin, or more of a hut really. There were footprints in the snow and frozen mud leading up to it. I didn't know what I would find in the cabin, but the only two options out in the forest seemed to be exposure or apprehension, so I followed the footprints. In a small cleared yard, I saw an axe stuck in a stump. I pulled the axe out and began to use its blade, awkwardly, to unbind my hands.

It wasn't the sharpest of tools, and breaking through the rope took some effort. When I was finally done I caught my breath and looked up to see two old men staring at me from the small porch of the cabin. They were holding what appeared to be antique Mauser rifles.

## XXVII

The first man was dressed in rustic clothes. He was wearing short, dark pants of a coarse fibre, work boots, and long grey breeches. A thick brown shirt peeked out of a jacket with broad lapels and a militaristic collar. His piercing eyes glared at me in what I took as a challenge; his lips were turned upwards on an otherwise square moustache in what appeared to me as a humorless sort of smugness. His companion was more formally dressed in slacks, a corduroy blazer, and a red woolen tie. There was something proprietary about the first man – I took him to be the cabin owner. With the officious expression he wore, he looked particularly disturbing standing at the ready, locked, loaded and aiming straight at my heart. Despite being armed as well, his companion smiled slightly as if intrigued by the event of my arrival at the cabin.

Desperately, knowing that, despite their reception of me, I was exhausted and needed rest and shelter if I was to survive, I slowly walked towards them holding my hands up in surrender. Nearing the porch where they stood, I asked if I could come in to warm up. I claimed I was out hiking and had become lost in the woods. I saw, as they exchanged glances with each other that they had some doubts about my story. I supposed very little in my comportment suggested I had been out for a nature walk. The man I took to be the cabin owner spoke to the other in German. I caught the word 'polizisten,' and saw his guest nod and move towards the cabin. All in all, I had not been well-treated by the authorities of this city and had no desire to sample their hospitality again, moreover the longer I waited outside the greater the risk that Paine would hunt me down. Deciding to come clean, I called out to wait and said I was a private investigator on a case. Maintaining eye contact with the cabin owner, I asked if I could enter my pocket and get out my license to prove myself. He gave a slight nod and I very slowly and carefully got out my wallet and produced my I.D., feeling lucky Paine hadn't taken my wallet. I set it on the first stair of the porch. The companion took a few steps and bent to get it as the cabin owner continued to regard me warily from behind his rifle. They took turns scrutinizing my I.D. I begged permission to explain why I was truly at the cabin and received another microscopic nod from the cabin owner. I began to explain myself. The two listened intently but with different styles. The cabin owner was indignant. He made small adjustments to his rifle to continue bearing the weight of pointing it at me. He was ready at any minute to carry through on his intention to call the police and detain me in the yard until they came by, or to do worse. His guest grew increasingly curious,

eventually relaxing and letting his rifle hang by his side. I tried my best to be calm and expedient in the telling. Having explained how I became involved in the case and some of the dangers I'd encountered so far, I brought the story to my apprehension by Paine, my escape, and the present danger I was facing, given that it was almost inevitable that he would come looking for me. Something shifted slightly in the cabin owner's attitude at the mention of the social Darwinist in the industrial district, not necessarily a greater empathy for me but his face very briefly registered looks of disgust and then regret before he smoothed it into indignance again. After I had explained this part of my story, he finally lowered his rifle, spoke briefly to his companion who shrugged in apparent agreement and smiled. The cabin owner gestured toward the open door of his shelter.

Thanking my reluctant host profusely, I approached the cabin, I knocked some mud from my pants, removed my shoes and asked, deferentially, where I could set them so that they couldn't be seen from the porch. The cabin owner opened the door and gestured to a mat inside the cabin. I stepped into the cabin and set them on the mat alongside another pair of muddy boots that sat there drying, their heavy wetness, soiled leather, and worn innards speaking of their belonging not so much to the world of the cabin, but to the wintry forest that had marked them.<sup>44</sup> The cabin owner and the companion followed me in and shut the door. It was sparsely but functionally appointed inside. A kitchen and sitting room occupied most of the floor space to my left, and open doors to my right revealed two small bedrooms and a small study. A few windows provided the only relief from the wood paneling all around. A wood-burning stove in the kitchen heated the cabin itself and also the water for the coffee the two men had been drinking before my visit interrupted them. The steam from the tin percolator and two plain mugs on the thick, plank-style table billowed out into the cabin air. The warmth of the cabin nibbled at my cold fingers and toes. The companion asked the cabin owner something in German, received what sounded like an affirmative response, and invited me to sit at the table. I thanked them both and sat down, grateful to rest my weary limbs but also careful not to slouch in excessive familiarity. The companion went into another room, came back without his rifle and sat down to the right of me at the table. The cabin owner sat across from me with the Mauser resting on his lap. The companion seemed to ask for and receive further permission from the cabin owner, and then found another mug in the cupboard and offered me some coffee. I accepted, bowing and thanking both of them. It was good, lightly bitter, refreshing and warming. I knew I had been cold, but hadn't realized how thirsty I was.

It wasn't long after we were seated that I heard the whine of an All-Terrain Vehicle, followed by a putt-putt sound as it came to rest. I heard heavy steps and then a loud knock on the door. I looked imploringly at the host; he briefly considered things and then, with a look of annoyance, gestured towards the study. I crept into the room and quietly shut the door behind me. From the study I heard another door squeak slightly open, probably only a crack, and then Paine's voice. He was growling and slurring a little, maybe concussed from the kick I had delivered to his head. He described a man who looked like me and demanded of the cabin owner that he tell him if he had seen this man. He claimed this man had recently broken into his office and then fled the scene. My host, with equal brusqueness, told him "no" and slammed the door in his face. Paine pounded on the door again. This time I heard some footsteps in the cabin, and then a rummaging sound before the door squeaked again. There was a rough exchange of words. Paine said they

---

<sup>44</sup> See Heidegger (1978a, p. 159)

had to have seen me. The two men insisted no. Paine shouted they were liars. More shuffling, Paine trying to shove his way into the cabin, my hosts resisting on the other side of the door, I guessed. Worried, I opened the study door very slightly and risked a peek. As Paine kept shoving, my hosts suddenly quit resisting and the door swung open all the way. They each took a quick step back as Paine stumbled forwards, barely keeping his feet under him. He held a large revolver, but it was futile; my hosts had the drop on him and both were aiming rifles at a distance of six inches from his head. The cabin owner barked out orders. After a minute, Paine cursed and set his piece on the cabin floor and backed away with his hands up. I heard him start up his ATV and drive off.

I returned to the main room. The companion walked into another room with Paine's revolver, a .44 Magnum, and the rifle he himself had been using, stored them and sat down at the table. The cabin owner was already seated at the table, absently stroking the smooth stock of the rifle he still had out, like he was scratching his favorite dog behind the ear. I thanked my hosts and, thinking further introductions might be in order after the incident with Paine, somewhat awkwardly asked their names. The cabin owner gruffly introduced himself as Martin, his guest as Hans. I was prepared to take what I was given and ask for no more, but I felt funny having only their first names at my disposal. It seemed too familiar. Both of them spoke, drank coffee, and even sat in the custom of a grander era, one that I thought demanded formal address. Even so, maybe the correct ritual for being a guest in the cabin involved first names only, who was I to say?

Hans spoke, smiling, "I must thank you Max, for the opportunity you've just provided, to enact a Kantian morality experiment in real life.<sup>45</sup> I trust you think we chose correctly." I wasn't sure what he was talking about but smiled politely. I did, after all, appreciate their choice. Martin did look like he understood, but shot a disappointed look at Hans suggesting he was unimpressed with this attempt at levity. Hans caught the glance and looked like a chastened child. Hans continued with me more seriously. "I like the work you are doing on this case; I like how you are playing with this educational concept."

This pulled me up short a bit.<sup>46</sup> It wasn't what I thought I was doing. Despite my gratitude at the rescue and the hospitality, I felt I had to correct him. "With respect," I began, "I don't think I'm playing with anything. My work is more important than that. I'm looking for slow learners. My client is very worried about them."

"And just where do you think they will appear?" Martin demanded suddenly, staring intently at me in a manner that rubbed me the wrong way.

"I've found students who would be categorized as slow learners," I said, but then felt compelled to add, "but I'm still trying to find where the category belongs so that the students can be treated more justly."

"Where do you think the category belongs? What is the appropriate enframing for slow learner?" asked Martin with that same dismissive stare.

---

<sup>45</sup> Korsgard (1986, p. 325)

<sup>46</sup> Gadamer (1989, p. 270)

I wasn't sure if there was any difference between his two questions, so I just answered the first. "I'm not sure," I admitted, thinking of Veronika Sternwood. "From what I've seen, these kids wouldn't do well if they were just thrown into the educational system such as it is and ignored. For most of the kids I talked to, this kind of inattention was where their school failure started. But where does the category belong?" I repeated Martin's question; it was a good one despite his angry condescension. "That's part of the problem too. From what I've seen, institutions seem to take too many liberties once this kind of a concept gets locked down too tightly."

"Locked down, locked in, and locked up in storage," Martin scoffed cryptically.

I didn't think there was anything in that for me so I continued. "From what I can tell, if that happens, the concept starts to produce restrictions, stereotypes, long quasi-scientific lists of all the things the students aren't supposed to be able to do, and the sense that they are lesser students. So for the slow learner concept to belong, maybe there has to be some fluidity built into the concept," I concluded articulately.

"Play?" Hans suggested. He'd been patiently, almost deferentially, listening to our exchange before he heard this word calling out for recognition again. Despite my earlier rejection of the term, it sounded like he was offering it as a possibility more than a challenge.

"Maybe," I replied, I still wasn't sure about that word.

Hans waited deferentially for Martin to respond, but Martin looked like he was still making up his mind as to whether he should deign to offer me any sincere counsel beyond the potshots he was currently taking. Whatever it was in him that compelled him to offer me shelter, it didn't seem like it extended so far as taking a sincere interest in my larger mission. After a moment, Hans asked me the question, "Have you ridden a bicycle?" I said that I had. "Concepts are like that." He went on. "*On the front wheel, the axle, it is important not to tighten the nuts too tightly, else the wheel cannot turn. It has to have some play! [But] not too much play, or the wheel will fall off.*" "You know," he said, "*Spielraum, leeway.*"<sup>47</sup>

That interested me. It reminded me of the way some of teachers I'd met seemed to be able to use their technical knowledge of things like disability categorization and learning styles without being constrained by them. I had been thinking of play in the sense of folly, which I'd had little use for on this case, when he brought it up. I asked him to tell me more about how he regarded play.

Martin continued to register only vague interest. Hans thought for a minute and then replied, "*The play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. All of these things [play in a] to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end.*" As he spoke, Hans swung his hand a few times, like a pendulum, in seeming demonstration of his claim. He

---

<sup>47</sup> Gadamer in Miller (2003, para. 4)

then paused for a minute before concluding, “*The play is purposeful, not random, but at the same time it has no set end point or forgone conclusion.*”<sup>48</sup>

Now I thought he was taking the idea too far, at least as it applied to my case. “With respect,” I began again, “I don’t want to be engaged in that kind of play on this case. I want to solve this case, find a safe place for the category of slow learners and find some justice for these students. I want to tell the truth about how slow learners have been treated in the past and what they truly need right now. This case needs an end point; it can’t be an endless investigation that accomplishes no goals, it needs to be settled.”

“How is your desire to close the case any different than the categorical impulse for closure that you’ve just claimed endangers these students in institutions?” Martin suddenly demanded haughtily.

I didn’t appreciate being lumped in with Veronika Sternwood and Maddox Paine and tried a reasoned response to break the association, “Because the institutional claims that they are somehow defective as students is a distortion – and one that traps them both categorically and physically in restrictive programming.” I was not thinking so much of the K & E classes themselves but the, seemingly willful, systemic denial of opportunities for these students. “I need to find and tell the untainted truth about who these students are and what they need, I need to break down the stereotypes. I need to piece together the facts of the case and carefully present them to my client in a way that corresponds with the reality of the situation.” Happy with my reply, I drained my coffee cup. My host and his guest exchanged glances.

Martin now regarded me with a little smile as though he was a gator studying an unwary tourist who’d wandered too deep into the Everglades. It was unsettling. Hans was smiling too, but sympathetically. As Martin continued to stare at me, Hans retrieved the percolator from the table and refilled my cup.

“Max,” he said patiently, “what if, as one of your disability studies scholars has said, the purity of a concept *is* its danger?<sup>49</sup> Does there have to be a singular, objective, disembodied truth to be found about these students?”

I’d liked Hans better than Martin from the first time I’d seen the two, but this question bothered me. I’d already owned up to believing the category needed to be thought of flexibly and generously, but I now felt as though I was being treated as naive, or even dangerous, for still wanting to make a tangible claim about how to help these students. In my resentment I blurted, “Look, students are in danger here. This isn’t some intellectual exercise, like how you two must sit around this table and wax philosophical about nothing, some sort of game in which anything goes ...” I winced inwardly as I heard myself say this. It was rude and stupid. Martin, unconsciously I hoped, shifted his rifle in his lap. I raised my arms in apology.

Hans objected to my statement on a point of order. “There aren’t any games in which anything goes. Any game is a shaped activity by definition.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Gadamer (1989, p. 104)

<sup>49</sup> Porter in Rice (2006, p. 17)

“More to the point,” said Martin, seeming more engaged now, though no more friendly, “true thinking, or the thinking truth, *is preserv[ing] something in its essence ... maintain[ing] it in its element ...It is the quiet power of the possible.*”<sup>51</sup> I didn’t sense he’d suddenly come around to being interested in my case. It was more like, hearing the depths of my ignorance, he suddenly felt compelled to help Hans straighten me out on their similar notions of truth before I went back out into the world with such a poor understanding of the concept.

I nodded, a little afraid of him still, but pleased that he had joined the conversation. Something about him wanted to make me hear him out despite his apparent disdain for me. I was still, however, confused as to the significance of what he had just said. It was obviously some sort of response to the ‘anything goes’ charge that I’d levied, but what did it mean and why did it matter?

“What I mean to say,” I continued along my own familiar lines of thought about the case, “is that there are students’ lives at stake here. And the truth of their oppression, through class hierarchies, through restrictive definitions of what counts as intelligence, or even what counts as legitimate disabilities requiring resources and supports has to count as more real than all the negative stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies about their potential. For the sake of justice it *has to be* more real.”

“Obviously yes, some interpretations are unhealthy, toxic even,” Hans acknowledged. “Perhaps as Caputo, a scholar I am enjoying recently, has noted, these are enforced interpretations, examples of the self-serving abuse of power.<sup>52</sup> But I’m sorry to tell you that any truth you find about slow learners will also be an interpretation. As our host and my teacher,” he said, gesturing to Martin, “has pointed out, we are always already interpreting,<sup>53</sup> so there can be no disembodied, objective truth about slow learners. You cannot liberate these students with an appeal to ‘just the facts’ as that American detective serial used to claim.<sup>54</sup> As Caputo points out, the very word ‘fact’ comes from Latin – *facere* – meaning ‘to make’. You’ve seen firsthand the trouble psychology, all the sciences really, get themselves into when they forget this, or at least when their practitioners do. It may look otherwise when a truth seems particularly compelling, but truth does not float above context, just as a dove does not float weightlessly in the sky.<sup>55</sup> The dove must press on, shift with and employ the resistance of the wind, the air, in order to achieve flight. So too does truth depend on context.”

Martin nodded at his companion, this time in appreciation of this homely metaphor before turning his gaze back on me. “Context grounds truth, it gives a weightiness, an importance, to the objects of discussion and to ourselves. The machinations of modernity in all their objective

---

<sup>50</sup> Weinsheimer and Marshall (1989, p. xiv)

<sup>51</sup> Heidegger (1978c, p. 196)

<sup>52</sup> Caputo (2013, p. 214)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 215)

<sup>54</sup> See Internet Movie Database (n.d). Hans is speaking of the 1951-1958 television series *Dragnet*, though the exact line “just the facts ma’am” was, in fact, never used on the program.

<sup>55</sup> Caputo (2013, p. 217)

calculabilities have not brought truth closer to the essence of things, they have unhinged things from significance and reduced understanding to diffusive trivia.”<sup>56</sup>

I thought I was starting to get it but, coming from a profession that operated on the currency of evidence, this way of thinking about truth still bothered me. I was typically hired to find out the truth about a case, the location of lost property or people, or, if I was desperate enough for work, the identity of some mistress or gigolo in a home-wrecking tryst. My clients didn’t always appreciate the truth I brought back, but they usually recognized it when they saw it. Maybe, I thought, that wasn’t because I’d found objective truth after all, but more like what Martin meant about being engaged in preserving and maintaining an essence. And context *was* crucial I realized. Once, I’d debated the motives behind a murder-suicide – the killer being a dangerously beautiful sort at the end of a chain of crimes – with a cop I was on more or less friendly terms with. The dame was bad news, that much we both agreed on, but whereas all the homicide detective could see was another evil act in the chain, I saw in her final act, a means of sparing her already put-upon husband and benefactor the further indignity of being implicated in her trial.<sup>57</sup> You couldn’t even really say the fact of the crime lay outside our interpretations; it was *in* both of our interpretations, but seen from different vantage points. Still though, I was left feeling that both the case and I needed more certainty than this way of thinking offered.

“I’m still not sure I agree, but for the sake of argument, let’s say I am looking for a better, a much better, *interpretation* of who slow learners are and what they need,” I said. “But I can’t be just playing with interpretations here – I need to settle on one that brings justice to these students, that has the potential to change how school looks for them in a real and permanent way. I’m not sure my client would accept anything less than this. How will I know for sure?”

“There is a problem also,” Martin observed, instead of answering my question, “with your notions of justice ...Karl Marx once said, ‘the philosopher has hitherto interpreted the world; the point is to change it’. But in saying this *he overlooked that the fact of a world change presupposes a change in the world’s conception and that a conception of the world can only be won by the fact that one interprets the world sufficiently. Marx bases it on a completely certain world interpretation to demand his change. Therefore he knows this sentence is not a sound sentence.*”<sup>58</sup> He looked very satisfied with himself after saying this, so satisfied that he apparently deemed his rifle a more imprecise weapon than his wit, and finally re-engaged the safety on it and set it aside, in close reach, on the kitchen counter. He returned to the table and now rested his arms on it, gripping his coffee mug in two hands. At first I wasn’t sure why he looked so confident. His observation sounded like logic-chopping, a distracting riddle in a case where, as I had pointed out, real lives were at stake. Out of professional thoroughness, though, I parsed the statement in my head a little more before dismissing it. Then I began to feel a sort of vertigo. I had been coming around to understanding that most of what we knew about slow learners was a matter of interpretation. I now saw that whatever justice looked like for them was too. Whether or not we actually made things better for them in the end was highly interpretive, and, in an ever-shifting educational landscape, any changes would necessarily mean re-interpreting the whole scene all over again. Martin and Hans had spoken of essences and the grounding of context, but I

<sup>56</sup> Wrathall (2011, p. 202)

<sup>57</sup> See Chandler (1940, p. 92). Max’s recollection is borrowed from Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger in Eidos84 (2011)

felt like I had completely lost my bearings and was spinning out of control, passing by Martin's smug mug on each queasy rotation.

Hans, noting my discomfort, asked me to take a deep breath and drink some more of my coffee. I did, and felt less dizzy but no more certain. Martin, seeming to read my mind as to the source of my distress remarked, "*This circle of understanding is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle ...In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.*"<sup>59</sup> It was nice to hear Martin offer up something more affirming, though his concern seemed more directed at clarifying his position than at reassuring me of anything. Moreover, I was still confused. What was "primordial knowing?"

"I don't know about all that," I admitted. "But," I added, looking to find a claim to stabilize things, "since you mention Marx, I do think one strong *interpretation* is that economic class plays a large part in constructing slow learners, in some of the negative assumptions people make. I'm pretty much convinced of this, that this is something that needs looking at."

"Yes, you likely do need to look into that." Martin granted. "but can you say the *essence* of 'slow learner', the label, *is* a position in a class struggle?" he asked, still somewhat indignant.

"Maybe," I replied.

"But what and where is this '*is*' for slow learners?" he asked.

"What?" I blurted. But he had spoken very clearly, there was no way I'd misheard his ridiculous question. "Slow learner *is* a lot of things," I replied somewhat hotly. "I've done a thorough investigation."

"And which appearances spoke the most strongly to you?" Martin asked.

"The ones that best represent the present reality of their situation," I replied. "Even if something always remains undecided, surely this is how we have to judge the strength of the interpretation."

"How so?" Martin asked.

"The best interpretation is the one that most closely matches the situation," I repeated.

"Which you can only abstract, so you will compare your representation to your abstraction to see if you've found the truth."<sup>60</sup> Too early and too late." He had worn a stern expression as he questioned me and I felt like a schoolboy being called out by a teacher intending to expose his ignorance.

"Maybe so," I replied, "but it works pretty well. We flew to the moon on this sort of correspondence." I thought I'd made a good, if argumentative, point but he didn't even acknowledge it.

---

<sup>59</sup> Heidegger (1962, p. 195)

<sup>60</sup> See Ibid. (p. 258). Heidegger expressed what I have paraphrased here in argumentative dialogue as "With regard to what do *intellectus* and *res* agree?"

“If you want to bring a report back to your client that he might actually find helpful – consider this. Imagine a *lichtung* – a clearing in these trees,” he said gesturing to the forest outside the cabin window. As it happened, just as Martin was speaking I looked out the window and I did fix on such a clearing in the forest. A snow white rabbit flitted across it. As Paine’s recent quarry, and feeling somewhat pursued by Martin too, I felt some solidarity with the little animal. Martin continued. “In this clearing, a spot where light – light – shines, something previously concealed appears as unconcealed in the light. But even as it appears, other possibilities are concealed. Before you can even begin to discuss whether your statement about that thing matches up to it, that thing has already appeared, been presenced and unconcealed to you as itself.”<sup>61</sup>

I considered this for a minute, finding it perplexing. “How is *that* supposed to help my investigation? How is *that* supposed to help my client? How is it going to bring justice to slow learners?” I was losing my cool again; I reminded myself to calm down.

“You described how strange you find the history of all this – the exhibits in the research institute relating to mass confinement, for example. Perhaps in some of these artifacts lie un-concealments or disclosures that are no longer available as truthful or even comprehensible.”

“That’s because they were evil,” I shot back, though I quickly realized it was a weak point.

Martin ignored this and advised me, “Consider, then, what is un-concealed and concealed in current understandings of slow learners.”

“To what end?” I asked.

“So that you might move from these current apprehensions to the being of these students,” he replied.

“I have more important things to worry about than the being of these students,” I said. “If I can identify the prejudices they’ve had to deal with and the mistreatment they’ve faced, and how they might be treated more fairly, their being will take care of itself.”

He stared at me as though I’d uttered the most naive statement he’d ever heard. In a matter-of-fact voice he said, “*The growing and unacknowledged anxiety in the face of thinking no longer allows insight into the oblivion of being which determines the age.*”<sup>62</sup> He then fell silent. He drank his coffee and stared out the window at the forest. I did the same. I wasn’t sure how much I understood him, or how relevant his ideas were to the case, but something about them was starting to itch at me.

“My friend, I think, is worried that in your methods you are forgetting that we are always a part of what we seek to understand,” Hans spoke up. He’d listened patiently to our testy exchange and was still smiling.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. (p. 51)

<sup>62</sup> Heidegger in Harrison (2013)

“Well obviously, I take my work personally, but the problems are in the institutions in this case, not in me. I’m just the part of the case that intends to solve it,” I replied.

“Do you feel that you’ve become an expert on slow learners and the hardships they face?” He asked the question calmly, without challenge it seemed.

“I’ve only been on the case for four days, but I think I have learned a thing or two,” I replied with what I hoped was appropriate modesty.

“But you feel that your investigation has led you to understand the ills in institutional treatment of slow learners and the potentials cures for these ills?”

“To some degree, yes,” I had to admit that I was operating on this assumption.

“I commend your interest in justice for these students, but it sounds as though from your investigative methods, you are assuming the role of the lone healer, the one who will eventually be ready to deliver a cure to all of the hapless institutional victims. That may not be very hermeneutic, or practical.”

I wondered what hermeneutic and practical had to do with each other? As to Hans’ comment, I preferred to think of myself as the lone gunslinger, not the lone medicine slinger, but I could see where he was going. I wasn’t sure I agreed with his assessment of where I’d positioned myself in the investigation. I thought I’d been more collaborative than usual this time around. “I’ve interviewed a lot of people affected by the slow learner concept, and I’ve read a lot too. I’ve been very thorough,” I insisted.

“But were you listening for symptoms of an institutional disorder you intended to piece together and repair, or were you truly trying to understand?” he asked.

It took me a minute to consider how different these two things really were. I decided they were similar to a degree but the first had a cold, clinical flavor I didn’t like. I felt I’d mostly done the latter, but at times maybe I hadn’t listened carefully, or openly enough. “I’m just trying to bring some justice for slow learners,” I repeated, a little evasively.

“But what if you recommend something for your client, and through his efforts it becomes a sanctioned practice. And then, your solution turns out to be flawed in concept or application and causes many problems of its own. Using the analogy of illness and medicine, it too will need a cure. Have you read Ivan Illich’s *Limits to Medicine* in your investigation? He calls this cycle of cure and cures for cures *iatrogenesis*.”<sup>63</sup>

A cliché about good intentions sprung to my mind. I realized that the process he described did indeed make sense to me. It reminded me of much of what I’d read about in prior attempts to reform programming for slow learners. The range of problems that resulted in the switch from IOP to K & E also came to mind. A question called out to me. “I can see this is a problem, but it almost seems the inevitable way of things. How can I avoid it?”

---

<sup>63</sup> Illich (1977, p. 23)

“There is a Rilke poem about an acrobat,” Hans said, and then he quoted a line. “*The pure too-little incomprehensively transforms itself, springs over into the empty too-much.*”<sup>64</sup> He saw in my eyes that it hadn’t done much for me, and he went on to explain. “*The more strongly the sphere of application becomes rationalized, the more does proper exercise of judgment along with practical experience in the proper sense fail to take place.*”<sup>65</sup>

I asked him to elaborate.

“Continuing to use medical practice as an analogy, I would note that the role of the practitioner as technological specialist of the body has undermined the previous sense of medicine as an interpretive art – a healing conversation between the practitioner and patient. The hubristic notion of being the agent responsible for healing has overshadowed the wiser, primordial sense that the doctor assists in the healing process,” he said.

“So if there are problems with how slow learners have been treated institutionally, this needs to be addressed as a healing conversation, not a diagnostic and prescriptive treatment?” I suggested.

“Or indictment and manifesto,” Martin added, recalling, I think, his earlier mention of Marx.

A thought struck me. “Might this healing conversation you are talking about as a way of dealing with the problems with how slow learners are treated also relate to the approaches to teaching these students? Some of the teachers I spoke with recommended things like inquiry, discovery, and experimentation.”

“Yes!” Hans exclaimed, beaming, and even Martin looked somewhat interested. Hans continued, “Socrates said he modeled his teaching after his mother, who was a midwife.<sup>66</sup> He did not pass knowledge on to his students; he helped his students give birth to thought.”

“*What teaching calls for is this – to let learn.*”<sup>67</sup> Martin added.

I found myself liking the sound of this idea, but if I was going to bring it back to Williamson, I wanted to examine it a bit, kick the tires and look under the hood. I asked, “If all the teachers do is ‘let learn’, what does this say about the need for their teacher to be skilled and knowledgeable?” I asked.

“It is very difficult to teach such that the impression is we properly learn nothing from the teacher.”<sup>68</sup> Martin asserted.

“It requires, as Aristotle said, not only technical knowledge – *techne* – but also *phronesis* or practical wisdom,”<sup>69</sup> Hans added.

---

<sup>64</sup> Gadamer (1996, p. 17)

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 24)

<sup>66</sup> Plato (n.d, p. 10)

<sup>67</sup> Heidegger (1968, p. 15)

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

I asked them to explain the difference between these two ideas a little more.

Hans spoke up. “Techne is without a moral or contextual dimension – it is just skill. Phronesis is imbedded in concrete situations. It is contextual. It has moral and political dimensions. It does not follow a predetermined, uniform course, it is interpretive in its approach to action. It requires, always, the choice of the proper application [of knowledge and ability] for the good.<sup>70</sup> Practices such as teaching and medicine are best understood as hermeneutic arts – arts of bringing forth – under this understanding; bringing forth learning, bringing forth healing. The way knowledge is considered in the modern world distorts the relationship between theory and practice.”

“How so?” I asked.

Martin’s hands clenched more tightly around his coffee cup. I interpreted that this was not in vigorous objection to his companion’s ideas, but in his desire to add his particular interpretation. “The more strongly the sphere of application becomes rationalized, the more does proper exercise of judgment along with practical experience in the proper sense fail to take place. He,” Martin noted, gesturing to his companion, “will tell you that Aristotle held there was a special place among skilled artisans for the doctor as he did not directly construct an object, but brought forth healing. To me, every artisan working is engaged in *poesis* or bringing forth. Each handicraft uniquely bears its own history, the marks of its own construction: the materials it was crafted from, the artisan’s labor, and the artisan’s choices. Each handicraft is, even if only subtly, different from the others. It is revealed, *as itself in itself* as such an object. Modern machine technology has a very different form of revealing. It strives for uniformity so there can be no revealing of the particularities of anything. *The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth.*”<sup>71</sup>

I had been following along fine until he lost me with that last sentence, so I asked him to explain “challenging forth.”

“Things have lost their density, their existential importance.<sup>72</sup> Instead of making a claim on us, they’ve become *formless formations of technological production.*<sup>73</sup> Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. *Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve,*” he replied gloomily.<sup>74</sup>

The darkness with which he uttered that last thing provoked a silence during which I considered what I had been hearing. I could follow what Hans was saying about the importance of practical wisdom in teaching. I recognized how, beyond my investigative skills, practical wisdom guided my own practice as a detective. It was usually this sense of where a case was going, needed to go,

---

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer (1992c, p. 170)

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. (p. 184)

<sup>71</sup> Heidegger (1978b, p. 321)

<sup>72</sup> Wrathall (2011, p. 201)

<sup>73</sup> Heidegger (2001, p. 110)

<sup>74</sup> Heidegger (1978b, p. 322)

that was the glue that bound the disparate pieces together. What I could not immediately recognize was the application of Martin's rant about handicrafts versus manufactured goods to the current mystery I was investigating. On a literal level, it sounded two parts stodgy and one part wistful, what were we supposed to do, abandon industrial manufacturing in order to *be* more authentically? I liked the Buick and, when it was running well, felt nothing but appreciation for the good men and women on the assembly line in Detroit who put it together. I liked that there was another one just like it, minus the personal touches I'd installed (coffee stains, fuzzy dice and a few bullet holes) out there in case I broke the first one. I took a drink of coffee and thought for a minute longer. Where else might this standing-reserve critique have application? A few things came to me. Was the wild proliferation of educational labels I had learned about such a form of production, a ready-made set of shunts and widgets to attach to children who did not appear as orderly in order to make their disorders uniform too? Did schooling itself function as such a form of production – producing its own standing reserve of workers, consumers, modern subjects, and human resources?<sup>75</sup> If so, was this unhealthy for slow learners? And, then the question I had been asking all along came back to me – did schools produce slow learners? Was 'slow learner' a discarded part of the production, a label put beyond use, or was it still standing on reserve? I'd have to think more about that one later. I had another question, a pressing one.

"How can I find justice for slow learners within all of this?" I asked.

"Cultivate solidarities," Hans interjected. "We focus too strongly on that which divides us, and shift too much responsibility onto so-called experts to solve our collective problems. Embrace activism against those things that endanger us collectively, support reform to strengthen measures to protect the vulnerable – these things are genuine solidarities."<sup>76</sup> Finding something familiar in this, I then realized this was the guy Williamson had told me about who'd spoken of free spaces. I recalled how Colleen Birdseye told me about the soon-to-be alumni who'd protested the closure of the vocational schools despite not being directly affected by the plans. I thought of the protest march against cuts to disability funding when Smart Ass Cripple had been arrested. I also, however, thought of those on the other side. The Veronika Sternwoods and Maddox Paines and their fanaticism and hostility, and, again of my revulsion at what I'd seen on my tour of the sorting museum. I had a question. Was Hans' way tough enough to deal with them?

"What about those with whom solidarity seems impossible? It's pretty hard to find common ground with someone who is standing on your throat, or someone whose ideas seem reprehensible to you."

Hans responded. "Perhaps in that case not solidarities, then, but it is always in your best interest to try to understand, even in such a situation. You may feel strongly opposed to an idea, perhaps quite rightfully. This feeling, this prejudice," I was surprised at his use of this word, "is not just ethically warranted; it is also useful. It informs your understanding; it makes your understanding possible. This is your interpretive horizon, the wide expanse of your interpretive vision as well as its limits. In an interpretive event, whether reading, conversing, considering an idea, trying to come to terms with a historical event, you nevertheless try to put your prejudices, your interpretations at risk or in play, you allow for the possibility that there is something to the sentence, the

---

<sup>75</sup> Wrathall (2011, p. 198)

<sup>76</sup> See Gadamer (1992a, pp. 191-193)

idea, the event, that you are interpreting. In doing so, you allow for a fusion of horizons between yourself and that which you are interpreting. You will not fully overcome your prejudices but you will have a more expansive understanding, one you can continue to use as you interpret other things.”<sup>77</sup>

I considered this. It made sense, but I still had a problem with it. “I can see why I might want to engage in such a process with some person or idea or practice I *might* find some common ground with, but how can any fusion be possible when I find whatever I am interpreting beyond contempt? Or what if I am talking to someone who makes no attempt to understand me?” It was true that I operated, often, by trying to wrap my head around the dark matters I was looking into, but “fusion” sounded too intimate.

“But you benefit as in investigator from the effort,” Hans replied. “An awareness of your own reactions - the consciousness that informs your prejudice - leads to greater, though not ever complete, self-understanding. Historically effected consciousness is an element in the act of understanding itself and ...*is already effectual in finding the right questions to ask.*”<sup>78</sup> The traditional ways of thinking that you feel have led to the oppression of these students need to be questioned, but it is an error in thinking to believe you can do so by standing outside of tradition. You draw from the well of your own traditions in forming your questions; they are, in this sense, part of your creative energy. You do value asking the right questions?” He asked this almost impishly.

His question seemed rhetorical so I didn’t respond, but I liked the idea of tradition being used to question tradition. Instead of beating on a wall empty handed, why not rip a brick from the wall to use for the smashing? There were probably some problems with this analogy but that’s what it made me think of.

“And the purpose of interpretation,” he continued, “is not necessarily to find agreement. Finding intelligibility can be good enough.”<sup>79</sup> How are you to find greater justice for these students you are worried about if the ways of thinking you think are destructive for them remain unintelligible to you? How can you question these ways of thinking from this position?” Again, he was challenging me, but I found little in his manner threatening.

I considered this. I still wasn’t sure if I thought this was true, though it did make me think of the many cases I’d solved, the victims I’d avenged, the future victims I’d protected, not by dismissing offenders as incomprehensible, but by trying to understand them. And if I was going to close this case, I did need to ask the right questions.

Martin, who was now listening with interest, took the opportunity to bring up something of his own.

“If you want to have any hope of finding justice for these students, look first at the language that you’ve used to describe them. Every statement you made about these students when you de-

---

<sup>77</sup> See Gadamer (1989, p. 305)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. (p. 301)

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. (p. 302)

scribed this case to us, even the statements about your supposedly humanist intentions towards them, has cast them as ‘objects’. This is an issue with language.<sup>80</sup> Philosophy has been in this rut since Plato, and what we need right now is *less philosophy, but more attentiveness in thinking*.<sup>81</sup> Undertake a *destruktion*,” he said, punching the hard “c” in the word, “of all of this categorization, of the whole ontological tradition,<sup>82</sup> find a way, like the pre-Socratics, to present these students outside this objectification, as they are made manifest, being-in-their selves.”

I would have liked the idea better if I understood how I was supposed to achieve this destruction and how I was supposed to find a way to present students as in-themselves. I at least understood Hans well enough to consider his views. Martin’s thinking sometimes seemed almost mystical to me. I tried to say it back in my own words. “If the appearance of slow learners as lacking or defective is an effect of a variety of inequities in educational institutions, any attempt to bring justice for them needs to acknowledge this and try to find a more genuine way for them to appear as students in schools.”

I had been concentrating hard on formulating that sentence and thought it had a nice ring to it. Martin looked grimly at me and told me that the ontological and epistemological problem ran much deeper than this and I was bound to fail if I could not see and address this, and then he fell silent.

Hans spoke up. “I do not fully share my friend and teacher’s pessimism. Writing off modern thought so completely strikes me as somewhat dangerous.” Martin’s face twitched a little at being challenged, however gently, by Hans but he remained silent on this charge. Hans continued, “I do not think there is some oppressive and monolithic ‘language of metaphysics’ because *language is simply that which we speak with others and to others*.<sup>83</sup> Metaphysics occurs only when language becomes hardened into concepts – and this rigidity can be restored, not through the abandonment or rebirth of philosophy, but through continual dialogue and (re)interpretation.” But then Hans hastened to add, “I do, however, appreciate the threat to intellectual freedom posed by trends toward bureaucratization, specialization, accountability and, as I said, technologization of knowledge, but it is still up to us to discover free spaces.”<sup>84</sup> And there it was again. The free spaces idea. It spoke to me.

“You speak of restoring justice for these slow learners as solving the case,” Martin said, resuming his critique of me after recovering from the mild one directed at him by Hans. “Has it occurred to you that too much ‘solving’ has already been undertaken on their behalf? We encounter beings as *actualities in a calculative businesslike way, but also scientifically and by way of philosophy, with explanations and proofs*.<sup>85</sup> Even the assurance that something is inexplicable belongs to these explanations and proofs. You should be considering ways not to solve slow

---

<sup>80</sup> Heidegger (1978c, p. 243)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. (p. 242)

<sup>82</sup> Heidegger (1962, p. 44)

<sup>83</sup> Gadamer (1989, p. 98)

<sup>84</sup> Gadamer (1992b, p. 52)

<sup>85</sup> Heidegger (1978c, p. 199)

learners, but to restore the mystery of their persons, to be content to exist in the nameless [until] you and they can be claimed again by being.”<sup>86</sup>

“With no official label slow learners *have* been existing in the nameless. That’s been part of the problem,” I countered. Martin raised an eyebrow.

Still smiling, Hans elaborated on this point for me. “Not the namelessness of a bureaucratic style of inattentiveness to their needs, the namelessness of, as my teacher has called it, ‘care.’ Being attentive to what is unsaid; the unsayable. As Davey has written, “*Our understandings have ever-present limits.*”<sup>87</sup> There is a strong ethical implication to these limits as they remind us to maintain a “*principled otherness*”<sup>88</sup> in how we interpret others, indeed to a large degree we remain mysteries to ourselves as well. As for language, “*the occasionality of human speech is not a casual imperfection of its expressive power; it is, rather, the logical expression of the living virtuality of speech that brings a totality of meaning into play, without being able to express it totally.*”<sup>89</sup>

“So let me get this straight,” I said. “In order to find justice for slow learners you are saying I need to find a way to restore their mystery of being, and to try to say what is both sayable and unsayable about them. How am I supposed to do that?” I wasn’t being ironic. For once, I really meant it. They had answered all my questions well and pointed to some things I needed to pay attention to. But what they were asking seemed a tall order.

At more or less the same time Hans and Martin said “poetry”. Then Martin said “art” and then “handicraft” and then, most decisively, “thinking”. We all sat in contemplation.

I drained my second cup of coffee. It had grown cold while we were talking. I saw from my watch it was 4:30 but I had no idea what time it was when I’d arrived at the cabin. These two had saved my life, giving me shelter and nourishment and had stymied Paine’s pursuit of me. What’s more, though I still found much of what they’d explained to me confusing, some of the disparate elements of the case had started to gel a little in my mind. At least they’d solved the mystery of why Williamson thought I needed to consider the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology in this investigation. Not that I would have admitted an analogy this childish to them, but I also realized that, despite what my client said, like Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Lion and the Scarecrow from the Wizard of Oz, I had possessed most of the traits I had needed for the hermeneutic journey all along. Maybe I’d not proceeded as humbly, patiently, or wisely as I should have, and Martin and Hans had taken me to task on this, but I’d been engaged in a rigorous, multifaceted attempt to interpret slow learners and the educational scene they appeared in. I’d observed, discussed, and listened attentively, and brought an expanded horizon to each new encounter. I’d even conversed at length with villains, though admittedly mostly for the purpose of saving my own skin. There was still a lot I needed to understand about the case but, having learned this much with my accidental brand of hermeneutics, I hoped that with the heightened sensitivities I’d gained from this conversation I might follow up my remaining leads in greater depth and

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Davey (2006, p. 11)

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Gadamer (1989, p. 454)

eventually be in a position to offer my client the understandings he needed to move through his distress about the slow learners.

I also realized it was risky to have spent so long in a place so close to my most recent captor. Maybe, despite his threats, Paine had believed Martin and Hans and was looking elsewhere for me. There were many directions I could have gone in and it probably wasn't the first time someone had reacted this way to his personality even without harboring an escaped prisoner. On the other hand, maybe he was simply re-arming and calling for back up. I couldn't afford to stay and find out which one of these possibilities was correct. Shaking hands with both, I thanked them for the hospitality, the coffee, and the conversation and said I had to be going. Martin, who had seemed to have had less use for me as a partner in dialogue than Hans, nevertheless gruffly asked me to sign a guestbook which he kept on the porch. It seemed like a big deal to him, so I obliged.

Stepping out of the cabin and surveying the wilderness around, it we saw no sign of Paine. Pointing along the other side of the cabin, Martin showed me a thin, partially concealed path back to civilization, one that would emerge well clear of the building I'd recently escaped. A thought seemed to strike him and he asked me to wait while he went back into the cabin. He returned with Paine's revolver and said I should take it along with me.

My leg throbbed during my walk back, but I noticed my stamina for traveling was much improved now that I was thawed, rested, caffeinated, and following a purposeful path. My aimless flight from Paine had somehow brought me to a safe place but it had been exhausting and terrifying. After a half an hour of travel, holding a reasonable pace, I reached the end of the forest. It emerged in the now familiar industrial district. I saw the building I'd been held in was far off in the distance, and I knew that Hans had indeed directed me well. I had seen no one on my walk through the forest, but it seemed unlikely the same would be true back in town. Realizing the large weapon I was carrying would bulge too obviously under my coat, I pocketed the shells, dissembled it as best I could without tools, smashed the grip with a rock and distributed the various parts in several dumpsters along the block. My pleasure in wrecking something of Paine's was only dampened by the thought that I was treating one of Candace's relations so unkindly.

When I was done disposing of Paine's weapon, I kept on walking west. The sun was beginning to set. I saw a collection of workers, who I assumed to be coming off of day shifts at various factories, huddled around a bus stop – there was probably a shuttle that came around at this time for them. I waited with the crowd, and got on the bus with them when it came along. I had to pay the driver a full five dollars because I didn't have exact change for the \$2.75 tab, but it was worth it not to have to walk any further. I sat down gratefully but there were more riders than seats on the bus, and I ended up giving my seat up to a woman who wore a long open coat, under which her blue coveralls bulged out to reveal a very pregnant belly. I stood and held onto the railing, piecing a puzzle together in my mind as the city lights began to shine on the passing factories. I was getting close to something major. I wasn't sure to what, but I could feel it.

After a while, I walked up to the bus driver and got directions back to the part of the city where I hoped my car still was. A half hour ride on this bus, a transfer, a shorter ride on the next one, and

a short walk later, I was safely in front of the internet café from which I'd been apprehended. It was almost 6:00 p.m., obviously too late to try to track down the curriculum managers Summit had recommended to me. I felt renewed and full of purpose after talking to the wise men in the cabin, but being captured had still burned an afternoon of research and left me with no immediately apparent point to enter the circle again. I needed to find one.

## XXVIII

I checked my city map and saw I was near another two large high schools. That was good. It was too late to follow my original investigative plan but questioning some additional high school educators in light of what I'd learned recently might be a good way to get the investigation rolling again. Despite Hans' and Martin's warnings about the limits of my knowledge, I felt some sort of realization was out there, just a little beyond my horizon, and that I was getting closer with each lead I pursued.

It was obviously too late to try to bluff my way into another school, but I figured if I drove around for a bit I might be able to find a pub where the staffs from both of the nearby high schools would be likely to hang out. It was the tail end of happy hour. I drove to and then a little past one of the schools and started looking for the nearest bar. I entered a shopping complex, and saw a building painted entirely in red above which the neon sign 'Ultimate Brew' glowed. Another lit up sign below promised 'Fine Food' and 'Beers of the World'. Though it was darkened in the bar, I could see inside well enough to tell it was busy. I thought I'd give it a try.

I made a partially successful attempt to knock some of the frozen mud off my shoes and pants, made a wish that the low light would conceal the rest of it, and made my way in. The pub fell a little short of its name on the inside. Faux vintage beer ad posters scattered unoriginally over the walls, a chipped laminate floor, and peeling wood-effect wallpaper completed the depressing scene. A pool table and gambling machine occupied one section, a large seating area another. Something annoyingly upbeat played on the speakers, and several television screens with close-captioning on displayed various hockey games. I went up the bar and, confronted with thirty different possible taps to choose and none of them my preferred brand, I asked for a lager that was on for cheap. I was rewarded for my thriftiness with a synthetic-tasting peach flavored aberration that I nevertheless carried with me as I looked for somebody to talk to about slow learners.

Wandering around looking for a seat, I listened in on various conversations but all I overheard was idle chatter; sports, weather, entertainment, like I was listening to a morning news show being acted out by the pub's patrons. Then I overheard something different. Someone was talking curriculum. I looked more carefully to see where the voices were coming from. There was a tall, lanky dude in a navy blue suit. He was wearing a novelty tie with hearts on it. His curly hair was receding slightly; it just meant a larger forehead for now but all he'd have left of it would be a monkish island in the center in a few years. Across sat a shorter lanky dude, meaning he had the build of a tall, thin man too but was not tall, as though the first man had been shrunk to four-fifths size. He wore black corduroy pants and a beige sweater with a collared shirt under. He'd probably gone to work looking fresh enough, but now his shirttail hung out below his

sweater and his collar stuck out on one side and stayed in on the other. I asked if I could sit with them and was rewarded with a nod and a gesture to an empty barstool from the taller man.

Gord, as he introduced himself, continued with a point he was making. "It's pervasive," he said, directing his comments more to the other man. "As a principal, I adopted the same timetable I'd followed as a student thirty years before. The twenty-five hour - per credit requirement wasn't officially on the books until 1993, but even before then schools were stuck in this logic." He spoke with an earnestness that belied his novelty tie.

There was a pause after this and then the shorter man, Chuck, under the assumption that I too was an educator, asked me what I taught. I said I was a K & E teacher. He said he worked in K & E too. I wondered if this was just a lucky coincidence, or if with all the problems with the series of classes and how they were handled, K & E teachers flocked in thirsty multitudes to these sorts of places. He asked me why I got into teaching K & E and I tried to imagine what Williamson might say. I said when K & E was at its best it was a good opportunity to try to do some authentic teaching and learning with a group of kids who'd been overlooked. I asked him how he got into K & E. The conversation he'd been having, the drinks, and his weariness must have loosened him up a little because, despite our being strangers, he offered a rather personal story.

"I struggled in school myself," he said and took a swallow of something dark and frothy. From his appreciative look I could tell he'd ordered more wisely than me. He continued. "Eventually my parents sent me to a private school, where I did a little better but not much. I scraped through high school, and after a while of sort of drifting around, I went to college as a mature student, at least that's what they called me. I partied way too much at first; it took me three years to get my first year. I left the city after a while and went to a college in a smaller town. I still wasn't doing well even though I was living cleaner. Eventually I saw a doctor and got an ADHD diagnosis. I went on Ritalin as an adult. My marks steadily improved once I could concentrate. I finished a teaching degree, subbed for three months, and taught grade six. After a while I got to choose what areas I wanted to focus on, and I started working more with kids with disabilities. I've been in it seventeen years now. I'm in my fourth year of being a department head of K & E, and they offered me the chance to be assistant principal this year too."

Chuck was pretty earnest too; I could see how these two had gravitated toward each other. I was struck by how his story paralleled Williamson's and Colleen Birdseye's stories of their own struggles in school. That made three teachers I talked to who had struggled in school and had made K & E the focus of their teaching. I didn't ask about that, though. I remarked that if his school actually had a leadership position involving K & E that it must have a pretty comprehensive approach to it.

"We had ninety students enrolled in English 20-4 this year," Chuck said. "But a lot of those students will move on to get the high school diploma. Of the students who've stayed with K & E, we've had a one hundred percent completion rate of the Certificate of Achievement."

"Why do you think it's working so well?" I asked.

“Administrative support. My principal actually values the work we do in K & E, and we do a lot of self-directed learning, which the students like, and we have teachers who actually want to teach K & E and are good with the students.” He took another sip of his stout and I dutifully did the same with my peach beer.

“That sounds good,” Gord remarked, “but in some of the better schools I’ve worked in we didn’t just deal with K & E as a discrete program.” He thought for a minute and then went on, his momentum gaining with each sentence. “Of course, these are the sorts of schools that individualize for any kid who needs it and provide opportunities to adjust pacing. They don’t talk about ‘modified programming,’ they just meet the needs of the students. They don’t approach curriculum in traditional ways, along grade lines, stream lines, and subject lines. Credentialing can happen after the fact. They’re just responsive to the realities of the student in front of them. Not just K & E, but all labels seem to disappear from the lexicon with flexible teaching. Every kid’s label is disappearing, they’ve become individual.” He’d become a little excited during this explanation, and took a deep breath and a deep swallow of his brownish ale.

This seemed like a good chance to resort to one of my standby questions. “Something that’s been bothering me,” I said, making eye contact with both of them in turn, “is whether slow learners, you know the sorts of kids we are supposed to recommend to K & E, are born learning as they do or are produced by schools.” I was coming to realize this was an impossible question to answer, but it was a great question to ask. Every time I had, I’d learned a lot about the vantage point of the person I was questioning.

Without a second’s hesitation the taller man said, “Produced. Just like any other labeled kids they are produced by our system. As a principal, I ask students ‘what kind of kid are you’ and they say ‘I’m an honors student’, or ‘I’m a seventy-three percent student’ or, in this case, ‘I’m a K & E student.’”

The shorter man was more circumspect. The question seemed to stick in his craw a bit. He looked disturbed. “I pray to God slow learners aren’t manufactured. Maybe it’s half nature/half nurture. I know my medication helps me. I can feel the difference, that’s real, that’s not produced.” He considered this for a moment. “Then again, from early on in school, you often have the robins and the blackbirds. In elementary sometimes the teachers prefer working with the good readers, so the shittiest readers are furthest from the teacher’s desks. It’s all about attitude, you know, if you get told something for long enough. When I was in school I never told off a teacher who didn’t deserve it.” With that he produced a package of cigarettes and said he was going outside to have one.

“It’s more than that,” Gord asserted, as his companion was leaving. “The traditional way of high school teaching is damaging to students. The Carnegie Unit standardizes every aspect of teaching and learning. This standardization can be insane considering how we learn as humans.”

I asked him to explain what a Carnegie Unit was, and he told me it was a system of organizing the amount of time high school students were to spend studying each individual subject during a school year.<sup>90</sup> I made a mental note to find out more about that with some investigation of my

---

<sup>90</sup> Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.)

own. “This is the logic of the assembly line approach,” he explained, “to make sure teachers can efficiently do the work they are supposed to do, unfortunately with zero focus on learning. The Carnegie Unit made sense for its time. As massive increases in student enrolment in schools occurred in the nineteenth century in public education, there was a need to standardize the system for mass education. Harvard needed to know what students wanting to attend there had learned in high school. The industrial model was easy to administer. But it’s only if you accept the challenge to break out of the traditional model that every individual can have a meaningful education.”

Maybe I was missing something but I didn’t really see how allocating time by subject area was the main problem that slow learners faced so I tried to steer the conversation towards something that had emerged as an issue instead. “Do you see educational disability labeling as a part of that traditional model?” I asked.

“Absolutely. A young man with an intellectual disability, if he was of age, could walk into this bar and be served, but as soon as he walked into a school he would be placed elsewhere than with the other students. It’s an artificial environment, and that’s a complete disservice to anyone in the system. Why can’t we create a chemistry lab that any high school student at any instructional level can get something out of?”

“I’m still not sure blended classes can be as inclusive as you claim,” Chuck offered, having returned, and caught the tail end of Gord’s statement, “but even within our discrete K & E classes we see a huge range of student ability as well as a very diverse set of interests and learning styles among the students. That’s why we do self-directed learning. The students can all do meaningful projects regardless of these differences.”

A waitress came by. They both ordered another pint of what they were drinking. I said I was still working on mine; it wasn’t pleasant work.

“If you have enough imagination, inclusion is always possible,” Gord insisted. “A fellow principal I knew told me that at his school there was a student who fell into a permanent coma. He remained part of his school’s band program. He attended band class and the school even made arrangements for him to go to performances. He was able to participate as best as he was able to in band. So too should all students be given these sorts of inclusive participation opportunities.”

I wasn’t sure the words ‘attend’ or ‘participate’ truly fit the situation he was describing here, but then I wondered, who was I to say so? Gord continued, “At the school I used to be principal of, we had an overarching theme based on the *Habits of Mind* principles of Art Costa, and we gave out a Habits of Mind Award.<sup>91</sup> The first award went to a student who had a moderate intellectual disability and was born with no eyes, but who had excelled at high school art. As a part of the Habits of Mind programming, students were required to present an overarching project in grade twelve. Her project was a series of finger-paintings she had completed. She’d met outcomes from the Art 10, 20 and 30 programs of study with the project.”

---

<sup>91</sup> Costa and Kallick (2008)

My interest rose with each of these stories, but they seemed more to me like inclusion parables, meant more to prove a point than describe any common practice. “Aren’t these examples a little far out – you know, exceptional?” I asked, “Would we really be likely to see these sorts of things in most schools, now or anytime in the near future?”

“Fear of the unknown is a big problem,” Chuck agreed. “How many teachers would have the courage to try things like this?”

“Teachers don’t bear all the blame for not always seeing the opportunities for inclusive practice. I feel like they want to tar and feather me sometimes when I tell them this, but they are caught in the logic of the system,” Gord reflected, then added, “It’s hard to separate inflexible attitudes from the system. The logic of the assembly line drives decision making. My son, according to his teacher, who states it regretfully but as a given, ‘knows his stuff but can’t do multiple choice tests.’ There is no recognition of alternate possibilities for assessment. That’s what the assembly line dictates. My daughter is in Advanced Placement courses. The whole gifted education stream also fosters a sense of laziness in educators. We don’t need to get to know these kids as learners, thinking they can practically teach themselves. It leads to a lazy approach to education. It allows teachers to fall into traps that are artificial – it does not reflect what human learning is all about.”

“That’s all true, but individual teachers can break out of this,” Chuck insisted. “Everybody can remember a teacher who helped them and a teacher who didn’t. The K & E kids need teachers who will keep them asking questions, not shut them down.”

I found myself thinking about the men I had met at the cabin, Hans’ talk of bureaucratized learning systems and Martin’s statements of technological modes of being. Both these concerns echoed eerily, particularly in Gord’s complaints about the industrial model of schooling. I wondered about ways of transgressing these boundaries. I remembered the advice ‘cultivate free spaces.’ Both, in their own ways, had spoken to the possibilities and the obstacles inherent in trying to do this. But they’d both only spoken of their local efforts. I wanted to know if there was something larger, on a provincial level that held the promise of a free, or at least freer, space for slow learners. When I met Williamson near the start of the case, I thought I’d heard him speak of something like this. I asked if they’d heard of anything on the horizon.

“There was *Action on Inclusion* – an ambitious reform of special education in the province,” Chuck said, “but I’m not really sure what is happening with that. But there’s also something called the *High School Flexibility Project*. I think that might make a huge difference for K & E students.”

“I agree,” said Gord, “The High School Flexibility project could be very helpful for better inclusion of K & E students. There is also a new initiative called *Inspiring Education*. It lays out a challenging and provocative vision of what education will need to be in twenty years. The inflexible practices we’ve been talking about are definitely not endorsed in this vision.”

I felt my excitement mounting. Would I finally find lasting justice for slow learners in these initiatives? I was eager to start chasing these leads down. The waitress returned and I was surprised to see that I had finished most of the disgusting brew I’d ordered, sipping excitedly as I

heard about these initiatives, now oblivious to the taste. I paid for myself and for the drinks my two new acquaintances had consumed so far, to their surprised gratitude. Chuck asked if I could stay longer and continue chatting with them, but I claimed to have school work to do. I cursed myself for not bargaining more firmly with Williamson for the inclusion of liquor as a part of my expenses; it had proven a useful tool of the trade once again.

Back at my motel I brewed some coffee. I had some thinking to do. The truth, or, I corrected myself remembering Hans and Martin, some truth about this case was out there. I just needed a couple more things to fall in place before I could see it. I am not a voluminous note taker. I have a strong memory and concentrate hard when on a case and make a lot of mental notes which I tend to be able to retrieve on command. Occasionally I jot something especially important down, more as a way of cementing things in my recall for future reference. It's proven an effective method for me; as bashed around as I get on cases, my head is usually the only safe place to keep things. Even so I've wondered how long the lock on the much-abused filing cabinet between my ears will hold out for – one day it might give, and all the depraved miscellany will spill out at once. This time to get my thinking started, I took the alarm clock and lamp off the circular night table and, once the table was empty, laid out the few business cards and scraps of paper with notes I'd written out so far on the case. Staring at these fragments, I filled the rest of the space with imagined representations, phrases or images, for all the leads I had checked out so far. I stared at the table until it wasn't a table anymore, just a circle of words and pictures.

Along the upper curve of the circle, I saw the faces of my adult interviewees. I had a bunch of dedicated teachers, administrators, and a program manager who, even if they couldn't agree on every aspect of how slow learners should be supported, all seemed to recommend personalized approaches. On the subject of personalization I imagined, as the circle curved down, a hand reaching out. Three of the teachers I talked to, including Williamson, reached out to these students in solidarity having struggled themselves in school. But then I saw the number one hundred. I saw the problematic hundred-year-old solution to the issue of slow learners – segregation and vocational education; how personalized was that? But I'd been surprised to discover how this approach, despite coming from the vantage point that these students learned differently than regular students and required different programming, had in its various inception sometimes seemed sincere, well-intentioned, effective, and appreciated by students and parents. Below this I imagined an oasis in the middle of a barren dessert. Matthew Summit, the father of one such program, had turned out to be less interested in conversations of inclusion and more interested in creating an educational oasis of sorts for a targeted group of vulnerable students. But had it become merely a mirage in many of the districts that implemented his vision? Along the bottom curve I saw the ugly images from the sorting museum and thought of the troubling history of exclusion based on increasingly formalized determinations of intellect and impairment. Rounding the curve back upwards were the media portrayals of slow learners, often demeaning, at times romantic, but always limiting. Smart Ass Cripple sat above this, invoking in his own sarcastic way the activism of disability studies, a rejection of exclusionary practices and deficit labelling, and a demand for an authentic justice untainted by pity and paternalism. I saw Jacques and Michel grinning at me. Their ideas fit like a hand in a glove with disability studies, ongoing challenges to the arbitrariness of categorization. Though they were long gone, the modes of critique they demonstrated in the museum of sorting were still with me.

I saw the students. I'd met some students who, in equal measures, resented their categorization but often appreciated some of the supports that came with it. The students Colleen Birdseye told me about had even protested the closure of the school they'd been they'd been placed in via IOP/K & E tracking. Then I saw the villains. Veronika Sternwood in her seductive positivism, and Maddox Paine with his social Darwinism; I didn't like it, but both of them made claims on slow learners as well. I wondered if there were more dangers out there than these two. Next I saw the small cabin in the forest and thought of the thinkers who had given me shelter. I was still wrapping my head around what I'd learned from Hans and Martin. The limits to our understanding of ideas like slow learner and the consumptive mode in which people and knowledge itself are made available in modernity were certainly concerns that applied to my investigation. I rounded the circle again, past my interviewees and back to the number one hundred. But this time I saw the current inception of this form of vocational programming for slow learners; a series of classes that very few students were taking while a mysterious twenty percent of all students were not completing high school – a challenge to the efficacy of K & E, and to every other measure in place to engage at-risk students.

I looked at the circle and wondered where the slow learners were. My client had hired me because he thought that the slow learners had disappeared or were being disappeared by the system. Had I been able to make them reappear? Remembering Colleen Birdseye's insistence that the only useful common characteristic about K & E students was that they were all complex learners, and the diversity of the students I had met and heard about that shared this label, I realized the case had been pulling me away from the idea that there was some sort of essence to slow learners that held the key to educating them properly. Without making a conscious choice, I'd changed my emphasis from looking for this essence to looking for justice for students who would be labelled or considered slow learners, assuming that only justice could make them appear as they ought to. Having reflected on this shift in emphasis, this way the case had worked on me even as I had worked on it, I found it fitting, and felt determined to continue along these lines. I wondered if my client would approve.

Smart Ass Cripple and other interviewees had intimated that it might not be such bad thing if the slow learners, as a deficit category, disappeared – if more inclusive practices made it so. Related to this were the ongoing rumors I'd heard that efforts were underway to make the system more inclusive for everyone. I realized that what I next needed to check out was the set of educational reforms my most recent interviewees had mentioned. I had to try to figure out if these initiatives were likely to bring an inclusive and attentive sort of justice, the kind that Colleen Birdseye and others had spoken of, to slow learners. Or would they be forgotten, undermined, or shunted off to the side again? I still felt determined to ask the informants that Summit had mentioned everything I could about this, but I realized I might need to know a little more for myself first in order to ask effective questions. My client didn't seem to know much about the reforms, but maybe we could figure some of this out together.

I looked back at the imagined circle on the table. I was grateful to have had the chance to catch my breath and review the case, and thought the next steps this exercise had brought me to were logical ones. But I sensed that there was something more; something mysterious that I was still trying to wrap my head around. I stared at the circle on the table hoping it would project some sort of larger truth to me. The truth was in there – the circle practically vibrated with its power –

but I still couldn't quite get it to appear, not yet. I wanted so badly to put this case to bed, but there sat the circle, withholding something. Keeping it in my peripheral vision in case some larger truth suddenly sprang out, I walked over to the phone in my room and called my client.

## XXIX

A pleasant voice I assumed to be Williamson's wife answered the phone and said she would get him. There was a pause as she carried the phone to him and then I heard her telling him she had no idea who it was. Williamson's voice greeted me.

"I need to talk to you about education reform," I said.

"I'm kind of busy. Report cards are due the day after tomorrow and I am marking," Williamson said, sounding oddly reluctant.

"I'm close to breaking this case," I told him, exaggerating, "and this is an important piece. We need to talk now."

Williamson agreed, though with no great enthusiasm, to meet me. Thinking that I might have to pry some secrets out of my sometimes cagey client, I said I'd pick him up. I didn't want him to be surrounded by the comforts of home this time when I asked him questions. I asked him to bring a computer along if he had one. As I drove, I wondered if it was really the marking or if some other reason was making Williamson hesitant to talk. I understood that the actual work of teachers could be quite pressing at times, but he'd been so worried and eager when he hired me, and as I began my investigation. I wondered what was going on now.

I pulled into his driveway and walked up to the front door. I was about to press the doorbell when he opened the door. He slipped a coat over a plain white t-shirt. He was wearing faded jeans and a baseball cap with the logo of what I presumed to be a local brewery on it. I took this to be his marking outfit. He carried a beat-up laptop computer with him. We got in the car and drove off.

Williamson looked uncomfortable, even more so than usual. I thought it might cheer him up if I told him about my meeting a couple of scholars I was sure would be legends of hermeneutics to him, but I realized there was still some advantage to being able to feign ignorance when he talked about hermeneutics to me, and telling him about my meeting with Hans and Martin might undermine it. Instead, I just asked him what was bothering him.

"It's just that I have all this marking," he said unconvincingly.

"No it isn't," I rebutted. "You were so torqued at the start of this case you would have set anything aside for a while to help me with the investigation. What's going on?"

He stared off into the night, hoping I'd forget the question. When we pulled up to a light, though, I took the chance to look right at him expectantly, to let him know I was still waiting.

He finally spoke up, blurting out, “It’s just – what happens if we make things worse? Maybe I just need to keep quiet on all the problems and try to protect K & E as it is right now.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “The only thing going for slow learners is a program that despite, its good intentions, very few of them want to be in. Most of them, at least the ones that the regular program is truly too hard for, are probably still dropping out of high school instead of taking K & E. How could it get any worse?” In all honesty I knew that things could *always* get worse, you don’t operate in the underbelly of society without learning that. But it seemed like a good question to ask to get at what was bugging Williamson.

Williamson sighed and began to explain. “We are planning for next year at the school I work at. With so few kids in K & E, the principal is asking why we need separate core classes for them. She says it’s a waste of human resources tying up our K & E assigned teachers with these classes when they could be teaching regular classes. The extra sections, she says, would help keep class sizes down for everyone. And she says having these K & E kids stuck together with each other in their core classes and taught by K & E specialists is ghettoizing them, that they deserve to be included with their peers more and to have access to teachers who are skilled in the subject areas they are teaching. I don’t really get that part. Most of the students we enroll in K & E end up graduating with one of the two credentials; probably half of them end up transitioning successfully to the diploma stream. The K & E teachers must know something about the subjects they teach to be having that kind of success, but it’s almost like it’s a black mark on them that they want to work with these kids – like they couldn’t get a regular teaching gig even if they tried. Anyhow, she wants to throw all the K & E students into the regular education classes with regular education teachers and have the teachers give K & E credits to any kids who can’t handle the work at that level. A default, no-dignity pass at the K & E level for attempting regular education work they can’t understand.”

I thought Williamson was being overly cynical. This was my act and I didn’t like him stealing it. Whatever he thought of the blended classes, there was no reason to think that the teachers of these classes would be unwilling or unable to try to meet the needs of their new K & E students. Additionally, he’d always claimed to strongly support inclusion, but was now claiming that enrolling his K & E students in core classes with kids from the next highest academic tier was throwing them to the wolves. So I challenged him on this, asking if what he was objecting so strongly to couldn’t be seen as a form of inclusion.

“Inclusion into what?” Williamson asked back, and I recalled being asked the same question by an alert, modishly-dressed teacher in a staff room a few days back when we were discussing this same exact practice.

I’d just been arguing the other side of the topic to help tease out whatever was bothering Williamson, but I suddenly realized this was an important question. Could slow learners get more justice in discrete or blended classes? It felt like this question had been hiding in plain sight since early on in the investigation. Now it was out in the open demanding attention. I challenged Williamson further on his negative views of blended classes, noting, “But some of the people I’ve been talking to have described teaching or observing blended classes and said it worked well.”

“Yeah, K & E specialty teachers,” replied Williamson. “In classrooms with low class sizes in vocational schools specifically organized to look out for less academic students.” He was obviously talking about Colleen Birdseye, and it was true that if anyone could make space for slow learners in a blended class it would be her. But there were more possibilities here than Williamson was owning up to. The students I talked to described liking a blended science class that, as far as I could figure, was just taught by a regular science teacher. Gord, the principal I’d met at the pub, had opined that it was already obvious what K & E students needed to thrive, schools where flexibility was the norm and academic tiering was de-emphasized.

I rounded a corner. I was driving down a busy strip looking for an all-night diner. The constant cold and constant confusion of this case had done strange things to my appetite. I had felt a deep hunger that I hadn’t ever filled since arriving in this city. I thought I saw something in my rear view mirror but then I wasn’t sure. I’d have to keep an eye out. As I was driving I reflected that, despite his attempts to defend himself, for the first time I thought I was hearing the familiar tones of dogmatism and hypocrisy in this client of mine who claimed to be an inclusionist. At least the father of IOP, Summit, had come right out and said inclusion wasn’t his highest priority. I stayed mum on all this, though, I wanted to see where Williamson’s dark thoughts on this matter would take him.

Williamson either read my mind or heard himself sounding inconsistent because he spoke up again in his own defense. “Sometimes, in my K & E classes, I’ve had students who I felt were strong enough to be assessed at the next higher level so that’s what I did. And we always teach K & E with the consideration that we are getting many of these kids ready for the next level, so we’re not trapping anyone in that tier by running discrete classes. But consider the risks of doing blended classes full stop in a regular school.” He took a breath and I steeled myself for a long hypothetical. “Maybe your first year with blended classes,” Williamson continued, “you keep the class sizes really low in the blended classes with the K & E kids and hand-pick teachers who are good at personalizing to teach them. The next year the classes get a little bigger and the K & E kids are spread out a little more or maybe the hand-picked teacher moves to a different school. The next year, there’s a provincial budget cut and the administration of the school now more than ever thinks they can’t afford to give any consideration to the size of the classes with the K & E students in it. And by now the K & E kids are spread out so thin that there’s only one or two in every class. Eventually the district’s central administration notices that no one is doing anything with K & E and stops funding schools for K & E teachers. Pretty soon nobody even remembers the K & E level credits are on the books as a possibility and the students who the teachers think can’t pass their classes at the high school diploma level just fail. Or, if that sounds too paranoid, the K & E courses do stay on the books but only, like I said, as a default pass for failing students tacked on at the end of the course with no attempt at modification throughout.”

I wasn’t sure if Williamson was being appropriately hard-boiled or, as he himself said, downright paranoid. “That’s a pretty bleak prediction, but I guess it could go that way,” I offered noncommittally. “But what does all this have to do with your reluctance to help me tonight?” I looked in my rear view mirror again.

“What if we end up helping kill K & E?” Williamson speculated. “I admit I’ve always thought there were some problems with how it was conceived and handled, and lately it seems less popular than ever. Most of what you’ve found out seems to confirm this. But what if the problems we turn up in this investigation, a lot of which were probably pretty available for the seeing ...” he looked at me and I shrugged in agreement, “what if this investigation is the final nail in the coffin? What if this kind of research leads to the killing of K & E? And what if they replace it with nothing? Where would slow learners be then?”

I thought about that. I had to admit that it was a good question, but I had one of my own. “But K & E won’t exactly be replaced with nothing, the system is supposed to be changing. Will there even be a need for K & E with all the reforms that are underway to make education more flexible and inclusive for everyone?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Williamson admitted but then added, “Slow learners are barely on the radar now, but at least there’s a curriculum with a group of students attached to it and some sort of a fuzzy concept about how these students learn. As problematic as the label is, if there is anything at all to the concept of slow learner, if any of the claims about how they learn are true, at least contextually, then these students need to be part of the discussion about making education more inclusive.”

“But if you keep singling groups of students out into all these categories based on reasons they can’t learn like so-called normal students how can you really say you are including them?” I asked.

“But how can you make a space for their inclusion *without* considering what might be the most unique and crucial aspects of their learning needs?” Williamson asked back.

We were both quiet for a minute in acknowledgment of this seemingly irresolvable question. He didn’t say anything, but I sensed a shift in Williamson’s attitude away from the impossible wish to withdraw and build a fence around this endangered series of classes and toward the need to take this investigation down the path of the recent educational reforms and try to figure out where slow learners fit. I checked my rearview mirror once again. I was now sure someone was tailing us. There were plenty of snow-encrusted white trucks in the city but this particular one had been my constant companion for several blocks. The driver was doing a good job by hanging back a couple cars and choosing a different lane when possible, but I’d made him nonetheless. We drove up to an intersection where the light was about to turn red. I entered the intersection anyway, executed an illegal U-turn, sped back the way I’d just come for a block, and then made another hairpin right-hand turn down a different road. I continued in this manner, making a variety of turns to ensure I would remain lost to my tail but getting somewhat lost myself in in this unfamiliar city. I saw a neon light above one of the businesses we passed advertising glow-in-the-dark bowling, and I saw that the establishment had a back parking lot. If I was going to try to confer with Williamson, maybe I’d need to switch to a more unlikely venue than an all-night diner. I whipped down the side road, entered the back parking lot and parked in a dark section concealed by a crookedly placed dumpster. We waited five minutes. The white truck was nowhere to be seen. Satisfied I’d lost the tail for now, I led a confused-looking Williamson into the bowling alley.

## XXX

A family of four, a trio of teenagers, and what appeared to be a double-dating couple occupied three of the lanes while the rest sat empty. A disco soundtrack played and the lanes glowed blue with strips of red lighting all the way to the pins. Video screens above the pins danced in kaleidoscope patterns. It was nauseating. I attempted to tell the apparent proprietress we just wanted to go to the lounge for now, but she told me that they only served clients who purchased games. I reluctantly paid the applicable fees for games I had no intention of playing and shoes I had no intention of wearing. We walked past the lanes into a lounge near the back of the alley that was, mercifully, far enough away from the stereo system to allow conversation if one was willing tolerate the sound of crashing balls and pins from time to time. I purchased from a bored cashier a coffee for myself, a Coke for Williamson, and a bag of potato chips. We sat at the table near the back of the lounge.

I asked Williamson to tell me everything he knew about the various reforms that might impact slow learners.<sup>92</sup>

He thought for a moment, and then began. “In 2007, we were told Alberta Education was going to audit the documentation for students with severe disabilities, you know mental health, behavior, and medical conditions seen as having a major impact on school functioning and requiring high levels of support.”<sup>93</sup> They wanted to see if the students with these labels truly fit the criteria and schools were doing a proper job of documenting the services they were receiving.”

“Why did this happen? What brought this on?” I asked.

“I think it was the increase in the amounts of students being labeled. I swear, in the first ten years I worked at my school, the amount of students with codes – especially severe codes – must have more than doubled,”<sup>94</sup> Williamson replied.

“Interesting, but so what?” I asked. I still didn’t see what this had to do with slow learners.

“So every one of these labeled kids brought in extra funding to the school,” Williamson answered. “A couple years ago, a student with a severe code brought in another \$16,645 beyond the base pupil rate and a student with a mild to moderate disability brought in \$2,438.”<sup>95</sup> I’ve even heard of something called the ‘Bounty Phenomenon’, the observation that some schools may

---

<sup>92</sup> See Gilham and Williamson (2013). Chris Gilham and I wrote a paper that describes, in a more traditionally academic style of writing, and without reference to slow learners specifically, some of the recent changes to special education in Alberta. This section outlines some of the same changes and gives a similar perspective on them.

<sup>93</sup> Alberta Education (2013, p. 7)

<sup>94</sup> See Winzer and Mazurek (2011, p. 51). The period between 1998 to 2003 saw an increase of 64% in identification of Alberta’s students with severe disabilities and an increase of 140% for students with mild/moderate disabilities, compared to a general increase in the school population of 5%.

<sup>95</sup> Government of Alberta (2011, pp. 85-88)

operate by claiming to have as many students with disabilities as they possibly can, even actively diagnosing as many students as possible, in order to qualify for the most funding.”<sup>96</sup>

“Isn’t that sort of unethical?” I asked.

Williamson thought for several seconds and then said, “I guess maybe be if the resources aren’t used for what they are supposed to be used for; say, for example, if a teaching assistant is funded to work with students with disabilities, but actually does marking and photocopying and rarely works with the kids. But supporting these students *can* be expensive. As I said, there are teaching assistants to help them in their classes, there are teachers of discrete programs and resource rooms for students with disabilities, and some teachers work as learning coaches - that’s the fashionable word - to help other teachers work with students with disabilities. In addition to our K & E teachers, there are several other teachers where I work who are designated as diverse learning teachers who were probably funded through disability funding. There are district-wide consultants to support teachers of students with various disabilities too. There are the psychologists to do the tests that result in many of the diagnoses. There is a lot of specialized equipment; communication devices for severely autistic students, programs to read out loud to students who struggle with silent reading or to translate speech into text for students who struggle with writing. It takes a lot of resources to get these kids through, so as long as school districts are actually using the money to help support students who struggle in school I can’t blame them for wanting to maximize their funding.”

“Never mind school districts, have you been a part of this bounty phenomenon?” I asked my client, making it personal.

He paused and then replied, “I guess so. Whenever I’ve been involved with psychologists and consultants to code students, if I thought the student would require a lot of support, I encouraged whoever was doing the diagnosing to go the route of severe coding. And to tell you the truth,” he admitted, “we sometimes even kept the severe codes on students whose needs no longer seemed that severe because for every one of these there was a student who required a lot of support but who didn’t qualify according to the coding criteria.”

“Like slow learners,” I said, and Williamson nodded.

“If everyone was up to this kind of thing, no wonder the amount of severe codes doubled,” I observed.

“That had a lot to do with it, sure,” Williamson acknowledged, “but I think it’s more complicated than that. There just seems to be a lot more diagnosing being done, I mean for things like autism, AD/HD, depression, and anxiety in society at large.”<sup>97</sup>

“Is that good or bad for inclusion?” I wondered.

---

<sup>96</sup> Graham and Jahnukainen (2011, p. 277)

<sup>97</sup> Rosenberg (2013, p. 1)

“I don’t know. In a way, it probably makes people more aware and accepting of people with disabilities, but it also perpetuates the idea that disability is a problem or a defect in individual people; I mean, it’s all based on medical or psychological diagnoses,” Williamson replied equivocally.

I realized we had strayed a bit in our conversation and tried to direct the conversation back on course. “So what happened in the severe funding audit?” I asked.

“Well, the experience was pretty awful. I’d already finalized and submitted the severe coded student’s Individual Program Plans and severe student monitoring forms for the year to our instructional services branch, but after we heard there was going to be an audit everyone panicked. We ended up rewriting the Individual Program Plans very carefully to try to ensure they met the complex coding criteria exactly. It troubled me to do all that revision seeing as how the parents had already signed off on the original documents for the year and now we were making big changes to them. But at the time we thought we were at risk of losing funding.”

“But how did the actual audit come out?” I asked.

“A report came out later that said almost half of the students with severe codes were found not to meet the criteria.<sup>98</sup> But we weren’t actually penalized on any of our cases or even told which ones didn’t make it. I don’t think any of this was a surprise to Alberta Education because shortly after this they launched this massive consultation about improving Special Education Policy in the province.”

The bowling pins in a couple of lanes crashed at the same time and I waited a minute before asking Williamson the next question. We sipped our drinks and I munched on the chips, finding them bland and unsatisfying. When it was a little quieter again, I asked Williamson to tell me about the process he’d just mentioned. He told me it was called *Setting the Direction*.<sup>99</sup> It involved three rounds of consultations with thousands of Albertans. He told me he’d been to one of the consultation sessions – a massive gathering of administrators, teachers, curriculum leaders, government ministers and other stakeholders in special education – held at a large convention centre. The event had been a two-day affair consisting of speakers and video presentations combined with small group sessions in break-out rooms. The notes from the sessions held in the break-out rooms were then reviewed by facilitators who identified common themes in the discussion and announced these to the larger group. Williamson said he’d found it funny that they never discussed how to better support students with any specific disabilities, let alone slow learners, only the need to create a more flexible special education system for everyone. He also told me that one of the keynote speakers, the Minister of Education at the time, said he wanted to eliminate the practice of coding students with disabilities while the very next speaker, a professor of education policy, mused that there would always have to be some kind of coding in order to identify and meet students’ needs.

Williamson told me that the last phase of the consultation involved the formal submission of a set of recommendations for reform to the government of Alberta, all twelve of which were

---

<sup>98</sup> Alberta Education (2008, p. 1)

<sup>99</sup> Alberta Education (2009b)

accepted. These recommendations, he said, triggered a reform initiative known as *Action on Inclusion* which spoke to a fundamental ethical shift in Alberta's classrooms. Illustratively, he opened up an on-line pamphlet from the *Action on Inclusion* initiative on his computer and showed me some examples of the planned reforms.

*Moving from tolerating difference to valuing diversity, moving from special education founded on a medical model based on the student's diagnosis to [a practice] of understanding a student's strengths and needs through [collaboration] in which teachers, parents, students and special-ists ...identify supports and services that best match the student's strengths and needs.*<sup>100</sup>

Williamson then opened up one of the *Setting the Direction* documents to show me the vision of inclusion that was to guide the reforms.

*Inclusive education system [is] a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance of, and belonging for, all students. Inclusive education in Alberta means a value-based approach to accepting responsibility for all students. It also means that all students will have equitable opportunity to be included in the typical learning environment or program of choice.*<sup>101</sup>

This was interesting, but I wasn't sure of its relevance to the case. "Do any of the *Setting the Direction* or *Action on Inclusion* documents talk about slow learners, or K & E students?" I asked Williamson.

"No, like I said, for the most part it didn't talk about any categories of students. But a lot of it seemed to me potentially promising for supporting slow learners. The idea of teacher's assessment of student needs driving the supports the students receive, instead of being totally reliant on medical or psychological assessments of disability, I thought might empower teachers to take a closer look at slow learners or any students who were struggling regardless of whether or not they fit into disability categories. Along those lines, the literature acknowledged that..." he pulled up another website, did a search for a phrase, and showed me another line, "*many of the strategies used to differentiate instruction for students with disabilities were also effective within the general student population across grade levels and curriculum areas.*"<sup>102</sup>

"So," I surmised, recalling a conversation we had early on, "You hired me to help make sure slow learners don't get lost in all the commotion. To help hold the Department to the commitments made in these documents, at least their implicit commitments to slow learners."

"Initially, yes," said Williamson, "but look at this. I discovered it a couple days ago. That's why I'm not sure we should be messing with K & E. Maybe, for all of its problems, it still is the safest place for these students. I'm no longer sure these reforms are going anywhere, and if K & E goes too I don't know what will be left for slow learners." He ran the cursor over the word "Archive" on the top of the screen and I realized we hadn't been reading documents from a current and actively maintained section of the Alberta Education website. Then he clicked back to a passage

<sup>100</sup> Alberta Education (2010b, p. 2)

<sup>101</sup> Alberta Education (2009b, p. 2)

<sup>102</sup> Alberta Education (2010c, p. 3)

that tersely explained the present state of affairs, “*Action on Inclusion no longer exists as a project or initiative, but the work continues as part of our collective practice to build an inclusive education system in Alberta.*”<sup>103</sup> I was probably imagining things but somehow that statement seemed to suck all of the noise out of the cacophonous bowling alley into Williamson’s beat up laptop computer. All I could hear for several minutes was a dull silence.<sup>104</sup>

To be continued...

## References

- Allan, J. (2008). Foucault and the art of transgression. In J. Allan (Ed.), *Rethinking inclusive education: The philosophers of difference in practice* (pp. 85-97). AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training. (2015). Trade entrance requirements. Retrieved from [http://tradesecrets.alberta.ca/SOURCES/PDFS/Entrance\\_Requirements.pdf](http://tradesecrets.alberta.ca/SOURCES/PDFS/Entrance_Requirements.pdf).
- Alberta Education. (2016a). *Guide to education ECS to Grade 12 2015 – 2016*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author. <https://education.alberta.ca/inclusion/inclusive-education/>.
- Alberta Education. (2016b). *Inclusive education*. Retrieved Alberta Education (2016a), *Guide to education ECS to Grade 12 2015 - 2016*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.
- Alberta Education. (2013). *Information manual for knowledge and employability courses*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.
- Alberta Education. (2012). *Government of Alberta - education - initiatives, projects and reviews – Inclusive education*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/Inclusion> (no longer live).
- Alberta Education. (2012). *Special education coding criteria*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.
- Alberta Education. (2010a). *Pathways to possibilities: The revised career and technology studies program*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.
- Alberta Education. (2010b). *Moving toward an inclusive education system in Alberta*. Retrieved from <http://education.alberta.ca/media/1296822/inclusiveeducationfacts.pdf> (no longer live).
- Alberta Education. (2010c). *Making a difference: Meeting diverse needs with differentiated instruction*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

---

<sup>103</sup> Alberta Education (2012)

<sup>104</sup> As of this revision in May 2016, the Alberta Education (2016b) website no longer maintains, even in archived form, the Setting the Direction / Action on Inclusion documents cited here and has not retained the 2012 announcement about the Action on Inclusion termination. Currently the section on inclusion states that fully inclusive schools are a matter of provincial policy with little or no reference to any specific changes or measures in programming or curriculum that have helped facilitate this larger policy.

Alberta Education. (2009a). *Inspiring education: A dialogue with Albertans*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Alberta Education. (2009b). *Setting the direction framework*. Retrieved from [http://education.alberta.ca/media/1082136/sc\\_settingthedirection\\_framework.pdf](http://education.alberta.ca/media/1082136/sc_settingthedirection_framework.pdf) (no longer live).

Alberta Education. (2008). *Report on severe disabilities profile review*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Alberta Education. (2004a). *Report on consultation for policy change*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Alberta Education. (2004b). *The journey: A handbook for parents of children who are gifted and talented*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Alberta Education. (1992). *IOP occupational component 16-26-36*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Caputo, J.D. (2013). *Truth: Philosophy in transit*. London, UK: Penguin.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (n.d.). *FAQs: What is the Carnegie Unit?* Retrieved from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/faqs>.

Central Alberta Regional Consortium. (2010). *Regional curriculum implementation report 2009 - 2010*. (Grant 2008-0653). Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Chandler, R. (1940). *Farewell my lovely*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

Costa, A.L., & Kallick, B. (2008). *Learning and leading with habits of mind: 16 essential characteristics for success*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Davey, N.P. (2006). *Unquiet understanding: Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics*. Albany, NY: SUNY.

Eidos84. (2011, July 11). *Heidegger on Marx*. [Video file]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxmzGT1w\\_kk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxmzGT1w_kk).

Gadamer, H-G. (1992c). Notes on planning for the future. In D. Misgeld & G. Nicholson (Eds. & Trans.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on education, poetry, and history: Applied hermeneutics* (pp. 165-180). Albany, NY: SUNY.

Gadamer, H-G. (1996). *The enigma of health: The art of healing in a scientific age* (J. Gainer & N. Walker, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Gadamer, H-G. (1992a). The idea of the university--Yesterday, today, tomorrow. In D. Misgeld & G. Nicholson (Eds. & Trans.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on education, poetry, and history: Applied hermeneutics* (pp. 47-62). Albany, NY: SUNY.

Gadamer, H-G. (1992b). The limitations of the expert. In D. Misgeld & G. Nicholson (Eds. & Trans.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on education, poetry, and history: Applied hermeneutics* (pp.181-192). Albany, NY: SUNY.

Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer, & D.G. Marshall, Trans.) London, UK: Continuum.

Gilham, C., & Williamson, W.J. (2013). Inclusion's confusion in Alberta. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(6), 553-566. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2013.802025.

Government of Alberta. (2011). *Funding manual for school authorities 2011/2012 school year*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Crown in Right of Alberta.

Graham, L.J., & M. Jahnukainen. (2011). Wherefore art thou, inclusion? Analysing the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 26(2), 263–288.

Graham, C., & Neu, D. (2009). Standardized testing and the construction of governable persons. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 36(3), 295-319. doi:10.1080/0022027032000167080.

Harrison, R. (2013, May 22). *Thomas Sheehan on Heidegger and technology* [Audiopodcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.apple.com/itunes/store>.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Heidegger, M. (1978c). Letter on humanism (F.A. Capuzzi, Trans.) In D.F. Krell (Ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings from being and time to the task of thinking* (pp. 139-212). London, UK: Routledge.

Heidegger, M. (1978a). On the origin of the work of art (F.A. Capuzzi, Trans.) In D.F. Krell (Ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings from being and time to the task of thinking* (pp. 143-212). London, UK: Routledge.

Heidegger, M. (1978b). The question concerning technology (F.A. Capuzzi, Trans.). In D.F. Krell (Ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings from being and time to the task of thinking* (pp. 308-341) London, UK: Routledge.

Heidegger, M. (2001). What are poets for? In *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper Collins.

- Heidegger, M. (1968). *What is called thinking?* (J.G. Gray, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper Colophon.
- Illich, I. (1975). *Limits to medicine. Medical nemesis: The expropriation of health*. London, UK: Marion Boyars.
- Korsgard, C.M. (1986). The right to lie: Kant and dealing with evil. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 15(4), 325-349. Retrieved from <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3200670>.
- Mathew, N. (1984) *Industrial education in Alberta: Its evolution and development*. (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Alberta. Edmonton, AB, Canada.
- McGinnis, S. (2010, February 17). Trade school may be shut. *The Calgary Herald*, p. C5.
- Melnyk, T. (2012). The English 30-1 *Diploma exam: Assessment practices and pedagogy* (Unpublished master's thesis) University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada.
- Miller, D. (2003). Play. *Dr. Anne Galloway*. Retrieved from <http://www.purselipsquarejaw.org/2003/11/play.php>.
- Plato (n.d.). *The Theaetetus* (B. Jowett, Trans.) Retrieved from <http://izt.ciens.ucv.ve/ecologia/Archivos/Filosofia-II/Plato--Theaetetus.pdf>.
- Rice, N. (2006). Teacher education as a site of resistance. In S. Danforth & S.L. Gabel (Eds.), *Vital questions facing disability studies in education* (pp. 17-32). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Rosenberg, R.S. (2013, April). Abnormal is the new normal: Why will half the U.S. population have a diagnosable mental disorder. *Slate Magazine*. Retrieved from [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2013/04/diagnostic\\_and\\_statistical\\_manual\\_fifth\\_edition\\_why\\_will\\_half\\_the\\_u\\_s\\_population.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2013/04/diagnostic_and_statistical_manual_fifth_edition_why_will_half_the_u_s_population.html).
- Ross, E. (1989, February 20). Parents, students rap vocational plan. *The Calgary Herald*, p. B3.
- Ruttan, S. (1992, October 2). Axe posed over vocational schools. *The Calgary Herald*, p. B1.
- Sears, E.P. (2010, March 15). Van Horne kids at risk to fall through the cracks. *The Calgary Herald*, p. A11.
- Skytt, J. (2002, April 9). Government leaves IOP high and dry, *ATA News* 36 (17). Retrieved from <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20News/Volume%2036/Number%2017/In%20the%20News/Pages/Government%20leaves%20IOP%20high%20and%20dry.aspx>.
- Stewart, M. (2004). The perils of testing. In M. Moll (Ed.), *Passing the test: The false promises of standardized testing* (pp. 177-181). Ottawa, ON, Canada: The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Taylor, A., & Lehmann, W. (2002). "Reinventing" vocational education policy: Pitfalls and possibilities. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 48(2), 139-161.

Tremain, S. (2008). Foucault, governmentality, and critical disability theory: An introduction. In S. Tremain (Ed.), *Foucault and the government of disability* (pp. 1-26). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Trivia Dragnet (n.d.). In *Internet movie data base*. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043194/>.

Tulgan, B. (2009). *Not everyone gets a trophy: How to manage Generation Y*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Weisstein, E.W. (n.d.) Young girl-old woman illusion. *MathWorld - A wolfram web resource*. Retrieved from <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/YoungGirl-OldWomanIllusion.html>.

Weinsheimer, J., & Marshall, D.G. (2004). Translators preface. In H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and method* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed, J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Trans, pp. xi-xix). New York, NY: Continuum.

Williamson, W.J. (2016a). The case of the disappearing/appearing slow learner: An interpretive mystery. Part two: Cells of categorical confinement. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, Article 5. Retrieved from <http://jah.journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/jah/index.php/jah/article/view/111>. <http://hdl.handle.net/10515/sy5np1x18>

Williamson, W.J. (2016b). The case of the disappearing/appearing slow learner: An interpretive mystery. Part one: A strange and earnest client. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, Article 3. Retrieved from <http://jah.journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/jah/index.php/jah/article/view/107>. <http://hdl.handle.net/10515/sy51n7z43>

Winzer, M.A., & Mazurek, K. (2011). *International practices in special education: Debates and challenges*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Wrathall, M.A. (2011). *Heidegger and unconcealment: Truth, language and history*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.