

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

## **Part Five: Time to Kill Time**

**W. John Williamson**

### **Abstract**

These concluding chapters follow the events described in the previous four parts of this narrative. Max Hunter, a private detective remains 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. As this section begins Hunter and Williamson are in a bowling alley where they hope to remain undetected as they investigate recent reforms to Alberta’s special education system. At the conclusion of Part Four, the detective and client read a terse statement on Alberta education’s website declaring that *Action on Inclusion*, the ambitious reform project “no longer exists.” These chapters examine the termination of this project, other recent educational reforms in the province, and their impact on students labelled as slow learners, additional bureaucratic discourses that are toxic to slow learners and diversity in general, and a fleeting glimpse of hope involving how “slow” might be more generously reclaimed from its current deficit-based discursive usages.

### **Keywords**

slow learner, efficiency, bureaucracy, inclusion, inquiry, lived curriculum, Dewey, Honoré, Rancière, slow movement

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*For Jacob*

XXXI

*“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.”*

When I saw the news that the Inclusion Project had been halted, a chill ran through me, followed by a grim tension that began in my chest and worked its way up to my jaw. This sounded like a cover-up, like someone had got to someone. Considering their bureaucratic origins, the *Setting the Direction* documents Williamson had been showing me seemed frank and earnest in identifying the problems with the current model and the reforms identified as necessary. What was this vaguely stated *work* in the message I’d just read? I wondered if this phrase, in an<sup>1</sup> Orwellian sort of way,<sup>2</sup> meant its opposite, in just the same way that police cover-ups I’d experienced on the West Coast were always still labelled “Active Investigations.” I had to remind myself the background noises I kept hearing were crashing bowling pins and not doors being slammed shut.

“And take a look at this,” said Williamson, clicking on a video link. Some upbeat music started up. A blandly handsome man, whom I saw from the by-line was an education minister at the time the video was produced, spoke up in faintly accented English, “*When you are looking at becoming an inclusive society there really isn’t a beginning or an end. It is all about a process, it is all about becoming accepting and inclusive and not reaching a finite goal.*”<sup>3</sup> From what I had observed on this case, I had to agree with him. Inclusion was complicated. The video that followed, however, wasn’t very complicated at all. A group of students with learning disabilities, a student with a physical disability, students from cultural and linguistic minority groups, and a student who identified himself as gay were all shown going about their school days. They were happily participating in the educational and social activities in their school, and appeared to be receiving, as a matter of course, a variety of forms of support including peer and teacher support, assistive technology, adaptations to the physical space, and a gay-straight alliance club. I attended to my first impression and I realized I was touched. But then I felt a little sick. The lighting in the bowling alley didn’t help, but it was the saccharine aftertaste of the video that I was reacting most strongly to. Williamson observed my reaction. “It makes it all look pretty easy, doesn’t it?” he remarked.

“It looks like all the inclusion that needs to occur is already happening, despite what the guy said about it being a journey,” I agreed.

“It’s happening, it’s already happened and it’s about to happen,” Williamson mused, making me think of a confusing article on quantum physics I’d once started to read in a science magazine in a doctor’s office. Then, returning to a prior point he added, “You know, inclusion can get pretty messy a lot of time. I spend large parts of my day helping teachers, students, and teaching assistants

<sup>1</sup> Alberta Education (2012) in Gilham and Williamson (2013)

<sup>2</sup> I am alluding more specifically to the portrayal of deceptive bureaucratic language constructions such as “ministry of truth,” “ministry of love,” and “reality-control” in George Orwell (1976. p. 6, 7, & 31).

<sup>3</sup> InspiringEducation (2012, January 13)

work together with each other, and there's often tears, frustration, and confusion all around. It's hard to convince a busy teacher to take the time to design a different assignment for a student labelled with a reading disability when that same kid has skipped her class three times this week and told her off in his first class back. Even though I'm supposed to be the expert, I sometimes wonder how inclusive my own classroom really is. I was teaching a story to my K & E English class yesterday, I didn't think the story was that hard, but I had a student who was moving up to K & E from a program for students with intellectual disabilities burst into tears and run out of the room because she said she didn't understand any of it."

"What did you do about it?" I asked.

"When she came back I worked with her a bit, re-reading the story with her one on one and giving her some hints until she felt more confident," Williamson replied. "It wasn't that big of a deal, but with all my years of doing this, I still didn't anticipate that story being any sort of barrier for her, or anyone, until it was."

I thought about that for a minute. Then Williamson spoke up again. "And where are the kids with behavioral/emotional disabilities in this video? Or the student with Tourette's Syndrome who can't help blurting out racial epithets?" His rhetorical question was answered by the sounds of crashing pins. The video had seemed to focus on the more photogenic forms of diversity.

I was worried Williamson might continue to rant along these lines, and I didn't need to hear a bunch of war stories to illustrate why inclusion was more complicated than the video suggested. I tried to move our inquiry forward with another question. "Did they change anything at all about special education before *Action on Inclusion...*?" I paused, unable to come up with a verb for the particular way in which the project had ceased to be.

"Good question. Let me try to find out." He punched some searches into the computer. I drained my coffee and tried another stale chip before giving up, crumpling the bag and attempting to throw it into a nearby bin. I missed, and the bag fell on the floor spilling five chips. The cashier shot me an angry glance and I held out my arms in apology and went and picked it all up.

When I got back to the table, Williamson had already found something. "It looks like," he said pointing at a document on the screen, "they did get around to replacing the model of block funding for each student with a disability with something called a 'Census'.<sup>4</sup> There is still per pupil funding for diverse learning needs, but it's based on *all* the students in the district, not just the ones with diagnosed disabilities, and it's more generally called 'an Inclusive Education Fund.' It specifically says the resources are supposed to be used to support all students. Instead of funding specific disabilities at higher rates, it ties increases in inclusive education funding to a variety of demographic factors in communities that suggest the students in these communities have greater needs."<sup>5</sup>

He showed me the chart. The new inclusive education funding was set up to address, through additional funding, community issues including: if there were a greater number of single parent

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<sup>4</sup> Alberta Education (2013a, p. 28).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

families than the provincial average, lower average incomes per family, lower education levels in parents than the provincial average, or higher rates of children in care in an area and so on.<sup>6</sup>

“I like how this better addresses the social complexities of struggling in school,” Williamson admitted. “I remember what we found out about the socioeconomic factors that might contribute to kids appearing as slow learners, instead of learning disabled. If they’re no longer just funding for specific students with disabilities, maybe this will mean distributing resources more equitably for all students who struggle in school regardless of disability labels. Remember how I told you that was one of the problems with the slow learner label? Because it wasn’t considered a disability, it didn’t bring in very much additional funding.”

I considered this. “I can see that,” I said. Still, I’d grown pretty good at interpreting financial statements over my career, and I could see there was a certain shrewdness that had little to do with philosophies of inclusion at work too. “But it also makes the funding much more predictable and manageable,” I explained to Williamson. “The way I understand it, under the previous model, any time a school district could come up with a new severe code for a student, a massive amount of funding was suddenly allocated to that student. And Alberta Education had no control over these increases, as they were dependent on the diagnoses of specialists, diagnoses that, as you mentioned, are increasing in number. Community demographics don’t change very quickly and neither does overall enrolment in the district. I can’t tell if this will actually save Alberta Education money in the short term, but it will certainly make special education, or inclusive education funding much more predictable.”

Williamson took that in for a minute.

“Did you find any other significant changes that were made before the announcement that *Action on Inclusion* ...?” I asked still unable to find the cause of death to put on the autopsy.

Williamson admitted that he hadn’t.

We both considered this for a minute. “It looks bad,” Williamson agreed. “That after such a thorough and collaborative process, and after all of those inspiring promises, that *Action on Inclusion* was just arbitrarily terminated like that. There was no warning to stakeholders about it, just a statement saying the Department supported diversity and the short video I showed you. It almost does make it look like it was all about the money, or at least that changing the funding model was the main priority. But that sounds paranoid too – everyone seemed so committed to reform at the consultations.” At least he’d found the right verb combination for the initiative’s demise.

“I don’t know if anyone is going to get to the bottom of that one,” I remarked pragmatically, though it rubbed me the wrong way to admit it. Then, feeling we’d exhausted that subject, I inquired “Do K and E students still earn more funding per credit?”

Williamson pulled up a K & E manual. It took some scrolling but it turned out that this hadn’t changed; they were still funded 5/8 on the credit in K & E courses.<sup>7</sup> It seemed ironic really. Slow

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. (p. 16)

learners, despite the obscurity of the label, were in a way now one of the only specifically funded categories of student; that is as long as they went with the K & E course offerings. We talked about how these funds, as limited as they were, supported the idea of assigning specific teachers to look out for K and E students in some way but, again, that there was no guarantee schools would continue doing this just because we thought this was the implication.

I looked outside the lounge in the alleys, to see if anyone was watching us. In one of the middle lanes, a young, muscular dude, his white shirt glowing purple in the light, shanked his throw at the last minute and threw a gutter ball. I thought for a minute. Williamson had used the word “inspiring,” and I remembered my conversation at Ultimate Brew and my intention to ask Williamson if he'd heard of *Inspiring Education* and the High School Flexibility Project. I'd got the sense that whatever happened to *Action on Inclusion* these two initiatives were very much alive and, according to the two school administrators I talked to, potentially beneficial to slow learners. I asked him first about *Inspiring Education*.

“Well, lately, whenever they talk at staff meetings and district professional development sessions, principals and superintendents of my school district refer to the three ‘Es’ of being a twenty-first century learner, according to *Inspiring Education*, “engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial,”<sup>8</sup> Williamson replied. “But I haven’t had time to look closely at any of the literature the initiative has produced myself.”

I told Williamson there was no time like the present. If this was the vision of the future of education, we needed to try to find the slow learners in it. Williamson pulled up the *Inspiring Education* page from the Department of Education website and we both surveyed the screen. We scrolled through a page describing Alberta in 2030 and predicting what the generation that comes to adulthood then will have to be able to do to thrive in this complex era. We then met the trio of “Es” Williamson had mentioned. The website briefly explained each value, and its importance to the project of producing a citizen ready to face the challenges the future posed.

***Engaged Thinker*** - Alberta must cultivate students with an inquisitive, engaged mind. Students that are prepared to ask “why?” and think critically about the answers they receive.

***Ethical Citizen*** - Knowing the answer is not enough. Our children and grandchildren must be ethical, compassionate and respectful to truly grow and thrive.

***Entrepreneurial Spirit*** - To shape innovative ideas into real-world solutions, our education system should develop motivated, resourceful and resilient citizens. Alberta would do well to encourage our students to be bold, embrace leadership and actively seek new opportunities.

The document went on to assert that these traits were best fostered not through teaching that involved the “dissemination of information,” but “a process of inquiry and discovery.”<sup>9</sup> I thought the rhetoric in this echoed the *IOP Manual* as well as Summit’s remarks about learning when we met in person. I told this to Williamson. He agreed with me. “The entrepreneurial spirit idea interests me,” said Williamson. “It seems written to sound compatible with the other two values,

<sup>8</sup> Alberta Education (2010, pp. 5-6)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. (p. 7)

and I think it can be in some ways. Trying to motivate students to think for themselves seems obviously worthwhile. But I read a book a long time ago entitled *No Logo* that talked about how the idea of being a “free agent” can be interpreted more critically as a gloss painted over a future of privatization, frequent layoffs, contractual work over long term employment, and a deregulated de-unionized labor market.”<sup>10</sup>

You’d better be resourceful and resilient because it’s a jungle out there. Be your own boss, because you can’t count on a loyal employer,” I remarked. Williamson scrolled down and we looked more deeply into the document. We skimmed over a section that, like the principal I’d met at Ultimate Brew, criticized the relevance of the industrial model of schooling for the present generation of learners. Then there was a further explication of the entrepreneurial value we had been discussing:

***Entrepreneurial Spirit:** I create new opportunities. I am motivated, **resourceful**, and **self-reliant**. Many people describe me as tenacious because I continuously set goals and work with perseverance and discipline to achieve them. Through hard work, **I earn my achievements** and the respect of others. I strive for **excellence** and personal success. I am **competitive** and ready to challenge the status quo. I explore ideas and technologies by myself and as part of diverse teams. I am resilient and adaptable, and have the ability and determination to transform my discoveries into products or services that benefit my community and by extension, the world.*<sup>11</sup>

Maddox Paine’s themes of individualism and intense competition rang out again.<sup>12</sup> There was something else too. Despite the earlier commitment to move schooling away from the industrial model, here we were grinding out products and services. I repeated Martin’s words “standing reserve” and Williamson, who seemed to have some familiarity with the concept, nodded.<sup>13</sup>

We continued scrolling up and down the document, trying to make sense of it. Williamson paused on a section and the spirit moved him to observe, “The tone of the document is sort of all over the place,” he observed, “There’s all the talk of entrepreneurship, excellence, competition, and being top-performing, but then there are earnest statements like this one.” He showed the section that he’d stopped on - a letter written to the then Minister of Education that had made its way into the document:

*In 20 years I hope that education isn’t about grades. Grades judge us on external things – and don’t take into account the darkness that is often on the inside. People always say that if you try hard enough you can achieve anything. But unfortunately that is not true. When I’m being abused, feeling alone, or if I have a physical or mental disability or don’t have a safe place to go home to – I can’t try very hard at the things that people measure. Please stop measuring as much. Please give me a chance even if I don’t measure up. Thanks for listening.*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Klein (2000, p. 255)

<sup>11</sup> Alberta Education (2010, p. 20). Emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson (2016a, p. 16)

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger in Williamson (2016a, p. 34)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. (p. 50)

We weren't sure what to make of this letter, what commitment to inclusion it might be implying. "What else does the document say about disability?" I asked. If *Inspiring Education* had absorbed *Action on Inclusion*, I wondered what traces of the latter initiative's themes might be found in it. Williamson did a key word search for "disability" in the document. It appeared once, in the letter we'd just read. He tried "inclusion." The word didn't appear at all. He tried "special needs." It showed up three times in the main body of the document. Two of these mentions were simply demographic descriptors of participants in the committees that helped create the document. "Special needs" in the context of instruction only appeared once, in a paragraph about how assistive technology, including "intelligent clothing" would continue to break down barriers for learners with special needs.<sup>15</sup>

"Smarty Pants," I couldn't help but remark.

We then scrolled through the document to see if we'd missed anything that addressed concepts from *Action on Inclusion* without specifically mentioning any of the words we'd searched. There really wasn't very much.

"It looks pretty thin on disability and inclusion," Williamson said. "It's almost as though they think curriculum will be so flexible in the future and technology will be so advanced that disability will disappear in a way, or at least become less relevant. I hope they're right. I hope the changes do open up more spaces for kids."

"Either that or they are paying lip service," I suggested. I was trying keep an open mind, but I'd read my share of long on promises - short on details documents.

Williamson sighed and remarked, "It wouldn't be the first time for that. I've seen both the high school diploma level English and Social Studies programs of study re-written in my years as a teacher. Both curricula were supposed to be more flexible and inquiry-based.<sup>16</sup> But what I've often seen in practice after ten years with these new curricula, is kids answering questions from textbooks, and writing multiple choice tests and in-class essays that seem modeled after diploma exams; things slow learners don't do very well with.

This was a familiar complaint. Other interviewees had made it too. "That's not very inspiring," I remarked, echoing the name of the document we were looking at.

"Maybe this time will be different. I hope so," Williamson remarked, and then added. "I'd like to hear about the concrete things that are being done to support this new vision."

I made a mental note to ask my next interviewees for some of the specifics Williamson was looking for. He clicked away from the framework document and searched for other documents related to the title *Inspiring Education*. We found a website with the heading "What's happening now?" related to the project and found a list of projects that Alberta Education was currently engaged in to support *Inspiring Education*. Among the various initiatives, Williamson thought the following were relevant to students labelled slow learners:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (p. 29)

<sup>16</sup> Alberta Education (2003; 2005)

***A New Provincial Dual Credit Strategy*** - Creating opportunities for students to earn both high school and post-secondary credits for the same course.

***A High School Flexibility Program*** - Empowering students to show learning through mastery of the subject, rather than linking credits to the number of hours at a desk.

I asked Williamson to explain why he thought these two were relevant. “I think some of this stuff was already happening, even before it got absorbed under *Inspiring Education*,” he began in his ever-equivocating way, “but it’s still good. I like the dual credit strategy, especially the ability to credit students for the college component of their training for the trades. Some of our K & E students really are strong hands-on learners and have an aptitude for this sort of thing, so giving them opportunities to receive trade school credit for advanced training in the areas they excel at during high school honors their strengths and motivates them.” Then he tempered this by saying, “This is great for students who excel in these areas, but it isn’t going to turn around the lives of all the kids who struggle in their classes, or even all K & E students. Some of our students who present as K & E level academically are also no better than I was in their hands-on courses on campus.”

“What about this flexibility project?” I asked.

“I don’t know much about that,” he admitted, clicking on a link. A black and white summary in five short paragraphs popped up. It explained how the flexibility project had, experimentally, eliminated a requirement that formerly applied to most of the province’s schools. The stricken requirement was that students receive twenty-five hours of face-to-face instruction with teachers for every high school credit earned. A trial in sixteen schools in the province had apparently gone well enough that the time per credit requirement was being loosened for all of the province’s high schools. When the report on the initial trial was released the Minister of Education at the time had made these comments:

*This is Inspiring Education in action. We are rethinking and redesigning high school to provide flexibility for students and teachers. Linking credits to the time a kid spends sitting in a desk is too prescriptive for some high school students, especially those who don’t require the full 25 hours of face-to-face instruction to master the curriculum.*<sup>17</sup>

Gord, one of the administrators I recently met, had complained about the hours to credit policies also, but I still didn’t see the connection to this case. “I don’t understand how this will help slow learners,” I commented. “If they learn slower, how will the opportunity to move faster through curriculum be of much benefit?”

Williamson nodded in agreement. But then he got a thoughtful look in his eye. “There might be something more to it than that,” he said. “Maybe we need to check that out more thoroughly.”

We scrolled through a series of reports about the project. We came to an explanation of the Carnegie Unit, the roots of the hours to credits concept that the Flex Project was challenging. It was

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<sup>17</sup> Johnson in Government of Alberta (May 8, 2013, para. 3)

more or less the same information that Gord had explained to me, except that it was specific to Alberta's ratios.<sup>18</sup>

I saw that fate had rewarded the intention I'd made to follow up on the Carnegie stuff by providing me with this detail, but I still wasn't sure I saw the connection to this case. "I don't see the problem with this," I said. "A public education system needs some way of organizing what classes the students take, how much emphasis gets placed on each subject, and how the students are measured on their learning. This seems pretty logical; no wonder it's lasted for as long as it has." I didn't fully believe this – I'd actually switched careers from cop to shamus precisely to escape this sort of regimentation – but I thought I'd try this perspective out on Williamson to test his views on the subject.

"According to this," said Williamson, pointing to a paragraph further down in the document, "the logic you are talking about is the exact problem." He pointed to the passage he was talking about.

*[A]lthough intended as an organizational construct designed to manage teaching inputs, the Carnegie Unit's logic may have crept into teacher's beliefs about the nature of learning.*<sup>19</sup>

The paragraph went on to describe how this form of organization implied a highly standardized form of teaching and learning that was focused more on what teachers did than what students did and more interested in numerical grades than student engagement. A page below this passage listed several questions, three of which pulled us up short.

*How can teachers relinquish some of the control over time and pacing but still adhere to their responsibilities to support student learning?*  
*How do school practices such as streaming conflict with the ability of the school to honour the learning goals of students?*  
*What does success mean in school if all students are not following a standardized path through their coursework?*<sup>20</sup>

I recalled Martin's sentiments that the true teacher lets learn. "If pacing was more personalized," I asked suddenly seeing a possibility, "what would this even do to the idea of a slow learner?"

Williamson and I paused to consider the weight of this question, and then we began to discuss the implications of the project for the students who concerned us the most. As we read through the various ways the Flex Project had been implemented, we realized that it was true that the Project offered the opportunity for some students to move more quickly through their courses. But there seemed to be more to it than that. Williamson said he disagreed with my earlier statement that this would be of no value to the students we were representing just because these students were purported to learn slowly.

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<sup>18</sup> Fijal (2011, p. 9)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (p. 10)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. (p. 12)

“If work is being assigned not on the basis of personalized observation as to how each student learns and what he or she requires to move forward, but to fill a certain amount of instructional time, it might imply an attitude of rigidity in assessment that is harmful to the students. It could mean asking every student to do the same volume of work in a class no matter how quickly or slowly he or she works, not so much to get them to an acceptable level but to fill the time. It might involve giving all academic tasks in the class equal time instead of moving students more quickly through content they are showing mastery of and taking more time with content they are struggling with. Maybe this Project might challenge this kind of rigidity,” Williamson speculated.

I thought he was done speaking, but after a short pause he piped up again. “And what about when slowness isn’t really slowness at all but just a handle for other problems? I have a student in my K & E English class right now who is repeating the course for the third time even though she’s one of the best readers and writers of all of our K & E students. She probably shouldn’t even be in courses at the K & E level, but they kept dropping her levels due to school failure. She just can’t seem to get it together to attend more than once or twice a week, probably the seven o’clock bus she has to take from the reserve she lives on doesn’t help. Our counsellor and family support workers are obviously trying to work with her and her family to get her to come to school more often, but in the meantime it seems like such a waste to repeatedly fail her just because the course is stretched over a one hundred and twenty-five hour time frame that she doesn’t seem to have the stamina for, especially when she entered the course with most of the skills to pass it.”

“How might this be different under the Flex Project? I asked.

“Instead of marching her through one hundred and twenty-five hours of content, I could just give her the assessments that meet the main outcomes of the course on the days she showed up. Once she completed all of these, we could credit her in the course, even if it was only after a few hours. Instead of watching her repeatedly failing a course that is actually too easy for her, we could enable her to prove she can do K & E English so at least she has credits in that. Maybe having these credits in the bank would give her a little more confidence and we could begin to assess her at a more challenging level of English when she shows up.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as just enabling her truancy?” I asked.

“Being forced to put that much time into a course she can already do, on top of everything else she is dealing with, is a pretty good reason to want to avoid school altogether. Her pattern has been to begin each new semester with good enthusiasm, miss a few days, get behind, get discouraged, and end the semester by missing most school days every week. The structure implied by the time requirement might be good for some students, but it’s just boring and frustrating for her, she never feels like she’s getting anywhere. At least this way we can make it count for something on the days when she does show up, maybe even motivate her to attend more often because she thinks she’s getting somewhere.”

A suspicious thought came to me. The strategy Williamson was talking about didn’t sound like it had come out of nowhere or had never been tried before. “Would you even really need the Flex Project to do this?” I asked.

“Probably not,” said Williamson after considering my question. “There are already all kinds of ways students can challenge courses, or take classes that are not strictly tied to the time requirement. There are schools where most of the learning students do is self-guided, so it would be impossible to measure how long students were actually spending being instructed. And there are on-line courses and old-fashioned pen and paper correspondence courses which must be exempt from time requirements too.”

“Maybe it’s more symbolic then,” I suggested. “Like a ritual sacrifice. Even though much this stuff was already possible, something has to go for educators to feel that they have permission to free their minds. Someone has to *kill time*, and not in the way that we usually mean that phrase.”

“If you killed time,” I then asked, “what would happen to slow?” We contemplated this as a strike in one lane and a gutter ball in the next sounded off in the distance.

Another question came to me. “Is there any indication that students were more successful in the schools that experimented with the Flex Project?”

Williamson tried to look this up. “So far it hasn’t dramatically changed the dropout rates in those schools, or dramatically improved how students did on diploma testing, but I think it’s still pretty early. It’s hard to tell how deeply flex got worked into the culture of these schools. One thing it appears to have done in all the schools is improve student’s intellectual engagement, at least how engaged students report they are on annual surveys. On average in Canada, only forty-four percent of students feel intellectually engaged in school.”<sup>21</sup>

“That’s depressing,” I remarked.

“Yes it is. But, over the three years of the Flex Project in the experimental schools, intellectual engagement rose almost seven percent. And look at this.” With that Williamson pointed to another paragraph that reported qualitative data:

*Principals and teachers have reported a much more purposeful atmosphere in their schools and a reduction in disciplinary issues. It is noteworthy that many principals, teachers and students have reported that there is a sense of calm in their school; that overall their schools seem less “stressed-out” and “frantic.” Time is available to all stakeholders to approach learning in a manner that suits them best and is most responsive to the natural “ebb and flow” of the school year.*<sup>22</sup>

“What does that mean for slow learners?” I asked.

“Maybe it’s easier to persevere with work you find difficult when you are intellectually engaged, or maybe it’s easier to become intellectually engaged in the work when the learning experience is more flexible and personalized,” Williamson offered.

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<sup>21</sup> Fijal (2013, p. 13)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (p. 7)

“Beyond the hypothetical opportunities you’ve identified for K & E students, how do we know if this was even applied to K & E kids specifically in the trial schools?” I asked. “Maybe they’re just trying all these innovations out on the high fliers, the more academic students.”

“Or maybe they’re using K & E students as guinea pigs because they are an obscure population who don’t write diploma exams. I can see K & E kids being considered perfect subjects to test this on, with minimal perceived risk,” Williamson countered. He was beginning to sound excited.

We searched one of the documents for K & E. As it happened, two of the schools who had trialed the Flex Project had directly involved K & E classes in the experimentation. “This chart is still pretty low on detail,” I said, referring to the list of Flex Projects we were looking at. “Can you find out more specifically where all the trial projects happened, and how they all went over three years?”

Williamson pressed some keys but then looked at me apologetically as his laptop had shut off. He told me it was his school laptop and though the batteries had been losing their capacity for several months, he could not ask for replacements until they were completely exhausted.

I noticed the last set of players leaving the bowling alley. I looked at my watch. The place was closing in ten minutes. I told Williamson I thought it was time to go and we got up from the table and began to head out. On an impulse, before the manager could complain that I was still in my street shoes, I grabbed a ball and attempted a throw. I play infrequently and poorly but I threw a strike nevertheless. I would have taken this as good tidings for the case except that the leg injury that had begun to heal so nicely tweaked angrily from my exertion and continued to hurt as we walked to my car. I drove Williamson home and dropped him off. I drove to a pay lot a block away from my hotel instead of the hotel lot, not wanting to make it too easy for the tail to find me again.

Back in my room, I poured two fingers of bourbon in the smudgy glass and sat on my bed and stared at my imagined circle of possibilities on the end table, adding the things I’d learned in the bowling alley. I felt I was close to something. The abandonment of *Action on Inclusion*, the superficial diversity video, the failure of the *Inspiring Education* document we read to comprehensively address issues related to disability and diversity, and what I suspected would be the continuing problems with K & E, all suggested to me that slow learners were still at-risk. I saw this all clearly enough, but I still worried that I didn’t completely have a handle on the larger dangers slow learners faced. These dangers had often seemed to come out of nowhere on this case, so I was still looking for some clear advice to give my client about how to keep slow learners safer in schools. On the other hand, I saw some promise in the initiatives Williamson and I had looked into. Again, however, I had a strong feeling there were important things about this aspect of the case I was missing. If these new initiatives held some possibility of greater justice, the larger vision of what this looked like still eluded me. I felt closer but not close enough.

At least I had a better idea of the questions I needed to ask the informants Summit had recommended to me, I thought. Maybe that was enough for the night. I sent myself to bed, exhausted, but I slept lightly, like a spider might. I always do when I feel a case coming together.

I awoke early, feeling not so much refreshed as excited. The picture was still hazy, but I somehow felt closer than I'd ever been to discovering what justice for slow learners looked like. I dressed, choosing the second pair of beige pants Williamson had lent me, and a blue sweater. I looked so bland I thought I might disappear completely. I brought my first coffee of the day down to the hotel's business office. A further breach of the hotel's rules was required as the office wasn't open yet. While a balding overnight clerk faded in and out of sleep, his head bobbling up and down like those novelty dolls, I loaded the door with my almost maxed-out credit card. I booted up the old beast again and fed it some coins. On the Department of Education site, I searched under contacts for the names Summit had given me. I cursed my luck when the first name generated no hits; perhaps that person had gone back to classroom teaching and now worked in some far flung school district. I had better luck with the second name. It appeared from the website that she had a different job in the curriculum area, but at least she still worked for the ministry and I figured she must have switched positions pretty recently and probably still knew a lot. I did some further searches on her name and discovered she was a frequent user of social media. On her Facebook page she'd commented on developments in education, world news, and entertainment. What interested me more was that she'd also described the interesting conversations she'd had on public transit and the refreshing winter walks through downtown she'd been enjoying as she made her way from the train station to the nearby Department of Education office. Her New Year's resolution, she wrote, was to be more ecological, slow down her busy life a bit, and build some exercise time into her day by taking the train to work. She was even getting off the train a few stops early to lengthen her walk. Chronicling how much serenity this was all bringing her, she'd posted a few pictures of frosty trees and icicles hanging decoratively off city lights. I could see she had a good eye for this type of thing even though, with all my recent experiences on this case, I was less than enamored with winter wonderland pictures. Aside from this aesthetic difference, I appreciated all her posting. I didn't want to lose momentum by waiting to schedule an appointment with her, and she'd provided more than enough detail in her posts to triangulate her location as she began her morning walk. I drove downtown, parked at an expensive lot near where I thought I would be able to catch her, and walked to the station. My much-abused leg didn't appreciate the walk and neither did the rest of me. It was a little warmer out again but still too cold for me. At the best of times, I viewed walking not as a form of recreation but as a necessary evil, a regrettable body function, and this wasn't even the best of times.

At 8:00 a.m., the woman I recognized from her picture as Yolanda Grant exited the transit platform. She was wearing a smart red wool overcoat that I didn't think looked warm enough, but she wasn't shivering. She had grippy-looking winter boots on and carried a briefcase that I assumed held dressier work shoes, along with her other supplies. She wore her hair straight and just past her shoulders and, when a fellow passenger deferred the single safe walking lane to her on an icy patch of sidewalk, she wore a wide appreciative smile too.

"Ms. Grant!" I called approaching her. "Can I ask you a couple of question about slow learners?" Her smile vanished as I made the distance between us, holding up my detective's licence as I did. "I'm Max Hunter. I've been hired by a client who is worried about these students."

"We don't really use that phrase much where I work. How do you think I can help you?" she asked. She seemed vexed at this sudden intrusion on her morning walk.

“You’ve worked in K & E recently; I have some questions about the classes and the students in them. As I said, my client is worried about them.”

“Why is he worried?” she asked.

This was my one shot to interest her in the conversation; I had to come up with something concise and practical. “A lot of kids struggle in school, a lot of kids have low average IQs, whatever that data means, and there are classes designed for these students. So why do less than one percent of Alberta’s students graduate with the K & E certificate?”

She considered this for a second and then sighed. She told me she was still several blocks from the Education Building,<sup>23</sup> which I knew but didn’t own up to knowing, and that I could walk and talk with her. I wasn’t eager for more walking but it sounded like my only chance.

She was a rather fast walker for someone who taken up the hobby in order to slow things down. It took considerable effort to keep up while regulating my breathing enough to carry on a conversation. After we’d covered some ground she said, “You’ve probably heard that the fact that it ends with a certificate instead of diploma is one of the main problems with K & E. If employers and post-secondary institutes have heard of the certificate at all they tend not to value it. Students don’t see the value in working towards it.”

“How has the Department of Education responded to this problem?” I asked.

“I don’t work in K & E anymore,” she told me, and I tried to affect a slight look of surprise, “but I do know that how high school students are certified is under discussion, that there’s been some talk of including K & E students into the diploma proper.”

That was interesting but a little vague. I asked, “Can you tell me anything more about that?”

“No, not at this point.” She seemed pretty firm on that. There must have been some rule she was following about keeping mum on the ideas that were being floated about this. Too bad. Still, I thought this kind of secrecy probably rubbed someone as chatty as she’d appeared to be on social media the wrong way. Other than maybe the very most confidential stuff, I could probably find out a lot from her if I kept asking questions.

We came to an intersection and the light was against us. I said, “My client is really worried. He doesn’t think K & E as it stands is doing enough for these students and he also says it’s getting worse. Numbers are so low a lot of schools are cutting K & E programming.” Then I asked her, “Is there anything else going on in the Department that you *can* tell me about that you think might support K & E, or as my client has said, help slow learners?” Nothing wrong with a little guilt trip, I figured.

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<sup>23</sup> Ministry office moved from Edmonton to Calgary for plot convenience.

“There’s an initiative called *Inspiring Education*,” she said. “The whole idea behind it is to make things more flexible, inclusive, inquiry-based and learner-centered. It’s to be based on competencies without rigid rules about how students have to show them.”

I chose not to reveal that I’d already been reading up on this with Williamson. Instead, remembering the complaints of ongoing systematic rigidity I’d heard from many of the teachers I talked to, I commented, “That sounds great but would it even be possible under the current system?”

“Not fully. The changes will have to go deep to bring this about. Curriculum will have to get a lot ...” she paused, searching for the right word, eventually settling on “skinnier.”

“Don’t know what you mean,” I admitted.

“You know. Based on the most essential competencies for a subject instead of a four-inch binder full of content teachers are required to march the students through at all costs,” she replied.

“How will that help K & E students or slow learners?” I asked.

“Take writing. I taught IOP for many years before I started working here and most of the students I taught struggled with writing. If I got a strong ten-sentence paragraph from a student by the end of a K & E class I would be thrilled. Not because I was ‘dumbing it down’,” she stuck up some finger quotes for that one, “but because they were meeting the outcomes. It’s nice if they *can* write more than that, but if you really look at what they’re supposed to be able to do, that should get them through. Anything that supports the teacher in making these kinds of assessments is what the kids need.”

That sounded fine to me, but then I remembered my own English teacher from high school, less forgiving than a sadistic loan shark. I thought also of the diploma exams that almost all the teachers I’d met had complained about. Would a single paragraph be enough to pass the writing component of one of those?

“Would it be possible,” I asked, “to set things up so everyone has this understanding of assessment?”

“I hope so, but,” she paused, considering how much to tell me, “I’m not sure. These kinds of changes can be pricey, at least at first. Keep watching the provincial budgets.” I didn’t understand how making a change to assessment practices like the one she was describing would be that expensive but I kept quiet on that count.

“Speaking of the budget, I’ve heard K & E is pretty under-resourced,” I commented instead, moving to another topic.

“I can’t get too far into that,” she said cautiously. Then sighed and said, “But you’d be amazed at how little has been allocated to develop resources for K & E. We’ve tried anyway, but it’s minimal. They’re probably the least resourced students in the province in terms of curricular materials.”

This admission from Yolanda Grant was a little more candid. I felt I was making some progress, which was good. On the other hand, the last exchange had bothered her, and she was the sort who walked faster when troubled, so I had to work even harder to keep up. I was grateful when we came to another set of lights and had to wait. Catching my breath, I asked another question. “What else did you try to do, or do you think needs to be done to make more space for K & E students?”

“Flip it,” she said, and she stepped to the side to make room for a pack of excitedly talking adolescents rounding the corner and heading the down the same sidewalk we’d just come from. A boy of maybe thirteen in the group noticed and thanked her, his voice squeaking a little.

“Come again?” I asked.

“In Alberta, it practically seems like course design starts at the PhD level and works down. I mean, a lot of the time when curriculum is written they design it with the most academic kids in mind and then keep trying to water it down to more basic levels. This almost automatically insults the less academic students and it might not even work. There’s a risk that whatever simplifications are introduced to make the content more accessible might still fail to do this. The worst part, though, is after the ‘dumbing down’ of curriculum for the next lower instructional tier, they eventually get tired and give up or simply forget before they even get a chance to think of the needs of K & E students. Instead of designing curriculum for the high-end kids and then ‘dumbing it down’ we should start at the K & E level first. If we started with the outcomes that were most important for *every* student to meet, no matter how much they struggled in that content area, and then built in additional challenges for the more academic students, no one would be left behind.”

I thought about that for a minute, found it sensible, and remarked, “If it worked that way, it does seem unlikely they’d *forget* to build up to the ‘cream of the crop’ students.” She nodded in agreement. Now that she was speaking a bit more freely this was becoming an instructive stroll for me.

The walk sign lit up and beeped and we resumed our journey. After a minute, Yolanda Grant confided, “As a provincial person, I always worried that, because so few students are enrolled in K & E that the kids are being left off on their own, off in the corner while the class is doing the main activity. Teachers don’t know what to do with them. K & E was supposed to provide an opportunity – a sanction – to scaffold. The purpose of providing this instructional level was to support student learning.”

I didn’t really know what she meant by scaffolding. I imagined some builders standing on temporary structures and installing some windows on a high rise. I wasn’t sure what this had to do with teaching. I asked her to explain herself.

“Well, say the kids are engaged in a larger project-type of assignment,” she began. “The idea might be for students to end up with a similar type of product at the end, but every student doesn’t have to complete *all* the same steps or produce *all* the same parts or do *all* the work completely independently. Requirements as to what steps of the projects the students complete and for the pieces of evidence of learning they have to submit for marking along the way can be different between K & E and other levels of classes. But kids can still feel part of the same process.”

“Would the more advanced students be required to show higher level thinking?” I asked. I knew by now that the psychological literature claimed that the more abstract the reasoning task, the more a slow learner would struggle with it. I no longer believed it was as simple as this, but I still found it helpful to speak from this perspective when asking that particular question.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” she replied. “Imagine I am writing chapter review questions for a textbook. If I am on page ten and I am asking a question about something that can be found on that page everyone should be able to answer it because it’s right there. Maybe these questions could be marked with a check mark as mandatory for every student. If I am in K & E, everywhere I see a check mark I know I should be able to answer those questions. The next level up is marked with some other symbol, maybe a circle. These will involve more critical thinking. And, now if I am the teacher of that class I know I either need to highly support students in doing this or, in some cases, not assign those parts. And maybe the next part is marked research questions – rectangles. Everybody in the class is going to answer the questions marked with the check marks. The rest will get assigned depending on context, some might be supplementary.”

I thought that sounded like a good way to make things more concrete and achievable for slow learners, but also a little bit elitist in the assumption that they would struggle with the deeper questions. Not to mention that it might be a little boring for them to always be asked to sniff out all the facts without ever being asked to consider their deeper meaning.

My fleet-of-foot informant seemed to read my mind and continued. “But Bloom’s taxonomy ...” She realized this too might sound like jargon to me and explained to me it was a hierarchy of levels of abstraction used to guide educators in questioning for student learning.<sup>24</sup> Knowledge and comprehension were the bottom two levels of the pyramid, synthesis and evaluation the highest two. She continued, “Bloom’s taxonomy doesn’t need to be quite as linear as the pyramid that explains it suggests. K & E students can still do synthesis if they are properly supported. If you ask a student, ‘Why did they expropriate the funds?’ versus ‘Why did they take the money?’ it’s still a synthesis question, just one that is fair for the student. If K & E students have the right kinds of scaffolding and support, then they can get to the critical thinking. Eventually they even start to build their own structures, find their own ways of figuring things out.”

We dodged around another ice slick. I asked, “Are accommodations a part of scaffolding too? I’ve heard K & E students have trouble accessing accommodations sometimes.”

“That’s because it’s too formalized and reactive,” she replied. “Every time I put an exam in front of any kid, it should be designed to have those accommodations options, just like it’s built into Microsoft Word to be able to get the program to read out loud to you or to dictate out loud to the program, no matter who you are. The first time you design something to be accessible it’s more expensive and time-consuming, but then it’s done. Why couldn’t an exam a student was writing on computer – which is an increasingly popular mode of administering tests these days – have a built in auditory feature to read it out loud? If I am talking to the class as a teacher, I’m likely doing a visual on the board along with auditory explanation so that students can be more engaged. A test should be like that. The whole point of accommodations, which is what the inclusive education people are trying to get everyone to understand, is that accommodations should not be for

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<sup>24</sup> Bloom (1984, pp. 35-37)

some – they should be for all. That’s called Universal Design for Learning – UDL,<sup>25</sup> you’ve heard of it?”

I said I had. At least I thought I’d seen the phrase somewhere in my investigation. I liked the simple goal those four words expressed, but thought that getting there might be significantly more complex.

“Ideally,” Yolanda Grant continued, “planning is bringing those two worlds together, UDL and scaffolding. It’s more expensive, you have to muck around with it, but once you’ve done it, you have that template.”

With all this talk of projects and templates, it sounded to me that, in her thinking, a lot had to be decided and planned in advance in order to make things inclusive for slow learners. Like an on-line Social Studies course with all the readings and assignments already posted from the very first day. I wondered if there was a way to be more spontaneous while still being inclusive. I thought I might try to figure this out for myself. I knew the Education Building was maybe only a block or so ahead and I only had time for maybe two or three more questions.

I went with one that had been bugging me for quite a while. “What’s better for K & E students? Is it to be in blended classes with other levels of students or in separate classes?”

“I don’t think that’s a useful question really,” she replied. I felt faintly chastised by this, but I looked at her face and I could see from the thoughtful expression she had no rancor in saying it. “The milieu in each district, each school even, are different. I always just tried to provide the best resources – so teachers with blended and teachers with discrete K & E classes – could be supported.”

“Do you think education could ever get so inclusive there would no longer be a need for K & E?” I asked. I’d asked something similar of Colleen Birdseye.

She thought for a second and then replied, “Yes, I do actually. But it would take more money, support and flexibility. Alberta Education would have to restructure many things. Sorry to repeat myself but assessment might be the most important. The way we often do assessment now couldn’t be done in a truly inclusive, Inspiring Education-type classroom. Students need choice, assistance, flexibility and second chances.”

We were at her destination. The tall grey Department of Education Building, that I hoped had more personality on the inside, stood right in front of us. She considered the icy set of stairs leading up to it, but opted for a long ramp up instead. I don’t know if it was because it looked safer or because it offered a little bit more of one of her favorite things – walking. As she was about to ascend, I

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<sup>25</sup> Alberta Education (2011) has defined UDL as follows: “An educational approach that aims to increase access to learning for all students by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, organizational and other barriers ... UDL is based on the concept of universal design in architecture, which proposes that designing for the divergent needs of special populations increases usability for everyone. A classic example is the sidewalk curb cut. Although it was originally created to allow wheelchairs to move more freely between roads and sidewalks, an unintended consequence was that other people, including parents with strollers, cyclists and people with shopping carts, also found it easier to move from the sidewalk to the street.”

asked if I could pose one last question. She nodded. I asked, “What is the one thing that has to happen so that slow learners or K & E students don’t disappear so regularly?”

She thought for a second and said, “The students need to feel safe and involved. When they feel school is that place – where they are getting something that will sustain them – then they’ll get to the finish line more often.” With the finish line analogy, I heard an echo of what former Education Minister Jim Dinning had said regarding the IOP certificate, about school being a foot race. But unlike his claim that it was perfectly natural that some kids run like hell and never get to the finish, she thought that working to support the students all the way to the finish line was worthwhile.

I was getting ready to thank her but then she added to her answer, “And authentic context. The students need to look out into the world say that’s something that I will need to do or that is relevant to me. We teachers might have the greatest goals but we’re already educated, more or less, we need to get the kids to buy in.”

I thanked her for her time and she said I was welcome. Then she took a couple of steps onto the ramp leading up to the building and turned back again. With all these encores I was beginning to feel like I was at a James Brown concert and an entourage member might be required to drape a cape over her and drag her in to the building. She said, “And we need to quit trying to be so prophetic about what various levels kids will be able to do. They’re all kids. Their frontal lobes are still developing. Give them a break.” She waved goodbye and shrank from my vantage point as she ascended the long ramp into the building, eventually entering. It took me a minute to wrap my head around all her “one last things.”

I looked up at the winter sunrise shining down on the many stories of the education building and considered the interview. Whatever complaints Williamson and many of my informants had about the curriculum branch, here was a professional, who’d recently worked in K & E, who spoke passionately and optimistically about what inclusion for these students could look like. She’d owned up to the larger department’s underfunding of K & E, which wasn’t a solution but was at least a useful admission. It was the sort of admission that made me think there might still be like-minded advocates for K & E students here in these offices constantly pushing for more resources. She’d given concrete examples of how instruction could be made fair and accessible for slow learners in classrooms, even if some of these ideas were a little on the technical side. She’d confirmed some of Williamson’s hunches about the inclusive possibilities of *Inspiring Education* including the need to rethink entire courses to realize these ambitions. I asked myself if that was enough, if I’d finally found enough justice to tell Williamson that slow learners were likely safe.

I sat down at a nearby bus bench to rest my leg and think for a bit before the walk back to the Buick. I considered the phrase *Inspiring Education*, especially the first word. “Who have I found inspiring during this investigation?” I asked myself. I started to list them in my head. The department insider I’d just met, who saw the need to better support these students and who had done her best to look out for them was. So too was Colleen Birdseye’s determined, empathetic practicality. So were the administrators I met at Ultimate Brew, both trying to wrap their heads around inclusively supporting all the students they worked with, including slow learners. I was inspired by the class of K & E students I met - - a diverse group of students, some of whom were supposed to learn even slower than slow learners and all of whom seemed willing and able to learn given just

conditions. My client, Williamson, was an annoying, often confused worrywart, but the work that he was trying to do in his learning centre seemed pretty inspiring. Looking back, the IOP guru, Summit, in his efforts to create an educational oasis for a struggling group of learners, was inspiring. Despite my distaste for the exclusionary language, and some of the openly stated negative assumptions about slow learners I had to admit that aspects of the vocational programs going back forty to eighty to a hundred years were inspiring in some ways – some educators had from very early on seen the flaws in the ‘one size fits all’ academic program offered and thought and worked hard to provide an alternative.

All of this inspiration began, ironically, to depress me. If I couldn’t think of a time in the last several decades that didn’t have inspirational educators working to engage slow learners, how could I be so sure that the current batch of inspirational educators would have any more success than anyone else, especially under the regime of diminishing resources Yolanda Grant had described? Would someone finally make some improvements to K & E that would see more than the current one percent of Alberta’s students complete high school with the K & E Certificate, or would the new programs of study become so inclusive that K & E was rendered obsolete, in a good way? Did I truly feel any change was on the horizon that was so inclusive that students would **stop** appearing as slow learners? I could maybe tell Williamson I’d found *some* evidence of justice for slow learners, but could I tell him, truthfully, that any sort of comprehensive plan to treat these students more justly was in the works?

I thought then of Michel’s word’s “everything is dangerous” and of what Martin and Hans had tried to explain to me about the concealing/unconcealing of truth. I realized I might be neglecting the immediate in trying to take such a long view. My suspicion was quickly confirmed. My peripheral vision registered something black coming at me with devastating speed and power. It hit me thunderously on the ear. Connoisseur that I am, I registered earthy notes of leather and the hearty finish of buckshot. I lost my equilibrium and fell off the bench and onto the icy sidewalk. I saw a hazy blue-clad figure swinging at me again and raised my arm to block, but my perspective was off and I took another shot in the same spot and then another on the temple. “This sap has been sapped,” I thought. It wasn’t very funny, but I heard sardonic laughter and realized it was my own. Then I didn’t hear anything for some time.

### XXXIII

When I regained consciousness, all I could hear was bad music: humming, whirring, squeaking, ringing, and a steady throbbing. The ringing, I realized, was in my ears. The throbbing was in the back of my head. When my eyes got their focus back, I traced the rest of the noise to behind a closed door along the far wall from the small room I found myself in. Despite the slight visual relief the door provided, it was the plainest room I’d ever been in. Cold light came off a single fluorescent fixture overhead. The walls, floor, and table (which I could have been resting my arms on were they not tied behind me) were all different off-white shades. None of them were the least bit warming, organic, or chosen for any apparent purpose save for starkness and expedience. I was sitting in a plastic chair. A plastic zip tie was biting into my wrist. Like so many of the educators I met, I thought, I could have been doing a lot more for slow learners if my hands weren’t tied.

Across from me sat a man I'd seen before in a greasy spoon restaurant. He was wearing the same grey suit with the sharp creases. He was bald, pale, thin, and looked neither young nor old. He regarded me with the steely-eyed gaze he'd surveyed me with several days ago, except this time I thought he was using this gaze for effect instead of concealing it. I demanded that he release me and began to say that my client was expecting me back with instructions to call the police should I not return by the afternoon. I was inwardly embarrassed trying this play, but could think of no other.

The bluff that never even worked in the movies didn't work this time either. He held up his hand before I could even get it all out. "Don't waste my time, Mr. Hunter. There were no outgoing calls from your room at the hotel, and we've been observing your solitary patterns since it first came to our attention that you'd undertaken this foolish quest. Your client is likely working away in his learning centre oblivious to your whereabouts."

I had nothing to offer in reply.

My most recent captor spoke again. "Besides, if you handle this situation correctly you will be released in short order. You are to return to your client and tell him that despite his concerns, the slow learners are safer now than they've ever been. Then you are to return to the West Coast and never speak of this case again. Not only will you and your client remain unharmed, you will be well-compensated. Once you have fulfilled these requirements, you will receive a wire transfer well beyond your usual fees, or imagining. If you refuse ..." He left that one hanging.

"That's a tempting offer, I mean the first one," I remarked, and it was, "but why is it necessary? What threat do I pose for you? All I am doing is looking for justice for slow learners. How is that a threat?"

"You have been interfering with the smooth operation of things and undermining the careful progress this system is seeking to make," said the grey-suited man. "Within prudent guidelines, and in recognition of sensible restraints, the educational system is always trying to move toward a higher standard. Your critique is disrupting this orderly process. It is a foolish and selfish quest."

I was having trouble believing this guy. Maybe it was the careful way he was talking; maybe it was because he'd had me sapped and restrained. Remembering what Hans had told me about being more hermeneutic, more open to the possibility of the other's intelligibility (or at least that was as far as I was willing to take it) I reminded myself to keep talking and thinking calmly and not to resort as quickly to insulting him as I'd done with Maddox Paine.

"Some might say this process needs all the help it can get," I remarked. "As far as I can tell, none of the reforms have addressed the concern that you have an underfunded, undersubscribed series of classes intended for students who cannot handle the high school diploma stream of instruction and, despite this program being on the books, an overall dropout rate of around twenty percent. This needs to be addressed." Then, figuring 'Why Not?' I added. "And I'm not sure I can accept your kind offer until I am convinced that it will be."

He glanced at a digital wristwatch and sighed. “It is regrettable that our dropout rate is that high. But efforts are being made. You have seen the changes to special education funding. School districts can now choose how best to apply the resources; it is no longer tied to a small group of students with disabilities. If school districts determine that the needs of certain categories of students are not being met, they have the flexibility to use their diversity funding to address this. Also, K & E courses continue to be funded at a higher rate.”

“But from what I can tell none of this is helping,” I objected. “Many districts are closing K & E schools and collapsing discrete K & E classes.”

“Good,” he replied. “With such low enrolments these sorts of discrete interventions are very inefficient. And they run counter to our priorities for inclusive education.”

“Some feel this way about separate K & E classes,” I admitted. “But if blended is the tacitly preferred model what is being done to support it?”

“As I said, schools can choose how to use their diverse learning funding. Supporting slow learners in blended classes could be one way. Inclusive education funding has also been increased by two percent. They’ve cut or frozen budgets in other areas of education to allow for this.”<sup>26</sup>

“Couldn’t that be seen as a sort of a shell game?” I argued, still keeping an even tone. “If the whole point of inclusive education is the inclusion of students in the school proper, isn’t taking resources from other areas in order to support it still harmful?”

The grey-suited man’s voice took on a somewhat sharper edge as he replied, “There is no more money available. The Minister of Education has said ‘the fiscal reality is that many school districts will see fewer operating dollars this year compared to last year and we will all need to work together to make sure that kids are not impacted in a negative way.’”<sup>27</sup>

“But how are schools supposed to reach more struggling students with fewer resources?” I asked.

He glanced at his watch again. I was beginning to feel that this conversation was on some sort of schedule. Then he replied, “My concerns are only with priorities and efficiencies within the system, not the larger provincial education budget. On the former count, you remember that one of the reasons for the special education reforms was that the emphasis on diagnoses and specialists hindered a lot of the funds from going directly to the student.”

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<sup>26</sup> See Alberta School Councils’ Association, (2014); Alberta Teachers’ Association (2015) and Tucker (2015). This was written at the time of 2014-2015 education budget. In the following year the then government proposed a budget that would cut inclusive education funding by 1.9% as well as freezing or reducing funding in most areas despite a provincial enrolment increase of 2% or 12,000 students to Alberta’s schools. A change in government after the May 2015 election saw an increase in the education budget that reversed many of the cuts and addressed increased enrolment.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson in Salz (2013)

I had to concede that point. But I was curious how far he was willing to take that logic. I asked, “If including more efficiently is the goal, why even have K & E, why not make things more accessible for slow learners in the high school diploma stream? Get rid of diploma exams, they are a major expense after all,<sup>28</sup> or at least open up a pathway to a high school diploma that doesn’t require the writing of diploma exams.”

“That would mean sacrificing the rigor of the high school program of studies for the sake of a handful of students,” he replied. “Diploma exams are money well spent. They hold districts, schools, teachers, and students accountable. They push the system towards excellence. With their high stakes and high visibility, they prevent the work of teaching and learning and those engaged in it from becoming slothful and complacent. As the most important thinker about institutional efficiency the last century produced, Frederick Winslow Taylor, correctly noted many years ago, workers, meaning teachers and students, are wont to take it easy and underperform when leadership fails to provide accountability measures such as this.”<sup>29</sup>

I found this a warped view. I thought he was drinking from the same rancid stream Goddard, Terman, and the other eugenicists were when proposing that even in a democracy only an elite few were really fit to rule. I found it ridiculous to suggest that, without a strict external measure like this, students and teachers would collectively fall into indolence. I didn’t say any of this, though. I suspected instead that he would go out of his way to claim this system was a fair one, so I tried to tackle him on this point. “But many students struggle with these exams,” I objected. “Not just K & E students, students with disabilities and English Language Learners too.”

He quickly replied, “And there is a fair and efficient system of accommodation to level the playing field for them.”

I was ready for that and noted, “From what I can tell, the accommodations policies are better than nothing, but fall well short of levelling the playing field. The exams don’t set students up very well to do their best work, especially students whose learning needs appear as more complex.”

He sighed and looked at his watch again. “The exams are not supposed to bring out the best in students, they are intended to provide an environment where the students provide representative samples of what they are capable of. Accommodations are not intended to optimize performance.<sup>30</sup> Accountability needs to be based on representative samples of work, not rising to the occasion. Upon analysis of these representative samples, the appropriate managers will determine what more needs to be asked of teachers and students in order to make the work of learning more productive and efficient. This is how you push a system towards excellence.”

His answer was noxious to me, but it had a certain thoroughness that seemed to discourage further questioning. I went back to the idea of fairness. “The accommodations policies regularly exclude slow learners from accommodation.”

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<sup>28</sup> See Hancock (2010). In answer to an on-line question from a student the then education minister wrote that the province spends about \$10.5 million a year on administering diploma exams. [site discontinued].

<sup>29</sup> Taylor (1919, p. 54)

<sup>30</sup> Alberta Education (2013b, p. 1)

“I thought Veronika Sternwood explained this to you. Some students have legitimate, measurable, scientifically verifiable disabilities and, for the sake of fairness, should qualify for accommodation. If students do not meet the criteria for disability, however, then accommodating them is a threat to the validity of the exams,” he said. “We cannot grant unfair advantage. It is expected, after all, that only eighty-five percent of students will test within the acceptable range on these exams. Anything higher than that would be a sign the exams were starting to lack rigor. I applaud these slow learning students for their ambition in wanting to take on the diploma tier, but given their functioning levels, it is likely that some slow learners who opt for this higher stream of instruction will fall within the fifteen percent who do not meet the standard. K & E remains on the books for students who are unable to complete the diploma.”

“But K & E is a poorly funded series of classes that leads to a credential that nobody wants,” I objected. “How is that inclusion? How is that equity?”

My captor took another look at his watch and replied, “They are guaranteed equality of choice, not outcome. Students can choose whether or not to go into K & E. They have equal opportunity to choose the diploma stream.”

I ignored my perception that this was all becoming dangerously circular and focused instead on exploring the new value that had just revealed itself. “But if the diploma stream is indifferent to the learning needs of many slow learners, how is that any kind of choice?” I asked.

“The diploma program provides the rigor to ensure that everyone working in education is accountable to learning and that students are prepared to transition to further education and the workforce. We cannot water the diploma route down for the sake of a handful of students. We owe it to society to provide the next generation of literate and skilled workers to meet the needs of industry. K & E will look after the students who are unable to make it up to this standard; it was, after all, designed to ensure that these students successfully occupy the lower vocational niches they are able to.”

That was a distortion, more Goddard and Terman than any of the expressed purposes of K & E I’d seen, but I let it pass. “But you just said you supported blended classes. How different can K & E really look in a blended class? Isn’t it true that being included in classes that emphasize diploma exam-style assessment, and teaching to the tests might feel inhospitable to K & E level students, or slow learners?” I asked.

He wasn’t having any of this, replying, “This is the responsibility of the teachers. Teachers of these classes will have to determine how to make their K & E students accountable to the outcomes at a lower level of instruction. That’s what inclusion is all about. Making all students and teachers appropriately accountable.” After making this statement, he produced a cellular phone and briefly typed and sent a message to someone. That seemed like a bad sign.

I tried to find something else to engage him. “But isn’t high school completion also a priority? Aren’t you concerned about the drop-out rate? Don’t you think if the whole program was set up to be more flexible and to give more chances ...”

“It is unfortunate that certain students, due to various deficiencies, cannot handle the system without additional support,” he said, cutting me off. “It is our responsibility to study these students as individuals and remediate their deficiencies as best we can so that they might eventually become more proficient as learners, or at least become as proficient as they can. K & E is one such remediation. The inclusive education measures are another. And perhaps more are needed too. But dropout prevention is about the most efficient delivery of specialized services to the most at-risk students. It has nothing to do with curriculum.”

Something occurred to me then, a point I thought he might have to acknowledge. “From what I’ve been hearing, *Inspiring Education* will involve changes to make assessment more flexible, to make teaching more inquiry-based and less top down. Skinnier programs of study, greater student involvement in deciding what they want to learn about, how they want to learn it, and how they want to demonstrate their understanding, and more cross-curricular work. And then there’s the *High School Flexibility* project removing the time-to-credit requirement. Isn’t the system changing right under your feet?”

He glanced again at his watch. I wondered what event he was waiting for and when it was supposed to happen. In a voice that was beginning to sound bored he said “I am familiar with these projects, and not necessarily wholly opposed to them. If students’ perceptions of having greater freedom and being more in charge of their own learning can be recruited to produce the sorts of the results the system needs, these things need consideration. But these are merely techniques, not a philosophy. Limits are needed: regimented inquiry, managed discovery, controlled participation with no larger changes to our efficient and accountable system. The expert work of deciding what learning needs to go into the production of socially useful citizens cannot truly be left to the students. I will work to limit how deep these changes go.”

From what I could tell from reading through the new initiatives with Williamson and from talking to Yolanda Grant, my captor’s interpretation of these reforms underestimated their intent and ambition. I had assumed I was talking to someone who worked directly for the department of education, but some of his statements, and the blunt style with which he said them, were making me start to question this assumption. “Who are you and how do you fit into all of this?” I asked.

“I work in an unofficial advisory capacity related to ensuring efficiency, standards and correct bureaucratic procedure in the department’s operations. I’m often consulted, though always unofficially, about the sorts of issues we have been discussing.” He stated all this flatly, more like he was killing time now than really talking to me. Then he added, “And, officially, I own the company that does all the shredding and recycling for the education building.”

It registered on me that he’d neglected to tell me his name during this explanation, but I was even more curious about his connection to all the others who’d enacted their objections to my work on this case. Was he connected to whoever had deported Jacques and Michel, and told Trent to lock me up and throw away the key? What about Veronika Sternwood, the black widow of categorization, and Maddox Paine, the homicidal president of the competition society with the stupid name? I asked about this.

“I may have given unofficial advice to the authorities in the case of the banishing of your friends and your incarceration. The others you mention are colleagues, but we work as independent cells to avoid detection, only communicating when it is strictly necessary, such as when a determined anarchist seeks to destroy a functioning system over a handful of students. When their methods of persuasion failed, I knew it was up to me to put an end to your quest – by any means necessary.”

I was going to thank him for the new label to add to my resume, but I remembered I’d decided to leave the sarcasm out of this conversation. Instead, I objected in a straightforward manner. “I’m not trying to destroy the system,” I insisted. Then I asked, “Why can’t inquiries like the one my client and I have launched help guide the reforms? Why are they a threat?”

His voice went from bored to firm, and even more precise. “Beyond the level of the individual taking the initiative to be more productive in his duties, the system can ill-afford the distractions posed when any worker feels entitled to abandon his station and indulge in planning conversations that he is ill-equipped to comprehend or contribute meaningfully to with his betters. It may seem collaborative and helpful, but it is narcissistic and inefficient. *In the [disordered] past man has been first. In the future the system must be first.*”<sup>31</sup> He looked at his watch again and straightened an already stiff frame in resolution. Then he said, “When I made the arrangements for our meeting, I determined that I could afford to discuss my offer with you for ten minutes, Mr. Hunter, less if you were ill-mannered. I commend your manners but our ten minutes is up.” He then asked, “Are you prepared to terminate your investigation?”

I considered my options. I couldn’t take the money and abandon the case; I’d seen the danger the students were in. I could pretend I was closing the case, and continue discreetly investigating. But this guy or someone from one of the other cells was bound to catch up with me again. They seemed to have eyes all over the place. It was suicidal, but I decided to go with a tactic of frontal honesty and hope for some luck or inspiration with which to deal with whatever consequences arose.

“Maybe I’m a slow learner,” I said, “but I think there are still things that need to come to light in this case.”

My captor sighed and remarked, “What a waste.” Then he walked across the small room and opened the door. Four thickly-built men, each dressed in a security uniform, entered.

He instructed the men. “Mr. Hunter has proven unfit to serve the purposes I intended. Please dispose of him as we discussed.” Then he left without saying goodbye, hurting my feelings.

The henchman yanked me to my feet and muscled me out the door and into a large room. A creature with a giant mouth hummed, whirred, and squeaked. It was the largest paper shredder I’d ever seen. It was being fed paper, several boxes at a time, by a wide conveyor belt, shredding not only the contents but also the boxes. The shredded remains flew into large plastic bags which in turn rolled the rest of the way down the conveyer, through a chute, and into (I assumed) a bin outside the bay door. No need to be careful about staples and paperclips with this one, you could have run the Buick through the blades and got nothing but thin little strips of fine American styling on the

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor (1919, p. 7)

other end. I felt like I'd been somewhere like this before, and then I remembered the sick dream I had at the beginning of this case, the dream that took place in the sorting factory.

I shouted and struggled as eight strong arms added a leg tie to the arm tie, and wrangled me into a large box, half full of paper. Darkness now as my head was forced down. Then a squawking noise like a team of ducks as the henchman wound rolls and rolls of tape around the box. A distant memory of the days of hilarity I'd experienced playing in a refrigerator box, when my thrifty mother finally broke down and purchased a new unit, came to me. Not so fun this time, maybe I was getting dull in my old age. I felt suddenly weightless as the box was hoisted onto the belt. I wondered what documents were here in the box with me, my final earthly companions, destined to share my fate. Perhaps copies of some of the documents I'd read during my investigation. The Special Education Coding Criteria, The Knowledge and Employability Manual, last year's education funding manual, the diploma exam guidelines, or the, as yet unchanged, high school program of studies, a program Yolanda Grant had told me would have to get a lot 'skinnier.' I hoped, in my absence, the inspiring professionals I met would be able to prevail over the likes of Veronika Sternwood, Maddox Paine, and the nameless vigilante of efficiency who'd finally got the drop on me. I decided to call him Shredder Man.

I felt the box beginning to move. My mind raced with a thousand thoughts, old cases, broken romances, plans postponed until more convenient times, regrets. Then I heard a voice. To this day I don't know if it was some part of my consciousness that was always there, waiting for the right moment to talk to me, or if the case somehow took on a presence of its own and called out to me. Wherever the voice came from, its message was a simple one. "Slow down, Max." It seemed strange advice in my current predicament, facing a less forgiving deadline than even the standardized tests that I'd been learning about, but it somehow made sense. I cleared my mind of thoughts, and when I did, possibilities started coming to me manageably, in single file.

I rocked back and forth vigorously and felt the box tip and then fall to the side. But rolling the box hadn't dislodged me, I was still moving forward. I remembered a trick from my time in law enforcement. I slammed both my wrists into the small of my back using my body as a lever. The tie bit into my wrist but stayed on. I did it again with the same result. On the third try the tie burst. I then tried punching through the box, but the cardboard was too thick. I got my car keys from my pockets and made a jagged fist, keys between each knuckle. I attacked the same spot on the box again, rapidly punching. My hand burst through. I let go of my keys, stuck my arm out of the box and grabbed onto the first solid thing I could feel. I forced my other arm through and strengthened my grip on the thing. The conveyor belt kept pulling on the box as I kept gripping the purchase I'd found, whatever it was. Just as I began to worry the strength of my fingers might give out, the opposing forces of the conveyer pulling me forward and my stubborn grip pulling me back began to rip a larger hole in the box. My head and then my whole torso popped out. I saw that what I'd grabbed was the outer edge of the mouth of the shredder. The blades were just beginning to slice at the bottom of the box. I pulled hard and got myself free all the way to my knees. The blades screamed as they cleaved. I could feel the paper sliding past my legs and into the blades as I finally got my feet out and tumbled off the conveyor. I landed on my shoulder and rolled away from the machinery.

I heard shouting, and then footsteps from the distance. My potential executioners must have been watching from another room. Still bearing in mind the advice I had recently given myself, I scrunched down, slowed down my breathing and tried to make a plan. Crouched in the empty space between the conveyor belt and the safety fencing, I got the credit card from my wallet and used it to unlock the leg tie. Someone had shut off the shredder. I thought of trying to flee, but the footsteps were getting louder and I didn't think I had enough time. I hid under machinery. I saw four sets of legs. It was a tight space between the conveyor and the safety fencing, probably too tight for all of them to fit in at once, I thought. I heard a bit of discussion and then one of them entered the space. He walked gradually, carefully. It was all shadows under the machine and he couldn't see me. Quickly as I could, I rolled out behind him from under the machine. I crouched and grabbed both his feet and pulled back like I was an Olympic rower. For a second, I thought I wasn't going to be able to move him but I had surprised him and the space had forced him into a narrow stance, bad for balance. He fell forward and I let myself fall with him, reaching for and winning his sidearm as he was falling. The fence caught our fall and he struck back at me with a clumsy elbow I was mostly able to roll away from. I cracked him behind the ear with his sidearm, once and then again for good measure. He sagged into the fence. I turned now on the other guards. They were drawing in on me from three different angles.

We all stood there for a minute staring at each other. I tried to come up with another possibility for this situation but couldn't, no matter how much I tried to slow things down. Then every light in the place went out. There was confused shouting, scuffling, and the percussive sounds of heads and bodies being struck. Someone with a flashlight pointed it in my face and told me to follow him. I shuffled out between the fence and the conveyor belt and followed the light. Another four beams, all in single file joined up with it. We paraded down the large room to the chute where shredded paper fell into the bin outside. The crew who had rescued me had simply come in through a hole in the chute.

One by one, we took a ladder down through the hole. My leg didn't like it, but I didn't have much choice and it was only a short way down. A van was waiting for us. I got in along with my most recent rescuers. I began to ask questions, but one of them shushed me. The driver wasn't taking anything slowly just then, tearing down the building's back road and blowing through a security gate. Once we'd travelled for a while, though, he did slow down. I started again to ask questions but they were coming out too fast. The rescuer beside me in the first row of seats took off his black ski mask. He had a strong, wizened face; determined lips below a moustache that pulled off the trick of looking both down-to-earth and distinguished. He had bright, alert eyes. He told me what I had repeated to myself earlier, "Slow down, Max." I took his advice, deciding not to speak again until I'd had more time to consider everything that had just happened to me. The rest of the crew took their masks off as well. Like my seatmate, the driver was an older fellow, with straight grey hair that hung past his ear, a chin dimple that rivalled Kirk Douglas' and a permanently (I suspected) quizzical expression. There were three rescuers in the seat behind us; a broad-shouldered, red-haired man with a round face and a whitening goatee, a younger woman with pink hair, eye-brow and nose piercings, and an oddly serious face, and a thin man with short, curly hair just starting to grey at the sideburns. He had dark eyes and an impish sort of smile.

"Who are you?" I asked, deciding this was as good a place to start as any.

“We’ll do individual introductions once we find a more comfortable place to talk,” the thinner of the two men in the back seat began, “but suffice it to say we are a loosely structured league in defense of slow learning.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been doing!” I exclaimed. “Defending slow learners.”

“Slow learning, Max, not slow learners,” said the pink-haired woman.

I wasn’t sure I got the distinction. “Does my client, Williamson, know about you?” I asked.

The man beside me, the older one with the moustache, spoke up. “We’ve been considering approaching him. Other members of our community have recommended him to us, but we are still vetting him. His heart is in the right place about justice for the students, but we have been unsure, as yet, if he is ready for our message.” He had a way of talking that made even ordinary words sound weighty.

It was interesting to hear this assessment of my client. I wondered how many of the people who’d helped me on this case were members of this league? Many of the rest seemed likely compatriots too. I made a mental note to ask about all of this later, but I had a more immediate concern just then. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“We’d like to take you to one of our meeting places and tell you more about who we are and what we do. It may be essential to your case.” This came from the driver, who spoke with a French accent.

Ironically, considering my present company, I didn’t feel like I had the patience. I wasn’t sure I could stand another long conversation about educational philosophy. “I have a better idea,” I said. “You seem a handy enough crew. Let’s go back and see if we can get Shredder Man.”

“Get?” asked the husky guy in the back seat.

“Yeah, rough him up, maybe force him to help us find some damning evidence of his crimes, wrap him up like a present and give him to the cops,” I replied. I wanted to do worse, but knew my code would only allow me to take things this far, unless it was more or less in self-defense.

“Please Max, slow down and let me explain,” the driver said. “We came right away when Yolanda Grant called us up and said you were near the education building asking questions about slow learners. We thought it likely you’d be captured. We came as soon as we could but, even so, we were worried we wouldn’t make it in time. You did well, by the way, to hold your captors off for as long as you did.”

None of this came close to answering my question, but I thanked him nevertheless, feeling a tinge of pride at this. I made a mental note to remember the two things I learned from the adventure: you can keep a villain talking for longer if you don’t insult him, and when things look like they’re at their worst, slow down.

“These sorts of skirmishes need to be fought when the dangers are imminent,” the driver continued, “but the struggle we are engaged in is more like a war of attrition. You’ve done well to expose and reveal some of the ideologies that threaten your slow learners, and our principles of slow learning. It would be wiser now to let the sorts that you have encountered attempt their misguided work in greater light, for all to see. Our movement is gaining momentum, and these displays of ruthless sorting, out of control competition, and monstrous bureaucracy serve ultimately to emphasize the need for our way of thinking. The complete vanquishing of the agents you struggled with might serve to drive these ideologies underground, towards greater secrecy, where they might be more dangerous.”

Most of me thought that this was the wrong way to go, and that a big reckoning was still due. What the driver said made at least enough sense to me, though, that I felt I needed to hear more about their league before I made my next move. I agreed to go along with them.

### XXXIV

The driver took us to yet another large high school. There were only a few cars in the parking lot, the night caretaking staff I figured. He drove around the back and up to a bay door and we all got out of the van. The husky, red-haired guy punched a code into a panel beside the door, and it slid up. We all went in and he lowered the door and turned on the lights. What I saw brought me back to the semester of high school when I took a class in a shop like this, finding the experience enjoyable but my carpentry skills mediocre. It smelled comfortingly of sawdust, glue, and paint. On the far side from where we entered, there was a small office and then ten large tables where I assumed the students worked at light assembly as well as any theory or ‘bookwork’ components from the class. There were various power tools, table saws and the like by the bay door, and a storage space for hand tools and projects in progress in the other corner.

The man who let us in bade us to sit at one of the tables. The metal stools weren’t any more comfortable than I remembered them from high school, but still an improvement over the chair I’d occupied while bound and wondering what form the most recent attempt on my life would take. He went into the office and came back with a tin, a kettle, a French press, cups, and an icepack for my face. The icepack made my injuries feel worse again, but then better as it started to do its work. Aside from the impishly smiling guy staring at my face for a minute and then wincing sympathetically, no one said or did much of anything while the husky man prepared the coffee. The whole process probably only took four minutes but I found this annoying nevertheless. If they were going to talk to me about their league, I wanted to get to it. I wanted to see where it fit into the case so I could make my next move. I wondered why a busy shop teacher, as I deduced him to be, would choose this method to get his java fix when there were faster ways. Then I wondered if it had anything to do with The League I was about to find out about. When he was finished, he poured for us all and then, glancing to make sure a safety poster still obscured the window of the door leading out to the rest of the school, produced a flask of brandy from his pocket and topped us all up. The coffee was good, perhaps not cosmically worth the pain and terror that had led up to my connecting with this group, but well worth the short wait as he had prepared it after all.

After sipping appreciatively for a while, we did introductions around the table. The pink-haired woman was Annabelle Stanley; the husky shop teacher/French press wizard was Tony Baird; the

impish-faced guy with the curly hair was Carl Honoré; the driver was John Dewey, a thinker Matthew Summit had told me a little about, and the man who'd been sitting beside me in the van was Jacques Rancière.<sup>32</sup>

Carl Honoré spoke up, "Around ten years ago, I wrote a book about a worldwide movement – the Slow Movement – active on multiple fronts, dedicated to challenging societal obsessions with speed, hyper-efficiency, and hyper-productivity<sup>33</sup> I discovered the same phenomena at work in human endeavors as varied as cooking and dining, urban planning, health and exercise, work, sex, leisure, and schooling and child-rearing."

I almost missed the last, and most relevant, items on his list, my mind having trailed off to thoughts of slow sex. When it did register with me, though, it hit me almost as hard as the blackjack had some hours ago. I gave myself a stern mental warning that I had better focus.

"Carl has been called the Godfather of the Global Slow Movement,"<sup>34</sup> Annabelle Stanley said teasingly.

"And its unofficial guru,"<sup>35</sup> added Jacques Rancière chuckling.

Carl Honoré rolled his eyes and said, "These labels are grotesque exaggerations, though they do help sell my books. Actually, I'm more like a recovering speedaholic."<sup>36</sup> He grinned self-effacingly.

I asked him to explain himself.

"Well, the crisis that provoked my investigation of our cultural obsession with speed, and of the slow movement, involved reading bedtime stories to my son, who was two at the time.<sup>37</sup> My tendency was to speed read the stories, not wanting to spend too long on the task lest it take time away from my next scheduled activity. His preference, of course, was for me to take my time. Read more slowly, actually talk to him about the book, and read his favorite books, not just the shortest ones.<sup>38</sup> It was a *nightly tug-of-war between us*.<sup>39</sup> Well, one day as I was reflecting on this dilemma, I saw an ad for a series of 'Sixty Second Bedtime Stories.' I immediately lurched on to the concept of this as the solution to all of my problems. Then, later, I was horrified at my own interest in the books."

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<sup>32</sup> It is perhaps a somewhat egregious exaggeration of the common ground between this writer, these two scholars, and these two teachers/interview subjects to lump them into this defense league for slow learning, particularly since only Honoré uses the term "slow learning" explicitly. The idea of slow learning is nevertheless strengthened by this appropriation.

<sup>33</sup> Honoré (2004)

<sup>34</sup> Huffington Post in Honoré (n.d.)

<sup>35</sup> Globe and Mail in Honoré (n.d.)

<sup>36</sup> Honoré (2005)

<sup>37</sup> Honoré (2004, p. 2)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. (p. 3)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

“That’s a courageous confession,” I remarked, “but what does it have to do with slow learners?”

“Patience, Max,” John Dewey said in a fatherly tone that I somehow didn’t resent.

Carl Honoré continued. “Well, once I started investigating, I came to realize that the various communities that make up the slow movement, though diverse and decentralized, all challenge the same ways of thinking that I was displaying with the bedtime story. Larry Dorsey, a physician, called it *time sickness, the feeling that time is getting away and that there is never enough of it*.<sup>40</sup> It starts with the western tendency to think of time as linear and finite. Add to that increasingly sophisticated technologies for measuring time and centralization of global time zones. Add to that the impulse of industrial capitalism to consider time as a resource, ‘time is money’ as Benjamin Franklin said, and to *feed on speed*.<sup>41</sup>”

“I saw a formula for funding high schools in which time is quite literally money,” I said. Then I realized it was a little hypocritical of me to see this as some sort of sign of institutional depravity. Even though the rates I charge for my work are pretty reasonable, one hundred twenty-five dollars a day was indeed a ‘time is money’ calculation as well.

Carl Honoré nodded in polite acknowledgement of my example and continued. “Now consider consumerism, which constantly jacks up both the levels of abundance and the number of components which go into our vision of the good life, and then decreases the time we have to enjoy any of these things.<sup>42</sup> And technology, the *false friend that saves time* [but always with the result] *of creating new duties and desires*.<sup>43</sup> And then there’s multi-tasking ...”

I heard echoes of Martin’s idea of standing reserve, but I still wasn’t sure we were getting anywhere. “I get it,” I said, cutting him off. “We’re all time sick. But what does that have to do with slow learners, or even with your league of slow learning? I still wasn’t sure I got the difference between the two, but I wanted to steer him away from this depressing analysis and towards something relevant to me – if he had anything to offer.

“Well, the damage done by an over-velocitized society can potentially be hard on everyone. Constant impatience and boredom, anxiety over not being able to achieve everything, obesity problems from gorging on un-nourishing fast food, health problems from overwork and lack of sleep, inability to relax, a consumer industry that rushes out products before they are they are thoroughly tested for safety ...”

“Carl,” Annabelle Stanley chastened, saving me the effort.

“But specifically to your students, the cult of speed contributes to drill and kill teaching practices, rigid, content-heavy curriculum, more homework and more exams, standardized tests, de-emphasis of activities that require creativity, increased competition, and generally, the imposition of an intensified mode of being for children in schools that isn’t even working very well for their parents

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (p. 23)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. (p. 30)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. (p. 31)

in workplace settings.” I thought of how Sputnik, the satellite that had accelerated U.S. curriculum, had helped create the idea of learning disabled as Carl Honoré continued. “It’s hard to imagine any student truly thriving as a happy and well-rounded person in this environment, but some students fail to thrive in particularly visible ways, behavioral issues and low grades for example, and can be labelled ‘slow’ as in stupid because of this. Maybe they lack the so-called advantages that the parents of so many of their peers are increasingly exploiting, tutors and the like, or maybe they’re just not built for this kind of speed. It doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with them, but it appears this way in such a system.”

“So, there’s your slow learners,” I acknowledged, “but where does slow learning come in?”

“Slow schools and slow classrooms are emerging and we work to support them. Just as the slow food movement has inspired people to really appreciate cooking and dining we try to give students the freedom to *fall in love with learning*.<sup>44</sup> The pacing is gentler, students are given an opportunity to study subjects in greater depth, make connections, and learn to think. Less emphasis on ‘drill and kill’ and sorting by ability levels, and a greater emphasis on communities of learners playing with ideas and flexing their creative muscles. A scholar I am reading has recently described this type of learning as ‘whiling’ and ‘tarrying’ and points out that it provokes a ‘profound thoughtfulness’ and honoring of the subjects being studied.<sup>45</sup> Let me see if I can find the exact quote I liked.”

And with that he pulled out his cell phone, clicked around for a bit, and then read it to me. “*The more we understand of them, the better — richer, more intriguing, more complex, more ambiguous and full and multiple of questions — they become, and the more we realize that gobbling them up into a knowing that we can commodify, possess and exchange is not only undesirable. It is impossible.*”<sup>46</sup>

There were murmurs of agreement around the table; one of them came from me. From what I could tell, the practices the students I met had suffered under the most involved the commodifying sort of knowing that this scholar that was objecting to. This way of consuming knowledge had declared them lacking when they were unable to keep up, and when they became the subjects, this same consuming way of knowing had settled on the labels slow learner, or intellectually disabled, or learning disabled and then cut off any further discussion of their complexity. And yet, in our two discussions, given the time and space to consider my questions, they’d often presented as pretty insightful students. Many of the suggestions that my previous informants had given about what conditions would make school more just for slow learners seemed contained in what Carl Honoré and the source he was quoting were saying too. Colleen Birdseye had described how she taught thusly, and Matthew Summit had said that was how he envisioned IOP being taught. Hans had talked about free spaces, and Martin had talked about a deeper, non-quantifying, non-commodifying way of thinking. Slow learning, as Carl Honoré suggested, certainly seemed conducive to deeper thinking for anyone who attempted it. I imagined the other Jacques, as well as Michel,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. (p. 255)

<sup>45</sup> Jardine (2008, section vii, para. 2)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. (section vi, para. 4)

Martin, and Hans all had to employ slow learning in their careful reading and thinking, how else would they have come up with the interpretations they laid out?<sup>47</sup>

Still, coming from Carl Honoré, and regarding a way of being in classrooms, it seemed, possibly, like some sort of pipe dream type of suggestion. Did he really know what he was talking about? As far as I could tell, this man was neither a professional educator nor a philosopher, he was just some sort of writer type who'd had crisis of conscience, did some research, and wrote a book. On the other hand, he had managed to attract the other league members too. I thought for a minute, and came up with some objections I could throw at him to test this all out.

Though I didn't like all the sorting by perceived intelligence levels I'd seen, I'd become well-versed in the assumptions behind the practice, so, playing devil's advocate, I asked a question from this perspective. "This sounds great for brighter students, kids who already have the ability to take a topic they are curious about and run with it, but psychologists say slow learners need more repetition, more instruction in basic skills, less abstraction, and content reduced to the most essential parts. It doesn't sound like this kind of teaching really plans to ensure they receive these things – it might leave too much to chance. Are slow learners intelligent enough for slow learning as you describe it?"

Carl Honoré looked like he was about to say something, but Jacques Rancière spoke up sooner. "A basic principle of criminal justice – how does it go? Unless proven guilty you are ..."

"Innocent," I replied automatically.

"What if intelligence was thought of in a similar way?" he asked. "Just as innocence is presumed – presume that everyone is intelligent, equally intelligent."<sup>48</sup>

"That's ridiculous," I couldn't help but saying. "People are not all of equal intelligence. Everybody knows this."

"Suspend for a moment your doubt about whether Jacques' idea is true in a grander sense, and consider the practical difference it might make if people operated on this assumption," John Dewey advised pragmatically.

"Many would say that it is unlikely that people are all equally innocent, even among those deemed innocent," Jacques Rancière added, resuming his analogy to the criminal justice system, "but it remains an important operational principle in the system. Besides, who are we to say? You cannot really say because she did better on this test, that Sally is smarter than the other students, or make the same statement with the clauses reversed. It all becomes dangerously circular, it explains nothing.<sup>49</sup> Imagine if institutions of learning operated on the understanding of equality of intelligence instead, if we considered equality as a starting point, not a destination. There could be no definition of slowness as in a lag or a deficiency under such an understanding."

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<sup>47</sup> See Nietzsche (1997, p. 5). "To read well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers."

<sup>48</sup> Rancière in Bishop (2013)

<sup>49</sup> Rancière (1981, p. 50)

“I’ve been learning about scaffolding, as a means of making learning equitable,” I said. “The skilled teacher determining how much support each student requires to meet the learning outcomes of the course and expertly providing these supports. How does this jive with this idea of equal intelligence? If all the students are of equal intelligence, why should teachers look for times they need to scaffold?”

“I find it interesting that you bring up the idea of a scaffold. Not that I have any opposition to the act of helping it describes, but because of the vertical, hierarchical relationship that the metaphor implies. This is a problematic relationship that institutional teaching, unfortunately, usually entails. The greatest risk is not that teachers will be deficient in the knowledge and skills to teach labelled students, it is that their method of teaching, as so-called teaching experts, will reproduce the very inequities they are hoping to heal. It matters little whether this inequity is brought about by an authoritarian who believes the indoctrination of docile pupils is the proper way to do things, or by the misguided reformist who believes the students too culturally deprived to endure the rigors of their studies – the damage is the same.<sup>50</sup> *There is stultification whenever one’s intelligence is subordinated to another ... whoever teaches without emancipating stultifies.*”<sup>51</sup>

“Stultification?” I asked.

“To frustrate, to make another feel useless, to kill one’s enthusiasm,”<sup>52</sup> he replied.

“But teachers should know more than their students do in the subjects they are teaching them. Isn’t it inevitable that this will create an unequal relationship?” I asked.

“Another principle I hold essential in emancipatory education is that every student has received from God the ability to self-instruct.<sup>53</sup> The teacher’s only true role is to assist in this process, having the will to help move it forward. Recognizing this is how stultification is avoided,” Jacques Rancière replied.

I’d heard this line of thought before, it was implicit in the statements of several of my interviewees, and in the vision of learning presented by *Inspiring Education*. It was particularly evident in how Hans had quoted Socrates in describing the teacher as the midwife to learning,<sup>54</sup> and in how Martin had said the true teacher lets learn. I recalled Martin had also described this way as very ‘difficult,’ and Hans had said it required considerable knowledge and wisdom. “Is it realistic,” I asked, “to expect that teachers of slow learners will all have the necessary skills to teach in this emancipatory way?”

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. (p. xv)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. (p. 18)

<sup>52</sup> Oxford Dictionary (n.d).

<sup>53</sup> Rancière (1984, p. 16)

<sup>54</sup> See Ibid. (p. 17). Max would have no way of knowing this and it therefore it seems unlikely to come up in this conversation, but Rancière’s perspective is that Socrates used inquiry only to guide students towards pre-established knowledge. Therefore, even this master was, as seen from this perspective, a perfected stultifier not an emancipatory educator.

“It may not be a matter of formal expertise. Slow learning is a way of thinking and acting,” Carl Honoré stated. “It has emerged outside of institutions. It has come, at least in part from the work of the home-schooling community, parents who know their children and embrace the philosophy of slow learning, but who are not necessarily experts in all the subjects their children are learning.<sup>55</sup> It has come from informal learning collectives. A blog I was reading the other day called ‘Adventures in Slow Learning,’ a forum for arts, crafts, creative writing and philosophizing suggested the following characteristics of slow learning ...”

He began to rattle off the following list of items. Slow learning, the blog had said:

- *Promotes deep learning*
- *Crosses genres, disciplines*
- *Is grounded in the interests of the learner*
- *Champions the pleasures of learning*
- *Promotes inquiry and dialogue*
- *Lasts a lifetime*
- *Allows for authentic learning*
- *Seeks unmediated experiences*
- *Supports, and is supported by learning in community.*

“More specifically,” said Jacques Rancière, “it has been shown that an effective teacher can, in fact, be ignorant in many respects. Indeed, ignorance can be beneficial in emancipatory teaching. In 1819, Joseph Jacotot, a popular professor in the city of Dijon, France, was forced into exile by the return of the Bourbons. He took up a professorial position in the Netherlands, and soon found himself in the challenging position of having students who spoke no French, even as he spoke no Flemish. He gave every student a bilingual text of *Télémaque*, a popular contemporary retelling of the adventures of the mythic hero Telemachus, with instructions that the students work with the text until they could fluently recite it in French. By using this text, but with no additional support from Jacotot, the students learned French grammar, spelling, and composition. Please understand this was not a simplified text nor was it designed to have any particular application for French instruction, and yet this was the result.<sup>56</sup> This was a surprising discovery for an instructor who had, until then, endorsed the conventional view that it was his duty to transmit knowledge, or explicate, to his students. It is less shocking when you remember that we have all acquired our mother tongues as children without explication, before spending a day in school.<sup>57</sup> Why do we presume this intelligence goes away?”

“Good question,” I conceded. “But,” I added, hoping I wasn’t about to sound too much like Shredder Man, “you can’t seriously be suggesting that an educational system could run under a method this ... haphazard and random. What assurances would you have that the students were learning what you wanted them to learn?”

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<sup>55</sup> Kambitsch (2011, para 2)

<sup>56</sup> Rancière (1984, pp. 3-5)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. (p. 5)

That question seemed to puzzle him for a minute. Then he said, “The pupil *will learn what he wants, nothing maybe. But he will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the production of the human mind.*”<sup>58</sup>

I wasn’t sure if I was satisfied with his answer, but before I could say anything, John Dewey who had, until then, been listening attentively, and often nodding in agreement, broke in. “I endorse these views to a point. Jacotot’s experiences and my colleague’s alert analysis of them are of great service in dispelling the unfortunate and undemocratic view that the act of teaching the child simply involves *pouring knowledge into a mental and moral hole that needs filling.*”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, to be effective, curriculum must recruit the child’s native impulses, and develop creativity as well as academic skills.”<sup>60</sup>

John Dewey continued, “Still, Jacques underestimates the role of the teacher as the careful guide and the organizer of instructional activities. The goal of constructing a curriculum that results in maximum growth is too important to rely solely on the spontaneous interest of the pupils, or to leave their learning completely up to their own impulses, or nature, or what have you, and hope for the best.”<sup>61</sup> Education has to be directive to function.”<sup>62</sup>

Jacques Rancière tilted his head and regarded John Dewey suspiciously. I thought it unlikely that this was the first time they’d discussed this difference. Dewey hastened to add, “But with the urgency of the project of democratic education, and the potential contribution of our league of slow learning in advancing this project and mitigating the threats to it, perhaps this is a debate for calmer times.”

Jacques Rancière looked mollified, but only partially, by this. He still looked like he wanted to say something, but I jumped in instead with a question of my own. “Where exactly do you see the most serious threats to democratic education?” I asked. I’d heard Carl Honoré’s and Jacques Rancière’s thoughts on this, but was curious as to how John Dewey saw things.

“The threat begins,” he replied, “with a fundamentally flawed definition of social efficiency. Teaching for social efficiency does not involve subordinating individuals to the demands of an industrial system, or merely acclimatizing them to the particular stations within that system that they are deemed most likely to occupy.”<sup>63</sup> It does involve teaching the students industrial skills, but this is only one aspect of the larger project of facilitating their development as complete persons, citizens ready to exercise justice in daily life and participate in the democratic process,<sup>64</sup> citizens ready to have and reflect on experiences such that they will progressively learn to direct the course

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. (p. 18)

<sup>59</sup> Dewey (2001, p. 56)

<sup>60</sup> Pinar et al. (p. 107)

<sup>61</sup> Dewey (2001, p. 57)

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. (p. 28)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. (p. 124)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. (p. 126)

of future experiences.<sup>65</sup> Teaching for *social efficiency means neither more nor less than the capacity to share in the give and take of experience.*<sup>66</sup>

I was a little surprised to hear this advocate for slow learning talking about efficiency at all, but this was a very different understanding of it than the one held by the man who'd attempted to have me shredded a few hours ago. I considered the phrase 'industrial skills,' and another couple of questions came to me. "How do you balance training in industrial skills with the broader goals that you mention, and how do you offer an appropriately comprehensive training program in industrial skills without making the students feel like they're being pigeon-holed into narrow career areas?" This was something that had been bothering me since I read the phrase about those 'doing the drudgery' being in their rightful place in the museum. Though I'd found many educators who were trying to open doors for slow learners, I still worried that the system itself was in some ways grooming them for little more than low paid, low-skilled work even if they did their part in completing the Knowledge and Employability certificate.

John Dewey replied, "Occupation is not to be misconstrued as a purely vocational concept - though I highly value the practical, manual work that falls under the rubric of vocational education - as a way to engage all students. Thinking occupationally involves a way of learning that is active; it is closely linked to the student's environment and interests, it is conducted in democratic and cooperative ways, it should involve the open communication of ideas, and it should mirror how learning takes place in the larger community outside the school, at least if that community is appropriately democratic."<sup>67</sup>

Jacques Rancière added, "Occupation might also mean *to occupy* - as in the recent protests. Authorities often imagine a space such as a downtown street only as a means of circulation of people, money or goods. They recoil when it becomes a space of gathering and speaking and exchanging ideas. Imagine the police saying 'move along, there is nothing to see here'.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, gathering and talking and taking one's time with ideas in communities of learning, and thereby slowing down the traffic of institutional currencies, that's slow learning as a political act." There were nods around the table but none of us had anything to add to this.

"The whole idea of active occupation sounds pretty, I don't know, fast, or at least busy," I remarked, returning to John Dewey's conception of it. "I imagine excited students scurrying around. How does this even count as slow learning?"

Carl Honoré remarked, "Slow learning isn't necessarily inefficient, and rushed and intensified learning isn't necessarily that effective. Many of the educators I spoke to said children learn more completely and develop more rounded personalities when they learn in a less regimented, less hurried way."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. (p. 81)

<sup>66</sup> Pinar et al. (p. 109)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. (p. 106)

<sup>68</sup> Rancière (2001, para. 27)

<sup>69</sup> Honoré (2004, p. 256)

“Slow learning means done with the right intent, the moral imperative to educate democratically,” John Dewey said. *“A child may have to be snatched with roughness away from a fire so that he shall not be burnt. But no improvement of disposition, no educative effect, need follow. A harsh and commanding tone may be effectual in keeping a child away from the fire, and the same desirable physical effect will follow as if he had been snatched away. But there may be no more obedience of a moral sort in one case than in the other.”*<sup>70</sup> Learning through the mere absorption of facts is no better; it might increase a child’s competitive zeal to memorize more information than her classmates, but it will produce no *social gain*.<sup>71</sup> Learning some sort of self-contained lesson is artificial and ineffective. These restrictive classroom conditions mirror nothing so much as the societal pattern of hordes of laborers who are not permitted to fully, freely, or intelligently engage in their work,<sup>72</sup> who are treated by their employers more or less as appendages to the tools they operate.<sup>73</sup> As Jacques has implied, the restrictive classroom conditions only reproduce the larger inequities.<sup>74</sup> *To organize education so that natural active tendencies shall be fully enlisted in doing something, while seeing to it that the doing requires observation, the acquisition of information, and the use of a constructive imagination, is what most needs to be done to improve social conditions.”*<sup>75</sup>

I remembered something Matthew Summit had said. When I asked him if he thought slow learners were different than other students in their need for concrete learning, he’d said he thought all students were concrete learners. I found myself enjoying this conversation. Over the course of the investigation, I’d been given glimpses of ways of teaching and learning that might finally provide some justice to slow learners, but this league, though they still appeared to have some tensions to resolve, was attempting to give these practices a name and turn them into a comprehensive philosophy. It was also nice to be talking on this higher plane, beyond labels and procedures and course sequences and funding formulas, for a change. This reflection, however, drove me back to the practical. I’d certainly witnessed leagues, organizations, and full-scale movements that were long on talk and short on action. Was this, I asked myself using a metaphor that I’d used before on this case, a mirage or an oasis? The rescue they’d recently affected on me was pretty decisive I supposed, but aside from this I’d seen little evidence of a capacity for action in this group. And I was beginning to wonder what purposes, aside from helping out on rescue operations, Annabelle Stanley and Tony Baird served in the group. She’d spoken up only once, when Carl Honoré was getting carried away. After making the coffee, all Tony had done was sit and listen. Finally I asked, “What does it all look like? I mean, this is an impressive set of ideas, but what might this look like in Alberta’s schools?”

John Dewey asserted, “All of us have had many relevant and valuable experiences with slow learning, but our colleagues here,” he added, seeming to have heard my unasked question as well, “can speak to some very contemporary examples.”

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<sup>70</sup> Dewey (2001, p. 31)

<sup>71</sup> Dewey (1907, p. 29)

<sup>72</sup> Dewey (2001, p. 268)

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. (p. 323)

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. (p. 143)

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Carl Honoré took back the role of master of ceremonies and said, “Tony, please tell us about your house project.” This hit me like a jolt of electricity. I had been hearing about this project for much of my investigation, but didn’t know where it fit in, and twice failed to follow up on the lead.

Tony drained the rest of his coffee and began, “I used to work at a school with one hundred fifty or so IOP students and nine teachers. For three weeks at a time, the whole school would shut down and every student would go to work in cooperative job placements. This was a good arrangement for a lot of the students, but there were a few problems. Kids would get fired from their jobs, and we’d have to find something to do with them. The other problem was that it was hard to get kids into trades jobs. Trades employers didn’t feel like they had the time to train students. As we thought a lot of our students well suited for career paths in the trades, this was a problem. Then I remembered hearing from one of my instructors when I was in college about a school in Houston that built a house as a class project. I got together with some other teachers and the instructor who told me about the Houston Project, and we decided to try to build a house with our IOP students. At first, the school district wouldn’t allow us to borrow money; we even offered to take out money against our own mortgages, but they wouldn’t allow it. So, we did a presentation to one of the largest companies in the city, Canuck Foods, and they said they’d give us fifteen thousand for the project, and after that the district changed its mind and said they would loan us another seventy-five thousand. We eventually built four houses and twenty-one garages between the house projects.”

“That’s pretty impressive,” I said, “but how did it help the students?” Tony chipped absently with his fingernail at some dried glue on the table and then answered my question. “We were able to work with the trades employers to have them send out journeyman who would be good with the students. They were often older guys. The journeyman electrician, for example, would turn a bucket over, sit on it, and tell his two students ‘do my plug in,’ and he’d watch and direct the students this way as they did every plug in for the house. It took a week longer than he would have taken on his own, but that was ok.”

“A week longer,” I thought, “that *is* slow learning.”

“What was so special about how the trades guys taught the students, as opposed to what their teachers could have done on-campus?” I asked.

He replied, “Well the lived curriculum in project house ...”

I interrupted to ask what ‘lived curriculum’ was, and he told me it was exactly what it sounded like, an emphasis on thinking of teaching and learning not in terms of planning, but as lived or experienced.<sup>76</sup>

Tony Baird continued. “The lived curriculum was really evident in the house project. You’d have IOP kids who couldn’t do math in abstraction suddenly using a square, doing rise and run when doing stairs – because that’s how you have to do it. Sometimes the tradespeople who might have been IOP level students, you know pretty un-academic way back when they were in school, would

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<sup>76</sup> Aoki (1993, p. 255)

have a method of doing some sort of measurement or calculation that we college-instructed teachers didn't get. But our students would get it the way the tradespeople were teaching it. It would make sense to them. In a way, they were better math teachers than us."

"Was it just having access to the tradespeople as instructors that made the difference in the student's learning?" I asked. I knew there was more to it than that, but wanted to hear him explain it.

"Well, you can't tell a kid what to wear, or what to take for lunch." I thought of all the students I'd seen outside, smoking, in their t-shirts in the dead of winter, and I knew what he meant. Tony continued, "But the kids on our project realized 'hey I need a bigger lunch,' and, 'hey I need to dress warmer.' Once winter set in, we noticed the students were bringing much larger lunches with thermoses of hot liquids. They were dressing in layers. You need this when you are in the cold from eight to three, except for maybe a half hour in a warm van at lunch." I wondered if the bitter cold had taught me anything on this case.

John Dewey said, "*The more human the purpose, or the more it approximates the ends which appeal in daily experience, the more real the knowledge.*"<sup>77</sup> Despite this expression of approval, I was already thinking that it sounded like things had fallen into place too easily once Tony and the other teachers got it up and running. I asked Tony about some of the obstacles he had faced.

"I switched schools at one point – I was recruited really – to start up the house project at this other school. A new administrator to the school used to make all kinds of rude comments about slow learners. He was smart enough to know better than to make fun of the students with outright intellectual disabilities, but he loved to insult the IOP students. He said trying to teach these kids was a waste of time, and why couldn't we just build doghouses. I had to go the principal, who assured me we wouldn't just be building doghouses. Also, we made money on most of the houses we built and spent that money on improving the shop facilities at the school, but on the third house we had a buyer who didn't really get that this was an educational endeavor and basically tried to squeeze us for all the material costs on the project. We ended up losing \$3000 on that one. I got questioned about it by an administrator and had to remind him that the art department loses \$6000 every year, so for me to spend \$3000 in order to provide these sorts of opportunities to such a large number of students was probably worth it."

"Accused of inefficiency, you had to remind him of the deeper efficiencies of habit you were developing in so many students," John Dewey remarked.

"Your project depended on the separation of IOP students from other students in the district," I observed. "If you didn't have the separate classes with three weeks at a time for vocational pursuits, you wouldn't have had a project. Doesn't that run counter to inclusive education?"

"Even though the one school specialized in IOP and the lower academic tier of regular education, I don't think it was that restrictive. In my old school, you'd have an IOP level, English 30-4, or I guess it was 36 at the time, class of maybe fourteen students. You'd teach them well, raise their confidence, and maybe six or seven would be willing and able to go that extra mile and learn a bit more to challenge the diploma exam. That's way better than dumping four or five K & E students

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<sup>77</sup> Dewey (2001, p. 206)

in a regular English 30-2 class with teaching to the test going on, and thirty-nine kids in it. Now on the house project, when I transferred to more of a regular sort of school that had every level of class, we included students from lots of different areas in the project. We had an International Baccalaureate art student design one of the houses, and then he took shop so he could help build it. We had special education kids with intellectual disabilities on Project House with us, with assistants. It went fine.

I noted he was speaking in the past tense. “Are you still running the house project?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, no. The Alberta government changed the rules for insurance. There’s urban school insurance, and rural insurance for schools, and we’re under urban – and it became so restrictive it would have been impossible to continue the projects. Too much red tape, and it drove the costs up too high.”

This annoyed me. “I thought you said this was a contemporary example. If the house project would be impossible under today’s regulations,” I asked The League of Slow Learning, “why was it so important to have Tony tell me about it?”

“I hold this project as one of many examples of the sorts of experiential learning your so-called slow learners need to thrive educationally. There are mental and bureaucratic barriers to every project; they may become unsurmountable in some cases, but there are also free spaces for experiential learning in any educational milieu,” John Dewey replied.

“Take something as simple as an eighty-minute wood shop class,” said Tony. “When I teach shop in here, I let everyone build the projects they want to build. We spend the first five minutes of every class figuring out all the jobs that those projects will need. It works well. This other guy I work with has everyone build the same widgets. It’s more efficient maybe, whatever that means, but the students don’t learn as much or enjoy the class as much. They all make the same lamp. They all line up at the table saw to do exactly the same cuts, or the instructor does the cuts for them.”

“With the other teacher, it’s like the students are widgets making widgets. It’s more about the learning than the product with you,” I said, thinking I was summarizing.

“Yes it is, but the product isn’t irrelevant. They get a lot more choice and freedom, but I expect good work. Unless it’s done right, it doesn’t leave the shop. I tell the kids that no parent is going to want to pay the shop fee next year if their child brings home junk. But it’s a lot easier to get the students to buy into all of this when the projects are truly theirs.”

John Dewey said, “Tony’s students in the shop class – their projects are all different, but they are all truly participating in the experience of the craft as a learning community. Just like the students working on the house project.

Nobody said anything for a minute. Then Jacques Rancière said, “Annabelle’s project epitomizes my concept of equality of intelligence.”

On this cue, Annabelle produced a small tablet-style computer from her backpack, entered a password, and clicked on a video file. The video depicted a large gathering of students in what looked like a library. Some students were at tables; some were sitting together on the carpeted floor. I wondered why anyone would sit on the floor when offered the choice of a chair, but dismissed the thought as unimportant. Many students had laptop computers or tablets. While some were engaged in individual work, others appeared to be showing or explaining things to partners with use of the machines. I could tell by the give and take dynamics between the partners that they were not just passively watching videos together. Many of the kids were smiling and laughing, particularly when they noticed they were being filmed, but it still looked like work.

“What is this?” I asked.

Annabelle paused the video and explained. “All of the students, regardless of their levels of English Language Arts, do an all-semester inquiry-based project. The amount of support we give and how we assess depends partially on the level, though we are pushing for depth at all levels. We work on it all afternoon one day a week, we teachers call it Diverse Learning Day, but the kids call it English Mondays. Students get to choose the space they work in, a classroom, the library or a computer room. Some of the working environments are noisier, some are quiet. The grade tens come up with an inquiry question, research it, and then explain to their classmates what they asked about and what they learned. In grade eleven, still working with the same topics usually, they go back to their questions and revise them, go back to their sources and evaluate them, and then do annotated bibliographies. Then they film a public service announcement or PSA, you know like the advertisements you see on TV, about some aspect of that topic. The PSAs are only sixty to ninety seconds, but we expect they cover a lot of ground with this time. They watch a lot of PSAs in advance.”

“Wow, a whole semester to make a sixty second ad,” I thought. “That *is* slow learning.” I asked if there were challenges unique to working with the K & E students or slow learners. Jacques Rancière scowled at me.

Annabelle Stanley replied, “For the K & E kids, it’s really hard at first because they are so conditioned by ‘what do you want me to do’. That’s where the rapport comes in. We really have to persuade them they are *their* projects, and they can inquire into anything they want. As long as it’s school appropriate, and even if it isn’t, we can make often help them make it that way. After that it’s fine. It can sometimes be hard to remember what instructional levels the different students are from when it’s going well.”

Annabelle Stanley resumed playing the video. It showed a student apparently in the process of explaining her project to an attentive group of peers. I had no way of knowing what level of English she was in, but she looked pretty confident. As this continued, a list of some of the inquiry projects scrolled across the screen:

- Do professional athletes get paid too much?
- Body image of women in the media.
- Do we control time or does time control us?
- What causes a black hole?

- Does God exist?
- Is sport the new religion?
- Why do we dream?
- Why am I so pessimistic?

Annabelle explained that the student who'd completed the last project had done an inquiry that involved media, literature, psychology, and personal and family history. She then told me more about some of the other projects. "Last year, the student who was really into black holes, who was a K & E student, wrote to NASA. They not only responded, but posted, his question. We've twice had students with autism email Temple Grandin and get responses from her as a part of their research. There's something to it when the K & E students are sitting next to Advanced Placement students, and they are working on the same project."

I thought I understood what she was trying to show me, but I wasn't sure I was buying it. "Looks like a good project," I admitted, "but how does this address the larger institutional injustices slow learners experience? How does it prevent them from falling through the cracks, or getting pushed through the cracks?"

She replied, "In the past three years since we started the project, graduation rates have improved. In this school, the subject of English had been one of the many beasts that hindered high school completion, not only with the K & E students, but with our large population of English as a Second Language students. In addition to our overall graduation rates, our class grades in English have improved in every tier since we started with the inquiry project, and in the tiers in which students write diploma exams, the marks have improved on these too. It's becoming more and more cross-curricular, which means we can use it to engage the students more in their work throughout the entire school day. We always took the instructional time from the humanities, and the students' work on the projects was considered a part of both their English and Social Studies marks, but teachers in other areas like math, science, and art, have started to give the students credit for demonstrating learning relevant to these courses too. So in addition to being able to inquire into topics that personally interest them, the students are having their efforts recognized across multiple subjects."

I told them about the High School Flexibility project, and how I thought it would be a perfect match for something like this, allowing students the time to work on their inquiries without all the timekeeping about how long they were spending engaged in this or that class.

To this, John Dewey nodded and said, "And with projects like this, the academic subjects become more like resources to serve the learners and their inquiries and less like sets of arbitrary and artificially divided lessons that are being imposed on them."<sup>78</sup>

Nobody said anything for a while, giving me time to come up with what I felt to be an important question. "I can see many similarities between the two projects, but I can't help but notice that the house project depended on a lot more separation of slow learners from other students. Tony, your first house project happened at a separate vocational school, and even the new school you worked

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<sup>78</sup> Pinar et al. (2008, p. 107)

at must have run a pretty different program for the IOP students, if they were able to get that much time to be off-campus working on it. Annabelle, your project is just the opposite, bringing students from a variety of academic levels together. What is your stance, as The League of Slow Learning, on whether programming for slow learners should be separate or congregated?"

They looked at each other for a minute. "That's another issue we are still discussing," Carl Honoré admitted.

"I admire Tony's project and his approach," Annabelle Stanley said, "but when it comes down to it, I think the risks of separating off the K & E level students are too great. If you use these kinds of projects that treat all the students as capable learners, and teach sensitively and carefully, there's no need to keep separating the students by ability levels. And doing so just perpetuates the negative stereotypes about students seen as weaker."

"Agreed," said Jacques Rancière. "Any such separation reinforces inequality. Everyone is equally intelligent."

Carl Honoré suggested, "But couldn't it be argued that keeping this level of classes separate frees the IOP students and teachers from the pressures of all the standardization that still infect the diploma program and gives them a better opportunity to form communities of slow learning?"

Annabelle Stanley pointed out that she had managed to run her inquiry project, inclusively, despite these pressures.

Tony said, "But not everyone values the K & E kids like you do, Annabelle. I've heard what other teachers say about these students. The separate classes, even the vocational schools, give us a chance to focus on these kids, and make sure they are taught well."

John Dewey said, "Democracy is not just a political system. It is the practice of association, the art of living, of conjoint communicative experience. I oppose any divisions that severely limit the opportunity for students to practice association in its plurality. However, students also need to have the opportunity to discover and realize their aptitudes. It is tragic for students to be so unprepared for future eventualities that they fail to discover what they are good at, and end up engaging in occupations that bring them little pleasure.<sup>79</sup> If within a larger system of free association these particular students who concern you are given greater access to some educational experiences that are less restrictive, more connected to out-of-school experiences, and where industrial themes enliven and enrich curriculum instead of narrowing it, I cannot oppose that. I would hope that all students would receive these opportunities but I cannot oppose efforts to offer this population of students integrated occupational learning in this sense, as long as it does not mean their larger exclusion."

Matthew Summit had made a very similar point, and I considered again how Colleen Birdseye had characterized the now-closed vocational school she had worked in as a democratic community, and how the students of that school had demonstrated this by protesting its closure. With John Dewey's pragmatic reply, which was principled but also sort of on the fence, I counted two league

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<sup>79</sup> Dewey (2001, p. 317)

members against separate classes, and two league members more or less for them. “How can you even work together if you can’t agree on something like this?” I asked.

“Because if the individuals that make up the system are always embracing the values we’ve been discussing, that system will progress in a more democratic direction. This issue may be more easily resolved in a more evolved system,” John Dewey replied.

That seemed to settle the issue for now among the five of them, though I thought Jacques Rancière looked unsatisfied. This sounded like too much of a leap of faith to me too, and that thought brought me back to my original question. “Is simply advocating for slow learning as a classroom practice good enough? There are still so many things endangering slow learners,” and with that I rattled off the long list of all the problems I’d observed on the case as the various league members nodded sympathetically. Finally I came to my point. “There are three especially nasty villains still on the loose, and each of them seems to have some sort relationship to the governance of education. You seemed pretty handy when you rescued me, why can’t we simply go after them directly, take as many of them as we can down for good; won’t that do more for slow learners?”

“As I said,” asserted Jacques Rancière, “slow learning becomes political in the way it interrupts the standard traffic of educational discourse, the sorting, the competition, and the imposition of a top-down bureaucratic process at the expense of respecting communities of learning. In insisting, by way of one’s own practice, on considering the students intelligent, in insisting that their inquiries matter ...”

“And by insisting that they be granted the time and space to learn from experience, to learn by doing,” John Dewey added, “you work to ensure that the democratic community within the school offers the hope for democratic reform of the larger system.”

“And you demand the right to be considered a community of intelligent learners,” Jacques Rancière concluded.

We all took this in, and then John Dewey said, “These restrictions you object to – the limiting graduation credential, the barriers you say standardized testing creates for these students, and the stingy dispersal of resources – should be vigorously and publicly opposed as policy, resisted when possible in practice, and co-operated with in an un-endorsing way when absolutely necessary. But the emphasis needs to be on making the conditions possible for the work of slow learning to happen on a daily basis.”

I thought this last statement was taking things a little too far. My prayer of serenity, which I chose not to share just then, went a little differently. “Potentially existing creator, I lack the foresight to know what I can and can’t change, so give me the strength to keep on hammering until the walls start to break.” Nevertheless, I thought I got the larger message.

A question suddenly occurred to me. “Why haven’t you haven’t recruited my client yet?” I asked.

Carl Honoré replied, “Our network includes others that you’ve talked to, but despite his sincere desire for inclusion, we fear John Williamson is more worried about slow learners than slow learning. Our people are talking to him, trying to bring him around, but he can’t be fully trusted with the work of The League until he makes this leap. We are spreading the message of slow learning as much as we can, but The League itself is still somewhat vulnerable.”

I told the five around the table with me that I thought I might be able to start bringing him around, and asked if I could tell him a little about them, and maybe set up some sort of way for him to contact one of them, at least so they could vet him further if I thought he was ready. After some discussion, they agreed, I was given the number of an untraceable cell phone to give to Williamson. That concluded our business for the evening, unfortunately with no retaliatory assault on Shredder Man. They drove me back to my car. There were four parking tickets on the frosty windshield, but I was grateful it hadn’t been towed. I scraped the frost with the nearly maxed-out credit card and drove back to my hotel. I noticed I wasn’t cold. I wondered if it had kept warming up all day or if I was finally starting to get used to the weather.

### XXXV

It was before school, around the same time of day we’d initially met, when I walked into Williamson’s Learning Centre. A student was sitting in a desk working, probably using the room as a venue to complete a test he’d been unable to finish the previous day, or maybe he’d missed it altogether and was making it up before school. Williamson was at his cluttered desk. An open newspaper sat beside him and he was reading something on his computer. He looked morose. I greeted him. His expression changed to one of worry when he looked at the lump on my head. I assured him I was fine and asked what he was looking at.

“Looks like Alberta Education just released another guidebook to K & E,”<sup>80</sup> he said quietly, on account of the student. “I found it on-line today.”

“Are there any changes?” I asked.

He scrolled back up to the beginning of the document on his computer. The title page bore a picture of an intense-looking male teacher pointing at a spot on a partially built wooden stool while a young man in a blue shirt raised a lever on a large industrial drill.

“There are some new sections,” Williamson said. “It quotes heavily from *Inspiring Education*. The authors describe how K & E is a part of a larger move of the ministry towards a child-centered, inclusive education system,<sup>81</sup> they talk about educating children to be Engaged, Ethical and Entrepreneurial. It mentions First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students, English Language Learners and students with disabilities as students who might benefit from K & E,<sup>82</sup> if they meet the other enrolment criteria. And the guidebook has links to further resources for working with these students.”

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<sup>80</sup> Alberta Education (2013c)

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. (p. 16)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. (p. 4)

The test-writing student gave us a dirty look. Williamson apologized to him. I tried to talk more quietly.

“Does it say anything that’s different than previous guidelines about how K & E should be run?” I asked.

“Not really,” he assessed. “It sort of sits on the fence about whether it should be taught through segregated classes or blended classes, just like the 2008 version did.<sup>83</sup> It gives case studies of successful K & E classes with both sorts of delivery models. When describing the benefits of K & E, though, it talks about how students make gains from being in smaller classes, with more hands-on learning and better connections between the subjects of study and occupations. It reminds readers that K & E students are funded 8/5 on the credit for K & E classes.<sup>84</sup> I don’t remember that being in the prior guidebook. Maybe that’s a hint that classes with K & E students should be kept small, and that schools should invest more resources in these students, seeing as how they are being funded at a higher rate. It specifically mentions dual crediting, maybe reminding readers that K & E students are good candidates for apprenticeship programs.”<sup>85</sup>

“That’s all good – right?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Williamson said. “It’s kind of underwhelming. No substantial changes. It still pretty much says the program is for slow learners, without actually using those words: low average IQ, history of academic failure, and so on. It still distinguishes between the Certificate of Achievement and the High School Diploma, though it does explain the transfer points for students who want to use K & E as a stepping stone. The Certificate of Achievement is still on the books, and requirements for it are basically the same.”<sup>86</sup> He sounded defeated.

The student got out of his desk and brought Williamson his completed test. Williamson affected a cheerful face, and told him he hoped the rest of his day went well. Williamson went to the back office, placed the test in a filing cabinet, and returned to the main room.

“Well at least there don’t seem to be any plans to cut K & E,” I noted. “You were worried about that when you hired me. If efforts are being made to explain its relevance to all of these other initiatives, it looks like Alberta Education still thinks there’s a place for it.” I was surprised to hear myself sounding this optimistic.

“There’s still a place for a series of classes that very few students have any interest in taking, that school districts and the ministry itself have little interest in funding that heavily, and that post-secondary institutions have no interest in honoring. And there have been no concrete steps spelled out about how to improve classrooms for slow learners, outside of K & E. How progressive.” His voice rose sarcastically as his spirits sank. I was glad the student wasn’t in the room to hear it.

“Weren’t you worried that K & E might be cut and not replaced with anything?” I asked.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. (pp. 31-33)

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. (p. 6)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. (p. 11)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. (p. 20)

“I was, but I was also worried it would continue as it has been,” he said. Then a thought seemed to occur to him, and he asked me why I had come to see him. Wasn’t I supposed to be out on the case still?

“I’ve come because I can’t keep charging you for my work on this case. I’ve come as close as I can right now to finding justice for slow learners,” I replied.

“How can that be?” he demanded. “What has been settled with K & E seems to have been settled pretty uninspiringly. And there is no guarantee slow learners won’t be forgotten, or at least undervalued again, in what remains to be settled in inclusive education reform and education reform in general. How can you say you’ve found anything to prevent slow learners from getting lost, as much as they currently are?”

“Let’s backtrack,” I suggested. “You hired me to look for slow learners.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“We did a lot of searching through the annals of human classification and educational classification. We learned that the label had its roots, at least in part, in social class. We heard many negative stereotypes about slow learners. We learned that slow learners don’t just appear, they appear in an educational system that predicts and produces their appearance, that often excludes them from so-called regular schooling opportunities even as it sets aside certain types of schooling, often vocational schooling, for them. And as regards the label itself, what conclusion did we reach?” I quizzed.

“Slow learners are complex learners,” Williamson replied quickly. We’d been over this several times.

“Exactly. The label is a gathering and an oversimplification of a certain way of failing to thrive in a restrictive educational system. That’s even tacitly acknowledged in that list of categories of students you just said the new handbook suggests might benefit from K & E, if they meet the other criteria of course. The slow learner label’s only potential use is as a lens through which the ways of being more inclusive might be magnified. Where did we decide to take the investigation after that?” I asked.

“To finding justice for slow learners,” Williamson replied.

“Right. And at first I thought we’d do this by rooting out the injustices they experience. If we could only identify all the barriers in the system that contribute to their school failure, all the obstacles to their inclusion, then I thought we’d have a chance of breaking down or getting around these barriers. But I could never see the villains coming, and when they did come for me they were crafty and ruthless, I was lucky to get away with my life. And I have no reason to believe there aren’t more dangers out there.”

“Then how can you say you’re done with the investigation?” Williamson asked.

“Because these forces can be fought effectively, and are being fought largely effectively, in classrooms all over the place,” I said.

“How?” Williamson asked.

“Through slow learning,” I said.

“What?” he asked, his face contorting in confusion.

I brought Williamson up to speed on all my adventures, even the parts I’d withheld earlier. If I planned on leaving him with this, he needed to know everything I had learned. He seemed especially interested when I got to the part about my conversation with Hans and Martin in the cabin, and he made me repeat a lot of what they said. He was a little envious, I think, and wanted to at least take in as much as he could in vicariously. Finally I got to the most recent part of the quest. I told him about my experience with Shredder Man, and how I’d used a rapid bit of slow learning to extract myself. Then I’d told of how, coincidentally, I’d met The League of Slow Learning. I explained about their work to Williamson, at least the parts they’d agreed would be okay to share. At first, he had as much trouble as I did with “everyone is equally intelligent,” but I did my best to explain why this was a useful way of thinking. I explained about inquiring students, doing practical activities in supported learning communities, assisted by teachers who helped when needed and got out of the way the rest of the time. I explained how slow learning was critical of the idea that there were things the students couldn’t do, whether it was contributing to ambitious house-building projects, or launching their own extensive inquiries of topics that were supposed to be too hard for them to understand. I told him The League had persuaded me that the promotion of these practices was the first thing that had to happen to make things more just for slow learners, and I told him if he was interested, I could provide information for him to contact them.

Williamson considered all of this and then hung his head in disappointment. “Don’t you have anything more original, or more conclusive to suggest?” he asked. “As we discussed when we last met, educators are already supposed to be using an inquiry model of teaching, which sounds like it’s a big part of slow learning, and it has been part of the conversation about how to plan curriculum and teach in public schools for more than a hundred years.”

“I met someone who claimed to support inquiry, but only in the most restrictive way possible,” I said. “Then he tried to have me shredded for taking things too far. I met people whose obsessions with categorization and competition would be destructive to the supportive learning communities this kind of work needs to happen in. They seemed influential. Maybe that’s why it isn’t going on as much as it might. But that’s no excuse not to embrace it. You need to be hard-boiled in your determination for slow learning, The League certainly was.”

“How do you even do slow learning?” Williamson asked. “You’ve only given me two examples of what it looks like in classrooms, and the examples were very different from each other.”

“There is no exact method,” I admitted. “The League doesn’t even totally agree on how to do it. It’s a set of principles, or a way of thinking, and one that is constantly being revised.”

Williamson continued to look unconvinced. “You’ve spent most of your time on this case rooting out current and present injustices slow learners face. How can you claim that slow learning will be of any help with this when it doesn’t offer any direct remedies? I hired you to fight these injustices, I told you how important this was to me, and why.”

He was looking almost crushed now. I could understand that. He had seen the harm that came from this label and other labels, and the restrictive practices they unleashed firsthand, and had invested much of himself in trying to fight this. A lot was at stake for him. I thought I’d have to explain myself carefully on this point. I reminded him that we’d looked at some potentially helpful reforms. I told him I talked to people who worked inside the curriculum area that I knew or suspected were affiliated with The League, and who were advocating for conditions that supported slow learning during this process. I told him that the teachers I’d met who embraced slow learning seemed like the types to challenge injustices when they saw them, and to fight to be able to teach in slow learning classrooms. Then I asked him, “What did Colleen Birdseye tell you happened when they tried to shut down the IOP School?”

“The students protested,” Williamson answered.

“Why?” I asked.

Williamson looked about to say something, but I answered my own question. “Because, in part, they were taught to inquire, and they were given the time and space to do so.” I moved on to explain how The League had felt that, in addition to supporting slow learning, it was important to continue fighting the good fight on specific injustices like getting rid the K & E certificate and inviting students into a more inclusive high school diploma stream, and ending or reducing the weight of diploma exams,<sup>87</sup> or opening up a tier of instruction that led to the high school diploma that didn’t require the exams. I said also that at least one member of The League had questioned the need for any tiering practices whatsoever, and was unsure why high school instruction was in the business of granting diplomas *or* certificates. I said that underfunding was a concern that came up when I talked to many League members. But then I got back to saying the most essential way to work for justice for slow learners was to establish slow learning classrooms. I talked about how this might move things forward from the ground up, how behaving like a democratic, slow-learning community tended to reinforce the community’s will to demand the conditions it thrived on. For good measure, I mentioned Jacques Rancière’s idea that slowing down the traffic of things, occupying education spaces and actually using them *as* educational spaces, was a political act.

Williamson didn’t say anything for a minute. He eventually said, “I still don’t know if it that’s good enough.” But it sounded more like this was to get the last word in. The statement didn’t have the same sort of heat on it the prior objections had. In truth, I still wasn’t so sure either. Many

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<sup>87</sup> See Williamson (2015; 2016). When I originally wrote this part I chronicled statements by The Alberta School Board Association and members of the then-governing party that, as it subsequently turned out, foreshadowed that government’s decision to reduce the weighting of diploma exams to 30% of students’ final grades. As mentioned in Part Two of this serialization, I have chosen not to revise this work in light of changes in policy subsequent to its release in its first inception – though I do acknowledge these changes are likely to benefit students so - labelled as slow learners.

aspects of the system remained hostile to slow learners. But when things were at their most dangerous on the case, there always seemed to be someone from The League nearby to lend a hand. But was it enough?

Williamson sighed resignedly and asked, “Did you at least figure out if I should continue resisting blended classes in my school, or if they were actually the more just approach for K & E students?”

“No, the committee couldn’t agree on that either,” I admitted. “But either way, they did all feel the most important thing for the students was that the classrooms they ended up in were slow learning classrooms.”

Like a new torrent of tears from an infant whose troubles his mother thought she had finally soothed, Williamson appeared to think of something and his waning suspicions seemed suddenly renewed. He asked, “Do you really think teachers will be given the autonomy to run slow learning classrooms?” He held up a newspaper. “This task force report about teaching excellence, initiated by the current Minister of Education, just came out. It recommends much tighter regulation of the professional development of teachers. If it goes through, teachers will have a lot less say about the goals they want to pursue in order to become better teachers. Instead of reflecting on their own practices and being given the freedom to take a few risks in how they might approach teaching differently, they are more likely to be directed as to which goals they need to pursue, and evaluated by principals about their success in achieving these goals. In addition to the ongoing professional development that is already an expectation, teachers would have to apply to be re-certified every five years. Do you really think anyone will feel very compelled to take the risk of embracing slow learning classrooms under this kind of surveillance? Does this really leave you feeling much hope for the vision put forth in *Inspiring Education*, or the promise of those other initiatives we discussed?”<sup>88</sup>

These were pretty good questions. No wonder my client wasn’t in a trusting mood just then. I hadn’t heard of this report before, indeed it seemed kind of late in the case to be bringing it up, but I supposed it had just come out. I wondered if the Shredder Man had influenced this task force report. “It’s ironic,” I agreed, “that even as the *Inspiring Education* document talked about giving students more space to figure things out for themselves, this report appears to be recommending teachers be given less space to do the same thing. But that’s where you have to be courageous, and know that there is a league to support you. It sounds bad but who knows, maybe if some of this does go through, slow learning classrooms might actually produce the sorts of results that would help teachers meet the targets they need to, even if the proposed process is wrongheaded and belittling.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> See Alberta Teacher’s Association (2014, pp. 4-6). The recommendations made in this proposal have not been enacted and may reflect the less collaborative approach to governance of education that characterized the governing party at the time. More broadly, teacher supervision practices that favor “inspection, direction, accountability, [and] top-down management” (p. 40) remain frequent topics in neoliberal discourse about school reform.

<sup>89</sup> See Friesen (2010, p. 12). There is some evidence that schools using more inquiry-based learning tend to have higher results on standardized testing.

Williamson looked unconvinced. “More like teachers won’t even want slow learners in their classrooms slowing the class down or pulling down their results, if that’s how they think they are being evaluated.”

Finding my client’s suspicions, though well-founded, a bit petulant as well, I decided to take the offensive. “How much attention do you give to slow learning in the K & E classes you teach?” I asked him.

“Some, on some projects, but maybe not as deeply or as often as I could,” Williamson said. “And it often goes well. But there’s stuff I really want them to know. The ones who are upgrading to the high school diploma level courses especially. I feel like I’m leaving too much to chance if I leave things too open-ended or give the students too much choice. There’s things I feel I have to ... download on them, or in them, to really make sure they get it before their next courses.”

“And how much slow learning, and not in the deficient sense, do you see going on in the projects from other teachers you help students with in your learning centre?”

“Same answer,” said Williamson.

“And in your role as a coordinator of diverse learning, how much time do you spend talking with other teachers about his sort of thing?” I asked.

“Not as much as I’d like,” Williamson admitted. “The conversation usually doesn’t get much further than the accommodations the students need, like making sure the teacher knows a student should get a reader for tests if she asks for one, and making the arrangements if she does request it, or encouraging teachers to send students to my learning center if they need more support than the teacher can give them just then.”

Williamson didn’t say anything for a minute. Then he said, “Yes, I could be doing more. But how much can I really change things? I don’t even know if I will be given K & E classes to teach next year. They are still talking about blending them. For the classes I teach, when I’m not doing the coordinator stuff, I could just as easily be assigned a regular English class, with a few K & E students in it.”

“But from what I can tell, slow learning was one of the best, most inclusive ways of teaching in a blended classroom. And if that happens, that’s all the more reason for you to embrace this philosophy yourself and push for it with other teachers,” I insisted.

Williamson looked uncertain.

“There’s a contradiction here,” I said. “We’ve been asking every question we can think of, really taking our time to get to the bottom of this case, checking out every lead, looking at it from every angle. It’s been a slow learning kind of investigation, and we’ve learned a lot. You’ve been like a dog on a bone with this, but you have not fully embraced this same philosophy to use and promote in your school with the students you are most worried about. Isn’t that the place to start?”

Williamson took this all in for what seemed like a long time. “I guess I’m a slow learner,” he finally said, and smiled a little. He asked me how to get a hold of The League so he could begin a conversation with them, and I gave him the information. A bell rang, and a few kids started wandering into the learning center. Out of habit, I wondered which ones were slow learners but then I thought, “All of them one day, hopefully.”

“Am I ready for this?” Williamson asked.

“Ready, enough. You started this inquiry in the first place. And you’ve been guiding it all the way with your annoying questions. That’s got to count for something.”

Then Williamson stuck out his hand, and I shook it, and he thanked me for my work. Then he said, “The school business manager isn’t going to be too happy with me, but I guess we need to go see her and settle up.”

I felt an impulse that often comes to me at the end of cases, and tried to fight it. My rent, after all, was overdue. It was no good. I couldn’t help myself. “Save it,” I said, raising my hand like I was refusing dessert in a restaurant, “It’s been an education.”

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