

TEACHING NORMALCY AND LEARNING DISABILITY- THE RISKY BUSINESS OF
SPECIAL EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE RETROSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS OF
SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES BY LEARNING DISABLED POST-SECONDARY
STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

Although the policies and practices of special education are openly constructed around a premise of mobility and opportunity, students from low income backgrounds ('at risk' youth) are twice as likely to be labeled "special." Moreover, of all the special educational categories, learning disabilities (a diagnosis deeply contested) account for the largest group of special educational students who are 'at risk' learners. This project is hinged on addressing how those students who are apparent beneficiaries of special educational policies and programs (evidenced by post-secondary enrolment) make meaning of their prior and current educational experiences in relation to special educational policies, services and programs.

The author begins by theorizing that such disabilities may medicalize social problems while still preserving a veneer of equality. However, since not all labels have universal meanings when applied to specific social agents, they may both hinder and help some in gaining access to post-secondary education. With the support of a group of four enrolled post-secondary students located in the Canadian urban west-coast, who identify as learning disabled and the recipients of related interventions, this thesis provides a complex reading of the everyday that draws upon how the students' specific cultural and material locations inform their understanding of education, ability, disability, meritocracy and normalcy. Collecting data through semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted during the Spring and Fall of 2007, the students actively engage and challenge the author's original theoretical and methodological assumptions.

Anticipating critiques of special education, the author is surprised by the students' support of such programs. Expecting responses to interview questions to be based on a reading of meritocracy as normalcy and disability as deficit, these students weave understandings of meritocracy and normalcy to articulate their abilities without rejecting their disability labels. In terms of policy where the emphasis is placed on disability as deficit, the findings imply that policy-makers neglect the energy and labour students invest in emphasizing their abilities. For educators, this reveals an important pedagogy of inclusion by inverting assumptions that special educational students are 'at risk' of educational failure without unfolding the complex ways in which they actively demonstrate their abilities.

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DEDICATION

For my mother, my first teacher

&

For Jeff and Carol who opened the door

CHAPTER I

Learning to Read - Literature Review & the Risky Business of Joining the Conversation

All students should have equitable access to learning, opportunities for achievement, and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs. (*Special Educational Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines*, 2006: 1)

The idea of education as the great equalizer is a predominant theme in contemporary Canadian society. Media is full of stories of extraordinary teachers who extend both effort and opportunity to and for their ‘under-privileged’ yet deserving students. School is the site of possibility, blind as justice as solid as a sermon. Through the application of much bootstrap pulling and a little elbow grease, the rough edges of intellect are smoothed and polished obtaining the right luster to ensure a dazzling future. At seventeen I was no different. I wanted that future. I wanted to be polished and bright. I wanted to escape the realities of my family home: the reliance of charity to make ends meet, the constant worry about money, second-hand clothing, the meek and grateful gratitude for odds and ends that no one else wanted, embarrassing ‘interventions’ by social workers, the taste of threadbare hope that had no satisfying substance. I wanted a scholarship. I wanted a future I knew was not reserved for girls like me.

Nose to the grindstone, I cultivated a version of middle class girlhood as closely as I could afford to emulate, purchasing my clothing and supplies with summer wages. I began to read books I thought ‘smart’ people read, sleuthing through second hand book stores for old college textbooks. And I studied. Although I was aware my ability to spell was ‘creative’, my mathematics books looked like mine fields filled with scribbled out attempts to crank out answers and would have preferred a root canal without anesthesia over my second language classes, I attributed these as my own burden to overcome and pushed harder. After all I still did well, made the school’s honor roll and even took home a few top student awards.

Yet, two events changed all my careful planning. As a requirement for graduation, everyone had to make an appointment with their assigned guidance counselor to discuss their future plans. Walking in, full of confidence, I sat down and spun out my desires. “Ahh hah, ummm humm,” said my guidance counselor after a long pause, “I don’t think university is the place for you. Community college at best, but university? *Never.*” Waves of anger washed over me, fingers clenched, controlling the rage which wanted to smash her framed degree through her head, tear up her books and slash the upholstered chairs. I filled in my application forms anyhow. Outside her office door.

Final exam scores, that critical divider for scholarship money, were finally tallied. Hoping I had done well enough to compensate for a lousy French mark, my scores revealed large discrepancies between my class work and exam tally. In spite of the effort, the grades were simply not high enough to be considered for a scholarship. Concerned and curious, one of my teachers (himself a scholarship student) suspected something more than the gig was up. Arranging for testing, what I had considered my own idiosyncracities, showed up as symptoms of dyslexia. I was humiliated. Instead of assuming I hadn’t tried hard enough, here was evidence that I was innately stupid. I attended high school graduation bitterly defeated.

Yet, rather than barring me from post-secondary, testing secured a space. Creating an alternative argument for my final scores supported by objective measures provided enough leverage to finally produce an offer of scholarship. Desperate, yet ashamed, I packed my things and headed off for my first year of undergraduate studies. The campus sprawled as lush and beautiful as any dream, as terrifying and horrible as any nightmare. Tucked away in a dormitory I meet people I had only before read about; the children of successful business men and

politicians, students who received automobiles as graduation gifts, those for whom a trip to Europe was an annual event, students whose parents sent spending money. I said little and allowed them to assume a background of lower middle class origin (I certainly couldn't hide an intimate understanding of street corner cafes in Paris or couture fashions.) I spent each moment in disbelief at my escape and terrified it would dissolve. I had only stopping silence for my first year sociology instructor, who upon handing back my first mid-term said, "You're working-class aren't you? I can tell by how you write."

I came to understand what had happened or to read these events through the lenses of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. I graduated with first place standings and on the Dean's List. Yet, like the letters of accommodation from the Disability Resource Center I never used and kept carefully hidden in the back of my desk drawer in a thick unmarked envelope, disability was kept as silently secrete.

1.1 Debating Definitions: The Problem with the Problem

"The 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person." (Davis, 1995:24).

Learning disabilities refers to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning...

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing, phonological processing, visual spatial processing, processing speed, memory and attention, and executive functions (e.g. planning and decision-making.)

Learning disabilities are life-long. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individual's lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual's strengths and needs...

...Learning disabilities are due to genetic and or/neurological factors or injury that alters brain function in a manner that affects one or more processes related to learning. These disorders are not due primarily to hearing and/or vision problems, social-economic factors, cultural or linguistic differences, lack of motivation, inadequate or insufficient instruction, although these

factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities may co-exist with other disorders such as attentional, behavioral or emotional disorders, sensory impairments, or other medical conditions. (*Special Educational Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines*, 2006:46)

Taken directly from the Ministry of British Columbia's *Special Educational Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* (2006), learning disabilities are outlined in a bare few paragraphs, the simmered down explanation to a disorder I believe is far more critically complex. Situated obviously within the frame of bio-medical constructions, learning disabilities become the 'problem' of "genetic and or/neurological factors." The focus of this explanation becomes the internal dis/functions of the body, only visible to the specialized vision of specific knowledgeable practitioners. The space, location and times in which students learn, the substance of what is learned and the measures by which student 'progress' is charted fall away in the name of objectivity, yet learning disabilities intimately link the 'problem' of learning with its substance and spaces. Without denying the materiality of the body, the 'problem' seems more a problem of meaning that neglects the social contexts in which we live. This definition fails to understand the ways in which learning disabilities are not a symptom of disordered reading, but a way to read cultural and as socio-historical processes which classify difference.

While the above does not absolutely ignore "social-economic factors, cultural, or linguistic differences, lack of motivation, inadequate or insufficient instruction" these issues are not the focus. Instead the 'problem' is deeply individualized, centered upon the brain and not classroom and curriculum. The brief mention of the social neglects how or why meaning is made of these differences, operating as a qualifying statement that serves to cover all the bases without directly addressing any of them. It is not sufficient to merely note these factors as part of a sanitized checklist. Such checklists only serve to strip students of their agency as thoughtful subjects, interpreting and creating their own meanings in relation to their specific social

locations. It serves to cast students as the objects of medicalized schooling interventions who do not speak back or cast their opinions about being the recipients of such therapies. Such a definition does not adequately or critically engage the nature of such help, who it might target and why. It does not address medicine as Eurocentric, white, ableist, heterosexual, patriarchal and masculine. It does not address teaching as a feminized, white, Eurocentric, heterosexual, ableist, patriarchal and as a de-valued profession. The helping hands merely wash each other.

Although the intent of a definition is to name, shape and provide the boundaries to a specific object of knowledge, definitions cannot be separated from their specific time, place and spaces. They cannot be thought of as objective or innocent, but rather reflect assumptions of normalcy equally situated within space, place and time. Learning disabilities assume 'normal' scholastic performance, that the knowledge and tasks performed by students are somehow 'normal', that the students themselves come from 'normal' families who offer and construct 'normal' childhoods. It does not assume a critical awareness of normalcy as a social construction. What determines a learning disability or not has much more to do with how, where and when we live than how children spell, read or do long division in their heads. 'Objectivity' can merely be a pseudonym for an historical amnesia which does not locate its reasons of acting and being in the world that connect to its everyday lived consequences. It is this understanding that is of specific interest.

Hence, those students who already fell outside the 'norm' (e.g. as white, able-bodied, middle class masculine subjects) might be the targets of special educational interventions leading to their overrepresentation as enrolled special educational students. With a curriculum that focuses upon assumptions of normalcy, students learn to label disability in relation to these practices. Defined as a medical and not a social problem, structural inequality can be ignored

while maintaining the appearance of equality and justice. Social transformation could be viewed as unnecessary as the existence of special educational programs could be read as not merely as remedial education, but remedial social transformation.

This project hinges around what meanings enrolled university students who had previously been identified with a learning disability, might place upon their prior and current schooling experiences. Targeted through schooling interventions designed to help student achieve scholastic success and now pursuing post-secondary studies, would they see themselves as the success stories of such policies? Do they mark the same meanings about equality of opportunity as the Manual clearly celebrates? How might their answers also reflect their positionality as gendered, classed, racialized and sexualized social actors? What meanings might they place on education? How might they understand disability in relation to their educational experiences? How might they speak back to special educational policy makers? How might learning disabilities be used as a way to read schooling practices, policies and pedagogies?

The body of this work attempts to address these questions. This chapter concentrates on situating this work within a body of literature, or conversation about this topic already sparked. It is a means to ground possible findings and speak back to the traditions, fields and debates which inform this topic. Chapter Two more closely examines which theoretical standpoints I felt best offered direction and those reasons for this choice as well as how in turn these decisions affected how to approach the topic methodologically. Chapter Three more clearly details the findings, the substance of the participant interviews showing where, how and why I had to switch tracks. Chapter Four provides thoughts as to implications for possible future policies, programs and services and conclusions.

This is by no means meant as a final word, or a truth with a capital “T.” It is, at best, a way to join the conversation and offer up a new take, an alternative position not explored before. It is a way for the subjects of such interventions to directly speak back to those policy makers who have so intimately embraced their educational experiences. It is a way for those same participants to in turn, teach us new lessons in pedagogy that does not silence them as knowledgeable contributors. It is these participants who, in turn, have much to teach us about how to read the everyday.

1.2 Contested Knowledge, Contested Fields: Mapping out a Social Problem

Much to my surprise while exploring the canon for existing works that might connect seemingly ‘at risk’ youth as ‘at risk’ learners¹, I could not locate a singular body of literature. Instead I found myself taking up conversations in multiple traditions and disciplines, piecing together a cartography that radiated out from the familiar field and green grass of sociology. At times the subjects of this study came sharply into view or waned like a new moon on the horizon guiding, but untouchable. A tension gathered at the back of my neck as I opened each book, read yet another article, growing increasingly aware of how students with disabilities were positioned by various academic fields in an attempt to ‘level the field’ of social inequality. Yet, academic fields in themselves are not level, unproblematic wonderlands of enlightenment. They are contested cartographies continuously revised, disputed, battered, and sometimes even celebrated.

I could not start with the assumption that the tools, perspectives or even the ‘problem’ of investigation would be a simple renovation job that could be rightly aligned toward an emancipatory social justice once I chose the ‘right’ studies and theories. I had to critically abandon such naïve hope and replace it with the complexity of messy uncertainty. There simply

¹ Note that I find the phrase ‘at risk’ extremely problematic and agree with other critical theorists that ‘at risk’ is a term coined to incite a moral panic about particular youths that often individualizes structural inequality. The repetition of terms here is to link how these ‘problems’ are related constructions.

were not any footsteps to follow in. Moreover, I could not find anyone who might have made similar connections between learning disabilities, power and knowledge, schooling and oppression. I was able to find works that were helpful in addressing some of my questions, that enabled me to get a better sense of the conversation at the moment and that had come before. Hence, for the purposes of this view I have drawn upon four fields of literature (1) studies of university students with disabilities (2) disability studies, (3) ‘at risk’ youth studies, and (4) work directly on learning disabilities.

1.3 Beating the Odds or Beaten Down by the Odds? What’s been done on Post-secondary Students with “LD”?

While many post-secondary institutions openly celebrate and promote themselves as inclusive spaces, disability is often cast to the shadowy periphery. Indeed the Vancouver campus of the University of British Columbia, which has one the largest student populations in the province (43,579 full and part time graduate and undergraduate students as of November 2006), graduated only 3.2% of persons with disabilities in 2000 with undergraduate Bachelor’s Degrees (UBC Equity Office: 2004). Amongst its staff only 1.87% of its workforce (clerical staff, management, professors, sectionals instructors, etc) were classified as persons with disabilities for 2006 compared against the 2001 national figure of 5.25 % (UBC Annual Report: 2006). Moreover, persons with disabilities in Canada are twice as likely to not obtain a post-secondary degree as persons without disabilities (Behnia, Cossette, Langlois & Duclos: 2004). However, given that these figures can hardly be considered a telling or revealing sample of all Canadian post-secondary institutions, they are a useful starting point in that they infer the unlikelihood of people with disabilities at higher educational institutions.

Being a student with a disability, or at least a student enrolled with special education does have an effect on graduate rates. The BC Ministry of Education’s *Students with Special Needs:*

How are we doing? Province- Public Schools Only recorded that while 84% of regular instruction students graduated high school, students enrolled within Special Education recorded fluctuating rates ranging from 100% for students in Gifted Education, to 68% for those with Learning Disabilities, to only 26% of students graduating who were identified with Behavior Disabilities (2006:19). These figures suggest that special educational categories do influence the likelihood of graduation and the possibility of post-secondary study.

Hence, unsurprisingly researchers have addressed post-secondary students with disabilities mainly in terms of visibility and access. Sue Ralph and Kathy Boxall's *Visible images of disabled students: an analysis of UK university publicity materials* (2005) compared images of students in recruitment materials distributed to potential undergraduates. Their study attempts to explain if a plausible link could be established to explain the just under 4% of people with disabilities enrolled in undergraduate studies in the United Kingdom to representations within these materials. They conclude that although there was almost minimal inclusion of people with disabilities, women and people of diverse ethnicities were well represented. Overwhelmingly, they also found, if students with disabilities were included they were included in disability related informational brochures that were requested apart from 'regular' recruitment materials.

While the authors make some interesting and provocative suggestions, the emphasis of the argument is deeply lodged in a neo-liberal understanding of equity, similar to some familiar constructions of multiculturalism that skimming across deeper systemic issues, in this case, ableist constructions of normalcy. For example while they mention the difficulty potential students may have in accessing disability materials which are located only on-line and Hence, can produce difficulties for those using screen readers that do not always capture photographic

information , the separation of disability related materials from ‘regular’ recruitment materials (p.374), or in the unspoken assumptions behind their comparison of glossy, colorful general recruitment materials against photocopied, in-house produced disability information, no further than merely counting images. Moreover, the reader is outside their decisions in how they counted or marked individuals as members of particular groups, going only so far to reveal that they relied heavily on Knoll’s (1987) visual ‘disability symbols’(p.379) that included wheelchairs, white sticks and guide dogs. Students with disabilities seem a homogenous group, differentiated only by a medical understanding of visually apparent deficit.

This approach does not address ableist constructions of normalcy. Assuming disability is merely visual and neatly split neatly into mind – body polarities does little to unravel inequality. It doesn’t address if post-secondary institutions deliberately recruit or are structured to address particular kinds of disabilities within their student population over others. Moreover, they do not acknowledge that some disabilities/differences do not photograph. Power is only addressed in terms of photographic staging by questioning who is positioned and who does the positioning, but not extended into a deeper discussion of material location.

Teri Hibbs and Dianne Pothier’s (2006) *Post-secondary Education and Disabled Students: Mining a Level Playing Field or Playing in a Minefield* reports some experiences of University of Victoria students between 1994 and 2002, concluding that the largest issue in obtaining access to accommodation hinged upon “the fixation by governments on deficit and debt control that gained momentum in the 1990s (and continues to grow) has coincided with losses of civil and social rights for disabled people; ... a resurgence in patterns of policy development based on assumptions of disability as an individual, biomedically based deficit which depicts disabled people as passive, sick, asexual, and apolitical” (p.197).

Obviously much more political in scope than Sue Ralph and Kathy Boxall, their findings unravel the everyday ramifications of budget cuts and ableist constructions of normalcy by citing the repeated struggle of students who must solely advocate for accommodations on their own often resulting in extra costs, personal fatigue and wasted study time. Moreover, students found themselves often repeating the same processes term to term, instructor to instructor or even class to class. There was no consistency of services offered; while handing in a taped assignment might be acceptable for one instructor, another might reject this form of accommodation. They argue this approach sits upon a liberal understanding of merit and agency that in turn rests upon disability as individual deficit that creates inequitable power relations between students and the university. Other students, (those most often with invisible disabilities) commented that they rejected accommodations out of fear of stigmatization by instructors that might translate into lower expectations or burdensome generators of additional work.

They further argue this point through the issue of documentation required by the university before accommodations can be accessed. Accommodations, which can only be provided by medical doctors or psychologists, medicalizes and individualizes disability placing the emphasis on students to individually bare the financial costs associated with assessment testing and investment of time. They argue that documentation also gives many university departments access to sensitive information about students who must provide it each time they request an accommodation further intensifying inequitable power relations.

Based on a Foucaultian reading of disciplinary power which they describe as an interactive and dependent power-knowledge relationship determining, legitimatizing and normalizing which information becomes central to constructing the everyday, they argue the

participatory aspect through which individuals adopt and internalize these meanings in order to navigate their social worlds produces 'docile bodies.' These bodies in turn produce their own surveillance and adherence to the norms of normalcy. They argue that taking up a disability label results in unwitting self-induced and self endorsed social oppression.

While their work appears politically minded and much more complex than a simple reading of neo-liberal inclusion, there is still a slight ring to the peal of their words. These students are still interchangeable throughout, lacking the material outline of class, gender, race and sexuality which informs all social experiences, including disability. I agree that access and accommodation are deeply political; I agree that they have been constructed as open pathways to be trod by individuals without consideration that they may in fact be road blocks, but these authors have not complicated which students are present in the first place. Are students with disabilities evenly discriminated against, or is it more complex? I am not convinced disability is a singular experience on any level but is always informed by our specific and multiple social locations. Disability cannot be unproblematically condensed into disability and impairment or mind-body dualities.

Yet, what is most troubling is the notion of 'docile bodies' against existing social structures that provide no other alternatives to base rights-based claims. How else might students gain access to accommodations if they are deemed complacent in their own oppression by naming it? It also suggests no other meanings can be made from the disability; it becomes as hegemonic as normalcy. By homogenizing students, the authors fail to explore how social actors negotiate with meaning, perhaps deliberately using some labels over others in ways that both speak to their agency and social positioning.

Overall the main short coming of the literature describing, explaining and investigating post-secondary students with disabilities fails to contextualize experiences, identity and everyday beyond their disability experience. They also fail to contextual schooling experiences prior to post-secondary study, to investigate the impact of prior policies that have also attempted to ‘level the field.’ The result is an ironic privileging of every other assumption of normalcy that does not take on its Eurocentric, heteropatriarchal underpinnings. It is an attempt to reinstate ‘business as usual’ as much as it tries to upset things and promote social change.

1.4 What do you mean by disability? Definitions and Disagreements, Strategies and Surprises

At the heart of this discussion is an underlying tension about how to define disability. While definitions have been criticized as rigidly deterministic, they do allow people to organize for political and social change by naming, not only an identity, but the shape, size and location of oppression. Hence, definitions are as problematic as they are helpful, sometimes as divisive as much as they unite. Within Disability Studies there is an agreement that disability as defined through medical model understandings of disease, pathology and deficit surgically dissects and disinfects the social meaning from the corporeal. Disability stands alone as unfortunate individual tragedy or alternatively becomes a moralistic condemnation for life choices that may include substance use or promiscuity (Liton: 2006). Disability scholars argue that medical models fail to address how social structures, institutions and interactions shape disability experience; medicine fails to understand how disability is both social identity and material reality.

Here is where the similarities end. Because naming is a political act shaping how to organize for social justice, discussions have split into different directions (Meekosha: 2004). Disagreement arises over the usefulness and need to separate disability from impairment with

some scholars rejecting all biological essentialisms, others collapsing the social and biological, some bringing forth a diversity argument that celebrates inclusion without going after structure, and yet others recognizing the two but holding on to biologically based difference as a means to launch rights claims.

Disability and impairment have been used to separate biological materiality from disability as a sociopolitical construction in much the same way gender has been differentiated from sex. Making this distinction has served several political and practical purposes. For Rosemarie Garland Thompson (1997) disability as a social experience can only stem from the body as a non-negotiable material fact, arguing that without which there can be no basis for identity. Identity can be dissipated in a deconstructionalist moment. Rather she states discourses are embodied, written large across the body.

I agree discourses are lived and are embodied but would argue underlying this approach is an almost liberal desire to generate equality through reclaiming the word. Not that I disagree or would abandon this strategy. I would argue that it needs to do more than tinker with definitions and hope the result is transformative. Larger structural barriers need to be addressed. Racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism will not buckle under 'nice words' (Linton: 2006). 'Nice words' do not open doors and put food on the table. Words can galvanize people to work toward structural change, but alone do not always signify change. Moreover, arguing that definitions need to be reclaimed into more affirmative meanings fails to recognize the agency some people deliberately employ to work within seemingly stigmatizing labels to access services and resources (Salmon:2005).

Simi Linton's *Reassigning Meaning* (2006) echoes similar sentiments to Garland Thompson by choosing to define disability as encompassing impairment stating, "... I am not willing or interested in erasing the line between disabled and non-disabled people, as long as disabled people are devalued and discriminated against, ... naming the category serves to call attention to that treatment (p.163)" Yet, unlike Garland Thompson who only focuses on discursive constructions with embodied consequences, Linton recognizes disability as a much more complex set of relationships that have to account for both the material consequences of ideology and the body as material reality. Like Garland Thompson, she does argue that disability is material, not purely social, a reality that needs to be upheld, a call to acknowledge difference without dissipating it as a social construction. Nor is it a term so encompassing that it ceases to be a difference, removing the basis from which to launch rights based claims.

This stance marks Linton's work differently from Garland Thompson because the structural emphasis placed on naming; it is an identity politics that recognizes that the political isn't just personal, it's structural. Without this basis, rights based claims could not be launched; they'd be as easily scattered as words in the wind. The disability rights movement could be dismissed as the noise of yet another 'special' interest group drowned out in the reactionary wave of backlash.

Leonard Davis' work *Constructing Normalcy* (1995) approaches disability as created against the scientific rise of bell curve measurements and eugenic constructions of superiority and inferiority that in turn created their seemingly stable cousin, the average. For Davis, disability and impairment become collapsible terms, a distinction he feels is unimportant as he becomes far more interested in building an argument that cites able bodied normalcy as hegemonic. While his insights regarding the construction of normalcy are important, he fails to

look outside the European enlightenment. Science hasn't always been the linear starting point in constructing taken for granted versions of the everyday. Collapsing terms results in collapsing and overlooking the importance of particular traditions of thought (Bannerji: 2003).

I'd argue colonialism with its evangelical and capitalistic intents fueled by the energy of missionary morality has been a far more entrenched means of separating, classifying and assigning value to humanity. Davis doesn't link science to its genealogical roots (Bannerji: 2003 Roman, Brown, Noble, Wainer & Earl Young: 2007), and doesn't fully ground these ideas in actual bodies that bare progress. Unlike Linton and Garland Thompson do who understand the political implications of separating terms, his reasons for collapsing terms seem to bypass contemporary nation-building (and busting) practices that cannot ignore gender, class or race. Ironically his argument illustrating the construction of the normal and average in turn constructs people with disabilities into generic, interchangeable items with identical needs, desires and hopes in much the same fashion he explains has occurred with the creation of the average citizen.

Lilly Meekosha and Leanne Dowse's (1997) article *Enabling Citizenship* directly picks up where Davis leaves off, tying in gender by arguing citizenship is built upon ideas of active fitness, thus works to exclude people with disabilities rendering them as passive recipients of state 'care' and intervention. Pointing out that passivity genders disability feminine, regulating disability to the private sphere, out of view from the public realm they also emphasize the binaries between activity/passivity, inclusion/exclusion are then not only gendered, but also dependent on colonial imagery of race. The hegemony of normalcy becomes more complex than a compare and contrast of normal vs. abnormal nor a simple mathematics of difference where in somehow all categories of difference remain separate and could be added together to produce an

integrated view of difference. Citizenship, they argue, is then “embodied as male, white, active, fit and able” (p.50).

Unlike Davis, persons are not interchangeable but are situated and contextualized within time, space and place. Much like Linton, Meekosha and Dowse focus on how disability is connected to the structural processes of oppression, arguing for citizenship rights beyond a mere discursive inclusion that does not complicate the underlying privilege of such a stance. An identity politic may be beneficial, but only if access to recourses is not threatened, denied or at best sporadic.

Yet, what most of the disability studies literature doesn't fully address are mind/body divisions or invisible over visible disabilities. Ability seems to be hinged upon conceptions of the impaired 'normal' body. This implies a privileging of visible over invisible, placing the emphasis on the person with an invisible disability to continuously 'prove' their disability. The center and periphery reform themselves within the group hierarchically organizing 'outsiders' within 'outsiders' (Becker: 1963). Although I agree with Linton's need to draw a line and insist on creating parameters to name difference, to fight against structural barriers and launch rights claims, I am concerned with her use of Gill's classification system that separates disabled from non disabled. Based on the significance of disability as difference that affects daily life and the manner in which someone consistently presents themselves within the world as a disabled person (p.163), for those with invisible disabilities it is not so easily cut and dry. How do you consistently present yourself as someone with schizophrenia, depression or a learning disability? Is disability the only identity/ 'master status' (Goffman:1963). Or is it multiple and even contradictory? What happens when your disability is discredited as make-believe? How might social relationships and power dynamics be understood?

While I understand the political need to have a term which unites a group and names the size, shape and location of oppression, a term to rally around and launch rights claims, I am skeptical if such attempts at organizing work. These fractures have occurred before within other movements: women's, queer and civil rights have all previously attempted to unite difference like class without recognizing even class happens differently to people within different contexts, times and nation states – a point Susan Wendell (1996) makes beautifully in relation to disability. Illustrating the differences between gendered urbanized industrialized life in a 'first world' setting compared to the physical demands made in rural 'third world, who is or isn't disabled is highly dependent on who, where and when you are. Using the UN definition of disability, she explains both the strengths and weakness of defining universal terms which both enable and restrict personal freedoms.

Although I agree with Linton's need to differentiate and separate experiences, to name privilege, power and oppression, there needs to be some indicator which marks experiences of disability as different that doesn't forego the rest of the everyday. Without recognizing this work, dangerous hierarchies are created that resurrect boundaries around who are the 'true' representatives who speak for 'all.' This produces the same elitist notions of authority struggled against or worse reduces a movement to a following of a few devotees.

Instead the challenge disability studies poses is in rejecting normalcy, in rejecting perfection, in rejecting waged productivity. It asks, "How do we create a social justice which isn't perfect?" This is very much like Stuart Hall's (1996) notion of giving up on guiding essentialisms, of working 'without guarantees.' It does not suggest giving up on material reality, but rather working from that reality. Giving up on the guarantee that the body holds its own truth

recognizes that the social positions individuals in relation to the material world that matters. The body or 'truth' doesn't position you. Rather it is social processes, structure and interaction that position social actors within a very tangible and real world. Those identity labels are not either cultural or material as Miriam Iris Young (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1997) debate or only material as Peter McClaren and Valerie Scatamburlo – D'Amibale (2003) insist. They are both at the same time.

1.5 'At risk' Youth as 'at risk' Learners: What's Already been done on 'At risk' Youth?

The canon, as much as Western popular culture, has been peppered with images and investigations of 'at risk' youth from the careless cool of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) to the redemptive promise of education in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Freedom Writers* (2007). Yet, much of the literature within disability studies, as previously discussed, does not draw into its analysis a discussion of 'risk' although arguably both touch upon constructions of productive citizenship through the framing of 'burdens.' Moreover, perhaps because of the tendency within disability studies to homogenize identity where the visible has been privileged over the invisible, those links between disability and education remain targeted to addressing issues of accessibility. While I do not disagree that this is worthy of much needed critical attention, focusing only upon removing physical, architectural or bureaucratic barriers levels social transformation that has the look of inclusion without addressing social structure or ideology. When it comes to disability studies, 'at risk' youth are strangely absent, but as I will attempt to explain, when it comes to studies of 'at risk' youth, disability becomes absent.

The overlap between 'at risk' youth and disability seems obvious; both groups have been osrotized and villanized as drains on the system, as non-contributing members of society and

both pull upon the same neo-liberal redemptive promise of ‘cure’ be it through medical or educational intervention. Both conceptions of the problem have focused on individual pathology rather than investigate social structural explanations and both have passionately ignited public contempt, charity and pity. Both constructions have popular culture heroes and villains, both have been the objects and subjects of much academic discussion which has at times abandoned social justice and turned social problems into the big business of research. However, most interestingly, both have utilized the same thematic framing of the issue that draw upon neo-liberalism or critical approaches hinged upon social constructionalism.

There have been some empirical measures indicating ‘at risk’ youth and specific kinds of disability, do fit together. Of all students enrolled in special education, 77% were from single parent families living on yearly incomes of \$29,999 or less (Bohatyretz & Lipps: 13). The Roeher Institute echoes these findings stating the over-representation of low-income children as 2.5 times more likely to have a disability (p.5), to live in families who depend on government aid (p.6) and to be from single parent, women-headed families (p.11). Bohatyretz and Lipps also found children who received special education for a learning disability were also twice as likely to be ranked at the bottom of their class by classroom teachers (p.15).

However, some interpretations of these findings are part of a casual relationship embedded within the lived realities of poverty. These students fail because of a lack of resources and access to proper nutrition, supported only by exhausted parent(s) who struggle without a living wage, or by ‘unmotivated’ parent(s) who selfishly choose to be ‘drains on the system’ by relying on social assistance payments, instilling in their children a similar work ethic, thereby denying them a ‘better’ future. The Ministry of Health in British Columbia *Health Guide* (2006) which provides information about many health issues, including learning disabilities, list under

the same ‘symptoms’ of nutrition, abuse or neglect, stressful home environments, parenting skills and alcohol or drug abuse for disorder. Even Bohatyretz and Lipps whose goal is to provide a statistical overview, echo these assumptions in their work by citing lack of resources as a possible reason for the over representation of low income students in special education.

On the surface this explanation seems to offer a transgressive potential in pulling away from biological based deficits toward contextualizing lived experience within a social location, however it is an analysis that does not go far enough. Donald L. MacMillan’s *Hidden Youth: Dropouts from Special Education* (1991) exemplifies this kind of argument. Identifying the over representation of low income students within special education, including the highly racialized, urbanized characteristics of poverty that do not fail to mention substance abuse and single parent families (pp.14-15), he argues this as the main reason for schooling failure, without extending the discussion toward examining systemic racism, classism, sexism or homophobia. ‘At risk’ students are a homogenous mass, neatly categorized as troublesome without risking the mess of actual lived experience, of actual live students who not only dare to complicate such a simplistic telling of the everyday, but might speak back, refusing to be the subjects of such paternalistic interventions.

Hence, his suggestions for schooling change are equally problematic. Placing the thrust of transformation onto classroom teachers whom he stresses must identify such students and produce creative pedagogical solutions, he homogenizes teachers as much as the students. Neglecting that schools are also hierarchical gendered workplaces, classroom teachers must close gaps, extending class room space as laboratory and domestic hearth. The ‘cure’ for dropouts is the heroic teacher, who takes on structural inequality with an encouraging smile, a willingness to listen and flawless instruction. Such an analysis has the look and feel of social transformation

without weight, substance and texture. It is a lesson in neo-liberalism, celebrating the lone individual who never asks or takes anything in return, including social justice.

Critical theorists have taken on these assumptions and demanded more complex explanations that do not lump social realities into singular headings, pulling apart power dynamics. Leslie Roman's *Spectacle in the Dark: Youth as Transgression, Display and Repression* (1996) gets at the ideological underpinnings of youth 'at risk' by illustrating how youth are constructed to incite a moral panic which shifts the focus away from state practices and relations of rule. She argues school drop outs only became a matter of increasing public concern during a time of national financial strain, an ideal scape goat to pin anxiety about a failing economy in spite of the high number of students who choose to finish their studies later, thus actually reducing the number of students who do not complete high school. Linking public concern through ideological notions of ideal citizenship based on productive membership that connects national strength to economic vitality, 'at risk' youth became a voiceless spectacle for a public very strategically left in the dark.

Other works, which do not fully nuance ideology in the same fashion as Roman, do complicate 'at risk' by contextualizing youth with particular locations. Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine' *Reconstructing Drop-Out* (1997) attempts to investigate how and why institutional processes create unequal outcomes for minority students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds for high school students. Gathered over a three year period from three different schools in Toronto, their findings cite multiple factors: an ethnocentric curriculum, educational streaming, lack of representation with the staff and student populations, staff and administrative attitudes and a lack of respect toward minority students contribute to some students dropping out of school. Factors, they argue, that are grounded in systematic racism.

Meoldy and Walkerdine (2003) invert this question by investigating the impact structure has upon the self identity of young working-class women as they negotiate between working-class roots and middle class futures. Interviewing two young women (one 'white' and the other of 'mixed' heritage both African and white) they found these women both felt frustrated and guilty shifting between the middle class world of the academy and their working-class family relationships. Differences between the participants drew upon their classed, gendered and ethnic identities, influencing the ways in which each chose to negotiate their everyday as the young woman with African heritage closely identified with the image of the 'strong black woman' who both cares for and relies upon her family as opposed to her counterpart's instance on independence, work ethic and individualism.

Deidre Kelly's *Stigma Stories* (1996) applies a discursive analysis in investigating the ways in which teenage mothers have been the objects of much public debate, including discursive constructions utilized by these young women. Pulling apart four strands which she identifies as the 'wrong' girl, the 'wrong' family, the 'wrong' system and the stigma is wrong she attempts to unravel what is specifically powerful in the way each discourse constructs these women without neglecting dynamic and deliberate agency displayed by her research participants. She argues that teenage mothers cannot be read as simple 'dupes' who unwittingly get 'knocked up,' cannot be easily pathologized as familiar or state delinquents nor can they be romanticized as resistive transgressors who balk paternalistic authority. Teenage pregnancy cannot be summed up simply, but draws upon a myriad of structural pluralities. It's not all sex, drugs and rock n'roll, rather how social actors act within and against class, gender and racialized oppression.

Yet, inasmuch as critical theorists have rightfully critiqued the narrow scope of previous perspectives that have not seriously spent time contextualizing subjects (as opposed to dissecting objects) within their specific locations by insisting that theories such as the cycle of poverty do not dig deeper and go far enough in their analysis to include systemic racism, homophobia, classism and sexism, they have stopped short of revealing how and why these theories are deeply eugenic and medical- model driven. The rationale that argues a linear progression is not upset. They have failed to see how disability and ‘at risk’ are part of the same relations and traditions of thought that do more than categorically intersect. They have stopped short of recognizing how they are colonial constructions. Instead readers are presented with the social barriers of class, race and gender without acknowledging the epistemology of the measure. Science (or route of investigation) isn’t wrong, the test or tools need to be reconsidered. Not only does this create an impossible juggling of the ‘isms’ or the holy trinity of gender, race and class, the West remains the guiding beacon, the great I/eye² flashing a comforting signal over the dark and troubled waters of the lived everyday.

1.6 Learning Disabilities: How have Social Constructionalist Perspectives framed the ‘Problem?’

Similarly, much of the work done on learning disabilities follows some of the same thematic framing devices that draw upon conservative, neo-liberal understandings of dis/ability driven by medical understandings of deficit or social explanations that remain divided between the field posts of material, structural understandings or post-structural, discursive paths. Undeniably there is a large body of works devoted to educating and explaining learning disabilities as a bio-medical phenomena, exploring cognitive functioning, childhood development, brain chemistry, the symptoms and possible cures.

² This allusion to Foucault’s Panopticon is deliberate and will be elaborated upon in Chapter Two’s discussion of theory which will concentrate upon the idea of ‘docile bodies.’

Yet, some works which do attempt a social explanation, rather than explore meanings attached to disability, argue for a need to foster and build resiliency within ‘at risk’ children. Intending to be a pragmatic resource material for teachers and administrators, Topf, Frazier-Maiwald and Krovetz (2004) suggest resiliency could be developed in students through building schools as sites of ‘caring, high expectations and purposeful support, ongoing opportunities for meaningful participation and effective instruction.’ (p.207) The authors’ suggest an approach of active engagement between administrators, teachers and parents, setting aside instructional time to meet and discuss expectations. They also suggest discussing progress individually with students as well as making themselves more available to offer additional support. It is an attempt to focus upon ‘strengthening the environment, not fixing kids.’(p. 208).

While on the surface this strategy seems idealist by providing students with the appropriate resources, it does little to address any systemic issues. They make no mention of poverty or racism, and side step schooling funding issues which are dependent upon special educational labels or schools as gendered workplaces. Much like Donald MacMillan’s ‘at risk’ drop-outs, the emphasis is placed upon the educational system without any additional support for these spaces. Moreover, it also doesn’t address why additional educational instruction is the appropriate intervention for a disability defined as an internal pathology, independent of the classroom. Without unraveling the social meanings constructed around disability, ‘strengthening the environment’ makes little sense since it is a remedial strategy attempting to, perhaps not ‘fix kids’ but fix the problem as individualistic.

Barry Franklin’s (1980) work *From Backwardness to L.D.: Behaviorism, Systems Theory, and the Learning Disabilities Field Historically Reconsidered* illuminates this tension.

Franklin demonstrates learning disabilities have historically been contested, criticized for neglecting to focus on schooling instruction by only concentrating on biological factors. Yet, he argues that the opposite strategy, focusing on better classroom instruction and practices, only works to reinsert a biologically driven behaviorist model, which better training can remedy any defect in a student's learning behavior. It is not a critical overhaul of schooling and does not upset the authority of science and medicine.

On the flipside, other works have fully questioned meanings around learning disabilities to the point to which they may exist only as an abstract relationship between discourse, knowledge and power. Scott Yates (2005) article *Truth, Power and Ethics in Care Services*, a case study of one man and one woman with learning disabilities living in a care facility (group home) in the United States, borrows Michael Foucault's notion that authority is textual with embodied consequences:

With reference to learning difficulties, this domain of ontology leads to the realization that we are not dealing with an essential pathology whose nature resides outside of discourse, awaiting its discovery by medical or psychological knowledge. Learning difficulties is not a "condition" about which we can unproblematically amass absolute knowledge; rather, it is a discursively constituted object. The ways in which concepts of "mental abilities" are constituted, and in which they emerge as particular type of problems in certain fields of knowledge, produce what we understand as "learning difficulties." The human subject is in turn rendered knowable as an object of these forms of knowledge. (p. 68)

Yates' argues labeling someone as "learning disabled" produces not only a disability which cannot exist outside of the text, but the text or an epistemology in turn produces selves positioned, known according to the text.

Yates' analysis does make a credible point as learning disabilities, without visible material evidence, are defined through school failure and assessment testing that depends upon textual understanding and performance. Moreover, even the corporeal medicine claims as its

authority is also reliant on the text that gives it meaning. Situating disability as a discursive construction shifts the emphasis away from individual ‘trouble’ and provides room to begin to theorize about explanations that relate rather than transcend identities - problematizing knowledge through which identity is named.

While I appreciate his recognition of disability as a discursive creation, positioning individuals according to certain power relations and his instance the people are not passive recipients of such relations (p.74), I feel as post modernist explanation leaves some gaps. For me, if all material experience/ knowledge are a textual construction that can be deconstructed, this leaves identity on a slippery slope in which there are no spaces from which to speak. All identity then can be deconstructed, speech and critical engagement thus disregarded. In avoiding essentialisms, treating learning disabilities as only textual disallows for social structure, our material positionalities no longer matter. It cannot explain why some find this label comforting and reassuring while for Others it leave them vulnerably voiceless. Disallowing materiality may reinforce the same dynamics which it argues against. Power and knowledge cannot only occur in a perpetual present.

Speaking to this critique, beautifully written as a narrative poem David Connor’s (2006) *Michael’s Story: “I get into trouble just by walking”*: *Narrative knowing and life at the intersections of learning, disability, race and class* presents an intersectional analysis of the experiences of Michael, an urban, New York, working-class, black youth enrolled in special educational classes for the ‘learning disabled.’ Connor, a former high school special educational teacher, begins his inquiry by questioning the over-representation of Black and Latino young men in special education who seem hindered rather than helped by this schooling intervention compared against white, middle class students who are able to access increased services and

resources for the same learning disabilities. Drawing on Crenshaw and Collin's understanding of a matrix of domination which illuminates intersectionality, he uses his semi structured interviews with Michael to demonstrate how class, race and disability connect simultaneously.

Connor's work is located, challenging traditional standards of objectivity both used to measure disability and 'good' research. He situates himself within the text by stating his relationship to his research interest and to his research participant. In doing so his participant becomes someone located within time and place; a person with a family, a girlfriend, a class position and an ethnicity, hopes of higher education, deep frustration, anger and resistance. Michael is more than merely talked about; he speaks back, informing Connor's research. Choosing to write his interview findings as a poem is also a creative way of addressing conflicts of academic standards that have often cast learning disabled students as 'defective', speaking back to post modern perspectives without having them dominate.

I agree that class, race and disability do meet in profound ways that involve the positing of social actors with particular locations, I remain less optimistic of using Crenshaw and Collins 'matrix of domination' which splits into four spheres: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal. This approach seems mechanical, an intense juggling of accounting responsibilities that doesn't best explain the everyday. I thought this was evident in the authors 'forgetfulness' of gender in spite of mentioning the over representation of minority young men (although he does recognize this shortcoming, it is still not a central aspect of his analysis.) This approach can easily reduce and oversimplify how oppression and power operate (again something the author admits but does not critically take up in this work.) Separating each out into a 'sphere' doesn't allow for the relational possibilities that refuse to follow any singular direction.

Christine E. Sleeter's (1987) work *Why is There Learning Disabilities? A Critical Analysis of the Birth of the Field in its Social Context* is similar in that it speaks to the construction of learning disabilities as ripe with political, national and classed intention rather than biological causality. Yet, she differs from Connor by complicating the over representation of 'at risk' youth in special education. She argues learning disabilities as a social category worked to protect white and upper-middle class students in the United States during the late 1950's who were facing school failure. Learning disabilities as an individual problem took the focus off students' families and home life while providing a cast of 'normalcy' around these students, cloaked in the language of scientific legitimacy. This served to separate them from other categories of learning trouble (mentally retarded, slow learner, emotionally disturbed and culturally deprived (pp. 221 – 224) typically applied to classed and raced minority students. Moreover, she argues learning disabilities also took the focus off increased demands for tougher and advanced literacy skills which constituted national and political fears after the launch of Sputnik.

Although Sleeter, like Connor, provides bodies with classed and racial/ethnic identity, she too overlooks how learning disabilities might be used ideologically to draw upon the material positionality and identity of students. While she argues how learning disabilities as a category were created as a means to protect white, middle class boys from educational failure in the 1960's without placing them within existing definitions of special educational students (e.g. mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed...) protecting white, masculine class privilege, for working-class girls, learning disabilities might not be rigidly deterministic. Rather this diagnosis may play on middle class assumptions of gender, ability and success. While working-class boys may seem beyond 'saving' from not only educational failure but expression of working-class

masculinity (which may provide insight into the over-representation of low-income boys with learning and behavioral difficulties), there exists a plea for help from a ‘deserving’ working-class damsel in distress. For working-class girls, those negative assumptions about ‘risk’, although deeply and personally stigmatizing, can become an un-intentional swinging door to secure the resources needed to further life choices and opportunity for class mobility.

Moreover, schooling failure of middle class white girls may not have been seen as a “problem”, but as an appropriate gendered response to schooling pressures. Schooling failure for working-class girls may also carry an additional reading beyond the ‘damsel in distress’ particularly for girls with ethnic/racial identities. Their scholastic achievements may not have been viewed not as an academic performance “problem” affecting the nation state, but a national crisis based on colonial images of feminine sexuality.

Although the literature has been helpful in illuminating an array of differing perspectives, much of the literature has not yet provided a material explanation of how power operates in conjunction with these issues on an ideological level. Too often works are presented in a fragmentary fashion concentrating on a meaningful piece of the puzzle without consideration of how they might connect to other social occurrences. For instance although there is little denial of contemporary Canada as built on prior and ongoing colonial practices, linking this to schooling, medicine, gender, class and race (not that I intend to suggest that these are the only categories that matter) has remained allusive.

The largest gap in the literature is that it does not fully address how normalcy links ‘at risk’ youth, schooling, disability and programs, policies and services designed to promote access. Bridges between specific topics, such as disability and normalcy, are certainly well established

and argued, but do not branch out toward other fields. Nor do these fields attempt to create paths toward critiques offered by disability studies. 'At risk' youth are only theorized in terms of delinquency but not deficit. Services, programs and policies designed to promote equality through access are not contextualized beyond the embodied experiences of disability and normalcy (which should be acknowledged), but neglects their space and place historically, nationally and ideologically. Likewise learning disabilities are constructed as the 'problem' of biological or social meaning without attention to how each of these meanings have been contested in connection to specific contextualized ideological meanings underlying the nature of the help they offer.

What the literature does is open the door to several conversations that have framed how this topic has been previously conceptualized, what has been of interest, what has been hinted at and what has been left out. It is a way to speak back, to join in and raise issue with what has already been said as part of a lively and ever-changing dialogue. Chapter Two intends to explore these gaps in the literature by drawing upon certain theoretical perspectives to bridge and building a stronger argument for why 'at risk' youth are over represented as 'at risk' learners and to develop a methodology which responds back to British Columbian special educational policy.

CHAPTER II
Theory & Method Theories: Cliques, Truths and Speculations about Oppression, Labeling, Stigma and Special Education

2.1 What's going on? Do Schools Heroically Medicalize Social Trouble?

For most students, the identification/assessment phase begins in the classroom, as the teacher observes exceptionalities in learning and behavior. The teacher responds by entering the first phases of the process, initiating in-depth classroom observation and evaluation. Further while beginning a comprehensive assessment of learning needs, the teacher should also introduce variations in instructional approaches, evaluating the success of using such teaching techniques and instructional materials with the student. (*SES Manual*:13)

In 1982, a new troublemaker hit Garfield High. He was tough. He was wild. He was willing to fight. He was the new math teacher. (*Stand and Deliver*: 1988)

In tenth grade remedial math in place of regular classroom instruction, we were all told to watch *Stand and Deliver*, a film about a hard-nosed mathematics teacher assigned to teach a class full of drop-out prone students subject to all the exotic indicators of deviance: poverty, gang violence, drug abuse, prostitution and pregnancy. Encouraged by his efforts, this class exceeded expectations by scoring so well on a national mathematics test, they are accused of cheating. The film finally ends with both teacher and students vindicated. Looking around at my classmates, I became angry in a way not intended by our teacher's seemingly innocent attempt at motivation. I understood that the line of division between him and us was as clean as the lines on the chalkboard equations: we were in need of saving, and he was to be our rescuer. That I vehemently disagreed and felt sickened by his attempt at heroic machismo did not matter. Who I was, what I could do, and what I might become had already been decided. For the rest of the year, I resented him and I resented that class. Years later, during a summer break from my undergraduate studies, I ran into him on the street, "How's community college going?" he asked jovially. "I wouldn't know," I responded icily, "I attend *university*."

Yet, as the first quote above demonstrates, in class assessment by regular classroom teachers is the first intervention in identifying a potential learning disability. Armed with the scientific method, the teacher is then recommended to conduct a series of instructional experiments, matching the success by comparing their findings and hypothesis. The student, merely responds to the stimuli until the best corrective measure emerges, graciously guided away from a life of unproductive misery by the most benevolent and selfless of educators, gratefully redeemed. The teacher is ultimately heroic, quelling social trouble through the use of enlightened reason and logic. But given that 77% of children from households with incomes of \$29,999 or less lived in single-parent families receive special education (Lipps, Garth & Bohatyretz: 2000) poses some important questions about these 'objective' practices: why are children from low income families more likely to need special education? Are they 'naturally' less adept than their higher income counterparts? Or is another explanation possible?

Taking a material feminist anti-colonial stance, I would argue by applying Dorothy Smith's (1987) institutional ethnographic method, that those everyday micro processes of who is and isn't identified for a special educational intervention, cannot be considered without linking them back to macro structural operations. Teachers and students cannot be neatly divided into homogeneous groups but must take into account their identities and material locations as classed, sexualized and gendered social agents positioned within a specific time and place. Schools inasmuch as they are sites of education, are also workplaces with their own internal hierarchies. Teaching as a profession has been feminized and de-valued, just as schooling, medicine and normalcy have linked historically (Petrina: 2006) against colonial practices of nation building and busting (Marckel:1996).

With this in mind, schools as institutions as sites embedded with practices, policies and pedagogies intertwined with the colonial knowledges of their founding settler powers that have forced the standardization of the norm as white, masculine, heterosexual, able bodied and bourgeois (Davis:1995, Meekosha: 1997). Schooling curriculum places these Western ‘truths’ as the basis of which knowledge it considers important, measuring student ability against how well this knowledge is performed through schooling activities like reading, writing and arithmetic. Learning disabilities have been defined as a deficit in performing these activities or norms which in themselves are inseparable from official discourses governing scholastic achievement. The test for this disability is a psychometric written exam based on these assumed ‘naturalisms.’ Other ways of acting, knowing and being in the world are disregarded.

I would argue that this targets students who ‘deviate’ from this ontology for such interventions. Moreover, since the ‘need’ for the intervention is based on these taken for granted norms and is scored ‘objectively,’ it abandons critical attention to the space, place and time in which students learn. Learning disabilities become a category to warehouse and medicalize what is a social, not biological, phenomena. As an ‘objective’ category critical questioning is not raised but rather celebrated as progressive inclusion that addresses rather than reinforces oppression. Teachers remain heroic without addressing the material everyday of the classroom in which they must work and students are ‘saved’ whether they want it or not. The notion of education as the guardian of equality is left undisturbed.

However, just as schooling is a process that shifts dependent on time, place and space and is not universal across these axis, learning disabilities as a label are also not universal in their

meaning but take on different shades depending who they are applied to. For working-class³, racialized boys, whose 'risk' is associated with moral panics around violence and criminal activity (rather than with racism and classism), learning disabilities may become a way to 'naturalize' these attributes. For working-class white girls, a learning disability label may valorize seemingly botched schooling performances as meritocratic effort, securing resources to gain access to post-secondary education. Hence, disability may become the backdoor in gaining access to more prestigious locations.

It is not that I am attempting to argue away the materiality of the body but rather to cast critical attention to the social meanings generated by such conditions. For instance BC's *Health Guide* lists learning disabilities as a medical diagnosis stemming from abnormal brain function. They also suggest that behavioral difficulties (also highly diagnosed as a disability in school children) such as Attention Deficit Disorder is also more common in children with learning difficulties and include the following symptoms:

- **Giftedness.** Some gifted children will show signs of inattention in class. Often they are not challenged and are bored, so they lose interest in normal class activities. (It is also possible for a child to be both gifted and have ADHD.)
- **Under nutrition.** Without proper nutrients, especially in the first year of life, a child is at risk of not developing normally. This includes compromised brain development and function.
- **Abuse or neglect.** Emotional problems that often result from abusive conditions can cause a child to have behavior difficulties.
- **Stressful home environment.** Temporary or permanent family or household situations, such as divorce or a death of a loved one, may cause a child to act differently than normal. Children can become confused and frightened when there are major changes in their lives.

³ Note that while the statistical date categorizing special educational students as 'low income', I prefer to use working class. These are related but not interchangeable ideas. Income and class are related but income alone does not properly indicate sets of social relationships and power dynamics which give it meaning. Rather defining the realities people live within as purely income derived maybe an attempt to objectify and side-step issues, obscuring power and privilege. Moreover, defining things as only income based does not fully capture shifts over time in which income levels fluctuate. Nor does it acknowledge liminal spaces. For example, after the first million, is Dire Straights an appropriate band name?

- **Parenting skills.** Sometimes parents do not know how to effectively handle challenging—but normal—behavior in a child. If parents are inconsistent or unsure of themselves, their child may develop behavior problems.
- **Alcohol or drug abuse** (most common in teens and adults). It is important to screen for alcohol or drug problems, especially in adults, when evaluating behavior problems

Yet, these ‘symptoms’ have little to do with the internal lattice work firing (or misfiring) of neurotransmitters but hinge upon the social conditions in which individuals live. These social explanations which link disability and deficit to social explanations that pin point parenting skills and poverty, such as the cycle of poverty, are simplistic explanations that again separate people from larger macro structural processes. Individualizing the explanation (just as ‘objective’ assessment testing does) removes the focus away from an interconnected or relational understanding. This strips social, historical and political context, thereby potentially inciting a panic which smokescreens larger structural issues in which there are no removed positions.

Moreover, I do not wish to suggest that students who negotiate their labels in ways which allow them access to post-secondary do so deliberately. Rather because the label itself slides on top the notion of meritocracy, denying access could result in an unintentional ‘politics of embarrassment.’ (Adam & Moodley: 2005) Simply put, for students who meet those unspoken requirements regarding effort and work ethic who should then expect the promised reward, withholding it and exposing this contradiction tears at the cohesion it creates. It is not intentional as students themselves have a vested interest to maintain this idea. How they know themselves to be in the world is a linked relationship of meanings that connects meritocracy, it’s a story of overcoming the odds. It also works in reverse: students who were also labeled and did not gain access did so because they simply did not try hard enough.

2.2 How did we get here? Why/ Does Special Education Target ‘At risk’ Youth?

While statistical demographics provide a brief sketch of numeric details pertaining to special educational students, statistical explanations fall short of attributing meaning to social occurrences beyond the arguably ‘subjective’ decisions placed into determining classification categories (my favorite of which are income variables measured by penny differences - \$19,999 vs. \$20,000.) Simply knowing low-income youth from single parent families are over represented doesn’t theorize why or how ‘at risk’ students become ‘at risk’ learners; it does not reveal how ‘risk’ is constructed – it does not expose the less sure, evasive, slippery, murky and difficult work of social sense. It does not touch upon how ‘at risk’ youth have become an industry, not only for statisticians, but for academics and the popular media who have launched many careers theorizing, glamorizing and demeaning lives perhaps in spite (or because) of noble intentions.

‘At risk’ is a seemingly obvious, commonsensical, simplistic and almost stereotypical pop culture/evening news sound bite. Popular definitions are not hard to find. For example *www.atrisk.org*, (2004) a website intended to be a resource for parents and the public on ‘risk’ defines risk as a “major crisis” centered around “...violence in schools, deteriorating family structure, substance abuse, alarming media images, and gang activity[.]” According to this source, these youths are:

...more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, engage in criminal activity, are sexually promiscuous, and attempt suicide. Many of these at-risk teens run away and eventually find themselves locked up in detention centers or living on the streets.

Yet, scholarly work is not impervious from drawing upon the same constructions in their explanations of schooling failure. For example, Donald MacMillan’s *Hidden Youth: Dropouts from Special Education* (1991) defines ‘at risk’ similarly:

A child may be at risk *due to* a number of quite different phenomena, such as poverty or abuse. Therefore, the child may be at risk *for* a variety of problems, such as developmental delays; debilitating physical illness or psychological disorders; failing or dropping out of school; being incarcerated; or generally having an unrewarding, unproductive adulthood. (Forward, v, italics original)

While these definitions share an underlying assumption of ‘at risk’ youth and hence ‘at risk’ learners as potential burdens dependent upon state care, they do not contextualize the lived everyday of students within their particular and specific place, space and time. The ‘problem’ is deeply and deliberately individualized or isolated to simplistic explanations of ‘traditional’ family collapse, urbanized violence, or a few ‘bad apple’ teachers, schools and administrators. The real material work of identity, the messy and much more contentious positing of gender, class, sexuality and culture neatly drops out as readily as the students who are the silent objects of such discourse.

Yet, Sherman Dorn’s *Creating the Dropout: An Institutional and Social History of School Failure* (1996) suggests ‘drop outs’ did not constitute a problem until the 1960’s. Although mass schooling had been made mandatory at the beginning of the twentieth century, prior to the Second World War many students left school before graduation. High school graduation was mainly reserved for elites, little changed by new schooling emphasis. Given the scarcity of such credentials high school graduation was associated with increased job opportunity and higher income. While I agree with his assumptions that World War Two radically altered expectations of what education should offer and do, I disagree that there was an increased premise for the educational system to solely ameliorate social inequality.

I agree World War II became a pivotal point in history that dramatically altered the topography, not only with increased independence movements physically pushing out colonial

powers from their former outposts, but through the increased emphasis on democracy, equality and freedom as galvanizing calls to action. Reason had to be reformed; the modernist promise of progression had brought the West to the nightmarish brink of implosion. Images of the holocaust tore at the old comforting cliques of good vs. evil – the war changed fronts⁴. The war stripped bare its ideological intensions and need to redeem American Dream ideals. It was no accident that Bess Myerson became the first Jewish Miss America in 1945 and almost twenty years later in 1964 Lyndon Johnson announced his War on Poverty. Schools had to literally open the doors through desegregation and producing greater volumes of graduates. Education was no longer (at least as visibly) to remain the privileged right of a few.

Yet, I'd argue this only produced inclusion without consequence. Racism, sexism, classism and homophobia didn't disappear; the civil rights, queer and women's movements demanded more than mere tokenism. I'd argue what it did do was secure the look of inclusion, secured the American Dream not as mythology but open possibility. It reiterated progression and modernity while holding the same colonial ontological premise even as colonizers left the colonies. This cemented itself in developmental theories of childhood milestones, in the creation of childhood and adolescence itself. Norms became increasingly institutionally entrenched; high school graduation became both ideologically profound and profane.

What happened in the moment after World War II was to build on preexisting ideas of modernity – namely science. Science as the celebrated beacon of enlightened rational that progressed after the Renaissance, after the Romantics faded like dried roses, drove a brave new

⁴ I say this with a grain of salt knowing that a focus on the Holocaust of the 1940's neglects the equally terrible consequences of other nation-busting practices that justified genocide of many First Nations people and cultures. It is not my intent to appear tokenistic in only including mention in a footnote, rather to emphasize a way of thinking and reasoning that did not register in the public imagination until these events were not isolated abroad but within 'enlightened' Europe.

world of metal and machine beneath a pastoral veneer. Schooling was not exempt from this process; it meant that the very ideological key which opened the door operated to shut it again through teaching as prescriptive, through medical moralizing that came to predominate instruction (Petrina: 2006). In the moment when science, medicine and education become linked and driven toward their goal of democratic liberalism, the ‘drop out’, the ‘at risk’ youth was created as a social problem with a redemptive quality. Medicalized and sanitized through ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ process, the ‘problem’ could be explained away as a few bad genes contaminating an already heavily chlorinated gene pool.

Marvin Lazerson’s *The Origins of Special Education* (1983) echoes some of these connections. He links the creation of special education as coinciding with mass mandatory public schooling, serving a humanitarian intent to promote self sufficiency while masking fears of ‘subnormal’ or ‘feeble-minded’ children presence in regular classrooms would drain resources and hinder ‘normal’ children. Special education served to establish a bureaucratic mechanism that coincided with a hygienic movement based on colonial knowledge. It is not accidental that the Binet-Simon IQ test was imported from France, first used en masse and praised by Henry C. Goddard, Director of the Vineland (New Jersey) Training School for the Feebleminded who was pleased with the manner that this examination fit the school’s existing categories of evaluation. Later developed by Stanford’s Lewis Terman, use of the exam became widespread supporting existing notions of heredity and ability that were inseparable from class, gender and ethnicity.

Education became an extension of a colonizing project that relied on colonial ideas of health, fitness and superiority with the missionary intent of civilizing progression. Special education grew alongside residential schooling, asylum making, exclusionary immigration acts, sterilization of people with disabilities as well as medicalized notions of child development and

childhood. This physically divided populations, but simultaneously united them under a collective imagining of national belonging: the American Dream. At its core this ideology is part of the same notions of progression, individualistic effort, redemption and reward, like scientific objectivity, magnifies difference through neglect of the issue. Psychometric measures do not reveal underlying biological causes as suggested by their practitioners – they reveal much more about building a nation state. Students are not only being measured against definitions of scholastic knowledge; they are being measured against Europe.

2.3 How is Difference Created?

Although originally written to explain deviance and now considered ‘classic’ sociological texts, Howard Becker’s *Outsiders: Studies in Sociology of Deviance* (1963) and Irving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoilt Identity* (1963) are the starting point in beginning the discussion on defining difference as the result of social labeling. Becker begins by defining outsiders (those deemed different) as those who violate social rules regarding collective norms; being an Outsider is being outside the norm. Yet, he pulls away from using a statistical analysis which he states are too concerned with tracking deviation as distance from the average and hence “too far removed from the concern of rule-breaking.” (p. 5) For similar reasons he also refuses medical understandings:

The medical metaphor limits what we can see much as the statistical view does. It accepts the lay judgment of something as deviant and, by use of analogy, locates its source within the individual, thus preventing us from seeing the judgment itself as a critical part of the phenomenon. (p.6)

For Becker, the creation of Outsiders through labeling deviance is a social process that must consider how even the ways in which labels are generated cannot be universally agreed but are instead based on disagreement and “part of the political process of society.” (p.18) Labeling can be as nuanced as the social situations which give them rise, hence rule-breaking does not always bear the same consequences for all individuals equally, but is mediated through specific social

location. Therefore, deviance/difference is not innate but a contested and socially constructed category.

Although Becker was more intended applying this perspective to explaining narcotics use as socially learned and supported, this is an important distinction in terms of schooling norms and remedial interventions. Given the over representation of particular kinds of youth in special educational classrooms, his work suggests social norms become self-serving and perpetuating – categories of difference operate to not only set the boundaries but reinforce themselves. It is social location in tandem with any type of ‘rule-breaking’ that sets the conditions for becoming an Outsider. In his discussion of marijuana use, availability of this substance was only partially why some individuals could get ‘high’, become ‘recreational’ or ‘habitual users.’ It was how individuals were perceived by those around them that influenced use, noting that even Outsiders may disagree with their status and in turn flip around the relationship to label the ‘Normals’ as outsiders.

Goffman’s *Stigma* attempted to offer an up-close, micro perspective of this process that even Becker acknowledged in *Outsiders* as beyond the scope of his project. *Stigma*, in a nutshell, details various techniques and strategies individuals develop once labeled. Although Goffman agrees with many of Becker’s earlier assumptions such as the contested and unfixed socially constructed aspects of labeling, the binary between ‘normals’ and the stigmatized, unlike Becker, Goffman more clearly defines the ‘normal:’

For example, in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective, this constituting one sense in which one can speak of a common value system in America. (p.128)

Becker's interest lay in the differences in the labeling process, not specifically in who was being labeled, nor specifically in describing who or what they were being labeled against.

Yet, other than making mention beyond this promising statement, Goffman's analysis fails to include a discussion of why or how 'Normals' are those white, heterosexual, sport – loving young men. While he may have pushed Becker's work by making this suggestion, ignoring why and how leads to uncritically assuming all labeling functions as stigmatizing. It is this point that many disability scholars and activists have taken issue with; blatantly, powerfully and playfully affirming difference as movingly poetic and beautifully transformative. Becker and Goffman, while attempting in some ways to critique the normal, fails to move beyond its epicenter, failing to see anything worth celebrating. This removes the possibility of resistance and agency and erases the material consideration that labels also provide access to needed resources. It also locks Normal and Outsider/Stigma labels as binary positions without careful consideration that categorizes/labels, while contested, are woven into each other, sharing the same genealogical family tree (Roman, Brown, Nobel, Wainer & Earl Young: 2007)

Very simply, although Becker and Goffman initiate a conversation about the social construction of difference, it is only a beginning. What their works fail to do is situate the subject of inquiry back within its specific place and time. This is an important consideration in theorizing about the contemporary everyday in Canada as this nation state has been built on colonial policies that have justified the divisions between groups of people and people from land and resources. The insertion of Goffman's normal cannot be naturalized; centers and margins of power are deliberate social processes that do not remain static historical artifact. While Goffman describes how individuals 'manage' their stigmas through particular efforts of concealment,

information control or disclosure, the context is absent. Little wonder then why both Becker and Goffman thought they were writing about deviance!

Perhaps because it was not until 1967 that Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* was first printed in English (four years after the publication of *Outsiders* and *Stigma*) that deep consideration is paid to the impact of colonization and colonial rule. Unlike Becker and Goffman who argue difference is generated through violating the norm, Fanon interjects it's the norm (as privileged, able-bodied, white heteropatriarchy) which produces difference. Moreover, Fanon does more than name which social process produces difference, diving deeper than the surface naïve hope of empirical reason by arguing difference as part of a discursive creation:

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. (pp. 17-18)

Fanon understood colonization as something more than the conquering or addition of empire; it is a process that maps the body, the psyche, imagination and desire of both the invader and subjugated, a cartography carved by both steel and word. However, it's language which imposes the greatest harm through the ruthless definition of humanity by placing the norm, through systems of reason that produce such classification systems as enlightenment, as civilization, as human. The body then not only signifies difference, but is literally garbed in difference. For colonized people to attempt definition as human (e.g. white) means the abandonment of space (material land, culture, language) for place (placement against the norm) that deliberately disregards this struggle as stereotype, comic farce or ungrateful transgression, an 'education wasted.' It is this embodied dislocation which cannot be easily remedied, a fracturing that Goffman and Becker neglect.

On the other hand Foucault's *docile bodies* (1995) provides another perspective on this process of internalization. Under constant surveillance, individuals internalize the panopticom/authoritative power to self regulate and monitor behavior, becoming an omnipresent force even when absent thereby reducing the need to physical corrosion. Education becomes the extension and reinforcement of this internalization by tailoring the parameters of knowledge, closing the known from the unknown, right from wrong. However, unlike Fanon, Foucault was not directly referring to colonial processes in *The Birth of the Prison*; his social is unproblematically homogeneous. Europe is once more taken for granted.

Foucault is correct in pointing out the political and discursive nature of knowledge, but I disagree with the rigid construction of binary positions, with his inability to get past Europe, not as an epic journey of 'exploration,' but its systems, traditions and reason. He is useful in thinking about but not through the abstract composition of power, neglecting the tangible, lived and material manifestations of these dynamics that create space to put individuals in place. In spite of his seeming complexity, there is a deep cynicism about the ability of social actors to actively engage with these abstract systems of meaning. They are docile bodies to be acted upon, not to act out. In many ways this does not stray too far from Bowels and Gintis' one-to-one ratio, repeating another version of Marx's 'false consciousness' in which individuals are the unwitting dupes of the very systems they put in place.

In contrast to Foucault, Stuart Hall (1996, 1988) argues that social actors are far from being 'cultural dupes' but are articulated through hegemonic ideologies that call attention to their particular cultural and material identities and locations. Not disregarding Foucault's focus on discursive power, Hall links it to material reality in which the signifiers 'float.' Simply put, people are not thoughtlessly led, but can be turned toward seemingly contradictory paths by

crafting new directions from old meanings, re-ordering the signifiers to carve out new material understandings and realities. Since the 'truths' the signifiers signal are not directly based on the tangible, he argues that this is both emancipatory and challenging. Emancipatory in that there are no comforting 'guarantees' on which to base such claims and therefore challenging for the same reason.

In relation to the topic, when apparently obvious contradictions arise, such as the over representation of working-class youth within special education, Hall provides a way of saying it is not a matter of binary slippage or false consciousness. The issue is ideological. In considering that the cognitive abilities of students with learning disabilities have been found deficient, Hall suggests a way of providing an explanation that does not rely on creating yet another way of creating the same doubts about their dis/abilities, even when utilizing a social model. It is an explanation that pulls away from setting up some as the privileged participants of Truth and others as dupes, but implies a process which implicates us all that places both feet on the ground.

Yet, inasmuch as Hall is useful for these reasons, the work of material feminist anti-colonial scholars offers a perspective which attempts to critically question homogeneity as gendered and Eurocentric. Given the strong links between special education, developmental psychology and medicine, this is an appropriate connection. At the root of this discussion is an interest in difference and normalcy which cannot be theorized in isolation from its political and historical context anymore than can individuals. Material feminist anti-colonial scholars are primarily concerned with these issues in ways that acknowledge individuals do not live binary lives as only material or only abstract, as only gendered, classed, racialized or sexualized. Rather it is those abstractions which position us in our material everyday that cannot be rationally tallied or neatly accounted for. When applied to this topic, taking up Dorothy Smith's (1990) instance

that theories of knowing, in this case sociology, are tautological in that they only ‘discover’ themselves and Himani Bannerji’s (2003) point that the search and discovery of this knowledge is always premised on colonial projects, it provides a way in that it becomes about understanding how ideology may articulate risk, disability and normalcy. Attending to how to address these issues becomes central when considering a methodology.

2.4 Research Methods – Re-building the Everyday on the Page

When considering how I would begin the task of doing research, I was torn between knowing that research has been used to silence and delegitimize the voices of people who often become objectified, and believing research could be used as a tool to propel those voices often absent from policy making into conversation with those policy makers. I felt uncomfortable about going into the ‘field’ as an ‘expert’ yet also understood that boycotting the issues would be an easy cop-out that would not resolve anything. Those power dynamics determining who speaks and who doesn’t, who is present and who is absent from the canon, would not take notice if I never opened my mouth. Speaking for others, as Linda Alcoff (1991) reminds me, does not excuse me from dealing with power nor does it excuse me from the responsibilities of how I decide to use that power. It is how we negotiate these processes that ultimately matter, not only to our lives as researchers, but also the lives of those research participants.

For these reasons I decided to structure this work wanting to speak with others, wanting to discover and talk about their educational experiences rather than base this research solely upon intensive library work. I wanted my assumptions challenged as part of the dialogue beyond myself and a few texts, to challenge the idea of what it means to be or become an ‘expert.’ I also wanted to include the voices of students who had struggled with meanings about their own intellectual abilities to occupy a space of authority, as knowledgeable subjects instead of repeating

a hierarchical arrangements in which the expert had found them as lacking. I did not want to repeat what I had considered to be so terribly problematic.

For these purposes I chose to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews that asked each participant questions about how they defined themselves, their schooling experiences and their disability (see Appendix A). Guided, but not rigidly determined, allowing the interests of the researcher to act as the catalyst for conversation, semi-structured interviewing allows for the opportunity for active collaboration in which participants are able to co-identify major themes and concerns, problematizing the emergence of a single authoritative narrative determined by specific objectives. This technique would offer the greatest amount of flexibility in that participants could ask questions back, openly challenge my questions and clarify meanings. For me, it meant I could approach each participant on a level foothold as a person with similar experiences and work toward the findings together. This also meant that I had to pay serious attention to the idea of participation and subjectivity. While subjectivity might suggest inclusion in the form of direct inclusion of voice, I wanted collaborative participation about how these words were to be used and interpreted.

The interviews with each participant were structured with an initial interview (one and half hours) and a follow up (an hour) during which the participants would be provided with their transcripts and my initial interpretation of their thoughts. The interview length was also not strictly determined and was intended to not impose on the participant's schedules. All the research participants were given the opportunity to view both the consent form and interview questions prior to the interview. They were also informed as to my intent, their right to withdraw at any time and the right to control the record button on the voice recorder. They were also informed of their right to participate as much or as little as they wanted, that they were not

obligated to a second interview, at which time their consent would be verified again, and that they could withdraw their transcripts from the study provided notice was received before the end of the data gathering period.

They were informed that they could pick, or would be given, a pseudonym of their choice, that only myself would be able to identify them after their pseudonyms were chosen and that all the data would be password secured and stored in locked cabinets. In meeting university standards regarding data storage upon completion, they were also informed that data would be stored electronically in the lead researcher's office also in a locked cabinet. The contact information for counseling services was also highlighted. Before the start of any interview, we once again reviewed the consent form and restated the above. No interview was conducted prior to undergoing this process and consent was obtained at both interviews before proceeding (first written and then verbally.)

Participants were recruited through the use of poster advertising outlining the study which was placed on campus in heavily student trafficked areas such as libraries, student lounges, near ATM's, bus stops and eateries. I also placed an advertisement on the bulletin board outside the office for students with disabilities and placed a call for participants using my department (educational studies) graduate student's list serve. Although I did consider asking permission to use the office for students with disabilities list serve, I refrained from doing so. My concern with this strategy was that although it specifically targeted a group of students with disabilities (which I wanted), I was concerned that these students might feel harassed by becoming the unwilling targets for such solicitations. Drawing only upon this pool, the participants would know that they were registered to receive accommodations, a fact they may or may not have wanted disclosed. Moreover, this would fail to capture students who may have

learning disabilities but refrain from seeking accommodations. It also limited the ways in which students knew or considered themselves learning disabled given that university requirements insist upon recent assessment testing to determine disability.

The participants did not receive an honorarium for volunteering their time. Part of this decision was purely financial – I did not have adequate funding to provide modest reimbursement and could not anticipate how many participants this technique might have attracted. Although I could have addressed this by limiting the number of participants, I was concerned that this might incite students claiming a learning disability to withdraw their participation after the honorarium was paid out. Moreover, as all university students were provided with a bus pass as part of their tuition this eliminated the need to reimburse travel costs. To honor those participants who came forth on a purely volunteer basis without monetary expectations, I provided refreshments. I also gave the participant choice of the interview site to ensure their comfort and safety, but maintained access to an office space on campus as an alternative location. Only one research participant agreed to continue our conversation through email. Finding it difficult to agree upon a suitable time to meet which would best accommodate our schedules, we both agreed that email might be used as a solution to ask follow up questions of each other.

As a recruitment strategy, this yielded only a small response from four students. Part of this can be attributed to the time of year data collection was undertaken as approval to conduct interviews was obtained during the spring of 2007, a time during which most students are preparing for the end of term. Spring also signals the exit of the majority of the campus population as students migrate to other sites for the summer break. This did play a part in the interviews, as Sasha, for example, was only available for a single interview as she was in the

process of moving back to her hometown the same week. Moreover, postering in public spaces also means that the posters are removed by campus maintenance staff or covered over, requiring many attempts to maintain their visibility. This, in part, explains the later collection date of the last interview in October 2007 as staff at the student disability center did not remove my recruitment poster until after the expiration of the data collection period which appeared on the poster information.

Snowballing was also ineffective as the students coming forward did not know of other willing students who meet the requirements. Lilly attributed this to issues of stigma which made it difficult to locate other students. Part of her reason for joining this study was to attempt to make contact with other students:

I'm interested to see the bigger picture of the study you are doing as you pull things together - its really not that frequent that I hear much of other peoples' stories and experiences because we all keep quiet that we are accommodated. (Email response two)

A university campus located in the pacific southwest of Canada was chosen as the site for this project. In order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the site name has been removed to minimize the potential likelihood of the participants being identified. The specific department and program names relating to each student's course of studies were also removed for the reasons cited above.

2.5 The Politics of Power: Whose Story is this Anyway?

As much as I wanted and attempted to create this work as an open collaboration between equal participants, it cannot romantically dismiss these efforts as inclusive without addressing that this research serves a specific purpose much more beneficial to me as the researcher. It is their narratives which will provide the basis for my possible academic accreditation. I have the

privilege of exiting the scene and of using this data to further benefit my own interests. As Gesa Kirsch (1999) states, interviews are still a staged performance that cannot bypass these dynamics whereby the researcher maintains control of the topic and how it is presented.

Although I consider it an important ethical and theoretical choice to include the voices of the participants, I am also aware that I am crafting how they appear on the page, weaving their words alongside those themes which I feel are central. Ultimately this work is reflexive of my authority and authorship. Other scholars have attempted to address this issue by including their interview transcripts, in their entirety, as an Appendix for the reader. Although I have permission to include excerpts of those transcripts for the purposes of the project, I do not have explicit permission to include their entirety. Sandwiching the interviews as an Appendix may also have unintentional ghettoizing affects that includes their words without fully doing the work to address what was said.

I am also aware of the criticisms these attempts have posed as fancy linguistic footwork (Kirsch: 1999) that do little to upset the ways in which research is presented. For this reason I chose to indicate to the reader where I've pulled my quotes from each participant's interview, to deliberately demonstrate that the flow I'm creating on the page did not necessarily follow in the interview, calling attention to the performative aspects of scholarship which can become submerged. I have also chosen not to edit each participant's response for syntax or grammar to better reflect the tone and pitch of our conversations. Email responses have also been left with their original formatting for similar reasons as textual style is sometimes used in email communications to reflect emotion, formal or casual conversations.

Although I had intended the process to be collaborative, in practice I found that I ultimately had control over the interpretations. The major constraint I faced was the compression of time as I was only able to obtain funding for one year of studies which had to be supplemented with additional part time work. While this afforded me the time to collect data, it did so in a manner which had to be negotiated between both affording and asking time off from my paid employment responsibilities. Moreover, as the funding date approached its completion, I had to devote time to finding full time employment which again demanded time away from my studies. Ineligible for federal and provincial student loans as based on my prior income before program acceptance, yet not adequate to cover both living and tuition fees, engaging in paid employment was the only strategy that allowed me to secure a space within the academy.

In terms of direct participant collaboration I found it difficult to attend to my employment responsibilities during the day, transcribe the interviews during the evenings and identify emergent themes in a timely fashion. Although transcripts were provided during a second interview and did allow a space to discuss and clarify meanings as presented in the first interview, the participants could not respond to broader themes as I had not been able to prepare them fully.

On the surface this left me feeling deeply conflicted and troubled as it seemed the obvious outcome was my increasing control over the text, reinforcing privilege rather than upsetting it. However, as other ethnographers and theorists point out, achieving democracy in research is difficult. Even under more 'ideal' circumstances there are real material realities at play working to locate myself and the participants within our specific social positions. These realities influence our work and our findings no matter how we which strategy we engage to promote inclusiveness. If not the realities of being a working-class student researcher, there are

other material realities which need to be likewise acknowledged. For instance, I was in no way part of the participants peer or social groups. Although we shared some commonalities as post-secondary students who had been identified with a learning disability, our paths to this place were radically different.

The participants came from a wide variety of different backgrounds which did not match my own. Differences of gender, age, ethnicity, class and even credentialism (as with Sandra who had already been well established in her career as a special educational teacher) are very real lived experiences that cannot be mitigated and would still come into play. I am not attempting to dissolve an acknowledgement of the privilege and power I did have in those interviews or over this text, but am attempting to argue that it was not entirely one-sided. Rather participant collaboration must also acknowledge how we come to have power and privilege in the world without idealistically wishing those differences will be bridged through a series of conversations. The conversations are important, but just as important are those sets of relationships which make them possible. As much as participant collaboration intends to create a space of equality, it can also amplify those material constraints which operate to separate and reinforce our differences.

However, this is also not an argument to abandon the contested work of academic knowledge. Part of the desire to conduct this project arises from my own dissatisfaction with previous works in which I could not locate myself, my family or my history. Although I could sit in the libraries of the academy, I did not find any representations in works already done which reflected or acknowledged my own relationship with this space and the privilege it invokes. This too, I would argue, is also a material and collaborative inclusionary practice. This is how knowledge is challenged, contested and re-worked becoming the spark which does ignite change.

2.6 Confessional Tales or Tales of the Everyday? Calling attention to the “I”

I am also aware that my self-inclusion in this project asks that I also specifically identify my own desires for launching this work, to locate myself, as a researcher, a student and as a social actor with a history. I have included experts of my experiences, not as “confessional tales” as John Van Maanen (1988) calls them, nor an attempt to re-insert a sense of liberal individualism (Kelly:1997) or as good intentioned storytelling that centers the West once more by pulling on a seemingly alternative literary tradition. The inclusion of the I is to signal research as a vibrant and dynamic process which connects what is often considered a private happening to public or social processes.

If we take seriously the idea that research is a political act that therefore cannot be removed from issues of subjectivity, then the researcher must also state their reasons for acting and being in the world without retreating behind the security of the page. Writing can acknowledge it is a material act inasmuch as it is also abstract, throwing weight and substance behind the ink. However, in choosing to directly include the experiences of the researcher does not excuse the researcher from critique or critical comment. Experience is not a safety blanket against accepting the responsibility of what and why we write. It is a starting point, a way into a conversation, the fuel behind our theoretical perspectives and passions.

Hence, including biography has the potential to be more than mere storytelling or fancy semantic footwork, side stepping the work of social justice. When conducting interviews, I found that being able to locate my experiences in relation to the topic may have given me legitimacy, a way to establish a bond of trust with the participants which may not have happened similarly if I had been more removed. I found the participants responding by saying things such as, “well you

know!” or “you understand.” For instance when Michael was telling me about struggling through his studies he states, “I’m sure you know as well, it’s harder.” (Interview 1:13)

This aspect is crucial in qualitative work as questions of validity surface. However, given that qualitative research is interested in the interpretations of specific actors located within specific space and places, validity achieved through being able to reproduce findings is not a fitting question. Rather investigating the strengths and weakness of such work relies more heavily upon how relationships are established with participants, relationships which may benefit from establishing ourselves as similarly positioned.

Yet, it is not to suggest that such inclusion might be a manipulative ploy to obtain information. Again inserting direct experience is not a means to be excused from those contentious politics of power. It is how and why they are used that can offer potential for insights that are worth mention.

CHAPTER III
**What Research Risks: Theoretical Potholes, Assumptions, Ascertain and Surprises in the
Everyday**

The everyday has a way of muddling even the best theories, upsetting the order of each careful sentence, pushing past the paragraph, rejecting the ledger of logic which categorizes identities and materiality into a mathematic equation, counting combinations into social justice payoff. I thought I had defined the parameters of my search, refined my questions, knew the size and shape of what I was looking for. Pinning up my posters recruiting volunteer participants, knowing that working-class students were over-represented in special education and knowing that students with learning disabilities constituted the largest group of special educational students, I thought I would be contacted by working-class students with learning disabilities. I expected outrage and cynical criticism. I expected to collect stories similar to my own, stories about using disability as the back door into institutions that celebrate pluralistic inclusion in the front window. All of which looks and sounds great on paper, laid out stiff in rigid lines that have the decadency to not collide, smear or dare disagree with their author. But that's not what happened.

The participants who graciously and generously volunteered their time and shared their thoughts without which this work would not be possible, were not the working-class students I had anticipated. Recruiting three women and one man, they ranged in age from early twenties to mid sixties. Two were graduate students, Sandra (mid 60's) and Lilly (23). The other had just completed all requirements for a program certificate and was looking forward to a spring graduation (Sasha, mid 50s), while the other was an undergraduate student (Michael, 23). Only one student identified herself as a "minority woman." Most described their family backgrounds as comfortable, happy and middle class although a single definition of what middle class meant to each participant varied:

Michael: Oh. Well we're like...well my dad opened a business when I was in grade ten and it's now grown to have one employee and they do okay. But umm all through elementary school and for a good chunk of high school, I'd say we were lower middle class kind of thing. Working family. My dad worked and didn't make that much money but we're happy. Yeah, so ummm, yeah you could say that. (Interview 1:12)

Lilly: ...I came from a pretty well off, didn't struggle. My dad drove a Ferrari and we went on trips around the world every year on a private yacht. (Interview 1:3)

Both Sasha and Sandra do not make specific mention to their class backgrounds, but Sandra, now semi-retired, did have a long career as a remedial teacher instructing children and adults as well as English as a second language students and does make mention of her previous experiences teaching in other countries. Sasha mentions her reliance on external funding to support herself through her studies.

Very obviously these were not the kinds of students I thought this project targeted; none of the participants described themselves as working-class. Although there was a great deal of discrepancy between how participants defined middle class, as Michael and Lilly's answers illustrate, the participants were aware of how class and disability related, interjecting their own analysis of why learning disabilities may or may not target students with class backgrounds similar to themselves:

Lilly: [I] mean a lot of that is that the parents have to have an education level that and exposure to be aware that to have that the program is...your parents have the time to drive you around, that when you don't get homework to realize that you were bored in school and go and explore the options. To go and see what communities make things better. (Interview 1:3)

That's one thing I was lucky my parents had enough money that they had the four thousand dollars in 1999 to buy a laptop and to get one at the school would have been a year later. I was lucky that my parents had enough money put away to afford something like that and to be able to afford the psych assessment in the first place. Cause again you can get one through the school but there is a wait list that takes several years. (Interview 1:6)

Michael: [A]fter four years after your psycho-ed test, you don't get accommodations anymore unless you get another test done by a psychologist or whatnot. So I obviously can't afford that! Its 1800 dollars or something like that to get a test done [.] (Interview 1:5)

So if you're eligible for student loans there's a grant available to you to get the psycho ed analysis done so or get it discounted so you only a portion of it so, cause I'm not eligible for students loans I'm not eligible for this grant so the whole burden of the 1800 dollars falls on my shoulders. (Interview 1:6)

Sandra: [L]ike all of my friends, we prepared the kids for reading. I mean there is a define way you read to your child at night. I mean we all read and we had books in the house and ahh whenever I went to my friend's house they always had books, you know, and they read to their kids every night. You prepare you child for school, for the kinds of questions the teachers are going to ask like, "What do you think is going to happen next? Ummm, look at the picture and what do you see? Describe all those things and name them. What's that? What's this called?"

Whereas when you go into the poor neighborhoods they are just reading to be sociable with the child and they read just to make the bonds, but they aren't asking the children to predict or to imagine that they're that person and they don't like the children to imagine things. They want the children to be very practical so they don't read a lot of books like *The Wild Things*, with a lot of imagination where the kids are getting into trouble. They wouldn't read that kind of book. They would read a book with a purpose, a moral, you know with something like this is the way you behave and this is what happens when you behave. But so it's really hard for those kids to come to school because the teacher asks all sorts of what if and when and you know, put the story in sequence, stuff like that. And the parents who don't have those experiences don't ask those, they don't set the kids up for those kids of, that kind of language experience so the kids don't have the language. (Interview 2: 9-10)

Sasha: [Like] the person is made to feel like they are getting charity. Like ahhh you poor thing you have this! That's not the type of person I am. Like I worked hard for what I do and I don't like charity...It's really hard for me to accept charity, it's not, I don't like that feeling cause I know that I'm a go getter. But you get that feeling like you'll walk into there and people will say oh you poor person you! I'm going don't treat me like that! I'm not a poor thing, I work hard! So that's why I didn't want to feel that way. I didn't want to feel like I had a disability. That takes away your power and I couldn't release that to anybody. (Interview 1:24)

Undeniably because of the written performative nature of learning disabilities, diagnosis does not exist independently of often costly assessment testing. As the participants mention, although provisions exist to provide testing, these resources can be overwhelmed and can lead to delays placing an emphasis on parents to provide the necessary resources. For students whose families cannot afford the additional costs associated with this process, other special educational categories may be applied. Indeed behavioral difficulties are the second largest group of special educational students, and as discussed in the introduction, the twinning of 'disorders' such as attention deficit and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is not uncommonly linked to both learning disabilities and what I would argue are stereotypical working-class characteristics. Yet,

in comparing high school completion rates amongst all categories of special education students, those with behavioral difficulties record the lowest rates:

Figure 1
Six Year Dogwood Completion Rates %

	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2000/01	2004/05
Sensory Disabilities	63	70		59	
		65		66	
Learning Disabilities	45	17		6	
		70		68	
Behavior Disabilities	19	13	13	26	
		23			
Gifted	100		100		100
		100	100		
Students Without Special Needs	83		79		81
		84			84

(Students with Special Needs- How are we doing? Province Public Schools Only British Columbia Ministry of Education, April 2006:19)

Linking learning disabilities to working-class post-secondary students may have been incorrect.

Since the participants were not what I had imagined or anticipated, their thoughts, feelings and stories were also not anticipated. Rather than the critical analysis of special education I thought I'd uncover, the participants, although critical, did praise the attention and access to programs and services they had received. Their criticisms hinged strongly on a lack of funding support to offer programs rather than the programs themselves. Unsatisfied to dismiss their interpretations as a form of neo-liberal false consciousness as each was extremely articulate, bright and thoughtful, I found each participant was offering me an interpretation of a particularity cherished ideology in schooling as read their particular material and social identities. These students understood their school experiences, and hence their disability through an understanding of meritocracy. Rather than being upset by the apparent contradiction between the notion of open inclusion and the barriers such as class as they suggested, their understanding of meritocracy was woven into, part of and inseparable from the ways in which they understood

themselves, their social world and their place in that world that included notions of normalcy, disability and schooling.

3.1 Michael: “Life’s a struggle right?” Class and Gender Implications for The Little Engine that Could

At the time of this study, Michael was enrolled in his third year of undergraduate studies but had already spent six years at various post-secondary institutions. First attending community college, he completed a two year business diploma, switched schools to attend another university, then switched again to pursue a specific program specialization. Also working part time, playing hockey, and enduring a long commute from his family residence by transit to attend classes, the most pressing concern for Michael was his lack of access to accommodations and services at the post-secondary level.

Explaining that his last assessment testing had been done before his transition into high school to secure accommodations for this level of study, and then again before high school graduation, his testing was now more than four years old. In order to receive accommodations for post-secondary, Michael needed to submit documentation to his university which could not be any older than four years. Although he was aware of financial assistance offered to students who were eligible for student loans, and had previously been eligible for this kind of loan, he had dropped several classes thereby not retaining the necessary course load to meet his funding level. Asked to pay back this now over-awarded amount, Michael was unable to pay off the full amount, disqualifying him from future funding and blocking off any grants available to offset the cost of providing current documentation.

However, as Michael is also an avid hockey player and has suffered several concussions, all of which have been documented, he has been able to receive limited accommodations in the form of a note taker for his classes. Yet, the majority of his current dilemma stems from his need to obtain a second language requirement for graduation. Tested prior to high school, and officially diagnosed as dyslexic, his accommodations included extending test time to time and a half and the waiver of a second language. This has left Michael to complete the necessary credits in order to pursue his specialization.

When asked to define what he meant by a learning disability he responded:

Ummmm, I think it's...biological definitely. I don't think it's, umm, a disability par say, maybe not an accurate word. It's more about people who learn differently I guess. I dunno, but that's how I've thought of it. Ummm, because I know, even people will say that a learning disability means your stupid or whatever. I know my IQ is a lot higher than the average and it never really made any...but I don't put any stock into that, but it just means you have to work harder at some things, ummm, some aspects of school. (Interview 1:2)

Situated within a biological understanding of a personal flaw to be overcome by hard work, juxtapositioned against his need for accommodations to successfully complete his degree requirements he states:

...It strikes me as completely illogical, like we know learning disabilities don't go away, it's something you're going to have for the rest of your life and because a psycho-ed form is over four years old, you can't get accommodations, so it's kind of a problem. (Interview 1:5)

Because my psycho-ed was over four years old it was the only documentation that was relevant. Like I brought in the one from earlier and it was like, "yeah we can see you have a learning disability." I talked to the guy as was like, "they don't go away!" Well obviously! (Interview 1:8)

Taking on the idea of disability as biological and thereby are a fixed and indisputable set of attributes against the need to prove his disability seems to snag a contradiction: if disability is an obvious affliction, why the constant need to prove it? Isn't this meaning fixed, universal and totalizing? As mentioned in Chapter One, even the Ministry of Education recognizes and defines

learning disabilities as life long. The need for evidence seems to suggest that the definitions are not as determinately anchored to a single polarity something Michael also acknowledges:

Like what if it comes back (the assessment tests) and it says Michael doesn't have a learning disability anymore? Like, like what if I do well on the test or something because a lot of IQ tests... I do a lot of IQ tests for fun cause I like puzzles and stuff. Like I'm really good at writing IQ tests, so what if it came back and I don't have a learning disability? (Interview 2:5)

At this juncture, I had assumed that Michael would begin a critical analysis of the assessment process, pulling apart its discursive attributes, its measurement within a narrow scope of tasks deemed scholastic. Yet, instead of beginning this torrent tango that twirls between biological and social models to define the 'problem', I found instead the more familiar tempo of staccato sounds that beat its message of sweat and success. For Michael the issue was not one of defining himself in relation to a particular meaning of disability, but rather how that meaning of disability fit in relation to how he defined himself. Disability became part of the world he already knew, the intimate and yet mundane materiality of being located as a particular social agent with a particular position. For Michael disability could not be separated from those things he already knew about himself, which where predominantly his gender and class identity.⁵ But these notions also related back to what he already knew about schooling, what he already knew about how schooling and success where equated, that meritocratic promise which was anything but mythology:

SB: Well how did you fee about that label and the way it's been taken up and used?

Michael: Ummm, the learning disability label?

⁵ I acknowledge that some scholars take up the notion of identities rather than identity; it is not my intent to erase the multiplicity of our identities but rather to highlight their relational (as opposed to intersectional) qualities. I do not believe identity can be separated out into categories which can be added together nor thought of as colliding like chemical models spiting out seductive electrons of possibility. Identity is not accounting; it is not chemistry. It is braided, woven of many threads, uneasy and sometimes poetic, situated and informed by our material locations that in turn relate to their abstractions.

SB: Yeah.

Michael: Ummm, I love it. I accept it was part of who I am and I know I've got a different take on it cause I know a lot of people feel ashamed or they feel like they aren't complete people or whatever. I say, look, I've had to work hard, probably harder than a lot of people in high school and college. It just makes me a better person and just makes me a harder worker... (Interview 1:13)

Michael: [A]t the beginning people would kind of snicker or whatever. But this is the way I always deal with things: I kind of laugh, I mean what can I do? I can't change anything. I could feel bad about it, but I got to cope and just go on. But they would laugh at me and I'd be well, go ahead guys. I get a bit of extra time on my test, enjoy the deadline! Whatever, I mean I would joke about it and go on about my way, cause what can I do? I have to take advantage of the accommodations that they give me, I can't feel embarrassed. (Interview 1:4)

His emphasis on constructing a tough and defensive ability to joke, his determination to work hard and success echo strongly the meritocratic promise of rewarding effort, but gender it masculine within in his own class background that also emphasizes and values hard work. This is best demonstrated in Michael's recollection of parent-teacher night in the eighth grade:

Michael: ...[When] Mr. Andrews [a pseudonym] met my parents – this was like the first parent/teacher night in grade eight – well okay, he said to them, he was like don't encourage Michael to go into academics. He's talking right now about going into medical school or being a scientist or something. But he's like, it's going to be too hard. You might want to persuade him to go into a trade or just focus on getting your grade twelve and that sort of thing. So I was like, and I was right there! I just sitting there. I was like oh!! This guy is an ass!

SB: So how was it when you got to grade twelve and you decided you were going to apply for post-secondary?

Michael: Oh I decided I was going to university in like grade eight. There was no way! [Laughter.] Like everyone in my family is educated. Like my dad has a degree and my mom had a three year certificate with her teaching. My aunts and uncles are all educated, like lawyers and doctors and everything! They've all gone to university and my sister is going to university, so there was never a thought of not going. (Interview 1:9)

He continues to reiterate this stance when speaking about his current educational experiences:

Michael: I just look at – if it's not hard it's not worth doing. Life's a struggle right? And when you do go, it just makes your goal that much sweeter I guess. (Interview 1:16)

SB: But how do you feel when you walk into your class and maybe you're aware that not all the people are doing that much...

Michael: That's fine. It doesn't bother me. It doesn't bother me. It's probably why I don't get bothered or why I don't get bullied or why I just laugh it off, that sort of thing. It's just the way I've always approached it, I don't know. (Interview 1:16)

In this way, meritocracy articulates itself through those material and discursive elements which work in relation to what Michael already knows to be true. Instead of starting a new telling of the everyday which cuts against his positionality, he offers one in which he remains located. Yet, instead of being left powerless and voiceless by Truths that seem to strip agency, he takes them to task. By accepting a biological definition of his disability, he infuses it with messages of hard work, effort and definition that affirm his gender and class identity. He retains the Truth of objectivity, of progress, of science, of schooling and retains his agency.

Unlike false consciousness or even Foucault's docile bodies where as social actors are either duped or assimilate meanings that become part of a regulatory process, power isn't located between two singular polarities that demand either/ or, all or nothing ultimatums. Social actors don't either have agency or not with glimmers of hope offered by occasional slippage. If power has ideological roots, then the arguments are not binary, they are circular. If power can quell agency by pulling on those threads of values and beliefs people incorporate into their identities, which are part of their everyday world in a very material sense, it risks people pulling back. Instead of being stopped in his tracks by that moment of slippage that occurred between needing assessment testing and the promise of schooling as the level ground of opportunity, Michael reads this as a moment to put forth more effort, to toughen up and joke it off. In doing so, he doesn't give up the pursuit of post-secondary studies; he actively becomes a presence on campus. Although he acknowledges there are serious roadblocks that can bar passage on the meritocracy highway, the highway itself is real and ready to be traveled. Instead of meritocracy operating to

hide inequality by drawing attention away from social issues, it can provide leverage to have actual agency.

This could explain why I did not receive any negative recollections of previous schooling programs; his criticisms hinged on a lack of funding and ironically a lack of support created ill informed, or educated, teachers, parents or public. For instance, Michael recalls his experiences in a high school:

Michael: But ummm, they [educators in his learning disabilities program] were very helpful and really good people. But actually the department got and the learning assistance got eliminated by the cuts to education, like this happened a few years after I was out, but yeah I went back and all those teachers are teaching different subject an stuff now. There isn't actually a center and that's a real shame too cause honesty – I was going to university anyway – but for a lot of kids, if it wasn't for [this program], they wouldn't be getting through high school and doing well and having the confidence to say there's nothing wrong with us. We just learn differently and that sort of thing. Like it just got closed down. It's a travesty. But, ummm, yes there's going to be a lot of kids who can't fend for themselves now. It's kind of a shame. But yeah, that [program], they showed different memory techniques like word association and acronyms and stuff like that. I still use that. It's the only way I'm able to remember different...names [for my program]. It's very important. But they closed it down. (Interview 1:10)

Michael: It can see it not being the most efficient funds wise, but it got me into college. It got a lot of people graduated that may not have graduated either and just generally feeling good about themselves. It was very important even if it wasn't efficient. (Interview 1:9)

Michael: The big thing for me is the constant re-testing. It doesn't make any sense to me. Other than that, they seem to have every tool somebody would need. (Interview 2:5)

The ways in which Michael uses meritocracy as an extension of his understanding of himself and the world in which he lives, were not unique to him alone. The other research participants also constructed their recollections weaving in ideas of equality, work ethic and reward alongside the abstractions and materiality of identity and location. Other than this commonality, the ways in which each participant told their story and reflected on their experiences was specific to their particular identity which was different between participants. Lilly, Sandra and Sasha also have their own stories to tell.

3.2 Sasha: “We Don’t Have Any Control!”

When I met Sasha she had just completed the last of her requirements for a program certificate and was awaiting the results determining graduation. In her mid 50’s, Sasha had enrolled in this program along with her daughter, to which she told me very proudly that they would be the program’s first mother-daughter graduates. Unlike Michael’s experiences of dealing throughout his educational experiences with his diagnosis of dyslexia, Sasha suffered a massive brain aneurism during her studies which impacted her memory, ability to concentrate and overall energy leaving her feeling at times dizzy, nauseous and fatigued. Suffering the aneurism in class, Sasha fell to the ground and struck the back of her head. She was later told she had to wait over a half hour for the ambulance paramedics to find their way to her on campus. In and out of consciousness, she describes finally regaining her sense of self at the same moment one of her physicians was busily placing the screws into a halo (device which screws into the skull and helps immobilize the neck). As she had struck her head, she is first diagnosed with a broken neck.

Once her physicians had reassessed their original diagnosis, emergency surgery followed. During her recuperation, she describes being made aware that unless she begins to attend classes again, she will be withdrawn. Outraged, not wanting to re-do her completed credits and worried about her ability to obtain funding if she takes time off, she determinedly attends as many classes as she is able and completes her requirements. The source of her outrage steams from not being included in the decision making process to withdraw in spite “stay [in] within their rules.”

(Interview 1:2)

Sasha:.. Well I was upset because of being removed from the program without my knowledge – I don’t know what they think, but they have so much power over students that if they see fit, they will remove you. But the person – they shouldn’t have that much power. They shouldn’t – all my fellow students they were like you know they have that much power over us to remove us out if

they see fit? That we don't have control over our own education! We don't have control! My fellow students realized that they don't have control and they were upset. You know, they were going if this had never happened to you we would have never realized the extent that they have control, in the end we don't.

SB: Did they ever explain the reasons why they wanted to remove you?

Sasha: No! No, they just said ahhh we're sorry! I'm going I have no witness, no written apology; I had nobody to come over and say ahh we're sorry, we didn't realize that we didn't have the power to do this. They just act like they were embarrassed. They said they were sorry they did this. And you know my fellow students were kind of upset too because they realized how little control they have over themselves in the program by what they did to me. They didn't officially or publicly apologize to me. And they knew it because they were watching them – my fellow students in the program. They said they were watching them to give that apology officially. And now they realized – okay now, they said okay now that this happened to you that they'd have to watch their backs. And you know they think - they said we don't realize what little control we have over ourselves after we see in both the program and the faculty. Everybody in those offices have control over you. You don't really have control over yourself. They can say when, they can automatically discard you – boom! - without your say.(Interview 1:17)

Again, as with Michael, this is where I assumed the critical moment would occur between Sasha's knowledge of following the rules yet still being barred, a moment that would tear apart any meritocratic understanding she may have held. And, again, this didn't occur. Instead Sasha told me very emphatically of the extra energy and effort she's had to devote to her studies, how determined she's had to become and how she's had to discover strength she did not know she had and to rely on the support of her family and other students enrolled in the program:

Sasha: I was determined to walk back in there. I was staggering in class, literally. I sat down. I was sweating. I sat through the class and she (Sasha's daughter) says, "Okay, I'm taking you home now." She put me in the truck and drive me back and she went back to study. She put me to bed and said now you've got to come back tomorrow. She was so determined to get through this. I guess she knows my strength. She said I know you can get through this. Get read for class tomorrow. So I would read all night and get up the next day. Get all ready. But after sleeping, you know, I slept a long time, I could get up. You could look at me and never think anything was wrong. I just got so tired and was sweating...I managed...I built up my strength and after that I was fine. (Interview 1:16)

Sasha: ... I went to one week of classes and am so frustrated cause I can't keep up! I can't take notes, I can't listen. Because they'd say something so I would write it down and so they continue talking - I couldn't keep it straight. I realized I couldn't keep up so. And so some of my classmates noticed I was really getting frustrated trying to take notes and one of my classmates

said, I think you need a note taker. And I'm going where do I go do that? And so they said that you just go to the [center for students with disabilities] and talk to them.(Interview 1:3)

Sasha: I learned from my classmates. I didn't even know what a disability center was; I don't even know where it is...(Laughter) I don't know where anything is! (Interview 1:26)

Although Sasha mentions her displeasure about the lack of official direction in the university connecting her to resources, she admits that some of this was the result of her hesitation to approach contacts in fear of lowered teacher expectations and the possibility of such documentation always shadowing her, determining her future again without her knowledge or consent:

Sasha: Yeah!! I thought about it too well if I tell them I really have a disability and this and that it's going to follow me. Are they going to write it somewhere and say but you only got because of your disability? It's like; I thought where is this going to get written down now? Where is this going to come up and say somebody down the line say, oh you have a disability, can you tell me about it? Is it you now? Where is it written in that program office, is it going to follow me or something like that?

SB: Yeah on the flip side, I have friend who has a fear that oh, is are that they only reason why they are going to hire me?

Sasha: Yeah. I thought about that too. You know cause you hear things about, you read things in the paper about that ohh they have to hire this many people with disabilities. I'm going how is my life going to be? ...That made me think about when I read that newspaper that some places have to hire so many workers with disabilities, I'm go gee I wonder who is gong to categorize me in that area now? Without me knowing! That's the part that really gets me, without me knowing. (Interview 1:27-28)

Yet, again she reiterates her desire to not attract attention to herself, to keep her head down and graduate. Asking for accommodations already places students in an uncomfortable position as they must approach their instructors and initiate the process, navigating the power differentials between teacher and student, assumptions or misunderstandings the teacher may have regarding the student's ability to perform the requirements of the program, thereby creating another potential obstacle requiring additional effort to address. Asking for accommodations may mean weighing out the options of not asking depending on how much help or hindrance may result:

Sasha: Well I didn't want to rock the boat. I would never rock the boat. [Laugh.]

SB: Just trying to get through and finish your program?

Sasha: Ummmhumm yeah. Sometimes it was frustrating. Really frustrating. You know like I would be at home and in the middle of the night I would be I can't understand it. You're looking at your notes and trying to remember the lesson, trying to remember the lesson was the hardest part and then understand it. So I would dig up all my notes and books and read everything and read the notes. But I had to work like two or three times more probably than anybody else to understand the concepts. So my disability got me to the point where I did a lot of work, a lot of thinking. But in the end I think it helped anyway because when I was in class I did the same thing, reviewed all my notes, read my books.

...So I was talking to him (the person marking her classes' exams) about the finals saying how much I was really worried about it because of my disability and he said how much time do you need to write this down? I said by right I have time and a half; I have four and a half hours to write this exam if I want. He said I don't think you need it and I said well we'll see. So I studied and I studied and studied some more. I put in almost 36 hours studying. And I told him look I really put in a lot of effort and I put so much effort into work and I put so much effort into my midterm take home. (Interview 1:7-8)

Sasha had already experienced a similar scenario during the practicum portion of her program where she had to request that her mentoring teacher take the time to provide her with written instruction so that she could fully understand which tasks were expected of her. Although she had prepared several options, the mentor insisted she re-do a unit she had previously prepared before; abandoning the new units she had worked on:

Sasha: But I had prepared [a] unit and I prepare a couple of other ones and ahh she wasn't satisfied. So then she said why don't you do your First Nations thing? I know you have one. Yes I do. So why don't you do that one? You are very familiar with it [.] So I said well I guess so, well it wasn't my plan. I was kind of frustrated because I had put all the effort beforehand to work on these other units and then she has to do something that I had I ready had, I had already done. So then they said hand [it] in [.] I said well ummm I kind of umm and hawed and I kind of wanted to do my other unit but so I agreed with them to do something I had already done in a class before. I was saying well I put all my effort in the other one! ... I worked hard.

SB: Why do you think she was trying to push you into doing the other material you had already done in the other classes?

Sasha: Ummm, maybe she didn't feel confident that I could do it because she knew my disability right. So I was wondering if that was maybe she didn't feel confident that I could do it.

However, the telling of her experiences, of explaining why she understands herself in a certain way over others, cannot be separated from who, where, when and how she is located with the everyday. As Sasha eloquently puts it:

Sasha: [I] had only one teacher who really understood what I was going through and she taught ahh a special needs class. That's where I learned a lot by doing that class. Okay, this is me, this is me. I think I must have been the class project on how to teach people with disabilities, and realizing now that they didn't treat me different, they didn't treat me any different than the way before I had my accident and had I been any place else I would have been scared. Scared out of my mind of what people thought of me! That's the labels. Cause I'm a minority, a First Nations woman minority, I get labeled already. So I was definitely scared of more labels added on to my labels. Yeah, that was a biggie. (Interview 1:15)

Sasha: [It's] a lot of power to totally change a person's life. I thought about that and I'm going if I wasn't who I was and determined to finish it and do the work, where would I be? I was trying to think of where I'd be and that's exactly where I'd be! I'd be doing a job where there's no good just to survive. (Interview 1:24)

Hence, meritocracy, nose to the grindstone, hands ready to pull up those bootstraps, is in no way about clinging to false assumptions that the world will suddenly be transformed positively by a little elbow grease. Nor is it about being duped into believing social transformation is brought about as easily as taking out a soft cloth and polish to restore the luster to tarnished ideals. Meritocracy can be about regaining control needed to get past gate keeping procedures like university requirements. It can be about survival and about doing what needs to be done in a specific moment to achieve other ends. Like Michael who read his experiences through meritocracy as a reason to push harder and toughen up, as a reason for action and agency, Sasha reads meritocracy as an active response to oppressive structural barriers.

3.3 Lilly: "Unfair Advantage in the Real World"

Lilly, unlike Michael and Sasha, had spent all of her educational experiences identified as exceptionally bright and enrolled within enriched programs offered to gifted children. A first year graduate student, she had already been awarded a research grant and had just published her first article based on her undergraduate work with her now research supervisor. Lilly's diagnosed

disability, dysgraphia, came to the forefront when she applied for the gifted program during the ninth grade. Aware that her written work was consistently weaker than other skills, she did not consider this discrepancy unusual as she still managed to score within the top of her class. Many of her classroom teachers attributed this difference to exam anxiety with the exception of one, who encouraged further investigation:

Lilly: I remember there was this where I was getting 90's on all my take homes but 70s on all my tests. So a lot of my teachers thought I had test writing anxieties and I was pretty sure I didn't. I would go into an exam pretty happy and confident...I had one good teacher who backed me and would say, "No, she's fine. She's not nervous." (Interview1:2)

Completing assessment testing which identified her as dysgraphic (a disorder in which the brain and hand do not synchronize their efforts when placing pen to paper) and then encouraged to type all her written assignments, she describes as a freeing moment yet a moment in which she realized the 'truth' of the assessment testing:

SB: What was your reaction to going through the testing?

Lilly:...I discovered that I could type and it was really important. I started being aware myself at that point that there was something going on. When I typed things flowed and they had never flowed before with my written answers, so I started typing more... With the testing I knew what was going on and was trying to convince people to put it down on paper. [I] guess that was what it was...It was also late enough on with already having the gifted label, having the LD (learning disability) label stuck on was [not] that discouraging so much as giving me a right to giving me access to something that would make me able to perform. But [it was] something I was really worried about, especially for younger kids, the idea of putting on the LD label, but having them grow up with that concept that clearly – I can never be expected to perform as well. I mean I was already an overachiever so to give me a label that said I was exceptional therefore I can't do well was more well now you're going to help me do well. I think that was different from a lot of kids who end up with a label on their transcripts. (Interview 1:2)

Yet, in so much as Lilly understood herself as holding a particular label and thus not expected to do as well as was reinforced to her by her grade five science teacher:

Lilly: Yeah I had a good science teacher that year but she said I didn't have any potential to go anywhere – but I was bored out of my mind in her class! (Interview 1:4)

She understood her that the assessment testing which lead to a diagnosis also freed her to pursue other activities outside of her studies as much as it marked her as different:

SB: If you were to tell a story about you being in high school, what is the first thing you would say?

Lilly: In terms of?

SB: What stands out for you?

Lilly: When I was allowed to use a computer and I could write better. I didn't tell anybody, but in grade nine I was the only kid in class with a laptop. No wonder my friends thought my parents were rich! Her parents got her a laptop! It was tough cause I already stood out in class, like I was already the smart one, I was top of our class because I worked pretty hard, but I guess one of the things that really sticks out is grade nine. I grade nine I started playing volleyball and using the computer. Suddenly I wasn't spending seven hours a night hand writing my assignments. I was typing my assignments and playing volleyball in three hours. So it gave me the time to become well rounded instead of having my studies be the only things in order to do as well as I wanted to. (Interview 1:5)

Unsurprisingly she supports assessment testing and the need for parents and students to advocate for accommodations, but she also makes clear a distinct tension between accommodations as a right and accommodations as special treatment:

Lilly: Yeah I think that in order to get the accommodation, I really believe that you have a disability and it doesn't mean you're stupid ...you have the right to accommodations and you really have to believe you need it. (Interview 1:11)

Lilly:....Umm by yeah, that's the one thing in university, I guess maybe in high school, you know is to have the ownance to self advocate. You have to say I have this disability. I had this one guy who was very reasonable. It kind of surprised him, "Oh wow! You can have as much time as you want!" Whatever. He was a nice old guy. It was better than a person not willing to do anything.

SB: Ummmm. Did you have a bad experience?

Lilly: I had [one professor who refused to allow me to have accommodations as he argued that people in the real world will not do this for me.] (Recording inaudible, Field notes October 2007)

SB: I would have argued that only a small percentage of the Canadian population has a university degree, so which 'real world' is he talking about?

Lilly: I guess he meant in the sense of this kind of job, you have to be able to think and input and output at the speed of that job.

SB: But they have computers right?

Lilly: Yeah, but time and a half doesn't exist there. I guess there's a realization that I will have to work harder to do really well. I will have to work harder to show potential. I had one Prof who was very bothered by it because I was top of the class – "Are you sure you need this?" Ummm, that was a bit odd. I think it wasn't what he expected with the lectures. I didn't fit. At the time I didn't want to go, but now I'm really glad I did because it prepared [me]. (Interview 1:7)

Lilly:Like if you apply [for a job] and it's really competitive and it's great and you know you're lucky to get the job it puts you in a very powerless situation. As you get more seniority, you can get more possibilities. Maybe you can get more software. I think it's the kind of thing if you have a good relationship with your boss, but to higher management who have 4000 other applicants for example and say you need all these special things it doesn't really work. (Interview 1:16)

Meritocracy for Lilly is not a way to articulate her gender and class identity as a brave face nor is it a strategic response to systemic oppression like racism; meritocracy operates here at a very face level – to offer equality of opportunity by obliterating differences, not through addressing them. Meritocracy, for Lilly, is about an equal opportunity to be 'normal':

Lilly: ...One of the challenges with kids who are identified, be it positive or negative, can use it was an excuse not to work, not to pay attention. It can easily go the other way. (Interview 1:8)

Lilly: I guess with my own label, it's something I have to be very, very careful of. [The] fear that they will stigmatize you is where the fear is from and going to be a problem. So I try to keep aware of it. You try to keep your work [up].

Lilly: I want to be the one who asks the smart questions, not the one who can't write. (Interview 1:14)

Lilly: If I have to write [by hand, as her degree program does focus heavily on mathematics, the majority of equations are still written out by hand], I knew I was comparable in ability level to the other students, but with time and a half, if the exam was short, they would finish it with five minutes to spare and I would finish with five minutes to spare. If it was long, they wouldn't quite finish and I wouldn't quite finish. It was comforting to know that I wasn't being accommodated unfairly, that it was putting me time wise right around some of the people I knew I could compare myself to in my class. (Interview 1:6)

Meritocracy is one path to normalcy that on the surface it provides comforting reassurance that the substance of oppression is recognized but individualizes any explanation of inequality so that the response resides within individual effort. Although Lilly is aware of her

class privilege, she is aware of it insofar as it pertains to overcoming her individual deficiencies. Her schooling success is only explained by the application of these factors, not by class, gender or ethnic privilege even though she recognizes the difficulty other students may have in accessing the appropriate accommodations. Unlike Michael and Sasha who leveraged a sense of agency and autonomy from this tautology, for Lilly, the promise of meritocracy allows her to articulate her right for accommodations that does not reside on her class privilege as ‘special treatment.’

3.4 Sandra: “I had to Train Him to Please the Teacher!”

Sandra, in her mid 60’s and a graduate student, had both experiences as a student with a reading disorder (never diagnosed through a battery of psychological IQ assessments) and as a retired remedial educator. Facilitating many programs designed to teach literacy skills to adults and children, as well as ESL (English as a second language) students, Sandra never considered herself as ‘disabled’ and assumed everyone had similar reading experiences in which the words shifted, blinked or literally ran ahead of the page. She compensated for this by copious note taking in order to retain the information, by using her finger as a guide while she read, by reading aloud and asking other students questions about their class work and studies. These efforts, instead of marking her for educational intervention, were viewed by her teachers as academic.

Like so many others of her generation, as she explains, there was no expectation to pursue post-secondary studies. Surprising her family and her university, she applied for the nursing program, again explaining that the two most popular reasons for women at this time to attend university was for either nursing or teaching, and suffered through a miserable year receiving failing grades in chemistry and mathematics. Continuing to take credits during the summer months, she enrolled in a psychology course and found herself doing well, promoting her to

switch programs and focus on teaching. Although Sandra had been aware of her reading ability, it was not until her late 50s that she discovered Irlen's syndrome (a syndrome in which the color of the paper or the words printed affects the ability to read by producing blinking, shifting, moving or running words. This is corrected by testing which aims to discover which color(s) are more beneficial and then through wearing same colored lenses while reading). Tested, she discovers she is a turquoise, and then spends five years as a tester and speaker for Irlen's.

Sandra spends the majority of our time together describing her teaching experiences or her experiences raising her sons which she realized had similar reading abilities as herself, rather than directly focusing on her own experiences as a 'learning disabled' student. She explains that although she suspected her reading experiences differed from others, she did not view herself as disabled (although she hints later at possible diagnosis for ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) when speaking about medications). Yet, it was not until she had undergone testing for Irlen's that her sons and husband admitted they had suspected something was 'up':

Sandra: [It] wasn't that they weren't supportive. I was surprised that they were so aware of it. Ummm, you know I thought it was relatively- I thought I was relatively normal compared to, around the others. I was surprised that they, that they knew about these things and they had adapted to me I guess. I guess they knew. [Laughter] It's a bit of a shock when people know. (Interview 1:14)

SB: Why are you more supportive of the Irlen's approach rather than some of the other approaches used?

Sandra: Well [if] it doesn't do you any good – but the thing is for about 30% it's like a miracle. [Whatever] problems you have, they just disappear. So for a lot of people it doesn't work at all and for those it helps, it makes it easier to read and umm, you don't get headaches and stuff like that, but for 30% is really dramatic. It just takes away the problem. There's no more problem there anymore. So it just seems to me such a shame that its not being used as a regular technique cause for the people it helps, they don't have to worry about it anymore. (Interview 1:7)

[I] found I didn't find the medications made me into a person I wanted to be. For very long. I was certainly able to concentrate and ahhh, you have to...all the students and myself we got feelings of depression. And suicidal thoughts. And very different suicidal thoughts, like how to do it. I mean I think most of the students have the suicidal thoughts but generally, "I wish I

wasn't here, I'm causing people problems, you know, it would be easier if I wasn't here." But with the medication it was like, "well I think I'll get into the water and drown myself or I'm going to drive too fast", or you know, and get it over with. (Interview 2:2)

But I can certainly see now how my life, I mean I've had 15, 20? jobs in education and people would always, I thought it was moving on, moving up you know. But now I can see it was sort of changing jobs because the situation was uncomfortable for the people who had to adapt to me or supervise me. [Laughter] They shuttled me off into something else. But for me it was great! [Laughter] (Interview 1:14)

Inasmuch as Sandra recognizes herself as different from her previous colleagues and classmates, like Lilly, she seems to understand the purpose of special education is to correct 'deficiencies' or mediate them in ways which allow students to achieve a degree of 'normalcy':

Sandra: [I] always tired to get the people, looking towards getting the parents to support them. They have to go through a period of grieving, I think, about what they wanted for their child and what was expected and ahh, what they had in mind or what they don't know they had in mind. And then just let them be what they are and then find their strengths and let them go that way. And then you know, when their in trouble, cause they are always going to be in trouble! [Laughter]

[With the adult literacy students] they talked a lot about drugs. And the prostitutes – who was the best customer and how you dealt with difficulties and so on. Yeah, no, umm they teach you as much as you can ever teach them. Umm, the idea was to take like, umm as many of the forms they had to fill out. They didn't know how to fill out those forms. Umm they couldn't read them they said, even though they knew, at first we tried to teach them individual words, so they know married, not married and so on. But it wasn't that that they couldn't read – it was the way the form was set up. They didn't know why they had to do certain categories, why they had to put things and how they had to put them.

I remember one story we had in a book. It was about a woman who won the lottery and she went to buy a car and then the whole story was about how to choose a car. Well I mean once you read the line about winning the lottery you lost the students! That was the end! Their whole life is to buy lottery tickets and they're going to win the lottery and then everything is going to be fine. So the rest of the story didn't make any sense and they weren't able to fill in the comprehension questions you know cause they had zeroed in on, they immediately thought about the lottery and what they would do, and the rest of the story was just lost to them.

So I think that's what we had to sort of, what we had to figure out, you know, how to tell them the story. Then we would say, "Well that part fits in here on the form and that part fits in here." And that's what they wanted. And you know your number is because, this is your age and your birthday. Because they are always very paranoid about why people want the information and what they're going to do with it, you know, so the more you explain it to them that the government has to have this and so on, the more they are able to fit it into the categories in the way that the person is expecting it to come in on the form. And also to keep the information that is not going to help them out of that form too. You know, to make them safe. That was a really

important thing as well – not to tell everybody everything as well. You don't tell somebody that your cousin is a member of the mafia! (Laughter) (Interview 1:3)

That her student's response to the reading materials or to questions for personal information required on their government forms might be interpreted not as a literacy problem, but as a specific response to marginalization does not appear in her conversation. Although she openly addresses her student's involvement with substance abuse or the sex trade, she steers clear of more structural explanations. As with her comment regarding the need for parents to grieve over their future aspirations for their child, there is again no explanation which may explain why the 'deficiency' occurred. This may be explained by her advice to special educational policy makers:

SB: What would you say to people who were putting together special educational policies and manuals?

SO: Yeah... let's see... (pause) I think we really have to get away from it...umm as much as possible because once you get into labeling things people lose sight that you can be, can contribute. They are so focused on you seeing the world differently and being different that you have the strength and you can live as happily as anyone else. So the quicker you get to them and do some adaptations like that the colored paper, whatever the student's need, an isolated place to work, a box in the corner, sort of thing or whatever strategies they need to work. If they get those right away in grade one, grade two, grade three and learn how to overcome what bothers them...[y]ou won't need to have the special education. (Interview 1:8)

One of the purposes of schooling therefore is to create equal opportunity to achieve normalcy that conforms to middle class, heteropatriarchial Eurocentric standards. Yet, it contains a neo-liberal twang of equality, that hegemonic helping hand which seeks to create opportunity through homogeneity. In describing her experiences raising her sons, who she describes as having similar reading and attention troubles as herself, as a remedial teacher in and out of different schools she actively mitigated her son's educational experiences by deliberately explaining their differences as something more sympathetic, physically altering the equipment her son's used or through strategies she taught them at home to behave and appear 'normal':

Sandra: ...So I actually trained them to cope with the school. My youngest son particularly. The oldest wasn't so bad until about grade 3 and then they wanted to test him and so on, so they tested him and then I went to speak to the teacher and said, "Oh well he's left handed you know, so all the problems are because he's left handed!" [Laughter] And she didn't know anything, so she just from the bluebirds, she put him in the turtles group. She actually named the reading groups the bluebirds and the turtles! [Laughter] I mean that's how smart she was about it! [Laughter]

So I said to her, I'll go through the test with you, I know this test and I'll show you where it is because he's left handed that he does this, and he does this, and he does this. So if you take into account, like you tell him something you can't expect him to do it right then, he needs the five minutes to transition into the other, into the new kind of thing cause that was the main problem she was having with him. She would say, "Okay put your pencils down, we're going to do this now." And he wouldn't do it, he needs the extra five minutes to go into the other thing. So once she knew that, there were several other students having the same problem and she gave them a five minute warning and no more problems. With him anyway. She put him back into the bluebirds and he did fine.

...But my younger son, he was a lot of, I was always getting calls for him and ahh, I had to train him to, like put his books on the other side of the room so he had to go, like I got him a desk that was broken so he couldn't keep his books inside. So he had to go over across the room to get his books. I said, "Go and sharpen your pencil once a period. Ask to go to the bathroom once a period, but not with the same teacher of course!" Just so he could get up and go. And I gave him a drawing book so he could draw umm when he's finished his work and so on. But yeah, sure they would have been in trouble otherwise if I hadn't had the skills to tell them.

...Once he had a grade one teacher, she phoned me...She phoned me the second day and said, "I just can't cope with this child, he won't sit still and he says he knows how to do all these things [Laughter] and is always making trouble in the classroom!" I said, "Ohhh, know what! I just remembered I started him on these new vitamin pills and I'll stop them right away. I notice that they made him like really hyper active, you know. I'll stop them right away. Phone me on Friday and we'll see if it made a difference you know." So when he came home I said you can't do [that.] So let's figure out what you're going to do with her and so I trained him to please her you know and please himself at the same time. So she called me on Friday and said I'm really glad you stopped those pills! [Laughter] He wasn't taking any pills at all! [Laughter] (Interview 2:6-7)

Like Lilly and similar to her last response, while there is recognition of her privileged ability to intervene on behalf of her sons, meritocracy allows her to articulate and affirms a desire to help and promote equality while that does not rest on her privilege. In this way, Sandra is able to maintain both her helping roles as mother and professional.

CHAPTER IV Conclusions or New Beginnings?

Beginning this project I started with assuming that because learning disabilities were discursively constituted through Western traditions of knowledge, the material ramifications of these systems of classification would target those students already positioned outside these norms. I assumed that these students would be aware of the attempt to pigeonhole them in place through the application of labels that medicalized and objectified their schooling experiences as individually botched, puckering the perfection meritocracy promised. I was interested in how they might reconcile these experiences, stitching together an everyday with an ideology that could not explain all that matters. I assumed answers that treated meritocracy as a strategy, a way to instill a ‘politics of embarrassment’ that wedged the contradictions wide enough to squeeze through.

But as Smith and Bannerji write so clearly, in mapping the field with the comforting compass of my own thoughts, I assumed a terrain without ever leaving home at all. While a seemingly elegant explanation, the everyday doesn’t easily slide under our pens and unfurl as neatly as our syntax. Unpacking the history which informs our positionality is like that bit of sand left in the suitcase that persists no matter how many times we drag out the vacuum. Although I had thought special education would target those students who did not meet the norm, I’d taken for granted normalcy. In doing so, I was surprised at how the participants responded, at how they wove together their understanding of disability and meritocracy.

Meritocracy just isn’t a way to hide inequalities under the cover of social justice; rather it is a way to articulate an understanding of equality and justice through normalcy. The trouble with meritocracy isn’t that it is a mythology, a lie or a convenient way to dupe otherwise well

meaning people into abandoning their best intentions. Rather it is about fulfilling those intentions. Meritocracy is about normalization, about becoming or at least offering the opportunity to become that masculine, heterosexual, able-bodied bourgeois subject. Hence, for the participants, although they recognized the need to receive accommodations as special educational students and were subject to potential stigma, special education was also about the opportunity to become normal, as they defined it in relation to who and how they knew themselves.

For instance in an exchange about defining equality between Lilly and myself:

SB: So I get it w/right - what do you mean by equality? How do you define/understand this?

Lilly: I think within the exam situation this would boil down to equal opportunity to demonstrate my level of understanding. Given that university examinations are designed to test how much of the material we have learned and how well we are able to synthesize that material, an exam situation which allows me to perform equally well as someone who understands the material as well as I do would be fair.

This was often a challenge for me because as an overachiever I have often been near the top of my class, so it is harder to gauge the "fairness" of the writing situation when not roughly centered in the mark distribution.

The additional challenge beyond myself believing that I was fairly accommodated is explaining it to a peer group. Inevitably people notice when you aren't at an exam - I've had some friends actually get worried during writing the first midterm of a class when they didn't realize I was writing at the disability resource centre (DRC). In university friends have been more understanding - its more of a running joke than anything - but in high school i think a lot of people found it unfair that the person at the top of the class was getting additional support - its not immediately evident to those people that without support I likely wouldn't have had a shot at university. (Email response two)

Lilly's statements hinge upon a sense of fair which situates her on the same level, a level measured by testing performance, as her classmates who she perceives as normal. Although she does mention that needing accommodations has signaled notice from others, accommodations

mitigate her disability, removing what she feels is a barrier to her abilities to university attendance.

Yet, her definition does not directly address herself as an “[u]pper middle class...female [of] [C]aucasian/[W]estern [E]uropean descent” (email response two) Her access to education is barred by deficit ability, not supported by class and ethnic privilege. Meritocracy not only allows her to claim normalcy, but a normalcy of the middle that does not draw attention to privilege. Success becomes what you do, not who you are. This is echoed in her definition of learning disabilities (LD):

Any specific condition (not physical in nature) which inhibits an individual from performing at their potential ability level ...As such, LDs are a product of our definitions of success... (Email response two)

For Michael, meritocracy allowed him to express his normalcy through his emphasis on work ethic and masculine responses such as joking off comments to about needing accommodation. For him, this supported his experiences, although not perfect, as positive. This is reflected in his comments he’d like to pass along to policy makers:

SB: Well if you could actually talk to people who put together policies, what advice, or what would you want to say to them?

Michael: Umm, I think it’s stupid that they closed down [the program]. Like was one of the main reasons why I got through high school, not easily, but with more ease then if I had to do it on my own. I would get through high school regardless, I was going to university regardless, but that was a huge help and I know there were some people in that class that only got through high school and got to graduation because of that program. And they closed it down [.] And like the way that they had it set up, it was totally like about self esteem, like and at the same time like working on skills at the same time. It was a really good program they had set up and then they just closed it [.] ...It’s not worth saving a few bucks and sacrificing all this intellectual talent that you have that have the ability to grow in a program like that. So that’s what I think they should keep. (Interview 1:14)

For Michael, special education doesn't tear at his sense of self, but reaffirms it. His support of these programs is based on this understanding that tough determination should be rewarded and supported.

Of the four participants, Sasha's experiences seemed to be more critical of her experiences. She alone was the only participant who did not praise special educational programs or services. However, like the other participants, she did strongly emphasize the need for hard work, yet her interpretation focused more on normalcy as part of the need for self reliance. In our conversation, when describing her prior employment experience as a secretary at a Catholic high school, she says:

Sasha: And that's where I seen kids with disabilities, they couldn't cope in the real world. So I would talk to them and I said, "Well you have to get over this. Life is like this, life is not going to bend for you." I said, "There is no place out there that will bend for you have to realize what you have to change in your life."...So if I make myself think I have a disability, it will make everyone else think I have a disability. In my head it's a lot of work and it's going to take longer, but in my mind I know I don't have a disability, but other people see different. You have to sit yourself down and say, "I can do this. I don't have a disability. Work hard."... I put in a lot more effort than a lot of them. I accomplished it but nobody said you did great. I had nobody said you did great. Not even my partner.

I'm going it's all the little things in life people don't give you praise for. Self appreciation is the hardest thing a person can do. We are always putting ourselves down so much and I realized, okay you know when I was really frustrated, I'd say, and "Back up"! Really loudly. What's important now in my life? Let's not worry about anything else but this. And when you get it done you know what you did to get there but don't expect anyone else to say you did a great job. Cause in real life nobody does. (Interview 1:31)

Strategies aimed at achieving normalcy were not so much about achieving the 'good life', but about having a life that was not rigidity determined by labels of deficit. She did not expect to be rewarded or acknowledged for her efforts, only to lessen how she would be determined by them.

Sandra, unique from the other participants as she identifies as having a learning disability, but also as an expert within special education as a remedial education, very strongly

sees the role of special education to offer opportunity for students that cures their differences, solves social problems and lowers the costs of funding social programs. In sharing her experiences about teaching, Sandra also tells me of one of her former adult literacy students, now in his forties, who still keeps in contact with her in spite his continuing substance abuse issues:

Sandra: ...Like my friend, who I was telling you about, I've calculated the amount we've spent on him cause he was in like 15 foster homes, you know, been in jail 3 times. We've spent over 3 million dollars on him already and he's not finished yet! And that's not even counting all the cars he's stolen or the problems he's caused people, women and children and so on. But if you had taken that million dollars and put somebody with him constantly, somebody who he got along with, somebody who was his friend to live with him, to direct him, to take him to work, directed him in social activities and stuff, you would have cost us a million dollars less. I mean it would still cost us a million dollars, but there would have been a lot less impact on other people because he's had a tremendous impact on children and lost of women and so on along the way. So you can't count the costs of that. (Interview 1:9)

The redemptive promise of meritocracy not only can unproblematically solidify privilege, it can also justify professional interests that reaffirm the role of the expert to be the authority without connecting larger structural issues like poverty beyond individual action. Moreover, as a student with a similar disability, it only strengthens authority as it seems to objectively connect textbook knowledge with personal experience.

4.1 I have ability too! Residual and Emergent Ideologies

Inasmuch as these participants are revealing meanings around meritocracy and normalcy, to borrow from Raymond Williams (1991), meritocracy and normalcy are residual (that is informing hegemonic ideologies) which are informing a new and emergent meaning about ability. While none of the participants did not argue they felt their label as disabled was in anyway 'made up', the stress they place upon meritocratic ideas of effort and fairness are not only about normalcy, but about retaining and reclaiming a space to announce their abilities as thoughtful, capable social actors, apart from understanding of deficit. Ideologies of meritocracy and normalcy are re-woven to offer a new reading of disability and ability which do not duel. It's

not 'I-am-disabled-because-normalcy-reads-me-as-deficit', but 'I-have-ability-because-meritocracy-allows-me-to-read-normalcy-in-a-way-that-doesn't-leave-disability-as-deficit.'

Rather the stress the participants place on meritocratic understandings of effort is not a causal statement that attempts to compensate for deficiency through implied meanings of normalcy, but is a way to articulate ability. The struggle and effort they engage within is about stating ability which does not neglect disability. Disability is not an automatic default deficit position but one in which its abilities must be struggled over to be acknowledged. This is in opposition to understandings which take the default deficit position and turn it into cause for celebration. Nor is it a response that fails to recognize normalcy as oppressive, but arises out of that understanding. Hence, it is also in opposition to a neo-liberal multicultural understanding of inclusion which creates homogeneity through acknowledging the surface emblems of difference but rejecting their structural processes.

The participants are taking those meritocratic understandings about hard work, effort and determination and applying them to normalcy which transforms it from an experience of oppression to one which acknowledges the power, not powerlessness in disability labeling. The more familiar reading is my starting point where meritocracy can only read normalcy by concluding disability as deficit, as a powerless position. In this way, schooling is reduced to a normalizing process which hunts for disability through the application of its measures and milestones (Baker: 2002). It does not get past as Bernadette Baker points out, "...a critique of labeling or overrepresentation turns on the view that "normal" students are really being mislabeled and made closer on a scale to "genuinely" "disabled" students, than it does not undermine the presumption that "it's better to be dead than disabled." (p. 685) The participants directly challenge this, pointing out that the hunt has been in all the wrong places for all the wrong reasons.

If we once more pay attention to the participant's words, their stories become more complex than a singular reading of normalcy and meritocracy as a strategy to articulate agency, identity or survival. They are utilizing these discourses that seem to only contain meanings of 'being a burden', of worthlessness and deficit to articulate a positive understanding of disability. Not only have policy makers, who rely on medical definitions to hunt for disability, I too searched in places which missed how to read disability in this way.

For instance if we revisit Michael telling us about how he feels about his disability label, the meaning is much more complex:

Michael: Well, I mean it was fine. Like I was saying, at the beginning people would kind of snicker or whatever. But this is the way I always kind of deal with things, I kind of laugh. I mean what can I do? I can't change anything, I could feel bad about it, but I gotta cope and just go on...I have to take advantage of the accommodations that they give me, I can't really feel embarrassed. (Interview 1:4)

His ability to joke off negative comments in order to claim a space to receive special educational services is not an uncritical celebration. He understands how disability is a stigmatizing label.

Yet, he uses other understandings about his identity (gender and class) in connection with ideologies of normalcy and meritocracy to demonstrate his capacities and abilities. This was extremely evident in his relating the story of his parents' interview with his eighth grade teacher, Mr. Williamson, who actively discouraged him from post-secondary studies:

Michael: "... I've been told from an early age that because I have a learning disability, I'm not going to be able to do certain things. So when I get a challenge like that, I try to rise above it and keep my head and try harder...Kind of like, you know what? Forget them! I'm going to it anyway kind of thing." (Interview 1:9)

His story is centered on masculine, working-class articulations of meritocracy and normalcy but uses these ideologies not as repetition of deficit, but as a means to drive the focus toward his abilities without abandoning disability.

As with Lilly, she too articulates disability not as deficit but as potential only realized through effort, a response similar to Michael's. The difference in her response resides in how she articulates her classed and gendered identity/ positionality. Whereas for Michael meritocracy and normalcy solidified messages of masculine effort, for Lilly the emphasis is on constructing herself as genuinely deserving (a highly feminized construction), not as a ploy to for 'special treatment' that reinforces privilege:

Lilly: I guess there's the realization that I will have to work harder to do really well. I will have to work harder to show potential. (Interview 1:7).

Lilly: [I knew] I was reasonably smart and knowing I had dysgraphia. I knew I was capable of doing well. I never accepted that I couldn't. (Interview 1:8)

Lilly: ...I really believe that you have a disability and it doesn't mean you're stupid, it doesn't mean- you have the right to accommodations and you have to really believe you need it... (Interview 1:11).

Sandra too articulates disability, not as inability, but as strength and capacity. Her articulation heavily hinges on her role as a teacher, which again is inseparable from both the material and cultural positioning of class and gender:

Sandra: [O]nce you get into labeling things, people lose sight that you can be, you can contribute. They are so focused on you seeing the world differently and being different that you have the strength and you can live as happily as anyone else...So if we allow more strategies, you know, within the classrooms and are aware of those and teach the teachers to do all those things, all the kids will do better... (Interview 1: 7- 8)

Lastly, Sasha also articulates disability as ability using meritocratic understandings of normalcy which speak to her identity and positionality:

Sasha: Like the person is made to feel like they are getting charity. Like, ahh, you poor thing, you have this! That's not the person I am...I'm going, don't treat me like that! I'm not a poor thing! I work hard! (Interview 1:24)

Sasha: ... I had to work like two or three times more probably than anybody else to understand the concepts. So my disability got me to the point where I did a lot of work, a lot of thinking. But in the end, I think it helped anyway... (Interview 1:7)

Yet, as much as these participants articulate new understandings of disability and ability, and strongly identify with their emphasis on hard work to draw attention to their capability and not deficits, I am less certain about the role of special education as helpful within these processes. At eighteen, hiding my envelope of accommodation letters and holding onto the tide of anger, desperate determination and fierce bravery to counter feelings of illegitimacy, disability was yet another label which wrote my powerlessness billboard large. Disability was not part of how I understood myself in the world, how to live strong, fully fleshed and unashamed. Rather, it powerfully ruptured the hidden message about justice meritocracy offered by attacking the only weapon with which I had to fight: my ability to read and write. If my ability to make sense of the world for myself collapsed under the weight of diagnosis, I had no way to counter meanings other people placed on my life as 'truth.' Rejecting my disability label was a strategy to reclaim an ability to fight back. I read to stay alive. I wrote to articulate a self that was not voiceless. I did not feel special education was a way to assist me to strengthen who I was or what I knew, but to strip them away. I felt it was a means to take away the hope of possibility and replace it with the 'supposed-to-be' truths expected of girls like me: welfare dependency and promiscuity that implied stupidity.

Yet, like the participants, meritocracy became a way to struggle for a position of power. Pushing the hard edge of my pen across the paper by actively engaging with traditions and fields of knowledge which attempted to so intimately map the text(ures) of my being through its (author)ity is effort. Reading and writing became a way to connect to the possibility of the impossible life. I saw disability as lending a kind of respectability, turning the bitterness of

everyday oppression I had already experienced, into something more palatable and pliable for the middle class world of the academy. I am still struggling to make sense of it. The most common response to my disclosure is one of disbelief. I am not believable as a person with a disability. Although my assessment testing indicates a difficulty with spatial direction, if I lose my way, I usually receive a gendered comment about women's 'unique' sense of direction. If I score highly on an examination, I am unsure whether or not to believe in my own abilities or in assessment testing which predicts the unlikelihood of such scholastic performance. If I admit my doubt, I'm told given another gendered comment about self esteem. There are no tell tale signs, no way to separate out one moment of my life as 'disabled' from another as 'non-disabled.'

I do know disability as contentious, a label which amplifies all the others. I do not know how to say, with any certainty, if I am disabled or not without evoking the same kinds of delegitimizing processes or challenging the authenticity of experience. Disability, for me, evokes the delegitimization of my own voice and capacity against official knowledge. In this way, I understand the division of disability from impairment, but disability is not so unproblematically separated. Especially in the case of learning disabilities, impairment is defined through social meanings of intelligence and knowledge. Therefore, unlike the participants, the 'truth' of my disability does not stand alone. For these reasons, I do not find special education an entirely innocent or unproblematic attempt to promote equality.

Yet, I would like to make it clear that the broad strokes in which I paint processes of schooling as medicalizing inequality needs to likewise be equally problematized. There is a community of educators who do not see their classrooms as laboratories intended to 'train' students, but thoughtfully challenge oppression by using classroom spaces for lessons that openly challenge these teachings. The struggle over whose knowledge counts is both long and

continuous. While course offerings in Women's, Working-class, Indigenous or Black (to name a few) may seem but par for the course, they do represent a radical moment in which issues of difference could no longer be ignored. Hence, nor can the struggle over naming learning disabilities or the struggle for their recognition and right for accommodation be purely read as a conservative moment in social history or education. Parents and educators fought hard for recognition that would allow them options to address real, lived everyday concerns. Certainly, the options which emerged are layered in a history, but it is important to not forget the history in which they were born. There is a real desire on the part of educators to use their classrooms as spaces for social justice, to 'help' their students by giving them tools to think through the complexities of the everyday. Do I dare forget the helping hands which helped me into this space? Do I dare forget the helping hands which continue to challenge and support me? Broad strokes may paint pictures, but attention needs to be heeded as to what they paint.

4.2 Implications for Further Study: The Challenges of a New Path in Policy

Although I believe I was successful in opening a crack in the discussion about education, learning disabilities, meritocracy and normalcy, I realize that this is at best a beginning. Learning disabilities are not the only reasons for accommodations. Interested in the ways in which this form of disability seem to directly pull upon scholastic knowledge and performance, I have not explored or problematized the divides between visible and invisible disabilities. Certainly students with invisible disabilities 'blend' more easily into the landscape and do not require the physical re-ordering of spaces. Students with learning disabilities are also much more easily accommodated by a liberal inclusionary response which throws funds into equipment or tutoring but does very little to actually alter the classroom or curriculum, neatly sweeping up the problem without addressing housekeeping practices. I have also not addressed how the anonymity of

appearance can be interpreted as a privilege rather than disadvantage (as with Michael's frustrations over the need for current testing). I do not know if students with physical disabilities would offer the similar responses about their educational experiences. Dividing disability this way may not be an appropriate way to really get at how meritocracy is picked up, interpreted and incorporated into the everyday.

I am also aware of the voices not included, that is the voices of parents, teachers and policy makers who did not join in the dialogue to respond back to these participants. I have only a single-sided telling. I am aware that in targeting university students, I am still interviewing students with some privilege and power no matter how they might have arrived. What about those high school students identified with behavioral difficulties? How might they interpret official definitions of their disabilities? Would they hold similar responses about meritocracy and normalcy? How might they respond? What might influence those responses? The potential and need for future work is necessary.

Yet, the major implication of this project is the connection between schooling, ideology and normalcy. If schools impart a sense of normalcy which disallows for those identities, spaces and places away from itself as valued, how might this become altered? What kinds of schooling practices, policies and pedagogies should be suggested? How do we articulate new positions that work with who we are and what we know without creating seemingly inclusionary divisions?

I do not think the response lies solely in changing curriculum to include a ghettoized section on issues of normalcy and disability will be enough. Like the politics surrounding multiculturalism, the issue is raised without being addressed. While it is important to have a

moment in which the emblems of difference are acknowledged and even celebrated (like food and dress), it cannot ignore what happens the next day when ‘business as usual’ resumes. We also can’t ignore the conditions in which teachers work, complete with internal hierarchies, budgetary concerns, perceived meanings about such work or how those who provide these services are themselves materially located. Schooling reform needs to start with a little noise but it can’t stop there.

So what do policies and practices look like if they are no longer about teaching normalcy as deficit? How/where/should we continue the ‘hunt for disability?’ I believe both educators and policy makers need to look at normalcy as an unrecognized yet productive labor (Brown: 2007). It’s hard work to emulate white, middle class, masculine heterosexual privilege in order to achieve a degree of respect, attention and value. Economies are reliant on this labor, similarly as it has relied on the unpaid domestic labor of women, to continue the steamroller of progress. Rather than burdens, the cost of curative and rehabilitation to curve the stubborn toward the norm is an enormous employer of fundraisers, marketing pros, the visual and print media, education, health care and the legal system. People with disabilities often are responsible for employing the same professionals who demand they ‘make something of their lives.’ I believe a little humility and not humiliation on the part of such care professions might be in order. It is this labour the participants attempt to draw attention to, giving meritocracy new meaning. It is then not a struggle to become able-bodied normality, but a struggle to have the ability recognized. It is not to create policies which hunt for disability as deficit.

In terms of the documents like the SES Manual, it means rejecting the premise of normalcy that hunts for disability as ‘flawed’ normalcy. As chapter one demonstrates, the definition of learning disabilities is centered upon locating the site of abnormality as

truth/evidence of the disability. Once located, strategies to assist the student to perform are implemented. The policy does not attempt to understand how students locate ability within themselves, nor wonder at the efforts and strategies student implement to achieve them. It is premised on what students cannot do rather than what they can. In contrast it would be equally interesting to list what students with learning disabilities are able to do a point Michael was making by drawing upon Albert Einstein's achievements for inspiration:

Michael: ...Yeah, ummm, it might be dumb sounding but maybe that Albert Einstein thing. When I heard that, I was like I can do anything! If he can do it with a learning disability, he wasn't able to get through grade the, like why can't anyone else? He's like considered one of the smartest people in the world right? (Interview 1:15)

Of course I recognize that there are very real funding concerns attached to specific special educational labels as each label secures a certain level of funding for each student. This is not an argument attempting to get rid of the labels, but rather what they mean. Nor is it a reclamation project whereby potentially stigmatizing labels are reclaimed with new subversive meaning. It is an attempt to flip the hunt around, to show policy makers disability does not reside in the house of normalcy in the ways which may have been anticipated, to demonstrate too that the hunt for disability has been in all the wrong places.

Indeed, policies such as the one outlined in the SES Manual do teach normalcy with profound lessons in disability. Yet, those lessons are not a straight transmission – reception model with social actors passively accepting the ideological fare placed before them. When considering strategies which will be most beneficial, learning how these students construct meaning must be central. All the participants in this study clearly wanted to be perceived as individuals with the capability and ability to fully participate and perform scholastically. They in no way considered themselves 'stupid' yet no one yet the ways in which they articulated this were complex responses situated within their particular gendered, racialized, classed and

sexualized locations. Although they did support special educational programs which they felt offered the appropriate accommodations when they could gain access, they resented being made to feel that the accommodations signaled an amendment to ability. Their abilities, as far as they were concerned, were just fine.

Perhaps the challenge to policy makers is to change the focus of programs and services from ‘fixing’ abilities to strengthen and concentrating on how students articulate them. The ‘risk’ in special education is far more complex than I had begun to imagine. As a researcher I had to risk all my assumptions, risk joining the conversation and give up on the sometimes comforting cloak the anonymity of objectivity offers. I had to risk my emerging authoritative voice for one that chose to listen and admit I did not have all the answers. I had to admit I had been hunting in all the wrong places too. The ability of social actors to weave ideology is not a position of powerlessness; it is not one of paucity. Although I had thought this a lesson I had already learned, what I have learned is that meaning making is far more complex. A radical moment may not be the total rejection of special education as I had originally anticipated, but in the ways in which the participants constructed disabling discourses into a positive articulation I did not think possible before.

The challenge to policy is to recognize special educational students as profound educators in their own right, to recognize the complex ways in which they labor to be knowledgeable subjects not passive objects of schooling interventions. This is what is missing not only from the literature, but from how policy is currently constructed. If special education is to get past notions of normalcy that implies risk, then the risky business of education is acknowledging how much more there is to be learned.

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APPENDIX I – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

Interview Introduction

Although we have reviewed the consent form and the research procedures, I do want to remind you that you can stop the interview at any time, do not have to answer all the questions and can turn off the tape recorder. Your confidentiality will be protected. All transcripts and recordings are to be stored on a password protected computer and in a locking filing cabinet to which only I have access. You will be given a pseudonym, which you may choose, that will be used in the documents and transcripts for this project. You will be provided a copy of your transcribed interview can help to edit them to ensure you are being correctly represented. To help me remember and identify each interview, I'm going to record the time, date and place orally too. Do you have any questions before we begin?

SES Manual Questions

After reviewing the Special Educational Services (SES) Manual, what are your feelings about the services and procedures offered in SES Manual?

How do you feel the SES Manual constructs meanings about learning disabilities?

How do you feel the SES Manual constructs students with learning disabilities?

How do you feel the SES Manual constructs the families of students with learning disabilities?

How do you feel the SES Manual constructs elementary schools?

Middle schools?

High schools?

How do you feel the SES Manual constructs elementary teachers?

Middle school teachers?

High school teachers?

What does having a learning disability mean to you?

Do you think the way you construct meanings about learning disabilities is similar/dissimilar to the ways in which the SES Manual constructs them? How so?

Looking back on your own experiences, in what ways (if any) were the programs and services offered to students with learning disabilities were similar to the ones outlined in the SES Manual?

...Dissimilar from the ones outlined in the SES Manual?

Looking back on your own experiences, what can you recall of specific policies in place for students with learning disabilities?

Reflections on Elementary School Experiences

Where did you attend elementary school?

When did you attend elementary school?

How would you describe any memorable experiences you had in elementary school with a teacher or teachers applying the term "learning disabled student" to student(s) in the school?

What can you tell me about your own memorable experience with a particular teacher in elementary school? What made this experience memorable to you?

How were your experiences in elementary school constructed by how others made sense of students with learning disabilities?

How were your experiences as an elementary student constructed as someone with a learning disability?

Reflections on Middle School Experiences

Where did you attend middle school?

When did you attend middle school?

How would you describe any memorable experiences you had in middle school with a teacher or teachers applying the term "learning disabled student" to student(s) in the school?

What can you tell me about your own memorable experience with a particular teacher in middle school? What made this experience memorable to you?

What is your most memorable middle school experience? What made this experience memorable? How is this experience similar (or dissimilar from) your memorable elementary school experience?

How were experiences in middle school constructed by how others made sense of students with learning disabilities?

How were your experiences as a middle school student constructed as someone with a learning disability?

Reflections on High School Experiences

Where did you attend high school?

When did you attend high school?

How would you describe any memorable experiences you had in high school with a teacher or teachers applying the term "learning disabled student" to student(s) in the school?

What can you tell me about your own memorable experience with a particular teacher in high school? What made this experience memorable to you?

What is your most memorable high school experience? What made this experience memorable?

How is this experience similar (or dissimilar) from your elementary and middle school experiences?

How were experiences in high school constructed by how others made sense of students with learning disabilities?

How were your experiences as a high school student constructed as someone with a learning disability?

Reflections on schooling experiences once identified as learning disabled

When did you first understand that you were being identified by someone else as learning disabled?

How did you feel about being identified as having a learning disability?

How do you think your school constructed you as a student once you were identified as learning disabled? How did your school experience relate to this designation?

How do you think your meanings about learning disabilities might vary from the labels and social processes that distinguished you in school? If so, how so?

How do you construct meanings about school 'success'? Do you think these meanings are similar (or dissimilar from) meanings you had when you were younger? Do you recall which age you were when you had these thoughts?

Why did you choose to pursue post-secondary schooling? How did this decision relate to being identified as learning disabled?

Now that you are located in a post-secondary environment, do you have the same meaning about or understanding of having a learning disability as you did when you were younger? What age were you when you had these thoughts? How has it remained the same or changed? If it has changed, tell me how so?

Participant Background Questions

Tell me any stories you recall about how you understood your parent(s)' work?

What can you tell me how you understood your family' social class background as you were growing up?

How do you understand your family's social class background currently?

What can you tell me about any significant shifts you and your family made in terms of your family's social class background?

Would describe those shifts that you recall? What stands out about any changes in your family's class background?

How do you think your understanding of social class relates to your being identified as learning disabled?

How do you understand your family's ethnic background? How do you think your ethnicity relates to being identified as learning disabled?

Interview Conclusion

Is there anything you'd like to add or feel I should have asked?

If you have questions about the interview after you leave here today, you can contact me on my phone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or email me at xxxxxx@xxxx.xx and I'd be happy to speak with you.

Thank you for meeting with me today, I most sincerely appreciate your time.

APPENDIX II- BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Leslie G. Roman	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Educational Studies	UBC BREB NUMBER: H07-00322
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution		Site
UBC Other locations where the research will be conducted: N/A		Point Grey Site
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Jo-ann Archibald Stephen Petrina Sheena Brown		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: N/A		
PROJECT TITLE: Learning Disabled Students' Retrospective Reflections of Elementary and Secondary Schooling Experiences of Special Educational Services and Programs		
REB MEETING DATE: February 22, 2007	CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: February 22, 2008	
DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: March 16, 2007
Document Name	Version	Date
Consent Forms:		
Consent form for Participants	03/10/07	March 10, 2007
Advertisements:		
Recruitment Ad	03/10/2007	March 10, 2007
Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:		
Interview Guiding Script	02/06/07	February 6, 2007
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		