

**Contagion and Antidote:
Changing Locations of "Risk" in BC Public School's Discourse on
Disability**

After several years of working in supported childcare, autism home support programs, and as a Special Education Assistant in public schools, I noticed I was beginning to "break"—not from the stress of working with high needs kids, but from the constant unchallenged emphasis on "normalizing" children with disabilities. One morning a well-intentioned (and otherwise skilled and dedicated professional) colleague commented in the staff room that one child, "sometimes does really well, but other times he really looks autistic." My reply, "some days I do well too, but other days I really look like a dyke" was an excellent signal to me that it was, perhaps, time for me to have avenues to expound critical reflection on the system I was working within.

Introduction:

Critical disabilities studies and activism has asserted the radical notion that disability is not a contagion to be isolated or pathology to be cured by the antidote of able-bodied influence but rather part of a spectrum of human experience. Within this framework, the main obstacles encountered by people with disabilities are often institutional practices that do not allow room for ways of being that fall outside cultural norms. Spanning over a hundred years of discourse regarding students with disabilities in the Vancouver School Board, the structure of education for students with intellectual disabilities still operates from the goal of eradicating disability. Significant changes have been made within the school system, whereby the residential model that removed students from their peers and community has been replaced by an "inclusion" model in which students with disabilities are "supported" within their mainstream classrooms. However, while this is often framed as a progressive victory, the construction of disability as pathology remains.

The first half of this article examines some of the history of public schools in British Columbia and ways these institutions took part in constructing able-bodied, male-privileged, white-supremacist, heterosexual norms delineating who was deemed eligible for citizenship. In the second half of the article, I focus on current discourse regarding disability and inclusion in public schools taken from a presentation by Vancouver School Board Autism and Inclusion consultants. While arguing the importance of “inclusion,” they do so with the goal of erasing difference rather than shifting normative conventions for student behaviour, cognition and learning styles. It is not my intention to use historical context to show how “terrible” the past was compared to the present, nor do I wish to parallel the present as “just as bad” as the past. Rather, it is my goal to illustrate the legacy that continues to be enacted in order to propose further development. I conclude with a narrative of an instance in which my work at a Vancouver public school was situated in a way that could challenge the trend toward normalization replicating dominant status quos.

Early discourse regarding disability and Vancouver public schools located the “risk” of children with disabilities as dwelling within their potential to “infect” able-bodied children, endangering their development of good moral character. Recent discourse has relocated the “risk” to dwell in exclusion—purporting that without an inclusion model, children with disabilities lack the normalizing influence of their able-bodied peers and are therefore “at-risk” of further disability. While location of “risk” has changed, it is a categorical shift rather than one reflective of a more radical change in the construction of disability.

Disability as Contagion

In “Sacred Daemons” Nic Clarke addresses the period of 1870-1930 as a pivotal historical window in which childhood was generally re-conceptualized as “emotionally priceless,” or rather sacred, as opposed to children being “objects of utility.” However, Clarke writes, “while normal children were coming to be seen less as economic units, the defective child was still being judged in economic terms” (74). Children with intellectual disabilities were discussed as economic liabilities, at least in part as a result of their exclusion from notions of citizenship. Children seen as likely to grow up to be what was considered “citizens” in Canada were afforded the above-mentioned status of “priceless.” However, intellectual disabilities placed a child outside such eligibility, resulting in their status as those for which citizens must “pay.” In a 1929 letter, the Provincial Health Officer made such views explicit in his thanks for the Vancouver School Medical Officer’s “remarks in regard to the financial loss owing to the presence of retarded.”

Nic Clarke contextualizes the differential value afforded to students within the relationship between public education institutions and eugenics discourse. The Eugenics movement, which was dominant throughout Canada at this time, endorsed the segregation of children with disabilities from public school/mainstream classrooms. Key actors in the movement included groups as divergent as “the National Council of Women of Canada, the United Farm Workers Association, and the Canadian National Committee for Mental hygiene, as well as individual medical and educational professionals and legislators” (67) Clarke quotes a speech from the Women’s Canadian Club at the Empress Hotel in 1917: “All mentally defective

persons are antisocial in the sense that their presence in the community means disruptions, disorder and dependency” (68).

Framing disability as “antisocial” allowed justification for removing children with disabilities from their communities. Once these children were removed, framing disability as a contagion to be isolated could be further established without actual people with disabilities to distract from the picture that was being constructed. Clarke writes:

First, attempts were made to segregate mentally deficient children from their ‘normal’ peers in order to prevent them from ‘infecting’ the ‘fit’ with their ‘defective’ characteristics. Second, education programs for the ‘defective’ were designed to ensure that they were not burdens to society rather than to make them ‘well-rounded’ adults. Third, the segregation of mentally deficient children into separate classes allowed for their control and supervision (88).

With disability established as a contagion, children with disabilities were judged not as citizens (or humans), but as pathogens that had a cost requiring economic management. This framework facilitated education within institutions to be supervisory rather than well rounded. The supervisory and control based nature of separation is reflected in Foucault’s critique of educational institution’s disciplinary history. Foucault writes, “The whole indefinite domain of non-conforming is punishable” (178-179). Non-conformity worthy of punishment involved disability as a site of non-normative identity to be treated as contagion best isolated from the rest of the population.

This discourse regarding children with intellectual disabilities was part of larger discourse surrounding exclusionary citizenship. In “White Supremacy and the Rhetoric of Educational Indoctrination: A Canadian Case Study,” Timothy J. Stanley writes about how such exclusions were investments in building notions of

citizenship and nation. In his analysis of the 1920s, he describes BC as a white supremacist state. Stanley writes, “First Nations people (North American ‘Indians’) and Asians, unlike Whites, were politically disenfranchised, barred from certain occupations and free associations, confronted by legalized discriminations and subjected to random violence” (39). The explicit violences were normalized through a series of institutionalized practices. Without people of colour and people with disabilities present, curriculum could, again, construct citizenship to their exclusion, and naturalize de-humanizing discrimination. The education system was then not only complicit with such exclusions but was part of creating them:

State-controlled schooling was integral to the construction of supremacist hegemony in B.C.. As state schooling became a mass phenomenon, the school came to be one of the chief vehicles for indoctrinating the population of the province in supremacist ideology. School textbooks were particularly important in transmitting a nexus of ideas about patriotism, citizenship and ‘character’, which made supremacist notions virtually impossible to challenge.

The development of “good character” was racialized as well as gendered. Being of good character was framed in terms of embodying imperialist notions of white, gender normative masculinity. In this context, white women were often framed as playing an important role in birthing desired citizens but were still constructed as outside the capacity to embody good Canadian character, as it was often positioned alongside idealized white male masculinity (Einstein). Disability was well woven into this matrix, whereby the “loose” morals of the “feeble minded” were understood as leading to the corruption of “good stock” which, among other things, risked delinquency and homosexuality (Clark, Report to the Metropolitan Board of Health of Greater Vancouver).

Able-Bodiedness as Antidote

Like many young queers, I moved from the small town in which I was raised to the Nearest Urban Centre at the first moment I could scrape together rent to share a damp basement suite. This was not questioned by anyone—either residents of my hometown or of my subsequent queer community. It was taken for-granted that the city was a more hospitable place for me. The reason given was that the city has more diversity, and given that urban-dwellers are used to experiencing difference, they would then be more accepting of my divergent identity.

This argument is reiterated in myriad settings, not the least of which is in Canadian public schools. Rationale for disability inclusion, for multicultural programs, for Gay-Straight Alliances, all posit that if Canadians (assumed here to be Canadians from privileged social locations) experience social difference, discrimination will end. This argument seems to do, at best, half the work. While inclusive education may be an important step, I remain cautious about the way in which it is discussed as the final solution within current educational discourse. Though every small town (as well as urban centre) has a good number of women, and residents are accustomed to encountering women in their everyday lives, sexism is still readily apparent in all such places regardless of said exposure. Evidently, it is not just that presence of those marginalized that creates social change; it is also the discourse surrounding those present that challenge or reinforce oppressive norms/hierarchies.

Though currently segregation is generally challenged and inclusion held to be a superior model within public schools in British Columbia, much of the idealized

notions of citizenship go unchallenged. The subtlety of privilege (for those benefiting from it on an institutional level) leaves many hierarchies embedded in discourse, particularly in terms of disability remaining framed as a problem with able-bodied norms upheld as the solution. To illustrate this paradigm, I draw from the document “Inclusive Education” (2009) based on the workshop presented by Vancouver School Board’s Inclusion/Autism Consultants Pam Neuman and Vicki Rothstein. Both consultants visit a number of schools in the VSB and advise faculty staff on ways to make their classrooms more inclusive of students with disabilities. While I critique the document, I do so with acknowledgement of the barriers they often face within educational institutions. They are often in the position of advocating for increased funding and resources to work against systemic exclusions—from normalizing pedagogical instructional styles to architectural design of the school buildings themselves.

Neuman and Rothstein begin with an overview of historical exclusions of children with disabilities from public education institutions. Neuman and Rothstein warn, “It is easy to forget that as recently as 1973 pupils with IQs of less than 50 were regarded as uneducable and therefore excluded from the school system.” The phases leading to present inclusion-based models are framed in five “stages” from residential schools to the present. Throughout the overview, mainstreaming/inclusion movements are held as the answer to Canada’s problematic treatment of “Special Education” in the past, without critical investigation as to ways these too could continue to perpetuate exclusionary social

norms (though to be fair there is limited time within one workshop slot). The stages are framed as such:

Residential Programs

The way in which many children with intellectual disabilities and with sensory deficits were taught prior to the normalization movement.

Relative Isolation

Phase prior to the 1970s during which **what they term** students with exceptionalities were served either outside the public schools or in isolated settings within them.

Normalization Movement

A widely held belief that all individuals, regardless of any disability, should have as normal an education and living arrangement as possible; opposed to institutionalization.

Emerged as the debilitating effects of institutionalization began to be recognized.

Integration (or Mainstreaming)

Describes the placement of students with exceptionalities in general education classrooms, at least for a portion of each school day; otherwise known as mainstreaming.

Inclusion

A practice based on the belief that students with exceptionalities belong in general education settings, with support services provided in the general classroom by specialists (Neuman and Rothstein, unpaginated).

However, without complicating the unequivocally positive portrayal of normalization, such support can further compound exclusionary practice. Drawing again from a Foucauldian framework of normalization as presented in *Discipline and Punish*, normalizing practices can also be understood as facilitating the very discriminatory practices that create systemic exclusion. Foucault writes, “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instance in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes” (183).

While Neuman and Rothstein’s account of educational restructuring provides a useful way to illustrate that changes in the education system are recent, describing inclusion as the final solution as opposed to a current stage erases ways in which normalizing practices continue to reinforce hierarchies that position disability as a

pathology in current models of inclusive education. Indeed, the emphasis on inclusion above all else has been critiqued for positioning disability as perpetually awaiting able-bodied signification—in other words, not acknowledging that non-dominant groups have the capacity to change the mainstream rather than merely waiting for acceptance from it. In *Reading and Writing Disability Differently*, Tanya Titchkosky critiques this unproblematic emphasis on inclusion. She writes:

The assumption that exclusion is the main problem facing disabled people may be a dangerous one, especially if we are to maintain a critical focus on how, and to what end, disability is constituted as it is within the contemporary minority world. One of the dangers of focusing on exclusion without taking into account the inclusionary practices that generate exclusion is that we might be tempted to ignore the constitutive powers of seemingly benign remedial programs, enacted through texts that claim to solve the problem of marginalized people (149).

Such exclusions are evidenced in Neuman and Rothstein's discussion as to the disadvantages of Special Education Classroom Approaches. They advocate for inclusion based on the rationale that within segregated classrooms, "students are isolated from their typically achieving peers; students do not have 'typical' role models." Elaborations on this assert that when removed from "typical" role models, children with disabilities have no one to model "typical" behaviour. Elementary school classes for children with autism are discussed as a phase that the school board wants to move children through (and back into mainstream classrooms) as quickly as possible. The reasons focus on the "problem" of children in autism classes becoming more autistic when kept away from the influences of other children. Within this discourse is the unchallenged conflation of autism with a problem to be solved. Upon inclusion into the mainstream classroom, the implied goal would be that the child with autism would (eventually) need no accommodation for their disability. The individual with the disability could be

included without inclusion of lived differences they experience based on their disabilities (e.g. a need for breaks, a quiet work environment, alternative modes of communication).

The document from the “Inclusive Education” workshop includes a further section on “Knowledge and Skills” that outlines stages in what is perceived to be inclusive curriculum. It frames the stages it presents with, “Our goal is to get to the top.” This graph starts with “Developmental curriculum,” and moves through a hierarchy: “Learn Functional Skills in Atypical Routines; Learn Functional Skills in Typical Routines; Learn ‘Lower Level’ Curriculum, ‘Learn Grade Level Curriculum.” Within this graph, a child with developmental disabilities that prohibit grade level work will never be seen as having reached the “top” of inclusion. Inclusion is therefore based on the (gradual) eradication of disability as opposed to space within the curriculum for developmental disabilities.

A similar graph delineating goals for social “Membership and Participation” reads as follows: “In and out of class—limited participation with classmates; In class—participate in different routines; In class—participate in some typical routines; In class—participate in all typical routines.” This hierarchy does not reflect the differing ways that disabilities effect mainstream classroom participation. A student may be capable of participating in much of the “typical” routines but require more “out of class” breaks than are generally scheduled. While the site of risk is identified as students continuing to demonstrate identifiably “disabled” characteristics if excluded from mainstream classrooms, what remains undertheorized is that such qualities may unintentionally be positioned as a deficit

preventing full participation and membership. According to this graph, if a student participates a-typically, they could then be construed as not having reached the “top” membership in their class.

Within hierarchical descriptions of “Knowledge and Skills” and “Membership and Participation” are shadows of exclusionary citizenship from the previous century, as disability continues to connote segregation from full membership to a classroom. In addition, issues of inclusion are still solved with assimilation in a way that upholds able-bodied norms as the solution to difference. In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* Robert McRuer differentiates between the two models (past and present) compared in this article, with a focus on intersections between queer identity and disability and the ways “they share a pathologized past” (1). He theorizes that while past frameworks erased queer and disabled identities, current frameworks are increasingly marked. As with my analysis in the previous section, McRuer describes these processes not as separate, but as mutually constitutive processes for delimiting who is considered viable (or a viable citizen). McRuer writes:

The relatively extended period, however, during which heterosexuality and able-bodiedness were wedded but invisible (and in need of embodied, visible, pathologized, and policed homosexualities and disabilities) eventually gave way to our own period, in which both dominant identities and nonpathological marginal identities are more visible and even at times spectacular (2).

This speaks directly to work that integration alone did not accomplish. When marginalized subjectivities are no longer erased, but are still marginalized, *how* they are portrayed becomes critical. Heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are still idealized identities. In this context it is hard for their opposites to be extricated from a position of pity or the expectation that those with such qualities would (or should)

prefer to be normal if they could. McRuer describes this as, “A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, ‘Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me’” (9). With curriculum goals that place the eradication of accommodation at the “top” of an “inclusion” hierarchy, the discourse in “Inclusive Education” could serve to uphold the norms that McRuer purports people with disabilities are expected to embody.

In Beth Hutchison and Bonnie Smith’s anthology, *Gendering Disability*, Hutchison discusses the goal of shifting disability from medical and educational discourse that frames it as this kind of lack/limit to disability as a site for productive spaces that shapes identity and forms cultures. She focuses on common ground shared by feminist and disability activism—wherein both movements assert the need to change more than just an inability to be included in the same space as the dominant group, but also to challenge the notion that fitting the mainstream is the ultimate goal. She describes:

Disability, a term that has heretofore been so clear-cut to the public, is becoming increasingly polymorphous in the light of a new politics and scholarship. It can suggest a set of practices, kinds of embodiment, interactions with the built environment, an almost limitless array of literary types, frames of mind, and forms of relationships. Gone are the days of a simple and dominant physiological or medical definition of disability. Instead, people have come to see an art of disability—poetry, music, song, literature—and politics of disability that has accomplished path-breaking legislation and effected social change (1).

Hutchison and Smith’s anthology calls for reframing the position of neutrality afforded white, able-bodied male scholars and argues, instead, that women and people with disabilities are in the position to create thriving counter-cultures that challenge limiting social norms. Were such a shift away from privileging normative

learners/learning styles to be integrated with models of “inclusion” in public schools, the ultimate goal could be for children with disabilities to shift the organization of the larger classroom as opposed their enabled peers being constructed as holding an antidote to their disabilities. Current educational discourse and practice still operates on the basis that student’s assimilation with dominant norms is conflated with student success. Such norms, both social and academic, create barriers to educational models that appreciate possibilities for understanding disability in terms other than that which risks lack/limit.

Beyond Risk

During my years as a disability support worker with the Vancouver School Board, attempts from Special Education Assistants to utilize alternative tools or teaching methods that work for the students we supported were met with criticism from other educational professionals on the basis that we were making the child appear different. While there are a number of examples that depart from this model (included those often advocated for by Inclusion/Autism Consultants), I recount the following instance as one when there was particularly good collaboration between the classroom teachers and myself. Through collegial meetings, room was made for productive spaces of reflection as ways the classroom activities could be restructured to enable meaningful participation for the children I worked with, as well as creating increased self-awareness the rest of the students. The following story is not meant to be elevated as *the* answer, nor is it free from taking place within the same legacy of discourse of education and disability that I have critiqued. Though undoubtedly potential shortcomings could be found within it, I cite it here

as it has moments of departure from dominant modes of framing disability within special education.

I was brought into a kindergarten classroom to work with a boy's "problem" behaviour of climbing bookshelves and hiding under tables and screaming. As a child with autism, processing sensory information was difficult for him. He was climbing bookshelves during transitions between activities (which were hard for him in general, but also caused noisier moments in the classroom) and hiding under tables when he was overwhelmed. Upon brainstorming, the teacher and I set up a quiet corner of the class with a supply of thick headphones to reduce auditory stimulus (the main anxiety trigger for him). We talked to the entire class about how some people love noisy rooms and some people don't and gave everyone the option of going to the quiet corner and getting headphones when they needed to. They had the option of wearing them all the time, or just in the quiet area during noisy transitions. The teacher began giving two warning times for transitions—one for the children who wanted to clean up early and spend the main (very noisy) clean up time in the quiet area, and one for the rest of the class.

Over the following few weeks, many children tried different ways to participate in transitions (the novelty of headphones was, of course, exciting). All but a couple eventually stopped using the quiet area and headphones. The child I was supporting was much more calm, happy, and able to engage with his education with those options provided for him. However, when reflecting on the experience in terms of the historical and current discourse regarding Special Education, there are a few significant departures: the noise in the classroom (not the disability) was the

“problem” to be solved; the larger class was shown ways of understanding their own needs—they were not positioned solely as “role models” to the child with autism; there was no goal to eradicate the student’s needs, rather the structure of the classroom changed from one of mainstream “default” to one that accurately represented the needs of its member; finally, the taboo on looking “different” (wearing headphones) in class was removed by increasing options for ways that students could appear at school—instead of looking “different” being seen as “failure.” The student in question was a white, normatively gendered boy. First Nations students in the VSB are still not allocated support on par with white students—female students with autism can slip under the radar of diagnoses. I cannot help but question how he could have been differently situated had he occupied other marginalized identities.

However, the pedagogical significance of restructuring the classroom in this way began to disrupt the normalizing, categorizing, aspects of education. While much of the “Inclusive Education” document would support such an approach, the emphasis on the removal of stigma rather than disability challenges discourse regarding difference from “problem” to reframing it as a possibility for self-exploration. Given that the ways public educational history is rooted in eugenics and in privileging constructions of whiteness, heteronormativity, and able-bodiedness, a critical engagement with power as related to identity, which is embedded in normative institutional practices, could have far reaching implications.

Conclusion

Troubling normalization is nothing new. Feminist, queer, and anti-racist movements have long histories of using such strategies to further equal rights (e.g. gay marriage, pay equity) while others within such groups have challenged that these strategies are incomplete for the purposes of anti-oppression. Many activists have asserted that uncritical “inclusion” based discourses stress marginalized groups’ conformity to the mainstream (the individual changing to fit the system) and therefore do not require change from the mainstream to fit the needs/counter-culture/knowledges of those marginalized (the system changing to make room for alternative ways of being). When it comes to education and children with intellectual disabilities, however, “integration/inclusion” is generally presented as *the answer*.

The after-effects of oppressive historical discourse can leave much to be unearthed. The conceptualization of disability as a problem to be solved is often so taken for granted that it is discussed as an inevitable premise upon which other discourse and pedagogy is placed. Connecting discourse surrounding inclusion/exclusion and its investment in creating normative bodies and racialized citizenship with current Special Education discourse on “Inclusive Education” can provide a jumping off point to analyze current assumptions reflected in the limitations of current Special Education discourse.

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