

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

Part Three: All Hell Could Break Loose

W. John Williamson

Abstract

This follows the events described in Parts One and Two of this narrative. Max Hunter, a West Coast private detective, still conducting an investigation to find the educational category of slow learners, explores portrayals of slow learners in popular media, learns more about his client, John Williamson, and investigates the history of slow learner as an educational label, and the history of programming for slow learners in the province of Alberta. The case grows more dangerous with each clue Max unearths.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, education, slow learners, popular media, disability studies, history

for Jacob

XV

It was the first day of school for the new semester. I was at the back of the class. At the front of the room, a featureless black cloud, in vaguely human form, was shouting “Max Hunter” over

Corresponding Author:
W. John Williamson, PhD
Email: John.Williamson@cssd.ab.ca

and over again, but the affirmation I was expected to give stuck in my throat and the angry cloud just kept shouting my name.

Waking from my dream, I realized that the cloud was the door to my room and, in fact, there were two voices shouting my name and pounding on the door. I shouted, semi coherently, that I would be right there. I looked at the clock beside my bed and realized I had overslept. I was ten minutes late for my breakfast appointment with Jacques and Michel. I must have forgotten to set my alarm clock in my drugged exhaustion the previous night. That wasn't like me. I staggered to the door and peered through the peephole. Two figures in suits bad enough to make it obvious they were plain clothes cops glared back at me. I opened the door and they walked into my room.

"Are you Max Hunter?" the first asked unnecessarily. Two beady eyes, sunk into a round cold-reddened face, glared at me. I replied to the affirmative.

"Mr. Hunter," the other began. He was a full head shorter than me, and two shorter than his large, round partner, but he looked wiry and alert. "I am Detective Gimlet, and this is Detective Bennet. We are looking into the disappearance of two renowned professors."

I must have shot him a baffled glance. Gimlet continued, "It's well short of the twenty-four hours we normally wait for missing persons investigations but the circumstances are very strange. The conference organizers who called us said that they had been asked by the professors to juggle their speaking schedules. They said they had been approached by a local educator and asked if they would assist in some sort of mystery that he and a detective he hired were investigating. They were both interested in helping, and arrangements were made for them to take the afternoon and early evening to assist in the investigation."

I couldn't stand any longer. I asked if I could sit on the bed. They exchanged glances and Gimlet gestured his consent. Bennet took over from where his partner left off. "They had both promised to attend a celebration later that night, but neither of them showed up. The organizers were worried. Both had keynote addresses later today. The organizers tried to reach them in their rooms this morning. They did not respond to phone calls. The organizers contacted the hotel staff who knocked on their doors, and eventually opened up their rooms. They concluded that they had not returned to them since the previous day."

"What does all this have to do with me?" I asked, playing dumb.

Gimlet now regarded me with contemptuous patience. I'd changed categories in his thinking after my last remark. "What we do have," he said pedantically, "is a 911 call made after a black Peugeot was seen colliding with a pedestrian of your description outside a restaurant yesterday afternoon and a security camera video of the same vehicle driving you up to the front entrance of this hotel last night."

"Where did you go with them after the collision?" Bennet demanded.

"For medical attention, and then to another diner to talk about the case," I replied. I didn't want them liking me for an arson charge too.

Gimlet asked me what the name of the diner was. I said I was woozy from the medications and couldn't recall. Bennet asked what the case I was investigating involved and I said that was between me and my client. He followed up by asking if anything suspicious had happened so far, something that might help; I said it was the dullest case I'd ever worked and I expected to be leaving the city soon.

Just then Bennet got a call on his mobile phone. He stepped back a few steps and turned sideways. He stood up straighter and mumbled a few questions, and, nodded out of habit despite being involved in a phone conversation when he got the answers. "They just pulled a black Peugeot out of the Bow River."

Gimlet informed me they were hauling me in as a material witness. I was given five minutes to get dressed, a painful process. A grape-colored bruise occupied about as much space on my leg as Canada does on the map of the continent. Every step filled me with searing pain, but I refused any help on the walk from my hotel to the car. After a short drive and a hobbling walk through a parking lot, I was brought by the two detectives into a perfectly square brick building and seated in a small, painfully bright interview room with my back to the door. The detectives remained standing, glaring at me.

I heard lumbering steps and then the door opened behind me. A bear of a man plodded in and walked to the other side of the small table. He was even taller than Bennet. He looked likely to burst out of his brown slacks and shirt. His red tie looked more like a leash on his tree stump of a neck. His bulk suggested a layer of fat concealing a thicker layer of muscle underneath. He had gnarly, strong-looking hands, and thick forearms burst out of rolled-up sleeves. As he leaned into my face, I got a generous view of a red nose full of burst capillaries, and more hair jutting out between his ears and nostrils than on his head. He dismissed Gimlet and Bennet who exchanged more glances on the way out. I wondered what that meant. He introduced himself as Captain Trent. "I don't have much use for philosophers," he growled, "but no one murders visiting intellectuals in my city and gets away with it. You may confess now."

This wasn't good. I thought I might not make it out of the room with enough sense left to finish the investigation if I wasn't careful, I'd seen his type before. "I'd like to cooperate," I stalled, "but I want to make sure my statement gets recorded right. Can we get someone from the public defender's office to help us out?"

Something large whistled through the air and nearly took my head off. From the floor, I saw Trent rub his knuckles. My ear rang as I pulled myself painfully back into the chair. A little seed of rage hatched inside me and began to grow, but I needed to stay cool, I told myself.

"Why did you do it?" Trent demanded.

I changed my mind about disclosing our presence at the fire. Maybe if he had to reckon with my statements related to another crime, one with its own investigator, he'd be more cautious about how he handled me. "I didn't do anything. I don't know where Jacques and Michel went after but where I last saw them was at the Disability Research Institute on the outskirts of town. The

one that is built into a giant foothill, or at least it was before last night. It burned down when we were visiting it. Probably arson. We made it out. They dropped me off at my hotel.”

He considered this with growing incredulity. “I’ve never heard of the place or the fire.” I wasn’t sure if I believed him or not. “And I think you’re stalling.” His lack of curiosity was troubling. I was in for it no matter what, I thought. The best I could do was go down protecting the case.

Trent then asked me who my client was and, figuring he knew already from what the other two detectives said, I told him, “Williamson.”

He asked me what Williamson had hired me to investigate. I thought it might harm the investigation irreparably if I told him that much, so I braced myself and I said, “Fat, lazy cops with hairy fists who ask lame questions and are too illiterate to know where their city’s museums are.” It wasn’t one of my best cracks, but it nevertheless made him think for a minute. Then he reached down, grabbed the leg of my chair and yanked it towards himself throwing me backwards to the floor again. I landed awkwardly on my bruised leg. My body felt impossibly heavy as I got to my feet again, but I tried to hide it so he wouldn’t have the satisfaction.

He reached into a drawer on the table and pulled out a pen and a pad of paper. He slammed the items down in front of me. “That’s enough with the games,” he warned. “I want a detailed statement of everywhere you’ve been and everything you’ve done since you arrived here. Start writing.”

Resigned to my fate, with surprisingly steady hands I did a quick sketch of a pair of lips with a zipper fastening them shut; it was sort of juvenile but I had been spending a lot of time in schools lately and that was the image that came to mind. Then I wrote out a short rebuke for him - two words, seven letters. Then, below this, I wrote, “I want a lawyer.”

Trent watched with a bemused expression as I composed my statement. When I was finished he remarked, “You really are a slow learner.” He got out of his chair, stood over me, rolled his right shoulder a little and planted his feet. I was beginning to wonder if I should say some final prayers just in case there was someone up there to hear them, or if I should stay hard-boiled to my last breath. Then a curious thing happened. Trent appeared to be moved by some other consideration. He relaxed his posture and even sniggered a little, sounding disagreeably like air draining out of a wet inner tube. He picked up the phone in the interrogation room and summoned the two detectives who brought me in. Then he told them to lock me up in their holding cell and see to it that I was transferred as soon as possible to the city’s Remand center to await charges. I wasn’t sure if it was the power of prayer that saved me, since I never quite got around to it, but a wave of relief washed over me and I felt for a second like I was floating. It was followed by a wave of hurt as injuries new and old formed an army and hit me all at once, and then things got hazy.

XVI

I remember little of my time in the holding cell. I must have been concussed again. After a while I was rounded up, handcuffed, and placed on a bus to take me down to the Remand center. It must have been a slow day for crime because I was thankfully the only occupant. It was a large, spider shaped institution, almost completely grey on the outside. I was led, limping, inside. The color palette continued, it was like being inside a storm cloud, minus the humidity. Grey floors, grey ceiling, and grey bars. I was given grey clothes and grey bedding and taken to my cell. It was reasonably clean. It had a grey cot, a metallic grey toilet, and a concrete floor that maintained the drab pattern. I laid on the bed. My leg and head throbbed in a two/four rhythm.

At first I only dozed and hurt, but my thoughts soon came into tighter focus. I considered the new companions who had assisted me on this case and saved my life. Where were they? Were they safe? Could I do anything to assist them? I considered the case so far. Williamson had hired me to find the slow learners, or rather the proper place for the educational category of slow learners. It had been difficult during my investigation so far to keep this distinction straight, and I had often found myself trying to pursue actual students who might be considered slow learners instead. I had been to two schools and talked to five teachers, including Williamson, and a small class of students who may or may not have been slow learners. I had found out quite a bit about these Knowledge and Employability courses. Then there was the museum. I couldn't quite piece together how what I had learned there fit into this investigation. The bleak displays of exclusion, confinement, and eugenics seemed a dark and haunting legacy for any current practice that sought to label and categorize students even for educational purposes.

My meditations were interrupted by two voices. I saw that they belonged to a uniformed guard and a prisoner coming toward my cell. It wasn't the sort of hostile conversation I might have expected. They were debating and laughing amiably about football, the guard extolling the virtues of the rules of the Canadian league and prisoner arguing that America's National Football League had superior rules and entertainment value. With the press of a controller, the prisoner wheeled himself into the cell and actually thanked the officer as he slid the bars closed.

I guessed the new prisoner to be in his fifties from his medium length grey hair and neatly trimmed grey beard. He studied the contents of the cell. "That's what I'm talking about," he noted approvingly as he gestured to something that had escaped my attention; the hand railing along the wall beside the toilet. "Universal Design for Incarceration. You don't see many cells like this." I shifted to a sitting position on my cot to better regard my new cellmate. A spasm of pain shot through my leg, but then went away. I didn't have anything to add to his comment about the cell's accessibility; despite my usually keen observational skills. I wondered why I hadn't noticed the railing. Instead, I asked him what he was in for.

I got one of my assistants to chain me to a chair in the hall of the legislature. There's been some deep cuts to disability services in this province. I came up to help out in the protest."¹

¹ See Climenhaga (2013). When, in 2013, the provincial government of Alberta cut 42 million dollars from the budget of funds that support the community living of adults with intellectual disabilities (P.D.D.), 1000 people with intellectual disabilities and other concerned citizens protested outside the provincial legislature in Edmonton, with smaller protests outside the Premier's constituency office in Calgary, as

“And this was the result,” I stated, referring to his incarceration. Despite my efforts to use my time wisely going over the case, I was still disturbed to be locked up. It bothered me he didn’t seem disturbed as well.

“It’s no big deal. I did five years of hard time as a teenager at a school called the Sam Houston Institute of Technology, I like to call it SHIT for short, for the crime of Muscular Dystrophy. This is a luxury compared to that.”

“How can going to a special school be worse than getting arrested and sent here?” I asked.

“Look, I’ve been arrested for civil disobedience twenty other times before. The cops are usually pretty gentle with cripples, it looks really bad if they’re otherwise. In a way, cops are more scared of protesting cripples than of the Mafia and the Chinese triads combined. Compared to the sadistic therapist who tried to teach me to walk at SHIT, the guards at places like this are like big teddy bears.”

His usage of the word ‘cripple’ bothered me. I tried to say so. “I’m a P.I. investigating a case that has to do with disability...,” I began.

“You must be very skilled,” he interrupted, referring I think to where I had ended up. I felt a flash of anger. My cellmate was a smart ass.²

“And,” I persevered, “I’m starting to learn about how, with all the negative assumptions they carry, how damaging some of the old-fashioned words for disability can be. I’m not sure you should be throwing words like ‘cripple’ around.”

“Who the fuck are you to tell me I can’t say cripple?” my cell mate retorted, showing me, to my consternation, none of the collegial manners that he’d shown the guard.

“Whoa there gunner,” I shot back, “I’m on your side here. I’m investigating the disappearance of a group of sort of disabled students, slow learners. I’ve been all around the disability community. I’ve been to the disability museum. I’ve seen the pain all this sorting and exclusion has caused disabled people. I can’t tell you how sorry I felt for them, how poorly things were handled, how angry it all made me.”

well as in *Red Deer, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat*. Max’s fictionalized fellow prisoner was a part of this protest.

² This character is a fictionalized version of the satirical blogger Smart Ass Cripple, who is himself an exaggeratedly autobiographical literary alter ego of journalist Mike Ervin. I have attempted to replicate the sarcasm and artful profanity of Ervin’s literary creation as well as his (Smart Ass Cripple’s) expressed views on certain disability issues, directly quoting on occasion. I thought it would be illuminating for Max to talk to this character. Though Ervin gave me his blessings for this meeting of characters, I did not interview him on his views on slow learners. What follows is extrapolation only, based on his writing in the blog.

“How what was handled?” My cell mate was glaring at me.

“You know, the...” suddenly, I didn’t know what to say.

“The burden?” he insinuated.

“That’s not what I said,” I protested.

“Well, what else does one handle? I *am* a burden to society,” he leered. “I once added up all the taxpayer costs for my assistants, my pit crew to help me take a leak, sit on the crapper, get dressed, and brush my teeth ...”³

“I don’t need to hear about this,” I remarked.

“And I don’t need your sympathy, or help from anyone who thinks I need to be handled.”

Coming to the understanding that maybe my cellmate did have a point about how I was explaining myself, I did something I rarely do. I apologized. He accepted this and we shook hands and exchanged introductions. He asked me to call him Smart Ass Cripple or SAC for short, which I found odd until he explained that was the handle he went by on his blog. Taking him as something of an authority in issues of disability rights, based on what he’d already told me about his history as an activist, I asked him if I told him the story of my case more slowly if he might be able to give me some advice. I began to tell him about the case of the slow learners.

After I told SAC about the separate classes I’d seen for students labelled as slow learners and students labelled as having intellectual disabilities, he interrupted me by admitting “I don’t know much about this category of kids you’re talking about,” and then went on to say “though I did write on my blog about some of the other state-run schools for students with disabilities. My favorite was the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Youth. I wondered if anyone in the outside community would offer a venue for their prom. Imagine the Holiday Inn Marquee, “WELCOME PROM FOR THE FEEBLE-MINDED.”⁴ SAC’s voice rose in fantastical speculation and, though still feeling a little stung from my prior scolding, I grinned despite myself. It was a relief hearing this disgusting label that had informed so much of the oppression I’d learned about in the museum being wielded so sardonically. It drained a little of the poison out.

I directed the conversation back from this amusing tangent and took SAC through the rest of the case. When I had finished I had explained Williamson’s original desperate call and all my subsequent travels, injuries, discoveries, and suspicions. “Wow,” he remarked. “that’s quite an adventure. And you say you still can’t find the slow learners?”

“Not really. I’ve come close to finding them several times, but every time I think I have them they slip through my fingers. None of the teachers I talked to gave me a clear sense of where exactly the slow learners were. I came pretty close in the classroom I visited, but in talking to the

³ Smart Ass Cripple, (January 30, 2012)

⁴ Smart Ass Cripple (January 23, 2012)

kids I realized that, technically, everyone in this class was probably in the intellectual disability category and technicalities aside, they seemed too complicated to all be called slow learners. Plus a lot of the things they said seemed pretty apt, not slow at all. I thought I'd found traces in the museum, but disability was understood so differently back then it was hard to get a clear sense."

"Understood?" SAC interjected. "Is that how you still see it despite all your experiences in this case? Disability isn't just understood by society; it's created by society."

"What?" I blurted. "That doesn't make any sense to me. Disabilities are in people."

"Are you so sure about that?" he asked. "For too long we've focused on the medical model, calling a disability a defect, a problem in the individual. This leads to obsessions with curing the disability, excluding the people with disabilities, making all kinds of decisions on their behalf and at best a charity mentality in those who think they are trying to help us. These defects in thinking are societal."⁵

I thought of my travels through the museum. Looking at the situation through the lens my cell mate had just provided me, I realized that in every exhibit I saw it was difficult to separate the actual disability from the (usually negative) cultural response to it. The shifting ways disability was understood over time was good evidence of this point. The medieval idea of idiot was different from the categorical construct of the same name the early twentieth century IQ pioneers had come up with, and the learning disabled child was a very recent invention altogether. I still thought he was taking things too far though. "I see your point about culture," I offered in partial concession, "but disabled people have disabilities." That sounded lame and circular as soon as it came out of my mouth, and, in fact, he rolled his eyes as soon as I said it.

SAC sighed, and then went into an explanation. "Well, some people have some functional impairment. They need help, though it's not just them. All people regardless of disability need help with some things if you think about it, even though most of us are too individualistic to admit it. I once read, "*What is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body.*"⁶ We all get along by using tools to compensate for our physical limits, living together in communities, and helping each other out. But the forms of help cripples, for example, require has been a symbol of defect, an excuse for exclusion. Institutions have often failed to acknowledge that we need to realize the same basic rights for participation that everyone else gets. They have deemed us incapable of participation or deemed our inclusion too expensive. Or they have said we have to be cured before we can participate. I, for one, have nightmares about getting cured. I make my living telling cripple jokes on my blog."

I ignored the wisecrack and thought about the rest for a minute. Remembering that slow learner wasn't a disability category, I still thought I saw that medical model he was talking about at work in the definitions of slow learner I'd read. "I can see that in my current case," I admitted. "Slow learners are excluded from regular classes because of their so-called 'slowness.' Maybe the remedial classes they are placed in try to cure their slowness so they can participate in regular schooling. But is that a bad thing?"

⁵ Smith (2010, p. 8)

⁶ Davis (2002, p. 32)

Before SAC could reply, I added a broader question, “If some disabilities are curable or treatable what’s wrong with funding and researching and working on cures and treatments?”

“Well, nothing in one sense. Some of these things might be required for a person with a particular disability to participate in society at all or even to survive. But you always have to ask who the treatment is actually for. As for cures, the same thing can be said. Sure some conditions can be cured but around twenty percent of the population in the country where I live have diagnosed disabilities. Does this mean that any so-called uncured person in this group is an incomplete human being? I remember, Jerry Lewis once held up a kid with Muscular Dystrophy during a televised charity telethon and said, ‘God goofed up – it’s time for us to fix his mistakes.’⁷ What about curing society *from* a particular disability by getting rid of people with that disability? Like curing deafness and as a result getting rid of deaf culture or curing dwarfism and Down Syndrome by preventing these people from ever being through genetic screening. I once wrote something like ‘*I’ve always been tempted to form an exclusive cripple fraternity called Coulda Beena Borted.*’⁸

The last part of his rant had me cringing and smiling all at once. It was fascinating listening to SAC, I thought he would have made a pretty good detective. Still, somewhere during our conversation, I wondered if we’d strayed too far from the thread of what I asked for his help about. “Ok, I get the medical model stuff now,” I said, “but do you think any of this might help me find slow learners?”

“It might help you better understand the ways in which schools create slow learners,” he asserted, “and how to transcend these definitions and consider what their inclusion and participation might actually look like in a school setting. I’m no expert but I know what it doesn’t look like... SHIT, the Sam Houston Institute of Technology I was telling you about earlier. Participation, inclusion *for me, [means] when you know if you need equipment, you can get equipment - you can get wheelchairs, when you know that you can get accessibility in your environment, that your personal and public transportation is accessible and available, when you need the assistance of others in terms of attendants and you know that whatever you need in terms of physical assistance to get through your day that it’s going to be there and you won’t have to be broke to get it, when you know that those things are in place and you can complete your day successfully with the help of others and call your own shots and accomplish what you want to accomplish, when all that support is there, people that I’ve seen tend to view their disabilities as no big deal.*⁹ Find a way for whatever these kids struggle with to become no big deal to them.”

Suddenly SAC abandoned his eloquence and demanded, “Why the fuck are you looking at me like that?”

⁷ See Richardson (Producer and Director, 2005). In addition to depicting Ervin’s description of this moment in one of Jerry Lewis’s labour day telethons for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the *The Kids are All Right* film chronicles Ervin’s journey from being one of “Jerry’s Kids”, the ‘adorable’ children with MD portrayed as objects of pity in the telethons to one of “Jerry’s Orphans,” a group of former Jerry’s kids who, as adults, began to protest the telethons as demeaning and unhelpful.

⁸ Smart Ass Cripple (July 2, 2012)

⁹ Richardson (2005)

The ongoing novelty of this case for me was not good for the poker face I try to keep as a key investigative tool. I was feeling a strong current of admiration at SAC's last statements, and my countenance must have betrayed me. Why this angered him I had no idea. God, he was touchy, either that or he was just enjoying making me squirm. However I offended him now, I didn't want to aggravate the situation further by saying anything. Maybe I'd overestimated how much common ground we'd negotiated.

He glared at me for a full two minutes. Finally he said, "There's something else you need to learn if you want to avoid making things even worse for slow learners than they are already."

I asked him what it was, and all he said was, "Later." We lapsed into a long silence. I wondered what I had done to end our conversation on such a sour note and what this new thing he thought I needed to know so badly was. After a while, SAC stopped glaring at me and his eyes glazed over in deep contemplation. I wondered if that was the same sort of look I had when I was starting to put a case together.

XVII

A buzzer rang signifying, as a prisoner who walked by told us, a couple of hours of recreational time.

"Follow me," SAC ordered, jamming the controller on his motorized wheel chair forward. He was out the door and half way down one of the halls before he observed I wasn't with him and he circled back and waited as I struggled out of my cot and began to walk gingerly in the direction he had initially gone. He accompanied and accommodated me, now manipulating his controls for minimal speed. I wished I had the scooter I used at the museum but then I realized it might be good to get some strength back into my leg. I thought I might have to kick someone with it before the case was done.

"What the fuck happened to you?" SAC asked as I hobbled down the hall beside him.

"Choking, wrestling, falling, Peugeot accident, smoke inhalation, interrogation," I listed.

"All that trouble from looking for a category of children in schools," he mused.

"More dangerous than you might think," I asserted.

"You must be one hell of a detective," he mused again.

I let the Smart Ass have that one. He turned right then and I followed. We entered a small but surprisingly well stocked prison library.

As soon as we got into the library SAC zoomed over to a computer station, and, as I limped over to catch up with him, began to enter the demographic information that would allow him to access the system. He then clicked through a multi section user agreement to log in. A couple of guards

stationed at the back of the library regarded all this warily. I hoped he wasn't planning on going on any sites that would be harmful for his conduct record at the institution.

"What's your favorite Helen Keller joke?" SAC asked me.

I couldn't think of any but said that I'd definitely heard some. In a similar vein, SAC began an internet search of "slow learner jokes." This was the first one that came up.

*Why does Sea World have a seafood restaurant - I'm halfway through my fish burger and I realize, 'Oh My God... I could be eating a slow learner!'*¹⁰

"That's not very helpful," I said. "It's not even the right species." Then I remembered all that social Darwinism stuff and I wasn't so sure. He pulled up another one:

*A teacher called upon the classroom to make sentences with words previously chosen. The teacher smiled when Pete, a slow learner, raised his hand to participate during the challenge of making a sentence with the words Defeat, Defense, Deduct, and Detail. Pete stood thinking for a while, all eyes focused on him while his classmates awaited his reply. Smiling, he proudly said, 'defeat of deduct went over defense before detail.'*¹¹

"That's not really slow either," I said. "This kid used what little homespun vocabulary he had better than anyone in class might have used the real words. If anything he was too practical. Besides, how much can a couple of stupid jokes really mean?"

"You know what Freud said about jokes," SAC offered.

I found my poker face again for that comment. I *had* gone to college. I even went to some classes. But I only sort of knew. I knew more clearly that the throwing and receiving of wisecracks on the streets I roamed was a complex martial art that one's credibility as an operative depended on mastering.

SAC widened the search to 'slow learner insults.'

We came to the example I remembered from the Minister of Education in Alberta, the one that I'd read about in the restaurant. He had used 'slow learner,' applied to himself as a sort of reverse insult to accuse his opponent of being obscure.¹² I told SAC that in my own practice, I sometimes pulled the Columbo act too,¹³ pretending not to understand things I understood well in order to lure suspects I was questioning into revealing more information than they wanted to. I'd recalled saying, "Forgive me for being such a slow learner, but..." before launching into an inquiry that was fatal to the alibi of some cutie who figured he was too smart to get caught.

"Clever," SAC remarked. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

¹⁰ "Why does Sea World..." (1997)

¹¹ "A Teacher Called Upon the Classroom..." (n.d.)

¹² Alberta Teachers' Association (2009)

¹³ stndrds79 (2010)

Next we read about how, after President Obama had twice told American corporations and that going to Las Vegas for conventions was an irresponsible move during the recent economic crisis, the mayor of Las Vegas called him a ‘slow learner.’ In the mayor’s opinion, Obama had failed to realize the impact his words might have on the city’s tourist industry.¹⁴

“How can ‘slow learner’ be missing in schools like your client says it is? It looks like it’s all over the place everywhere else,” SAC remarked, echoing a mystery Williamson had earlier identified.

“I didn’t believe him about schools at first either,” I said, “but there’s some evidence to support the claim. It really isn’t out there very much in schools. At least not in the open.”

“What are schools then, cultural fallout shelters? How can it be out in broader society, but not in schools?” SAC demanded.

“That’s an interesting question and I don’t know the answer,” I admitted, “but that’s not what I’m trying to find out. I’m looking for slow learners in schools, period. How is all this pop culture stuff going to help with that?” I didn’t want to spend the whole recreation period reading jokes and quotes and be left with nothing to take away to help me with the investigation.

“Okay, okay,” SAC relented. “I’ll get to the point. I just find this all kind of interesting. Let me show you the main thing I wanted you to see.”

With that, he searched for, found, and opened a scene from the film *Forrest Gump*.¹⁵ The scene he had selected depicted some I.Q. politics; that is, a mother’s parental advocacy ‘saving’ the titular slow learner who had tested on the cusp of having a full-fledged intellectual disability from being placed in a special education classroom. The bell curve that I’d been learning so much about made an appearance when Forrest’s borderline intellectual functioning was dramatically illustrated as the principal patronizingly pointed to what ‘normal’ cognitive functioning was, and then pointed to the bottom margin of an oversized page to show Forrest’s score. Williamson had described a very similar practice of an educator or psychologist pointing to a spot on the bell curve while explaining the results of intelligence testing to a child’s parents. Forrest’s mom initially inquired about what ‘normal’ really meant, but when she saw she wasn’t getting anywhere she took a less theoretical approach by having sex with the principal in exchange for his reversing the placement. I went and saw the film when it came out, I thought it wasn’t bad though maybe a bit maudlin, but I had forgotten about that scene.

“Now check this out!” SAC demanded, opening a google preview of a section of a popular novel. The book was called *Lottery*. In the section SAC showed me, Perry, the protagonist, was saved from being diagnosed with an intellectual disability when his Grandmother said he was too sick to be at his best on the day he’d written his first, low scoring, I.Q. test.¹⁶ She demanded a retest and prevailed over the protestations of school district personnel. Perry scored one point higher

¹⁴ Coolican (2010, para. 14)

¹⁵ I actually viewed DVDs of both films and read a hard copy of the novel mentioned in this section, SAC’s internet search is a plot construct of convenience.

¹⁶ Wood (2004, p. 35)

and avoided the categorical diagnosis of intellectually disabled. SAC then scrolled back to the very first sentence of the book *Lottery*. “My name is Perry L. Crandall and I am not retarded.”¹⁷ Then he showed me some parts where Perry and his friends repeatedly corrected anyone who confused his slowness with an intellectual disability. Next he pointed out a part where Perry read about a convicted murderer on death row who had the opportunity to mount a legal defense of incapacity based on an I.Q. in the sixties, but who chose to remain on death row instead of publicizing his disability.¹⁸

“I get it,” I said. “Being a slow learner is depicted as better than having an intellectual disability. I already knew about this hierarchy. Of course it appears in books and films.”

“It’s not that simple,” SAC said. “Look how *Lottery* and *Forrest Gump* emphasize how narrowly each protagonist qualifies as normal or non-disabled. Perry escaped the diagnosis of disability by a single point and Forrest gets to be non-disabled because his mother looks hot to the perverted arbiter in charge of deciding such things. And even though they are not technically disabled, their being slow is still shown as a pretty sad state a lot of the time.”

He advanced to a scene when Forrest was informed by his on again/off again love interest Jenny that they’ve had a child together. He tearfully asked, “Is he smart, or is he like,” before proving unable to finish his statement verbally and pointing nervously to himself. Then, he showed me a part in *Lottery* where Perry tried to do his laundry and house cleaning by himself for the first time after his grandmother who used to help him with these things passed away. He ended up flooding the house and bursting out in tears.

“And when it isn’t sad, being slow is goddamn funny, I mean in the laughing-*at* sense.” showed me another scene from *Forrest Gump*. This time Forrest was part of the collegiate All-American football team. He was being honored at the White House. He failed to fully grasp the gravity of the situation but was impressed by the free food and beverages. He drank fifteen free Dr. Pepper soft drinks. Then when greeting President Kennedy, Forrest blurted, “I gotta pee.”

“Hilarious,” remarked SAC flatly. And then typed another search term into the computer. This one opened a film called *Being There* that I’d seen as a much younger man.¹⁹ I vaguely recalled it was about somebody named ‘Chance’, a middle-aged ‘slow’ person whose whole sheltered existence had consisted of gardening and watching television. He got cast out into the real world when his wealthy benefactor died and Chance was evicted from the mansion. In the scene SAC played for me, Chance, when confronted by a group of African-American muggers, took out his television remote control, pointed it at a mugger, and tried to change the channel away from the unpleasant scene in front of him. He was surprised when the muggers remained present.

“That’s a good one,” SAC commented. “Racist too.”

¹⁷ Ibid. (p. 1)

¹⁸ Ibid. (p. 34)

¹⁹ Ashby & Braunsberg (1979)

“I get it, I get it,” I insisted to SAC, “but why so many examples? I already know that the label provokes feelings of ridicule and superiority. Many of the IQ scientists I saw in the museum practically jeered at anyone they considered to have less than normal intelligence in their writing.”

“It gets worse,” SAC warned me. Then he opened footage from *Forrest Gump* on the computer again and showed me a bunch of scenes in short succession. These were all very different than the buffoon-type scenes we’d just watched and I wondered why SAC had a problem with them. Forrest was a private in the army amazing his drill sergeant with his obedience and his ability to assemble his rifle in record time. Forrest, in soldier garb, was embracing Jenny, who was clad in a flowing hippy-style dress, in front of the Washington monument during an anti-war protest, symbolizing a moment of peace between the two factions, as the crowd cheered. Forrest was inspiring John Lennon to write the lyrics to *Imagine*. Forrest was sporting long hair and a beard and running across America for some reason.

“Jesus in Nikes,” SAC quipped. Then he showed me some passages from *Lottery* again. His face was contorted with disgust as he scrolled through the pages. In the scenes SAC pointed out, Perry had won millions in a lottery but was besieged by greedy relations who were after his fortune. Perry, in a moment of clarity, gave away his fortune, not because he was duped, but as an act of free will that seemed wiser and wiser as the novel progressed. Despite their manipulations, the dysfunctional relations really did need the money more than he did, and his act of generosity cleansed his life of their demands and interference.

SAC ripped the book out of my hand and opened footage from *Being There* on the computer again. He shot through a bunch of scenes where Chance was talking to people, laying down a ‘simple brand of wisdom’ on every one he talked to, except that he didn’t know he was being wise at all. All he was doing was making literal statements about gardening that everyone misread as brilliant aphorisms about the economy and politics. In the end, he was being considered as a midterm replacement for the president. In the last scene, inexplicably, he walked on water.

“Look!” SAC said. “He’s a slow learner Jesus too!” and then he threw up his hands. One of the guards looked at us suspiciously.

“I don’t get it,” I complained. “What’s your problem? I mean it’s all a bit cheesy but these are all positive scenes. How can this be worse than the ridicule in all those other parts?”

“Yeah, but it’s all this superhero shit. There’s even a word for it in the disability community - the supercrip stereotype.²⁰ I need that like I need a hole in the head. The same kind of thing happens in real life stories, the sort of inspiration porn the media always shows about people with disabilities. I was in the audience of an Oprah episode one time, I wrote about it on my blog. *She did an inspirational piece on a woman with no arms. She was driving a car with her feet, changing her baby’s diapers with her feet, doing with her feet everything the fully-limbed do with their hands.*”²¹

²⁰ Martiniello (2009)

²¹ Smart Ass Cripple (January 21, 2011)

“But that is impressive,” I argued. “Why shouldn’t a story like that be celebrated?”

“Because how are you supposed to convince people you want to live an ordinary life like everyone else when they’re of the mindset that everything you do, ordinary shit like eating breakfast, is heroic? That’s worse than the jokes. Whatever you do, don’t make these slow learners appear as heroes. They’d be better off staying lost.”

And with that, I finally understood why my look of admiration back in our cell had angered him so much. I thought Williamson probably felt similarly when, in addition to saying straightforwardly negative things about the students he worked with, people sometimes described the students and their struggles in similarly overwrought ways. I also suspected Williamson would object to anyone depicting him as especially heroic for working with these students when, in fact, he told me he enjoyed it and preferred these duties to the “regular” teaching he had done previously.

Playing devil’s advocate though, after a respectful pause, I began to protest that I’d read about how people with disabilities were sometimes regarded with awe, like symbols of grace in earlier cultures and about how the mad and the palace fools always got the best line in Shakespeare. SAC just waved me off.

“The kind of shit I just showed you is not *that*. And even if it was, a time-honored stereotype is still a stereotype,” he insisted.

I wasn’t sure I agreed, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t see how arguing this point would be helpful for slow learners.

He sighed and said, “That’s all I got. I don’t know what else to tell you, I’m no expert. I hope you find these slow learners, or actually like I said, maybe I don’t. From what you’ve told me about the way things have gone until now, I’m not sure finding them will benefit them much. Maybe you should keep it to yourself if you find them. Have you considered that?”

I admitted that I hadn’t. I said I wasn’t sure how my paying client would feel about this suggestion, but I didn’t always do what my clients said when issues of justice were involved. He nodded. A buzzer rang for head count and we put the items back on a return cart and made our way back to the cell. The walk took a while with my injury and our having to fight our way through the rest of the prisoners returning to their cells. We fell to talking of other things, none of which I remember, but I remember it as pleasant despite the throbbing in my leg. I was appreciative of SAC’s advice and I hoped it would help with the case, but as we neared our cell, I remembered that if I really wanted to find the slow learners I had to get back on the outside to do it.

XVIII

When we got back, Trent was standing in our cell, like a bear that had taken over a cave. A shiver crawled slowly down my spine, like a tarantula on a Sunday stroll. Trent told me I was being released and to go with him. I was too surprised to say anything.

“Max here has told me about your methods,” SAC jumped in. “How do we know it’s safe for him to go with you?”

“Tell your friend to mind his own business,” Trent growled to me.

“I get it, we’re playing *address the vert*.²² Well tell this guy he’s an asshole and we’re not letting you go with him,” SAC instructed me, looking defiantly into Trent’s eyes.

Trent surprised me by appearing more worried than enraged. He looked around for where the video surveillance was, turned his hulking back to the camera to inhibit sound recording or even lip reading, and quietly, through clenched teeth said, “My bosses don’t even know I’m here. We gotta get you out of here now before they figure us out. No time to explain.”

There was something in his urgency that struck us both. Maybe not enough, but something. SAC raised his eyebrows, and then sort of shrugged indicating it was up to me. I took a leap of faith and began to follow Trent out of the cell. I stopped and turned to SAC and said, “So long friend,” and I added a piece of advice I have trouble following myself, “Stay out of trouble.” I started walking again.

“Hey Hunter,” he called, and as I glanced back one more time he slowly raised his middle finger at me, grinning. I took this as him wishing me good luck.

I was limping too slowly for him, so Trent grabbed my shoulder and began to drag me. I objected and he ignored me. He dragged me down a hall, past a checkpoint with a sentry with whom he exchanged grim pleasantries, and to a station where I signed for my possessions and was asked to exchange my grey jumpsuit for the rumpled clothes I’d been arrested in. As I was changing, Trent growled for me to hurry up - a guard told him to relax and Trent gave him an impossible instruction in reply. We cleared the final gate, and Trent dragged me even faster across a parking lot. He threw me in the back of a big brown unmarked cruiser, slammed the door shut, and tore out of the parking lot before I could assume a sitting position in the back seat. After I recovered my balance I realized Williamson was sitting in the front passenger seat. His eyes widened in relief, and he managed a weak smile but he didn’t say anything.

“I’m gonna get busted down to crossing guard for this,” Trent grumbled.

“Why are you doing it?” I managed.

“I’m sorry about the other day. I had orders. Orders I couldn’t refuse. Past misdeeds held over my head. I didn’t want to interrogate you, but they insisted. I held back, though. Then I looked for a way to make it right.” He took a hard right, nearly knocking me over in the back seat again.

“Didn’t feel like it to me,” I noted.

“The treatment you got wasn’t my A-game. Not even close.” Trent replied.

²² Smart Ass Cripple’s term for people able to walk (September 14, 2012)

I shuddered at that.

“They wanted you comatose in a prison infirmary awaiting trumped up charges you couldn’t answer to.”

“You nearly got me there. What stopped you?” I asked.

“The act you pulled in the interrogation room reminded me of how my kid acts in school. Then I heard myself calling you a slow learner, which is what they’re always calling him. Oh, he’s squirrely all right. It’s hard to get him to do anything he doesn’t want to, and he’s got a smart mouth on him, too. Sometimes the things he says make me laugh in spite of myself. I’ve never had much luck talking any sense into him, but that slow learner thing is trumped up, it’s just been an excuse not to try harder to work with the little brat. When I heard myself call you that and I thought about your case, I realized it was too important to let the institution shut it down.” Trent said that last bit with something like conviction.

Something wasn’t right. “But I didn’t tell you anything about the case,” I protested.

“We already knew all about the case. You’re about as subtle as a jackhammer with your methods. You attract attention.” He chuckled, sort of. It was a horrible sound.

Williamson, who on account of being out of his element had remained nervously silent until now, offered something up. “Officer Trent told me Jacques and Michel are fine.”

“Yeah. They’ll be okay, aside from hurt feelings,” Trent confirmed. “Once the video of the three of you surfaced, they were rounded up and sent on the first flight back to France. The authorities around here don’t mind if they speak at conferences and bring in tourist dollars, but the minute they start poking their noses into the way things work in our institutions....” He didn’t finish his sentence.

“Who burned down the museum; who parked the Peugeot in the river?” I demanded. “Was this all an inside job?”

“Beats me,” Trent replied. “That line from the good book about alms-giving - don’t let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. Change hand to tentacle and add about six more of them. And then change the part about alms-giving to alms-keeping, but still with the other tentacles being none the wiser. That’s how the institution operates.” Williamson and I exchanged glances over that one.

We drove for around three quarters of an hour, south of the police station where I’d been held, and past my hotel, and if I was piecing the directions in the layout of the city together, past Williamson’s school too. We arrived at what looked from the outside to be a non-descript suburban house. I realized it was Williamson’s. Trent asked Williamson if he was sure we’d be safe there.

“I don’t have much experience with this, but out in the light is probably the safest place for us,” Williamson replied. Trent nodded. We all got out of the car. Trent opened the trunk and retrieved my suitcase for me. “Supposed to be in evidence,” he said. I thanked him and took it, but the weight made me stumble. Williamson took it for me.

“Good luck,” Trent said. “I hope you find some justice for these kids.” He shook Williamson’s hand. I saw Williamson wince a little at the strength of his grip. Then Trent said, “No hard feelings,” and offered his hand to me. It took all the resolve I had to accept it when I caught a full view of that huge paw of his again.

XIX

Entering Williamson’s front door into a living /dining room area, I noticed some family pictures. I asked where the rest of his family was. His wife, he said, was still at her job and his daughter was at a friend’s house. There was bit of hesitation in his voice when he said this. I wasn’t sure why. I sat down at the kitchen table, and cleared out a space to rest my arms by moving some of the documents and books that littered the table to one of the chairs instead. Demonstrating strong competencies with a toaster and microwave oven, Williamson made us some bacon sandwiches and, with apologies for not having anything stronger, he got a couple of beers out of his refrigerator too. After a few bites and a few gulps, I reflected that I was beginning to feel ‘normal’ again. Then, reflecting on my experiences with ‘normal’ lately, I thought, more precisely, that I was beginning to feel a renewed sense of personalized equilibrium. I was beginning to doubt if I had much of a handle on what normal was. Williamson shoved another pile of books to the side and joined me at the table.

When we were finished eating, Williamson explained how Trent had contacted him about my arrest and that they had hatched the plan to release me into his custody. Now that I was in a position to answer to charges in a public forum, Trent had figured that whatever the authorities had tried to pin on me would be quietly withdrawn. I filled Williamson in on all the developments in the investigation since our last meeting. He listened intently, nodding in agreement and smiling when I told him about the students I met at the school. He looked troubled when I told him what I’d seen at the museum. Then he got very quiet and just stared at his hands when I told him what Smart Ass Cripple had said about the medical model and charity models of disability, and supercrips, and about slow learners maybe being better off lost. He didn’t even laugh when I repeated a couple of SACs more memorable lines to him.

“If you look at it that way, that’s what I do all day, I guess,” he finally said. “Create and distribute disability.” It sounded to me like he was feeling sorry for himself.

“Maybe you need to get your job title changed.” If he was going to beat up on himself, I thought it might be fun to pile on too. But then he just kept morosely staring at his hands, as if he had built all the sorting machinery himself and only discovered how dangerous it was to operate it once it was out on the market maiming everyone. I thought he was being too hard on himself, and further, that his moping would slow down the investigation, so I tried to offer up something to assuage his conscience a bit.

“That can’t be all you do,” I mused. “Even if you aren’t exactly replacing or fixing the system, don’t you at least try to use it to the advantage of the kids you work with? The system *I* work in,” I offered, “seems designed to unleash justice for my clients in the same way the claw of a hammer is designed to open a beer bottle. You know, not a recommended usage. But if you fumble around enough and then apply some force at the right moment, sometimes you get somewhere.”

Williamson thought about that for a minute and then smiled a little. He held up a document. “You see this?” he said. “I was working with this girl who wasn’t a very strong silent reader. So we started reading her exams out loud to her and she started doing much better. She was pretty perceptive if she could hear the words too. I mean she *could* read silently to some degree, but she just needed that little bit extra for the subtleties of the questions to really register with her. But the problem was, she didn’t have any diagnosed disabilities on record and her grade twelve diploma exams were coming up fast. So I talked to her for a while about this and it came out that she’d been in a car accident and experienced pretty bad whiplash, with neck and back pain and headaches. So we got her coded as having a medical disability.”

“Were the headaches causing the reading problem?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Williamson replied. “Her reading comprehension grades were pretty low even before the car accident. She probably wasn’t a very good silent reader even when she was healthy. But I was able to use her whiplash to get her disability coding which got her audio CDs as an accommodation for her diploma exams. Because that’s what her real problem was, academically, silent reading.”

Something occurred to me, based on what I’d learned so far. “Couldn’t one of your district psychologists have tested her to see if she had an actual reading disability? Why the indirect route?”

“The indirect route was more direct,” replied Williamson. “It is expensive and time-consuming for the district psychologists to test students and there’s no guarantee that just because we observed she handled assessment better that way, it would show up as a formal learning disability in a formal psycho-educational test and qualify her for accommodations.”

“Williamson!” I scolded, though more in amusement. “Isn’t that taking advantage?”

“I don’t know,” Williamson replied. “If the accommodations were really a validity threat to the exams they wouldn’t allow them for anyone. I’m just using the tools I have to make a rigid system a little more flexible for the kids who need it.”

I thought of another question, though I was reluctant to ask it just as I was getting Williamson to cheer up a bit. But before we took this way of playing the system he was describing out on the road, I thought we better look it over and kick the tires. “But doesn’t that get you back to creating disability - like you were so sad about just a minute ago.”

“Yeah, I suppose it does,” he replied, sounding a little deflated again.

“I guess that’s one way to reduce the stigma of disability, though,” I said. “Code everybody as disabled. What would normal have to say about that?”

We contemplated this ridiculous possibility over our beers. I unthinkingly shifted position a bit and a pain shot through my leg. I must have winced visibly.

Williamson noticed this and took a good look at me. “I’m sorry you’re getting so banged up working this case,” he offered, “but I warned you it would be dangerous, especially proceeding the un-methodical way you have been. I’m worried; I don’t want you to disappear too.”

“You’ve talked about the danger many times,” I observed, “and I’m beginning to see what you mean. But who is responsible for all of this danger? It’s all been shadows until now.”

“It’s often hard to say,” said Williamson. “Trent said the authorities.”

“Which authorities?” I asked.

Williamson had no answer for that. Putting that concern on the back burner, I asked him what all the books were for.

“Kind of like your cold case files,” Williamson smiled, taking pride in dropping a bit of detective jargon on me, though in reality I’d only ever heard the term on television. “These books are all from between the 1950s to 1980s when people still used the term ‘Slow Learner’ a lot more openly. I’d prefer something more recent, but there really isn’t that much being written about slow learners in contemporary educational research. Even if you weren’t interrupted by a chokehold in the library, you wouldn’t have found much more than you did. We need to go through these texts. We still need to learn more about how this category was established.”

“Why?” I demanded. “I’ve already spent too long with my nose in books during this case. I need to get out there - I need to interview the living!”

“But you said that, except for a few fleeting glimpses, you had trouble finding slow learners in the museum,” Williamson pointed out. “These books are about slow learners specifically. Maybe we can trace the category and the programming for the category right up to its confusing present.” I heard an echo of Michel in that statement.²³

Williamson picked up a small red book with gold lettering, dated 1957. “This book shows that people have been aware that special educators often make bad placement decisions for a long time. It has several case studies of children who were misdiagnosed with disabilities and/or misplaced in special education. It actually reads ‘*Let us be clear in our minds that a student may be educationally subnormal and yet rightly retained in ordinary school.*’”²⁴

“But does it come out as critical of special education in general?” I asked.

²³ Foucault in Tremain (2008, p. 16)

²⁴ M.F. Cleugh (1957, p. 7)

“Not especially. The author firmly believes in IQ as the best means of comparing a child’s intelligence to that of the general population, and that it is worthwhile do so. He believes in separate classes, and separate schools and even residential schools depending on the level of intellectual disability, and the outright exclusion from schools of children with more severe intellectual disabilities.”

“Then why even bring this up? Why not condemn the author, throw him on the scrap pile with all the other bigots I learned about at the museum?” I asked.

“He also says the rules need to be applied generously and flexibly, with a lot of wiggle room for the complexity of some students. Even though he believes in the usefulness of IQ, he acknowledges the possibility of error and some imprecision in the process. He says a great deal of care is needed in how all of the decision-making about student programming gets done. Even though he’s in favor of special classes in schools for students with milder learning problems, he also worries that the existence of this kind of special class will result in the risk of the school dumping too many students into the special class instead of being more flexible and accommodating in the ‘ordinary classes.’

That rang a bell with me, and I then understood why Williamson was reluctant to wholly disregard the book. It also gave me another question. “Those sound like the same concerns you and some of the people I’ve interviewed have had, and that I pieced together in the later parts of the museum,” I observed.

“There have been *some* changes in special education,” Williamson agreed “but you’re right to some degree. The actual referral process for identifying and programming for students with special education needs that this book describes is very similar to what is still in use in Alberta’s schools.”²⁵

“Okay, so the finding and losing of special needs students hasn’t changed much. How does knowing this help us find slow learners now?” I asked. I was getting irritated with Williamson. I’d lost time when I was locked up, and the trail wasn’t getting any warmer now as we leafed through these faded books.

“I’m getting to that,” said Williamson. His crisis over the value of his work forgotten for now, he seemed a little more confident here, in his own house, poking around these old books that we were supposedly investigating together, even though he’d already found all the parts he wanted to show me. I wasn’t sure I liked this change. He pointed to another three books. “These books are from the seventies and eighties. The definition doesn’t seem as tied to intellectual disabilities anymore. There is still a lot of talk about slow learners, but it’s becoming less clear in the texts exactly who these kids are or what they need.”

Illustratively, he held up a large purple book entitled *Strategies for Success: An Effective Guide for Teachers of Secondary Slow Learners*. “Despite the title,” he noted, “the authors rarely use the words slow learner in the text of the book. In the index under slow learner, it says, “Low

²⁵ See Alberta Education (2004, pp. 6-10)

Achiever.” The book begins with a cautionary tale. It’s about an underprivileged girl named ‘Brenda,’ doesn’t say if she was a case study, a memory, or a fictional invention. After some early, ‘against the odds’ success learning to read in grade one, she fell behind due to several weeks of school absences, and failed to thrive throughout the rest of her schooling. She became a truant, marijuana user and eventual dropout. She hooked up with ‘Joe,’ another poor reader, became pregnant and married young. The authors predict they will have three or four children before the couple can be convinced to use birth control. Their offspring will become another generation of poor readers.”²⁶

“Scary story,” I remarked. “I think I read similar cautionary tales from the eugenicists in the museum. Like a horror movie - the non-readers are multiplying!” Then I asked “But do you get a sense that the authors advance any theories about who slow learners are?”

“It seems to me they define slow learners pretty literally and with reference to reading. Anyone who has proven slow at picking up on reading. And they recommend the same reading program to fix the problem for all of these cases.”

Finally, a real clue. According to this, slow learners could be found through reading assessment.

“What do you think of that?” I asked.

“I don’t know. In a way I agree; if kids have reading problems you have to address them. And like we were talking about the other day, I’ve read other research which actually argues that when it comes to reading problems, the distinction between slow learners, you know, the low average IQ types and kids diagnosed with learning disabilities in reading is actually pretty blurry.²⁷ There is something to responding to reading problems quickly and directly instead of obsessing about the right diagnosis. But I think this approach risks oversimplifying things, too. Potentially useful diagnostic information about impairments should be attended to, not glossed over or ignored.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve also read some brain research which I found pretty convincing that indicated a significant minority of students simply are not wired up to hear the words in their head well when they read silently, and the only way to fairly assess their reading or to use reading for learning with them, is if they are given the chance to hear a text of any real length as they read with their eyes at the same time, you know, the accommodations I was talking about.²⁸ And if you want them to improve as much as they can as silent readers, a much more concentrated approach than would be appropriate for other struggling students is needed.”²⁹

This took me back to the Sputnik exhibit in the museum and the birth of the learning disability label. Even if there was a lot of politics behind the label, what if there was something to the

²⁶ Wilkins & Miller (1983, pp. 3-4)

²⁷ Klassen (2005, p. 307)

²⁸ Wolf & Stoodley (2008, p. 188)

²⁹ Ibid. (p. 194)

science too? Then I remembered what Smart Ass Cripple had told me. I replied to Williamson from that vantage point. “So sometimes the reading problem is in the student then? A whole species of kids with different brains. Sounds like the medical model all over again.”

“And there’s the danger,” said Williamson, finally, “at least part of it. It’s dangerous to ignore a possibility like this, the reading brain thing. Otherwise you end up imposing a program designed to help struggling readers that’s totally unsuited to how some of the kids learn. But it’s dangerous to fully embrace an idea like the differences in the reading brain because our concept of normal is so dominant that once you decide a kid’s brain does reading differently, it kind of paints everything about the kid in this exotic color. What *else* does this impact, how *else* might this kid be different from the rest?”

“And that’s the danger we’ve seen with slow learners too,” I concluded. “The label just keeps accumulating all these characteristics that set the kids apart, even if there is some truth to the characteristics in some cases.”

I felt like we were getting somewhere, despite my annoyance over looking at books instead of talking to people. Even as we were starting to find some traction, however, I was increasingly troubled by Williamson and his confidence looking through these sources. I still couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I thought it might be important in the case. I decided I’d better keep talking to him until I could figure out what it was.

XX

Williamson picked up another book to show me. “Here’s one from the seventies I kind of like,” he announced. He held up a black book affirmingly titled *Yes They Can: A Practical Guide for Teaching the Adolescent Slow Learner*.³⁰ It looked like Williamson had pierced its flesh with a hundred daggers, thin red bits of paper stuck out all over the place marking different passages.

He read me one part.

*The reality as any teacher of the adolescent slow learner will attest, is one that goes much deeper than the fact of intellectual capacity. Students are placed in these classes for a host of reasons. Some are there because they **apparently** lack intellectual capacity. Others have a physical handicap serious enough to retard their progress but not serious enough to warrant special individualized treatment. The adolescent slow learner class has a share of psychologically disturbed students, a sampling ... of students who have been unable to adjust to a new language, and of course a number of behavior problems who have been assigned to the class for lack of a better solution.*³¹

“I like the acknowledgment of the complexity of who slow learners are,” Williamson noted. “The author even goes on to describe a number of students who he worked with as a teacher, and each of these was very unique in his or her learning needs. He had a writing sample on the topic of riding the city bus from a student who’d been diagnosed with schizophrenia and placed in his

³⁰ Weber (1974)

³¹ Ibid (p. 7) emphasis in original.

slow learner class. This kid's writing was so nuanced and expressive I think it would have scored well in any tier of English. Another thing he found out, and I suspect it would hold today, is the relationship between economic class and who gets placed in slow learner classes. He found some research that indicated that, in a cohort of all students enrolled in Toronto's secondary schools in 1970, children of unemployed parents and parents holding jobs involving unskilled labor made up sixty percent of the students placed in special education classes or vocational education classes for slow learners. Children of parents working in professions made up less than five percent of the students in these classes."³²

That reminded me about what I'd seen in the museum by the replica of Sputnik, the more affluent parents who didn't want their academically struggling kids in slow learner programs and who had lobbied for a different label and a different way of supporting them. I told Williamson about that.

"Yeah, we need to keep investigating that one," he agreed. There was that assertiveness and confidence again.

"Another thing he writes about, observed Williamson, "are some prominent myths about slow learners. Among these is, that because they do so poorly in school slow learners, need to be trained more directly for employment through programming that focusses narrowly on employment skills. The author says this is inconsistent with democratizing intentions for education and likely to pass along values of subservience and unquestioning obedience in the students."

I thought Michel might have made a similar observation about how narrowly job-specific vocational training functioned and found myself missing my banished co-investigator.³³

"If he thinks all of this is so complex, what sort of instruction does this author recommend for slow learners?" I asked.

"It's hard to summarize, but basically a competency-based literacy program to try to get the students more actively engaged in school. He lists the main goals of the program as life confidence, self-confidence, and employment confidence and the main competencies as reading, speaking, listening, writing, creative thinking, logical thinking, critical thinking, appreciation and awareness."

"Sounds worthwhile, but vague. Any clue to how it looks under the hood, as you interpret it?"

"A lot of what he writes makes sense. He has a long section on engaging students who have become discouraged with reading and writing. For example, he suggests reading out loud to the class when you want students of a variety of skill levels to be able to discuss the same text, but individualizing more when the tasks involve silent reading. I've always found if I read out loud and we slowed things down and discussed things a lot, I could use a recommended text from

³² Ibid. (p. 17)

³³ See Foucault (1995). Foucault's analysis of the institutional production of "docile bodies" seems particularly applicable to a curriculum for poorly achieving students that narrowly focuses on employment skills training for labor / semi-skilled occupations.

almost any level of high school English to my K & E classes. I teach *Catcher in the Rye* to the kids all the time even though it's supposedly a recommended resource for a more advanced level of English."

"So you pretty much agree with all his advice for working with slow learners?" I asked.

"Not all of it, actually," Williamson said. "He recommends the kids do a lot of word searches for improving their visual acuity; so did the other book with the reading program for slow learners, actually. I'm not so sure about that. I don't enjoy word searches myself. I've found that some kids enjoy them, but these are the same kids who are good at finding the words already and don't need the practice. I'm not convinced it would be worthwhile imposing a word search on a kid who would find it torturous unless you were sure it would make a significant difference in improving his or her reading."

Williamson was at-risk of ranting so I cut him short. "Anything else?"

"Again, there is no mention of accommodations. But I guess the main thing that bothers me is it seems like there is a built in disconnect between the first section that strongly protests stereotyping slow learners, insisting they are heterogeneous group of complex learners, and the second section that proposes a common curriculum for all adolescent slow learners."

That was a lengthy appraisal. It took me a minute to digest all of it. When I did, though, a question jumped out at me. "But wouldn't most of his advice on how to set up an effective classroom apply to any student?"

"Oh," he paused considering. "I hadn't thought of it that way. I guess so, except the stuff about word searches." Boy, he really had an axe to grind about word searches. I wondered if one had stolen his lunch money or kicked sand in his face at some point.

Williamson showed me another book. It was navy blue and had no writing on the front or back. On its spine it bore the title "*Teaching Geometry to Slow Learners*"³⁴ and the date, 1986.

"Why does it look so plain?" I asked.

"It's a master's thesis, not a published book," he explained. "There's a standard format, and a pretty sparse one at that. We have to pay for the binding ourselves so it's no-frills. Anyhow, this one is about using computer assisted instruction to help slow learners in math. But the curious thing is, this author isn't so sure who slow learners are either."

He read a passage to me:

There is still a disagreement as to the definition of a 'slow learner'. There are many terms which are used interchangeably. These include 'culturally deprived', 'educationally disadvantaged', 'underachievers', 'low achievers', as well as slow learners. The inability of educators to agree on one specific term with any degree of precision is due to the

³⁴ Ellis (1986)

*fact that the individuals characterized vary greatly in characteristics and needs, and in part to the fact that each definition is based on different criteria which sometimes erroneously describes the student.*³⁵

Before he read the passage, Williamson let something drop that helped me clarify what was bothering me about his newfound confidence, but I didn't want to pursue it. Not yet. I asked a blander question instead, keeping him talking. "So, did computers help with slow learners?"

"Well, it seems like it. Despite her caveats about who exactly slow learners were, she did find a number of low achieving students at a vocational high school in Calgary to do the research on. From the criteria she describes, these would basically be K & E level students. The students did pick up faster than the control group on the geometric concepts taught, something she attributed to the novelty of the technology, as well as their opportunities to control the pace of the instruction and to receive immediate feedback from the system on how they were doing. You know what else this research noted?" Williamson asked, starting to grin.

"What?" I asked.

*"The microcomputer cannot be viewed as just another electronic fad that will go away if the teacher ignores it for long enough."*³⁶ He giggled at this now-obvious prophesy. He was getting giddy. Maybe it was the half of a beer he'd consumed; maybe it was all the reading. This was perfect.

I chuckled too, but then, when he wasn't expecting it demanded suddenly, "How come you said *we* when you were talking about this thesis?"

Williamson's smile froze and his mouth fell into an oblong shape as he stared off into space while he considered how much he should tell me. People sometimes beat the truth out of themselves if you have the patience to wait them out. "I wrote one of those too a few years back and I am working on another one right now - about slow learners."

I felt my temper flare up. "Is that how you got acquainted with Jacques and Michel and that other methodless method you told me about the day we met?"

"Hermeneutic phenomenology. Yes, it is."

"I suppose you have a supervisor and a committee helping you with your research too?" I'd had some clients from the academic world, so I knew the basics about the process.

He admitted this as well.

"Why didn't you tell me how long you'd been working on this case before we met? Why did you let me risk my neck at the library, and the school, and the museum when you already had all this information? How come you've waited this long to show them to me? And while I'm at it, are

³⁵ Ibid. (p. 10)

³⁶ Ibid. (p. 7)

you so sure you're even actually worried about finding the slow learners and saving them from that crisis in special education you were telling me about? Seems more like you've been worried about finding an interesting and familiar topic to exploit so you can look clever. You're too sure of yourself with these books. Was all that stuff you told me about needing me and my strength all just hot air too? What am I even doing here? Am I just a sideshow?" I had a habit of asking too many questions in a row when I was steamed, and besides, I was feeling Williamson had a lot to answer to just then.

Williamson sighed. It was a heavy sigh, a sincere sigh, it belonged in the Sigh Hall of Fame. "Mr. Hunter," he began, "I am very sorry I didn't tell you more about my own work with this topic. I have my reasons." I made a note not to let him off the hook so easily on this point but allowed him to keep talking for now. "As to your concerns about exploiting this topic, maybe I can tell you a little about the last time I researched an educational issue like this. A few years back, I investigated a different sort of teaching, work experience education. At the time, a part of my job was visiting students who were working with employers as a part of their high school program, making sure the paperwork was done right, helping make sure the workplaces were safe, helping resolve any conflicts that came up between the student and the employer. Actually, many of the students I supervised over the years were from IOP, and later K & E, as the graduation credential for these students required work experience. As I continued to work in the program, I developed some ethical concerns. There were parts of teaching work experience that just didn't make much sense but other aspects that I really liked. At first, the research I was doing didn't sound much different than the standard complaining I do about my job. I was at risk of wasting my time and not really learning or proving anything. Then, with the help of my supervisor, I looked at the issue interpretively, at the level of discourse, and I recruited some theorists, primarily Michel Foucault, to help me. I learned all kinds of things I wouldn't have otherwise. When I finally completed the whole thing, I came to the realization that even though I highly valued work experience as a form of learning for some students, the whole program was just going in one direction with too much momentum - it was a potentially exploitive direction for many students - and I needed to stop teaching it.³⁷ I started teaching more special education classes instead. I wasn't able to fix work experience, but I outlined my concerns about it my thesis, in a summary I prepared for the school district, and later in an article for a teaching magazine.³⁸ I moved myself to a type of teaching I felt I could get behind more, at least at the time, and when I do talk to kids who are considering doing work experience classes, I try to give them what I see as a balanced perspective. In the end, this all felt a lot better than just griping about the work all the time without doing anything. The research made me a more ethical teacher. I am hoping our work with slow learners will help me similarly in this area."

This explanation calmed me a little; it was a reasonably satisfactory answer to my accusation that he was exploiting me and the students. But he was still leaving some things unanswered. I thought a little ridicule might shake the rest of the truth loose. "So, a method saved you, did it? You're a strange one, Williamson. This is what I learn from my methods on pretty much every case. The rich get away with murder, almost everybody's on the take, and if you shake your highball a little, the ice cubes dance in their pretty black dresses."

³⁷ Williamson (2004)

³⁸ Williamson (2005)

“If it’s that bad why do you even keep taking cases?” asked Williamson, with that surprising assertiveness. I could feel him trying to shift the interrogation back onto me.

“It’s kind of absurd, I guess,” I found myself admitting. “It’s like that Greek hero I learned about in college, on one of the days when I decided to change things up and actually went to class. He was condemned for scorning the Gods and sentenced to push the same massive boulder up the same mountain for eternity and seeing it roll back down every time. He could despair of his fate, but he chose to own it. His thing was pushing the rock up, and when he is doing it, he’s doing his thing, he is pushing that rock up. It’s his struggle.”³⁹

I heard myself sounding circular but somehow I couldn’t stop talking. It was weird, as if my interrogation had backfired. “I mean he’s trying to relish his fate,” I continued, “I even imagine him jogging back down the hill to start again. I can’t even let myself think about making the world safer or fairer, but when I take a case I can find or restore or avenge or protect someone for a while, even if the rot catches up eventually, which it always does in the end, at least I can do that much. It still seems a worthy fight, even sort of sickly enjoyable at times.” Why was I owning up to all this, in the middle of my attempt to get Williamson to come clean? There was something about this case.

“I don’t think I see this as starkly as you,” remarked Williamson. “But I agree it is a worthy fight.”

“Why did you think I needed the help of Jacques and Michel in this fight?” I asked.

“They’re not even the theorists I think we need to pay the most attention to in order to solve this case,” said Williamson in another moment of candor, “but I thought as you started investigating things you’d need some help sniffing out all the injustices for slow learners, not just what they were, but where they came from and how they operated, and it seemed like they could help you get a good start on this.”

I didn’t disagree with this, so I just let it sit there on the table with all the books. Williamson had answered many of my questions, but there was still an elephant in the room, an elephant which, despite its girth, was as elusive as the prize fighter Willie ‘Will o the Wisp’ Pep. I’d gone several rounds with it and there it was, still untouched, taunting me. I was beginning to despise this elephant. I looked right at Williamson, holding his eyes in my best glare of accountability. “Williamson,” I began, calling him out by name, “why did you really call on *me* to work this case? What do I have that you need? Never mind the vague stuff about needing my strength you said earlier, if you don’t tell me that right now, and clearly, we are through here.” I’d changed my mind about letting him off the hook on anything. Every bit of disclosure seemed too important for the case now.

Cornered, Williamson sat there staring at me. The seconds and minutes accumulated slowly, as though they were being piled on top of each other by sluggish bricklayers. Eventually, he went up a flight of stairs and returned with a book of pictures. He extracted one of them. It was of a

³⁹ Camus (1983, p. 123)

skinny kid in an orange large-collared shirt. He was gangly as a monkey, and stared up at the camera with a shy smile and big eyes. I realized it was Williamson.

“You were right to say I’ve been holding out on you,” Williamson admitted. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do this, but that was probably wishful thinking. What you need to understand first about why I called you in, is how highly involved I am in all of this. I’ve been accidentally studying, or to put it another way, experiencing, disability and special education for most of my life. The kid in this picture,” the way he said it was interesting, as if trying to get some distance from his former self, “had difficulties in school that I am sure, from my knowledge of coding, would have resulted in a special education code in today’s classrooms. He struggled, particularly with handwriting, sports, counting objects in primary math textbooks, and copying off the board. He was diagnosed by a psychologist as having a learning problem related to visual motor integration; at the time they were still sometimes calling it a form of brain damage. These days, these learning issues probably would have resulted in a code for a mild to moderate medical disability.”⁴⁰

I was glad Williamson was finally being honest with me, and the thing with the word searches was starting to make sense too. He still, however, hadn’t directly answered the question I was asking. I decided to try a little patience to see if he’d get to it. Instead of redirecting him to my original question, I asked, “Was he, were you, accommodated at all in those days?”

“There was no formal system of coding or accommodation in schools at the time to help manage these difficulties. But I remember one time my mom,” he had switched back to the first person, maybe on account of thinking about his mother, “recopied word for word this big fantasy story I wrote during grade five, even a love scene,” he blushed, “and the teacher gave me a perfect score and read it out loud to the class. I liked that. But I don’t remember the supports being very comprehensive, and I remember getting a lot of bad marks in English - which should have been my best subject - because teachers couldn’t read my writing. I remember being called lazy for writing off the board too slowly or messily, and elementary school math was always a disaster with all those tiny dots to count and all those columns to keep straight. Seeing as how we played sports every recess, my clumsiness made me pretty unpopular with the other boys, and I didn’t want to hang out with the girls in elementary school, so I was pretty isolated.”

“Is that why you got into special education, to see that other kids who learn differently get treated more fairly?” I asked.

“Not really,” Williamson admitted. “I never really connected the two things. I often thought I was kind of a loser and not very bright, but no one ever called me disabled, so I didn’t develop much of a sense of solidarity with anyone who might have been labelled disabled or handicapped, or whatever the words for it were at the time. I vaguely remember some kids in my school going to work in a different room some of the time, I might have been sent there too at some point, but I don’t recall hearing the word ‘disability’ or even ‘handicapped’ connected to this either. Things got a little better for me in my later teen years. I discovered I was a little better, no superstar but better, at contact sports like boxing and rugby, and it felt really good being even average at something physical. We got a personal computer when I was in junior high, and by the time I

⁴⁰ Alberta Education (2012, p. 5)

was in high school, I was word processing most of my written work at home and achieving well on some of it. I still felt like an imposter in any group that seemed to accept me, like if they found out what I was really like I'd be out for sure, but after those early experiences even being an imposter felt like an improvement."

"So how did you end up connecting to special education as a teacher?" I asked.

"Two things. I'd kind of fallen into teaching after an English degree and was doing alright. Actually to back up, I guess I had a mandatory special education class as a part of my education degree in university, but all I remember was a little bit on disability categories, a lot of talk about gifted kids, and a lesson on mnemonic memory tricks. It didn't do much for me. Anyhow, I was doing alright with teaching English but then I got surplused, you know, bumped out of my position at the junior high I was teaching English Language Arts at when there was a drop in enrolment, and I ended up getting moved to teaching IOP, as it was called at the time, at a high school where there was an opening. I really didn't have much choice but to move into IOP if I wanted to stay in teaching, but it turned out that I bonded pretty well with a lot of the kids, and I liked how I was rarely told by administrators or departments heads what to do or how to teach. It seemed like as long as I kept the IOP kids contained, I could do my own thing as a teacher."

"What was the other thing?" I asked.

"I'm getting to that." Williamson opened the photo album again, but then changed his mind, closed it, and instead rolled up the sleeve of his golf shirt, like he was about to get a flu shot or something. When he got the sleeve all the way up, I saw staring back at me, a portrait-style tattoo of a child with the biggest, most beautiful smile I thought I'd ever seen. The smile was so expansive the child's eyes were half shut to make room for it, and, even in this black and white likeness, they seemed to sparkle in merriment. After staring, dazzled, at it for a minute, something else began to slowly register to me about the face I was looking at, but by then Williamson had resumed his explanation.

"This is Jacob," he said, "He's always with me. Jacob was our second-born. He was gifted with a capacity for affection I have not experienced in any other person since. He was also severely disabled with Down Syndrome and a host of additional medical problems. He was really fragile at first when he was born and, for me and my wife anyway, the news that he had Down Syndrome, when they told us in the ICU, was pretty secondary to our incredible relief when he got stronger over those early days and we became sure he would live. There were all kind of things he struggled with. Never mind the developmental milestones for non-disabled kids, they have a separate set they use for kids with Down Syndrome, and he was often way behind on those too. I guess he would have seemed more like a baby or a toddler than a young child even when he was four, which is when he passed away. Our lives were a whirlwind of therapies, checkups, surgeries, administering medications, and operating assistive equipment. But he had such a personality! He was so loving; I don't think there is a word for love that approaches the depth and sincerity I think he felt it and shared it with. And then there was his laugh - he'd laugh hysterically whenever there was a sort of a crashing sound, like dropping dishes in the kitchen. And he'd give you these kisses with his whole mouth open. He couldn't walk, and actually had trouble with crawling too but if our daughter, who was six at the time he passed away, entered the room he'd light

right up and study her every movement, and if she went upstairs he'd strain his body after her like he was going to burst out of his chair and fly up to join her."

Williamson smiled at the memory and then went on.

"People all reacted differently to Jacob. Some seemed to accept him intuitively; but I could tell that some people were uncomfortable around him. We had some of the most caring doctors, nurses and therapists but then there were some who were all about clinical indifference too. When he was getting tested for allergies, the technician without a word of reassurance to Jacob or my wife forcefully slapped a board of little needles with potential allergens on his back like he was a slab of meat, after which he screamed in terror and pain, and the technician just stared blankly. He probably didn't have much of a bedside manner in general, but I'm not sure he would have thought he could get away with that level of indifference with a child who could walk and talk. We were provided a wide range of government-funded support and services for which we will always be grateful. But my wife and I, more her than me because I was working full-time, still had to attain these services through a daunting process of documentation. We were left wondering what happened to other families with similar needs in which the parents were less skilled at completing complicated forms. He touched a lot of lives and we had a lot of support. When he passed away, almost every seat in the church was filled with our families, his caregivers, and people my wife and I worked with. But when Jacob was born one of my acquaintances told me he was sorry and when he passed away, another acquaintance assured me it was for the best, and both of them were teachers."

A muscle twitched in Williamson's jaw. He was still angry over the defects in thinking that would have produced such statements. I said I was sorry and he thanked me. Then I said I had a question. "Why are you investigating the disappearance of the slow learners instead of something to do with Jacob and how people understood him?"

"Maybe I will do something more to explore my experiences with Jacob more directly at some point, but trying to do something for slow learners *is* strongly connected to this. Jacob had a lot of medical issues but he wasn't defective; he was whole. He filled our lives with his personality. It took a lot of help, money, time, and effort to care for him, but these obligations were small compared to what he gave us every day. I've been working with IOP/K & E kids for fifteen years now. I haven't seen eye to eye with every student I've taught, but I have seen how much these kids can do when you treat them with respect. Some of these kids are pretty complicated in terms of how they learn. But they're not half students and they don't deserve a half of an education, half a credential or a half-assed effort to meet their needs. And like I said, changes are afoot in special education and in schooling in general; the slow learners are more at risk now than ever. Someone needs to look out for them."

"So with your background, why do you need me on this case?" I asked again, insisting.

"I can research and write about this, that's true," he said, "but I need something..." he stopped and began again. "I've read some fine, challenging, thoughtful books and papers on teaching and on disability that were written in an academic style. But the way these students have been categorized and either ignored or moved into other programs, and the ongoing issue of what do

with them now - it's a tough conversation and it requires a tough approach, something...." He trailed off as if searching for a phrase he'd suddenly forgotten.

"Hard-boiled?" I suggested.

"Yes, hard-boiled. Hard-boiled operatives, like yourself, talk tough and are tough. Look at everything that's happened to you on this case, and here you are still. They do not suffer fools, I mean not the fool category, but the generic kind of fool as in ignorant and unthinking persons of course, gladly." Williamson was correcting his labels again, I figured he must have been feeling more himself. "They speak for the dead, they help the oppressed defend themselves, they demand truth, and they demand justice."

I was about to say I wasn't sure I could live up to these expectations. Williamson was on a roll though; I couldn't get it out. Next, he said something that has always stayed with me.

"And they look for missing persons. Slow learners are missing persons, or they are missing *as* persons. That's what I want. Find them as persons if they are there to be found, and give them the truth and justice they deserve. That's why I need a hard-boiled detective, that's why I need you." His voice had firmed up as he spoke and, ironically, seeing as how he was asking for help, there as an almost defiant resolve in his last sentence.

With that, I finally thought I understood, as well as I ever would, what Williamson was up to. I said "Okay," and we both sipped our beer. I was troubled by SAC's question about whether or not the slow learners would benefit from being found, but in Williamson's statements I found a purpose I could deal with - trying to find some justice for them, just in case their getting found was inevitable, but I didn't share this with Williamson. Instead, to make him feel in control again, I asked him to tell me more about some of the scholars who might help me proceed a little more cautiously as I continued to investigate. Still calming down, he began to tell me what he thought I needed to know about hermeneutic phenomenology; about how it was the tradition, philosophy, and practice of interpretation, about how it involved thinking about and describing things themselves in the life-world without appeal to some sort of external reality.⁴¹ He was tired now, but he made a good effort, sometimes correcting himself on a point, sometimes owning up to only partially understanding some aspect of the topic. I listened and tried to understand. I thought I picked up a few things. Some of it was interesting, but I still didn't see why it was necessary for this investigation. After I'd heard him out for a while, I said I was eager to get back on the road - the slow learners were still out there. I thanked Williamson for explaining this all to me but said I needed to get back to the investigation. He protested that there were still things in hermeneutic phenomenology that I could benefit from hearing about, but I insisted. I asked him to drive me back to my hotel and he obliged.

As we were driving, the dull pain in my leg still disturbed me now and then, like a loud neighbour, but I'd been off my feet a lot recently and the rest had done it good. I needed a shower and a change of clothes and, after that, it was still early enough to peek into some corners to look for slow learners.

⁴¹ Moules (2002, p. 6)

XXI

I reached my hotel. The host regarded me warily as I walked, limping slightly, past the front desk, wearing the same ripening suit I'd had on for two days. The news of the visit the police had paid me in my room must have reached management by now, but when I opened the door, I saw no notice of eviction. Maybe you really were innocent until proven guilty at this establishment, or maybe the only indictable offences were not paying your bill or ripping those little tags off your mattresses.

I quickly showered, shaved and changed. I would have liked the chance to relish the heat of the shower more, but I wanted to get back to the case. Before we left his house, Williamson had added to my small suitcase some of his teacher clothes so I might look more inconspicuous which was good because both of my suits had taken as much abuse as I had. I put on some beige cotton pants and a red sweater. I felt heavier, like I had grown a thicker set of fur for the winter, and I thought I looked ridiculously like a character in a Christmas movie, but at least I'd be warmer. As I was changing, it occurred to me to my annoyance that, despite how tired I was of historical research at this point, the one thing I hadn't done was conduct a thorough search of programming for slow learners, over time, in Alberta's schools. I needed to check this out more. Hopefully this city had some kind of archives where a guy could find some primary sources about this, but where? I looked in the booklet of guest services on my dresser; it had a cigarette burn and some kind of dark stain on it, but it said clearly enough that the hotel had a business centre with high speed internet. For a dollar for each fifteen minutes, a guest could browse and research all he wanted.

I went down to the business centre and slid my room card through the key reader to get into the room. I stuck a couple Canadian dollar coins into the machine, and a desktop computer that was missing the letter 'Q' started humming and clunking. It was a little quieter than a jumbo jet starting up. After some browsing, I saw that a large local gallery, this one more widely known than the apparently mysterious and now destroyed museum of sorting I'd visited, had an archive that included records of educational institutions. I was annoyed to see it had very limited visiting hours and was closed, and further so to see a notice that some documents previously available had recently been restricted for public use due to changes in the province's privacy laws. Just as I was about to click away from the site, I noticed it had a staff section. Out of curiosity I clicked it. I was taken to a login page, to which I entered "ADMIN" and was then prompted for a password. Harnessing all possible stereotypes about the unknown site administrator I was trying to impersonate, I tried 'the boss,' but to no success. I tried 'Captain Kirk,' but was again told it was incorrect. 'Password' itself seemed so obvious as to be verging on negligence, but remembering Jacques, the idea of 'binary' popped into my head. Using a free translator program I located online, I searched and found the binary code, expressed in hexadecimal, a form of writing binary, for the phrase 'the password.' Then thinking this was still too easy, I added an adjective 'the sexy password,' seeing as how it was February, the month of Valentine's Day. A whirling icon sprung up and a second later I entered a page with a big picture of a smiling dude in a suit, job postings, links to various forms related to benefits, and a 'What's New' section.

An announcement in this section told me that there was a wine and cheese that had just started in the archives room to celebrate the discovery and donation of a bunch of pictures and records

related to a-hundred-year old championship curling team that were thought, until now, to have been lost in a clubhouse fire. Here was my chance to visit the place on my own schedule and maybe use the distraction of the party to access some of the confidential documents.

There was only one monkey still jumping on the nerves in my leg and he wasn't even trying very hard as I drove to the gallery. I parked across the road and entered the main gallery, flashing a fake badge at the security guard. I made my way to a large archive room and selected, for extra camouflage, one of a few remaining name lanyards from a table by the entrance. The large, warmly lit room was replete with mahogany tables, and on this occasion, was also lousy with curlers in various team jackets milling around and looking at all the pictures, yearbooks and old tournament programs. Several had eschewed wine in favour of beer and a nervous man was running around reminding everyone to be careful with the artifacts in the collection and to use drink coasters on the tables. What I assumed were staff members hung around the periphery in business casual attire and forced smiles. I wondered if the staffer who came up with the idea for this celebration might be archiving elsewhere soon.

At a cash bar along the far corner, a stunning woman exchanged an empty plastic wine glass for a full one. She was clad in a ridiculous sweater that depicted an outdoor bonspiel with Canadian wildlife among the spectators and a loud tartan skirt that somehow still worked on her, and me. She had wavy brownish-blond hair and eyes of a much lovelier green than any of the many varieties sampled on her skirt. In her other hand she absently held an old straw broom. She pouted beautifully. My planned beeline to the storage area took a detour.

"Want to help me sweep something under the carpet?" I asked her.

"Good one," she said, icily but giving me a once over as she said it. Then she looked self-consciously at her sweater and, in a more approachable tone, confided, "Staff all agreed to come in retro curling gear. Help us honour our guests. Kind of dumb but it might have been fun that is, if *everyone* followed the plan like we agreed to. Apparently that plan was changed at the last minute, but no one told me. I don't feel much like mixing at this point."

"Well, you're classing up the joint nonetheless," I assured her. "As for me, I quit following the sport once they switched to synthetic fibres in the uniforms."

"Thanks," she said flatly. But she wasn't leaving either. "You run a nice line of bull, Mr.?" Her inflexion rose as she paused for me to fill the space in.

We both looked down at my lanyard.

"Save it," she said. "You're wearing my ex-boyfriend's name."

"Max Hunter," I admitted. "Listen. You look like you want to be anywhere but here. I can help you with that. I'm a shamus. I need to get a look at some documents in your collection... and I got a good bottle of something stronger than what they're serving here if there's someone who can help me with that."

“Veronika Sternwood,” she said, unnecessarily since her name was hanging just above a row of maple leaves on her sweater. After a half of a second’s consideration, she uttered, “Why not?” and led me down a narrow hall into a small, but tidy office. She clicked on a bright overhead lamp on the way in.

She got a couple of spotless glasses out of a desk drawer and I retrieved my flask of bourbon and poured out a couple fingers each. There were two plastic chairs along the side wall of the office and two more comfortable looking chairs on either side of her desk. She sat down along the wall on one of the plastic chairs, away from the artifacts and motioned me to sit beside her. I felt a little like I was sitting at a stop waiting for the bus but nevertheless obliged.

She downed half her drink, carefully dabbed a pretty upper lip with a Kleenex she had taken from a box on her desk, sighed, and said, “That’s more like it.”

Getting to the point, I said, “I’m looking for slow learners.”

“We should have stayed at the party then,” she said. There it was, the concept right there for disparaging use, just like it had always been for me before this case.

“No, I’m looking for records on students labelled as slow learners, you know academically. I’m trying to piece together what sort of programs they’ve been in over the last hundred years or so.”

“Oh,” she said, “that kind of slow learner. What’s your interest in them?”

“Justice, Ma’am,” I said in a deep voice, doing my best Lone Ranger impression.

She laughed at that. It was a nice laugh, but maybe a little forced. Perhaps my impression hadn’t been as good as I thought. Or maybe she wasn’t partial to masked lawmen. “I might be able to help with that,” she confirmed. “If I can’t find anything under ‘slow learner’ are there any other terms I might look for?”

I told her about IOP/K & E and suggested she see if there were any records of similar programs that would have preceded them.

She took this in for a second and appeared to decide this was pretty doable. She said, “Okay, be back in a jiffy” and with that she downed the rest of her drink, wiped her mouth again, and was gone.

I surveyed her desk. Documents and tools were neatly arranged, like rows of soldiers. I would have liked to look around but I didn’t think upsetting the order would go over well, so I just sipped my drink. She was taking longer than a jiffy. I was making some shadow puppets with my hands along the back wall of her office when she came back in with a stack of documents.

“There were actually quite a few things that matched,” she informed me. Leaving our empty glasses on the plastic chairs for now, we both donned thin gloves and began.

Leafing through some turn of the century newspaper clippings and Department of Education policy statements as well as what I now recognized as a thesis on the topic from more recent times,⁴² I understood for the first time that the idea of a practical public school program that would train students for employment had been a feature of public schooling almost since the inception of mass public schooling in Alberta. The benefits of such instruction were seen to apply not just to slow learners but to all students. By 1901, the elementary school curriculum already included something called “manual training” including construction activities in paper, cardboard, clay and plasticine, as well as weaving, all of which were designed to develop hand-eye coordination in the children and leave them prepared for related duties in their “after lives,”⁴³ which I took to mean their lives after school not the great hereafter. I also realized from reading this that, for many, lives after school meant after elementary school. This marked the end of the majority of students’ careers in public schooling at the time.

I asked for the next document and Veronika carefully handed me a yellowing report from Alberta’s Department of Education.⁴⁴ Looking it over, I realized that from these beginnings a program of manual training was formalized in all the province’s elementary schools, which must have included grades seven and eight at the time. In addition to prescribing instruction in the basic construction craft skills I’d already read about, the program included more advanced training for the boys in “simple processes in the accepted industrial manner” and, for the girls, training in “sewing and cooking.”⁴⁵ Again, it was understood that these courses would prepare the majority of students for careers in technical trades or, depending on their gender, domestic sciences. As the document stated, this instruction aimed:

*To give a new channel to the expression of ideas; to give hand and eye training; to develop constructive impulses, judgement, accuracy, resource, patience, industry, and a sense of symmetry, proportion and beauty by the artistic production of common things; to give respect for manual pursuits and encourage industrial efficiency.*⁴⁶

“I like a man with an eye for symmetry and sure hands,” Veronika, who had been reading over my shoulder, remarked with a bit of a purr. “A little patience doesn’t hurt either.” I felt my hand twitch and was glad I didn’t rip the article I was holding. We’d hit it off fairly well from the start, but she seemed to be kicking things into a new gear. I wasn’t sure if I could chalk this up to the bourbon or if my studious look was just that irresistible. Regardless, if she was already getting bored with these documents and looking for a new game to play, I was unfortunately, just getting started with them. I murmured my amusement at her innuendo and returned to the documents.

Skimming the thesis again, I read about the emergence of junior high schools in Calgary. By the 1920s, the minimum school leaving age had risen to fifteen, creating a number of growing pains for the school district. Many students ignored the law and continued to drop out sooner than this because they or their parents saw no purpose in continuing their educations past grade eight. The

⁴² Knobbe (1978, p. 11)

⁴³ “It is time for a change,” *The Morning Albertan*, November 23, 1900 (as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 13)

⁴⁴ Alberta Department of Education *Annual Report* (1912) (as cited in *Ibid.*, p. 14)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* (p. 14)

only schooling alternative for grade nine remained a highly academic curriculum which was irrelevant to many students' present interests and future career paths. Despite this, the Calgary district also predicted overcrowding in high schools with the increase in the minimum school leaving age. Stakeholders worried, now that a transition at least to grade nine was mandated for all, that many students would experience difficulties moving from elementary school to high school. Were slow learners among the students predicted to struggle with this transition, I wondered? As a result, the Calgary district developed a junior high school program that operated in a dual capacity: preparing students, depending on their interests and aptitudes, for high school, or for entry into the work force after grade nine. Almost a third of a student's classes in a week were to be spent not in core academic instruction but in the study of various electives which could, for the more academically inclined, include French, dramatics, music or elementary sociology, or for the students more inclined to practical pursuits include general shop, typewriting, business arts, and home economics. It seemed to me that as it was becoming more normal for most students to be enrolled in school and stay there until they were at least fifteen, the possibility of two school pathways, a more academic one and a more practical one was elbowing its way into the normal curve too. Or was it? I remembered the IQ pioneers, had, as I understood it, liked their reasoning as abstract as possible. So was this more practical pathway a place I could look for slow learners on, or was it just a distraction? "Where do slow learners fit into all of this?" I mumbled out loud.

"What's that baby?" Veronika asked, having returned to the plastic chairs and poured herself some more bourbon which she sipped while she watched me read. I realized this probably wasn't very fun for her, she was probably hoping to be better entertained. I thought I could try to make it up to her soon. I wasn't quite done though. I mumbled that I was just talking to myself and got back to reading.

Skimming back a little, I noticed something I had missed. Even before the junior high concept, spurred on by the success of the manual training evening classes they had begun offering adolescents, the Calgary district formed a committee to discuss opening a technical high school. This resulted in the founding of Victoria Prevocational high school in 1919. Students were recommended for this school on the basis of being "hand minded [not] book minded,"⁴⁷ and, in a jarring description I recognized from the IQ exhibit in the now-incinerated museum of human sorting "*not the bright and studious pupils but the dull uninterested ones.*"⁴⁸ I had found where the slow learners fit into the story. My pulse quickened. Victoria Prevocational offered a modified curriculum with a fifty/fifty split between academic coursework modified to be more accessible to slow learning students, and vocational training designed to help students discover the technical occupations they were best suited for and prepare them for these occupations. The echoes of this in the K & E policy I'd read about were unmistakable.

This vocational school for slow learners was, for a time, widely lauded as a progressive step in education in the city. It was praised by both the chief school inspector at the time and in an article in the Calgary Herald. The district superintendent went so far as to note that students who had "previously been regarded as retarded would, by way of this new [pathway], be stimulated

⁴⁷ Ibid. (p. 15)

⁴⁸ Ibid. (p. 18)

and come to enjoy their schooling.”⁴⁹ When the junior high concept arrived in the 1930s though, this discrete program became absorbed by the larger plan I had read about previously. I wondered if the absorption of Victoria Prevocational, while making schooling a little more ‘practical’ for most learners, made schooling more ‘academic’ for the sorts of students Victoria Prevocational had targeted. Compared to Victoria Prevocational, the junior high plan involved less time spent in practical electives, more time spent in academic instruction with no reduction in the difficulty levels of academic instruction. From what I could tell, there was little talk of a more vocational tier of instruction specifically for slow learners for the next twenty years. Had the slow learners gone underground?

“Come back to the party, we miss you,” a boozy voice pleaded. I looked up and saw that Veronika was shimmying my flask back and forth slowly in her hand even as she was shimmying a little herself. She had undone a couple buttons on her curling sweater, and in the process cleaved a moose that was depicted on the picture on the front. It stared at me accusingly.

“In a minute,” I stalled. It seemed like a nice party, but I was on the trail of slow learners. I skimmed ahead a little in the thesis. By the 1950s the Department of Education and Calgary school district were beginning to worry that the junior high concept wasn’t working for all students after all. They were concerned by the amount of students continuing to drop out during their junior high years. Facing a set of rigorous standardized exams to qualify to transition from grade nine to grade ten, and with only limited access to more practical classes, many students still weren’t even sticking around until the end of grade nine. By 1959, some Calgary schools were beginning to experiment again with modification of curriculum for students who were seen as unable to keep up. A wholesale report on the state of the education system in Alberta - the Cameron report of 1959 - criticized the school system, particularly junior highs for failing to address the growing diversity of ability levels that was appearing in classrooms, and proposed a distinct vocational education route for students.⁵⁰ One year later, the federal government lent support for this suggestion with the Technical Vocational Assistance Act which, in collaboration with ten provincial governments, provided substantial funding to improve industrial education in general and to re-open discrete vocational pathways for non-academic students. Not only did the federal government agree to funding seventy-five percent of capital expenditures for facilities until 1963 and then fifty percent for five years after that, Ottawa also agreed to assume fifty percent of the cost of any approved vocational program for the length of the agreement.⁵¹ I remembered seeing a plaque in Williamson’s school acknowledging the support of this act in its construction, and read of additional hybrid academic/vocational high schools, combining a full high school academic program and an extensive industrial arts program. This funding also led to the eventual creation of Lord Shaughnessy Secondary Vocational School in Southwest Calgary, and Van Horne Secondary Vocational School in Northwest Calgary, two schools designed specifically to provide vocational training to non-academic students, including slow learners. I also learned that the location of Van Horne was initially controversial in the University Heights community as the resident association noted that while they commended the school district attempting to “teach the unteachables,” they did not want these students, all of whom they felt

⁴⁹ Ibid. (p. 18)

⁵⁰ Ibid. (p. 35)

⁵¹ Ibid. (p. 102)

came “from a lower class,” schooled in their community.⁵² My mind flashed back to the eugenics gallery in the now-destroyed museum of human classification.

In 1961, the Calgary District initiated the Junior Vocational Program, later renamed the Junior Academic Vocational Program, in several of the schools with vocational facilities. This program was intended specifically for students who had gone through at least seven years of schooling and who had shown consistently below average achievement in their grades at school, as well as low average intellectual functioning in formal testing. Students who would benefit from the Junior Vocational Program were identified by teachers and administration. The school principal was then expected to meet with the parents to describe the program. Junior Academic Vocational involved a course load of about fifty percent core academic classes with a focus on basic literacy and numeracy skills demanded in the workplace, with fifty percent technical skills. Structured work experience placements, in which students worked with community employers under the supervision of the school, were also required. The program grew in popularity and eventually six percent of the Calgary District’s students were enrolled in Junior Academic Vocational Programming.⁵³

Knowing what I’d learned so far about K & E and IOP, I was not surprised by the instructional balance of academic and vocational courses, with even the academic courses emphasizing the practical demands of the world of work. I did find three things interesting though.

The first of these involved the political heat generated by the proposed opening of these programs. Trustee G.M. Burden was the primary opponent. In a speech at a home and school association meeting in 1964, Burden declared that instead of lowering their standards for their children such that they considered vocational education a possibility, that all parents should have the ambition of university education for their children. He feared that these schools would become known as “dumb schools” and that it would be seen as a public embarrassment that the district was spending so much money on a school for “dumb children.”⁵⁴ He also declared of the minority of students who might actually require modified programming that “these people will make no contribution to society”⁵⁵ and that money could be better spent serving the needs of the majority of students in the general student population instead.

The second thing that interested me was the positive perceptions of the program held by many of the enrolled children’s parents. On a 1964 questionnaire that asked responders to rate the program as excellent, average, or poor, one hundred and seven out of the one hundred thirty-four parents said it was excellent and none responded that it was poor. In the comments section one parent wrote:

I have only praise for this program and find that my son has taken an interest in school for the first time since he was in grade two. His marks are much better and he has a bet-

⁵² Ibid. (p. 82)

⁵³ Ibid. (p. 88)

⁵⁴ Ibid. (p. 68)

⁵⁵ Ibid. (p. 67)

*ter understanding of the subject he is being taught. I am sure that this program has saved him from becoming another drop-out.*⁵⁶

Many parents of children in the District's Junior Academic Vocational Programs not only agreed to their children's placements, but formed an association and aggressively lobbied to keep the program open during this period of controversy. Alan Low, president of the association, was quoted as saying prior to the program, "I saw my own son drowning in a sea of frustration in academic studies. Continuous failure was making him a nervous wreck."⁵⁷ Having weathered the storm during the first few years of the program, the parent association remained involved, continually advocating for more funding, better facilities, and expansion of the program to make it available to all students who might benefit. In 1965 - 1966, a hundred students who had qualified for the program were turned away because it had reached its quota.

The third thing that interested me was the sense I got that planning for the program went far beyond trying to simplify curriculum for weaker learners; there really did seem to be an attempt to do something *different* for students than what was currently being offered in regular education. Former administrators the thesis author interviewed indicated that they felt fortunate that the program necessitated hiring new teachers as such teachers were often unhindered by 'knowledge' of the standard teaching procedures these students had struggled under. Newer teachers had not as yet met very many pupils in the regular stream, so they were less likely to devote much thought to negatively comparing Junior Academic Vocational Students to more academic students.⁵⁸ I thought about what Williamson had said about moving to IOP so early in his teaching career, appreciating the autonomy he was given, and enjoying the students.

After my experiences in the museum and in speaking with Smart Ass Cripple who had experienced his own separate schooling in an institution he continually referred to as SHIT, I was bewildered to read this overwhelmingly positive depiction of a separate program, housed in separate schools, for slow learners. Save for mentioning that the school tended to do more to enhance the career prospects of boys than of girls, for whom the emphasis in vocational training remained on domestic skills, the author of the thesis had little of a critical nature to say about the Junior Academic Vocational Program. She reserved most of her criticism for those who had opposed the program, suggesting for the most part that this opposition had its roots, not in a pedagogic disagreement about what slower learning students needed to thrive, but in a parsimonious and elitist notion that these students were not worth devoting extra attention or resources to.

I closed the thesis, though not before reading that one of the "unteachables" from the junior vocational program had upgraded to high school diploma level courses, completed a university degree and was, at the time the thesis was written, working as a teacher in the city.⁵⁹ I looked up. Veronika was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she'd given up on me and gone back to the wine and

⁵⁶ Ibid. (p. 63)

⁵⁷ Ibid. (p. 71)

⁵⁸ See Ibid. (p. 59). Additionally, the freedom from provincial academic curricula and standardized examinations in the vocational schools may well have fostered a sense of liberation from more traditional teaching methods. Knobbe mentions team teaching as an example of a successful method regularly used in the vocational schools, despite its being discouraged in 'regular' classrooms at the time.

⁵⁹ Ibid. (p. 93)

cheese, if it was still going on. I really hadn't been much of a date so far. I was usually more attentive to gorgeous dames who threw themselves at me. I saw that she'd taken my flask with her wherever she went. I thought maybe I should go look for her. Looking back at the desk, however, I saw that she'd also brought me a couple of interesting looking books with light blue covers. They bore the label Alberta Education in that stylized futuristic font that everyone was so excited about at the dawn of microcomputers, and both appeared to be evaluations of other Academic Occupational Programs in various parts of the province. I gathered that, even though there was no centralized provincial curriculum and there might have been bumps in the road in various districts, this approach to programming for slow learners had hung in there through the 1970s and into the early 1980s. I realized I was reading program evaluations, commissioned by Alberta Education and written by members of the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Alberta, for the purposes of determining if two urban school-based programs merited funding from the province.⁶⁰ Just as the thesis I'd just read had, these reports went out of their way to praise the dedication, skill and enthusiasm of many of the teachers in the Academic Occupational Programs and listed characteristics of ideal teachers of the programs. The authors suggested teachers of such programs should: ideally have some training in special education, be flexible as to individual needs but also firm on maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect, appreciate and use humour but not sarcasm (that disqualified me, I thought), know their subject disciplines well, and enjoy teaching students at this academic level. The classroom conditions these students were said to require included the use of small discussion groups, hands-on activities whenever possible, and the use of inquiry-based projects where the students and teachers worked together on figuring out the tasks necessary to explore a particular topic.

Despite my experiences in the museum of sorting, I felt from reading these reports, some good will towards the creators, administrators, and teachers of these programs. I saw few of the eugenic assumptions that these students were a burden on the system or incapable of learning. It seemed to me that I was reading an earnest discussion of how to teach these students, with care, such that instead of disappearing from the educational landscape, they succeeded in school and went on to live successful lives. All of these documents seemed to describe an attempt to create an educational oasis for this group of at-risk students.

As I thought of all this, the gravity of the realization that I had just witnessed almost a hundred years of a type of programming for slow learners that continued on in present times in the Knowledge and Employability classes began to hang on me. Were slow learners being lost or found in these programs? In describing the need for this sort of programming, these documents had strongly implied that the regular education system at the time was far too rigid and theoretical for many of its students. Was it still so unyielding to diversity that it required this sort of intervention for slow learners? I felt the case breaking open.

XXII

I had just started reading a report on the piloting of the Integrated Occupational Program, getting no further than the acknowledgements page, when a hand belonging to the stunning archivist I'd been neglecting tousled my hair from behind, surprising me slightly and making me realize how deep my distraction with all this history had been. It slid softly down my neck, and stroked my

⁶⁰ Nyberg (1984) and Harders Consulting (1983, p. 64)

chest. Then I heard a regretful sigh. I was about to say, again, I'd be all hers in just a minute more when I heard a click. I whirled around, finally giving Veronika the attention she'd deserved all along. She was holding a pretty little pink revolver. It was so tiny that it looked at first like a toy, but the consequences of getting this category wrong could be grave. It was pointed at my heart. Its mouth said 'Oh', which, by coincidence, was exactly what I was thinking. On second glance it didn't look like a toy at all. It looked hard and sleek and dense.

"I know I've been neglecting you, dear, but..." my wisecrack dried out in my mouth before I could finish it.

"Shut up Hunter." I couldn't hear booze in her voice anymore and, moreover, it appeared we were no longer on a first name basis. "Insecure damsel in vintage curling sweater desperately seeking bourbon and companionship," she leered, mocking me with the backstory I had believed so completely. "Willing to look up documents and... hook up. Ridiculous, but I knew you'd fall for it - all of it. Too bad you got so distracted by the first thing; we might have had some fun with the other for a while. It wasn't for lack of hinting."

Mentally, I agreed it was too bad, in retrospect. I'm red-blooded as any man, more than most likely, but it wasn't the first time I'd jilted a potential paramour over a curious case. The ensuing scorn was always a particularly dangerous occupational hazard. Now that I'd blown it, she looked even more alluring as she stood there threatening and despising me. "Why?" was all I could manage. I really needed to reload my wisecracks.

"You've been unsettling the categories. If we let you keep this up all Hell could break loose."

"I haven't disturbed any categories, I've been looking for slow learners."

"They're not for you to look for, who do you think you are anyway?"

"Who are you?" I stalled, trying to hold her glance while using my peripheral vision to track the pistol. So far she was holding it depressingly steadily.

"That information is..." I think she was going to say classified but then she changed her mind.

"Well I suppose it doesn't matter. When you lose all amusement value to me, which will be pretty soon, you'll have your own permanent shift in category and it won't matter what I've told you. I work for an operation that maintains categories... by any means necessary."

"Government? Corporate?" I asked.

"Not directly. More covert. We call ourselves the Arranging Angels."

There was a trace of pride in this.

"Never heard of you."

“We work in the shadows. We have to. We’re under constant threat.”

“You sound more like terrorists to me.” A muscle flexed in her jaw at this. It was hard to concentrate on an escape plan even though I knew that’s what I needed to be doing. I just wanted to appreciate the hard beauty in front of me. I asked a different question, stalling to get my bearings. “Who hired you for this case anyway?”

“I don’t ever see the clients, not directly, it’s all rather tacit.”

“So your job at the archives...”

“Part of the persona. And rather convenient. History is useful to a point; it can help you refine your categories and methods. But you can get bogged down in it; it can impede progress. Sometimes a little forgetting is needed too. Sometimes I help with that forgetting.”

Staring at her, I was thinking that maybe getting together with her and forgetting a few things might not be too bad. She hadn’t shot me yet, that was something. I had to keep her amused one way or another. I asked another question. “Did you and a book of matches help with some forgetting over at the Museum of Sorting?”

“Our cells all work independently, but yes, that was probably one of us. I’ve been on the lookout for you for several days, my colleagues too I suspect. Regrettable, that fire. We work closely with the people who built that institute. It was very valuable in category maintenance. But there you went, poking around in things, using what was in there to destroy the categories, not refine them. It was safer to destroy the institute.”

“I’m not looking to destroy anything, I’m just looking for slow learners,” I repeated, hoping if I could put just a little doubt in her head about all the categories that it might travel all the way down to her trigger finger.

“And you keep on finding them, and then you keep looking anyhow. Digging up the dirt, disturbing things. What else are you playing at, if not to destroy the slow learner category?” The more she mocked me, the more alluring she became to me. It was sick.

“I keep looking because I’m never sure if I found them.” I was only being partially truthful when I said this. I had wondered if the category might need to be put out to pasture, or out of its misery, but I thought saying so might make her clench that gun-toting fist.

“Have you met adolescents with slow learner-level IQs?” she demanded.

“Well yes,” I admitted.

“Then you found the slow learners. You should have packed your bags and left town. How stupid are you? I just solved your mystery for you in ten seconds.”

“Do you have something against slow learners, is that why you want to stop me?” I asked. I

didn't know if this was a safe question or not, but keeping her talking seemed the most important thing.

"Do *you* have something against slow learners, Hunter? What do you think will happen if you destroy the category? From what I can tell the system figured out who these kids were and what to do about them a hundred years ago. For one hundred years compassionate people have been trying to give them the special attention they need so that they can overcome the unhappiness and sense of personal inadequacy that comes with failing in school and in life. The system has kept them out of jails and mental hospitals and, instead, doing the routine tasks that need to be done for society to function.⁶¹ You're the terrorist here for wanting to blow all this up." Her firm body vibrated in delicious contempt but she held the gun steady.

"But still, isn't the history behind all this sorting pretty dark? If your organization was affiliated with the museum that burnt down you know it is." I thought I had a good point but wished I was doing as well wresting the gun from her.

"Mistakes were made. Omissions, excesses, sure. But just because the science behind IQ has been abused on occasion, doesn't mean we should get rid of it."

"But how," I persevered, "can you even know if an intellectual category like slow learner is real when the claims it makes about the students in that category seem so contaminated by negative prejudices based on race, class, or disability?"

"There's *some* risk of prejudice maybe, but there is a lot of solid empirical work behind a measure like IQ too. And it's the good science that purifies that which might contaminate it. It is built right into the process.⁶² Maybe disabled people were treated badly in the 1700s and 1800s because society wasn't advanced enough to rigorously study these people and what their needs were. Science didn't *invent* mental retardation," I noticed her clinical word choice here, "or slowness. Science discovered these defects and is well on the way to figuring out how to manage them. And it's getting better all the time. Look at how many excellent categories of disability we have now and how much more we know about each one of them. The process works. And *you* want to break it and go back to the days of ignorance."

"Part of being enlightened is realizing that human intelligence can't be studied this easily, and the claims to knowledge you get are problematized by your two roles as," I wasn't sure what to say next, "*empirical subject* and *empirico-transcendent doublet*."⁶³ I concluded. I was surprised to hear myself saying something like this, but the weird phrase had been sitting half-remembered in my consciousness. It was never fully there or absent. I'd heard it from Michel when I was in a pain-and-pill fog in the back of the Peugeot, and he and Jacques were having their argument about Descartes. I was feeling rather outside myself at the time, but it had still struck me as odd. I was glad adrenaline had wrested it out of me now. I needed all the words I could get.

⁶¹ See Chauhan (2011, p. 288)

⁶² Ibid. (p. 183)

⁶³ Foucault (p. 1994, p. 4)

“Hocus pocus words,” she scoffed. “The idea of human is exactly what entitles us to study ourselves.⁶⁴ And where would we be if we hadn’t?” She hadn’t really addressed my claim with this, but I was in no position to complain. I was running out of ammunition in this debate; some of her arguments even made a warped sort of sense. I could see how things would appear that way from her perspective. Now that her alluring but feigned vulnerability at the cash bar was long forgotten, I saw a beauty that could break you in two.

“I never said that this knowledge isn’t potentially helpful,” I protested, “I’m just learning there might be some other ways, beyond these categories of understanding these students and their troubles in school, some ways that might help educators be more inviting.”

“Different ways of knowing!” she scoffed. “Like you can just pull some possibility out of the sky about how these students learn and stack it next to a research-proven treatment and say they are equal to each other. Is it all relative then, or maybe magic? Are you a magician? There’s only one true way to know who these subjects are and what they need and its logical scientific inquiry. Figure out how the slow learners learn differently, theorize different ways of getting their competencies as close to normal as we can and measure your results.” Her cheeks now took on a reddish hue as she spoke to her lust for clarity and continued to aim the pink revolver right at my heart.

“But when you call them slow learners haven’t you already stacked the deck about how they appear?” I managed, feeling a little hypocritical as this was the label that I’d been using during the whole case, and because, given what my client had hired me for, I was likely to continue to use it.

“You’re confusing names and things, Hunter.⁶⁵ No matter what you call them, these students are low average; the category below normal. You can’t make that come and go by what you call it.”

“But isn’t normal just...” I began.

“A hypothetical abstract. Yes, and a very good one, one that’s been helping educators get students, including slow learners, to learn up to their potential for years.”

“But isn’t potential...”

Three things happened simultaneously before I could finish my question. The first was that Veronika finally lost all patience with me. Her lovely finger squeezed the trigger and a short sharp shot echoed through the archive. The second was that I realized too late that I’d misjudged this encounter. This debate hadn’t aroused any doubt at all in her. She felt the need to explain herself to some degree, maybe to hear herself justify her own beliefs, but no matter what I could come up with in reply, there she was, shooting me.⁶⁶ The third thing that happened was that a pair of arms appeared behind her and redirected her aim as she was firing. The arms kept pulling,

⁶⁴ Ibid. (p. 386)

⁶⁵ Sasso (2001, p. 190)

⁶⁶ See Vilhauer (2010, p. 134). Vilhauer writes of the barrier to understanding posed when one participant in a conversation declares “no more talk - the time for talk is over.”

adding a twist to her wrist until she released the pistol. The arms tried to restrain her but she was too fast for that last indignity and broke free. Veronika turned and lashed out with a vicious left hook but she put too much on it. A nice straight cross got to her first, connecting to her perfect jaw with little cracking sound. She fell asleep, and Colleen Birdseye caught her and set her into one of the plastic chairs on the periphery of her office, the chairs that she'd insisted we sit on to keep the bourbon away from the paperwork. After a moment's recovery, I picked up the smoking gun.

"What are you doing here?" was all I could manage.

"Thank you might be a more appropriate response. John Williamson called me and asked if I could help you out again on the investigation. He was afraid you'd be too embarrassed to contact me after you ran out on me, but he said you were encountering a lot of danger."

I thought Williamson was reading too much of himself into that concern. I don't embarrass that easily. But it wasn't worth pointing out just then. Instead I asked, "How did you know I was here?"

"There's only so many places slow learners, the way schools describe them, might show up. I've heard some rumors about some strange events going on around the city in some of the other places slow learners might be found, but nothing about here yet. I figured maybe this was your next stop. Let's get out of here."

"What should we do about her?" I asked.

"Leave her here. I don't think I hit her hard enough to do permanent damage. She's going to wake up cranky any minute now. We should be gone when she does."

"Won't she come after me again?"

"I don't know if they'll use her again. From what I could gather she wouldn't be that effective now that her ..." she paused looking for a word, "approach has been compromised. What's with that sweater anyway?"

It would have taken too long to explain so I just walked out of the archives with as much dignity as I could muster. Colleen Birdseye followed me. The party was over, the place was dark, and there were no alarms or sentries to object to our being there or leaving. Veronika must have arranged for this during her 'jiffy' so she could dispatch me undisturbed. Whoever this group she worked for was, they seemed to have, as Trent had suggested, some pretty long tentacles.

XXIII

Following our escape from the museum, Colleen Birdseye and I agreed to meet at a coffee shop well clear of the facility to conclude the interview that I'd cut short when I pursued the stalker. We purchased coffees and sat and sipped. Hers was decaffeinated; I would have hated to see her on caffeine after the display I'd just witnessed. I filled her in briefly as to where I'd been since

we last spoke. She said it sounded like I was making progress. Then I cut right to the chase and asked her a question I'd been wondering more and more about since I started reading about slow learners but that I'd been lacking the understanding to put so succinctly until now. "Do schools produce slow learners?"

"I think that they can, yeah," she replied. "I think the label itself can make the kids go, 'Oh, I'm a slow learner. Oh, I'm not able to do this' instead of their looking at other ways of learning. 'I might not be able to read very well; I might read at the level of my grade one brother or sister but I still can understand in a different way.' I don't think schools allow students enough opportunities to show their learning ultimately, and they do come out believing they're slow. Slow in the way of less than."

"You talked about a sort of a hierarchy between LD kids and slow learners last time. Is that part of how schools produce slow learners too?"

"K & E is viewed as the kids that... it's often viewed as the kids that aren't worth putting the effort into. There are issues around LD too, I've often seen it where no one is really looking out to see that the LD students are getting the proper accommodations. But, when it comes to K & E, a lot of people don't want to work with the students because they see it as a waste of time. Unfortunately. And it's not a waste of time at all!"

Colleen Birdseye's observation confirmed the dynamic I'd seen in the "Birth of LD/Sputnik" exhibit. It also related to the book that demonstrated that the slow learner label was, at least in the 1970s when it was written, strongly connected to social class.⁶⁷ I would have laid this all out for her as further evidence of her suspicions but it was getting late and I wanted to stick with exploring the most pressing concerns in the remaining time we had to talk. Along these lines, to give her another contemporary example of the sorts of negative forecasts that I'd discovered slow learners often face, I told her Williamson's story of the student he'd seen in line at the apprenticeship board, the one who'd been asked to complete an entrance exam even though he already had the required coursework to bypass the exam.⁶⁸

"Wow," she remarked, then added, "and that happens, unfortunately. Yeah, it's sad, and that's... I mean, that's part of the reason the vocational schools saw numbers drop and that kind of thing, is because of that kind of attitude, right? That it's somehow less of a school if it's a vocational school, y'know? Even though those kids are trying to move from what's basically a trades high school to a *trades college*, right?"

"Do you think those schools do a good job of getting the students ready for trades colleges?"

"Yes they do. Those kids go into these trades courses and they come out ready - because the K & E occupational courses are supposed to be hands-on. Like, you are working for three years. You are in a *shop*. You know how to pull a car apart and put it back together by the time you're done, or build a house, I mean, we build houses on-site, right? So, you learned how to do whatever

⁶⁷ Weber (1974, p. 17)

⁶⁸ Williamson (2016, p. 5)

shop content you were taking. You might not have had all the bookwork to go with it, but that's what college is for, right?"

A question came to me out of the blue just then, it was unfairly broad but I asked it anyway "What is intelligence and how does it relate to schooling?"

She took a sip of her coffee and smiled. "That's a loaded question," she remarked. But then she took a shot at it anyway. "I think intelligence is... I truly think there's all different kinds of intelligence, I guess? It's... I guess, someone's ability to process and understand something in various ways. How does that come out in school?" she asked herself. "There's a very specific type of intelligence that is measured in schools. I think that that's what we see and that's what society focuses on, that being people's ability to memorize and people's ability to write an exam. To be able to understand what the marker is going to want at the end of the day or to understand how multiple choice exams are laid out. I think that's what schools honestly consider intelligence."

I nodded.

"And I think that when... I think other types of intelligence are just as important in being a human being in this world."

I nodded again.

"So, at the end of the day, there are a lot of things which aren't looked at in schools that are not measured. Things like being able to participate with a group of people, and collaborate, and have conversations, and understand why so-and-so next to you is having a bad day, and how to help that person. Relating it back to K & E, that's one thing that, in a K & E school, you see so much of kids helping other kids. You see so much of kids getting together and working together for a 'big-picture' good. Like, when they put our school forward for closure, the students got together and they were down at every school district meeting. They were talking at the meetings to public officials, they were protesting - protesting in a very productive way, not just out there swearing, and..."

"Throwing rocks," I said, helping her along.

"Yeah, exactly! It was organized, it was... they started up, like, a Facebook page, they looked into government documents to see if the school could actually be closed legally or if the district was going against human rights. They were working together and really showing who they were as human beings. And a lot of the students involved in that were grade thirteen kids or grade fourteen kids who would have been too old to come back there the next year anyway. So, it was really neat to see because it wasn't about their personal gain."

"They were looking out for those..."

"Those coming up after them. Yeah. And that's a type of intelligence, that... in a school, is only celebrated if it's in the right way in the right student with the right issue. But for kids who see

injustices that others don't want to hear about, then that is often seen as a behavior problem. That's the type of intelligence, again, that is not celebrated, and that's where our K & E kids often suffer, the things that they are good at and the intelligence that they have towards certain things is not valued."

There was something about all this. I retrieved Williamson's business card from my wallet and took out a pen and wrote down the words 'intelligence/valued' on the back of it as a reminder for myself. I liked what she said and wanted to pursue it.

Birdseye started talking again, about the school closures and about some of her students. Her stories were very informative and I listened carefully for quite a while. Suddenly, however, I yawned a yawn of tectonic proportions. I realized I wasn't feeling very intelligent anymore. It had been an eventful day and I was getting sleepy. I apologized and assured my interviewee it was the tiring case and not her stories that had caused this reaction in me.

"Thanks for all of this," I said. "I mean now and in the archives. I would have got the drop on her eventually by myself but you helped."

"We all need help from time to time," Birdseye said evenly.

I confirmed her contact information, intending fully to call on her again if things came up in the case that she could help me interpret. I had finally realized what a valuable source she was. We went our separate ways. Biting my tongue to stay awake, I drove back to the hotel, went to my room, and fell into a deep, dreamless and all too brief sleep. After a couple of hours, I lurched awake realizing there was something I had been neglecting all the while during this investigation. I wrote this down on a notepad by the phone beside my bed and fell back asleep. This time I didn't sleep dreamlessly. The tiny children were back scurrying around my dinner plate again.

I awoke early the next day. There was no need to look at the notepad, I remembered what I needed to do. I got myself ready (donning another one of Williamson's teacher outfits) and out of the room in twenty minutes. I had made a large cup of java in the machine and carried it with me to the business center, ignoring their 'No Food or Drink' sign. I deposited my coins and the old desktop computer reluctantly woke up and began to fill the room with its song of clunks and grinding. After about fifteen minutes of research, I got what I needed to and set off to follow up the lead. It was surprisingly warm out. A single cloud dominated the sky like the monolithic spaceship of an alien invader, but it had brought a nice warm wind with it. The roads were a slushy mess but for the first time since arriving in Calgary I felt my blood freely circulate.

I reached the office I had set out to find and asked if Matthew Summit was available. The secretary admonished me for not making an appointment and told me that Dr. Summit was a very busy man. I believed that. I'd read that Summit was the leader of the team that brought in IOP, K & E's predecessor and the first comprehensive province-wide vocational program for slow learners, and he continued to be involved in numerous projects related to vocational education and job safety for young workers. Despite the secretary's warning, Summit walked out of his office just then. I recognized him from some pictures I'd seen during my bit of research that morning. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man; I figured him for mid-sixties, but he still moved

with a sort of lithesome grace. He had a plain Samsonite suitcase in one hand and a case that I assume contained a laptop computer in the other. “Dr. Summit have you seen the slow learners?” I called out walking towards him. “My client says they’re disappearing and he’s hired me to find them.” He paused and I caught up with him and handed him my business card. He studied my card for a moment and an expression I took for curiosity flitted across his face. In a faint English accent I couldn’t quite place regionally, maybe due to the contamination of many years in Canada, he told me he had a flight out of town in two hours, but if I drove him to the airport we could discuss the case.

He set his belongings in the trunk of the Buick and sat in the passenger seat seeming to enjoy the ample leg room. I started the car, got the first few turns of the directions I needed from him, and drove off. I told him I’d been studying up on vocational education programs for slow learners in Alberta and had recently been learning about the Academic Vocational programs that ran, in various school districts, from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. I told him I’d seen his name connected with the program that followed this, the Integrated Occupation Program, and asked him to describe his connection to it.

“You’ve learned that for as long as there has been public education there has been some sort of vocational programming,” he began, “but many of the vocational programs of the 1960s and 1970s were not meeting the needs of the students or of the employers we hoped the students would work for after graduation. The vocational programs were meant for students less likely to transition to post-secondary schooling and more likely to transition directly to the workforce, but the unemployment rates of students from these programs were three times as high as those of other students six months after graduation and still twice as high two years after graduation. Though some programs in particular districts were effective, there was, overall, a lack of consistency in the quality and approach of the site-based programs. One problem many of the programs had is they tended to overvalue teaching the students job-specific skills over the generic skills they would need to function in any job.”

“What was different about IOP?” I asked.

“I led a team that built it, from the ground up. First, we developed the occupational program component of it and brought in curriculum writers to write the academic component and ground it in the occupational component. While the mode of instruction cannot easily be controlled, the most effective instructional strategies involved integrating English, math, social, and science into the applied learning opportunities provided by the occupational courses... on a *need to know basis*.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by this and said so.

“Needed to know for practical application. Seeing the application created motivation and gave meaning and concreteness to learning. Similarly, all of the occupational courses focused on instruction in generic skills such as organization, communication, reading, writing, visual skills, and math as well as instruction in the skills specific to that occupation.” He directed me to turn right.

I wanted to hear about the program but had another question first. “It seems like you pretty much endorsed the definition of slow learner many of the school districts were using in their vocational programs. How important was the concept of slow learner in creating IOP?”

“Truthfully, I’m not that attached to the slow learner label. I mean I am a slow learner too at things that don’t interest me,” he candidly replied. “Still, from a system perspective, you try to maximize limited resources to accommodate a diverse range of students. You try to identify the needs of various groups and set up supports to try to meet those needs as best as possible. Systems do not like offering costly programs, and only do so if there is a clear need and if expenses can be kept under control. A program needs criteria to become part of a bureaucratic system, part of a funding system. Alberta Education funds students based on credits earned. IOP students were to be funded for one and a half times per credit, I think K & E students still are,⁶⁹ you can’t do that for just any student. We were most worried about students who were two years behind in core course capabilities, though it turned out that many students who were enrolled in IOP were more like four to five years behind. We thought an IQ range of seventy-five to ninety plus or minus five was appropriate. The combination of these things seemed most suggestive of a student who was at-risk of dropping out of school without sufficient qualification for the world of work, as well as a student who did not likely qualify to receive support from other programming such as that available for students with intellectual disabilities, behavior disabilities and so on.”

I stopped, along with twenty cars that were ahead of me, at a light. The long wait gave me a chance to ask a long question. “You explained how you thought IOP did vocational programming differently or better than many of the previous vocational programs for slow-learners. What did it do differently than *regular schooling* to give these students, who’d struggled, a better chance of success?”

“The traditional academic model sees the teacher as the fountain of all knowledge and the role of the teacher as filling the empty vessels, the students’ minds, with their teachers’ knowledge. In the so-called Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, traditional schools rarely get further than thesis.”⁷⁰

That would have been a good line if I knew what he was talking about. From what Williamson had told me, it sounded like he was maybe describing teaching methods that left little room for the voice of the student or for negotiated understandings.

Summit continued. “The IOP model was designed to engage students in activities that were meaningful and relevant to them... a John Dewey model of learning by doing. Back in the early years of the program, for example, there was a vocational school with a large IOP population that taught the students aspects of both their occupational and academic coursework by engaging them in building houses.”

⁶⁹ See Alberta Education, (2008, p. 6). Max’s source is correct.

⁷⁰ See Leonard F. Wheat (2012, pp. 1-2). A thesis in this case means a proposition, antithesis it’s negation, and synthesis a new proposition that somehow resolves the contradiction by preserving the best parts of both. Although the concept is broadly attributed to Hegel, scholars have pointed out that he never used these terms explicitly.

That was the second time I'd heard about the house project. I silently chided myself for not investigating it yet. Then I asked Summit who John Dewey was and he filled me in and told me a little bit about him and some other 'Progressive educators' from the turn of the century that he'd studied. He told me that all had worked farming jobs or other forms of labor as youths, jobs where they sweated and saw the results of their work, and that they often had very religious upbringings even if they didn't maintain conventional faith practices late in life. These experiences, he told me, helped them develop their progressive views on education. I didn't think there was much for me in that just then, so I directed the conversation back to how IOP worked.

"Sounds like such a program would have to be focused a lot more closely on the needs of each individual student than regular schooling tends to be," I observed.

"Students come to school with KSAs; knowledge, skills and attitudes. Teachers must use their skills to help students use their KSAs to get to a place of learning. This is done through personalization and an approach that focuses on each student's strengths not their limitations."

"Sounds like this could be challenging," I remarked. I thought this was a pretty lame observation on my part but I needed something to keep the conversation going. Summit was turning out to be a good informant.

"It's an art," he replied. "A teacher needs to provide structure, but also be flexible. Like a chameleon. University teacher training programs need to teach this strategy of 'chameleonism'." He paused, appreciating his word choice. I couldn't blame him. "Teacher training programs tend to teach teachers to teach curriculum not individuals."

"From a systems perspective, as you said, I can see identifying measurable differences in IQ and grade level achievement in IOP and K & E students," I noted. I was switching gears conversationally and on our drive. We had turned onto a busy, slow moving highway. Unlike the many drivers jockeying to improve their positions, I hung back and focused on the conversation. We had plenty of time and slow suited me just fine. "But a lot of what I've been reading also identifies IOP students as especially concrete learners. What do you think about this?"

"Most students are probably concrete learners, in a sense. They learn best when learning begins with the concrete realities of their lives, their curiosities, concerns, skills, and interests. Traditional teaching had tended to be so didactic that it left little room for engaging students in this way."

I had a follow-up question. "If this is the case - about most students being concrete learners I mean - why not use the same ideas you used in IOP to make education in general more personalized and relevant to students instead of creating a separate instructional tier for them?"

"A more integrated, discovery-based, individualized curriculum would likely serve all learners, but my career has consisted of *the possible*. I was asked to look into the needs of a vulnerable population of students and I put a team together to improve the quality of education for them."

“If all students benefit from these approaches, do you think that a school or even all schools could realize a model of inclusion that was so flexible there would no longer be a need for K and E/IOP?” I asked, pressing a little.

“Yes and no,” he replied after a pause. “Definitely no if schools continue to proceed on a cookie cutter model. Students will continue to be turned off of traditional schooling, and their abilities to learn and succeed will be undermined. Beyond this, there is a time and place for segregated learning, and a time and place for inclusive learning; it is part of personalization. You need to figure out where the student is now in their learning, and where the student may best be placed in order to maximize their learning potential. If there is a significant number of students with similar learning needs, then it would appear to make sense to congregate those students for instructional purpose.”

Summit then indicated to me that I needed to change lanes. I made sure the driver behind me could see me and then eased the Buick in ahead of her. I waved my appreciation of her inclusiveness.

“What are the limits that would prevent students being taught, inclusively, in the same space instead of using congregated settings?” I asked.

“The abstract and confusing way curriculum is often written, and the careless way it is often used, is harmful for all students but particularly so for more vulnerable populations,” he replied, pausing and then explaining further. “IOP was about using a design down model of curriculum development. Recently I saw an educator drafting a thirty-page bit of curriculum and asked, ‘What would you like students to be able to do at the end of all of this?’ He wasn’t sure. I said ‘Figure it out, and then state it on the first page.’ He paused again for a minute, thinking. A passenger ahead of me had taken advantage of the traffic coming to a dead stop to read some messages on his Smart Phone and had failed to notice traffic was moving again. I was about to beep to remind him, but a hundred other motorists beat me to it. He lurched ahead in a panic, nearly running into the car ahead of him. Summit and I grinned at these maneuvers.

Then a new possibility seemed to occur to Summit and he explained it to me. “If every teacher had to constantly answer questions from their students such as, ‘Why do I need to know or do this?’ like the IOP students are so fond of asking, the education system would be better.

“Can anything be done to promote this kind of awareness?” I asked.

“Alberta Education does a less than efficient job in orienting teachers to deliver new curriculum,” Summit replied. “IOP might have been the last time the Minister of Education provided regional in-servicing and I had to fight to get it. It tends to be seen as a school system responsibility. Teachers need to know and understand the curriculum they’re asked to teach... understanding is a catalyst for learning. Our IOP teacher orientation sessions focused on teaching the teachers to engage students in reflective learning activities, and encourage the students never to see things as facts, and to challenge assumptions.”

“Were you educated under a system that was more inclusive or more congregated?” I asked, steering the conversation back to this topic.

“In England, at eleven years of age, students were sorted into one of two streams; Grammar School for those students on an academic track and potentially capable of going on to university, Technical Modern School, focusing on trade/career education for those less academically inclined. There wasn’t a lot of room for movement. I was put on the academic track.”

“But you ended up working in the trades area of educational programming,” I observed. “How did that come about?”

“As a twelve-year-old and for some years after, I worked in my uncle’s barbershop and did lots of practical work and learned to value the learning by doing model.”

I saw a sign indicating an upcoming turnoff to the airport. I figured this was about as far as I could push a discussion on inclusive education with Summit. He had many ideas about what might make school more inclusive for *all* students; that is to say, include them more authentically in what they are learning and in communities of learning. What he didn’t seem to have was the mindset that separate or congregated classrooms for different levels of students were inherently unjust in any way. I, on the other hand, could see lots of good reasons a person might develop this latter view: Smart Ass cripple’s educational experiences for example, or a careful viewing of the exhibits in the museum of sorting that I’d visited. Still, I could detect no derisive assumption in his practical description of who the IOP students were, at least tentatively, and what could reasonably be done to support their progress through a school system that was too rigid and academic for them. In that sense, what he was saying rang true to me.⁷¹ I was curious about why IOP changed to K & E and what he thought about the differences between the two approaches. As I took the turn, I asked him the first of these questions.

“There was the perception that, in schools that blended high school diploma level courses and IOP, which every school did to some degree, it was too hard to administer both programs at the same time. The amounts of credits, which related to the amount of instructional hours students were to spend in the classes didn’t match up. Five credit courses were easier to program than half day occupational courses. These changes were explained as making it more flexible for students, but IOP was always flexible for students, with multiple transfer points to the high school diploma tier. The K & E model was seen to provide a simpler model for in-school organization. It moved, in my opinion from a student focused model to an administration focused model.” I remembered hearing a similar observation from one of the teachers I’d visited with in the staff room.

A thought that had occurred to me much earlier in the case suddenly came back to me and I asked about it. “When I was reading up on K & E and IOP, it seemed like there was a lot more about what these students needed to thrive, educationally, in the IOP manual. The K & E manual seemed stripped of a lot of this. Almost watered down. Am I right about this?”

⁷¹ “The possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics.” Hans-Georg Gadamer (as cited in Grondin, 1994, p. 12)

“Yes, I believe that was deliberate,” Summit remarked. There it was, slow learners not so much falling, as being pushed through the cracks. Maybe the quality of K & E as a form of programming for slow learners had something to do with the shockingly low number of students who were taking it.

“Bureaucratic proceduralism - this is what kills good programming,”⁷² Summit added after a minute. “Here is another example of the stupidity,” he added. “The K & E classes are not named as sixteen-level classes anymore. Now they’re dash four (-4) classes. As long as we have tiered classes there will always be indications for more challenging classes and for less challenging classes. What difference does it make? Dash - four was seen as less demeaning than the number sixteen, really?”

I saw a 747 descending up ahead. We were nearing the airport. I had time for one last question. “But isn’t the idea of placing students in a separate program that is obviously intended for significantly weaker learners already potentially demeaning? What is the cost of these kinds of programs for the self-image of the students?” I’d decided earlier not to pursue further discussion of what inclusion meant, but Summit’s use of the word ‘demeaning’ in ridiculing the course numbers made it hard to resist.

“It all depends on the program,” he insisted. “If it’s an effective program, it will treat students as people who are able to learn, and they will learn. If it’s perceived as a program for dummies, the program will be destructive to students. If you think they’re dumb and you treat them as though they’re dumb they won’t disappoint you.”

I pulled into passenger drop off and thanked Summit for his candor as he thanked me for the ride. Before he got out of the car, Summit gave me the names of a few curriculum leaders currently working with the K & E series of classes and told me where I could find them. Then he offered a theory about how to find justice for slow learners that didn’t make much sense to me at the time. He told me to look to my own methods for an answer. I felt there was practical wisdom in so much of the rest of what he said; I hoped I might gather some more clues to shed some light on this last cryptic statement.

To be continued...

References

Alberta Education. (2013). *Information manual for knowledge and employability courses*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Alberta Education. (2012). *Special education coding criteria*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Author.

Alberta Teacher's Association. (2009). McQueen wonders why Hancock would “dumb down” diploma examinations. Retrieved from *Alberta Teacher's Association*:

⁷² The source actually said “Bureaucracy.” “Bureaucratic proceduralism” was a phrase suggested to me by Dr. Jim Field in personal communication.

<http://www.teachers.ab.ca/NewsRoom/EyeOnTheLegislature/HighlightsfromtheAssembly/2009/Fall2009/Pages/29-Oct-2009.aspx>

“A teacher called upon the classroom...” (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.bepop.com.ar/humor/TeachersJokes2.html>.

Braunsberg, A. (Producer), Ashby, H. (Director). (1979). *Being there* [motion picture]. United States: United Artists.

Camus, A. (1983). The myth of Sisyphus. In A. Camus (Ed.), *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Chauhan, S. (2011). Slow learners: Their psychology and educational programs. *Zenith International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 1(8), 279–289. Retrieved from http://www.zenithresearch.org.in/images/stories/pdf/2011/Dec/zijmr/22_VOL1_ISSUE8_ZEN.pdf

Cleugh, M.F. (1957). *The slow learner: Some educational principles and policies*. London, UK: Methuen.

Coolican, J.P. (2010, February 3). Should we be upset by Obama's latest remarks on Las Vegas? *The Las Vegas Sun*. Retrieved from <http://lasvegassun.com/news/2010/feb/03/much-ado-again/>

Davis, L.J. (2013). The end of identity politics. In L.J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ellis, N.A. (1986). *Teaching geometry to slow learners* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada.

Finerman, W, Tisch, S, & Newirth, C. (Producers), Zwick, R. (Director). (1994). *Forrest Gump* [DVD]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish* (A. Sheridan, Trans). New York, NY: Vintage.

Foucault, M. (1974). Prisons et asiles dans le mécanisme du pouvoir. In C. O'Farrell (Trans.), *Dits et Ecrits Volume II. Foucault*. Paris, France: Gallimard. Retrieved from <http://www.michel-foucault.com/quote/2004q.html>.

Grondin, J. (2004). *Introduction to philosophical hermeneutics* (J. Weinsheimer, Trans.). London, UK: Yale University Press.

Harders Consulting. (1983). *Report on the Bev Facey Composite High School academic occupational program and courses*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Alberta Education.

Klassen, R., Neufeld, P., & Munro, F. (2005). When IQ is irrelevant to the definition of learning disabilities: Australian school psychologists' beliefs and practice. *School Psychology International*, 26(3), 297-316. doi 10.1177/0143034305055975.

Knobbe, J. (1978). *The inception of the junior vocational program in Calgary public schools* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada.

Martiniello, N. (2009). Lesson 6: The 'super-crip' phenomenon. *Welcome to disability in the media*. Retrieved from <http://www.trinimex.ca/disabilityinmedia/lesson6.htm>

Moules, N. J. (2002). Hermeneutic inquiry: Paying heed to history and Hermes - An ancestral, substantive, and methodological tale. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(3), Article 1. Retrieved from <http://www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm/>

Nyberg, V.R. (1984). *Executive summary evaluation of the academic vocational program of the county of Leduc*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Alberta Education.

Richardson, K. (Producer and Director). (2010). *The kids are all right* [DVD]. United States: The Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media.

Smart Ass Cripple. (2012, January 30). *A burden to society* [Web blog post]. Retrieved from <http://smartasscripple.blogspot.ca/2012/01/burden-to-society.html>.

Smart Ass Cripple. (2012, July 2). *Coulda beena borted* [Web blog post]. Retrieved from <http://smartasscripple.blogspot.ca/2012/07/coulda-beena-borted.html>.

Smart Ass Cripple. (2012, January 23). *The feeble minded football league* [Web blog post]. Retrieved from <http://smartasscripple.blogspot.ca/2012/01/feeble-minded-football-league.html>.

Smart Ass Cripple. (2011, January 21). *Oprah's death squads* [Web blog post]. Retrieved from http://smartasscripple.blogspot.ca/2011_01_21_archive.html.

Smart Ass Cripple. (2012, September 14). *Where's the keeper?* [Web blog post]. Retrieved from <http://smartasscripple.blogspot.ca/2012/09/wheres-keeper.html>.

Smith, P. (2010). Introduction: Whatever happened to inclusion? The place of students with intellectual disabilities in education. In P. Smith (Ed.), *Whatever happened to inclusion: The place of students with intellectual disabilities in education* (pp. 1-20). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

stndrds 79. (2010, July 8). Columbo's great investigative style [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZiv8vkxMac>.

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

Vilhauer, M. (2010). *Gadamer's ethics of play: Hermeneutics and the other*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Rowman and Littlefield.

Weber, K. (1974). *Yes they can: A practical guide for teaching the adolescent slow learner*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Methuen.

Wheat, L.F. (2012). *Hegel's undiscovered thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic: What only Marx and Tillich understood*. New York, NY: Dover.

Wilkins, G., & Miller, S. (1983). *Strategies for success: An effective guide for teachers of secondary - level slow learners*. New York, NY: Columbia University.

Williamson, W.J. (2004). *Understanding work experience: A discourse analysis* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada.

Williamson, J. (2005). Working in the real world: Career pathways consultation, assumptions and possibilities. *ATA Magazine*, 85(4). Retrieved from <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATAMagazine/Volume85/Number4/Articles/Pages/WorkingintheRealWorld.aspx>

Williamson, W.J. (2016). The case of the disappearing/appearing slow learner: An interpretive mystery. Part two: Cells of categorical confinement. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, Article 5. <http://hdl.handle.net/10515/sy5np1x18>

Wolf, M., & Stoodley, C. J. (2007). *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain*. New York, NY: Harper.

Wood, P. (2004). *Lottery*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Why does Sea World... (1979). Retrieved from <http://laughbreak.com/quotes/comedians-best-lines-1997/>