CANADIAN JOURNAL OF
Disability Studies
Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association | Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association canadienne d'études sur le handicap

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

The Social Production of Disability in Encounters with Ontario's Right to Read Inquiry: Beyond the Models of Disability

La production sociale du handicap dans les rencontres avec l'enquête « Droit à la lecture » de l'Ontario : au-delà des modèles du handicap

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Abstract

This paper explores responses to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read Inquiry (2022) so as to reveal the importance of examining the social production of disability. In 2024, Christine Caughill, a student doing a Doctorate in Education, published a critique of the Inquiry Report and 157 recommendations raising concerns about its reliance on medicalized understandings of dyslexia and its implications for education in Ontario. Shortly after, Natalie Riediger, an Associate Professor of Nutritional Science, published a critical rejoinder to Caughill's paper. Riediger defended the Inquiry, framing it as an example of the social model of disability in action and cautioned against critique. Our paper explores the meaning made of disability in the Inquiry and Report as well as Riediger's rejoinder revealing their restricted versions of disability and reading. Our interpretive disability studies approach moves beyond the binary of the medical and social models, and demonstrates that any model used to contain or dismiss questioning also blocks engagement with the phenomena it explains. We build on the contributions of these models offer while addressing their limitations, in order to consider the sociocultural, historical, and political aspects of disability that allow meaning to be made beyond the confined rules or categories that models prescribe. Without a disability studies perspective that critically questions normative understandings of disability prescribed within scholarly models and governmental inquiries, and reports, people, including children labelled disabled, are left with limited conceptions of themselves and disability, as well as few ways to combat the powerful narratives that surround and order their lives.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les réactions à l’enquête « Le droit de lire » (2022) de la Commission ontarienne des droits de la personne afin de montrer l’importance d’étudier la production sociale du handicap. En 2024, Christine Caughill, étudiante au doctorat en éducation, a critiqué le rapport et ses 157 recommandations, soulignant leur ancrage dans des conceptions médicalisées de la dyslexie et leurs effets sur l’éducation en Ontario. Peu après, Natalie Riediger, professeure agrégée en sciences de la nutrition, a publié une réplique défendant l’enquête, qu’elle présentait comme un exemple du modèle social du handicap, tout en mettant en garde contre la critique. Notre article examine les conceptions du handicap présentes dans l’enquête, le rapport et la réplique de Riediger, révélant des visions restreintes du handicap et de la lecture. Ancrée dans les études critiques du handicap, notre approche dépasse la dichotomie entre modèles médical et social et montre que tout modèle servant à limiter ou à écarter la remise en question limite aussi l’analyse des phénomènes qu’il prétend expliquer. Nous nous appuyons sur leurs apports tout en soulignant les limites, afin d’intégrer les dimensions socioculturelles, historiques et politiques du handicap qui permettent de produire du sens au-delà des catégories prescrites. Sans une perspective en études du handicap qui interroge les conceptions normatives véhiculées par les modèles savants, les enquêtes gouvernementales et leurs rapports, les personnes, y compris les enfants étiquetés comme handicapés, restent confinées à des visions limitées d’elles-mêmes et du handicap, avec peu de moyens pour résister aux récits dominants qui structurent leur vie.

Keywords

Disability; Disability Studies; Dyslexia; Medicalization; Models of Disability; Right to Read Inquiry; Ontario Human Rights Commission; Sociocultural Perspectives

Mots-clés

Handicap; études du handicap; dyslexie; médicalisation; modèles du handicap; enquête « Le droit à la lecture »; Commission ontarienne des droits de la personne; perspectives socioculturelles

Introduction

Each and every encounter with disability is shaped by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which it takes place. Disability studies challenges us to trace how these encounters are not simply about impairments, diagnoses, and treatments, but about the systems, the narratives, and expectations that give disability meaning. When we consider the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Right to Read Inquiry* (2022)[1], especially through the responses it has generated, we can reveal how disability is not merely addressed, but actively socially produced through the assumptions, narratives, and politics that shape the report and its reception. In 2024, Christine Caughill, a student doing a Doctorate in Education at the University of Toronto, published a critique of the *Right to Read Report Inquiry* [hereafter the Report], raising concerns about the Report's reliance on medicalized understandings of dyslexia and its implications for how disability is framed in education. Shortly after, Natalie Riediger, an Associate Professor of Nutritional Science at the University of Manitoba, responded with a rejoinder that defended the inquiry, framing it as an example of the social model of disability in action and cautioning against critique. Riediger writes, "The report does not

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[1] "We" are a disability studies graduate writing group that developed from a disability studies course, "Encounters in DS" at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto in 2025. We are thankful to Mu-Yen Chan, Prairie Gillis, Kohinur Akter, and Paola Madrigal Correa as well as the Doing Disability Differently Research and Reading group – all of whom offered provocative comments and support. We also thank authors who opened the door to questioning the dominant conceptions of literacy. Our aim is to engage and re-interpret restricted responses to the publication and implementation of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022), *Right to Read: Public Inquiry into Human Rights Issues Affecting Students with Reading Disabilities* – hereafter called the "Report." In this paper, "Inquiry" refers to the practices behind making the Report. Titchkosky acknowledges and thanks SSHRC, "Reimagining Disability," and the Wellcome Trust for their funding of *Disability Matters* [226705/z/22/z] for providing time for this project.

in fact tell a “story of disability as a problem to be solved”, as asserted by Caughill (2024, p. 40), rather it tells a story of an education system that fails to provide the necessary instruction and supports to students who struggle to learn to read to become literate” (Riediger, 2024, p. 284). In Riediger’s view, the Report is helpful, its critique is not, and those who engage in critique misinterpret the report’s aims and reinforce harmful narratives of dyslexia and disability (Riediger, 2024, p.284).

Following the disability studies premise that every encounter with disability is socially produced, this paper examines the Report, focusing in particular on Riediger’s rejoinder to Caughill’s critique of the Report as a way to show that unless we examine and expand our conception of literacy, we will be left in power relations that generate limited versions of disability. We conduct this examination as a small disability studies group composed of both new and established disability studies scholars, all of whom subscribe to the principle that it is important to critically examine how disability is socially and politically constituted especially by “helpful” programs of education, policy, measurements, and treatments.

While our group shares many impairment/disability experiences, and at least one of us identifies as “dyslexic”, our critique of Riediger's failure to engage the necessity of critique is not based on identity claims but instead on the basic principle and value of *doing* disability studies. Through a close reading of Riediger’s paper, we aim to unpack and examine the disability and literacy assumptions that shape her response. Tracing the distinction between the medical and social models of disability helps us to contextualize aspects of a Report currently influencing the whole of education in Ontario (Ontario Provincial Government, July 28, 2023, Memorandum 168). Our overall goal is ultimately to situate a disability studies analysis in a way that does not take for granted the distinctions between medical and social frameworks *so as to reveal* how the act of assigning meaning to disability and dyslexia is shaped by broader cultural, historical, and political forces. It is in this way that we resist health professional and/or parental claims that a disability studies analysis of current programs of disability identification and treatment are unwarranted or dangerous. Before turning to an analysis of Riediger's claims, we will first discuss our disability studies orientation.

Our Disability Studies Approach

While there are many different approaches within disability studies, as well as multiple models of disability that have shaped the field, our approach focuses on how meanings of disability are socially produced and contextually shaped. By this we mean we are interested in examining the sociocultural, historical, and political contexts that have shaped normalcy and difference. In this way we resist treating normalcy, difference and disability as fixed or definite (Bell, 2011; Campbell, 2009; Davis, 1995; Gabel and Danforth, 2008;Goodley, 2014; Illich et al, 1977; Michalko, 2002; Swain et al. 1993).

Rather than aligning with a single model of disability (medical, social, cultural, affirmational, biopsychosocial, etc.), we aim to move beyond these frameworks so that our analysis is not constrained by definitions or assumptions of any one model. However, we recognize that these models have given us a greater understanding of disability and have allowed us to gain a necessary foundation. Our goal is not to dismiss or replace models but rather to build on their contributions, while also questioning their limits and exploring disability without being confined to rules or categories that the models prescribe.

Even though disability studies encompasses a range of approaches and models, we assert that it is united by a commitment to critically question the dominant or normative understandings of disability (Erevelles, 2011; Ferri and Connor, 2006; Linton, 2005; Oliver, 1983; Titchkosky, 2007). It is our disability studies approach that guides us to focus primarily on Riediger's paper because it presents several limitations in this regard. Despite claiming a disability studies informed perspective expressed as the social model of disability, that model is not fully engaged and is not used to promote critical questioning of dominant narratives, an aim central to the field. We will show that Riediger uses the social model of disability to discuss an unwanted relation to reading instruction as a structural barrier. Riediger, like the Right to Read Report, is committed to a single way of teaching reading (phoneme and word recognition). While alternatives to the dominant method of teaching reading are framed by Riediger and the Report as barriers to learning, this is not necessarily a full engagement with the barriers faced by those deemed to have reading difficulties or disabilities. This means that assumptions about dyslexia and normalcy, ability, and difference, shaped by educational structures, remain unquestioned as Riediger uses the social model of disability to dissuade others from questioning the institutionalized reading programs and testing currently being enforced in the province of Ontario.

Our aim, however, is not merely to critique. It is to show that the promise of any model of disability lies in moving beyond it toward questioning. Without a disability studies perspective that critically questions normative understandings of disability, people, including children labelled disabled, are left with limited conceptions of themselves and disability, as well as few ways to combat the powerful narratives that surround and order their lives.

The Report: The Social Production of Encounters with Disability

To say that each encounter with disability is socially produced is to recognize that disability is not simply an inherent characteristic of an individual, but is shaped by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it occurs. Consider the following sentiment expressed by the Report:

> “The Right to Read inquiry, which focused on early reading skills, found that Ontario’s public education system is failing students with reading disabilities (such as dyslexia) and many others, by not using evidence-based approaches to teach them to read.” (OHRCd, 2022)

In this statement, there is an assertion that reading is best understood as a skill, and reading disabilities as an impairment addressed by teaching the skill of reading. Students with reading disabilities will fail unless “evidence-based approaches” to the teaching of reading are used. Ironically, as Holloway and Peterson (2022) have suggested, there is no evidence that evidence-based approaches are not being used in Ontario schools.[2] Nonetheless, the Report statement communicates the understanding that the appearance of dyslexia means both the student and the system have failed. Whether true or false, the Report communicates a sense that disability is a kind of failure (The 68 page Report Summary has multiple references (more than 30) to failing,

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[2] Claims to evidence-based approaches are steeped in its own socio-cultural and political assumptions that require critical engagement (such as that pursued by a disability studies perspective).

e.g., page, 2, 11, 17, 26, 32, 34, 35, 37, 40, 42, 53, 54, 58, 61, 62, 63, 66, 68 and more than 140 references to failing in the 500 page general report.). There is, of course, nothing “in” an impairment that promises failure, or a lower quality of life, or truncated futures – these meanings are shaped by the social, cultural and historical contexts within which dyslexia and reading difficulties are addressed.

The Report frames encounters with cultural conceptions of disability as if impairment itself produces its own socio-historical meaning. The Report, for example, understands the skill of reading and even literacy itself to be founded upon “strong-word-level” reading:

> “Strong word-level reading is a key foundational skill for becoming fully literate. It is also the skill where most students with reading acquisition difficulties struggle. Students with dyslexia, and many others, do not develop a strong foundation in word reading, setting them up for further academic struggles and potentially, a lower quality of life.” (Report. p.20)

This description promotes an assumption that dyslexia and other ways people may struggle with reading (inclusive of a variety of sensory, mental or physical impairments) forecloses life chances. The sense that phoneme and word recognition difficulties, lead to life problems and that these problems are attributable to a disability is expressed throughout the Report. For example: “Students with reading disabilities often underachieve academically. They are more likely to drop out of school, less likely to go on to post-secondary education, and tend to take longer to finish programs they enrol in” (Report. p. 14). Regardless of whether one agrees with the causal logics employed by the Report, it is undeniable that to read about reading difficulties framed in this fashion is to encounter cultural assumptions about the meaning and consequences of disability. The Report promotes assumptions that an impairment forecloses life chances, suggesting, that "effects can continue past their schooling and can ... lead to lower incomes, poverty and homelessness and higher rates of involvement in crime and incarceration."[3] (OHRCa, 2022, p.10). Behind the claim that children with reading difficulties are more likely to be incarcerated lies a study (Lindgren et al., 2002) on rates of reading difficulties amongst imprisoned adults in Sweden. The unexamined production and circulation of such assumptions points to the importance of pursuing a disability studies informed analysis on any report that claims to know one's life chances as a disabled person simply by knowing an impairment condition.

A disability studies perspective means understanding that disability results not just from a person's impairment but from the ways society reacts to, structures for, and accommodates people with impairments. This perspective also opens up a space to question the very meaning of both disability and impairment, encouraging us to examine not only how society disables, but how perceptions of normalcy and assumptions about what constitutes an impairment are themselves socially and historically produced. This includes the social context of literacy with its norms, assumptions, and identified impairments. By examining the social production of each encounter with disability, we do more than simply identify societal barriers, we begin to uncover the underlying assumptions, historical narratives, and power relations that shape how disability is understood, experienced, and responded to. While the social model of disability does not capture the full complexity of this production, it has been foundational in understanding how disability is shaped by societal structures.

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[3] This is further discussed in "Criminalization and Incarceration" OHRCb, 2022, p.39-40.

The social model of disability emphasizes that disability is not an inherent characteristic of an individual but a result of societal barriers (Oliver, 1983). It claims that individuals are disabled not by their impairments but by the physical, social, and political structures that fail to accommodate, or respond inappropriately to those impairments. This model challenges the traditional medical model, which tends to locate disability within the individual, and focuses on these individual differences as though only a deficit or a medical condition. The social model, in contrast, calls for a focus on removing societal barriers and advocating for accessibility and inclusion (Oliver, 1983). The social model growing out of and influencing socio-political activism, helped the disabled people's movement gain traction and demand changes in legislation, accessibility, and societal attitudes.

While the social model of disability marked an important shift by locating disability in social barriers rather than in individual deficits, it has been critiqued for drawing too sharp of a line between impairment and disability. By treating impairment as a neutral or biological fact, the model does not examine the ways that the concept of impairment itself is shaped by social and political forces (Tremain, 2001, p.621). When considered in relation to the Report (2022), for example, the social model might not help us attend to how the history of dyslexia has changed over time (Heap, 1991) with the advent of mass education (Jackson, 2022; Kirby, 2020; Kirby and Snowling 2022), differing from culture to culture (Jenkins, 1998; Kawano, 2022). Instead, the social model helps us to attend to how the Report medicalizes impairment, by claiming that "dyslexia" is "well researched and understood," and is "the most common learning disability" and the "most prevalent special education exceptionality" (2022, p. 8, 9). Dyslexia is depicted in the Report as a problem-thing in and of itself.

The social model provides a foundational framework for understanding encounters with disability as socially constructed. However, the social model is only one part of a greater conversation about how these disability encounters are shaped not just by physical barriers, but also by the cultural norms that shape ideas of ability, the historical conditions that have influenced how disability is defined, and the political structures through which power and authority determine recognition and legitimacy in educational structures and beyond. By questioning what constitutes an impairment through a historical, cultural, and political lens, examining the social production of each encounter with disability moves beyond the limitations of the social model. In what follows, we examine and expand our conception of literacy by analysing responses to the Report, so as to reveal the power relations that are currently generating a conception of dyslexia that, as we show, is both limited and limiting.

The Right to Read: Social Model vs. Medical/Traditional Model of Disability

To contextualize the responses to the Report it is important to first understand how the Inquiry itself can be interpreted through the lens of the models of disability (medical/traditional, and social). The Inquiry, with its focus on implementing policies to “improve reading” outcomes in Ontario (OHRCa, 2022, p.14), is at first glance, interpreted as a move toward inclusion and equity. The Inquiry was hosted in 2019 by the Ontario Human Rights Commission and today one can find videos of the Inquiry proceedings (OHRCc, 2022), families testifying to their children’s failure to learn to read (often with their children by their side). The Inquiry produced, published, and distributed the Report in 2022 and since then Ontario school boards have been charged with the task of implementing its 157 recommendations. Whereas there is a long history of the critique of the "science of reading" when implemented in other jurisdictions, there is little exploration nor critique of its current appearance in Ontario.[4] However, Caughill (2024) has raised concerns that the Report aligns with the traditional model of disability, which centres medicalized narratives of diagnosis and remediation that risk maintaining a framework where the burden of adjustment falls solely on the individual, rather than challenging and dismantling the systemic barriers that contribute to exclusion. Challenging Caughill, Riediger (2024) argues that the Report aligns with the social model of disability by identifying systemic barriers, (e.g., inaccessible reading instruction and inconsistent teacher education) that disadvantage students with dyslexia, and she suggests that the Report proposes a solution to address these barriers.

Titled "The Ontario Right to Read Inquiry and the Social Model of Disability", Riediger's central argument defending the Inquiry is that it is grounded in the social model of disability, not the medical model as Caughill highlights in her critique. Riediger argues that the Inquiry centres the voices of the dyslexic community and frames literacy struggles as the result of systemic barriers, not individual deficits (Riediger,

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[4] As discussed by David Waters (2021) in *Politics of Phonics: How Power, Profit, and Politics Guide Reading Policies* in the United States, the National Reading Panel (NRP) formed in 1997 as a group of "experts" to evaluate the effectiveness of reading methods much like the Right to Read. The summary of their report recommended science-based phonics reading instruction as the ideal reading method in schools across the US. George W. Bush adopted this recommendation in a program called Reading First, which proceeded the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. The phonics reading program was criticized for showing little improvement in reading skills due to its one-dimensional approach and for negative consequences on the education system as a whole. This history should serve as a cautionary tale for the direction the Right to Read is taking with its unquestioned focus on phonics instruction.

2024). While Riediger positions the Inquiry as following the social model, it is important to ask what kind of systemic change is being imagined and within what framework.

Even though the Report identifies barriers in teacher education and reading instruction, it ultimately locates the problem within the failure to detect and remediate the diagnosable condition of dyslexia. In that sense, the Inquiry is aiming to improve the system from within a medicalized framework, rather than challenging the assumptions that make dyslexia a category of risk in the first place. Its emphasis on early screening, diagnosis, and structured interventions positions dyslexia as an individual problem to be detected and treated, rather than as a phenomenon shaped by the broader cultural, educational, and political structures. In this way, the Right to Read Inquiry and its subsequent Report is attempting to change the system by identifying more students with reading problems, but this change is only within the terms that system already allows, namely, the identification of individuals with problems. This reinforces the individual-deficit traditional model of disability cloaked in the appearance of systemic change. The Inquiry can be interpreted as aligning with the social model of disability insofar as it rhetorically frames individual focused interventions as systemic solutions. However, it is important to recognize that at its foundation, the logic behind these interventions remain tethered to medicalized ideas of diagnosis and remediation.

To further support the idea that the Report upholds the social model of disability, Riediger claims that “Nowhere in the report is it suggested that dyslexia can be eliminated, cured, or erased” (Riediger, 2024, p.289). While the Report itself does not use those exact words, in a section talking about the importance of early screening, it says, “If done properly and combined with evidence-based instruction and interventions, early screening reduces the likelihood that a student will later need professional assessment by a psychologist or speech language pathologist” (OHRCa, 2022, p.32). This suggests that the goal is not simply to support students with dyslexia, but to intervene early enough that their difficulties might not escalate to the point of needing professional assessment, i.e., diagnosis or formal recognition. In this way, the Report positions dyslexia as something to be managed or minimized before it becomes fully visible or institutionally acknowledged. Although the language avoids outright claims of elimination, the underlying logic implies that early action can reduce the presence of dyslexia in the classroom. Again, this reinforces the traditional medical model of disability.

Upon further examination, the Report reveals how deeply it draws on the language and logic of this traditional medical model of disability. Across multiple sections, the Report emphasizes prevention and remediation of disability, framing dyslexia as a condition that, if not addressed, leads to a range of negative academic and social outcomes. Socio-cultural perspectives on literacy are framed not only as inadequate, but also as a key reason reading skills have been neglected. It suggests that these cultural perspectives have been prioritized at the expense of what the Report defines as “effective” instruction: "Despite their importance, foundational word-reading skills have not been effectively targeted in Ontario’s education system. They have been largely overlooked in favour of an almost exclusive focus on contextual word-reading strategies and on socio-cultural perspectives on literacy" (OHRCa, 2022, p.5). This “exclusive focus” is asserted, not demonstrated, but once asserted is serves as a way to dismiss socio-cultural approaches to reading which is paired with a strong emphasis on the prevention of disability through early, evidence-based reading instruction:

> "Although dyslexia is assumed to be neurobiological in origin, there is evidence that with early identification, evidence-based reading instruction and early evidence-based reading intervention, at-risk students will not develop a "disability." If the education system is working as it should, a reading disability can be prevented for almost all students." (OHRCb, 2022, p. 29).

The Report then goes on to describe the consequences of failing to prevent disability, specifically dyslexia, highlighting risks for students: "When students have difficulty learning to read, it can affect their confidence in their academic abilities and overall self-esteem, and lead to significant mental health concerns" (OHRC, 2022a, p.10). Also, "Students with reading disabilities often underachieve academically. They are more likely to drop out of school, less likely to go on to post-secondary education, and tend to take longer to finish programs they enroll in" (OHRCa, 2022, p.10). The Report is obviously associating dyslexia and reading difficulties with a range of negative academic and wider social consequences, reinforcing the urgency of early identification and intervention within a medicalized framework.

These quotations from the Report demonstrate its alignment with a traditional model of disability which frames disability and impairment as factors that reduce life chances. This normative deficit version of disability, which we have contextualized, and drawn from multiple sections of the Report, has long been critiqued by most practitioners of disability studies (Linton 2005; McRuer, 2020; Oliver 1983). While we recognize that alternative readings of these quotations are possible, our approach to disability studies outlined above does not allow us to ignore this medicalization. Having situated the Report within existing models of disability, as well as contextualizing previous responses to the Report within these frameworks, the following sections move beyond these models to reveal limitations of disability categorization. In this way we emphasize the importance of examining the sociocultural and historical factors that shape our collective understandings of disability and dyslexia.

The Authority of the Social Model

While we have demonstrated that the Report aligns more closely with the traditional model of disability, we acknowledge that some, including Riediger, understand the Report as aligning with the social model of disability. Recognizing this perspective allows us to engage more critically with Riediger's central argument, which rests on this alignment with the social model. She invokes the social model as a way to invalidate a critique of the Report.

Just as something aligning with the traditional model of disability does not make it inherently negative, simply calling something an example of the social model does not guarantee its validity nor equity. What actually matters is the work that it does, and the conversations and questions that it does or does not allow. Recall that our disability studies approach suggests that models provide grounds from which to question the ways in which we encounter and respond to disability but are not an end in and of themselves. Responses to the Report, like Riediger's, serve as an example of how categorizing something as the social model of disability may not grant it the authority to be considered a good, equitable, or just way to address disability, or critiques of programmatic treatments. Without more critical engagement, we risk accepting assumptions that may limit the broader, more nuanced conversations needed about disability.

One way to begin conversations oriented toward questioning is by engaging with existing critiques of the social model itself. While the model has been instrumental in highlighting structural barriers and shifting the focus away from individual deficits, it has also been critiqued for oversimplifying the relationship between impairment and disability, and for overlooking how impairment itself is shaped by social, political, and institutional forces (Michalko, 2002; Tremain, 2001). Even a paper that adopts the language of the social model can reproduce the very hierarchies and assumptions it claims to resist. Riediger, for example, draws on the social model's distinction between impairment and disability to argue that the Report does not rely on a medical model, but rather seeks to address the structural barriers that turn an impairment into a disability (Riediger, 2024, p.285). This framing is used to highlight the Report's legitimacy and progressive intent. However, critiques of the social model remind us that this distinction is not neutral. Naming something as an "impairment" already involves assumptions about what is normal, desirable, or functioning "correctly," and often rests on clinical authority to determine such categories. By uncritically accepting the biological basis of dyslexia as a form of impairment, the Inquiry ultimately reinforces the legitimacy of medicalized definitions and the need for individual remediation (often medical), while appearing to adopt a social justice stance. Rather than challenging how categories like impairment and disability are constructed and mobilized, Riediger's interpretation risks reinforcing them. A more critical engagement would not only ask how social barriers disable, but also interrogate how the very definitions of impairment, ability, and intervention come to matter, especially in shaping whose experiences are validated, whose knowledge counts, and what kinds of futures are imagined for disabled students.

Social Production of Disability: A Historical Lens on Dyslexia & Reading

To continue our critical engagement and to move beyond the idea of categorizing the Report within a specific model of disability, it may be more generative to examine (instead of defend) the complex ways in which disability is socially produced within the Inquiry and Report. The history of dyslexia offers a crucial entry point into this complexity. As *Dyslexia: A History* by Kirby and Snowling (2022) shows, dyslexia has not always been the biologically grounded, individualized condition it is currently presented as. Instead, it emerged through a series of political, educational, and cultural developments, shaped by shifting ideas of intelligence, ability, and literacy especially with the event of mass education systems (Titchkosky, 2023). Kirby and Snowling write,

> "The science of dyslexia demonstrates with certainty that there is a biological basis for dyslexia, and more about its neurobiological bases is learnt every day. At the same time, dyslexia's broader history shows that these biological differences are only meaningful when framed as a problem via social norms and beliefs, the most obvious of which is the widespread requirement for skills in reading and spelling in most societies" (Kirby & Snowling, 2022, p. 184).

This "scientific" framing of dyslexia reveals how any claim to its biological basis must also be read through the historical and cultural conditions that define what counts as a reading problem. The Report's treatment of dyslexia as a "well understood" condition with a clear biological basis, and its emphasis on the science of reading risks flattening this history (OHRCb, 2022, p.8, 9). If dyslexia is produced through shifting social expectations around reading, then it follows that reading is not a neutral or instinctive act.

To deepen our understanding of the social production of dyslexia, it is important to examine the history of reading itself. Early reading was not the decoding of abstract symbols to reveal meaning as we know it today, but rather the transformation of oral traditions into visible forms. The first forms of reading were likely task-oriented, grounded in practical needs of the time, and often localized within specific social contexts (Fischer, 2003, p.17). When early writing systems developed, there was, in some cultures, a significant shift from using symbols to represent tangible objects or actions to using symbols that represented sounds. This transition marked the movement from a system where symbols served practical purposes to a system where symbols were used to convey abstract sounds- phonemes (Fischer, 2003, p.16). This shift to phonetic writing made it possible to record language in some cultures, but it was not until much later with the advent of printing, that reading began to spread on a wide scale. As Fischer (2003, p.209) writes, “Yet printing only succeeded because of the availability of paper. Although some early printers used parchment, its costs were prohibitive”. In this sense, the expansion of reading was not just a linguistic or technological development, but a material and political one. The very conditions that made widespread reading possible were shaped by economies of material production and access. Further, Anderson (1983, p.6, 37) documents how the “development of print-as-commodity” is accompanied by new ways of imagining community and thus who or what is a problem to this community. While this is just a glimpse into the history of reading, it puts into perspective reading as a social phenomenon shaped by cultural and political forces.

These various ways to consider the historical movement of reading reminds us that dyslexia is, in many ways, a social phenomenon based on other social phenomena. As the emergence of standardized literacy shows, the conceptualization of dyslexia has been shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces that have defined what it means to read, who is expected to read, and how reading is measured. The point of this is not to say that reading is unimportant or that the challenges associated with dyslexia are not real. Instead, it is to recognize that reading itself is a socially constructed practice and reflects particular values, norms, and power relations.

Consequences

In both the Report and responses like Riediger's, reading is being naturalized and presented as though it is simply an inherent and neutral skill, disconnected from its social and historical context. As a result, the Report and some responses assume the existence of a "normal reader," a figure who is implicitly used to shape standards of competence and to justify educational intervention. Yet, as Huettig & Ferreira (2023, p.866-868) point out, the "normal reader" is an unstable construct, as evidenced by the ambiguity of what it means to "read normally," the dominance of Anglocentric reading models, the variability of reading purposes and strategies, and the ways normative assumptions stigmatize those who read differently. This construction of a "normal reader" legitimizes particular forms of literacy as superior, pathologizes deviation, and upholds systems of power that sort and manage individuals through diagnostic categories like dyslexia. Reading becomes a tool through which institutions can determine who is deemed capable and who is in need of remediation.

Many discussions about dyslexia and reading in primary education are based on adult testimony which seeks to speak on behalf of children. Parents, educators, and policymakers all position themselves as authorities in the lives of children under their care. It would be wrong to say that this role is not valuable; however, creating space for children's own voices to be heard is equally if not more important, especially if we aim to honour the many ways in which disability is experienced in our society. Disability is not merely something to be spoken about; "it is a process of meaning-making that takes place somewhere and is done by somebody" (Titchkosky, 2007, p. 12). For children, a key site of this meaning-making is their embodied experience, learning to read. This can include how they physically and emotionally engage with literacy, and are now managed under initiatives like the Report, and its 157 recommendations. Their experiences are shaped by factors such as the classroom environment, peer interactions, standardized testing, views on success and failure—and let's not forget the broader challenges of growing up in an AI "enhanced" and politically polarized world. We recognize that parents create meaning through personal stories, medical diagnoses, and advocacy in their community. Whether it is reading reports and programs, parental concerns, or personal reading relations, none of these exhaust the meaning of reading and there is surely overlap between them.[5] However, both the Report (OHRCa, 2022, p. 20-22) and Reidiger (2022, p. 284-285) suggest an overly simplified sense of reading, namely, that there is a correct way to understand and teach

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[5] In Riediger's paper and in the Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read Inquiry video materials, we do not know the individual identities (or relationship to dyslexia/disability) of the parents who speak on behalf of their children. What is known is that the adults identify first and foremost as parents of children with reading troubles, publicly frame their children as having difficulties that make the parents sad and upset, and use this positionality to shape their engagement with the discourse of literacy and advocacy.

reading which they call the science of reading, and incorrect ways, which they call harmful.

This dichotomous relation to reading where one side is naturalized as correct and the other as incorrect has many consequences including teaching an oversimplified sense of literate culture as merely the acquisition of decoding skills, skills to be acquired, acquired in correct or incorrect ways, determined by some adults. This simplified sense of literate culture is also accompanied by an over-determined sense of adult authority. For example, employing the sense that there is a science of reading and everything else has negative consequences suggests perhaps tacitly, perhaps explicitly, that the adult perspective, while likely rooted in a desire to support their child, can overshadow the child's own ways of understanding and engaging with literacy. If we only ever encounter children's experiences in a way that is filtered through adult interpretations, we risk reinforcing ableist assumptions under the cloak of support. The focus can shift from letting the child develop the autonomy needed to share their own story, to remedying perceived deficits both in the story and how it is told.

Disability studies has emphasized both autonomy and interconnectedness as central elements that need to be respected in their many forms. In the context of reading and learning, this means resisting the urge to impose a fixed, one-size-fits-all idea of literacy and instead creating environments where diverse relationships to language are not only accommodated but encouraged. It is our hope that future conversations surrounding the Report highlight the perspectives of the students directly engaging with its recommendations.

As Titchkosky (2007, p.12) reminds us, "understanding disability as a site where meaning is enacted not only requires conceptualizing disability as a social accomplishment, it also means developing an animated sense of that which enacts these meanings". When this sense is absent, and we fail to recognize how disability is socially produced in each encounter, the figure of the "normal reader" emerges as neutral, and our social responsibility is not fully acknowledged (Huettig & Ferreira, 2023).

While Riediger acknowledges that dyslexia is partially socially constructed, primarily through the alphabetic code or the embeddedness of literacy in society, (Riediger, 2024, p.286) her engagement with this idea remains surface level. For instance, she does not engage in aspects such as the historical context of dyslexia as a diagnostic category itself and, thus, reinforces current cultural assumptions about dyslexia as an ahistorical category (Ferrari, 1983; Jackson, 2022; Kirby, 2020). When dyslexia is taken as an ahistorical impairment that simply needs to be remediated through evidence-based instruction, the burden of adaptation remains on the individual. Following her acknowledgment of dyslexia as socially produced, Riediger writes, "However, I think most would agree that society is highly unlikely to abandon print" (Riediger, 2024, p.286). A critique of how the meaning of people, disability or literacy is being constituted, an exploration of the consequences of these constructions, does not point toward "abandonment." From our disability studies approach, questioning the Right to Read report is not the abandonment of print but rather continued engagement with aspects of the vast culture of literacy. Riediger's argument does not fully engage with the idea of society as a productive structure, limiting her analysis as there are multiple sociocultural and institutional factors that shape experiences of disability and dyslexia. The education system is a structure, but it is not the only structure at play, it is not the only one that shapes societal norms and practices. Although the Inquiry and Report aim to reform policies within education, it operates within the broader structure of society, which should be acknowledged. Following this reasoning, Riediger's argument ultimately reinforces the same institutional logics and cultural norms that the social model of disability seeks to challenge.

In this sense, Riediger's paper reflects the naturalization of disability that the social model attempts to critique. By reinforcing the idea that reading is universally desirable and necessary, and that dyslexia must be diagnosed and treated within this rigid framework, she upholds unquestioned assumptions about ability and impairment that discourages critical engagement with an educational context that claims to identify, know and solve the problem that it assumes disability to be. This constricted engagement is not only problematic for educational practice but also carries significant consequences for the field of disability studies. As Linton (2005, p.518) explains, "What distinguishes disability studies from other approaches to the study of disability is the way we conceptualize the poor fit that generally exists: our explanation of what causes the poor fit and our prescription for change to make for a better fit". Asking how the Report frames problems with reading as a poor fit in society should be a question that disability studies willingly pursues. Literacy structures need, among other things, disability studies analysis. By framing her arguments within the context of the social model of disability, Riediger inadvertently narrows the scope of the field. For example, Caughill's disability studies analysis of the Report is dismissed as harmful (p. 284) and dehumanizing (p. 287, 290). This not only undermines productive dialogue but also discourages the kind of critical, transformative conversations that disability studies seeks to foster by questioning how disability is framed as a problem as well as proposed solutions.

We want to clarify that critique is not only welcomed but necessary in disability studies. It is embraced as a generative practice that keeps the field responsive to its own limitations and the shifting conditions of power and exclusion (Goodley, 2014, p.192). The aim of this paper is not to suggest that critique is unwelcome in disability studies, but rather that critiques of disability discourse should be situated within the field's foundational commitment to questioning the structures that define, contain, and often depoliticize disability itself. While Riediger's paper claims to be a disability studies-informed response, it does not fully take up this commitment. As a result, her critique may unintentionally undermine the ongoing, critical dialogue that disability studies aims to encourage and sustain.

Conclusion

Riediger begins her paper with claims that Caughill misinterprets and decontextualizes aspects of the Right to Read Inquiry and Report and therefore reinforces narratives of dyslexia and disability that are harmful (Riediger, 2024, p.284). It is ironic that throughout her response, Riediger seems to misinterpret and decontextualize aspects of disability studies, especially the authority of the social model. Although we have critiqued Riediger's response throughout this paper, her misinterpretation also seems to be instructive. It teaches us how disability studies can be misread, and even repurposed, in ways that obscure its critical commitments, e.g., naturalizing the idea that disability leads automatically to diminished life chances; or that impairments can be known and defined by one perspective and to use any other perspective is to play with danger but not with autonomy or interdependence. It continues to show us how every encounter with disability, including one grounded in a framework like human rights, scientific progress, or even the social model of disability, is socially produced. In this way, Riediger's response teaches us how dominant logics shape what can be perceived, said, and believed about disability.

Riediger ends her rejoinder with the hope that her commentary can "re-centre the voices and perspectives of the dyslexia community, as thoroughly documented in the report (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022) and in line with a social model of disability" (Riediger, 2024, p.290). We too join in this hope. We hope that this paper has started to reveal the complexity of the social production behind each and every encounter with disability inclusive of those of us who experience dyslexia. Through an examination of Riediger's interpretation of the Report, as well as the Inquiry itself, we hope to emphasize that when we move beyond the binary of the medical and social models and engage deeply with cultural, historical, and political aspects of disability, we begin to make meaning, not only of disability, but of the interpretive practices that shape our collective understanding of it. This requires the continued engagement with critique of those programs, policies or practices that make claims not only to know what the problem of disability is, but also how to fix it.

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