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The “Slow Learner” as a Mediated Construct

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Abstract

Seeking to make a contribution to Disability Studies in Education research, this paper opens up for conversation, via descriptive illustrations, how and why our societal, cultural and educational conceptions and perceptions of human capacities and abilities need to attempt to be firmly rooted in everyday relations, in the realm of possibility (Gadamer, 2004), subject to constant critical inquiry and revision. From an educator perspective, the term/concept “slow learner” is, potentially, one such relation. Establishing the general, ubiquitous nature of the term/concept as it is historically and culturally evident, as it is currently framed by educational psychology via psychometric categorization, and as it is complexly lived within the school system, the authors offer a critical examination of the cacophony of discourses emanating from the disciplines of educational psychology, special education and education, regarding what counts within the enterprises of identifying, classifying, programming and accommodating for exceptional students in learning institutions. By utilizing the increasingly popular analytic deconstruction and discourse analysis methods for researching special education topics, the authors assert that the term “slow learner”, despite an apparent, recent, solidification of its meaning, is itself as a categorical inheritance that must be challenged as a mediated and mediating cultural, psychological and educational referent and descriptor. This challenging of the term/concept reveals its complicatedness and how the professional and intellectual use of the term remains riddled with hegemonic assumptions and self-fulfilling strangeness and monstrous misinterpretations of who “slow learners” actually are. The authors explore the “slow learner” in public discourse and in popular fictional North American media representations of “slowness” and “slow learner” in such films as *Being There* and *Forrest Gump* and in the novel *Lottery* reflect and but also augment its uses in educational discourse. The intent of this inquiry is to invite a conversation between disabilities and special education studies researchers, practitioners and educators to re-theorize mediated depictions of “slow learner”. Specifically, “slow learner” as a concept reminds us that, despite the more inclusive rhetoric of current iterations of educational classification processes, troubling, privileging assumptions may still linger. “Slow Learner” may also suggest that, as with other concepts deficit-based discourses of disability have given us, an important agitation to the unsettling of the power relations of “slow learner” that can be found in critical / novel uses of the phrase itself.

Keywords

slow learner, intelligence testing, categorization, disability, learning disability, intellectual disability, media, discourse analysis, deconstruction, fiction

The “Slow Learner” as a Mediated Construct

“Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.”

Oscar Wilde

Introducing the “Slow Learner”

Kearney (2003) in an attempt to understand “otherness” names three manifestations of it as strangers, monsters, and gods. These manifestations, according to Kearney (2003), both confirm and challenge our attempts at comparatively normalizing our own depictions of selfhood in relation to a referential other; again, normally projected upon as a negation or a negative referent. Whereas Kearney (2003) wrestles philosophically with these otherness manifestations in relation to selfhood, we, as educators, seek to challenge a categorizing term/concept of self-other interconnectivity. That term/concept is “slow learner.” Contemporary discourses associated with this term/concept are inherently complex and seemingly framed within educational, psychological, and cultural discursive constructs. This paper challenges the manifestations of the term/concept “slow learner.”

Slow learner is a term/concept inherently riddled by contemporary educational, psychological and cultural interpretations and representations. Indeed, the word/concept of “slowness” itself as a living expression is alive in our everyday words, images and actions all of which convincingly attach themselves to children, adolescents, and adults. Slow learner, across time, becomes otherwise categorically referred to as apathetic, dawdling, delaying, disinclined, dreamy, drowsy, easy, gradual, idle, imperceptible, inactive, indolent, inert, lackadaisical, lagging, leaden, lethargic, listless, loitering, negligent, passive, plodding, ponderous, postponing, procrastinating, quiet, reluctant, remiss, slack, sleepy, slothful, slow-moving, sluggish, snail-like, stagnant, tardy, torpid, and tortoise-like.

In educational discourse, the term slow learner and many other labels used to identify students who are seen as learning differently or having learning difficulties comes from a widespread institutional phenomenon Graham and Slee (2008) identify as follows:

[u]nder the sustained and combined influence of the medical and psychological disciplines, teachers and education administrators have become used to thinking in terms of the norm and categorising educational endeavour according to abstract notions of intelligence (p.85).

Under this medical-psychological rubric of normalization and exceptionality, the slow learner label has had a variety of meanings. Previously, slow learner was an available general term to refer to any students who were seen as struggling with curriculum as well a more specific term used to describe students who were thought to be the largest subgroup of persons who fell into the category we now call mild to moderately intellectually disabled (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2006). Armstrong (2002) points out than an aspect of the normalizing / differentiating process is the proliferation of categories of learning difficulties. It is through this categorical refinement and expansion that the concepts of intellectual disability and learning disability became, at least in formal classification documents, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Task Force on DSM IV, 2000), and in educational jurisdictions that rely on this form of classification (e.g. Alberta Education, 2010), more firmly delineated. The concept of slow learner, while lacking the status of a formal category, remained as something of an informal, but distinct, diagnostic region between the two (King, 2006). Currently the slow learner label is often used to frame students whose Intelligence Quotients (I.Q.s), as measured by standardized psycho-educational and psychometric assessments purported to measure intellectual potential, fall into, but not below, the low average level I.Q. score of between 75 and 90 (Kaznowski, 2004; King, 2006).

From a positivistic standpoint, it makes sense that an educational label, formal or otherwise, might be needed to identify the approximately 13% of students who would likely fall in the low average range intellectually and who might therefore encounter some struggles with a curriculum intended for average students (King, 2006). On the other hand there is, to put it mildly, some ambiguity regarding what the hypothetical construct of an I.Q. score (in this case one in the low average range) actually means regarding how an individual might function in a classroom or in society (Gould, 1981). Dudley-Marling and Gurn (2010) assert that, despite widespread cultural assumptions to the contrary, the "normalizing curve," upon which measurement of intelligence is based, while useful in disciplines such as astronomy, "grossly misrepresents human affairs and therefore is a poor model of conceptualizing human difference" (p.11). Similarly, as Ewald reminds us (in Graham and Slee, 2008) despite the assumptions that often follow about populations identified as abnormal through the use of the normalizing curve, such "normative individualisation comes about without reference to any nature or essence in subjects [and] is purely comparative" (p. 86). Educational labels that are defined through the use of this statistical differentiation, however, come to mean much more than this. These labels embody, from the special education perspective the knowledge claims about the medical / psychological diagnoses that have been developed to account for these differences and the recommended strategies to treat, remediate and / or accommodate individuals with measured defects or deficits? (Graham and Slee, 2008). From the perspective of disability studies they may also contain traces of ableist, racist, gender and class-based assumptions that influence the production and description of educational categories of normal and abnormal (Graham and Slee, 2008). These are the sorts of assumptions Kearney (2003) describes when noting the tendency to frame the other as "monster". It is on this basis of these assumptions that the term/concept "slow

learner" it's self must be challenged. In the tradition of disabilities studies scholars including Allan (2008), Armstrong (2002), and Danforth and Gabel (2006) it is our intention to study the slow learner term/concept, using the tools of deconstruction and discourse analysis. In agreement with Armstrong (2002) who, describes the growth of special education as a "wild profusion of entangled events" we feel that the slow learner concept, so seemingly self descriptive and coherent in reified use, is a tempest of unequal power relations, hegemonic practises and hidden assumptions. In tracing its discursive appearance in a variety of historical, institutional and cultural settings, often alongside other concepts related to normalization and disability, we hope to dissipate some of the quiet violence of this term and in the spirit of "reclamation" that has seen pejorative concepts related such as "queer" (Brontsema, 2004) and "crip" / "cripple" (Lauredhel, 2009) recast to open up possibilities of inclusion ask if slow learner too might be an appropriate site for such reclamation.

Opening Up the Slow Learner Term/Concept

Prior even to the advent of mass public education, and as an aspect of the 18th century, European "great confinement"(Foucault, 1977) of the criminal, mentally ill people, and even people whose primary affliction was poverty, poor children and/or children with disabilities often lived, learned and worked in charity workhouses. Combining Christian charity, with the idea that society had to be protected from the menace that the poor, especially the jobless, posed these workhouses served the functions of controlling and rendering useful destitute children and indoctrinating these children in their roles in the social order (Armstrong, 2002). These efforts involved training the children as labourers in industrial production as well as providing them with some rudimentary level of literacy and numeracy (Armstrong, 2002). Though the practices

of sorting individuals based on intellectual capacity has often claimed to be an objective and scientific process, it is not difficult to see the influence of the aforementioned class-based disciplinary practices on the creation of the intellectual categories / hierarchies that followed. In the popularization of the concept of intelligence, and the social Darwinist sorting of individuals through the use of the bell curve during the 19th and early 20th century, many of the assumptions about those with lower scores seemed to flow directly from already-formed assumptions made about marginalized categories of people (mentally ill, sick, poor, disabled) who were preconceived as social problems. It seems the dominant solution of the great confinement, already in use with other marginalized populations, became the preferred model for dealing with many of the new categories of people that intelligence testing identified too (Foucault, 1977). The rubric of control, confinement and care (Foucault in Armstrong, 2002), informed in this case by the pseudoscience of human improvement through eugenics (Armstrong, 2002) combined in a discourse that dominated 19th century social and educational planning for people with intellectual disabilities. To what extent do the ghosts of these ideologies and methods haunt current discourse and practice?

In the practices of intellectual classification that became widespread in the Western English-speaking world of the early 20th century, individuals who we now call slow learners with low average levels of cognitive functioning were only one classification category above the then category of “moron” or “feeble-minded”. These latter labels indicate a diagnostic group, testing in the range of what we would now consider mildly intellectually disabled, that American proponent of mass testing and Social Darwinist Henry Goddard (1912 as cited in Gould, 1981) named and then deemed “undesirable” and suited for little more than institutionalization and forced abstinence. Commenting on the reasons for the increase in the number of children in

residential special schools during the early 20th century, Humphries and Gordon (in Armstrong, 2002) make the following assertion:

This increase was fuelled by a fear strongly influenced by the new science of Eugenics that the mentally disabled were undermining the health and strength of the British nation. They were closely associated in much social thinking with crime, poverty, physical degeneration and sexual immorality. The favored solution was to segregate them from the rest of society to avoid further contamination (p.454).

While acknowledging that those testing one standard deviation above this, of low average intelligence or at a level consistent with the slow learner label as it is currently used, could, with the right guidance and vocational placement, live in society, Goddard deemed them suited only for "doing the drudgery" or performing unskilled labor (p.191). When the United States Army brought in IQ tests, in 1917, for all recruits during World War I, -- despite the fact that the culturally biased tests included identifying missing items in pictures of people playing tennis or lawn bowling --, the recommendations were that recruits who tested in the low average range should be classified as "ordinary private". If recruits came in, just below this level of ordinary, then they should be classified as being "rarely suited for tasks requiring special skill" (Gould, 1981, p. 191). Slow learners, then, on the bases of mental testing categorizations were becoming viewed as both a societal risk and a labor opportunity. Terman (1919 as cited in Gould, 1981), another influential American social scientist at the time, noted that without proper vocational training these "slow" individuals, who were thought to lack the moral sense that comes with a higher I.Q.s, were bound to "leave school and drift easily into the antisocial and join the army of Bolshevik discontents." (p. 213) On the other hand, this large category of persons in the rapidly growing area of mechanized production offered a labor opportunity when one man, "with the ability to think and plan guides the labor of ten or twenty laborers of...inferior mentality" (p. 191). The Platonist notion of rule by a class of philosopher kings

(Gould, 1981), bolstered by the sciences of intellectual assessment, and Taylor's notion of scientific management -- the latter of which sought to eliminate any initiative, or thoughtful participation of the slow learning laborer in the operation of the assembly line that the better educated and more intelligent manager had designed (Friesen and Jardine, 2009) -- are obvious in this quotation.

There is evidence of one hundred years of the effects of such social engineering in programming for slow learners and other categories of people seen as having intellectual deficits in the Province of Alberta, Canada, which we will examine closely as an example, as well as in many other school districts in Canada, England and the United States. Policy in Alberta seemed to work on a hierarchy discursively similar to that of Goddard's rankings of intellectual deficits that regarded individuals with intellectual disabilities as suited only for sterilization and exclusion from society and those with low average intellectual functioning as less of a threat but still only suited for a limited role in society. Temporarily turning our attention to the treatment of the former diagnostic group, people with intellectual disabilities, reveals some extreme examples of this social engineering that may heighten our sensibilities to appreciate subtler forms of these same tendencies in the treatment of slow learners. The Alberta Eugenics Board existed from 1928 – 1972 and during this time forcibly sterilized 2,832 individuals deemed intellectually disabled (Wahlsten, 1997). The pernicious results that occur when intellectual classification is understood as a Darwinian hierarchy of citizen fitness can be seen in the now fairly well known (as a result of successful litigation, a National Film Board of Canada Documentary, a book and numerous news articles) case of the sterilization of Leilani Muir. Signed over, at the age of 11, by an abusive and neglectful family, to the Provincial Training School for Mental Defectives in Red Deer, Ms. Muir without her knowledge was sterilized ,

being told she was being sent for an appendectomy. The institution took these actions on the basis of her tested I.Q. of 64, which placed her in the vocabulary of the time in the range of a “mental defective moron” (Wahlsten, 1997, p. 187). From records of the case this single test, the results of which likely reflected a culturally impoverished upbringing, was apparently the only evidence of an intellectual disability. She was doing well in her classes in the institution and was reported to be “talk[ing] easily and volubly” in an interview (Wahlsten, 1997, p. 195). Later, after leaving the institution and benefitting educationally from the opportunity to live as an adult in society at large Ms. Muir had another I.Q. test and this time scored 89, which is the highest possible score in the low average (slow learner) range or just one point shy of a score of average range (Wahlsten, 1997). Had she tested in this range initially she never would have been sterilized (Keith, 2011). The technical reliability and validity of the I.Q. scores of Ms. Muir or any of the individuals who were forcibly sterilized is, in one sense irrelevant to this horrific piece of history. This case resonates most strongly as a shameful reminder of the toxic and dehumanizing paternalism with which people with / seen as having intellectual disabilities were once treated in institutional settings, it condemns the practitioners, the sterilizations and the labels and underlying assumptions that supported these abuses. Notwithstanding this assertion, the difference between Ms. Muir’s two scores also illustrates ongoing ambiguity as to what an I.Q. test actually means, likely in this case reflecting cultural impoverishment instead of innate ability, and the consequences when professionals, instead of using such data cautiously and collaboratively, use it to make arrogant, arbitrary decisions with potentially profound impacts on the lives of others. It also speaks to how purportedly value neutral educational concepts such as intelligence (Danforth, 2006) often conceal the racist and class-based assumptions that underlie them. In the case of the eugenics board, as Keith (2011) points out, non-British children (Lemuir

was Irish-Polish) were both more discursively likely to be described as a as a societal problem and more likely to test poorly on the culturally biased I.Q. tests. Finally, this concept is illustrative of what Hall (in Armstrong, 2002) has described, as an “impairment pecking order”. Though Hall meant this to indicate that the rights of those with physical disabilities are often valued more highly than those with intellectual disabilities, in this case the pecking order relates to the consequences of understanding intelligence categories as a hierarchy.

Though valued more highly than those with intellectual disabilities, educational discourse and policy certainly does not suggest that slow learners are highly valued. In Alberta, slow learner students are named as ‘at-risk’, and it is deemed that educational programming with a vocational emphasis was and is the best fit for them (Alberta Education, 1988; 2008; Kaznowski, 2004; Knobbe, 1978). Like the old English charity workhouses, this sort of programming is framed as a benevolent attempt to provide those who face hardship (academic hardship in this case) with the training necessary to function in society. A simultaneous interpretation is that, while lacking the dramatic abhorrence of the treatment that individuals diagnosed with intellectual disabilities have historically faced, this form of separate vocational programming for slow learners may also be informed by the eugenic or hygienic sensibility of protecting classes of “normal” children from dangerous others (Armstrong, 2002). In this case the dangerous other is the slow learner who may impair the progress of the class, whose slothfulness and supposed lack of intellectual and social sophistication may interfere with the proper development of other students. A 1901 proposal to put together a vocational school for slow learning children in Calgary, Alberta noted that the population it was intended to serve were “not the bright, studious pupils, but the dull uninterested ones” (Knobbe, 1978 p. 16). It was assumed of course that a student would appear “dull and uninterested” due to an innate deficit in

comprehending standard school curriculum, the role of social class in making curriculum less accessible to some students and in informing the placement decisions educators made about students was not acknowledged at the time. In a rare nod to this possibility that came some seventy years later after the Calgary vocational curriculum was written, Ken Weber (1974), a former school teacher and education professor wrote a book about slow learners in which he revealed Toronto Board of Education's statistics showing a wide gap between the number of children of labourers and unemployed parents referred to specialized vocational programming for slow learners and children of parents in professions such as dentistry, law, medicine and accounting. For example, while 9% of the children of laborers such as cab drivers and 29% of the children of single, unemployed mothers had been placed on the "special vocation" track, only 0.5% of the children of a group called "accountants, engineers, and lawyers" were placed in this sort of programming.

More recent curricular writing about slow learners is more respectful in its word choice than the blunt rhetoric of yesterday but similar assumptions still seem at work in how slow learners are described. For example in the manual for the Alberta Integrated Occupational Program (I.O.P), a vocational program for slow learners that was offered between 1989 and 2005 in Alberta (Alberta Education, 1988), the authors quote a document called "Teaching for Thinking" which describes the following characteristics of students with poor thinking skills:

Very impulsive pupils

- a) Make decisions quickly without pausing to reflect
- b) Do not think in advance
- c) Do not plan
- d) Do not consider alternatives...

Pupils who miss the meaning

- a) Have difficulty comprehending

- b) Have difficulty following directions
- c) Are unable to conceptualize big ideas and large issues ...

Pupils who are anti-intellectual

- a) Condemn the process of thinking as a waste of time and effort (p.39).

To be fair, these guidelines are presented in the remedial context – they suggest that with the proper assistance these student populations can improve to some degree in abstract reasoning and overall thinking skills. Yet there is still the assumption that these skills are widely lacking in students with this intellectual profile.

The most recent form of programming for slow learners in Alberta, the Knowledge and Employability (K & E) series of classes suggests something of a discursive relaxing of the educational concept of slow learner. Though referring to a low average I.Q. as one of several possible criteria for recommending a student for this form of programming, the K & E Manual (Alberta Education, 2008) makes very few global statements about its intended population of students. Rather, the document emphasizes the concept of “classes not a program” suggesting that students might enroll only in the more remedial K & E classes in the core areas they struggle in. It also emphasizes a transfer point back into the “regular” program of studies. These courses also do not seem very popular; less than one percent of Alberta’s students have graduated with the K & E certificate of achievement, the graduation credential awarded to students who remain in this instructional tier throughout high school, over the last five years (Alberta Education, 2010). If the Knowledge and Employability series of classes might be considered the only formal system of support and remediation available to slow learners in Alberta it is worth noting that these classes seem undersubscribed; if one sees little of value in the slow learner label perhaps the obscurity of this particular inception of vocational programming might be seen as beneficial.

Currently, in most Canadian and American school districts, though still predicted to struggle academically and still seen as candidates for vocational, workplace, or training education programs, slow learners are considered neither intellectually disabled nor learning disabled. Slow learners tend not to fall into any formal psychometric categories recognized in special education programming (Alberta Education, 2010; Cooter & Cooter, 2004; King, 2006). Why? Slow learner's I.Q.s are, by definition, too high to place them in the category of the intellectually disabled (Alberta Education, 2010; King, 2006) and, though some recognition of the complexity of such labelling is needed to illustrate this, essentially too low to place them in the category of learning disabled. To explain this second claim more fully, many struggling students score relatively evenly across the different subtests that go into determining a full scale IQ assessment. A student scoring in the low average or slow learner range on most of the discrete subtests of an intelligence / academic psychometric assessment would likely not fit sanctioned definitions of learning disabled that require both an overall I.Q. in the average range *and* large discrepancies between the subtests (Alberta Education, 2010, Cooter & Cooter, 2004; Klassen, 2002) or even the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (Task Force on DSM IV, 2000) requirement that the individual labelled L.D. show a discrepancy of two standard deviations between the area of deficit and the overall I.Q. Slow learner is a category of betweenness. In the sense that persons with disabilities have been and continue to be the target of prejudice and exclusionary practice (Belzile, 2008; Gould, 1981; Smith, 2010; Stiker, 1999) escaping from these categories might be seen as a beneficial event for students who would test as slow learners. This might also be seen as a pyric victory for these students and the teachers who work with them as special education programming for categorized learners, recently, has involved legally mandated supplemental funding, alternative assessment accommodations, and attempts at

enhanced learning and technologies support. Researchers have noted that slow learning students, though predicted by intellectual testing as likely to struggle in school, are not categorically labeled disabled and therefore have often been left ineligible to receive any additional support (Claypool, Murusiak, & Janzen, 2008; Kaznowski, 2004; King, 2006). Slow learners are categorically excluded from mandated assistance other learning deficit categories may benefit from. While many ministries of education (Alberta Education, 2009; Porter 2008) are re-thinking how special education services are defined and delivered, describing their current systems as inflexible and deficit-based, again, the slow learner is, ironically, not mentioned in any of the literature to describe possible changes and, in Alberta, the only form of support available for slow learners remains the vocational stream of classes (Alberta Education, 2008; Alberta Education, 2009).

The exclusion of “slow learner” from categories of disability, even as educational-psychological discourse predicts that students of this level of intellectual functional may struggle may be more than a statistical accident. It may be a function of the previously cited hierarchical bias about degrees of disabilities, or Hall’s “impairment pecking order”. There are other diagnostic options in the field that might see learning disability defined without reference to a full-scale I.Q. categorization, which might allow more slow learners to diagnosed as L.D. but all Canadian provinces insist on a definition of learning disability that requires that those diagnosed test in the average range in their global intelligence (Klassen, 2002). Both professional guidelines and advocacy literature about learning disabilities repeatedly emphasize the idea that “learning disabled individuals are not slow learners” (Barva, 2005; Battistella, 1990; Office of Disability Policy Educational Testing Service Princeton, 2010). While a thorough telling is beyond the scope of this paper, a sense of the history of learning disability label and the

misunderstandings that those diagnosed with learning disabilities as well as practitioners who work with them continue to fight today is certainly indicative of why a descriptive contrast with the slow learner label is often reinforced when talking about learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities, when facing difficulties in school have historically, often with the consequence of inappropriate placements in classes for students with intellectual disabilities or behavioral problems, been misunderstood in the words of 1932 reading researcher Marion Monroe as either "lazy or stupid" (Danforth, 2009, p.3) and many continue to fight the perception that a learning disability is an indication of diminished intellectual capacity (Barva, 2005). The current special education standard of seeing a learning disability as indicative as a, perhaps tragic, flaw or deficit in an otherwise intelligent person (Alberta Education, 2010; Task Force on DSM IV, 2000) and the recommendation that students with learning disabilities receive accommodations, a form of separate but equal treatment to "level the playing field" (Alberta Education, 2010) seem to fall short of an inclusive vision too. The individualized deficit model ignores the institutional role in (co)creating the learning disability through inflexible and / or ineffective educational practice (Alberta Education, 2009; Barva, 2005; Danforth, 2009). If the forms of differentiated assessment and instruction that students with learning disabilities perform well with were truly equally valued alternatives would the label "accommodation" be required to describe them? Still, the current concept of learning disability as a flawed or incomplete intelligence, as opposed to a lack of intelligence, feeds into the impairment pecking order. It may be better to be a slow learner than to have an intellectual disability but it is better to be learning disabled than to be a slow learner. Obviously, this sense of hierarchy undermines the assertion that all people with educational disabilities / difficulties are entitled to equal respect and appropriate accommodations.

Similar gaps in attending to and opening up the term/concept of slow learner seem apparent in educational research. Though slow learners were a topic that used to appear with some frequency in research and curricular writing in documents such as *The Slow Learner* (Cleugh, 1956), *Slow Learners in Secondary Schools* (Jones-Davis, 1975), and *Yes They Can: A Practical Guide to Teaching the Adolescent Slow Learner* (Weber, 1974), and *Teaching Geometry to Slow Learners* (Ellis, 1986) there is very little recent published research available about this category of student (Kaznowski, 2004).

Being deprived of a category of disability, as problematic as such categorizations may be, the opportunities for agency and advocacy for slow learners become disabled. The disability rights movement and the academic disciplines of disability studies and disability studies in education have engaged in effective political action and created vibrant discourses challenging the sorts of ableism that has resulted in the exclusion of individuals with disabilities from full inclusionary participation in society (Danforth, 2006; Shannon, 2011). These discourses of agency are dependent, however critically they engage with it, on the concept of disability.

Inasmuch as we may cautiously accept the possibility that many students who test in the low average range intellectually may struggle with school curriculum, we note that slow learners are present as persons in today's classrooms, but absent as a pedagogically supported category. Slow learners exist where psychological testing and educational practices intersect. Today many students continue to be placed into the real but categorically absent category of slow learner (King, 2006). An apparent disconnect needs to be addressed regarding how we, as a society, as educators, accept the vacant concept of

slow learner and yet live with and teach these real persons daily (King, 2006; Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2006).

The Slow Learner as Cultural Referent

The tools of deconstruction and discourse analysis may also be used to examine the term/concept of slow learner in popular media and to note how media may have shaped our contemporary realizations of educational disabilities based on inherited representations of “slowness”. In the context of popular cultural narratives, how are slow learners (mis)represented?

Due to the ambiguous state of “slow learner” as a disability category, the term/concept may even be more discursively available in popular culture than other disability terms. With the success of the disability rights movement, political correctness cautions against the derisive, or even inappropriately casual, use of vocabulary directly connected to disabilities – be they physical, mental, social, or emotional. However, “slow learner” does not seem to be, as a term/concept, associated with the political correctness movement.

When the hip hop group the Black Eyed Peas released a musical single titled, “Let’s Get Retarded in Here”, they used a term from the discourse of disability as a “slangy substitute for getting loose and easy, ready to party” (Seigel, 2005 para. 4). Some audiences were uncomfortable with the phrasing and the song only gained broad popularity after the lyrics were changed to the benign phrase, “Let’s Get it Started in Here” (Seigel, 2005). When American President Barack Obama self effacingly referred to his bowling abilities as being at the Special Olympic level he and his handlers immediately realized his error and they went into damage control issuing a public apology before the talk show in which he made the statements was even

aired (Tapper, 2009)¹. Using the phrase slow learner, however, as a criticism of others, or self effacingly provokes much less controversy. When President Obama twice referenced the city of Las Vegas as a place to avoid when preaching about the value of fiscal restraint in the wake of the world's recent economic crisis, the mayor of Las Vegas took umbrage and said, "Everybody says I shouldn't say it, but I've got to tell you the way it is. This President is a real slow learner" (Fox 5 News, 2010). An article about American foreign policy (McConnel, 2006) entitled "Slow Learners" proclaims, "five years into the war on terror Washington is none the wiser." An article in the *New Republic* titled, "Slow Learner" (Chait, 2008), critiques how after their candidate John McCain was handily defeated in the 2008 presidential election, instead of finding a more "qualified [and] detail oriented" candidate to, in their hopes, succeed George Bush, the U.S. Republican Party advanced Sarah Palin who was often represented by her simplistic knowledge gaffs. The Province of Alberta's former Minister of Education when challenged in the legislature question period over a change the Ministry of Education made to its province-wide standardized examination practices called himself a 'slow learner' using sarcastic reversal to suggest his opponent's questions were obscure (Public School Board Association, 2009). In a recent article in *Catholic Journal*, Keily (2007) reflects on the difficult but ultimately rewarding experience of being a parent of a child with Down Syndrome in the following passage:

Christina has taught us a great deal as well. My husband and I sometimes joke that God gave us Christina because we ourselves were slow learners as parents and needed to have everything writ large. Certainly, she has helped to make a few things very clear. (p. 36)

¹ In addition to being hurtful to the Special Olympians Movement in general Obama's words were, on a literal level, a misrepresentation of the quality of bowling that happens at the Special Olympics. One news story pointed out that a Special Olympian in Detroit had bowled three perfect games during his career (James, 2009) while another quoted two brothers, both Special Olympian bowlers with averages much better than Obama's as noting "That's not very good, it wouldn't beat us. He needs to practice." (Clair & McCormick, 2009).

The easy use of the words “slow learner” extends to academia. An article about Hegel in

Research in Phenomenology (Schmidt, 2002) inquires:

Why is spirit such a slow learner [and contends that] when it comes to the spirit lessons must be learned over and over again, structures get repeated, the same mistakes are made in different contexts. Repetition, not progress, is the rule of spirit’s education (p.26).

It might be argued that these many uses of the phrase have little to do with the educational concept of slow learner, and are simply literal, adjective-noun statements reflecting discrete examples of individuals failing to consolidate appropriate information in certain contexts. However, given its history, the use of a term/concept like slow learner cannot happen just as a neutral, literal statement. Slow learner is, after all, still often popularly discussed as an educational category, noting for example the news articles reporting of serial killer Robert Picton’s² defense strategy of depicting their client as a slow learner through the evidence of his low average I.Q. testing and poor school grades (Canwest News Services, 2007). Or, there is the availability of Internet self-help guides for parents of slow learning children (Fitzgerald, 2011; King, 2006). Slow learner, in this sense, has remained a viable term in public discourse for questioning someone else’s or one’s own sensibilities. The slow learner label seems relatively neutral on the surface, but continues to carry with it the same history of intellectual sorting practises as other, less sanctioned, vocabulary from the discourses of intellectual disability.

Three Illustrative Cultural/Fictional Narratives of the Slow Learner

² Robert Pickton of Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada is a former pig farmer and serial killer who was convicted of the murders of six women and who was also charged in the deaths of twenty more women, many of them prostitutes and drug users from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. In December 2007 he was sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole for 25 years (CBC news, 2010).

In addition to instances in which slow learner appears in news reporting and academic writing, there have been several fictional depictions of individuals who might possibly fit into educational definitions of slow learner. Though referring peripherally to several media works, a close examination of three popular cultural works follow: the novel *Lottery* (Wood, 2007), and the films *Forrest Gump* (Finerman, Tisch, Newirth, & Zemeckis, 1994), and *Being There* (Braunsberg & Ashby, 1974).

Both *Forest Gump* and *Lottery* provide depictions of I.Q. politics. That is, parental advocacy 'saves' a slow learner who has tested on the cusp of having a full-fledged intellectual disability from being placed in a special education classroom. In the case of *Forrest Gump*, Forrest is saved from special education when, as a placating gesture, his mother has sex with the principal who is about to deny Forrest a regular classroom placement.

Principal: Your boy's... different, Mrs. Gump. Now, his I.Q. is seventy-five.

Mrs. Gump: Well, we're all different, Mr. Hancock.

[The principal holds up an I.Q. chart and points to the center of the graph, labeled "Normal."]

Principal: I want to show you something, Mrs. Gump. Now, this is normal. Forrest is right here. The state requires a minimum I.Q. of eighty to attend public school Mrs. Gump. He's going to have to go to a special school. Now, he'll be just fine.

Mrs. Gump: What does normal mean anyway? He might be a bit on the slow side, but my boy Forrest is gonna get the same opportunities as everyone else. He's not going to some special school to learn how to retread tyres. We're talking about five little points here.

[Suggestively.] There must be somethin' can be done.

Principal: We're a progressive school system. We don't want to see anybody left behind. Is there a Mr. Gump, Mrs. Gump?

Mrs. Gump: He's on vacation.

Forrest's borderline intellectual functioning is dramatically illustrated when the principal, patronizingly, points to what 'normal' cognitive functioning is, and then points to the margin of the (oversized) page to show Forrest's location. This gesture satirizes a common practice of an educator or psychologist pointing to a spot on the Bell Curve while explaining the results of

psychometric testing to a child's parents. The deal that is struck, however, in order for Forrest to avoid the placement may also be a critic of the arbitrariness with which such placement decisions are sometimes made. In *Lottery* (Wood, 2007) Perry is saved from being diagnosed with a cognitive disability when his Grandmother says he was sick on the day of his I.Q. test. She demands a retest and prevails over the protestations of school district personnel. Perry scores one point higher and avoids the categorical diagnosis of intellectually disabled. The very first sentence of *Lottery*, in fact is, "My name is Perry L. Crandall and I am not retarded." (p. 1) Perry and his friends repeatedly correct anyone who confuses his slowness with an intellectual disability. At one point, Perry reads 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 60s but who chose to remain on death row instead of publicizing his disability.

In their deconstruction of *The Mighty* (Chelshom, 1998), a film about disability often considered inspirational, Maples, Arndt and White (2010) observe this same sort of negativity towards the label of intellectual disability. *The Mighty* depicts the relationship between two early teen disabled characters. Kevin is academically gifted, but small and physically disabled due to a genetic disorder. Max is large for his age, but struggles with dyslexia. Assigned to be Max's peer tutor, when faced with Max's insecurity over completing an assigned reading, Kevin tries the tough love approach in saying, "You can't. Oh, *you will*. Or you might end up in one of those special schools with kids who can't even say their own name." The threat of being placed with *those* students with intellectual disabilities, in a segregated classroom setting, is used to motivate a learner with a reading disability to try harder. Similarly, in the case of Forrest and Perry, the designation of intellectual disability and the special education placement that would follow is presented as a form of banishment from society; however, each character is saved by an

advocate. In these examples, the idea of being labeled intellectually disabled is presented as extremely undesirable, and a category to be fought against.

As Berube (2008) notes, a character in the parody film *Tropic Thunder* expresses a similar thought in noting, though with controversial profanity, that acting as if one were a ‘full retard’ does not play well with audiences. The character notes that actors who play characters with mild intellectual deficits such as Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* or Peter Sellers in *Being There* or Dustin Hoffman in *Rainman* are more likely to garner popular acclaim and academy awards than actors who play characters with more profound intellectual disabilities such as Sean Penn in *I Am Sam*. In the examples of *Forrest Gump* and *Lottery*, it is suggested that it is somehow better – less needy – to be a slow learner than have an intellectual disability. If *Forrest Gump*, or *Lottery*, or other narrative-image representations, reinforce or merely reflect this hierarchy within educational institutions may be an open question. Neither Forrest nor Perry have particularly rewarding school experiences which suggests some criticism of institutional labeling as well. In a misguided attempt to support them, both are labeled as “other” and, it is implied, because of this labeling, both are bullied for their strangeness or difference by their peers.

Even as these hierarchies of difference are reinforced, both *Lottery* and *Forrest Gump* emphasize how narrowly and contestably each protagonist qualifies as normal or non-disabled. Perry escapes the diagnosis of disability by a single point and Forrest is named non-disabled because his mother is sexually appealing to a corruptible arbiter of normality. The text-image narratives use this tension of disabled or not as an ongoing shell game constantly shifting the protagonists between categories for humorous or poignant affect. The portrayal of slowness as a disability in these fictional works teaches us that slowness is some combination of being strange, monstrous, or transcendent.

The concept of slowness as a contested present-absent disability status seems to be strongest when characters are portrayed largely for laughs. Perhaps, this extends and reinforces the "buffoon", "village idiot", or "fool" stereotypes. For example, Forrest Gump who is part of the collegiate All-American football team, fails to grasp the gravity of being honoured at the White House for his exploits on the field. Forrest is impressed by the free food and beverages and drinks fifteen free Dr. Pepper soft drinks. Then when greeting President Kennedy, Forrest says, "I gotta pee." The incongruity of Forrest Gump waiting in line to greet the President, recrossing his legs and squirming in discomfort, in the posture of a child, in informal parlance, 'holding it', digitally imposed on real footage of appropriately postured and mature football stars gathering with President Kennedy presents Forrest's slowness as a childish quality verging on clownish. In *Being There*, Peter Seller's character, Chance, is a middle-aged "slow" person who has led a very sheltered existence consisting mainly of gardening and watching television. He is cast out into the real world when his wealthy benefactor dies and Chance is evicted. So limited is his knowledge and experience of "reality" that when confronted by a group of African-American muggers he takes out his television remote control, points it at a mugger, and tries to change the channel away from the unfamiliar and disagreeable scene that is playing out in front of him. He is surprised when the muggers remain present. As much as the protagonists seem ridiculous in these two examples when the focal points of the joke are shifted, we see the real targets of satire are societal conventions. Football is, after all, only a game and acting childlike / childish at a celebration of football may be more appropriate than the gravity with which other characters were treating the occasion. As a metaphor for how many in society grapple or fail to grapple with issues of racial conflict, poverty, gangs and crime Chance's switching the channel seems suddenly apt. The slow characters, in this way, play the role of the innocent like the child

in the story "The Emperor's New Clothes". Or, the historical role of the courtly fool whose purpose it was to keep the King or Queen humble by being the only member of the kingdom allowed to criticize the social structure and their role in it (Stiker, 1999).

Lottery is a more realistic depiction of slowness and yet Perry's slowness is often presented as disabling. At times, Perry's slowness is presented as making him much more immature and child-like than his chronological age of thirty years. The highlight of a vacation to Hawaii he takes with his friend Keith is the opportunity to relieve himself in a high altitude lavatory during the flight to their destination. An ongoing source of humor in the novel comes from Perry's naiveté and literalism

"What are you drinking?" [Perry asks his friend Keith]
"The hair of the dog that bit me Per! The hair of the dog."
"What?" I ask. I do not see any hair in his drink and Keith does not have a dog bite
(p.57).

Perry's slowness causes more serious concerns as well. The major source of suspense in the novel is the threat that several of Perry's family members including a mother who handed over his care to his grandmother when he was a baby and two dishonest brothers, a lawyer and a failed businessman, seek to cheat him out of the lottery money he has recently won. Before she dies, Perry's grandmother worries that he is too "honest and suggestible [and that this is a] terrible combination" (p.35). As a response, Perry's friends and co-workers engage in behavior that could be characterized as taking care of him. He depends on his much smaller friend Cherry, and later love interest, to protect him from a group of thugs that call him 'retard' and try to assault him. Though Perry becomes more independent as the novel progresses, and is presented in other parts as wise and capable, the novel is at least ambiguous about the degree to which he is disabled by his slowness, often treating him as very vulnerable and in need of help.

In addition to highlighting the challenges and barriers characters with disabilities face, popular media depictions of characters with disabilities often involve these characters displaying acts of over the top heroism and or possessing rare and transcendent gifts (Berube, 2008; Maples, Arndt, & White, 2010; Shannon, 2011). Norden, a disability studies scholar (in Maples, Arndt, & White, 2010), has coined this term, at least as it applies to individuals with physical disabilities, as the “supercrip” stereotype. Maples, Arndt and White (2010) note that, though seemingly positive, this stereotype can be harmful implying that, “people with disabilities cannot just be ordinary people living typical lives” (p.80). *Forrest Gump*, *Being There*, and *Lottery* all reinforce the stereotype of the “slow” person as being gifted with unusual innocence, wisdom, physicality, insight, or moral clarity.

Berube (2008) discusses how in a relatively realistic movie like *Rainman*, while advancing the super mathematical abilities of an autistic savant, realistically depicts how at the end of a successful run of card counting in Vegas, Raymond is still autistic. However, in more fantastical movies such as *Dumbo*, the title character’s disabilities (severely overgrown ears) are reframed as unique gifts and essentially disappear in the narrative re-construction of what counts as disabilities as the film nears its happy ending. The latter phenomenon is alive in the three narratives being discussed. In a somewhat satirical reference to military thinking, Forrest’s literalness and simplistic interpretations of things, instead of being a deficit for Forrest in this milieu, leads to his being a most extra-ordinary successful soldier.

Drill Sergeant: Gump! What's your sole purpose in this army?

Forrest Gump: To do whatever you tell me, drill sergeant!

Drill Sergeant: God damn it, Gump! You're a goddamn genius! This is the most outstanding answer I have ever heard. You must have a goddamn I.Q. of 160. You are goddamn gifted, Private Gump. Listen up, people...

Forrest Gump: [*narrates*] Now for some reason I fit in the army like one of them round pegs. It's not really hard. You just make your bed real neat and remember to stand up straight and always answer every question with “Yes, drill sergeant.”

In addition to having nearly superhuman strength and reflexes when it comes to things like running, playing ping pong and assembling automatic weapons, Forrest Gump, despite his “slowness”, manages to capture the public imagination with the simple sincerity of his words and deeds. Describing his impressions of China in another one of the digitally manipulated pieces of archival footage, this one from the Dick Cavett Show, Forrest inadvertently inspires John Lennon to write the lyrics to “Imagine.” Forrest’s transcendent and inspirational simplicity is, in this scene, perhaps equated with the simple profundity of the song’s lyrics. In another scene, Forrest, dressed in his military uniform, rushes into the reflecting pool near the Lincoln Memorial to embrace his love interest, Jenny, who is a hippie attending a war protest. Their embrace is cheered by the crowd of thousands as a symbol of reconciliation. In another scene Forrest, perhaps out of frustration over his relationship with Jenny or maybe as he himself says “for no particular reason” repeatedly runs coast to coast over a three-year period. As Forrest continues to run, looking somewhat Christ-like in his thick beard, his odyssey strikes a transcendent chord and crowds of people begin to follow him. Whether this is supposed to represent a national, collective desire for escape during pessimistic times, or if each of his followers projects his or her own meaning hopes on the trek, it is again suggested that the simplicity of Forrest’s gesture is what inspires people. Indeed, simplistic here seems to be linked to a sense of innocence and purposefulness.

In the case of *Being There*, Chance’s accidental ‘simple brand of wisdom’, that is his literal statements about gardening misread as poignant aphorisms about the economy and politics, resonate with the American public as well as with the crowd of political insiders that embrace him as a philosophical and visionary, yet grounded leader. While Chance has no idea he

is being wise about more than gardening, the viewing audience can see the deep, though accidental, larger truths behind his statements and appreciate why these statements are capturing the public imagination in the film. In an iconic scene near the beginning of the film, having just walked through post-Nixon Washington full of casually dressed, bustling crowds of people, honking horns, graffiti, garbage, strip clubs, hustlers and teenage gang members, a fast, syncopated melody playing as the background theme, Chance approaches the White House. Observing the branches of a tree nearby he approaches a policeman, the White House occupying the entire background of the shot, and dressed anachronistically formally in a tailored grey suit, overcoat, and grey hat, briefcase and umbrella, his excellent posture evident in his stance, Chance quietly but insistently says to the policeman "Excuse me, that tree is very sick, it needs care." In the end, he inherits a fortune from an admirer, wins public acclaim during an appearance on a talk show, receives a large book advance, and is being discussed as a possible mid-term replacement for the president. As long as these fortunate misreadings continue, Chance's slowness cannot be disabling.

Again, Perry's success is treated more realistically and without the element of irony or satire. Towards the end of the novel, long removed from the school setting that deemed him less capable and recently removed from the exploitive relatives who sought to use his gullible nature against him, we see a hardworking and innovative individual who is well suited to working in the tourist fishing industry. In the fishing goods store in which he worked at the start of the novel and later bought a share in, Perry's improvements such as adding a concession and t-shirt stand and offering fishing lessons have maximized profit and the Chamber of Commerce gives Perry and his partner the Vision Award in recognition. When Perry decides to give all the lottery money away to his demanding family members, his decision is not presented critically. His

reflection that, due to how dysfunctional his mother and two brothers are that "they needed it, I did not," is presented as wise and spiritual, transcending the materialistic worldviews of the friends and advisors who encouraged him to protect his money. Surrounded by several close friends and working at a job he enjoys, the only toxic element in Perry's life is his relationship to these family members who practically seem likely to revert to ignoring him once they have his money. In these instances Perry's slowness or simplicity, is not presented as a disability, but as a source of insight, exceeding that of his 'normal' peers, in matters of morality and good business.

As mentioned, the use of the "simple wise man" stereotype can serve a satiric purpose exposing the pretentiousness, pettiness, and cynicism of the other characters who are at once more intelligent and yet seemingly more foolish. This simple but wise stereotype evokes a collective longing for moral clarity in audiences. To be able to know with certainty what the right thing to do is, and to go confidently about it, is, curiously, not equated with investigating all possibilities, introspection, ethical reasoning, and other intellectual pursuits. Instead this clarity is seen as an almost as a prophetic second sight, a gift bestowed most prominently on slow individuals who are unencumbered by the distracting complexities of those intellectually sentenced to over-think. There is something of Heidegger's (in Wrathall, 2011) concept of practical understanding in this sentiment. These depictions speak to a style of being in the world and with things, like that of a master carpenter to the objects of his or her trade, that is confident, ready, pre-linguistic and engaged, all of which stands in opposition to the detached mode of reflexive and disconnected contemplation often considered desirable in intellectual activities. All three narratives suggest that the more schooling/education the various characters have, the more they are cut off from this intuitive way of being in the world. Perry's brothers, despite degrees in law and business, have neither moral sense nor business sense. The 1960s radicals Forrest meets,

though ostensibly fighting for human rights have no consideration for individuals they encounter on a personal level. The Black Panthers Forrest meets are rude and hostile, and the particular angry young man that Forrest's childhood friend and love interest is involved with is abusive to her, despite his libRARY ideals. Many of the working class characters in *Being There* see Chance for who he is, but the highly educated, privileged and effete characters he encounters are universally delusional about his accidental prophesies. In the sense that this type of readiness speaks to a certain practical efficiency in being in the world, these narratives in the success of their protagonists seem to suggest that in many ways it can be more meaningful to be (stereotypically) slow.

In light of the deterministic assumption and practices that have held back those seen as slow, perhaps these three stories might be examples of what Marxist critical theorist Jameson (1981) would point out to be "magical narratives" of empowerment. Writing of societal class, Jameson points out that while the epic celebrates the powerful and, therefore, reinforces hegemony, a fairy tale such as *Snow White* implies both a criticism of conspiracies of privilege that make transcending class limits nearly impossible as well as a narrative strategy of magic as the only way of transcending these limits. In the same way, Forrest's, Chance's and Perry's transcendence of the hegemonic assumptions and self-fulfilling prophesies they face as slow individuals (Gould, 1981) to their achievement of wealth and status through strange chance and monstrous misinterpretation is indeed magical. Perry's winning a lottery and being on his way to earning a second fortune, Forrest's uncanny ability to be in the right place, doing the right thing, at the right time and resultant success as a military hero, athlete, cultural icon and businessman and Chance's accidental ascendancy to a position of political power all speak to this. In two of the cases this is balanced with at least some verisimilitude of character. Aside from the aspect of

the lottery, Perry's personality, education, family background, job and community are all relatively plausible constructs and the narrative, while sometimes using him as a device for social criticism, also frequently encourages us to see him as "real." *Forrest Gump* is a more complicated story with its digital imposition of the title character on various historical events seeming obviously absurd. Yet, Forrest is always depicted with a certain corporeality and many of his gifts and successes including his athletic achievements, success as a soldier, and success as a shrimp boat captain are played out primarily through simple physical expression backgrounded against a decaying empire. As played by Tom Hanks, Forrest, notwithstanding some of the jokes, maintains a certain dignity of character throughout the film, Forrest shows a variety of emotional states, and suffers through the loss of several friends and loved ones, all of which connect him to the audience as a more plausible human being. In this sense, Forrest is both real and impossible; but then so is his America.

The sense of the magical is communicated with the least ambiguity in *Being There*. Chance is not presented in a believable milieu and the way he is portrayed does little to encourage the audience to see him grounded in any physical, relational or emotional realities either. He is played, with remarkable restraint by Peter Sellers, as a nearly blank slate on which other characters work out their own issues following the ephemeral rubric of his gardening aphorisms. The sense of the magical is reinforced when, at the end of the film, strolling on a park trail away from the funeral proceedings of one of the political elites who embraced him, Chance arrives at a lake and simply walks on the water. Sometimes not knowing what is impossible makes anything possible.

Is the success of the three characters an attempt to reframe or reclaim slow learning as a positive concept? Are there publishing or film industries that enlighten? The projected slow

learners as framed by these cinematic and literary depictions cannot be held together as a coherent reclaiming of 'slow learner' in the sense that the disability rights movement has reclaimed concepts of disability like the gay and lesbian rights movement have reclaimed concepts of queerness (Danforth, 2006) or disability rights has reclaimed "crip" (Maples, Arndt, & White, 2010). These slow learner word-image depictions seem to work only as useable satirical allegories and critiques of societal privilege though *Forrest Gump* and *Lottery* try to have it both ways by situating their protagonists in actual educational definitions of slow learner even as they participate in these allegories. Criticizing the estrangement of the intellectual from the connected practicalities of life, the estrangement of the large institution from the common good, the estrangement of elaborate social ritual from common decency and good manners, slow learner in these narratives becomes wrapped within a populist, sometimes conservative, and romanticized belief system. A system favoring the help of family and community over that of the outside institutions, experience in the world over formal education, the natural over the technological, the working man (all three protagonists are male) over the professional, the practical over the theoretical and the body over the mind; and, simplicity over complexity. In the context of these narratives this position, while admired, stops well short of being clearly advocated. We find opportunities for reflection, ironically, in the simple wisdom of Forrest, Perry, and Chance, but in the absence of magical transcendence their form of "practical engagement" falls short of either being presented as a practical way of life for the audience at large or being understood as a way to better appreciate individuals who might be framed within the present yet absent category of slow learner.

Can "slow learner" be reclaimed beyond these examples of its use for the purposes of satire and social criticism? It might not be an appropriate target for reclamation because no one

would want it, that is to say find it useful to reclaim. People diagnosed with disabilities have a stake in participating in discourses related to how their impairments are discursively framed especially if this participation is critical. Reclaiming is one such form of critical participation. As Ferri (2004) writes:

As Audre Lorde (1984) taught us, although the master’s tools may never dismantle the master’s house, we are often required to take up those very tools in order to be rendered intelligible (p. 510).

In the case of “slow learner”, however, the label itself even falls short of being an actual category of disability. Despite the continued popularity of the term, and the disturbing assumptions it continues to suggest, beyond the walls of institutional settings, though many have educational struggles that might be framed by this still-available term, few would be saddled with this term as a life-long label and have reason to redefine it as a political act.

Despite this, there are, surprisingly, a few examples beyond these three narratives of how the sort of philosophy of ‘slow learner’ has been claimed, via mediated representations, to offer interpretations suspicious of institutional knowledge and beingness and what modern society strives for and privileges. In *Natural Life* magazine Wendy Priesnitz (2006) decries the flaws of a public education system that casts children who learn at different paces or with different styles as “slow or learning disabled” and she advances an alternate approach

I’ve been advocating for a different way of parenting and helping children to learn for close to forty years now; it was first called homeschooling, then ... about ten years ago, I began to frame this way of learning by living (and without school) in terms of the “slow” movement, which began in the mid-1980s with the launch of the Italian Slow Food Association by a writer upset about the opening of fast food chains in Rome.

Most schools, I realized, force-feed kids a pre-packaged diet of “fast food” knowledge – unrelated bits of facts to be swallowed as quickly as possible. “Slow learning,” on the other hand, involves exploring the world at one’s own

speed, enjoying, questioning, and understanding the experiences encountered as well as the ones created (p.10).

Similarly, a self-help/do-it-yourself blog created by Patricia Kambitsch (2011) devoted to fostering life-long learning and artistic expression is titled "Adventures in Slow Learning." This blog too criticizes the pejorative use of 'slow'

In no other context does the term "slow" carry a more negative charge than in education. To be labeled a "slow learner" is to be denigrated to very bottom of the educational hierarchical heap. In education, slow has come to mean dull, dim-witted, handicapped, disabled (Para. 1).

Kambitch then proposes this alternative definition whereby

Slow Learning is an idea. In short, Slow Learning

- Promotes deep learning
- Crosses genres, disciplines
- Is grounded in the interests of the learner
- Champions the pleasures of learning
- Promotes inquiry and dialogue
- Lasts a lifetime
- Allows for authentic learning
- Seeks unmediated experiences
- Supports, and is supported by learning in community (Para. 2).

The echoes of John Dewey in these slow learning stances are obvious and even speak to a sort of philosophical naturalism that may extend as far back as the work of Aristotle (Hobbs, 2011; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2008). The criticisms these authors make of formal education in co-opting the term are not new. In engaging the world on a practical instead of an intellectual level, what we sometimes understand as "slow" can actually be more effective. "Slow cooking" and many other reflexive-based endeavors tell us that sometimes slow is better than fast. Experiential learning had better be reasonably slow or one would be drawn to form conclusions based on insufficient experience. This may sound like a somewhat underwhelming reply to the common, overwhelmingly

negative uses of "slow learner" and the hundred or more years of sorting practices that have framed slow learners. While lacking the force of a more direct reclamation, though, valuing "slow" in this way does stand as a reminder that there are alternatives to the industrial, Taylorist model of schooling, with its emphasis on hierarchy, pace, uniformity and social efficiency (Friesen and Jardine, 2009). This all too prevalent model is undoubtedly an aspect of the normalization process that in its procrustean values is at least partially responsible for creating educational categories of difference (Friesen and Jardine, 2009) such as slow learner. Perhaps in as much as slow learner remains available as a pejorative phrase born out of educational classification, meaning academically less able, it may also contain resonances of naturalness, pragmatism, and reflectiveness. These effaced positive experiential associations may speak to its ongoing and complex uses in public discourse. In addition to Priesnitz's and Kambitsch's clearly positive claiming of the concept, perhaps many of the uses of "slow learner" in popular culture previously mentioned need to be read as reflecting both possibilities, the pejorative and the wistful. In addition to being a part of a larger cautionary tale of the abuses of educational classification "slow learner" as a concept may have something to teach us about valuing slowness educationally.

Simply and slowly what we have attempted to show/tell here is that the give-take, reveal and conceal, of categorical labels is that, despite their descriptive value, they obscure access to deeper understandings of the complex reality they name and come to encapsulate.

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