



## Inclusion's Historical Entanglements in Alberta

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### ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in Alberta is entangled in a long, dark history of exclusion. Hermeneutics can help illuminate and interrupt this entanglement in order to ask what might be taken for granted within it. Our notions of inclusion could be interpreted as suffering from an inability to recognize what is still historically at play, especially in the case of students diagnosed with emotional and behavioural disabilities. Seeing and understanding this through a hermeneutic sense of historical inquiry and play can help us move towards socially just school systems for children and youth.

### An Anecdote: Danielle

**D**anielle and her family had recently arrived from the Caribbean. She was an elementary school student in a multi-grade series of open classrooms. Her school team claimed she had high anxiety as well as attention and hyperactivity issues. As a consultant for one of Canada's largest urban school boards, my role was to support school teams struggling with students presenting with mental health problems. Danielle's school team had asked for my support. Upon arrival at the school, the team shared it believed Danielle needed to be placed in a special education classroom. Part of my work entailed serving as a gatekeeper to special education or exceptional settings.

In this school every student in grades 4, 5, and 6 gathered together in a double open classroom for the morning's agenda and introduction to the topics of the day. The teachers planned together and, depending on the topic, flexibly grouped students

throughout the day, according to student needs. The school was known for its inquiry work, based on the Galileo Educational Network (Friesen, 2009). Inquiry is described as "...study into a worthy question...the real work that someone in the community might tackle...involves serious engagement and investigation and the active creation and testing of new knowledge" (Galileo Educational Network, 2014). Inquiry work is often seen as a way for all students to enter curriculum topics because it allows the space for curiosity to emerge and be honoured. In my experiences as a consultant, inquiry-based classrooms tended to be more pedagogically inclusive. I expected, therefore, to see Danielle struggling despite a pedagogically rich learning environment.

That morning I watched as some 80 students assembled into the large double classroom. I was at the back of this long room. There was Danielle too, almost completely separated from the rest of the group. Why was she placed in a location where it would be very difficult for a student with attention issues to pay attention? What conditions had led to this situation? I watched her struggle to hear and listen. As she missed out on the lead teacher's instructions her stress appeared to amplify. She looked bewildered, unsure, and confused. The situation seemed extremely counter-productive for her success. Her physical placement in the classroom seemed counter-productive to learning yet painfully generative of her apparent disability. Disability Studies in Education perspectives would likely describe this situation as an example of the social model of disability (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). According to this model, social, cultural, and environmental conditions surrounding people shape them as disabled though they themselves are not disabled in and of themselves.

During the rest of that morning I witnessed Danielle being painfully bullied by her peers. I listened to her lash out at their hurtful comments. I struggled to understand how the other teachers did not see this and, if they did, why they did not interject. Danielle sought help throughout the morning. She was usually redirected to join her group. Finally, just before lunch she had an escalated emotional response. Tears streamed down her face as she cried aloud that the boys were being mean to her. Many of them smiled and laughed when this happened. It was shocking to witness. I felt guilt for not intervening earlier. One teacher guided her out of the room and into the hallway.

Soon thereafter, over lunchtime, I shared these observations in much more detail with the teaching and administrative team. They were stunned to know just how persistent the peer bullying was as well as how many times she had asked for help but was redirected. Their response led me to think that the situation was as if Danielle had become invisible in her marginalization and exclusion, yet she was entirely visible as having problems exclusively related to her situation. As was often the case in my work

in so many classrooms throughout K–12 schooling, there was an intense hyper-focus on the problems of the child. This focus seemed to conceal or blind educational teams to how school cultures and educational practices played significant roles in bringing forth or amplifying student sensitivities. Danielle's school team and the majority of her fellow students seemed to have already excluded her from the classroom. She had the problems and therefore she was an outlier who needed help that was beyond their abilities. At the end of the noon-hour meeting, Danielle's school team committed to making significant changes and invited me to return in several weeks time.

Three weeks later Danielle sat at the front of the room and was given focussed attention from an educational assistant and teacher. She seemed to need it. Because of that ongoing support, she engaged in learning throughout the morning. It was difficult, intense work for the team but she was included and she seemed happy. This was a very different state of affairs from my first visit. We celebrated their success during our post-observation meeting. We were also realistic about the intense energy needed to support her. There was no suggestion that the team could not support Danielle. I left feeling very hopeful for her future inclusion in that school.

Two weeks later the administrator of the school called me to tell me her team could no longer sustain the level of support it was giving Danielle. The administrator was putting her forward for specialized placement on this basis. There was no longer room for discussion or further planning. I was filled with frustration and anger.

Danielle's situation was much more complex than this paper can describe; however, the barriers to inclusion present in the actions and non-actions of students and educators alike seemed to me to point to the historical weight living in the day-to-day beliefs and practices inherent in many schools in which I had been. I was increasingly frustrated by the presence of a system-wide process that seemed to unnecessarily permit the placement of students into a parallel special education track of schooling. Maybe Danielle needed a smaller and more highly resourced classroom; however, during my initial observations there were no indications that this team—a highly progressive team engaged in inquiry work using a cooperative teaching model—was thinking about the inclusion of all students in their classrooms. Despite my expectations for a pedagogically rich environment, there seemed to be a pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991), at least for Danielle.

Then, even with her new success, the school team's initial hope to place her in another program prevailed. It seemed as if it had simply followed the protocol for trying to be inclusive—accessing my supports and following through with them—but then

claimed it was too hard to sustain. Perhaps it was too hard. Yet my second observation led me to believe it had the personnel to provide the kinds of support she needed, especially through its flexible groupings.

This reminded me of how I often felt that, at the critical and difficult point of having to be inclusive in pedagogical practices and supports, educational teams did not have the will to persevere in the face of this often complicated and intense work. A narrow focus on the problems of the student prevented us from talking about pedagogical practices. We could talk about strategies for the disabilities diagnosed or presumed, but talking about teaching itself was not what teams had gathered together for. Likewise, the everyday business of carrying on with curriculum demands and administrative duties, for example, overrode the need to slow classroom life down enough to help students understand and work well with one another, including students who present with more sensitivities than most in educational environments. More importantly and sadly, we could not begin to talk about how we teach in classrooms.

There was more at play here, too. Danielle's educational circumstances did not arise *ex nihilo*—out of nowhere. A historical lineage lived within and was inherent in these present-day phenomena. What prejudices belies our best-of-intentions belief that students like Danielle need specialized settings “for their own good?”

Danielle's anecdote is a powerful example of how, despite the ubiquitous talk of inclusion in Alberta and other provinces, a prejudiced and taken-for-granted way of thinking and being with students can be counter-productive to the social justice values of a truly inclusive educational system. In a much more sweeping and admittedly simplified sense, inclusion today is deeply entangled with special education's discourse (Gilham & Williamson, 2013). Further yet, special education has deep historical ties to normalization (Gilham, 2012). Inclusion today continues to reinforce a normal/abnormal dualism evidenced in the prolific and common language of disability and/or exceptionality (Valle & Conner, 2011). One of my main hopes for this paper is to enliven Slee's (2011) claim that inclusion in Western education is a form of neo-special education; we should be aware of this in order to be and do differently for and with students.

Hermeneutics can help us see this entanglement of the past with the present. Historical inquiry can serve an emancipatory function (Gadamer, Dutt, & Palmer, 2001). In the remainder of this paper, I attempt to loosen the notion of inclusion from the prejudices inherent in it by revealing its dark connections to the past. In bringing these connections to light, we may be more mindfully aware of how popular educational

discourses claim to address equity for all, yet might actually remain counter-productive to those very claims.

### **The Emotional-Behavioural Disability (EBD) Crisis in Schools**

Danielle's anecdote enlivens the following snippets of current statistics. For example, in Alberta students diagnosed with EBD are more likely to not complete high school (Alberta Education, 2008). Some other examples include:

- According to Gulchak and Lopes, over the past 20 years there has been a phenomenal rise in the numbers of students diagnosed with EBD in the western world (as cited in Winzer, 2009).
- In Alberta, for the 2011/2012 school year there were approximately 8,000 K–12 students diagnosed with severe EBD. Another 4,200 students were categorized as having a mild/moderate EBD. In all, more than 12,000 students or 2% of Alberta's total school population were categorized as having an EBD (Alberta Education, 2010).
- According to Alberta Education, 25% of all severe and mild/moderate codes do not complete high school after three years. This number jumps to 50.9% after four years (Alberta Education, 2010). Since students with EBD are included within this overall category of high school non-completers, it seems safe to assume that the high school completion rate of these students is comparable. There is no publicly available data on the high school completion rate of students with EBD; however, in a 2012 telephone interview with an Alberta Education employee assigned to the High School Completion Study (2010), it was shared that only 37% of students with EBD complete high school. This number, it was stated, "is the lowest high school completion rate of any disability in Alberta" (personal communication, February 29, 2012). Generously interpreted, only 4 out of 10 students within this category of diagnosis completed high school.
- At the same time, teachers are more likely to be opposed to working with students with EBD in classrooms (Cook, 2001). According to Eber, Nelson, and Miles, students labelled with EBD are the most underserved and last to be considered for inclusive settings (as cited in Winzer, 2009).
- For students diagnosed with EBD the alternatives to high school completion are poor health, unemployment, and significantly lower incomes (Canada, 2011; Versnel, DeLuca, Hutchinson, Hill, & Chin, 2011).
- Canadian data connects students with severe EBD and offender populations (Corrado & Freedman, 2011).

This data points to a crisis in schooling for students identified as having EBD. Despite more than 25 years of special education supports and services, students with EBD were most likely not completing high school. What light does the history of schooling in Alberta shed on the story of Danielle and this crisis of school failure?

### **Modern Schooling and Social Harmony: Inclusion's Older Story**

Despite schooling having official status in Alberta in 1905 (Dechant, 2006), it was not until the 1960s that schooling for the disabled was more comprehensively offered in public schools (Jahnukainen, 2011). Only since the arrival of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the 1980s was there a legal impetus for providing schooling for all students (Alberta Teachers Association, 2002). There were massive increases in students identified as "exceptional" during the post-Charter years (Winzer & Mazurek, 2011).

The history of public schooling in Alberta is largely seen as a movement that tried to bring about social harmony (Prentice, 2004), or provincial stability (Dechant, 2006) through "good character" training (von Heyking, 2006). Rapid industrialization and urbanization, as well as immigration, resulted in severe social class divisions (Prentice, 2004) and increased demands for education for children and youth (von Heyking, 2006). Children and youth who were not in schools either worked at home, in factories, or odd jobs, or they roamed the streets (McIntosh, 1999). Schools mainly had an academic focus and there was an intense stress on social efficiency, harmony, and "good character." Some of this focus resulted in severe methods of discipline in schools like the frequent use of "the rod."

The father of "free" or public schooling in Canada, Ontario's Egerton Ryerson (1803-1882), wanted to bring about a peaceful society by unifying the widening social classes (Prentice, 2004) that had occurred mainly due to rapid industrialization and urbanization. He believed through education there would be an increase in economic production from the poor, reflecting the prevailing belief of the day that they were unproductive because of laziness. Only a strong Christian values-based education could change that.

Additionally, it was thought that helping the poor might further reinforce what was seen as "sloth and weakness of character" (Dechant, 2006, p. 17). In Alberta there was a strong belief in the individual's responsibility (Dechant, 2006; von Heyking, 2006). In the movement to bring education to the masses, there was the belief that "unschooled vagrant children" (Prentice, 2006) needed to be shaped—often through punishment—and that "schools would conquer lower class apathy for the good of all" (p. 134).

Massive schooling for the general population of children and youth was itself a new phenomenon. Prior to modern urban life, children and youth were often seen and treated as adults. They worked to support their family businesses, so common prior to industrialization (McIntosh, 1999). In Alberta's first few decades of modern schooling, many school-aged children were needed on their family farms. Few students progressed to secondary schools (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2002). With the loss of close-knit communities of manufacture and trade, urban children and youth either worked in large factories or on the streets (McIntosh, 1999). Many engaged in criminal behaviour (Dechant, 2006). Society started to view the child as dependent and immature. They needed "saving" through stronger guidance and learning so they could contribute to a modern and increasingly urban society (McIntosh, 1999; Prentice, 2004).

Reflecting on the above in the light of our current calls for inclusion, could modern schooling be seen as a response to the changed beliefs about the nature of the child? Those beliefs about children were shaped by the drastically transformed world of the time and the realities that came to bear on families and cities (McIntosh, 1999). If the answer is yes, could inclusion also be seen as an ongoing struggle to respond well to the rapid demands placed on society as a consequence of the ongoing whirlwind of modernity? Inclusion might no longer be a current and popular initiative of Alberta Education over the past five years or an important human rights movement of the past 25 years. I suggest we could now interpret inclusion as a larger and more complicated play of events across society and institutions that started with modern schooling.

### **Neglected and Delinquent**

According to Lupart (2008), Albertan students with EBD were not included in early educational services. They were "...abandoned and set adrift in the local communities" (p. 4) and seen as poor, immigrant children who did not work (Lupart, 2008; Dechant, 2006).

These children were quickly stigmatized through a host of labels such as gutter snipe, black arab, waif, stray, and delinquent (Winzer, 2009). Children and youth who suffered were often treated as criminals or they were left to the responsibility of their families (Dechant, 2006). Society became increasingly concerned about youth crime and the social problems it created (Dechant, 2006; Prentice, 2004). According to Lupart (2008), large groups of children ended up in single facilities: "...not much more than human warehouses that were dumping grounds for young children rejected by their families" (p. 4). Dechant (2006) wrote that the delinquency model was based on the prevailing medical model of the day which saw these children and youth's problems as

issues of neglect, abandonment, and “an indigent environment.” Juvenile courts were intended to “identify and root out this sickness” (Dechant, 2006, p. 19). However, this was not the prevailing discourse of that time. Eugenics held the title and it was rooted in the logic of normal/abnormal that persists today in the medico-psycho discourse of special education.

### Inclusion for Most: Eugenics

From the Greek meaning “well born,” eugenics was a strongly supported movement in Alberta. Enacted in legislation as the *Sexual Sterilization Act of Alberta*, eugenics was used to sterilize disabled children and youth, primarily (Dechant, 2006). Forced sterilization remained in place as legislation in Alberta from 1921 to 1972. At the time, the government largely interpreted students with severe EBD and other certain disabilities as abnormal and subsequently immoral, which required “careful screening of immigrants and sterilization” and “suitable facilities” (Clarence Hincks, Mental Hygiene Survey of the Province of Alberta 1921, as cited in Dechant, 2006, p. 28).

“Feeble-mindedness” (Dechant, 2006; Lupart, 2008; Osgood, 2005) was a construct of psychology and it formed part of an early progressive education movement; that movement was deeply entrenched in the scientific method and industrialization (von Heyking, 2006). Feeble-mindedness was an official category of human kind derived from mental measurement practices newly introduced into Canada through scholars who had been attending Binet and Simons’ conferences on the development of intelligence testing (see Dudley-Marling & Gurn, 2010 for critiques of the application of the bell curve to individuals, typically and predominantly through intelligence testing). Eugenics was an attempt to breed purity into society while also denying breeding to those deemed abnormal or disabled, particularly the feeble-minded (Dechant, 2006). The practice of sterilization was only recently eliminated from existing national legislation by the Supreme Court of Canada in 1986 (Lupart, 2008), though it was repealed in Alberta in 1972 (Dechant, 2006). Over 60% of those sterilized between 1921 and 1970 were children and youth up to 20 years of age (for a more detailed and disturbing account of this particular history, see Dechant, 2006).

This dark history was supported and espoused as good for society by the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene (CNCMH). Nellie McClung (1873-1951), popularly known for her advocacy of women’s rights in Alberta, played a pivotal role in supporting the eugenics legislation in Alberta (Dechant, 2006). Her advocacy, along with the support of the committee and other groups, attempted to make a strong link between feeble-mindedness and delinquency (Dechant, 2006).



## Hermeneutics and The Art of Strengthening

The art of strengthening requires us to be open to the possibility that others may be right, "that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 361), which is a call to listening to what our conversations with texts and others say to us (Gadamer et al., 2001). The art of strengthening is the art of listening in order to ask questions of one another and our traditions.

In asking questions one is engaged in the art of thinking (Gadamer, 2004). If this kind of thinking results in interpretations that questions the judgment of a culture and time, perhaps such interpretations shed light on our current practices. The situational nature of human life includes the pre-judgments or pre-givens within a society. These prejudices constitute whom we are and are embedded in us through our cultural practices. Put differently, our practices are informed by tradition. Pre-judgments can be deemed as positive or negative within a given culture. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) restored the term prejudices to this meaning, thereby giving them a fundamental and necessary place in how we think about and see our world.

Thus, we do not stand behind or above, or over the lives we are already living (Gadamer et al., 2001). We live in horizons of understanding that extend to the past, live now in the present, and point towards the future (Gadamer, 2004). We can get a sense of what we are within by trying to understand the past and how we belong to it. This mediated sense does not entail that we fully escape how we are played or historically affected by our traditions. Yet, taking historical account of one's culture does not "relieve oneself of the duty to disempower, where possible, prejudices that do not prove to be positive" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 43).

The art of strengthening does not imply the strengthening of another's words so that they are right, but rather seeing one's position from this mediated, historical sense. In doing so, the possibility emerges for a position to be understandable *in its time*. Past practices have their inheritances too and are often taken for granted. During their time, such practices were therefore seen as right and true. In this way inheritances connect to the present, even though we may have already passed judgment on the wrongs of the past. Hermeneutics reminds us that in the play of history's influence on our current lives there is a need to make a balanced concession or judgment (Gadamer, 1999) on both the past and the present.

Re-considering the above brief historical inquiry inclusion can be seen to sit within the dark shadow cast by eugenics and similarly minded programming in Alberta. Inclusion takes on a new form in its connection to the past. The shadowy history of not

so long ago places inclusion within a larger horizon: one perhaps not expected in the current day-to-day talk surrounding the topic. The anecdote with Danielle helps to also strengthen our renewed understanding of inclusion by revealing how its dark historical connections underlay the thinking we tend to move towards when faced with a student in distress. Danielle's situation points us towards what has been inherited and taken for granted, I suggest. She's got the problem. She's abnormal. The specialized setting she needs to go to is for her own good.

This is why hermeneutic work entails both historical inquiry and the phenomenon we face everyday. Seeing what we take for granted is a form of interruption. When our prejudices (remember, pre-judgments) are interrupted, possibility arises. The art of strengthening has helped inclusion become readable or interpretable outside of a singularly dominating discourse like special education.

### **Hermeneutic "Play" and Inclusion**

If our prejudices are not interrupted, we can be taken in by our histories. These histories have the character of "play" (Gadamer, 2004). Those within the play of history are being played or tried so much so that in that seriousness of play we can lose ourselves to the game at hand. Being engaged in this kind of play is not always a chosen state. This notion of play in hermeneutics is intended to illuminate the ongoing, always present historical nature of knowledge as part of who and how we are.

Play involves the tragic, too. We can learn from suffering. Play can be risky and dangerous. We often use the expression "the play of things" in various instances to describe complicated events that often happen beyond our wanting and doing. This is a most serious renewal of the concept of play. It is inherent in human life (Gadamer, 2004). This is in contrast to a view of human life, including the accumulation of knowledge, as control over or construction of the world (Gadamer, 2004). Play is a reflection of human hope and tragedy. We are finite beings with finite knowledge. The world often outplays us.

The history of children and youth in Alberta, including so many experiences with cases like Danielle, attuned me to the serious topic of the play of inclusion today. During one historical period, the striving to make a peaceful society was played through eugenics and as we all know, that almost outplayed us all in Europe more than 70 years ago. Vestiges of that "othering" action inherent in normalization and eugenics remain in our schools. If one is not normal then one is abnormal. This is not a neutral or positive difference making.

## Inclusion Anew

Recognizing this we see that inclusion has become “a reality that surpasses” us in its historical being or entanglements to the past (Gadamer, 2004, p. 109). Now transformed, it has gained a structure that permits a renewal of its possible interpretations. This is how my work became readable or interpretable as something other than just special education and its deficit-ridden, disabling models. Inclusion is connected to and part of something that is “suddenly and as a whole something else” (p. 111). Inclusion is not just the current wish to have all students succeed or thrive in schools: it is also the story of specialized classes and exclusion of students. It is Danielle’s circumstances. It is the high school completion rate, claims of a lack of resources and supports, and also about teaching and learning, and communities of belonging. Inclusion is all of these occasions (Gadamer, 2004) presenting themselves in their concrete and yet interwoven circumstances. Inclusion in this renewed and profoundly important historical sense is at play in Alberta, I suggest.

My hope is that this brief explanation of the play of inclusion is an act that “produces and brings to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn” (p. 112) in inclusion today. In particular, my unpacking or interruption of our present-day notions of inclusion can help to reveal what might be at play in cases like Danielle’s. This is why hermeneutics also requires phenomenon to show or reveal what is at play. Without attention to the particular cases before us, dangerous abstractions can occur.

In the abstraction that occurred as a result of a certain belief in technology and progress, common sense was reduced to a mere contingency of the conditions in which eugenics appeared. The “playing field” of eugenics was “set by the nature” of the beliefs inherent to it, “far more...from within...than by what it comes up against” (p. 107). As a result the field of that play was closed: Eugenics was believed to be the true and proper way to human thriving much like we believe neuro-science and genetics are now the true learning sciences. We need to heed deep and critical caution to these approaches, especially when they are so venerated as scientific discourse.

It is now possible to see the mainstreaming movement of the 1980s and the subsequent changes in programming for students with EBD as an extreme though legitimate response to the monstrous program of eugenics and individual isolation from community. As if in recognition of what eugenics implied for education and for Albertan society, there required an immediate and rapid turn from its horrible consequences. I wonder if this history further reveals inclusion’s entanglement as a response to both eugenics and mainstreaming. Could inclusion be an attempt at a wiser, measured, proportionate, and thoughtful response to the needs of all students,

educators, and families? Is inclusion part of a pendulum swing of answers to and within, and of our own historicity?

At the same time, is inclusion part of a desire and hope for society similar to that which fueled the eugenics movement? Is the desire for a peaceful and harmonious society still at play here? Through this inquiry inclusion could be seen as entangled in the very tradition it attempts to be a counter response to. Hermeneutics does not promise clear and distinct answers. Danielle's situation should not be read unambiguously, either.

## Conclusion

Inclusion now regains resonances with an older etymology: "c.1600, from Latin *inclusionem* (nominative *inclusio*) "a shutting up, confinement,"" (Etymology Online, 2014). This brief historical inquiry reinforces the argument that what is currently called inclusion in most educational research and government documents is actually continued acts of segregation, integration and/or mainstreaming in and out of a "norm" of schooling (for examples see: Slee, 2011; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Valle & Connor, 2011). I hope this work has resulted in seeing inclusion as having "an indissoluble connection with its world" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 138), that world for us as historical in its being. What this inquiry has intended to do therefore, is enliven the topic through remembering its entanglement with the past and highlighting that past as it lives through one particular and modern anecdote. Inclusion can now be seen as so much more than the "naïve self-esteem" (Gadamer, 2004) of the presently rationalized and instrumentalized special education discourse. Given the complexity of the topic, it is no wonder we struggle to create an inclusive education system.

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