



CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Children and Adolescents with Special Needs

# A History of Special Needs Discourse

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CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Whether it is through conversation or literature, formal discourse regarding those with special needs has a history that impacts modern equity. This paper examines discourses around children and adolescents with special needs, and discusses how historical and modern special needs discourse influences the inclusiveness of society. The author explores words said to and about those with special needs while asking questions about the impact of those words on individuals with special needs.

Opinions and explanations given by various authors are documented as a means to demonstrate the transition from assimilation and stigmatization to inclusion. This movement towards equity is incomplete, and meets challenges that prevent a smooth transition. Current special needs discourse is embedded with old thoughts, as they reinsert themselves in modern literature. These ideas have a way of reappearing unexpectedly and remaining influential. In modern discourse, it is evident that old questions remain, while new challenges emerge that must also be battled.

Currently, the discourse of special needs is influenced by accountability and performance measures, as well as funding models that require individualization and labeling. The author suggests that we should allow children and adolescents with special needs to have more agency in their lives, and that those working with these individuals be less limited by labeling. She recommends the establishment of new discursive formations that are invested in equity and considerate of recent work in disability theory. Additionally, she argues the need for research that provides insight on how we can adequately open the door to a norm of equity and social justice.

## RÉSUMÉ

Que ce soit dans la conversation ou la littérature, le discours officiel sur les personnes ayant des besoins spéciaux est tributaire d'une histoire qui influe sur l'équité dans notre société contemporaine. Le document étudie les discours sur les enfants et les adolescents ayant des besoins spéciaux, et examine comment les discours historique et contemporain sur les besoins spéciaux influencent l'intégration sociale. L'auteure se penche sur les paroles qui sont utilisées à l'endroit des personnes ayant des besoins spéciaux ou à leur sujet, et se questionne sur l'impact que de tels propos ont sur ces citoyens.

Les points de vue et les explications fournis par différents auteurs sont documentés afin d'illustrer la transition de l'assimilation et de la stigmatisation à l'intégration. Ce mouvement vers l'équité reste incomplet et se heurte à des défis qui font obstacle à une transition en douceur. Le discours actuel sur les besoins spéciaux est émaillé de notions obsolètes qui sont réintroduites dans la littérature contemporaine. Ces idées ont une façon de réapparaître à l'improviste et de conserver leur influence. Il est évident que les vieilles questions perdurent dans le discours contemporain, alors que surgissent de nouveaux défis qu'il faut également surmonter.

Actuellement, le discours sur les besoins spéciaux est influencé par les mesures de responsabilisation et de rendement, de même que par les modèles de financement exigeant l'individualisation et l'étiquetage. L'auteure suggère qu'on devrait accorder davantage de moyens aux enfants et aux adolescents ayant des besoins spéciaux au quotidien ; par ailleurs, elle ajoute que les intervenants auraient avantage à ne pas se laisser limiter autant par l'étiquetage. Elle recommande la mise sur pied de nouvelles

formations discursives axées sur l'équité, qui tiennent davantage compte des travaux récents sur la théorie de l'infirmité. De plus, elle argumente en faveur d'une recherche proposant des idées sur la façon adéquate d'introduire une norme d'équité et de justice sociale.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines the discourses of special needs, exploring not just what is said to and about children and adolescents with special needs, but asking questions about what is at stake ideologically in this language – language that seeks to create equality, but is still intricately bound up, in policy and in practice, with normative conceptions of the abilities of young people. While the paper briefly considers the general move away from assimilation and stigmatization towards inclusiveness and equity, its main concern is to map the ways in which this change has been neither smooth nor complete: old ideas die hard, renaming and reinserting themselves in perhaps unexpected, but nonetheless influential, ways, and new ideas can have unintended effects. This paper maintains that the current discourses of special needs are often embroiled in old questions (e.g., is this child badly behaved or in need of innovative supports?) even as they do battle with new ones (e.g., how can educational supports be planned, financially or otherwise, for students with special needs without applying pathologies that unduly limit students' agency?). Taking into account recent work in disability theory and special needs discourse, this paper argues that new discursive formations, more profoundly and substantively invested in equity, are called for.

## **DISCURSIVE TENSIONS: PATHOLOGY, RESISTANCE, AND MISRECOGNITION**

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the term discourse, this paper takes as a premise that there is a complex relationship between words themselves and the real world as it is experienced:

'[D]iscourses', in the form in which they can be heard and read, are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and words: an obscure

web of things, and a manifest, visible, coloured chain of words ... [D]iscourse is not a slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between a reality and a language (*langue*), the intrication of a lexicon and an experience . . . . [I]n analyzing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects . . . . [Discourses are] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs, but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things.<sup>1</sup>

Put simply, Foucault argues that the words we use do not designate material objects, including people, in a straightforward way. Words have more power than this – they are a mode of practice, and they construct their objects. A child with “special needs” thus *becomes* such a child precisely because it is said of that child. That there are pedagogical, psychological, political, or medical reasons behind this naming *matters* because the authority of those subject positions – the teacher, the psychology researcher or practitioner, the disability activist, the doctor – constructs the child within a specific framework (what Foucault calls a “discursive formation”<sup>2</sup>).

All this is to say that the words we use matter, not just as window dressing, *politesse*, or ‘political correctness’ – it is not *appearance* that is at stake in the language chosen to talk with and about young people with special needs, and, importantly, in the choices these young people make in representing themselves in language. Words matter precisely because they *are* matter – a crucial part of the material experiences of children with special needs, their communities and families, and the policymakers, legislators, service providers, educators, and others who have responsibilities to children with special needs. On one hand, words are what make funding schemes for support services

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 53-54.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, 49.

possible. On the other, they are a means for people to fashion a subjectivity that appropriately represents not just their experience, but also the grounds of their political engagements. Juanne Clarke and Gudrun van Amerom, in a recent study of discourses of Asperger's syndrome (AS), give a clear example of how discourses can come into conflict. Organizations that seek to provide support services to those with Asperger's syndrome "clearly medicalized and pathologized AS and the people with AS" and "described those who had been diagnosed in terms of their 'deficits.'"<sup>3</sup> A community of bloggers, meanwhile, produced a resistant discourse, one that rejected AS organizations, the medicalization of AS, and its public stigma: "[b]loggers spoke of celebrating their differences and of anger at neurotypicals for stigmatizing them."<sup>4</sup> These bloggers respond to a medicalized and charity-based model of their deficit, one that is held up against a 'healthy' norm, by viewing difference as an enrichment – as a productive ontology with positive value in personal, social, and political contexts – and by naming themselves, as "Aspies," and those with whom they do discursive battle, as "neurotypicals."<sup>5</sup> As Clarke and van Amerom point out, the organizations and the bloggers have different levels of power and engage with different institutional frameworks: organizations that seek to serve those with Asperger's syndrome employ a "deficit" model in part because funding for services is often contingent upon a problem existing. Without a clearly defined problem, confirmed by the medical community as such, what grounds are there for finding funding and providing services? The bloggers showed a variety of methods for resisting this discourse, and some show a marked

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<sup>3</sup> Juanne Clarke and Gudrun van Amerom, "'Surplus suffering': differences between organizational understandings of Asperger's syndrome and those people who claim the 'disorder,'" *Disability & Society* 22.7 (2007), 771.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke and van Amerom, 771.

<sup>5</sup> Clarke and van Amerom, 769.

awareness of the Foucauldian concept of discourse. One blogger insists in no uncertain terms that discourse is indeed a practice, asking “[y]ou don’t think my life has been transformed by your endless campaign to turn autistic people into the lepers<sup>6</sup> of the 21<sup>st</sup> century[?]”<sup>7</sup> The dominant, medicalized model of AS has material, transformative effects in the daily lives of individuals – the quest for funding and improved awareness on the part of organizations interested in AS has consequences, likely not intended, but no less real. So, too, do resistant discourses,<sup>8</sup> but the pathologizing discourse remains dominant.

There are, then, current conflicts in the discourses of special needs. But how did we arrive at this point? And how do we move forward, toward a discourse that embodies equity? Historically, there has been a shift from discursive models of assimilation of those with special needs to the norm towards inclusion within the norm. One of the most recent studies of this transition over time was completed in a European context: Kristina Boréus traces the official discourses pertaining to people with hearing disabilities in twentieth century Sweden, finding three distinct periods in the discourse: assimilation, assimilation mixed with inclusion, and inclusion.<sup>9</sup> But this transition is by no means complete. Change happens slowly; established discourses have long institutionalized echoes, and can continue to shape practices even when they are radically out of date. In a narrative-based account of her own interactions with a teacher who saw her bilingual child as possessing a deficit, linguist Mariana Souto-Manning describes the teacher’s

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<sup>6</sup> i.e., the ‘sick’ in need of ‘saving.’

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Clarke and van Amerom, 770.

<sup>8</sup> See also John Swain and Sally French, “Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability,” *Disability & Society* 15.4 (June 2000), 569-82.

<sup>9</sup> Kristina Boréus, “Discursive discrimination against the ‘deaf-mute’/ ‘deaf’ and the importance of categorization in 20<sup>th</sup> century Sweden,” *Disability & Society* 22.6 (2007), 609-23.

discursive commitment (a discourse put into practice in the classroom) to understandings of bilingual students' achievement popularized in the 1970s: "behind in school, retarded in measured intelligence and socially adrift."<sup>10</sup> This deficit-based conception of bilingual students had been long disproved in the academic community, but the new information had both utterly failed to arrive in the discourse of Souto-Manning's child's teacher, and was met with resistance when it *was* introduced. And it would appear that this teacher is not alone: a recent study in the United States found that minority students, including those for whom English is not a first language, are over-represented in special education settings.<sup>11</sup> And, as Josiane F. Hamers and Michel Blanc suggest, anecdotal evidence suggests that some teachers in Canada have been known to approach immigrant parents about the need to use the "school language" at home – a move that can be detrimental to learning. Indeed, they argue that strong support of languages spoken at home in fact produces academic benefits for children.<sup>12</sup> The disconnection between scholarly research and teacher knowledge is, once again, offloaded onto students; even where research changes and discourse shifts in one knowledge community, the discourses employed by those working on the frontline are not smoothly supplanted.

Within the specific context of children and adolescents with special needs, there has been some research arguing that discourse, operating in a variety of situations, has important impacts. First, these impacts are felt at the individual level by children with

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<sup>10</sup> Qtd. in Mariana Souto-Manning, "A Critical Look at Bilingualism Discourse in Public Schools: Autoethnographic Reflections of a Vulnerable Observer," *Bilingual Research Journal* 30.2 (Summer 2006), 561.

<sup>11</sup> John L. Hosp and Daniel J. Reschly, "Disproportionate representation of minority students in special education: Academic, demographic, and economic predictors," *Exceptional Children* 70.2 (2004), 185-99.

<sup>12</sup> Josiane Hamers and Michel H. A. Blanc, *Bilinguality and Bilingualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

special needs and by those who support them. Paivi Pihlaji's recent study of inclusive daycare in Finland found that children defined as having socio-emotional difficulties were experienced by staff as "difficult" or as "problems," and that this was communicated to the children in a variety of ways.<sup>13</sup> Staff were unlikely to use prohibitive language (e.g., "Don't do that"), and were more likely to ask young people questions about their activities or motivations (e.g., "Do we have to stop everything because of you again?" or "Why are you always breaking things?").<sup>14</sup> Pihlaja argues that the interrogatory approach practiced by many staff members in the study is indicative of "a weak understanding of the socio-emotional development level of these children and the means of providing support for them."<sup>15</sup> In the act of asking such questions, which often contain evaluative or moral judgments of the child, the lack of staff knowledge is not experienced as such by the child – it is experienced instead as judgment and as a call to account, not just for a particular behaviour, but for how the child understands her or himself in the world. Needless to say, this is not an ideal situation, for either staff or children, but the study makes a crucial point: the words used in conversation with children with special needs might arise from a specific discourse (of behavioural difficulties rather than a need for particular types of support), but be offloaded onto children not as a lack of staff knowledge, but as an expression of a child's deficit. Discourse, in other words, has material effects – especially for children themselves, but also for those working with them to provide support.

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<sup>13</sup> Paivi Pihlaja, "'Behave yourself!' Examining meanings assigned to children with socio-emotional difficulties," *Disability & Society* 23.1 (2008), 5, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Pihlaja, 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Pihlaja, 10.

## INCLUSION, INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS, AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF DISABILITY

In the context of children and adolescents with special needs, *The Salamanca Statement*, produced under the leadership of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1994, remains a cornerstone document in the discourse of inclusion. The first section of the *Statement* is an expression of identity: a definition of the text's speaking position, of collective expertise, global scope, commitments to education, and wishes for the future life of its recommendations: authority, consensus, commitment, and hope are embedded in the text as operational identities, as the speaking subject of the text. The second section outlines what the signatories "believe and proclaim," namely that

- every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning,
- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs,
- education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of those characteristics and needs,
- those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs,
- regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.<sup>16</sup>

This section of *The Salamanca Statement* is particularly of interest because it is self-conscious of itself *as discourse*: that the signatories "believe" and "proclaim"

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), ix, [www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF).

suggests that they both harbour a consensus-based knowledge and publicly put this knowledge forward as truth. Their position is authoritative; their beliefs and proclamations set the terms of the discursive formation of inclusive special needs education. These beliefs and proclamations take their initial premise from the first point, that “every child has a fundamental right to education.” Each of the points that follows does so based on this initial invocation of rights: if every child possesses such rights, they *must* be met appropriately. Children are figured not just as those who possess rights, but as “unique.” Education systems are understood as requiring design, program implementation, and an understanding of diversity. Within the multiplicity suggested by “wide diversity” are children with special educational needs. These children must have their needs met both through “access” to a particular setting (“regular schools”) and “accomodat[ion]” via a “capable pedagogy” that is “child-centred.” Finally, the *Statement* makes a series of statements about inclusive education: it will produce social justice, provide appropriate education for all, and be cost-effective. The discourse of inclusive special needs education can be summarized thusly: it is grounded in rights; characterized by diversity; demanding of systemic change, access, and accommodation; and will create fiscal efficiency and justice.

The impact and import of the *Salamanca Statement* should not be lessened by the discussion that comes next – the *Statement* itself set a global standard, changed the terms of debate, and provided cogent ways forward for special needs education, while simultaneously highlighting its starring role in social justice and fiscal responsibility. But the *Statement* itself can only provide so much discursive accommodation. What, for example, exactly is an “inclusive orientation”? And what is an “inclusive society”? The

first is relatively easy to answer. The *Statement*'s companion document, the *Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* states that an inclusive school necessarily focuses on the following: "curriculum, buildings, school organization, pedagogy, assessment, staffing, school ethos and extra-curricular activities."<sup>17</sup> But the term "inclusive society" remains undefined in the document – it is used twice, and, on both occasions, special needs education is figured as *producing* an "inclusive society."<sup>18</sup>

And it is on exactly these grounds that inclusive education has been robustly critiqued: as a discourse, with attendant policies, legislation, funding models, and practices, it is seen to fail in adequately addressing the social basis of inequality. The *Salamanca Statement* suggests that inclusive education represents "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all."<sup>19</sup> First of all, this seems to be a rather heavy load for the education system to carry: a weighty responsibility. And although the *Statement* makes provisions for national-based programs to eradicate discriminatory attitudes, this is figured as a small piece of the puzzle (falling under the rubric of "School Factors"),<sup>20</sup> and, in any case, locates discrimination in "attitudes" rather than social forces. In the view of Derrick Armstrong, inclusive education for children and adolescents with special needs continues to participate in a humanitarian discourse that has what Roger Slee calls "a deep epistemological attachment to the view that special educational needs are produced by the impaired pathology of the child."<sup>21</sup> In

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<sup>17</sup> UNESCO, 21.

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO, ix, 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, ix.

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Derrick Armstrong, "Reinventing 'inclusion': New Labour and the cultural politics of special education," *Oxford Review of Education* 31.1 (2005), 136. See Roger Slee, "'Inclusion in Practice': does practice make perfect?" *Educational Review* 53.2 (2001), 117.

Armstrong's view, an inclusive discourse that works at "channelling troublesome voices into safe waters" and is "constrained by the goal of assimilating those with impairments into mainstream schools without addressing the exclusionary character of a disabling society" functions, ultimately, to "reinforce the very exclusionary process that it seeks to overcome."<sup>22</sup> Armstrong is not alone in this view. As he points out, sociologists, historians, psychologists, parents, and disability activists and theorists have all put forward a less than positive view of the "dark side" of inclusive education discourse.<sup>23</sup> But Armstrong goes further: cross-agency inclusive discourses that employ a "child protection model" and/or a "risk factor model" seek to engage with the social basis of exclusion – often poverty, in Armstrong's UK model – through collaborative approaches with multiple service providers, but still work at the level of the individual, assuming "that the effects of poverty can be transformed through social interventions aimed at those most at risk" rather than at the macro-economics of poverty itself.<sup>24</sup>

On Armstrong's more general point, that exclusion and marginalization occur in the social sphere, and that the individual embedded in inclusive discourses is not the appropriate site for intervening to end inequity, some working in the field of disability theory are in agreement. In her *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture*, Rosemarie Garland charts a shift in cultural representations of women with disabilities from "pathology" to "identity," and argues that disability is socially constructed:<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Armstrong, 140, 143.

<sup>23</sup> Armstrong, 136.

<sup>24</sup> Armstrong, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Rosemarie Garland, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 6.

My intention is to defamiliarize these identity categories by disclosing how the ‘physically disabled’ are produced by way of a legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse. Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity. In other words, I want to move disability from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity. By asserting that disability is a reading of bodily particularities in the context of social power relations, I intend to counter the accepted notions of physical disability as an absolute, inferior state and a personal misfortune. Instead, I show that disability is a representation, a cultural interpretation of physical transformation or configuration, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions. Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies, but as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do.<sup>26</sup>

In Garland’s theorization, which bears important resemblances to Foucault’s concept of discourse, people with physical disabilities are not “disabled” by their differences, but rather by a variety of powerful discourses that position the bodies of those with disabilities as empty vessels into which the abject is cast off by normative subjects. In this context, disability is not inferiority, but rather a socially constructed discourse, not about bodies at all, but about what bodies *mean* discursively. In the end, Garland argues, this process of disabling the body of the other is a social construction, and is embedded in discourses that have material effects: “[r]epresentation thus simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, such disabling discourses do not simply function to define non-normative bodies as such; it is *their* bodies that in fact constitute what is normal. The body disabled by discourse is necessary to produce the “figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked

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<sup>26</sup> Garland, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Garland, 7.

bodies shore up the . . . boundaries” of what Garland terms the “normate.”<sup>28</sup> Writing at the limit case of this argument, Elizabeth Grosz delineates the endgame of such discourses in her examination of “freaks” – specifically, hermaphrodites and conjoined twins – those subjects whose physical disabilities “imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, identities, and sexes.”<sup>29</sup> In confronting the “freak,” what is at stake is not an experience of difference, but instead the viewing subject’s “own narcissism, the pleasures and boundaries of its own identity, and the integrity of its received images of self”<sup>30</sup> For the supposedly normal spectator, experiencing the other is a means of understanding the self. “Freaks,” in this moment of othering, are not selves. The work of disability theorists, like Garland and Grosz, shows not just the extent to which discursive formations fail to recognize the social basis of inequity for people with disabilities, but also the degree to which such formations disable not just bodies or minds, but agency and subjectivity.

### **MARGIN AND CENTRE: DISABILITY AND THE PROBLEM OF LIBERAL CITIZENSHIP**

It has become a commonplace in cultural theory to propose that the centre (i.e., the normal) is defined by the margin (i.e., the abnormal). With its roots in the work of postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha,<sup>31</sup> theorizations of the relationships between centre and margin argue that hegemonic epistemologies and ideologies – embedded in discourses – regulate the conceptual practice of the ideal self

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<sup>28</sup> Garland, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Grosz, “Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 57.

<sup>30</sup> Grosz, 65.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

(as white, able, male, heterosexual, and middle-class, among other characteristics) through a compulsive repetition of this self's difference from the other (as non-white, disabled, female or of unstable gender, non-heterosexual, poor, etc.). This ideal self is not possible without the inferior other. In fact, this self comes into existence through the other. This self is constituted by the other. Cultural theorist Paul Mann summarizes this argument:

[R]elations between hegemonic center and oppositional margin are more or less constant. Marginal groups are suppressed almost to the point of invisibility, or at least to a theoretical *position* of "silence"; . . . the general structure of center and margin remains in a sort of hypertense steady state. The limited exclusion of the margin constitutes the center's defining boundary. Margins exist insofar as they are held in an orbit, placed at the constitutive limit of whatever power the center consigns itself.<sup>32</sup>

Mann's framework employs a rather fatalistic tone, but its characterization of the ways margin and centre function to "*position*" those on the margin at a point of "silence," that the center defines its boundary through exclusions of others to the margin, and that the power held by a central position is maintained through excluding the marginal position from such power. Thus, an inclusive approach to special needs that does not take into account that centre and margin as socially constructed, with normative subjects at the centre and non-normative subjects held at the margin even as they define the scope of the centre's power, fails to intervene in the discursive formation that marginalizes those with disabilities, or, more specifically, children and adolescents with special needs. By this logic, the *Salamanca Statement's* position that inclusive education will yield an inclusive society does not address Garland's argument that disability is socially constituted not just

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Mann, *Masocriticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

in education, but in “legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives”<sup>33</sup> that have power beyond the grasp of inclusive pedagogy.

Furthermore, the statement’s foundational premise, in the “fundamental right to education” for “every child” places it squarely within a framework of liberal citizenship. Grounded in individual rights, rather than in the social discourses that are seen by disability theorists to produce inequity, such premises are also hotly contested by political theorists in the field of citizenship studies. In this field, “citizenship” does not simply mean the official rights and duties accorded to and expected of a state citizen, but also includes concepts of “belonging,” and of feeling “at home.”<sup>34</sup> On one side of this argument are thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, whose *The End of History and the Last Man* argues that individual rights and democratic liberalism are both enviable, inevitable, and tied to the market rather than to the political or social spheres.<sup>35</sup> On the other are those, like Will Kymlicka, who critique concepts of individual rights because they inadequately address the social constitution of the individual. In Kymlicka’s view, a model of “group-differentiated rights” or “‘special status’ for minority cultures,” in addition to individual rights is the appropriate method to ensure equity.<sup>36</sup> Keith Faulks summarizes this position as follows: “[c]itizenship cannot be purely an individual status because citizenship only has meaning to the individual in the wider context of the social group.”<sup>37</sup> But Faulks takes issue with the views of thinkers like Fukuyama and Kymlicka, proposing a “postmodern citizenship” that, as one of his commentators

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<sup>33</sup> Garland, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, “Belonging and the politics of belonging,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40.3 (2006), 197-214.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>37</sup> Keith Faulks, *Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 2000), 90.

summarizes, maintains the primacy of individual rights while shedding the liberal concept of the “atomistic being standing over against the community” in favour of a view of the individual as “shaped by community” and holding rights that are “mutually dependent” with “responsibilities to the community.”<sup>38</sup> For Faulks, “true citizenship deconstructs the private-public duality that liberals subscribe to . . . [on the grounds that] the concept of the ‘private citizen’ is an oxymoron.”<sup>39</sup> In Faulks’ formulation of citizenship, then, rights-based discourses insufficiently recognize the individual’s embeddedness in the social world, while group-rights-based discourses come up short because they do not recognize that reciprocity between individuals and groups – mutual responsibility – should characterize citizenship. Hence, arguments about inclusive education’s failure to sufficiently interrogate the public (i.e. social) nature of exclusion, or to theorize the relationship between young people with special needs and the contexts and communities they are a part of, are also arguments about the citizenship of children and adolescents with special needs – and have a critical role to play in current debates about citizenship generally.

And indeed, one recent study argues that a model of inclusiveness that engages in a more holistic fashion with the social world shows more promise in terms of equity. Myriam Winance examines historical discourses of disability in France, describing first a “social insertion” model, in which people with physical disabilities enter the “normality space” via an alignment with the able-bodied.<sup>40</sup> This model is a model of inclusiveness, but provided only a “political dead end” insofar as it effaced physical difference while

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<sup>38</sup> A. T. Nuyen, “On the Confucian Idea of Citizenship,” in *Challenging Citizenship: Group Membership and Cultural Identity in a Global Age*, ed. Sor-hoon Tan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 177.

<sup>39</sup> Nuyen, 178.

<sup>40</sup> Myriam Winance, “‘Being normally different? Changes to normalization processes: for alignment to work on the norm,” *Disability & Society* 22.6 (2007), 635.

ultimately maintaining such difference as negative. Amongst those in the French disability activist community she studied, Winance found that this initial notion of inclusiveness, which still rested on normativity, maintaining a margin/centre duality and a model of individual disability, had been overtaken by the political concept of confronting “handicapping situation[s].” In this discursive framework, “disability” alters its meaning – rather than referring to the non-normative “social performance” of an individual or group, “disability” refers to “a rupture in the social interaction” which allows actors in social contexts to continually negotiate the terms that “will make it possible to live together.”<sup>41</sup> People with disabilities are not thus called to ‘fit’ into the norm; it is, instead, the concept of what is normative that shifts, and is constantly and collaboratively redefined by the collective. Within this discursive formation, difference is not effaced, and the social constructions of disability are actively engaged with – by all actors in the collective.

### **POLICY DISCOURSE: RETRENCHMENT, RESISTANCE, AND THE NECESSITY OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE**

Without sufficient attention to the discursive formations of disability or special needs as enacting power differentials, as historically situated, as materially meaningful in the lives of individuals and communities, and as socially constituted, “a problem can,” as special needs educational theorist E. K. M. Tisdall argues, “perpetuate, rather than solve, the problem.”<sup>42</sup> Writing in the journal *Disability & Society*, John Wilson characterizes the categories of “learning difficulties,” “disability,” and “special needs” as “partisan

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<sup>41</sup> Winance, 635.

<sup>42</sup> E. K. M. Tisdall, “Constructing the ‘Transitional Problem’ for Young Disabled People Leaving School,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education* 27.1 (1997), 88.

conceptualization.”<sup>43</sup> Wilson suggests that categorizing children using new terminology wrestles agency away from them by ensuring they are not “free and responsible people or individuals” and, furthermore, that the incessant changes in terminology applied to children dismantles an already serviceable set of pedagogical ethics: “I am a teacher, I know my pupils well, I am concerned for all of them and want to do justice to them all: that is my job as an educator.”<sup>44</sup> Paying heed to the fact that medical terminology provides useful information in planning supports for some children, and that not all teachers are as ethical as he, Wilson’s argument nonetheless relies on something like a “common sense” approach to how discourse functions in social and, more particularly, institutional and individual, contexts:

It is, I think, an open question how far we need to establish specialised categories in education at all: that is, the extent to which categories already marked in *ordinary language* may be inadequate . . . . [W]e already have a very wide and rich range of distinctions by which to categorise learners: ‘clever’, ‘musical’, ‘good at games’, ‘lazy’, ‘inattentive’, ‘illiterate’, ‘a bully’ and many thousands of others; and it is not clear that psychologists have added usefully to that range. That is unsurprising: ‘learning’ marks a very general human activity, and the *virtues and vices, talents and defects*, relevant to learning are likely to have found their way into our *natural language* already, and hence to be *available* to any competent teacher or educator. In other words, the differentiations we need to make between both learning-contents and learners may already be marked in language, and need not be *specifically constructed*.<sup>45</sup>

There are a variety of difficulties, but also some strengths, in Wilson’s position. First of all, Wilson forges a linkage between the inveterate capabilities of “ordinary” or “natural language” to mark out the “virtues and vices, talents and defects” of those who learn.

What Wilson suggests in this passage is clear – what is needed is not to move *forward*

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<sup>43</sup> John Wilson, “‘Learning Difficulties’, ‘Disability’ and ‘Special Needs’: some problems of partisan conceptualization,” *Disability & Society* 15.5 (2000), 817.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, 820.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, 820, emphasis added.

from categorizing and medicalizing students to a more useful approach, but to retrench into the moralization of children's behaviour. That the concepts of "clever," "lazy," and "inattentive" provide a "very wide and rich range of distinctions" is also clear, but such distinctions are only useful if all those involved in the assignation of such labels abjure the historical legacy of such terminology. How many "lazy" children are in fact in need of educational supports rather than pedagogical solutions seeking to solve a failure of will? Furthermore, his view that words used to describe students need not be "specifically constructed" suggests a belief that "ordinary" or "neutral language" is free of specific construction – a view that is patently untrue.

For Wilson, attempts to shift the discursive terrain by naming children with special needs differently yields both his conservative retrenchment, but also some crucial clues about the potential resistance to such shifts – in some ways, Wilson is not at all alone in his views. In an argument that appears repeatedly in the research literature on education for special needs students, Wilson suggests that applying pathologized labels to students robs them of their agency:

There are kleptomaniacs, but there are also thieves. We may sometimes be uncertain about which are which, but the distinction is a crucial one . . . . The overall categories are based on a picture, adopted no doubt from the best motives (we do not want to blame anyone for something which is not his fault), whereby all defects and 'difficulties' are construed on a medical model, so that those who 'suffer from' them are not seen as morally responsible for them. That is not only partisan and rides roughshod over a basic distinction which is necessary for all human interaction (let alone for bringing up children), but also deeply demeaning and demoralising to those on whom the model is deployed: ultimately they are seen as 'cases', rather than as free and responsible people or individuals. Even in relation to their own background concerns, the categories fail to cover enough ground: I have a 'learning difficulty' if I am lazy or arrogant, and a 'special need' for moral improvement if I am a miserable sinner.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Wilson, 824.

That the agency Wilson is so concerned about students losing appears to involve only poor behaviour – intentional thieving over compulsive practice – is clear. One does want to remind Wilson that “special needs,” “learning difficulties,” and “disability” came about as terms used in relation to young people precisely because so many were thought to be “lazy,” “arrogant,” and “miserable sinner[s]” when, in fact, they were in need of support because the discourses of what constitutes “hardworking,” “appropriately modest about one’s place in the world,” and “virtuous” were, at best, modeled on a very particular Euro-Christian ontology and, at worst, relentlessly racist and showing insufficient knowledge in how best to work effectively with children while understanding and honouring them as responsible agents. A call to return to the discourse of “ordinary” or “natural” language is nothing less than a call to return to *this* history, one that cannot be washed clean of morality and thus dishonours the children it seeks to support. Wilson’s discourse might restore agency to children, but it also wrestles any responsibility for supporting children firmly out of the grasp of institutions and the larger social forces that come to bear on children. To return to Mann’s discussion of centre and margin, discussed above, Wilson purports to return children with special needs from the margin and into the centre – all children, he suggests, have needs that must be met by the just and ethical teacher. Nonetheless, in his narrative, children with special needs slip quite easily back to the margin: the clever cannot help but be held up against the lazy because these words arrive in conversation brimming with evaluative connotations.

But perhaps the more interesting question about Wilson’s position is not the solutions he posits (though it is crucially instructive to be clear about the fact that concepts of special needs are not thought by all teachers to be a panacea), but the

pedagogical difficulties his solutions respond to. First, the power of labels, as noted above, hinders students' agency. And, second, Wilson argues that the new categories put forward in policy, codified in law, and put into practice by institutions and teachers are not detailed enough. What should be privileged, he suggests, is local knowledge born of everyday interactions with individual students: "in general I do best to attend more closely to the particular children with whom I have to deal, without the benefit of theoretical categories."<sup>47</sup> In this context, Wilson's belief in the usefulness of "ordinary" or "natural language" makes considerably more sense, since it forms one part of his overall view: teachers *already know* how best to support students in learning, that if they do not, then they should seek professional development, and that teachers themselves are most knowledgeable about how to provide the individualized support that *all* students require – and that such support is based upon their everyday interactions with and their local knowledge of students. In both of *these* views, Wilson is not at all alone.

In a study of an alternative high school in Edmonton, Alberta, Diane Wishart, Alison Taylor, and Lynette Shultz found similar difficulties – students with compromised agency due to labeling and teachers unable to freely employ the "knowledge of students that potentially allows them to . . . meet the needs of students."<sup>48</sup> But whereas Wilson takes aim at "partisan conceptualization" of special needs,<sup>49</sup> Wishart *et al.* aim at the "technologies" that produce youth-at-risk (YAR), many of whom have special educational needs. The term "technologies," like the Foucauldian concept of discourse, suggests both power and practice: technologies are "forms of practical knowledge

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<sup>47</sup> Wilson, 823.

<sup>48</sup> Diane Wishart, Alison Taylor, and Lynette Shultz, "The construction and production of youth 'at risk,'" *Journal of Education Policy* 21.3 (May 2006), 293.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, 817.

involving types of authority, vocabularies and inscription techniques that are intended to achieve certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed.”<sup>50</sup> Standing oppositionally to the school’s commitment to a social justice model of education, in which both power relations and institutional effects are acknowledged by the institution and the social construction of experiences is taken into account,<sup>51</sup> technologies that move students into alternative schools and that are used in the funding processes for students with special needs, are “double-edged in that they both respond to and produce YAR” through individualizing pathologies and labeling.<sup>52</sup> While provincial government policy focuses on both “accountability” for students’ education rights and “de-emphasiz[ing] labels,”<sup>53</sup> funding structures ironically bind teachers to labels in order to show accountability, not to students, but to government.<sup>54</sup> The process of providing accountability to the provincial government for the funding of students with special needs produces the following situation:

[E]arnest attempts to assist youth to reconstruct aspirations and identities of social and economic mobility become marginalized by the more invasive practises of testing, labelling, and coding. Teachers become the foot soldiers in the process of constructing YAR, as they continue to identify and report students’ special needs, to produce anecdotal records to confirm the diagnosis, and participate in educational screening procedures . . . . School staff who wish to disrupt the discourse of YAR find themselves engaged in coding and developing Individual Program Plans (IPPs), which then contribute to the objectification of youth.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Wishart, Taylor, and Shultz, 294.

<sup>51</sup> Wishart, Taylor, and Shultz, 295.

<sup>52</sup> Wishart, Taylor, and Shultz, 294.

<sup>53</sup> Wishart, Taylor, and Shultz, 298.

<sup>54</sup> For similar arguments on the ways in which funding and accountability processes intervene in pedagogy, see E. Kay, M. Tisdall, and Sheila Riddell, “Policies in special needs education: competing strategies and discourses,” *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 21.4 (2006), 363-79; Armstrong; Hosp and Reschly.

<sup>55</sup> Wishart, Taylor, and Shultz, 299.

Put simply, teachers and students feel the effects of the individualizing and pathologizing technologies required by government to provide supports to students. In an interview discussion of IPPs, one teacher spoke of the experience of creating such documents: “it’s more than a language problem . . . . I tend to see the language of these suggestions as sort of referring to the student as almost an ‘it’. And I think we’ve tried hard to treat them as an ‘I’, somebody who’s to be valued.”<sup>56</sup> The teacher’s belief that all of this is “more than a language problem” suggests her or his knowledge of discourse as practice with material consequences.

## **CONCLUSION**

In general, there appears to be a cohesive emergent argument about the necessity of creating room for children and adolescents with special needs to be able to exercise more agency in their daily lives, for those who work with them to be less limited by the individualizing and pathologizing discourses that conflict with working toward equity. Currently, the discourse of special needs molds and is molded by accountability measures, performance measures, and funding models. If students must be categorized and labeled in order to provide a school – or other support agency – with funding and ensure that expenditures are in keeping with, and sufficient for, the needs of children and adolescents, then measures must be in place to mitigate the potential negative effects of these concerns – concerns that currently burden not just teachers and other service providers, but the very children and adolescents that additional supports and resources intend to liberate. In the double-bind of labeling children in order to define a “problem” that requires policy, legislation, spending, training, and support services, there must also

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<sup>56</sup> Wishart, Taylor, and Shultz, 299.

be room for agency, collaboration with communities and families, multiplicity, and, above all, equity – these must be the new norm. Although the literature on special needs discourse speaks often, and often fervently, of the need to more adequately open the door to equity and social justice, there is a clear need for more research that provides solutions. In particular, there is a need for further discussion on how discourses of special needs (and their attendant practices) intersect with the social structures so often mentioned (but seldom discussed) in the literature: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and other sites of identity and, for many, inequity. As Naz Rassool and Louise Morley argue, these concerns do not fair well in the context of educational discourses more focused on such factors as “professional leadership” and “academic progress” than on equity.<sup>57</sup>

But what does equity look like? One very important route out of the double bind that compromises the ability of service providers to effectively support children and children to exercise appropriate agency as individuals – as citizens – is to look not just to “new” models of discourse, but to those that already exist. One of the clearest current points of intervention in this area is the work being done by Aboriginal communities and researchers on the design and implementation of education, programming, and services for children and adolescents with special needs. These texts, perhaps surprisingly, echo the main premise of Wilson’s argument – that children are not particularly well-served by a system that disallows the local knowledge of those who know the children they work closely with – but without the retrenchment into an outmoded system that links behaviour with negative judgements about the intrinsic character flaws or ethical shortcomings of young people. Nadine and Beth Ann Tepper, for example, argue that educators working

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<sup>57</sup> Naz Rassool and Louise Morley, “School Effectiveness and the Displacement of Equity Discourses in Education,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 3.3 (2000), 237.

with Native American children with special needs should ensure that “cultural background be used to support, rather than impede” a student’s experience with learning.<sup>58</sup> They are far from alone in making this claim, one which effectively makes a call for more attention to the local knowledges of communities and families – and to Indigenous knowledge more generally. Indeed, leading researchers in the field of Indigenous health propose that “externally imposed strategies fail to take into consideration local understandings of health and illness and local mechanisms of sharing knowledge.”<sup>59</sup> The sentiment is echoed in the literature specifically addressing inclusive educational and care settings for Indigenous children. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, for example, suggest that attention to culture be addressed at all levels of the design and implementation of inclusive early childhood education programs, including partnerships and relationships, systems of governance, policy and procedure, and personnel. Culture and language are to be foregrounded in curricula, and children themselves are to be understood “in the context of their own families as well as within the wider community.”<sup>60</sup> The concept that inclusive settings are best when the specificities of community and culture represent the most crucial premise of programming and

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<sup>58</sup> Nadine Tepper and Beth Ann Tepper, “Linking Special Education with Multicultural Education for Native American Children with Special Needs,” *Rural Special Education Quarterly* 23.4 (Fall 2004): 30.

<sup>59</sup> Janet Smylie, Nili Kaplan-Myrth, Kelly McShane, Métis Nation of Ontario Ottawa Council, Pikwakanagan First Nation, and Tungasuvvingat Inuit Family Resource Centre, “Indigenous Knowledge Translation: Baseline Findings in a Qualitative Study of the Pathways of Health Knowledge in Three Indigenous Communities in Canada,” *Health Promotion Practice* Online Publication (February 2008): 1. See also Janet Smylie, Carmel Mary Martin, Nili Kaplan-Myrth, Leah Steele, Caroline Tait, and William Hogg, “Knowledge Translation and Indigenous Knowledge,” *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 63 Supplement 2 (2004): 139-43.

<sup>60</sup> Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, *Piarnut, For Our Children: Quality Practices for Inuit Early Childhood Education Programs* (Ottawa, ON: Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, 2007), [http://www.pauktuutit.ca/pdf/Piarnut\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.pauktuutit.ca/pdf/Piarnut_ENG.pdf), 4.

services presents an important challenge to the reigning discourses of special needs. Taking this premise seriously would mean a shift in discourse and its constitutive practices, away from a system of individualizing pathology and toward a less simple but more equitable discourse. As Aboriginal researchers underline, the issue is particularly crucial in Aboriginal communities, but conceptualizing children in relation to community, family, and culture is an idea that raises an important question for those working in a variety of fields related to children and adolescents with special needs. If local contexts, local knowledges, and local communities must form the basis of effective supports for young people with special needs, then a discursive system organized around this premise would look quite different from the one we currently live with.

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