27 “The Tell-Tale Body”
The Constitution of Disabilities in School

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The tell-tale body is all tongues. Men are like Geneva watches with crystal faces which expose the whole movement.... The face and eyes reveal what the spirit is doing, how old it is, what aims it has. The eyes indicate the antiquity of the soul, or, through and how many forms it has already ascended. (Emerson, 1860, p. 154)

...a culture [is] not a community basket weaving project, nor yet an act of god; [is] something neither desirable nor undesirable in itself, being inevitable, being nothing more or less than the recorded effects on a body of people of the vicissitudes with which they had been forced to deal. (Baldwin, 1955, p. 140)

A popular but risky way to play nature and nurture 1 with children comes in two parts: the first describes what they cannot do at an early age; the second assumes that the identified limitations predict directly what they cannot do as adults. A more reliable way to predict what children will do as adults is to describe the roles available in the social structure that will acquire them regardless of their abilities. The analytic view from adult roles is most revealing and corrective in a society with a systematic and unjust misfit between the likely potentials of children and the jobs ready to reward them with position and status. The possibility of an unjust misfit requires, as Emerson might say, that we listen to “the tell-tale body” of the children to see what they have been through, to see what their “face and eyes reveal” about getting squeezed into lives smaller than promised at birth.

In the United States, the tight fit between race, class, and school failure signals an unjust system that assures the reproduction of biased individual outcomes over collective potential. Schooling, as Baldwin said of culture, is “not a community basket weaving project, nor yet an act of god,” but it does divide a population and leaves its “recorded effects” on the bodies of a people’s children: Make that, says this paper, recorded literally. The well-funded apparatus for diagnosing the problems of young children, as nice as it sounds, has become a guidance system for reproducing a divided and often unjust social structure, no less racist and class biased in outcomes than before, but now phrased in terms of embodied psychological traits, for example, ability, intelligence, attention span, problem solving skills, speed of reasoning, language capacity, and so on. These traits have been isolated from the potentials of real children and have become institutional labels: Learning Disability, Low IQ, Attention Deficit Disorder, Hyperactivity, English Language Learner, 2 and so on. They dictate limits on the best a child can be. Professional testers can add to the list with every new budget for more children to be diagnosed.

In the last 300 years, with the rise of nation-states, industrial capitalism, democracy, individualism, science, and university systems, words for various positive activities or events have been newly nuanced as kinds of persons. The medieval genius, for example, was not a person who was invariably smart across a range of situations, but a medium,
a person only momentarily chosen by God, to perform some great breakthrough; by the 18th century that same person was complete with copyright powers over his artistic and scientific achievements. This celebration of individual types is part of a larger package institutionalizing (you can’t do without one) and commodifying (you can buy one) not only the genius, but the expert, the scientist, the scholar, the tycoon, and the creative artist. The inherently intelligent entered the fray in the late 19th century, and the idea of the gifted 10-year old (and his, yes, mostly male at first, and later his or her LD counterpart) come to the fore in the late 20th century.

This seems positive enough, in a survival of the smartest sordid sorting sort of way, but for two dissenting traditions. First, the new terms for individuals were immediately followed by complaints that they are better treated as names for situations that happen to turn out productively for individuals in the right place at the right time. Second, the new terms were followed by measures of all those who, for reasons of an unfortunate constitution, could never succeed or make a difference. The negative extension of the new terms, along with racism, colonialism, and class bias, has filled our lives for the past 150 years with reports of illiterates, the hopelessly dull and stupid, the primitive, the uneducated, the uneducable, the criminal, the merely normal, and, for the past 50 years, the disabled of many kinds (LD, ADD, and even ELL, etc.). If you or yours haven’t been caught and labeled yet, just you wait.

This chapter expands the first line of dissent by treating achievement as situational and uses the second to critique the unjust degradation of those not achieving in expected ways. We seek a more political phrasing, not just to complain about the school disability industry, but to disrupt it. Two questions lurk in the background. By what perverse arrangements among persons variously situated in relation to opportunity and power would a society misdirect the tools of science to make children less than they are? How, if only at the level of research, can we intervene?

The point is not that there is no such thing as individual differences among learners; nor do we think differences among learners might not constitute difficult situations as the world is currently organized. Our point is rather that differences are better thought of as opportunities, and that a democracy intent on justice and equality should do more than just talk about equal opportunity. When the United States prepared for war in early 1942, potentials were put to use. People locked out from becoming machinists, pilots, and nurses before Pearl Harbor were suddenly given a chance. Arbitrary barriers were momentarily removed, the better to make war more efficiently. The same words, rearranged, state the pressing issue for American education today. How can we make war more effectively on the arbitrary barriers to everyone getting access?

To insure its own survival, a democracy must make the most of everyone’s potential. The current situation in the United States is poised to go in two directions: on the plus side, huge financial and institutional commitments for special education, all in the name of helping and appreciating individual differences, and, on the minus side, an ever growing sorting apparatus of diagnoses, tests, and labels for excluding more children from success (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Together they make a contradictory logic: yes, everyone can learn, and yes, because everyone can learn, those who do not learn better than others must have something, uhm, seriously wrong with them. So goes American common sense—step on others to climb on the shoulders of giants—to which everyone has to ascribe, or pay the price.

Emotionally, we take a lead from Christopher Nolan, an Irish writer trapped from birth by a cerebral palsy that kept him out of touch even with those close about him. At 12, his family noticed he could send messages by dropping his head, with a stick attached to it, in the direction of typewriter keys. At 15, he wrote an acclaimed book
of poetry and at 21 an autobiography that outlined his plight and offered a hope—his plight of fancy:

Century upon century saw crass crippled man dashed, branded and treated as dross in a world offended by their appearance, and cracked asunder in their belittlement by having to resemble venial human specimens offering nothing and pondering less in their life of mindless normality. So [he] mulled universal moods as he grimly looked back on the past, but *reasons never curb but rather create new gleeful designs.* (Nolan, 1987, p. 3; italics added)

This is the way to see all children and not just the dramatic case. Every situation should be built for children to create “new gleeful designs,” and educational institutions should make the best of what children can do, and not just diagnose their problems. It takes a great democracy to live up to this promise and great promises to enliven a democracy. The American educational system is less a contributor to democracy of late. One reason is that it is getting harder to promise that children will be educated to their full potential.

We proceed in three main parts. The first offers an approach to the learning body in a democratic state promising equal opportunity and justice for all. Current theories of school and society have been captured by a cynicism won in hindsight, accurate perhaps, but we prefer to begin with an optimism, the better to reroute our disappointments and to state a new direction. We begin early in American democracy when hope was still easy, but not naive. We begin with Emerson, who was a disruptive observer of the use of intellect in a democracy. Almost a half-century after Emerson’s essay on “The American Scholar,” Oliver Wendell Holmes (1885, p. 115) called it “our intellectual Declaration of Independence,” something much needed by both children and adults in schools today. Emerson appreciated that education by books could be a stimulus to the development of great thinkers and in turn great wisdom, but he also understood that learning at its best comes from all the people working together. “The greatest genius,” he warned, “is the most indebted man” (1995, p. 127). In a posthumous book on the *Natural History of Intellect,* Emerson called for “a Farmer’s Almanac of mental moods” (1894, p. 10).

Emerson appreciated the body as a nexus of the person’s experience in a wider world of forces. We can read a person’s experience in a society by the marks recorded on the body:

*A main fact in the history of manners is the wonderful expressiveness of the human body. If it were made of glass, or of air, and the thoughts were written on steel within, it could not publish more truly its meaning than now.... The tell-tale body is all tongues.* (1860, p. 154)

For those called disabled, for those with a dissed-ability, a missed-ability, their bodies show less what they cannot do and more the marks put upon them by circumstances, by those seemingly not disabled at the time, by the Temporarily Able Bodied without the means or willingness to see strength and wisdom where it is easier to see absence. Remember Baldwin on culture: “nothing more or less than the recorded effects on a body
of people of the vicissitudes with which they had been forced to deal” (1955, p. 140). As for everybody, so for every body! This section begs for a more representative democracy in which all citizens, young and old, established and just starting out, hyperliterate or just learning to read, would take their place in a larger whole, as Emerson urged, as representative of the wider wisdom of the society. In Emerson’s democracy, everyone—including Emerson’s genius: the “most indebted man”—works in service of a less bruising society with a less bruising school.

Our second and third parts recast accounts of disabled children into accounts of their others who might be inhibiting and, more evocatively, inhabiting their bodies: their inhabitus. By others, we mean both those immediately around them and those who have brought them together given social and political arrangements both near and far. As every new generation of parents learns to fear, the socialization of children can involve millions of others who set agendas, model desires, offer resources, and limit outcomes. We describe a clumsy child and a hyperactive child, the first mostly overlooked and the second impossible to overlook, and show how both develop with a precise attunement to an unnecessarily consequential issue at deep play and hard work around them: the attribution of inherent intelligence and of the lifelong promise of early literacy.

The Body Politic

Two important arguments have stood against the march of disability labels: first, that the “truly” disabled are often more able than their labels imply, and, second, that many if not most of the children called LD have been “falsely” labeled. The contrast set of “truly” and “falsely” in the last sentence is proposed in the most mutually relevant sense, both traits—true and false—being defined in terms of each other. By “truly,” adults usually mean visible, particularly to those on the look out for disabilities. Children who cannot see or hear, or children with Down syndrome or severe cerebral palsy (Christopher Nolan, always), are in some sense visible. Even if visible, they can still be “falsely” labeled relative to a fit between what they can do and the environments others create for them (Christopher Nolan, if treated as only a “crass crippled man” when, after all, he could communicate beautifully). For a nice example, consider a society in which both hearing and deaf populations use a signed language; under such circumstances, to label a person as deaf says only that they cannot hear, and says nothing else about them. In a more divided community in which a hearing population controls the media of participation and cannot use the relevant sign language, the label of deaf invites conditions for unjust condemnation. The more “truly” visible the deaf, or any other labeled group in an inhospitable society, the more “falsely” they are labeled relative to their potential.

By the same analytic turn, children with LD are not “truly” visible, except in situations requiring particular skills on unique tasks (often necessary on psychological tests only), and whether they are “falsely” labeled depends on the ecological validity of the test and, more importantly, the institutional adequacy of the pedagogy used to address the problem. Children without LD, but labeled as such, are also not visibly LD, not “truly” LD, but the truth value of their diagnosis is more complex. They have been “falsely” labeled by their diagnosis, but if it works to everyone’s advantage—that their family stops calling them stupid, that more time on formal tests allows them to display their learning more fully—then, given the conditions of the system, we may want to say they have not been “falsely” labeled, while reserving the right to say that under different conditions, under better conditions, under conditions encouraging the most learning by everyone in all situations, labeled and labelers alike have been “falsely” played by the diagnosis and the system that invited it.
This difficult account of the double life of labels allows the key point. Without a careful description of the environments in which a disability becomes visible, to whom, why, under what circumstances, by what mix of “truly” and “falsely,” and with what outcomes, true and false are neither rigorous categories, nor rigidly contrasted categories.

In selecting a clumsy and a hyperactive child, we seek a midpoint in the true–false continua (yes, the plural form is accurate). The conditions are there to be seen—clumsy is clumsy if anyone bothers to look and hyperactive is overbearingly present—but we can show that the symptoms do not belong to the identified child alone. It takes a few people to make a problematic situation and a whole society to arrange a diagnosis. Remember Emerson: “…you must take the whole society to find the whole man” (2004, p. 51). Watching the bodies of people in interaction affords a partial vision of the whole society at work, and so the other way round. Christopher Nolan after age 12 was not just, or not at all, a disabled person, but a poet using words to create “new gleeful designs.” A theory of disability requires not just a description of children facing a problem, but an analysis of their environment and a critique of the people who call them names.

We can start with the behavior of a child in school. Cancel that. We must start with a report of what is missing in the behavior of a child in school, for this is how schools establish a focus. American education is taken with, and held accountable for, the interpretation of what is wrong with individual children. Misbehavior and missing behavior are the institutionally well-paid preoccupations of consequence, the stuff of a child’s school records, the stuff of the institutional biographies that record a child’s problems in school files forever. To account for missing behavior, to interpret, say, a child not learning to read as quickly as others, schools do not look out to the larger world of inequalities of which they are a part. They go in the opposite direction. What counts, what is counted, is the missing behavior, and, to make it visible and recordable, tests are given and the results treated as real, more real than the child to the extent that the tests claim to have gotten inside the child’s head, into the throne room of cognitive abilities and disabilities. The problem with global norming is that our kids are getting toasted by tests.

Many problems offered children in American schools are not worth having. They must relentlessly arrange not to get caught not knowing something, constantly to do better than others, show off what is learned elsewhere as if it were learned in school—these are not productive problems for children to overcome. Some are crushed by the pressures, and those who survive are not always kinder and gentler persons for their competitive success. Without schools obsessed by what is wrong with children, everyone might be better off. Without schools and parents looking for LD and ADD children, the diagnoses of moment, we might be better able to ask questions about the conditions that have encouraged such problems. If Emerson is right that we can “read very sharply all your private history in your look and gait and behavior” (1860, p. 154), perhaps we can read in “the tell-tale bodies” of children their private histories and the social milieu that has staged the problems they must confront.

Many societies have developed strong literacy traditions without LD labels, MRI images, ADD worries, or ELL programs (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006; McDermott & Varenne, 1995). Traditional societies rarely develop such notions, although a century of anthropology, from Franz Boas (1911) and Paul Radin (1927) to Charles Frake (1980) and Harold Conklin (2007), has shown that they make extraordinary cognitive and intellectual demands on both children and adults. Even most contemporary state societies have developed literacy without theories of cognition and intelligence dividing up the population. It is more than possible, and maybe preferable, to build education systems that demand effort and responsibility more than intelligence. Japan might be the most prominent example of a society with an inclusive skill base answerable to questions about
responsibility. In contrast, the United States was the first society to institutionalize a narrow definition of intelligence as measured on IQ tests (Raftery, 1988), and it has followed that mistake as the first society to institutionalize the search for LD (although the trouble, as if LD were on sale at Wal-Mart, has been spreading around the globe).

Without a bipolar distribution of wealth and power, no one would need such a diagnosis. Children could be what they are without fear of being looked down upon or pushed aside without school credentials. We are all, said Karl Marx (1963) most famously, responsible for creating the social world, albeit under conditions others have arranged for us. If the full history of the world can be read in the sensuous organization of working bodies, as Marx (1852/1963) also said, then we can ask how historical circumstances have been beating children into the appearance of disability. The world has its way with bodies. We wear the bodies of others, of those long before us and those now around us. Our bodies are designed, as Emerson said, by the responses of others to fate, their struggles with power and wealth, and their place in the culture of interpretations that has them, never according to their own schedule, alternately terrifi ed and ennobled, disabled and enabled, hiding and showing off. Of all the things that could be said, and have been said, about children in various eras and cultures, what kind of society would make LD the description of choice? And can we reorganize society so children’s bodies would not have to bear the weight of social structure?

A Clumsy Child

Under a commanding thought all people become graceful. (Emerson, 1855/1990, p. 123)

Detailed studies in three fi elds have delivered summative conclusions about the resources and constraints available to people moving about with each other. Physiological studies have shown that walking is organized by trajectories that connect every beginning with an end, every whither with a whence. Sociological studies of the organization of people walking have shown them to be vehicular units sensitive to the role of others in the maintenance and disruption of the guiding trajectory (Goffman, 1971). Cultural studies have revealed constant in situ and post facto interpretations of people walking as a key to how they can be interpreted and talked about to others.

We examine the vehicular behavior of a child in a preschool classroom. Our analysis begins as she takes aim, sets her sights, her rights, and her lefts and rights, and lays out a trajectory in which she and others will engage. The others react and build an instruction system for the child to follow. If they give divided directions, like two people in a face-off trying to pass each other on a crowded sidewalk, they can thwart the path of the walker (in our case: fi rst a sitter, then a walker). The walker can be made to look clumsy. The thwarted person can be talked about and talked to as a clumsy person.

Clumsy Crystal has hands and feet and arms and legs and a voice, and they all get in the way. She says she’s clumsy. Her teachers agree. In the summer before kindergarten, the classroom fi lled with students new to school, and Crystal’s body seemed the least accustomed: lying on the fl oor while others sat, taking her shoes off while others tucked their feet crisscross, tripping over the edge of a carpet while others stepped over her. Videotapes from her kindergarten and fi rst grade are fi lled with Crystal and other children bumping into or tripping over each other. Here comes Clumsy Crystal.

We followed Crystal through a series of classroom episodes. Her body is there, out-of-place, in the middle of a group reading activity. Crystal’s clumsiness was not the reason we started looking at the tape, but the teacher’s strong responses to it bewildered us. Mrs.
Pomeroy’s strong scolding seemed, in our minds, sudden and disproportionate to Crystal’s transgression. We saw only Crystal’s body, first leaning sideways and then forward into the center of the circle of students, and we heard Crystal’s voice murmuring something to her neighbors. Other students were, at various times, more out-of-place, louder, more in the way than Crystal, but without anyone saying anything about them. But there Crystal is, getting yelled at, first at 5 and then at 19 minutes into a 22-minute activity. This paper details only the second scolding, when we find Crystal bent over, head turned to her neighbor, and asking what sounds like a question. “Crystal,” the teacher says strongly, “I’m not going to accept that.” Crystal leans back, sits up straight, covers her mouth with both hands, and the beat goes on.

The recording begins after the morning recess. Students enter the classroom, find their places around the perimeter of the rug on the floor, and arrange their bodies for the group reading activity to follow. The teacher announces that they will read a story, *The Mitten*. As several students comment she had already read the book to them, Mrs. Pomeroy explains that today the students will read the book to her. There is a break in the action, and instead of reading, the teacher begins a five-minute exchange on Carl’s demand that other students return the “fake money” he had given out at recess. The exchange is more public rebuke than dialogue, and punctuated by the teacher’s mostly unsuccessful effort to turn the exchange into a group lesson on citizenship. A successful transition to what looks like story time happens in the 20 seconds between two utterances, the first an announcement they are now “back to the story,” and the second a request for students to reorient their bodies by “sitting crisscross applesauce first” and then “raising your hand to answer the questions.” The explicit reorganization of bodies marks the shift to the new kind of activity. After 12 minutes, Mrs. Pomeroy refuses to accept Crystal’s body and voice.

We offer three versions of Crystal’s wrongly placed behavior. The first focuses directly on Poor Crystal tipping over and mumbling, out of control in body and voice. Because she is working with wiggly children, a fake money economy, and a slow-moving book, we could also focus on Poor Mrs. Pomeroy. The teacher directs a question, sees Crystal tipping and talking (again), scolds her (again), and moves back to questioning. The scolding has an effect. Crystal sits upright and covers her mouth. Students across from her call for a turn. Story time affords an explanation of Crystal’s scolding and a chance to exercise our sympathies. This feels good, but cannot stand as an analysis.

A second version focuses more carefully on Crystal’s interaction with her environment over the course of the activity, and we get to report a pattern. Crystal is not alone in the circle. She is sitting next to Bonita, a 3-year-old child who is spending part of her day in the kindergarten (she is the daughter of a teacher at the school). Bonita has been in the class before, but she is not up to the ways and means of kindergarten. Five times during the book reading (the one at 19 minutes is the fourth of the five), Crystal reaches to rear-range Bonita or the space around her: once as the group is just getting started, three times in the course of questions and answers, and again as the group moves to another activity. Each time, Bonita is in violation of the visible normative order. From this angle, Crystal is less a violator than an enforcer of the classroom order.

This version is appealing. Poor Crystal is still in trouble, but with a competent and well-intentioned sensorium under conditions that might be too much for any mind/body to handle gracefully. Crystal must monitor both her own and Bonita’s body. Crystal’s body and voice may look out of control, but she is only suffering from competing commitments. The teacher seems to know from past experience that Crystal is clumsy and loud, but a second look shows Crystal is living for two, with what Emerson called commanding thoughts coming from two directions. With one small accusation, we can add a
villain to the sympathy story: Poor Crystal, yes, but no longer the Poor Teacher, but the Insensitive Teacher. If only she could see what we see. Crystal is misunderstood.

A few minutes after the scolding, the circle of students gives way to an alphabet-singing conga line snaking around desks and bookshelves. Crystal is late off the floor and late into line. We might have predicted her delayed arrival, but we can now offer a reason. As before, Crystal has to organize two bodies—her own and Bonita’s—and it is a task that keeps Crystal’s body in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

The first account is limited to Clumsy Crystal on her own, and the second adds the teacher and Bonita into the mix with Crystal, her body and mind. The third version takes a wider angle view of what everyone is doing and treats the actions of both child and teacher as only two links in a sequence chain of activities made relevant over time.

The third version asks us to look away from Crystal and Bonita. We hear Carl, from his seat at Mrs. Pomeroy’s left knee, doing his best to make reading into a two-party conversation. He leans into her field of vision, he wiggles, he touches her knee, he raises his voice, he talks in a whisper. We see the teacher, working with the means available to make reading into something the whole group can be seen doing. She asks questions and scans the group, and she turns the book so Carl can’t see. Meanwhile, the other students struggle to determine whom this reading is for and how to manage their participation. They sit quietly, legs crisscross, exchanging glances with each other (but not with the teacher); or they lean into the center of the circle, wave their hands, and monitor the circle for competitors. In the middle of this finely tuned mayhem, Crystal’s body is in the right place at the right time for the teacher to have a reason to stop paying attention to Carl, to scold Crystal, and to give a moment for everyone else to place themselves into the core or the periphery of the group. The third version reveals a teacher struggling to keep a handful of fidgety 5-year-olds attending to a book they have already read, and it shows students (not Crystal) trying to figure out how to show off that they have an answer to any question officially put to the group.

In the third account, Crystal’s body is no less contorted or in the wrong place, but perhaps at the right time for others to get their interactional work done. While Crystal divides her time and rhyme between Bonita and the group, the teacher can reengage her students in question-answer chains. Andy and his neighbors can call for a turn, and Carl can raise his hand. Some students get to look better than others. The third account makes it harder to see victims and villains, unless we are willing to have undue sympathy or condemnation for ordinary kids and adults doing ordinary things. For a moment at least, the classroom seems to be a simple case of ordinary people using the materials, resources, and structures available to them to make it from one moment to another.

By the third analysis, Crystal is made comparatively invisible, but she is not transformed into a normal person as a result. Even if she does not look clumsy, even if no one responds to her on the spot as clumsy, she does not get time off from being labeled. The first account makes clumsiness a problem in the relation between Crystal’s head and body. The second account makes clumsiness a problem in the relation between Crystal’s body and those who pay immediate attention to her. With too much to think about, or with a mind divided by the attention of others, no wonder Crystal looks clumsy. In the third account, Crystal is not called clumsy while others are paying attention. If not quite the property of the group pushing and pulling on Crystal’s intentions and extensions, clumsiness is still in the group’s range of jurisdiction for description, critique, and complaint either after a clumsy move or, and this is crucial, even if a clumsy move never takes place. Crystal’s clumsiness is one way the group—and even the analyst—can explain what might be going on in ways consequential to their ongoing activities. Crystal’s clumsiness is an opportunity for everyone else to appear, or claim to appear, graceful. If Cry-
tal is not just clumsy on occasion, she can still be called clumsy on call. Her clumsiness is a constant occasion for a “status degradation ceremony” (Garfinkel, 1956). Crystal’s clumsiness is a constant opportunity for others to look, or to claim to look, elegant and graceful. Clumsy Crystal Makes Graceful Group.

Crystal’s body is an opportunity for others to do local interactional work, and her recognized clumsiness makes the opportunities regular. This is not the kind of opportunity we had in mind when we wrote that differences are better thought of as opportunities than as difficulties, and that a democracy must make the most of everyone’s potential. Our first statement was more political than descriptive. What we meant was that persons who are different should provide for a differently construed, more diversely imagined society and structure, with room for new “gleeful designs.” This is not what happens when Crystal’s behavior creates only an opportunity for more broadly distributed involvement, but all of the conforming kind. Crystal leans, talks, and arranges Bonita, and the rest of the group can remember, and organize again into a circle of students sitting crisscross applesauce waiting to be called on to give answers the teacher and the book already know. The easy acknowledgement of Crystal’s clumsy body makes for the easy recovery of the group’s involvement without forcing a demand that reading become something people do to learn things together and not just a measure of the individual child.

A Hyperactive Child

Peter was a busy boy around the classroom. He followed everyone else’s behavior carefully, and he was quick to give advice to others about how they should behave. He was often calling out to the teacher, mostly to tell what he was doing and how well he was doing it. The teacher in turn paid attention to him as quickly as possible and struggled to get him back on task. There were three difficult boys in the first grade classroom, all of them given to the best and most experienced teacher, who in turn rarely went five minutes without attending to each of the boys personally, if only for a few seconds of contact, physical adjustment, encouragement, reprimand, or threat. Two of the boys were labeled and placed in special classes for the second grade. Peter was not labeled, although all adults agreed he was hyperactive and might have to be reclassified later. There was an important behavioral difference between the two labeled boys and Peter: the first two had to be monitored carefully, and Peter hardly at all; as the teacher walked around the classroom, she would constantly check on the first two boys, whereas Peter could be counted on to show up often and loudly. Peter was easier than the first two boys, but still the hyperactive label followed him.

For a major part of every morning, the class was organized into three independent reading groups and three individual children who were in no group, one because she was far ahead of the other children in reading, one because he had been put out of the group for misbehavior, and one because he was still wetting his pants and was a constant source of complaint and degradation. In the morning, the teacher would work with each group while keeping an eye on the rest of the class, and in the afternoon she would work with the three group-orphaned individuals. The groups were organized by skill level, and everyone in the room seemed to know that there was a top, middle, and bottom group. The three difficult boys started in the bottom group where two of them, Peter and James, remained for the year; the third boy, Simon, became one of three orphaned children.

We offer three findings on Peter’s hyperactivity and use them to raise questions about the diagnosis and the society that invited it. First, hyperactivity is well tuned to the situations of which it is a part. Certainly Peter was noticeable to even a casual classroom observer. He seemed to be everywhere, calling for this and that and butting into
everything. And yet, he was rarely singled out as a problem. The first hint came from a videotape that surveyed the entire room while the teacher was with the reading groups. Peter had just finished working with the teacher and the bottom group, where he had greeted most every turn change with loud offers to read and loud complaints when he did not get a turn. While the teacher worked with the top group, Peter sat at his desk watching them work through their turns to read. For 25 minutes, he did not move or say anything. Impulse control was not a problem. Just what was this thing called hyperactivity and why was the label applied to Peter?

A second doubt developed with a second kind of data. As part of wider inquiry into the behavior of reading groups in the classroom, we used the Benesch dance notation system to record the movements of children and the teacher during a reading group session; we recorded torso shifts and arm, leg, and head movements—the information that Benesch, watching a dance in Paris, could send on paper to a director in New York and expect a reasonable replication. At this level of detail, finger, mouth, and eye movements were not recorded. In the bottom group, Peter could be seen making dramatic moves and a great deal of noise. The slow motion record of the movements told a different story. Our appointed hyperactive child was not first on the list of who moved the most. Actually, the teacher moved the most, then two other children, then Peter. Again, we were left wondering what it means to be called hyperactive.

A third kind of data offers a partial answer. Beyond the question of who moves the most, we recorded when different people moved and in what directions. Peter’s movements seemed well coordinated with times for getting a turn to read, often at the same time the teacher was moving, and, perhaps most strikingly, often in the opposite direction from the teacher. The plot thickens. Peter was a pivotal member of the group, literally so. Whenever the group would switch activities, say, from chatting about a book to reading a book, or from one person reading aloud to another person reading aloud, Peter was sure to be involved. When the first turn to read was given to Anna, Peter read the first words on the page before Anna did, and when it was moved next to Maria, Peter first pounded on the table calling for a turn and then complained that he didn’t get it. The next two turns were rejected by those called on, leaving the teacher in a difficult situation and mumbling to herself, and in both cases Peter was there to make a claim for the turn. Even after he had a turn to read, he called immediately for the next turn. When the teacher arranged for a next reader, Peter moved with her. He was always available for a turn, but when he did not get one, he complained and moved away from the teacher. When the first four turns went to other children, in each case, he sulked to the left, and in each case the teacher took her first free moment to reach out to him, to adjust his book. Not amazingly, although there are six children neatly distributed around a small rectangular table, the teacher’s legs and torso were usually turned to Peter. When other children got her attention, she would divide her top half away from Peter and leave her bottom half pointing in his direction. Peter, it seems, took work, and so did the teacher’s job of organizing the group and assigning turns to read while at the same time overseeing the rest of the class. The teacher seemed to rely on Peter being available to take a turn, to offer an answer, or to direct others to what is happening.

The Peter–teacher drama was at its clearest at turn-relevant moments, but played out in small and quicker ways at disruptions and other junctures within a given child’s turn. For example, if the teacher turned from the bottom group to pay attention to someone from another group, Peter, guaranteed, would turn away from her until she returned to the group. It is easy to understand why adults might call this hyperactivity: because Peter cannot sit still, as soon as the teacher looks elsewhere, he’s gone. But from the perspective of the group, Peter can just as easily be understood as the child in charge of the teacher
paying attention to his group. When the teacher is not with the group, if a child from another group enters, Peter is the border guard, and he will chase the visitor away. When the teacher is with the group and an outsider gets her attention, Peter can do that same job, but in a way appropriate to handling a teacher: he turns away from the group until the teacher notices and reaches out for him until they are refocused inside the reading group and the visitor leaves. Who is in charge here? And what can we say about seeming hyperactivity when it seems to be exquisitely well timed at the level of milliseconds with the teacher’s behavior and has the consequence of getting the teacher to behave appropriately for the bottom group getting back to work reading?

Peter’s body is an opportunity for others to interact, and his recognized busyness makes the opportunities regular. This is not the sense of opportunity we called for when we wrote that differences are better thought of as opportunities than as difficulties and that a democracy must make the most of everyone’s potential. Our first statement was more political than descriptive. What we meant was that persons who are different should provide for a differently construed, more diversely imagined society and structure, with room for new “gleeful designs.” This is not what is happening when Peter’s behavior creates an opportunity for the teacher to return to the reading lesson as a place to show off and compete. Peter bangs about, and screams, and arranges the teacher, and the rest of the group can organize again into a circle of students waiting to be called on to show off how much they can read better than others. The easy recognizability of his pouncing body makes for the easy recalibration of the group without an insistence that reading become more than just a measure of the individual child; that reading become an opportunity for people to learn together.

Democracy Disabled

In 1880, two years before the death of Emerson (and Darwin, and Marx only another year later), Henry Adams published a small novel called Democracy. Based on his years as a political journalist in Washington, Adams explored the vast darkness of strategy and duplicity that had become crucial to success in the young capital, but he also had one of his characters, named in a prescient fit, Gore, state the hope of a democracy in terms still thrilling to anyone working in education:

I believe in democracy. I accept it. I believe in it because it appears to me the inevitable consequence of what has gone before it. Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to a higher intelligence than formerly. Our civilization aims at this mark...I grant it is an experiment, but it is the only direction society can take that is worth its taking; the only conception of its duty large enough to satisfy its instincts; the only result that is worth an effort or risk. (1880/2003, p. 45)

The experiment is not over, but it is getting more difficult to state the promise without a sense of defeat, without an embarrassment at how it has gone wrong. Intelligence, at least the sort defined by school and academic degrees, is the new property. So-called high intelligence comes at the price of a so-called low intelligence and its disabilities, the result being a so-called democracy with the chosen few climbing ladders of information and skill at the expense of the many. Measured, attributed, and certified down to and even inside the body, down to the level of answers to arbitrary questions, useless knowledge, and partial skills, intelligence has become high and haughty, a term for what some people own that most others do not and cannot own. The others—the masses, each one labeled as a kind of problem child in school: Low IQ, LD, ADD, ELL, slow, clumsy, and generally
nonreactive—have less access than before, and their intelligence is under assault, down-
graded, degraded, and erased. Their abilities are disabled. The narrow range of intelli-
gence demanded, acknowledged, and given formal degrees by the psychometric industrial
complex is increasingly available for a price only a few can afford. In a double pun, the
new intelligence, like property, comes with an alienation of rights, with an alienation of
reads and writes (Lave & McDermott, 2002). The dis inherited have become the “disin-
herited.” When pressed with evidence that the masses cannot be high first priority in
postbellum Washington, Adams has Gore defend his faith in democracy: “I have faith;
not perhaps in the old dogmas, but in the new ones; faith in nature; faith in science; faith
in the survival of the fittest” (2003, p. 46).

The new dogmas have not done well. The rise of Reaganomics has brought a revival of
the fittest, the financially fittest, and a consequent decline of the middle class and wors-
ening conditions for the working and poor classes. The survival of the fittest in which
Adams placed his hopes has given way to the fetish of the fittest at the local gym, the
presence of which is nicely correlated with school performance; parents with money live
in neighborhoods with gyms, Starbucks, athletic leagues, and tutoring centers, all crucial
to the well-rounded (but sleek), well-founded (but lost), and well funded individuals who
make it institutionally (Pope, 2001). The gait keepers rule. The schools that were to pro-
tect children from any increasing division between the classes have been kidnapped into
certifying class differences by academic degrees, and, worse, science at its most mechani-
cal and disingenuous has been paid off to produce the tests that make the sorting look
legitimate (McDermott & Hall, 2007).

We started this paper with a question about the perverse arrangements among persons
that would force a society to misdirect the tools of science against its own children. The
situation has become simple. It is old-time politics around class and race, but with the
difference that political hegemony is now phrased and scientifically confirmed, make
that informed, in terms of cognitive abilities and disabilities. Adams was writing at the
beginning of the Gilded Age, and we are writing at the beginning of its second coming.
We also asked about how we can intervene. For starters, we can look to the bodies of the
children to find the pushes and pulls of the wider system played out on their sensuous
engagements and entanglements with the world we have given them. We should look less
inside their bodies, where we cannot see as much as we gain license to make up our own
models, abjectively verified, of what might be happening. We should look more to their
active relations with the world, to their bodies in the world. We should try to articulate
their attentions and intentions, of course, and their retentions, why not, but most of all
we have to define and confront the tensions, extensions, and detentions we have offered
them. We should study them, yes, but with an eye to how they negotiate their places and
suffer our symptoms and consequences.

Imagine then an intervention at the level of research and policy: that every description
of what is wrong with children must come complete with a description of the society that
has invited the diagnosis; that every description of what is wrong with children must
come complete with a prescription for a confrontation with the political and economic
circumstances that are going to use and abuse the disabilities. It is easy to appreciate
perhaps how Christopher Nolan’s loving family, before they discovered Christopher’s
responsiveness, might have missed the new gleeeful designs he was creating in his mind.
But it should not be easy to excuse a whole society for searching out disabilities and using
them in the competitive wars that mark a child’s pathway through school. So what if
Crystal is clumsy if she can be shown to be taking care of others? What kind of society
would look for the minor things she cannot do well and not notice the important things
she can do well? So what if Peter is hyperactive if he can be shown to be bringing order to others? What kind of society would be on the lookout for the ways he is wild and not notice what he sacrifices and accomplishes with his movements? Who gets served by each documentation of disability and failure, but those with the resources to avoid the consequences of being labeled and disabled and those who make a career out of diagnosis and treatment without acknowledging how they are a part of the problem?

Democracy is not easy. Even the new dogmas—“faith in nature; faith in science; faith in the survival of the fittest,” said Adams—have been subverted into doing the work of the old order: nature delivers individual differences, science documents them, and an ideology of the survival of the fittest provides the justification for conditions of birth being the best predictor of school success and failure. It won’t do. Democracy has to create the best conditions for every skill, every preoccupation, yes, and every kindness. Crystal for Secretary of State and Peter for Speaker of the House, please. Let kindness, however clumsy, reign. Let order, however hyper, find its mark for the better.

Notes

1. Most cultures do not divide children by nature versus nurture. The false opposites were used by Shakespeare to talk about the moral order from the view of a frustrated teacher:

   Prospero: A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
   Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,
   Humanly taken, all, all lost, quite lost;
   And as with age his body uglier grows,
   So his mind cankers. (The Tempest, IV.i.188–192)

   A survey of proverbs available to Shakespeare shows two main choices on nature and nurture: “Nature passes nurture” and “Nurture passes nature” (Tilley, 1950, pp. 491, 509).

2. Although knowing another language is clearly not a sign of a disability, it might just as well be if classroom teachers are asked to sort children who “cannot learn” from those who simply do not know the language of instruction. Teachers should be allowed to ignore this divide. The situation has become silly enough that teachers at one end of a district must get the same Spanish into heads that teachers at the other end must suppress.

3. Yes, yes, always male genius back then, and for a long time after; see Battersby (1989) on the gonadal genius. On the very idea of genius, see McDermott (2006).


5. On the importance of 19th century thought for rethinking American education, see the excellent study by Maxine Greene (1965).

6. Highlights from a large literature: On culture, bodily movement, and symbolism, see Mauss (1951), Turner (1980), and the dazzling volume on the Dogon by Calame-Griaule (1973); on the behavioral mechanisms involved, see Kendon (2003) and Schegloff (1996); on philosophical accounts of the communicative body, see Bentley (1941) and Merleau-Ponty (1964). Of particular relevance to this paper are Bateson and Mead (1942) on child training for balance in Bali and Efron (1941/1971) on bodily movement tied to stereotypes of intelligence.

7. For an important account of a 19th century community of kind, and kindness, on Martha’s Vineyard, see Groce (1985).

8. The sentiment was well expressed in two 18th century novels: Tristram Shandy, by Lawrence Sterne, and Jacques, the Fatalist, by Denis Diderot. The former was the model for Marx’s only attempt, at age 19, at writing a novel (Wheen, 2001).
References


