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## Journal of Curriculum Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713741620>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2005

**To cite this Article** Erevelles, Nirmala(2005)'Understanding curriculum as normalizing text: disability studies meet curriculum theory',*Journal of Curriculum Studies*,37:4,421 — 439

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/0022027032000276970

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000276970>

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## Understanding curriculum as normalizing text: disability studies meet curriculum theory

NIRMALA EREVELLES

Although post-structuralists within curriculum studies have examined many contexts of curriculum theory, they have been silent on disability. This silence is worthy of study, especially because of the growing significance of disability studies in the humanities and the social sciences. I question post-structuralist arguments in curriculum theory from the epistemological standpoint of disability studies. I extend the post-structuralist project of deconstructing and reinterpreting text to examine the material implications derived from interpretations of normality as a discursive construction. I ask the following questions: What are the historical, social, and economic conditions that produce the distances and inter-relationships that exist between the 'disabled' and the 'normal' world? How do these conditions prevent scholars from providing emancipatory representations of Otherness? How can educators construct a curriculum that can produce oppositional knowledges that will contribute to the possibility of not just textual but also material and social transformation for all students?

The very word BASIC compels selection. It demands the discrimination that ranks some issues as essential and others as not. Here's the BASIC thing to remember, we say, wielding the giant spotlight of our attention, and suddenly all else falls into darkness. I, myself, have always been pretty suspicious of that spotlight, always straining to see what lives in its shadow, always hoping that whoever directs its beam will be distracted and turn too quickly, letting the light pour into the world we weren't supposed to see. (Grumet 1995: 15)

This paper is about the centre and its periphery—in Grumet's words, about the spotlight and its shadows. Over the years, US curriculum theory has experienced several shifts in philosophical content, from Tyler's notions of an ordered curriculum with its behaviourist and technical-rationalist emphasis to the unruly and cacophonous onslaught of post-structuralist discourses of difference. These post-structuralist discourses, described by Grumet (1995: 16) as 'peer[ing] over the spotlight of consensus and certainty to catch glimpses of dispute and doubt', have produced theoretical analyses and formulations of curriculum in many contexts: historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, aesthetic, theological, and international (Pinar *et al.* 1995). Noticeably absent in this extensive list, and therefore obviously lost in the shadows, is any critical discussion of disability in curriculum theory.

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I contend that this omission of disability is significant, especially because there are more than 5 million students with disabilities in US public schools whose identities and experiences are, for the most part, seldom discussed in the regular curriculum (Lipsky and Gartner 1996). Disability appears on the landscape of difference as a hyper-visible identity, commonly associated with denigrating terms like 'cripple', 'moron', 'gimp', and 'freak'. On the few occasions when disability is celebrated, the focus has generally been on narratives depicting individuals single-handedly overcoming the stigma of disability in order to pass almost as normal, thereby attaining the dubious distinction of 'super-crip' (Clare 1999). Thus, the dominant paradigm conceives of disability as a physiological condition rather than as a political and social identity, and the field of disability studies gets its impetus from efforts to redress this misconception. As Linton (1998: 132–133) suggests:

[D]isability studies arose, in part, as counterpoint to the medicalized perspectives on disability emanating from the applied fields, and in response to the marginalization and distortions apparent across the curriculum. In one sense, the development of disability studies is a remedial endeavour, redressing the sins of omission and commission in the canon. Yet, in a significant way, disability studies moves beyond the corrective. It is the socio-political-cultural model of disability incarnate. It provides an epistemological basis for inquiries and actions that could not have been imagined from the restrictive thresholds of the traditional curriculum.

I use Linton's definition of disability studies as the epistemological standpoint for a critical reconceptualization of curriculum theory. Echoing Davis's (1995: 23) suggestion that '[t]o understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body', I contend that an understanding of disability within curriculum theory demands an understanding of how and why the curriculum has historically been constituted as 'normalizing' text. The notion of the curriculum field as wholly textual is derived from the Derridean argument that human reality is fundamentally discursive, and therefore nothing exists outside the text. As a result, according to post-structuralist curriculum theorists, understanding curriculum evokes issues of interpretation and meaning. In this context, social praxis is also textual, because transformation occurs through the act of re-interpretation (Pinar *et al.* 1995).

Although re-interpreting the curriculum is crucial to the task of social transformation, it is even more important to explain why certain discourses in the curriculum enjoy prominence in the spotlight whereas, historically, others have been left to languish in the shadows. In particular, from the epistemological standpoint of disability studies, it is vital to extend this interpretive project to explore also the material implications derived from interpretations of normality as a discursive construction, by asking the following questions: Why has it been historically necessary in traditional educational practices to ensure that the curriculum serves as 'normalizing' text? What are the historical, social, and economic conditions that produce the distances and inter-relationships that exist between the 'disabled' and the 'normal' world? How do these conditions prevent researchers from providing emancipatory representations of Otherness? How can educators

construct a curriculum that enables the collective interests of all students, such that they can produce oppositional knowledges that will contribute to the possibility of not just textual but also material and social transformation? Responding to these questions will invert the oppressive logic of the 'BASIC' and shine the spotlight on the shadows while making the periphery central to a reconceptualization of curriculum theory.

### **Reading the object: the invisibility of disability**

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva 1982: 4)

Pinar (1993: 61) begins his discussion of the intimate relationship between curriculum and identity by claiming: "We are what we know". We are, however, also what we do not know.' Pinar describes the 'American self' (p. 62) as fundamentally a fractured and repressed self, which, he asserts, has been deformed by the absences, denials, and incompleteness of its history, culture, and national identity. Focusing on the racial aspects of US identity, he claims that the US-self has never been exclusively or even primarily European American, but is, in fact, constituted in fundamental ways as African American. Unfortunately, the traditional curriculum does not reflect this intimate relationship; students, Pinar maintains, are taught selective narratives of both the past and the present that exalt Euro-centrism, while actively denying any acknowledgement of the contributions of African-American culture and knowledge to mainstream society.

Castenell and Pinar (1993) use what they term 'social psychoanalysis' to explain these exclusionary practices. They note that the traditional curriculum suppresses the pleasure-seeking and unpredictable id embodied in the stereotypical depiction of the African American, while at the same time celebrating the realistic, adaptive, and stable ego traditionally associated with European-American masculinity. This suppression of specific racialized memories in the curriculum constructs a context where 'what we as adults choose to tell our children in schools ... represents who we want them to think we are and what they might become' (p. 5). As a result, the school curriculum, by serving as a repressive force, is instrumental in the incomplete construction of self, identity, and difference.

Castenell and Pinar's use of social psychoanalysis lends support to my exploration of how curriculum is constituted as normalizing text. In particular, I focus on the social construction of the 'normal' body in the school curriculum. Such a focus on the 'curriculum of the body' (Lesko 1988) is not new. In fact, post-structuralists have critiqued the modernist delineation of the body as an ahistorical, pre-cultural, or natural object, and have instead conceived of the body as the site on which meanings of identity, difference, desire, knowledge, social worth, and possibility are assimilated and contested (McLaren 1988). More importantly, post-structuralists have described bodies as texts for understanding social institutions, social discourses, and social practices (Meekosha 1998).

Ironically, however, even though post-structuralists assert that ‘there is no body as such: there are only *bodies*—male or female, black, brown, white, large or small—and the gradations in between’ (Grosz 1994: 19; emphasis in original), they have maintained a studious silence around the issue of disability. For example, Butler (1993) has deconstructed the essentialisms attributed to the body by demonstrating how the individual uses the performative to reconfigure the discursive inscriptions on the body through the process of reiteration. This perspective assumes that remaking identities is merely a matter of discursive changes. However, this perspective is limited when confronted by the radical alterity of the disabled body historically perceived as ‘deformed, maimed, mutilated, broken, diseased’ (Davis 1995: 5)—an alterity that cannot be easily brushed aside or re-written via alternative discourses. For example, Morris (1991: 17), a disabled feminist, notes that:

[W]e are often physically different from what is considered the norm. ... Our bodies generally look and behave differently from most other people’s (even if we have an invisible physical disability there is usually something about the way our bodies behave which gives our difference away). It is not normal to have difficulty walking or to be unable to walk; it is not normal to be unable to see, to hear; it is not normal to be incontinent, to have fits, to experience extreme tiredness, to be in constant pain; it is not normal to have a limb or limbs missing. If we have a learning disability the way we interact with others usually reveals our difference.

Morris’s argument demonstrates that, unlike discourses about race and gender that do not necessarily interrupt the ‘normal’ functioning of the body, and that can, therefore, be read as mere signs, the experience of disability cannot be easily written out of the body’s script, and therefore marks the limits of performativity. In this context, Davis (1995: 5) points out that:

[R]ather than face this ragged image [of the disabled body], the [post-structural theorist] turns to the fluids of sexuality, the gloss of lubrication, the glossary of the body as text, the heteroglossia of the inter-text, the glossolalia of schizophrenic. But almost never the body of the differently abled.

This exclusion of disability in post-structuralist theories of the body is a costly omission because, as Murphy (1987: 5) suggests, disabled people are ‘not a breed apart, but a metaphor for the human condition’. While dominant discourses constitute disability as the site of absolute alterity—the liminal state that marks the discursive edges of humanity—this distancing is both erroneous and problematic. In fact, scholars in disability studies maintain that the discursive category of the normal is necessarily dependent on the notion of the abnormal. Thus, for example, Thomson (1997a: 8) foregrounds the category of the ‘normate’—a discursive representation of the definitive human being that she claims appears as ‘the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries’. Similarly, Trent (1994: 278) argues that ‘the problem of mental retardation [has to] be seen as the problem of mental acceleration, with all the threat and the magnificent promise that this implies’. And, in yet another example, Stone (1984: 4) defines

disability as a formal administrative category used by the welfare state to determine 'what is expected of the non-disabled—what injuries, diseases, incapacities, and problems they will be expected to tolerate in their normal working lives'. In all three examples, the category of disability is integral to the construction of the self as 'normal'—an argument that supports Castenell and Pinar's (1993: 4) contention that 'We are what we know. We are, however, also what we do not know.'

However, even though it could be argued that normality and disability can be viewed, borrowing Pinar's (1993: 63) phrase, as 'two sides of the same cultural coin', disability remains an absence that continues to haunt the humanist vision of Ideal Man. It is for this reason that I turn to Castenell and Pinar's (1993) methodological approach that uses social psychoanalysis to discuss the absence of disability in the curriculum. Social psychoanalysis combines the insights of critical theorists from the Frankfurt School with Freudian psychoanalysis to map out the relationship between ideology and its impact on the discursive social world. The object of psychoanalysis is to bring to the individual's consciousness the hidden content of symbolic expression that has been repressed by the individual in an effort to preserve his or her sanctity as a rational, coherent, and autonomous subject. The object of critical theory is to expose a similar tendency in the social world to reify the existing social arrangements as part of a rational and natural order and to repress any critique that describes such constructions as both oppressive and fictional. According to Kincheloe and Pinar (1991), the central task of social psychoanalysis is to initiate the difficult process of 'remembering' in order to expose the hidden dimensions of meaning embedded in the complex relations among politics, culture, and language.

By subjecting the construct of the normal to a social psychological analysis, the intimate relationship between normality and disability may be demonstrated. According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipal complex that represents the subject's longing (i.e. repressed desire) for the love object contributes to the formation of the split subject torn between its conscious and unconscious desires. Using this premise, Lacan, in an attempt to rewrite Freudian theory in contemporary post-structuralist terms, described the unconscious as the site of repressed desire, while mapping out the role language played in the construction of the human subject (Eagleton 1983).

In Lacanian terms, the subject develops an integrated self-image (i.e. its ego) during the pre-Oedipal state that Lacan calls the 'Mirror Stage'. During the Mirror Stage, the child perceives its image in the Mirror as identical to its self, and, in doing so, secures for its self an illusory sense of wholeness and belonging. However, when the subject enters the space of language, it learns to distinguish between the speaking subjects 'I' and 'You', and in so doing also recognizes the distinction between the 'self' and its 'other'. As a result, the introduction of the subject into the symbolic order foregrounds the impossibility of ever fulfilling its desire for a united self/ego, and is, therefore, compelled to repress its desire for wholeness within the unconscious. For this reason, Lacan described the unconscious as structured like a language that, at the same time, represents not only 'the discourse of the Other, ... [but also] a discourse addressed to the Other' (Taubman 1993: 290).

Lacan's description of the construction of the subject has interesting implications for the dyadic pair normality/disability, especially as this relates to the construction of the normal subject. Earlier I used examples from the scholarship within disability studies to illustrate the dependence of the construct of normality on the construct of disability. Thus, applying a psychoanalytic analysis to that discussion, it could be argued that Lacan's subject is torn between its conscious desire to represent its self as 'normal' and, in so doing, is compelled to repress all discourses of its 'disabled' Other and confine them to the realm of the unconscious. This repression, according to Freud, is essential for the 'normal' development of the ego in order for the subject to prevent its descent into neurosis, and thereby be termed disabled. Subsequently, it could also be suggested that the development of the 'normal' self would necessitate the invisibility of the 'disabled' Other.

Post-structuralists, however, are not committed to the reification of the stable and unified Self—a construct they associate with the doomed project of humanism. On the other hand, they foreground the Lacanian concept of the 'imaginary'—the condition wherein the self lacks any stable centre, but is instead caught up in an endless movement from signifier to signifier along a linguistic chain that constantly divides and differentiates all identities (Eagleton 1983). This endless movement from signifier to signifier constitutes desire—a desire that has to be repressed in order to enable the subject to enter into the symbolic order. Promoting desire, post-structuralists instead opt for discursive interventions that enable the subject to attain *jouissance*, the pleasure derived from subverting or exploding dominant repressive meaning systems and identity formations (Kelly 1997).

Castenell and Pinar (1993) occupy this disruptive space of *jouissance* as they discuss the construction of US subjectivity in the school curriculum. Lacan's split subject, in this context, is constituted by the tensions that exist between the European-American self and its African-American other. Castenell and Pinar, however, do not recommend repression of the Other, because this repression would impair 'the self's capacity for intelligence, for informed action, even for simple functional competence' (p. 5). On the other hand, they recommend that the subject attain *jouissance* by getting in touch with the multiple repressed sites located in its unconscious so as to regenerate into multi-cultural, multi-classed, and multi-gendered selves. As a result, they advocate a school curriculum that will begin to undermine the construction of an ideal type of body (Western, white, youthful, able, male body) through 'a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity' of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities (Grosz 1994: 19).

Castenell and Pinar's (1993) argument clearly opens up a space for deconstructing normality and introducing disability into curriculum discourses because it points out that the repression of the disabled Other would actually undermine the concept of normality. Although at first glance this argument appears to be empowering, the very act of recognizing the disabled Other is problematic because it develops into a Catch-22 situation. This is because in an ironic twist to the situation, Castenell and Pinar recommend that the subject get in touch with its unconscious (i.e. its disabled other) in order to avoid being otherwise constituted as impaired and incompetent (i.e. disabled). However, this recommendation is contradictory

because the subject is being asked to embrace the very aspects of its unconscious that it is also being urged to reject. In addition to its circularity, the logic in the argument also upholds the persistent denigration of the category of disability which, in another ironic twist, becomes the category used to mark both the limits and possibilities in the construction of repressed and transgressive selves.

Even radical social theories continue to address disabled identity in evaluative terms as a negative physiological condition rather than as a social and political category of analysis. As a result, post-structuralist theorists who usually deconstruct foundational constructs seldom investigate the historicity of the discursive inscriptions that continue to locate the disabled body and the experience of impairment outside the scope of their analysis. In this particular context, the failure to foreground the assumptions that undergird the category of disability, while deploying post-structuralist psychoanalytic theory, results in the above circumlocution.

I have argued elsewhere that post-structuralists who foreground the radical possibilities of releasing one's repressed desires do so on the assumption that the Other can, in fact, desire and be desired (Erevelles 2000). However, this assumption falls apart when confronted by the disabled subject, and thereby marks once again the theoretical limits of this perspective. This is because, unlike Castenell and Pinar's (1993) representation of African-American culture as signifying an exoticized site of pleasure and desire that has to necessarily be repressed in order to support the development of the ego and super ego in the Euro-American subject, the representation of the disabled Other in the popular imagination has historically been one of horror and tragedy. Take for example, the famous biographical sketch, novel, and film, *The Elephant Man*, that constructs a 'menacing motif' (Darke 1994: 238) of the disabled body of Frederick Treves—a creature so frightful that '[t]here was nothing about it of the pitiableness of the mis-shaped or the deformed, nothing of the grotesqueness of the freak, but merely the loathing insinuation of a man being turned into an animal' (Montagu 1979: 13). So horrifying are the images of disability in the books and the film that, when marked in the unconscious, they serve to mediate in invisible ways almost all human interactions with the 'disabled' other.

That these reactions continue to haunt the depiction of disability even in these post-modern times is evident in the autobiographical writing of several disabled authors and scholars (Murphy 1987, Mairs 1996, Brueggemann 1999) who describe how their life experiences are often haunted by the 'tissue of myths, fears, and misunderstandings that society attaches to them' (Murphy 1987: 113). Murphy (1987: 116–117), in an autobiographical account of his journey into the society of disabled people, offers some reasons for these discursive constructions of disability:

It hardly needs saying that the disabled, individually and as a group, contravene all the values of youth, virility, activity, and physical beauty that Americans cherish, however little most individuals may realize them. Most handicapped people, myself included, sense that others resent them for that reason. We are the subverters of an American Ideal, just like the poor are betrayers of the American Dream. And to the extent that we depart from the ideal, we become ugly and repulsive to the able-bodied. People recoil from us,



especially when there is facial damage or bodily distortion. The disabled serve as a constant visible reminder to the able-bodied that the society they live in is shot through with inequity and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, that they too are vulnerable. We represent a fearsome possibility.

In such a context, the disabled Other, already constituted as the subject-of-lack, cannot be recognized as the lost complement that will complete the subject/self because, instead of permitting the pleasurable enjoyment of repressed desires, it only promises the horrifying possibility of encountering the 'abject'.

In using the term 'abject' here, I do not intend to add yet another term that carries negative connotations of disability. Rather, I use Kristeva's (1982) definition of abjection as a social and psychic process that disturbs identity. Kristeva points out that the abject is not definable as the Other, even though its one commonality with the Other is that it exists in opposition to the I. Instead, unlike the Other that is connected to a desire for meaning, Kristeva's abject occupies a place of radical exclusion where all meaning collapses and where the 'deep well of memory ... is [both] unapproachable and intimate' (p. 6). As a result, unlike the encounter with the Other that causes the subject to fragment into heterogeneous identities at the moment of *jouissance*, it is the abject that keeps the subject from foundering by making itself (i.e. the abject) repugnant. Thus, it could be argued that the traditional curriculum, wedded to humanist notions of the 'normal', has much at stake in rendering disability invisible by keeping the 'abject' at bay.

### Seeing disability: what's 'us' got to do with 'them'?

In 1937 the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss sought out the Nambikuara Indians of central Brazil, 'looking for a society reduced to its simplest expression', but in the end found only human beings. My own work reverses the direction of Lévi-Strauss's experience. I looked for human beings reduced by physical incapacity to a struggle for survival as mean as the Nambikuaras', and I found Society (Murphy 1987: 5).

In the previous section, I used Castenell and Pinar's (1993) framework of analysis to describe what is at stake when reading the curriculum as 'normalizing' text. Although it is easy to critique the traditional curriculum's investment in normalizing discourses, it is much more difficult to explain why post-structural theories that are usually anti-foundational do little to question the assumptions under-girding the construction of the oppressive dyad, normal/abnormal. In this section, I explore what is at stake for post-structural theory when it continues to uphold the invisibility of disability. More importantly, I will also explore the implications of these positions for disabled people.

I begin this discussion from the epistemological standpoint of disability studies that defines disability as a socio-political construct and disabled people as members of a minority group. In other words, even though disabled people acknowledge the reality of their bodily differences, they nevertheless contend that the experience of being disabled is related to how they are treated in the social contexts they live in. Thus, a social identity like

disability is *not* a property inherent in any individual but is ‘conferred on’ that individual through his or her interactions with the social world (Goffman 1963). Oliver (1990: xiv), a disabled scholar and activist, notes that:

All disabled people experience disability as social restriction, whether those restrictions occur as a consequence of inaccessible built environments, questionable notions of intelligence and social competence, the inability of the general population to use sign language, the lack of reading material in Braille, or hostile public attitudes to people with non-visible disabilities.

To accept this definition of disability entails exploring not only how disability is discursively constituted in the individual psyche, but also how and why it is constructed as the abject Other by the social relations emerging out of late capitalist societies.

If disability is constituted via social interactions, then, as Murphy (1987: 4) put it, ‘[t]he lessons to be learned from [disability] ... have meaning for our understanding of human culture and the place of the individual within it’. So, before I begin to ask disabled people what lessons could be learned from their experiences, I would examine where they are located in society. According to the World Summit on Social Development (United Nations 1995), disabled people constitute one of the world’s largest minority groups facing poverty, unemployment, and social isolation. These conditions persist despite several legislative reforms because disabled children and adults continue to be segregated in the school, workplace, and community. This physical absence from non-segregated social settings further exacerbates their experience of invisibility.

When speaking of invisibility, I do not mean to imply that the able-bodied do not notice disabled people. In fact, disabled people are often hyper-visible—an experience that is, to say the least, uncomfortable. However, I use the term ‘invisibility’ to describe the peculiar relationship between disabled people and the able-bodied—a relationship that African American novelist Ellison (1952: 3) evocatively portrays in *Invisible Man*:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. ... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.

The ‘peculiar disposition of the [inner] eyes’ could refer to the manner in which the unconscious continues to cast disability as the ‘abject’ so that it exceeds language and, therefore, removes all possibility of ever being represented, which could account for its persistent condition of invisibility. Although at first glance this argument appears seductive, a closer examination reveals the hopelessness of the whole enterprise of ever representing disability—an argument that can then be very easily used to justify the exclusion of disability issues in contemporary theory. For this reason, I interpret Ellison’s depiction of invisibility to look beyond the playful context of language games and explore why disability is constituted as ‘abject’ in the first place.

On posing this question, the response I expect to receive from a post-structuralist would be to focus on language, because, according to Derrida, there is nothing outside the text. However, I contend here that there is. In doing so, I support Hennessy's (2000: 19) position that privileges a materialist analysis over a linguistic one:

The material requirements that allow human life to continue depend on social relations that encompass *more* than language, consciousness, identity, discourse—although they do depend on them too. It is this 'more' that constitutes the material 'outside' of language—those human relationships through which needs are met—but which is only made meaningful through language.

The relevance of Hennessy's claim is illustrated in Ferguson's (1987) exploration of the social possibilities, or lack thereof, made available to individuals with severe mental retardation. Ferguson (1987: 51) describes a 17-year-old student with severe mental retardation:

Peter ... could not walk or talk—either officially or colloquially. He could not sit up unsupported. He was fed through a tube that plugged into his stomach. His frequent seizures were powerful enough to knock him out of his specially adapted wheelchair if he was not strapped in. Peter's eyes seldom stopped flicking about long enough to focus on you. His hands seldom moved at all. He had a spindly body twisted by muscles that never relaxed and by years of therapy never received. He was shaped like a human question mark. For me, though, Peter began the questions, he did not mark their end.

Ferguson's description of Peter helps the reader recognize his radical alterity, not only from the able-bodied, but also from people with less severe disabilities. In fact, Ferguson points out that, even in the Disability Rights Movement (Fleischer and Zames 2001), people like Peter are often excluded, their exclusion justified through a similar logic used by an ableist society. Thus, for example, Ferguson quotes from Gliedman and Roth, two disability-rights activists, who, while defending disability as a civil rights issue, have this caveat to offer:

Not all handicapped children fit the minority-group model. Perhaps 10% of all handicapped children possess a disability so limiting mentally and emotionally that they would not be able to lead normal lives even if prejudice against them melted away (Ferguson 1987: 53).

Thus, when even the Disability Rights Movement concedes that it can do little to support or even acknowledge Peter, this concession underscores the challenge Peter poses to any form of social analysis that may be used.

At one level, Peter would not necessarily pose a serious challenge to a post-structuralist analysis because this perspective is, in fact, a theory of difference. As a result, the radical alterity that Peter embodies would be cause for celebration because he clearly represents the most effective rejection of the universalist claims of Enlightenment thought in order to support in its place discontinuity, heterogeneity, and irrationality. At another level, however, the transgressive possibilities that Peter represents cannot be easily absorbed into a politics of pleasure because, as described earlier, he continues to remain a haunting reminder of incommensurable difference. It is in this context that post-structuralists embrace relativism by urging scholars to

'radicalize the idea of difference itself—the other is not us, they insist, and is quite possibly not even *like us*' (Mohanty 1992: 119). Such a relativist position sees no common terms between and among rationalities, and, therefore, sees subjects like Peter as occupying entirely separate spaces and owning up to distinct and plural histories.

In the context of relativism, Peter's difference is accommodated; nay, it is actually celebrated. However, he continues to be located in the domain of the abject, and to me that is no space for celebration. However, is Peter really that different? Or rather, what is it that makes Peter so different that this difference maintains an unreachable distance between 'us' and 'him'? Or to raise the questions in Mohanty's (1992: 128) words:

[T]he issue of competing rationalities raises [another] nagging question: how do we negotiate between my history and yours? ... It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences; but could we afford to leave untheorized the question of how our differences are intertwined and, indeed, hierarchically organized? Could we, in other words, afford to have *entirely* different histories, to see ourselves as living—and having lived—in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?

In response to Mohanty's questions, I argue that we as educators cannot afford to leave untheorized the important question of how and why the concepts of normality and (severe) disability are indeed intertwined and hierarchically organized. Failure to do so would leave unquestioned the reasons why we have allowed disability to continue in a state of abjection never to be released from the shadows to which it has been confined. However, at the same time, even though Mohanty's questions urge us to pursue relentlessly the question of difference in relational terms, in the last instance he puts forth certain minimal conditions that once again limit its applicability to the category of disability. Mohanty suggests that, notwithstanding the enormous distances between 'us' and 'them', it is still possible to maintain a minimal commonality between the opposing dyad that he describes as 'the capacity to act purposefully, to be capable of agency, and the basic rationality that the human agent must in principle possess' (p. 136). This stipulation, unfortunately, continues to place Peter outside the realm of human society—one that once again locates him in the space of the abject.

If I ignore Mohanty's stipulation, while at the same time pursuing his larger objective of examining the relationship between 'us' and 'them', a discussion of the relationship between 'us' and the Peters of the world would bring to focus some interesting questions. If it is agreed that the rejection of disability is not an instinctual response to abjection, but is, in fact, socially constructed (i.e. remember the Elephant Man!), then it would be important to ask: What are the historical conditions that have produced the 'divisions which connect us' and the 'connections which divide us'? (Phillips 1995: 32). Why are these hierarchical relations put in its place? Who benefits from them? What would happen if this social order were to be replaced by a different set of social arrangements that challenged hierarchies? In such a context, how would the life-experiences of Peter, as well as other persons with severe disabilities, change if they moved out of the spaces of isolation in which they

are confined in order to experience a more meaningful life in the community? More importantly, what would US curriculum look like if scholars were to deconstruct the normative assumptions that under-gird its construction while regarding disability as a constant and meaningful presence in the text?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to the methodological perspective of historical materialism to better foreground the social relations emerging from late capitalism that both connect and divide ‘us’ and ‘them’. I make this argument despite claims by post-structuralist curriculum theorists that historical materialism denies the validity of all individual experience and reduces all explanations to a vulgar economic determinism (Pinar *et al.* 1995). These theorists have argued that the Marxist tendency to struggle to represent whole worlds and complex structures within a single text, especially with the increasing complexity and transformation apparent in the current context of late capitalism, makes such an analysis difficult to sustain. Therefore, they have suggested that the ‘political economy of the sign’ should supersede the actual ‘political economy of the relations of production’—a supersession that suppresses all critiques lodged against the exploitative conditions maintained by global capitalism.

In offering a critique of this position, I am not suggesting that the task of deconstruction be dispensed with. Rather, I maintain, with Ebert (1996), that deconstructing the dominant meaning systems represented in texts cannot be understood without a critical understanding of the political economy of the labour. Given that my intention is to deconstruct the ‘normalizing’ text and to demonstrate the oppressive material conditions that support its dominance in the school curriculum, I accept Marx’s challenge to engage critically and unrelentingly ‘the economics of untruth involving ourselves’ [i.e. normality] (Ebert 1996: 22). To do so, I offer historical materialism as the appropriate analytical tool to use when deconstructing curriculum as ‘normalizing’ text:

Historical materialist critique is that knowledge practice that historically situates the possibility of what exists under patriarchal capitalist relations of difference—particularly the division of labour—and points to what is suppressed by the empirically existing: not just what *is*, but what *could be*. This ‘could be’, however, is not a utopian dream: it is a possibility (owing to the development of the forces of production) that is suppressed (because of the dominant relations of production—the existing relations of private property and class). ... In sum, materialist critique disrupts ‘what is’ to *explain* how social differences—specifically gender, race, sexuality, and class [and disability]—have been systematically produced and continue to operate within regimes of exploitation, so that we can change them. (Ebert 1996: 7, emphases in original)

Using Ebert’s definition of historical materialist critique, I contend that ‘us’ and ‘them’, rather than being separated by oppositional discursive constructions, could instead be characterized as the two sides of the same coin, divided and connected by the commodity relations of late capitalism (Mies 1986). To do so, it is important to indicate where disabled people are located within the prevailing social relations of production, why it is that this location has produced conceptualizations of

disability that are exclusionary and exploitative, and how such a location benefits capitalism in particular ways. In particular, it will be important to show what part education and the school curriculum play in supporting these social relations.

Disability studies theorists have used materialist analyses to argue that the category of disability has been employed by capitalism to justify the exploitation or exclusion of certain social groups from participating in economic activity (Farber 1968, Finkelstein 1980, Oliver 1990, Nibert 1995). For example, they have pointed out that capitalism needs a surplus labour market to minimize costs of production and is, therefore, required to maintain certain levels of unemployment. However, instead of describing unemployment as a necessary component of the economy, capitalist ideologies justify the exclusion of particular populations from the world of work by claiming that these individuals lack specific physical, social, or technical characteristics deemed desirable for the economy, and are, therefore, designated as the surplus population that has historically included disabled people, the aged, as well as the permanent racialized and gendered underclass. By certifying these populations as incapable of producing for exchange value (disabled), the members of this surplus population are, in turn, certified as eligible to receive monetary aid as well as social services, and are, consequently, subject to the regulatory and controlling benevolence of the welfare state (Stone 1984). In this context, it is possible to see how disability is used as an ideological category to justify a social division of labour along the axes of race, class, and gender.

A similar logic can be observed in the context of education, especially its organization of the school curriculum (Erevelles 2000). This logic, central to the organization of both education and the school curriculum, is invested in the support of normalizing discourses that are continuously at work to efface any signs of deviance/disability that serve to threaten the social order. For example, the everyday functioning of public schooling is predicated on the institutionalization of a complex array of evaluation strategies used to predict the productive capacity of future workers. Using the results of these evaluative tests based on standardized norms, students are segregated on the basis of their 'natural' abilities and labelled 'gifted', 'regular', or 'special', and assigned to different curricula that educate them for their designated slot along the social division of labour. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) have pointed out, these tests have also been effective in compelling students to conform to the hierarchical organization of the social order that mimics the 'normal' development of the ego and super-ego of European-American males.

What, then, happens to students like Peter, whose disabled body refuses to conform to these norms? Such students continue to remain in segregated public institutions conveniently described as 'least restrictive environments' in accordance with legislative regulations that require that they have equal access to educational opportunity. Thus, if observers followed Peter into his segregated classroom space, this is what they would find:

[Peter] gets on an elevator in the morning and goes down two floors below the ward where he lives. Once there, he spends the day as much as he would had

he stayed on the ward: sitting or lying in a corner, perhaps with a mirror placed in front of him, some Fisher-Price Toys arrayed before him, a radio or TV nearby, and large amounts of time with no human contact at all.

Even if Peter lived in the community, in most states he would still be likely to attend school in a self-contained segregated building rather than the neighbourhood high school. ... [In such circumstances] it is difficult to imagine how Peter would fit into a job market governed by productivity, even if it were barrier free. (Ferguson 1987: 51)

While it is apparent that no amount of regular education would enable Peter to conform to the rigorous demands of 'normal' life, I understand Ferguson's disappointment in the educational establishment that demonstrates its absolute disregard for Peter's well-being by its unwillingness to open up the conversation where all the school participants can re-imagine alternative possibilities for him. In fact, most of the education theorists, administrators, practitioners, and consumers eager to have this conversation are often silenced and/or rendered invisible by the 'educational institution'. At the same time, school curriculum materials and school practices collaborate to construct stereotypical images of disabled people—the most damaging of them being those that only reinforce the construction of the disabled student as 'object' entity.

Borrowing Castenell and Pinar's (1993) strategy, I contend that, if the curriculum is read as 'normalizing' text, such a reading will also reveal the critical relationship between disability and the other social categories of difference. Sarason and Doris (1979) have documented that, with the rise of compulsory mass public education, the first special education classes in the USA housed the urban poor, new immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans. The justification for this separation of public education into regular and special education classes was based on results of psychometric tests, like Binet's intelligence scales, that supported a hereditary theory of IQ, and that drew relationships between mental illness, moral degeneracy, pauperism, and race, class, and gender (Gould 1981). Although these eugenic policies were no longer in vogue by the late 1960s, their influence continued in US public schools to the extent that as late as 1968 60–80% of pupils taught in special education classes were African American, Native American, Hispanics, non-English speakers, and children from non-middle class backgrounds (Dunn 1968).

In recent years, despite the move to integrate more students with disabilities into regular classrooms, new labels, like 'at-risk', 'learning-disabled', 'emotionally-handicapped', and 'gifted and talented', continue to segregate children in the name of upholding academic standards. The bulk of these special classes continue to be populated by students who have been marked in oppressive ways by race, class, or gender. Thus, special education through the articulation of an ideology of disability appeals to abstract notions of efficiency, rationality, and equity rooted in a seemingly open, objective, and meritocratic science in order to reproduce in abstract form the dominant class relationships, divisions of labour, and cultural hegemony present in 20<sup>th</sup>-century USA. It is also possible to show how 'disability' has been used by US public education (and yet been rendered invisible) to support the oppressive functions of a 'normalizing' curriculum.

### **Making bodies matter: a critical theory of curriculum change**

The peculiarity of the organic monster is that s/he is both same and other. The monster is not a total stranger nor completely familiar; s/he exists in an in-between zone. ... The monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity. (Braidotti 1999: 292)

I have argued that curriculum theory can no longer afford to ignore issues of disability. This is because the 'normalizing' aspects of the curriculum that have rendered disability invisible have simultaneously contributed to the oppressive practices meted out to students marked by race, class, gender, and sexuality. To do so, I have deployed a historical materialist critique that rejects a relativist position in order to map out the social relations that both separate and connect 'us' and 'them'. I have done this in order to open up the possibilities for persons marked oppressively by race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability to work collectively together to transform the exploitative conditions kept in place by normative discourses.

I am not calling for liberal gestures that will now mention 'disability' in the curriculum. This has already been done. These liberal gestures, by engendering a satisfied complacency, continue to push issues of disability into the margins. On the other hand, I agree with Macedo's (1995: 55, quoting Negroni) call for a curriculum that enables the conditions of possibility for radical transformation to take place:

One cannot simply rearrange the chairs in a classroom into a circle and proclaim that this will help instruction. In America's public schools, historically, children have been asked to sit one behind the other and told to be still, be quiet and never talk to each other. If the change constitutes putting the children in a circle and telling them to be still, be quiet, and never talk to each other, little has been done to change the results.

For disability studies to be included meaningfully in the US curriculum, radical transformation is required in both curriculum theory and practice. Responding to this call will require that educational administrators, teacher educators, and K-12 teachers in both regular and special education classrooms, re-examine their own discomfort and silences around issues of disability. Rather than giving disability studies scholarship only 'sideshow status' (Ware 2001: 113) in critical educational discourse, I urge these professionals in education to examine critically the growing literature in disability studies to enable them to deconstruct contemporary oppressive constructions of 'normality' and critique how these constructions depict people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> To assist educators, there are several articles and web-sites with sample lesson plans and sample syllabi that offer suggestions about how to include disability studies across the curriculum.<sup>2</sup> These resources will provide ways for educators to construct a curriculum in which disability is viewed as a critical part of the human condition rather than an abject manifestation of difference. These resources are also especially useful in demonstrating how the inclusion of disability studies across the various disciplines of art, literature, theatre, history, philosophy, sociology, political science, and policy studies can radically transform these disciplines.



While I am optimistic that re-examining curriculum as ‘normalizing’ text may open up a space for students and teachers to re-conceptualize disability within more transformative frameworks, we as educators may need to be more creative and more revolutionary in order to re-imagine emancipatory possibilities for Peter. Clearly, the ‘curriculum’, as we currently practise it, will not work for Peter. However, this same curriculum has not worked for ‘Other’ students either. Emancipatory possibilities for Peter will only be realized if we work towards transforming the exploitative material conditions of capitalism that have supported oppressive discursive constructions of difference that often manifest themselves in the school curriculum as ‘normalizing’ text. Within a school curriculum committed to the discourses and material practices of technical rationality and capitalist accumulation, students like Peter are assigned little value or worth because they are not seen as economic assets in the community. However, the ‘normalizing’ curriculum should not judge Peter on the basis of his economic productivity in a competitive and exploitative economy. Rather, I am suggesting that educators need to explore curricular discourses that support alternative ways of valuing Peter outside of these restrictive confines. In other words, I am advocating a curriculum that is dedicated to enabling not just Peter but all students to negotiate difference in creative ways that foster co-operation and interdependence rather than competition and radical individualism.

I have suggested that a critique of curriculum theory from the epistemological standpoint of disability studies requires that educators challenge the very logic on which schools are based. At the pragmatic level, this transformation would require the desegregation of both special and regular educational tracks, the re-evaluation of out-moded assessment measures, the re-organization of the curriculum to include the history, experiences, and scholarship of persons with disabilities. At the level of systems change, a radical transformation would require that educational theorists begin to dismantle the ‘normalizing’ ideologies that serve as the cornerstone of even radical theories of difference and explore the implications of such changes on school reform. Only then will it be possible to really ‘see’ Peter. Not as an ‘object’ entity, but as someone who has social worth. Not as the subject that has no name, but a person who in his own way can make a difference.

### Acknowledgements

I thank Robert Young for helping me work through several difficult sections in this paper, and Robert Boostrom and the unknown reviewers for their helpful comments.

### Notes

1. See Davis (1997), Linton (1998), Mitchell and Snyder (2000), Albrecht *et al.* (2001), Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson (2001), Snyder *et al.* (2002), and Gabel (2004).
2. See Thomson (1997b), Gabel (2001), Ware (2001), a radio programme by Block (1997), and web-sites such as the *Disability Social History Project* (n.d.), *Disability Studies in the Humanities* (n.d.), and *Edge: Education for Disability and Gender Equity* (n.d.).

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