

# Suffering “Like This”: Interpretation and the Pedagogical Disruption of the Dual System of Education

Christopher M. Gilham

Volume 22, Number 1, 2014

Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071471ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071471ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

0838-4517 (print)

1916-0348 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gilham, C. (2014). Suffering “Like This”: Interpretation and the Pedagogical Disruption of the Dual System of Education. *Paideusis*, 22(1), 108–117.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071471ar>

Article abstract

In this paper I attempt to show how my graduate work in interpretive studies transformed my previous work as a special education consultant. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, as well as Ivan Illich's notions of iatrogenesis and counter-productivity, I discuss my work with a school team as they struggled throughout a school year with a special education classroom for students with diagnosed mental health disorders.

© Christopher M. Gilham, 2014



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# Suffering “Like This”: Interpretation and the Pedagogical Disruption of the Dual System of Education

---

CHRISTOPHER M. GILHAM  
St. Francis Xavier University

*In this paper I attempt to show how my graduate work in interpretive studies transformed my previous work as a special education consultant. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, as well as Ivan Illich's notions of iatrogenesis and counter-productivity, I discuss my work with a school team as they struggled throughout a school year with a special education classroom for students with diagnosed mental health disorders.*

## Suffering and School Failure

“What do we do next year? This can’t go on *like this*.”

Gary, school administrator

“Every word breaks forth as if from a centre...”

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004, p. 454)

James, a young boy, had climbed high up a tree, again. Gary, the principal of the school, had called me and the police. I went to the school to support Gary and his school team, to see how I might be able to help. I was a regular visitor that school year because James and most of the other students in his class were often in distress.

At the time of the event, I worked for a large urban public school board as a specialist. My main work was to support schools in their work with students with “severe emotional and behavioural disabilities (EBD).” The “severe EBD” status came from diagnoses that are found within the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). The DSM diagnosis allowed the school board to apply a codification system to the students that identified them as having severe EBD status and in turn, permitted the allocation of special funding to the students. That funding was used to create the specialized classroom and others like it (Gilham, 2013).

I also supported several specialized classes for students identified with severe EBD. These classes were spread across the city, and in recent years had grown in number, considerably. James was a student in one of those classes. Ambulances and police had been called several times that year to attend to one or more of the nine students. James often climbed dangerously high trees near the school. Another student ran around the open concept school screaming in distress. Yet another student seemed to be perpetually fighting or crying, or both at the same time. Worse perhaps, the students in the class often fought amongst themselves. Their

fights spilled out into the hallways and classrooms around them. Some of the students had to be physically restrained, and escorted to a smaller room where they could calm down.

This class was one of the most resourced and supported classrooms I had been in; there was a full time teacher and support worker, as well as weekly visits from a therapist, and a family counsellor employed by a non-profit organization. A pediatric psychiatrist visited monthly. Even with this support, the specialized class and school team were often in crises, as Gary, the school administrator attested:

As the year went on and the kids were supposed to be integrated (into regular classrooms) we saw a lot of breakdowns in the kids, in their congregated setting they were kind of poking at each other...there was strain, and anxiety, and then there would be blow-outs that would impact all the children and so on a day to day basis we had numerous things going on in there...it was a constant battle and it really wasn't working. (personal communication, August 28, 2012)

Specialized classes such as this were intended to create conditions in which students could begin to thrive in learning. It has been my experience that, students who are placed in specialized settings have complex histories of suffering in multiple classrooms across multiple schools. Student cumulative files are often thickly filed with teacher's anecdotal records which reveal the intensely difficult situations both students and their school teams are trying to understand and work through. Specialized settings are often seen as the best places to ease or ameliorate the complexity of these situations through the application of special education practices. In turn, students are expected to eventually re-integrate into regular classrooms, a practice known as integration (Winzer, 2009). Gary's perspective on this particular specialized class exposed an increase in suffering amongst the children. I too had been witness to this suffering.

For example, some students would hide under desks at the mention of learning particular subjects, like math. Other students felt extreme discomfort around people they did not know, or large groups of people. Yet others did not speak in school at all. Some kicked and cried as they fled the classroom. As I moved among this class and many other specialized classes in the city, I re-affirmed my understanding of how complex the students and these situations were, and the tremendous resources and efforts that were being put into their education with the belief that they would begin to thrive in schools. I also began to see this differently.

My understanding of the work I was involved in had changed considerably over the previous few years because of my graduate work in interpretive studies. My previous belief systems, filled with what Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) called pre-judgements-which are a part of who we all are-offered a limited horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 2004). I had been swept up into the special education discourse for a time, without any ability to see children and youth differently: Children had deficits or disabilities that we needed to support and sometimes change. Interpretive studies, particularly Gadamer's hermeneutics as taught by Dr. David Jardine at the Werklund School of Education in Calgary, Alberta, created the space in which I was able to see teaching and learning and the lives of educators and students more ecologically and historically. What had once been a horizon of understanding limited to seeing what was wrong within children and youth, and even educators, had expanded into a horizon much more multi-vocal, complex, and inter-woven.

Put differently, I started to see my work and those I met as interpretable. Something about the comfort of speaking about essential truths for children with "disabilities" was dislodged for me. Now the work could be seen as a multitude of complex threads, woven together, taking on something of the sense of Wittgenstein's (1958) family resemblances. Although there may have been strong agreements between myself and educators on the struggles that they and their students faced, the resemblances between cases could not be distilled to final all-encompassing truths often reduced into neat and tidy disability categories. As a result of this expansion of my understanding – which included my past beliefs, also described by Gadamer (2004) as the coming together or fusion of one's fore-structures or pre-judgements with those of another into a larger horizon (pp. 269-272, 304-305) – I felt as though my work should primarily focus on teaching and learning.

I did not have to always believe and rely on the discourse of special education. I could talk about what I saw and heard in classrooms from multiple perspectives and I could also place myself within this seeing and hearing, too. At this point in my work I began to spend much more time in classrooms observing and writing down everything I could see and hear and notice. In team meetings I shared these observations which served

as the starting place for dialogue. This was different than telling teams what I thought was wrong with students or educators, for that matter. My work was liberated in a sense, from the confines of one way of seeing and being. For example, entering classrooms was no longer primarily about finding the student of concern and focussing on that student's interactions with others. I began seeing classrooms, especially artifacts throughout these rooms and the interactions of the educators with the students and these artifacts as pedagogical stories. I would ask myself questions like, "What pedagogical story do I see in this classroom?" and, "How does this pedagogical story speak to the inclusion of marginalized students as learners?" These two questions often cascaded into many other questions related to the idea of knowing one's students as learners in safe and caring classroom communities.

This is how I arrived in my work at Gary's school. I lived in an in-between place where, talking about understanding as I have above would have been met with glazed-over looks. Returning to discussions about teaching and learning likewise were difficult adventures. When I arrived on the scene, most educators wanted me to talk about special education and strategies to ameliorate or change student behaviour. With my new sense of possibility or interpretability at hand, I could see teaching and learning as part of the conversation. Students were no longer deficit-ridden in and of themselves. They were part of a complex ecology and history that demanded we stop and ask how the structure of schooling itself played a part in their suffering. I believed that one of those structures was often special education: the very discourse intended to help students thrive in schools was playing a part in exacerbating their suffering. Gary's class was an exemplary case of this and as I have mentioned, not irregular in my experiences, by any means.

Thus, despite the well-intentioned efforts of educators, including Gary and his team, there was the sweeping "*like this*" within Gary's question and claim which spoke of student suffering and school failure. He and his team and many other school teams I had met were suffering, too. Students endured or bore the weight of being put under conditions that did not permit them to thrive in schools (Suffering, 2014) and often educators found themselves in conditions that seemed impossible for teaching and learning. A desperate cycle of counterproductive clinging to essential problems that needed fixing or changing accelerated the sense of urgency and fragmentation in complex situations. Specialized classrooms tended to be places where this clinging to the need to find the way to fix or change the child intensified or completely shut down. I grew weary of walking into specialized classrooms to see students in tidy little rows with their binders of photocopied work. Some were surrounded in high cardboard tri-fold walls, and would peek out from the sides when I entered. In the very places we hoped to slow down and be well with our students so that we could all thrive in teaching and learning, these pernicious extremes often resulted. Gary's experience with this class, and my own within special education work across the city was often "*like this*." He and his team suffered as a result of the suffering of the students. Likewise, the students suffered further from the desperate attempts to isolate and change targeted behaviours or the absence of any presence for teaching and learning.

Despite my almost weekly visits with Gary and his school team, including the families of the children in the class and the professional supports of partner institutions, it seemed we could not help the students. Was all of this about being located in a specialized classroom? Could the situation be reduced to place? I knew there were several students who often found ways to provoke one another. Was this also part of the story of ongoing crises? Several students suffered from extreme anxieties. If the specialized classroom tended to be a place of conflict, then it was no surprise that some students would run from the classroom, and school. Gary often wondered if some of the students needed to be placed in our specialized schools. Could it have also been, as special education scholars have argued, that we were not engaging in evidence based special education practices (Kauffman et al., 2007)? The ecological interpretability of this case posed challenges for us all, as it has province wide.

In a telephone interview with an Alberta Education representative I learned that for every ten students categorized as having EBD seven of them would not complete high school (personal communication, Antaya-Moore, 2012). Data from the United States also points to a larger phenomenon of suffering known as the school to prison pipeline (Valle & Connor, 2011, p. 34). I knew this phenomenon too, as I tracked several of my previous students (I was a special education teacher prior to becoming a consultant) as they entered the local Young Offenders Center. Given all this, what did Gary's "*like this*" reveal about our attempts to help students thrive through both traditional special and regular education? What broke forth as a result of our collective suffering?

## Counter-productivity

Despite the caring and sincere efforts educators put towards supporting “special” or “exceptional” students, there were deeply troubling consequences arising from stigmatizing structures inherent to that very support. For example, Lydia, a grade 4/5 classroom teacher in Gary’s school who would sometimes take particular students from the specialized classroom into her “regular” classroom for certain subjects, shared:

They were very separated. On the playground they would be in one part of the yard where they were all away from the other kids, umm, in the school the other kids didn’t know them at all. They didn’t know their names. They didn’t understand who they were. We had a lot of conversations because there would be kids crying in the hallway or yelling and things like that that year. So we had a lot of conversations about, because kids had no clue who they were, they just saw these kids in the hallways and upset and...having meltdowns and so they did not understand what was going on so we just had conversations about them and about who they were and things like that but they were very separate. My kids did not socialize with them at all. (personal communication, March 7, 2013)

At the time I wondered, along with Gary, if the “poking one another” and “strain” and “anxiety” in the classroom was a result of placing the students together. The students knew they were placed together because of their diagnosed pathologies, in a classroom for “whatever.” Isolation from the school community ensued, despite the belief that the students would be successfully integrated into “regular” classrooms. This case was particularly acute because the students were not placed into a classroom environment; rather, they were housed in what was once the school’s infirmary. At the start of that school year I attempted to address this placement with Gary. Gary took me on a tour of the school to show me that there were no classroom spaces available for these students. Gary also shared that he was not involved in the very recent placement of this specialized class in his school. Gary shared that he was very open to receiving our advice and support throughout the school year because, as an educator, he had not worked before in a school with a specialized classroom. It was also his first year as an administrator. The situation was complex, indeed.

Interpreted through my own nascent understanding of some of Michel Foucault’s (1995, 2003) and Ivan Illich’s (1976) work, I offer the following: A segregated classroom within a community school with the aim of integrating students into the normal population can be a highly counter-productive (Illich, 1976) institutional structure. Based on my conversations with Gary and his school team, and my participation throughout the school year in classroom activities, crisis response, student and family meetings, and ad-hoc informal conversations with students, a binding, co-dependent and counter-productive *dual* gaze emerged. The students in the specialized classroom were stigmatized by the gaze of the “normal” school population, leaving them wanting to have a sense of belonging in the greater community. This is akin to a Lacanian sense of “gaze” whereby one longs to be like the “Other” (Johnston, 2013). At the same time, they were gazed *upon* by that “normal” majority. In the Foucauldian sense, the segregated students were “othered” by the peer surveillance that took place in the hallways and playgrounds. The dual gaze also worked to reinforce or perhaps constitute the identity of the “normal” students. “Normal” students might have seen themselves as longed for and therefore powerful and superior. In this way Foucault’s notion of power would have this reverse reinforcing effect on the centre or the norm. Yet, perhaps over and above my own wanting to explicate these “gazes” is what the complexity of this situation reveals: none of these formulations is actually adequate to what was a dependently co-arising network of layers permeating one another. The full complexity of what was at play must necessarily remain open to interpretation. This is a reminder of our finite nature.

Despite being in the same place, the structures of special education fragmented the school community into the normal and abnormal. I imagine that the children’s gazes at and upon one another produced immeasurably difficult and confusing emotions: From longing and loathing to curiosity and retreat. Because of this counter-productive, community fragmenting structure inherent to the school system, the students in the specialized class retracted from both the segregated classroom and the regular classrooms by expanding outward into the school’s spaces, including the school yard, as James would often do. If they were asked

about this I wonder if they might have said something like, “We just want to be like them but they stare at us as if we’re weird or something. I want to be with them and I don’t at the same time. I think I don’t want to be here at all, actually.”

The student’s expanding retreat from their mixed world of special and regular education could be read as a result of the amplification of the stigma attached to the western world’s sense of fixed, individual and importantly, *ill* or *abnormal* selves. Again, the amplification is inherent to special education and is lived out in codification regimes and the physical displacement of students from community classrooms. Such structures create further distance between the majority normal student population and the strange and foreign abnormal population. The dual gazing served to solidify the students’ perception of an “us and them” on both sides of the unhealthy binary. This revealed the co-dependent and viciously counterproductive nature of the relationship between regular and special education. The abnormal students were both in and out of the school, on many levels of understanding and interpretation.

The students’ turn inward towards seeing themselves as objects of sickness and, knowing that others saw them this way too, created a frustration that could not be contained. That counter-productive energy expanded outward into the school as confusion, frustration and anger. In other words, the retraction into a false sense of self, in this case, a very negative ego entrapment (Jardine, 2012), created an internal pressure that exploded outward into the community. It was as if the student’s anger shouted that the very idea of a self-existent and deeply troubled or *mental* ego in isolation – and in need of visible, physical isolation under the banner of “congregation” because they were “exceptional” and thus it was all “*for their own good*” – was deeply flawed.

The students had been *othered* by special education’s codification and placement logic which in turn created self-identities that worked to further alienate *themselves*, including their sense of self in relation to the community. The situation was counterproductive to special education’s aim of congregation for the amelioration of suffering or the changing of negative patterns of behaviour. Another interpretation suggests that this “technology of the abnormal” (Foucault, 2003, p. 316) was doing precisely what it was intended to do, that is, regulate and reinforce the normalization of inherently diverse populations through sustaining the classification of those considered mentally sick or ill.

### A Pedagogy of Suffering

The suffering of the students and its manifestation throughout the school as anger and dangerous retreat was also pedagogical. This is where Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics serve to help read Gary’s “*like this*” as a kind of reprieve from that counter-productive, co-dependent production of suffering inherent to the dual system of education. Here, suffering can be read as *pathei mathos*: “learning from suffering” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 351) understood by the ancient Greeks, particularly the tragedies of Aeschylus (c. 525 BCE). The children in Gary’s specialized class thwarted the embrace of special education’s expectations and specialized structures in such a way that Gary and his team could see and do something outside of special education. I had been reading disability studies in education perspectives on inclusion (Valle & Connor, 2011). I wanted to share these perspectives with educators and colleagues but felt that they were so entrenched in the special education discourse that talk of anything outside of it would be seen as a kind of treason or theoretical nonsense. I had also read Roger Slee’s *The Irregular School* (2010) and wanted to share his notion of moving outside of what we called regular schooling altogether. I saw this early on in the year but I strongly felt I could not tell Gary and his team this unless they were ready to hear it. At the same time I also thought that some students needed more than what Gary and his team could provide. It was difficult to maintain a balanced perspective amidst the crisis. As Wendell Berry (with Moyers, 2013) recently said, “the situation you’re in is a situation that is going to call for a lot of patience, and to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial.” (p. x)

What did Gary and his team see differently or anew? I suggest they saw the student’s perpetual crises as the expression of their desire to live in a different or freer space, one where the dual gazing would be absent or, a place where they could be with other students as part of a school that is healthy and communal. They saw the students as saying they wanted to be together with other students in the school in a way that was inclusive. As long as the segregated structure of a special education class existed, as well as the traditional

normal class – thus representing the dual system of special and regular schooling – the dual gaze and its counter-productive consequences would continue to manifest. Gary and his team came to see that the students were expressing something like this all year long through their often violent acts of what I describe as an *expanding retreat*. James, the student who often fled the school and climbed trees in the school yard, used to say “*All I want to do is be in Mr. W’s class. I don’t wanna be in X (the specialized classroom, author)*” (Laura, personal communication, March 7, 2013).

Seeing the students as saying something akin to the desire to have an inclusive learning environment also made a claim upon special education. The traditional and often taken for granted aim of their specialized class to support the students so they could be successful in learning was disrupted. As Gadamer wrote, “Understanding becomes a special task only when natural life, this joint meaning of the meant where both intend a common subject matter, is disturbed” (2004, p. 181). Put differently, the demand Gary and his team faced, myself included, to understand why and how our expectations were thwarted had already begun by having to suffer through that year of ongoing crises. I had to wait it through, and I often resisted Gary’s early calls to move certain students to specialized schools. I did not expect Gary to show me an opening through which I could share my newfound ideas on inclusion. When it arrived, so did my mind on the matter. I shared with Gary possibilities for doing things differently the next year.

The suffering of all made their educational world interpretable. Gadamer (2004) claimed that any experience worthy of the name thwarts our expectations. Likewise, any true conversation plays us out, has us in ways we cannot control or predict up front. Anything else called conversation is nothing of the sort. It is a waiting to speak. Gary’s “*like this*” was borne out of suffering and it revealed or broke forth towards other possibilities. “*Like this*” was a tear in and through the taken for granted fabric of special education practice; it is also a way of seeing that troubled, difficult pathway as necessary in order for understanding and therefore, a different way of being with the students, to arise. An opening towards possibility had been created by the year-long crises. We could see the year, the students, and our work differently. Such an opening could not have occurred without the structures of special education, Gary and his team, the students and their families, and so on. Possibility arose co-dependently out of a complex ecology that is historically influenced, not on an essential notion of disability inherent to the children.

### *“Like this”*

Thus, near the end of that school year Gary held his head in his hands and asked, “What do we do next year? This can’t go on “*like this*.”

Thwarted *and* ready: Gary faced this forced opening after a year’s worth of special education’s strategies and techniques. The “*like this*” was spoken and understood broadly enough to suggest that Gary wanted to stop being a part of the special education apparatus or machinery which incessantly and repetitively demanded that the students needed to stop fighting, or running from the school, or to calm down: “*Like this*” was not the usual pattern of “like this and this and this and this.”

Perhaps “*like this*” suggested that what was once seen as fixed and true was now interpretable or impermanent and thus, not necessarily all there was for helping children who suffered in school. The singular edifice of truth that special education had been venerated upon shifted, revealing that it was readable, finite, and possible. Gary’s “*like this*” was sweeping, as if to say, “I see the whole of it as a particular family of approaches to children that has exacerbated their school lives, and so I am open to being something different with and for them.” The realization that he was immersed in a seemingly rigid delusion of truth freed a space through which he and his team could see and be differently with those children. “*Like this*” was already on the way to an amelioration of a disproportionate and unnecessary suffering brought on by the taken for granted structures, policies, and practices inherent to special education and, as I have suggested, the very notion of self and normalcy in western society.

Interpretively read, “*like this*” began to reveal a deeper and systematic logic at play in the typical ways we tend to address students with ongoing social and emotional suffering. Gary could be read as saying that special education as the segregation of like “kinds” of students into a special classroom within his community school and all that was entailed in that parallel yet separate structure was a “*this*” that made life for them all

insufferable. “*Like this*” was expressed as the culmination of often futile “like this’s” aimed at “*those kids*.” Gary’s “*like this*” broke forth “as if from a centre” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 454), expanding outwards into interpretability.

That the instrumental measures of special education could be read as not measuring up to the demands of the students, and that those same measures exacerbated, even sometimes co-constituted their collective suffering in that school heralded the arrival of that event of understanding and the opening that ensued. The ongoing enactment of an idle knowledge intended to normalize the behaviour of what is typically seen as the inherently and essentially disabled was suddenly revealed to be inadequate for the children and their school team. We could see that understanding these particular children resulted from “what happen(ed) to us over and above our wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxvi).

Maybe we were not doing special education right. Maybe we were doing it right but the strategies were not right for the students in all their complex particularities. Maybe the logic inherent to the strategizing was part of the problem at play or, our collective clinging and attachment to that logic strangled the free space required to wisely decide what was best for each child in each situation that arose. For me, the year seemed like a perpetual roulette wheel of special education’s reductionist strategies. It was often hard to see what to do through the onslaught of instrumental services and experts brought forward with each new crisis, myself included. There always seemed to be a sense of panic to the year.

### Normalization

The “*like this*” of a largely medicalized and thus pathology-intense special education system within education, built upon the notion of healing and cure or the amelioration of suffering, was counterproductive to its aim in Gary’s specialized class. On one hand, the desire and attempt to normalize via a highly structured and resourced system of marginalization, at the level of physical spaces, bodies and curriculum (math sheets and tri-folds, for example) seems the best thing going for children who have not thrived in “regular” schools. Through isolation and a focus on the symptoms of disability, students can properly learn to be like other students in regular classes. At the same time, normal children can feel safe to continue learning without having to suffer from the burden of having to learn alongside the problem children. This approach appears to be compassionate.

On the other hand, special education’s move to retract suffering students from the norm seems absurd in the face of the desire to want students to be more like a bell-curved “us.” This bespeaks an educational practice that tells students what they should do upfront, and is also removed from the world of actually having to do learning together as inquiries into topics of concern in the world. Both students and curriculum face a dulling and dumbing down through preventative measures. As Jardine (2013) noted, this leveling action is seen by many educators as necessary so that “All hell doesn’t break loose” under freer conditions of inquiry. Read in this light, special education’s focus on mis-behaviour (*off* the norm) and its rectification as a ramp-way to general education learning (integration) – as if the high ground of the traditional ways we look at and teach curriculum are impervious to a questioning of its own dis-order of conduct – is a further step removed from an inclusive pedagogy. In this light, the above-said compassion is tainted with the dark hues of pity and victimization. The echo of a voice saying “poor little things” rings throughout this reading.

It is a strong claim to make however; the drive to fix conduct or teach children how to comply can often conceal our own historical amnesia and mis-conduct in education. After five years of consulting in hundreds of classrooms across a large Canadian city, I can attest to just how myopic that curing or fixing focus can be. It removes the ability to see how special education itself is often counter-productive to our shared goal of having students thrive and be successful in schools. In my consultative work it has been very difficult to talk about educator practices around teaching and learning but all too easy to talk about the problem child and how to fix those problems through new and novel behavioural strategies or specialized placement. This is not to say that all situations are one or the other, or even both. I am suggesting that a sense of measured and proportionate reflection on the complex circumstances we find ourselves in often seems lost to the discourse of normalization which is centred on a false sense of self-enclosed identity or ego-issuance. The self and other duality inherent to a logic of substance (Jardine, 2012) – it is either in you or in me – is at



play here. In other words, *it's that kid's problem* so there is no sense of need or urgency or even awareness for considering what we are doing that constitutes *that kid's problem*. That our suffering and struggles dependently co-arise seems concealed in this modern world of individuals.

The discourse of normalization takes on special significance when one considers the history of the treatment of students with EBD, particularly in Alberta, Canada (Dechant, 2006; Lupart, 2008). We have been entrenched in a system of normalization that has bifurcated students into “us” and “them” in the most concrete of ways: the province has segregated students since the official inception of schools in 1905. Alberta took a particularly dark route through eugenics along the way. The striving for social harmony or the alleviation of a communal suffering required the concealment and in some cases, elimination of future possibilities for abnormality (Gilham, 2012). Only the normal could be part of the happy utopia. The rest needed to stay on the margins, in the land of shadows (not fully concealed, but monstrously lurking as dark warnings for the normal) where their future could be controlled or even eliminated.

Perhaps today's continued marginalization of children deemed abnormal requires an unnecessary suffering so that “regular” education for typical or normal children is reinforced. “You see,” it could be stated, “they needed that special education classroom. Just look at them.” Vicious but unintentional circles have ensued reinforcing both the normal and the monstrous. The self-sustaining nature of the dual school system apparatus appears brilliantly effective. The dual gaze of that system as it lived in Gary's school is evidence of this. Through their collective suffering, Gary came to understand that the children needed something different, as did he and his team. “*Like this*” carried the suffered weight of a newly arrived at understanding about the complex fabric of our lives *together* with students in education: *pathei mathos*. Something more akin to compassion arose, perhaps.

### Interpretation as Non-Attachment

I suggest it was not as if Gary believed that doing something different would cure or better manage the students, rather it was that something different from traditional special education might just release them from the life-squeezing intensity and frequency of the crises in their school. Their attachment to the discourse of special education as Truth was part of an entrenched clinging to that played a part in their overall counter-productivity. As a school administrator, Gary had a role to play in that grip and he came to understand this differently from when the children first arrived. “*This can't go on like this*” is both human and worldly in its dense multiplicity. It gives a sense of readability to suffering and suffering's role in transforming how we see and understand the everydayness of the world. This is imbued with all the confusing richness of how we are in education with students and one another. Breaking forth as if from the world's centre, “*like this*” is recognition that suffering is not “out there” (Jardine, 2012a, p. 73). Rather, it arises in the ways we *are in the world together*. No longer solely a question of amelioration through scientific progress along a developmental pathway, perhaps Gary was henceforth after a way (as being) of holding their suffering and challenges such that there would be more room for those students to find places of belonging in the school, and thrive even though they would all still face lives full of challenges. The deficit model had become finite, too.

Gary's understanding of “*like this*” was born out of misunderstanding, and resulted in his suffering. Some of this weight might just be unnecessary and some is inescapable, given our finiteness. That the students suffered is evident, too. I have tried to suggest that this gestalt of suffering co-dependently arose, and this is important to understand. I have even suggested that special education's practices – enlivened by coding structures and congregated classrooms in community schools – increases the cycle of co-dependent suffering. Yet these finite attempts and experiences are part of what it is to arrive at understanding.

Gadamer (2004) claimed that we only come to understand through a finite pathway, though the pathway can have its excesses of prejudices and things taken for granted, or forgotten, like the historical weight special education bears down upon students and educators. Gary's suffering led to understanding because of the opening it provided for seeing and doing things differently; because it converted special education into an interpretable or possible way of being with children, which then cleared the way for other possibilities to arise. Once Gary and his team could see that, they found a more generous space within which they could hear what the children were saying to them, and respond in kind. Perhaps through all this Gary

and his team, me included, were reminded that all behaviour is language. If we listen carefully enough, we just might hear what is being said. The children spoke to us repeatedly and we were finally able to hear them. As a result Gary and his team's work became free or non-attached and thus possible. The next year the "like this" of their previous year of suffering was largely absent. In its place were classrooms of students thriving in their learning, together. That story of inclusion, however, is for another paper.

## Acknowledgments

With thanks to Drs. David Jardine, Allan Donsky, and Graham McCafferty for their thoughtful comments during the writing of this paper.

## References

- Gilham, C., & Williamson, W. J. (2013). Inclusion's confusion in Alberta. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1 – 14.
- Gilham, C. (2012). The privileges chart in a behaviour class: Seeing the power and complexity of dominant traditions and unconcealing trust as basic to pedagogical relationships. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. Retrieved from <http://jah.synergiesprairies.ca/jah/index.php/jah/article/view/15>
- Berry, W. & Moyers, B. (2013, October). Writer and farmer Wendell Berry on hope, direct action, and the "resettling" of the American countryside. *Yes Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/mad-farmer-wendell-berry-gets-madder-in-defense-of-earth>
- Dechant, G. M. (2006). *Winter's children: The emergence of children's mental health services in Alberta, 1905-2005*. Edmonton, AB, Canada: Muttart Foundation. Retrieved from [http://www.muttart.org/sites/default/files/Dechant\\_G\\_Winter's%20Children.pdf](http://www.muttart.org/sites/default/files/Dechant_G_Winter's%20Children.pdf)
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M., Marchetti, V., Salomoni, A., & Davidson, A. I. (2003). *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Greenberg, G. (2010). *Manufacturing depression: The secret history of a modern disease*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Illich, I. (1976). *Medical nemesis: The expropriation of health*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Jardine, D. W. (2012). The Descartes Lecture. *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*, n.a. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10515/sy5pr7n88>
- Jardine, D. W. (2012a). *Pedagogy left in peace: Cultivating free spaces in teaching and learning*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Jardine, D. W. (2013, July). *How to prevent all hell from breaking loose*. Keynote talk at the Eighth International Imagination in Education Conference, Vancouver, BC.
- Johnston, A. (2013). Jacques Lacan. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/#OthOedComSex>
- Kauffman, J. M., Crockett, J. B., Gerber, M. M., & Landrum, T. J. (2007). *Achieving the radical reform of special education: Essays in honor of James M. Kauffman*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kearney, R. (2002). *Strangers, Gods, and monsters: Interpreting otherness*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Lupart, J. L. (2008). Achieving excellence and equity in Canadian schools: Can inclusion bridge the gap? *Proceedings from International Inclusive Education Research Professorial Series*. Monash University, Victoria, AUS.
- Slee, R. (2010). *Irregular schooling: Special education, regular education and inclusive education*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Suffering, (2014). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=suffer>.
- Valle, J. W., & Connor, D. J. (2011). *Rethinking disability: A disability studies approach to inclusive practices*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

- Winzer, M. A. (2009). *From integration to inclusion: A history of special education in the 20th century*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1958). *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice and Hall.

### About the Author

Chris Gilham is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. He teaches courses related to mental health education and inclusion, as well as the sociology of education. He is currently researching mindfulness approaches in education. Chris can be contacted at [cgilham@stfx.ca](mailto:cgilham@stfx.ca)