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Looking through the learning disability lens: inclusive education and the learning disability embodiment

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Inclusion as an educational approach for students with disabilities is a widely debated topic. The concept of inclusion is often referred to as a philosophy that all pupils – regardless of ability and other differences – should be included within age-appropriate community schools [Stainback, S.B. and Stainback, W. eds., 1996. *Inclusion: a guide for educators*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Artiles, A.J. and Kozleski, E.B., 2007. Beyond convictions: interrogating culture, history, and power in inclusive education. *Language* Arts, 84 (4), 357–365]. This educational approach has been scrutinized for its capacity to meet the needs of students with and without disabilities Lindsay, G., 2003. Inclusive education: a critical perspective. *British journal of special education*, 30 (1), 3–12; Kauffman, J.M. and Hallahan, D.P., 2005. *Special education: what it is and why we need it*. Toronto, Canada: Pearson; McPhail, J.C. and Freeman, J.C., 2005. Beyond prejudice: thinking towards genuine inclusion. *Learning disability research and practice*, 20 (4), 254–267]. However, as Bodgan and Taylor [1990. Looking at the bright side: a positive approach to qualitative policy and evaluation research. *Qualitative sociology*, 13 (2), 183–192.] point out, the 'does it work' framework for analyzing inclusion programs for persons with disabilities is not beneficial to practitioners and researchers who believe that 'integration into society is a moral question rather than an empirical one' (p. 187). Instead of questioning whether inclusion 'works' or is 'effective' for students with learning disabilities (SLD), this study uses a critical geography perspective to examine from the SLDs' perspective how educational spaces are as socially and discursively constructed as places of inclusion and exclusion. This paper also examines interest in how these constructions of places are situated in relation to provincial and regional inclusive education policies.

Keywords: learning disability; inclusion; place; space; education

Introduction

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section outlines key theoretical concepts namely: space, place, and disability. The methodology section discusses relevant background information of the school board and participants, and the process for the two methodological approaches: photographic analysis and focus group discussions. The analysis, the third section, presents the major findings of each of the methodological approach. The last section concludes with a discussion key themes and the key implication to the inclusive education approach in Ontario.

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Defining space, place, and disability

Defining the difference between *space* and *place* is central to this study. This paper adopts Cresswell's (2004) definition of *space* as 'a realm without meaning' (p. 10). The transition from space to place, according to Cresswell, occurs 'when humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way' (*ibid.*). More radical geographers extend this concept to encapsulate place as a site of power (Harvey 1989, Keith and Pile 1993). Harvey suggests that places are 'often reactionary, used to exclude or confine [both physically and existentially] other who do not belong' (cited in Cresswell 2008, p. 137). Much critical geographic literature has pointed out how spaces, including school spaces, are not merely empty canvases removed from the societal interpretations of disability (Parr and Philo 1995, Holt 2004, 2007).

Instead, the everyday practices involve a dialectic relationship between the mind-bodies individuals and their (dis)abling social-spatial surroundings (Butler and Bowlby 1997, Kitchin 1998, Parr and Butler 1999, Holt 2003). This study draws from these theoretical underpinnings to examine how social and learning environments *within* schools are not merely empty spaces but rather function to construct students with learning disabilities (SLD) sense of place.

This paper conceptualizes school milieus as places of power relations that work to materially and discursively position SLD within a social/academic hierarchy relative to their 'non-disabled' peers. Several geographers have argued that disability is perceived as deviancy from able-bodiedness that must be corrected (Sibley 1995, Kitchin 1998, Philo and Metzel 2005, Holt 2007). In this way, I draw upon the work of Chouinard (1997) and others (Imrie 1997, Hansen and Philo 2007) to examine how schools socially construct – through normative practices within social networks and school policies – certain learning and social performances as 'abnormal' in relation to age/grade-appropriate norms, or ableist norms. Moreover, I make use of Hall's (2005) approach to the analysis of inclusion by focusing upon the meaning of these spaces from the students' 'complex subjective experiences... rather than their objective inclusion/exclusion position' of classroom placement (p. 113).

The definition of disability and, more precisely learning disabilities, is another key conceptual component this study. Here, the social model's distinction between impairment and disability is useful. Impairment is viewed as the physiological and/or mental limitation(s) of an individual. Whereas disability is considered as socially constructed barriers that constrain and/or disadvantage a person living with (an) impairment(s) (Oliver 1984, Barnes 1991, Shakespeare 1993, Barton 1996). For this reason, I approach learning disability not only as medically defined – as described by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) – but also by 'embrac[ing] the multitude of embodied and behavioral characteristics which are seen as socially stigmatizing and amenable to medical [and psychological] categorization and treatments' (Butler 1999, p. 12). I adopt the idea of 'learning disability' as a form of embodiment, which is rooted in the participants' conception of their mind–body differences in relation to others within their social milieu. In other words, this study explores how these embodiments, rather than the Ministry's definition, influences the participants' social positionality within their school.

Method

The methodological approach of this study takes particular interest in the participants' standpoint. Several critical geographers (for example Aitken and Wingate 1993, Dyck 1998, Parr 2000) have called attention to the utility of photography to engage participants', including children, expression their experiences of space, identity and disability/illness. Rose (2003) emphasizes how visualities can serve to depict a web of complex power relations. Dyck (1998) engages with a participatory methodology to explore 'the notion of embodied subject and the alliance to

the 'reading of space' (p. 103). In following suit, this study engages the participants to employ digital photography to explore two experiences of school environment: social spaces and learning spaces. Before engaging with these experiences, key background information of the school board policies towards inclusion and participants personal lives are discussed.[1]

Background

Inclusion is an educational approach that is at the center of much academic and professional discussion in both Ontario (Canada) and around the world more generally (Bogdan and Taylor, 1990, Stainback and Stainback 1996, Artiles and Kozleski 2007). The policy at the participants' school board, the South District School Board (SDSB), strongly believes that an inclusive culture in schools is a decisive element to their guiding principles for special education. The SDSB's (2009) recent document entitled *Special Education Guiding Principles* states that:

> An attitude of inclusion recognizes the provision of special education services on a continuum. While consultation with specialized personnel may help the regular classroom teacher deliver an appropriate program for some students, others require more intensive supports, which may include placement in a self-contained program. (p. 2)

The participant educational programming reflects this policy approach insofar as they are assigned to self-contained programs for 60 minutes every day school day and in a regular classroom for the remainder of the school day. All four participants in this study, three males and one female, were identified and recruited based on their categorization by school officials as 'learning disabled'. The participants, also, identified themselves as persons living with a 'learning disability'. These participants, at the time of the study, were completing grade 9 schooling and all 15 years of age. They all attended the same special education courses at Westend Collegiate and Vocational Institute. Although their family life was not the foci of this study, it is worth noting that all participants identified as lower/middle socio-economic status. Also, at the time of the study, Amy and Mark live in a two-parent home; whereas, Mark is raised exclusively by his mother with no contact with his father and Matthew, since 6 years of age, has been under the care of his grandparents.

Data collection

The fieldwork consisted of four themed sessions: Self Portrait, Social Space, Learning Space, and Movie Time. The intended format of the sessions were as follows: 40 minutes for focus group discussion; 20 minutes for photographic session; and, 20 minutes for digital imaging the photographs. Each participant utilized a separate Macintosh laptop with iPhoto, iMovie, and GarageBand software. In groups of two, the participants shared one digital camera and were given generally guidelines on how to take photographs such as lighting, camera focus and color.

Analysis

This analysis is divided into two major sections. The first section describes the participants' photographs and explores their analysis of these photographs. Then, the second section will present major narratives that emerged from the focus group discussions. In this section, I analyze four photographs that represent the predominant themes of the photographic session. These photographs will be assessed in two ways: a description of the space or artifact selected, and the participants' interpretation of this photograph.

Photograph 1

This is a common sight in many Canadian secondary schools, the 'Student of the Month' board. Every month, Westend Secondary will select four students to be showcased, who are displayed in front of the school's main office for all students, staff and visitors to observe. Despite the intended purpose of 'student of the month' board to acknowledge student achievement, this educational artifact is, from the participants' perspective, a constant reminder that their academic achievements and personal efforts have fallen under the administrative radar. Rather than viewing this space as an acknowledgement of the student body's success, it personifies '…like all the people that didn't quite make it at something' (Amy). According to Dale, this photograph symbolizes the school's lack of recognition for students whom hold membership to the 'DD' group. It is noteworthy to mention that, based upon the Ontario Ministry of Education's definition, the 'DD' acronym makes reference to students that are diagnosed as 'Developmentally Disabled'; however, none of the participants are diagnosed as such by the school. Nevertheless, Dale uses such terminology freely:

> Dale: We never, like the DD kids, no offense to anyone here… we never get recognized.
> Researcher: Yeah?
> Dale: So I could take our four pictures and put them right under that and say 'yeah, we're the students of the month now, what do you think about that Mr. Principal'… I already, I already told my principal that I am a goof[2] and I have only met him twice.

It is evident that Dale perceives school authorities as unaware – and even oppositional – to his success. In fact, he chose to self-label as a 'goof' to his principal. As shown in this narrative, he uses this term directly after he delegitimized the 'DD kids' from the 'student of the month' award, which gives the impression that his identification as a 'goof' indefinitely precludes him for any prospective recognition. This statement can be interpreted as Dale *reproducing* stigmated of his embodiment as 'learning disabled'. He has internalized the devaluation of his learning disability to the extent that he affirms a pejorative label even with unfamiliar authority figures. In this sense, Dale seeks to reproduce, what he believes to be, his embodied LD identity – or, more appropriately, 'goof' and 'DD' identity – in educational spaces.
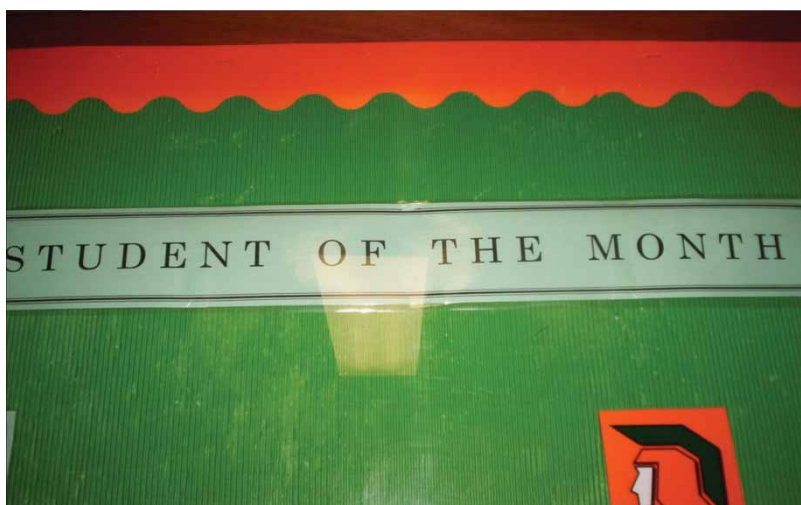

Figure 1. Mark's photograph of the Student of the Month board posted in front of the school office.

Photograph 2

The inspirational word 'imagine' was hung in the school hallway. This artwork, made up of blue and purple tinted glass, is hung in the school hallway. This artifact – similarly to Figure 1 – might be perceived as a motivational tool for pupils to envision academic, athletic and/or personal success.[3] Mark held, however, a significantly different interpretation of these words. For him, this photograph was symbolic of escaping a negative social space, bullying, through the creation of an imaginary world:

> Researcher:...Why did you pick the 'imagine' one?
> Mark: Because a lot of people don't like the world they're in because they are being made fun of and so they imagine a new world to be in.
> Researcher: You mean in their minds?
> Mark: Yeah.
> Researcher: So do you ever do that?... like try to escape from all...
> Mark: Yeah.
> Researcher: What do you imagine?
> Mark: Just like anyone else would imagine.
> Researcher: They aren't being picked on?
> Mark: They are better, they are huge, they are like a God and no one makes fun of them because they are huge.

This narrative of bullying could be dismissed as common adolescent experiences. However in the same conversation, Mark explains the nature of his bullying:

> Mark: I told them [bullies] that it sucks for being made fun of for what you are.
> Researcher: What did they say to you?
> Mark: Retard, and now and then, they call people... me fag in elementary school.

In another conversation, Mark and other participants recount that the 'retard' label has continued to persist into his secondary year. Mark explains that when peers label him as a 'retard' today, he chooses to thank them '....cause responding like that is better, especially if they are six foot tall'. It is important to recognize here is that the participant's imaginary world is centered upon the enhancement of physical attributes such as being 'huge' possibly as a means to redefine him outside of his perceived intellectual attributes. This is important in two ways. Firstly, Mark utilizes imaginary realities as a strategy to cope with exclusionary spaces at his school that take root in occurrences of bullying. This strategy would suggest that previous tactics, such as speaking with perpetrators, have failed and Mark has sought out more socially detached strategies. Secondly, his fanciful thoughts of 'being huge' are an alternative identity from 'being a retard'. The strategy that Mark uses suggests that in – both his fictional and non-fictional worlds – his status of 'retard' is inescapable. Thus, Mark's embodiment as learning disabled lies at the core of his victimization from bullying in which his only viable strategy is to cope with these experiences using imaginary realities.

Photograph 3

The locker is a common sight in most secondary schools across Canada. However, the locker in question (Figure 3) is not like the others; this locker is different. In view, there are five other orange lockers surrounding adjacent to the green locker. Aside from the fact that the locker actually belongs to one of the participants, this green locker – with its clear distinction from the other orange lockers – represents a dominant theme in Amy's life:
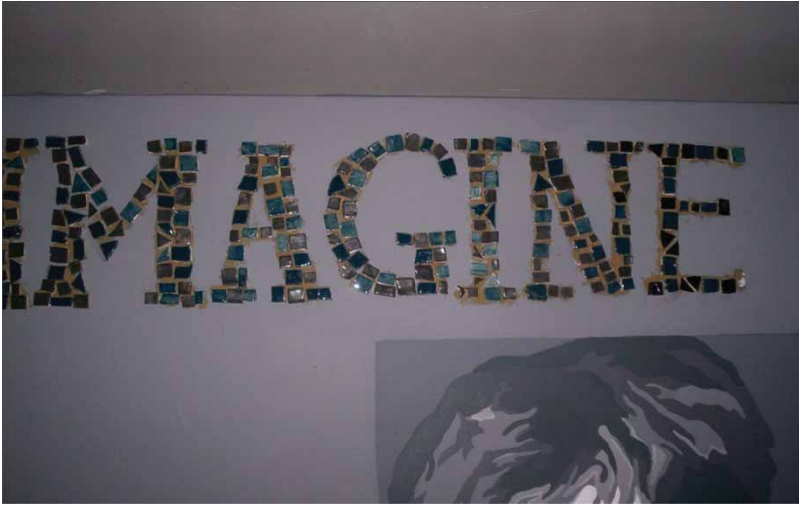
Figure 2. Mark's metaphorical representation of imaging a world where others do not bully him.

Researcher:…What does it make you think of?
Amy: Just like loneliness.
Researcher: Do you ever feel loneliness, at school?
Amy: Yeah, sometimes.
Researcher: Why is that, do you think?
    Amy: Because I guess I don't really have an actually good friend.

The theme of loneliness and social isolation was found in other participants' representations of social and learning spaces, which are explained 'because I feel like I am different' (Matthew).

Figure 3. Amy's locker and her metaphorical representation of loneliness at school.

Figure 4. Matthew metaphorical depict of himself as a learner.

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that the artistic methodology allows for emotional distance for Amy's memories of exclusionary experiences by speaking 'objectively' and in general terms about her locker. This generalization and the recurrence of the 'being different' discourse is critical insofar as it appears central in the participants' explanation of their lack of recognition (Figure 1), their incidences of bullying (Figure 2), and their loneliness (Figure 3). Thus, 'being different' is clearly a strong narrative in these photo analyses.

Photograph 4

The 'being different' discourse is also symbolically represented in Figure 4, the blowfish. As the first artifact to be photographed, the vibrant blue papier-mâché blowfish was selected by both Dale and Matthew as the visual representation of themselves as a 'learner'.[4] This blowfish represented, to them, their 'oddness':

> Matthew: I picked it because its unique, its different, its seems to be looking [in] a different direction and kinda looks like it doesn't care.
> Researcher: Why is that important to you?
> Matthew: Because I have a disability and I can act really retarded sometimes and I just don't care what people think about me anymore… like in grade 8, I use to care.

As shown in Matthew's discussion, the use of 'different', 'disability', and 'retard' are employed fluidly and almost interchangeably. His interpretation of the blowfish as 'not caring' and 'different' can be seen as a form of resistance towards the labels, which permeates in his school's social milieu. In this way, this discourse makes an attempt to adopt an embodiment of learning disability that resists the predominant labeling found in his school environment. Linton (1998) underlines that the 'higher level abstraction' of *normal/not normal* discourse sets up 'dichotomies [which] avoids concrete discussion of the way the two groups of children actually differ, devalues the children with disabilities and forces an 'us and them' division of the population' (p. 23). The essentialism of Dale's 'different' status and the utilization of language as a means of localizing both Dale and Matthew as outcasts in their school's social landscape is indicative of their

complex LD embodiment that rejects the dominant discourse of normalcy while still claiming oppressive social positions.

Place of special education and experiences of exclusion and inclusion

Places offer relational *experiences* that create meaning from space. Drawing from the theoretical concepts of *space* and *place* discussed previously, I argue in this section that the participants' photographs are reflective of their *place* rather than *space* within special education programming. Exclusion is not inherently to the special education classroom or curriculum; it takes root in material and social geographies that undermines the participants' intellectual capacity or social status within the school. In other words, the participants point out that some special education spaces such as a classroom and artifacts such as textbooks can be deeply embedded with the social meanings intellectual inadequacy of meeting the expectations of ableist learning norms (Imrie 1997, Chouinard 1997). By the same token, special education spaces are also described as places of inclusion, which are constructed through the validation of the participant's academic or social contribution to the school. This section first explores the participants' explanation of how special education can transition from *space* to *place* through a process of social contextualization by other pupils. This section continues by examining how the participants link their perceived exclusion/inclusion at school to the construct of special education as a *place*. Two elements of exclusion are analyzed: educational materials and pedagogy.

Special education's transition from space to place

As Dale reflects on his first recollection of special education as discrediting, he shows that the classroom or the curriculum of special education itself is not stigmatizing; rather, it is the labels that are associated with special education's *place* as inferior to the mainstream education:

> The teacher told [a student] to put this sign on the door... We were in only Grade 4... we didn't know what SPED meant. She went and put it up in the hall way... and everyone was pointing to this door and everyone figured it out after that... and we were so mad at her. (Dale)

Dale's explanation illustrates that only once the special education classroom is labeled 'SPED' does this space become discredited. Special education as a space 'with special characteristics' of individualized instruction and its physical locality away from his peers was not itself discrediting. Instead, the special education classroom became stigmatized once it acted as a 'frame of reference... [which] thereby orders the relation among' his peers (Zierhofer 2005, p. 29). Moreover, Matthew sees the fundamental premise of special education curriculum as valuable: 'you know what I think, Learning Strategies, should keep on going because it's good'. Thus, both Dale and Mathew point out that the physical *space* is itself not a source of exclusion. Instead, the participants identify exclusion as founded once it is associated with socially marginal status of educational 'outcasts'. This is, to some degree, supported by the mixed results in Elbaum's (2002) research (see also, Lindsay 2003, Kauffman and Hallahan 2005, McPhail and Freeman 2005). She conducted meta-analysis of 36 studies that compared various educational settings[5] with self-concept of students with LDs, which found that 'there is no systematic association between the self-concept of students with LD and their special education placement' (pp. 221–222).

Special education as an exclusionary place

Exclusion emerges from the label of 'DD' associated with special education materials or pedagogy that has discredited the participants' capacity as a learner. Consequently, the social construction of these participants as 'others' fosters exclusion by peers, teachers, or self-

exclusion. Here, two aspect of exclusion as mentioned by the participants are considered: educational materials and exclusionary pedagogy.

Educational materials

Many participants made references to education materials, which indicated to them that they are unmatched intellectually to their peers. Established by the school environment, the importance of intellectual capacity for an adolescent's self-conception should not be underestimated. Lackaye and Margalit (2006) found that both SLD and high achievers report similar sentiments of loneliness. They question whether the educational setting fosters an environment that is designed particularly for the average achiever. The materials are often classified in terms of 'age appropriateness', which serves as a clear markers of what is considered 'normal' for a specific age range and, by default, signals to a student their positionality within the intellectual hierarchy of their grade. The utilization of 'below grade-level' materials, whether in a regular or special education classroom, communicates to both the participant and their peers 'the deeply held belief of differently abled learners as "deficient" and "weak" relative to complex learning' (McPhail and Freeman 2005, p. 255). The participants expressed that this distinction can lead to exclusion by peers and/or self-exclusion. Dale explains how classmates can interpret 'special' materials as an indicator his intellectual deficiency:

> Dale: I got excluded because I had a computer... I always got excluded because they thought that I was dumb.
> Researcher: Because you had a computer?
> Dale: Yeah, like I'm... I have good hands on and like I can type really fast because I was taught how to and I can do it without looking and then there were a bunch of guys that walked up behind me and were like 'what are you doing?' and I was like 'I am doing work' and they were like 'why do you need a computer? Are you dumb?' and I said 'No, it's because I can't focus, I am more hands on'....

In a similar way, Mark, Amy, and Matthew use their photographs (see Figures 2 and 3, respectively) to demonstrate how their 'being different' status has ensued experiences of bullying, loneliness, and isolation from peers. Moreover, Dale points out here that there is a considerable lack of knowledge on behalf of the non-learning disabled students about the nature of learning disabilities, appropriate disability language, and the utility of adaptive technologies.

The stigmatization associated with special education materials can also by SLD whom discredit themselves as a result of using materials that suggest that their intellectual capacity is not up to par with their age-appropriate counterparts. Matthew and others explain how the interpretation of educational materials as discredited can lead to self-exclusion:[6]

> Matthew: Don't want to try in the class no more...
> Dale: Yeah.
> Matthew: Because I feel like I am not doing anything and the work that she gives us is Grade 2!
> Mark: No Grade 1. I went to my old school and check out the grade 1 book and it's the exact same thing we are doing and except it's in French...
> Researcher: And when they give you super easy work, what does that tell you?
> Matthew: I feel like a retard! I feel like... I could cry because they treat me like I am some special kid that like you know...

It is obvious that Matthew interprets these materials as offensive to his intellectual capacity as a student in grade 9. Despite whether the participants' academic functioning is comparable to the grade 2 curriculum, these discredited materials have contributed to his internalization of 'retard' discourse as discussed previously. These findings are consistent with Demchuk's (2000) research that reported many students with LD in self-contained classrooms were 'angry about

their situation, felt powerless and described themselves as being "educated in exile"' (as cited in Tardif and Wiener 2004, p. 29). More importantly, Matthew and other student's frustrations and self-exclusion (sometimes called behavior issues) are problematized as a function of the disability rather than their environment (Dudley-Marling 2004). Hall (2005) notes that this self-exclusion shifts the focus away from the environment as exclusion towards individualizing the problem. Similarly, Dale's explains his selection of the blowfish (see Figure 4) as illustrative of the dualism between 'normal' and those considered not 'normal' students rather than in the social structures that stereotype these differences. It is not surprising, then, that Lackaye and Margalit (2006) concluded that, regardless of achievement level, students with LD: 'beliefs in their academic competence were similar to those students who failed in their achievements' (p. 442). Thus, regardless of the educational space, discrediting of SLD can lead to excluded by peers or self-excluded.

Educational pedagogy

All the participants discussed at lengths the importance of teacher-student interaction as it relates to their sense of place within their school milieu. In the context of this study, student-teacher relationship refers to pedagogical choice and students 'perceived emotional security with teachers as well as the perceived need for a closer relationship with teachers' (Connell and Wellborn 1991, p. 26). Studies note that a strong student-teacher relationship is positively correlated to socio-emotional and academic outcomes (Mercer and DeRosier 2008); whereas, low student-teacher bond has been suggested to induce feelings of alienation and withdrawal from the school (Birch and Ladd 1997). The participants identified two dominant themes that led to experiences of exclusion: lack of academic challenge and exclusion based on disability.

The participants' understanding of the nature and impact of their disability was, at best, a patchwork of their memories from parents and educators statements. Much of their focus group discussions about their disability were linked 'trial-and-error' type incidents where a teacher would discipline them for an inappropriate behavior and, this behavior would be interpreted as rooted in their learning disability. The most noted memories include verbal discipline in front of classmates and physical removal from the classroom, which were linked to feelings of alienation, embarrassment and anger by both the student in question and bystander peers. It is arguable that these emotions are associated with, or are intensified by their impressions that these behaviors are caused by their 'permanent' disability, which is viewed largely as out of their control. Several of the participants collectively retell a 'typical' incident where Mark is excluded for his jittering during a test, which the participants' consider to be related to his disability:

Researcher: Tell me why you would be sent out, what would be a typical scenario?
Dale: Happy on life
Mark: Yeah, definitely, but uhm, ok yeah, we are doing this test and I can't sit down for a long series of time and so I start shaking my leg. And she's like 'can you stop it'. And I am like 'it's kinda hard' right? And I start again. And she starts to yell at me 'Mark, stop it!' and I am like 'I can't!' and she is like 'yes, you can it's called self-control!'
Matthew: I think that sometimes she really forgets that we have a disability
Mark: And she is like 'than do your test outside' and then I asked her if I could come back in and she is like 'no you can't'.
Researcher: So what does that tell you about who you are? How does that make you feel?
Mark: How does that make me feel?
Researcher: Yeah
Mark: Uhmm... kinda like...questioning: 'what the hell did I do wrong?'
Researcher: Do you feel like you have done something wrong?

Mark: She came out and was like 'do you want a blue sheet?'
Dale: And she actually gave him a blue sheet

Even though Mark might feel that he has done nothing wrong, the exclusion from the classroom followed by a disciplinary sheet, or otherwise known as the blue sheet, leaves him with few other possible explanations. This exclusion from the classroom- based upon what the participants claim to be a disability – influences whether the participants interpret the classroom as a place of acceptance of their differences. In fact, suggesting that these behaviors are 'blue sheet' worthy might indicate a conceptualization of normative behavior suitable for the classroom, which leaves disability as deviant (Davis 1997, p. 13). Thus, the incident can create an understanding of the classroom as a place in which disability does not belong; where it is stigmatized and unwelcomed. Due to the fact that all the participants believe that their disability is a permanent circumstance, this may lead to a troubling dilemma as to whether they will ever have a place in their educational setting.

The most influential component of participants' sense of exclusion was teacher compassion towards their lived experiences. In fact, the participants extended this idea by suggesting that their special education courses should be instructed by a teacher who has, her or himself, experienced living with a learning disability. Mark explains how different teachers' approaches influence how he feels about the classroom in general:

Researcher: So Matthew, do you feel included or excluded in [classroom] environments?
Matthew: Well, really excluded because teachers don't understand what you are going through, right? And… it's like seriously, I have a learning disability, I can't do this. And there are some teachers that encourage you to do your best and there are some teachers that really put you down and you don't want to try anymore because they put you down.

Thus, a perceived lack of understanding and compassion can create school environments as *places*, which are unwelcoming to SLD. In the previous section, Matthew argued that his special education course should persist. However, as Matthew continues his statement, he highlights how the course should be instructed:

Matthew: You know what I think learning strategies should keep on going because it's a good idea but don't get retarded teachers that don't have a learning disability.
Researcher: So you rather have… you want to have a teacher with a learning disability to teach the class?
Matthew: Yeah!

Matthew continued by expanding upon the importance of having a teacher that has had similar life experiences insofar as to understand the social, academic, psychological impact that is associated with their disability. Ferri *et al.* (2005) notes 'teachers labeled as having LDs are uniquely positioned to draw from cultural and professional discourses as well as from their own personal experiences as they construct understandings of LDs' (p. 67). The shared experience of living with a disability could arguably offer an understanding in which students feel emotionally safe to express their experiences of living with an LD.

Inclusion
Inclusion can be fostered in the social and educational climate that is created by the educator, which allows students – with and without disabilities – to seek out accommodations that are most suitable for their learning style and, also demonstrate an empathic awareness to the students' needs. Although this study does not specifically address inclusion at the a school level, it is important to recognize that any of the 'teachers' beliefs about the process of including

children with special needs in general education classrooms are generally consistent with those of the school leadership' (Jordan and Stanovich 1999 as quoted in Tardif and Wiener 2004, p. 29). Mark provides an example of what he considers an inclusive approach through accommodative practice:

> Well, in geography Ms. R knows that I have a learning disability and she kinda, she kinda gives me more leniency when I get distracted and she would be like 'Mark, I want you to continue your work again' and then I am like 'ok'.

This redirection of Mark's behaviors fosters an environment where he can reconceptualize his disability as something that can be adaptable to the school environment rather than an attribute that is unaccepted in the classroom. Ferri *et al.* (2005) points how 'more positive meaning [associated] to LDs are often the result of individuals' renegotiating authoritative discourses, resulting in a personal reconceptualization of their LDs' (p. 68). Throughout the focus group discussions, it is evident that the school environment, particularly educators perceptions and approach to the participants behaviors, have a significant influence upon the participants' sense of *place* within the classroom and, more generally, their school. These findings are largely consistent with Holt (2003) conclusions that school function within the 'assumption of "normally developing child", and locating any "deviation" from this norm within the individual child, rather than examining socio-spatial processes of disablement' (p. 126).

Conclusion

Discussion

Despite the fact that this study attempted to identify concrete inclusionary and exclusionary spaces, one of the most interesting finding resides in the divergence between the data yielded in the photographic exercise and the focus group sessions. It seems as though the participants reserved the photographic sessions for their metaphoric representation of inclusionary/exclusionary experiences. Whereas, much of the focus group sessions adhered to explicit discussions of educational materials and student-teacher interaction. On the surface, this discrepancy suggests inconsistencies between these methodological approaches. However, a closer look at the data reveals participants negotiation strategies explored in the photographic sessions (i.e. reproduction, copying and resistance) are reactionary measures to their educational milieu. In other words, these two methodological approaches, in fact, forge a comprehensive representation of the interrelation between the participants' social geographies and their embodiment of their learning disability.

Rather than photographing specifically a classroom or a textbook that the participants considered inclusionary/exclusionary, all photographs were symbolic of the participants' geography of knowledge of what it means to be SLD. For instance, Amy photographed her green locker (Figure 4) not so much because it belonged to her; but rather, because it was indicative of her loneliness at school. As such, the locker offers a metaphorical framework in which she contextualized her socio-spatial between herself and other 'non-disabled' students.

The participants' focus group discussions mainly focused upon the participants understanding of how their identity as a SLD is materially and discursively constructed in their classroom and school. The participants articulated that age-appropriate materials are a critical component in fostering places of inclusion. For instance, Matthew was rather supportive of self-contained special education programming yet expressed a strong discontent for material that suggested that he was intellectually inferior to his peers. Moreover, the participants identified several ways student–teacher interaction discursively constructed an understanding of what the *place* of SLD are within the classroom. These elements include: (a) the educators' expectations of the participants' capacity to master the curriculum and (b) the disciplinary

approach towards behavior that were interpreted as LD-related. The participants' repertoire of memories of how educators interpreted and expressed their expectations for these participants was fundamental to how they interpreted and evaluated their rightful *place* at school and their perceived inclusion.

Final thoughts

Despite the policy of inclusive education for SLD gaining considerable attention, there is much to be done before this student body feels truly included. This study attempts to contribute to both the academic and policy arena. From a theoretical level, this paper suggests reshaped the academic discourse around inclusion away from the assumption that school are merely *spaces*, distant from societal perceptions of disability. Instead, the participants' accounts propose to an understanding of special education as a *place*; where the meaning of learning with an LD is materially and discursively constructed, resisted and negotiated. This conceptual reorientation of inclusive education as *places* would, for example, suggest that the correlations between loneliness and SLD could not be reduced to physical boundaries (i.e. regular or special education classroom); but rather, understood as a strategy of resistance and/or coping against an exclusionary socio-spatial environment. In other words, the participants' experiences are understood within socio-spatial relations that continuously (re)interpret what it means to have a disability (see Butler and Bowlby 1997, Butler and Parr 1999).

The evolution of inclusionary education is rooted in a long history of special education practices, which was sensitive to the prevailing socio- political thoughts concerning the *place* of children with special needs, including those with learning disabilities. The Ontarian context presented here is illustrative of the policy entanglement surrounding the actual definition of inclusive education and its intended purpose. Bennett (2009) acknowledges that inclusion:

> . . .is often associated with such terms as *normalization*, *mainstreaming* and *integration*. The move toward its use is perhaps in part due to the imagery projected by the previous terms; Images of 'allowing' persons with disabilities into the mainstream to normalize them and make them fit. . . (p. 2).

This inconclusiveness serves as a backdrop against which the participants conceive their inclusion at school. From a policy stance, this study suggests that the Ministry definition of inclusive education must take into account the everyday school processes that extend beyond the notion of classroom placement. Parr (2000) and others (Sibley 1995, Hall 2004) point out how persons with disabilities can be 'considered to be "mainstream" social processes somehow "leak" and "filter" into marginal spaces and groupings' (p. 235). In this case, the participants' micro-geographies of schools identified several important elements: teachers, discipline, pedagogical approach to SLD and self-proclaiming disability labels. Pejorative disability labels – such as 'retard', 'goof', and 'DD' – reinforce the social dichotomy between the 'able' and the 'disabled' have momentous ramifications upon the embodiments as persons learning and living with a disability. In order for these efforts to be realized it is important that the SLD be *meaningfully* included in this academic process. Until the voices of SLD are articulated in the ontological, epistemological and pedagogical concepts of inclusive education, they will never be authentically included.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. Please note that the school board and participants' names have been changed to protect their identity.
2. It is worth mentioning that the dictionary definition of goof refers to 'a mistake; a foolish or stupid person' (Websters American English Dictionary 2009).
3. However, none of the participants spoke of imagining success; in fact, many of the participants felt comfortable expressing their less than ideal academic standing.
4. It is important to note that both participants selected this artifact oblivious to their peers selection.
5. These settings include general education classes, resource rooms, self-contained special education classes, and special schools.
6. Here, self-exclusion refers to the student disengaging from social milieus.

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