

On Purposes and Intentions: Doing the Work of Challenging Ableism in Education

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In this complex and ambitious essay, the author sets out to think beyond the common question of “what is or ought to be the purpose of education?” The author proposes to step outside our usual ways of knowing education’s aims and endeavors to ask what is occluded by the myopic focus on purpose, especially framed as it is by dominant – and, we might assume, unimaginative – ways of knowing. The author asks what, instead, does it do to ask what happens when we “bracket” the question of purpose and embrace the opportunity to learn from “nothing happening” in education?

The author describes “nothing happening” as “a claim, a diagnosis that something should have happened but didn’t and requires fixing.” I take “nothing happening” to refer to both a literal occurrence and an intellectual revelation. The author describes those moments of disruption that take place within the usual flow of our educational practices, where the outcome we expect does not obtain. Nothing happening also refers to an intellectual revelation that occurs when background assumptions are revealed through the failure of our expectations; according to the author, this is when the techno-discourse of education can become apparent to us. The author explains, via Heidegger, that techno-discourse “threatens to gather all modes of thinking under its umbrella”; it consists of those ways of knowing, being, and doing that reaffirm ableist assumptions about how education looks and how students learn, and that steer us away from forms of education that seek to be creative, imaginative, and accepting. The author then goes on to describe the site of the asylum (perhaps a literal place, perhaps a metaphorical one) in which autistic youth can flourish without being reduced to a label or subject of intervention and in which educators experience the potential of education at the margins of techno-discourse. The author concludes by remarking on the “saving power” of education where “nothing happens” — that is, the educational possibilities revealed when we bracket purpose.

I read this essay as offering two important insights for educational philosophers and educators alike. First, the author endeavors to think critically about what the often-disruptive presence of disability or disabled students teaches us about our educational practices and commitments, as well as how dominant educational ideologies *act upon* school people and school communities to reproduce ableism. Second, the essay offers (the beginnings of) a promising philosophical critique of inclusion, namely that the principle of inclusion would seem to demand assimilation and thereby frustrate opportunities for educational transformation. Each of these critiques marks an effort to think beyond those educational aims and expectations that foreclose disabled belonging to see what is occluded and what can be revealed beyond dominant educational ideologies. The author offers a proposal to educators to consider the power of *being with* rather than acting upon youth labeled “autistic” — to set aside the desire to correct, to remediate, even to formally educate, simply

so as to be with, learn from, and let be these labeled students. What the author calls “being alone in the presence of others” allows the educator to experience the individual labeled with autism not as “a theorized subject” but as a singular being, perhaps free of label, diagnosis, or deficit. Indeed, the essay promises us that if we engage in this proposed suspension of purpose, and, instead, embrace a confrontation with uncertainty or un-planning, we can no longer securely locate the deficit — the autism — within the child, nor can we rest assured that our best intentions are actually best for these youth.

Gently (and perhaps in a way that is uncertain given the author’s own criticism of purpose), I want to press some pedagogical implications of and potential philosophical problems that arise from the arguments presented in this essay. Foremost, there is a danger that the essay both underrepresents and overrepresents disability, and, because of lingering problems of clarity, falls short of its transformative potential. I will issue two challenges to the author’s essay, one that takes the form of a critique of the author’s view and another that critiques the author’s mode of representing autism/disability, which, I argue, weakens his view. Overall, I hope to suggest some potential opportunities and challenges for the author in strengthening the author’s contribution to work on educational inclusivity.

The author’s emphasis on the asylum as a space of refuge encompasses the view that there are spaces (perhaps literal, perhaps metaphorical) to be found outside of those colonized by dominant educational discourses. This argument leads the author to the assertion that it is possible to be inclusive without a common ground. The author writes that the state of being alone in the presence of others allows for “distinct language games, distinct worlds living contiguously, and, hence, being inclusive without common ground, yet breathing common air!” The idea of inclusion without common ground is promising: it acknowledges and challenges the often unevaluated assumptions of assimilation that underpin notions of inclusion. Indeed, inclusion seems to follow the construction *we* include *them*. The author is therefore highlighting the danger of an inclusive project that requires assimilation or, at the very least, that takes place according to dominant ways of knowing and seeing participation, understanding, even living together in society.

However, is there not an important difference between *dominant* ground and *common* ground? Indeed, a product of dominant educational discourse is precisely the view that there exists *no* common ground between individuals labeled with autism and putatively typically-developing students. The assumption of total otherness is often what drives exclusions in the name of “special” education, perhaps most markedly in the case of students with developmental disabilities like autism.¹ I am left to wonder, then, if it is desirable to be inclusive without common ground (I am also not sure it is possible, but I will not pursue this question here.) Moreover, is there perhaps a reification of difference in the notion that autistic youth and their educators are part of different language games, that autistic youth have something functionally or performatively in common with the “idiot as outsider”? In what sense exactly are people with autism other to their nonlabeled counterparts?

I think we could charitably interpret the author as endorsing a kind of argument in support of the neurodiversity movement. Neurodiversity is a term and concept used by the autistic self-advocacy community (and increasingly beyond) to describe the particular (and non-deficit-based) differences that autistic people experience and that constitute their neurological diversity, much like particularities of sex and gender expression constitute gender diversity.² For many autistic people, the shared experience of their neuro-difference provides an identity, community membership, and solace from the expectations of the neuro-typical community, perhaps of the kind akin to what the author describes as the refuge of the asylum. Yet, at the same time, the concept itself allows for a framework of intelligibility for nonautistics in understanding the lived experience of autism; that is, it is meant to call attention to the existent diversity of embodied membership in a *shared* social world.³ Moreover, first-person narratives authored by individuals with autism frequently counter the notion of autistic aloneness and express a strong desire to participate in a social world in a way that goes beyond mere presence.⁴ Consider Richard Attfield, a man (and occasional lecturer) labeled with autism who types to communicate and who describes his preference for spontaneous typed lecturing in place of displaying pretyped text at events. Types Attfield, “That to me is what it is all about, the participation.”⁵ Attfield’s narrative seems to suggest the presence and significance of common ground even within a world ruled by dominant ideologies of communication and competence.

A second concern has to do with the representational strategies that the author employs. One could read the essay as situating autistic youth as if they are the exemplary other to education, even as this occurs in the spirit of illustrating something lacking within or problematic about education in general. Consider, for example, the passage in which the author, citing Fernand Deligny, explores the distinction between subjects who are “totally taken over by the meanings produced by psychological or educational discourses” and individuals who “seem to resemble the existence of the idiot.” The author is careful to explain that the term “idiot” is not meant to be equated with stupidity or lack of intelligence but rather with the individual who is other to the rational community, who does not share the language of that community; this individual is, rather, a foreigner or “outsider.” The “idiot,” therefore, challenges the usual flow of the community simply through his presence. The author’s point here is to illustrate how the presence of autistic youth — or perhaps other disabled people — disrupts the community of education in such a way that calls attention to assumptions and expectations that are usually taken for granted and that mark a marginalized “disabled” technology.” As I suggested earlier, this is an important observation because it forces us to confront how our educational commitments perpetuate ableism. Yet I worry about the desirability of taking up this historically pejorative term (“idiot”)⁶ as instructive within a philosophy of education. Might it revive, rather than disrupt, the ascribed otherness attributed to those assessed as cognitively, developmentally, or mentally impaired? Moreover, it is unclear whether we can strip the concept of the asylum of its oppressive roots, perhaps especially given a contemporary world in which people with disabilities continue to languish in institutions around the world.

Overall, I applaud the author's goals of reimagining education through an excavation of what is occluded by dominant ideologies. In challenging educators and educational theorists to pay attention to moments of unexpected disruption, the author insists upon reorientation towards an education that eschews "the dominance of ablest notions of purpose." I nevertheless urge the author to clarify the philosophical implications of this view and perhaps to reconsider the representational strategies employed. In fact, in doing so, the author might ask, what is being occluded through my own purpose?

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1. See Christine Ashby, "The Trouble with Normal: The Struggle for Meaningful Access for Middle School Students with Developmental Disability Labels," *Disability and Society* 25, no. 3 (2010): 345–358.
 2. Scott M. Robertson and Ari D. Ne'eman, "Autistic Acceptance, the College Campus, and Technology: Growth of Neurodiversity in Society and Academia," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2008).
 3. For example, at Autreat, organized yearly by the Autism Network International, participants wear colored badges to indicate their communication preferences: red for "do not approach," yellow for "existing acquaintances only," and green for "everyone." See Robertson and Ne'eman, "Autistic Acceptance." Importantly, these badges indicate not *whether* participants wish to interact with their social surroundings but rather *how* they wish to do so.
 4. See Douglas Biklen, *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 256.
 5. Richard Attfield, interviewed by Biklen and quoted in Biklen, *Autism*, 257.
 6. Philip M. Ferguson notes that the term "'idiot' was used both as a generic term for all people viewed as mentally retarded, regardless of level, and as a diagnostic term for the lowest-functioning portion of the population." See Philip M. Ferguson, *Abandoned to Their Fate: Social Policy and Practice Toward Severely Retarded People in America, 1820–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 13.