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Danforth, Scot (2009). *The Incomplete Child: An Intellectual History of Learning Disabilities*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

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In 2006, Scot Danforth authored a very poignant article titled, "From Epistemology to Democracy: Pragmatism and the Reorientation of Disability Research" published in the journal, *Remedial and Special Education*. In this article, Danforth presented a thoughtful discussion of how the epistemological debate in the special education research and literature had unfortunately moved the field towards an "obsession with being right" and away from "the social hope of being together" (p. 338). He concluded the article with a call for a pragmatic reorientation to special education research that would allow for a "thoughtful expansion from issues of disability to broader understandings of the many human and cultural differences that matter within schools and communities" (p. 343). Danforth wrote of the field's focus on labels:



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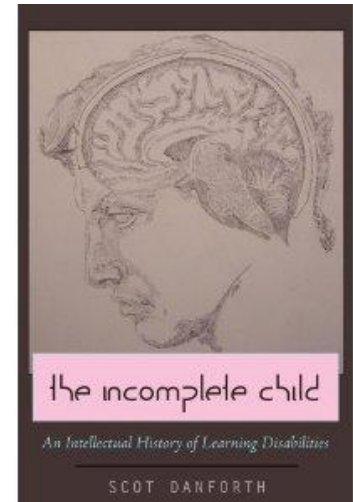
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...pragmatism also asks that we view customary categorical divisions of humanity with tremendous skepticism. All categories are markers assumed to be provisional—assumed to have a social artifice crafted of custom and convention. Labels and definitions are critiqued in light of how they contribute or fail to contribute to greater equality and deeper kindness in daily activity” (p. 342).

The continued emphasis in the special education field on positivism and “hard science” suggests that Danforth’s 2006 call may have fallen on deaf ears. And so, when I first learned of Danforth’s new text, *The Incomplete Child*, I was hopeful that the book would offer a similar message as his 2006 article. I hoped for a Deweyan pragmatist’s analysis of the learning disability (LD) construct, complete with a discussion of how the label “contributes or fails to contribute to greater equality and deeper kindness in daily activity”.

In many ways, *The Incomplete Child* does just this. *The Incomplete Child* represents an important contribution to the field of LD in which Danforth provides a comprehensive but manageable history of the LD construct – a history that is told through a detailed account of various professionals from Kurt Goldstein to Samuel Kirk, the zeitgeist of the times during which they lived, and the influence of their work for shaping the construct. Given the current debate in the field on the future of the LD construct, the text’s release could not have been timelier, and will hopefully broaden the direction and nature of the debate to include discussions about the development of school communities.

The Incomplete Child provides a rich and detailed account of LD that is primarily arranged in chronological order, allowing the reader to follow the development of the LD construct over time. Danforth’s postmodern prose is at times inaccessible which sometimes detracts from the information and message contained within the chapters. Additionally, at times the book reads more as a litany of names and places associated with the field of LD, rather than as an historical *analysis* of the construct as the title



suggests (or at least, suggested to me). I expected a more direct framing of the book to address the question that the title begs: Is a child with a learning disability in some way incomplete?

Danforth begins his historical account with the German neurologist and psychiatrist, Kurt Goldstein, and discusses how Goldstein's thinking about the identification and treatment of brain injury was heavily influenced by the German poet and philosopher, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who believed that "all forms of measurement leave a remainder, an aspect of a natural phenomenon that lies beyond the mathematical representation and, therefore, unnoticed by quantification" (p. 37). Later in the book, this view is juxtaposed with Danforth's constructive critique of the work of Marion Monroe and her quest to develop a set of objective measures to assess reading (dis)ability to remove the subjective nature of professional judgment from the process of identification. The focus on the development of objective measures to assess reading achievement in order to identify areas of deficit for remediation remains a stalwart albeit flawed, approach to LD identification and intervention.

Similarly, Danforth's presentation of the work and struggles of Samuel Kirk in chapter six does an exceptional job of capturing the essence of the problems that continue to plague the field of LD today – how to balance the competing objectives of developing a classification and service delivery model that truly captures the complete essence of an individual child while working within the constraints of an underfunded, bureaucratic system through which the child can receive services. Can we ever separate an assessment of an individual's functioning from the context in which that individual is expected to perform? And if not, should we pay more attention to changing the context or to helping the individual achieve greater conformity? Is the function of the disability label to provide access to remedial services or to identify the particular strengths and weaknesses of each student so that an appropriate, individualized plan can be developed? As Danforth's writing on Kirk suggests, these certainly aren't new questions, and

they are especially relevant as the public education system continues to emphasize performance on standardized assessments as the ultimate marker of everything from student achievement to school functioning to teacher merit.

I hoped that the concluding chapter would bring some closure to these questions. And perhaps it will for some readers. But the text in many places falls short of the analysis for which I had hoped – except for the chapter on Kirk, there is limited discussion of what the LD label has contributed to students so identified and their families. For example, the penultimate chapter on Kirk is followed by a somewhat out of place chapter called “Country Movement and City Children: Agrarianism in Movement Education” in which Danforth details the work of Newell Kephart and Marianne Frostig, which focused largely on perceptual and motor training within natural settings. I anticipated that this chapter might also contrast Kephart’s approach to treatment of LD with that of William Cruikshank (the omission of which Danforth does acknowledge as a limitation in his introduction to the book) – a contrast that may have been an appropriate ending to the text. Perhaps Danforth’s decision to conclude with a focus on Kephart’s holistic approach to the treatment of LD that has since largely been discredited is meant to remind us that through the field’s current emphasis on the individual deficit and medical models of disability, we have lost sight of the “critical attention to the way that social markers and identities operate to create and maintain social discord and inequality” (p. 342, Danforth, 2006). This certainly appears to be the case in the epilogue of the text, in which Danforth provides a sharp critique of Donald Hammill’s reviews of Kephart’s work, which set the stage for the privileging of the experimental approach in special education research. In the epilogue Danforth repeats his 2006 contention that disability research should be multiparadigmatic, noting that the focus on identification has come at a great expense to the advancement of good pedagogy. But throughout the text he falls short of taking a position on whether the label of LD has contributed or has failed to contribute to the “greater equality in...daily activity” for the children so identified.

But perhaps that is the mark of a strong historian – an ability to present an historical account through a particular lens, providing the reader the opportunity to bring her own interpretations and reflections to the text. If so, then Danforth has certainly achieved that goal.

Reference

Danforth, S. (2006). From epistemology to democracy: Pragmatism and the reorientation of disability research. *Remedial and Special Education*, 27(6), 337-345.

About the Reviewer

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