A Textual Deconstruction of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: Utilitarian, Mechanistic, and Static Constructions of Disability in Society and in Schools

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A Textual Deconstruction of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: Utilitarian, Mechanistic, and Static Constructions of Disability in Society and in Schools

Abstract. The extremely well-known holiday television special Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer is deconstructed to expose an underlying philosophical paradigm towards people, especially children, with disabilities that is mechanistic and utilitarian. This paradigm includes a static and over-determined view of any disability a person may have, and can be erroneously supported by a philosophy of “radical freedom.” Examples of this philosophy of disability as applied to the K-12 realm of special education are also provided, showing how the lessons learned from the children’s movie are mirrored in the static conceptualization of the notion of disability in the general society and educational system.

Rudolph the Disabled, Red-Nosed Reindeer (May, 1919).

Donner, the lead reindeer in Santa's army of reindeers has a son, Rudolph, who is born with a red nose. The Donner's are appalled at the sight and when Santa meets baby, he too is taken aback, expressing concern about Rudolph’s ability to make the sleigh team. As the first year goes on the Donner's do “a pretty fair job of hiding Rudolph’s nonconformity,” thinking that hiding his nose will make him a “normal little buck.”

Soon it is April and the reindeer games are about to start. Donner prepares Rudolph by placing a black nose on top of his red one. Donner tells Rudolph, “There are more important things than comfort…there is self respect.” Rudolph meets Fireball, another buck at the games. They become fast friends, until Rudolph’s nose is exposed. Horrified, the coach bans Rudolph from future practices and encourages the other bucks not to play him. Santa agrees, saying no reindeer on his team can have a red nose. Names are called, reindeers back away. Dejected, Rudolph decides to leave and become independent.

Meanwhile in the elves’ workshop, Herbie, one small elf, is miserable, for while elves generally have a “knack for toy making” Herbie wants to be a dentist. “Shame on you,” he is mocked and laughed at by the other elves. “I just don’t fit in,” decries Herbie as he sings, “I’m just a misfit.” The two misfits meet and decide to become independent together and seek their fame and fortune elsewhere.

As they travel the North Country, Herbie and Rudolph meet up with Yukon Cornelius, escape from the Abominable Snow Monster, and land at the Isle of the Misfit Toys. Told that they cannot stay
on the Isle, as the island is not for living creatures, the head of the Isle directs Rudolph to “Tell Santa about us, a toy is never happy unless it is loved by a child.”

Because his bright red nose attracts the Snow Monster to the Isle, Rudolph decides to return home, realizing that you cannot run away from your troubles. Meanwhile a terrific snowstorm and fog sets in and Santa is forced to cancel Christmas until he realizes that Rudolph could guide the sleigh that night. Santa now appreciates the value of Rudolph’s talent and proclivity. All ends well, with the misfit toys getting children, Herbie getting his dentist practice, and Rudolph being accepted by the other reindeers. Even the Abominable Snow Monster finds a use in placing the stars on top of the tallest trees.

**How Rudolph Informs a Static Construction of Disability.**

Advertised as one of the “best loved holiday specials of all times,” *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* is one of the most widely watched and beloved annually shown movies on television. Shown to millions of children each holiday season, it perpetuates antiquated, static notions of disability. In this paper, we deconstruct the famous children’s story, and argue how it mirrors the perception and definition of disability in society as static, as overly determining, thus lessening, a person’s humanness.

To start the story, a reindeer is born with a noticeable difference, a red nose. Appalled and frightened, Rudolph’s mother states, “We’ll just have to overlook that,” while Donner’s initial view is to hide the difference. Gleaned from a visual inspection of the buck, Santa decries that “it better stop, if he wants to make the sleigh team.” Each of these views illustrates a static view of disability (Biklen, 1995) that imposes cultural stereotypes; that is, an individual who is labeled: shunned, treated differently, and/or feared. The individual becomes further handicapped by the attitudes of people whom they encounter. From the reactions of the other young bucks’ fears and loathing, what ensues is a degrading of Rudolph’s self esteem and self efficacy and overall sense of humanness.

In another area of the village, Herbie, the elf, struggles to make toys, when he only wants to examine teeth and work as a dentist. He, too, is rejected by his peers and supervisor, made to feel failure; useless and odd. Disconsolate, Herbie and Rudolph accept their fate as misfits and leave, hoping to seek their fame and fortune in a more hospitable environment.

Worth is measured only in utility, following a “mechanistic/reductionistic heritage” of the Newtonian paradigm, noted by Heshusius (2004, p. 37) as conceptualizing individuals with disability only by their disability and the assumption that they have no worth. The utilitarian and empirical paradigm, the “science-technical model,” according to Iano (2004, p. 65) is particularly strong in the field of special education, and rests on a static notion of disability. This notion of disability leaves out issues of dignity, intrinsic worth, and the virtues of individuals with disability. In the utilitarian paradigm one’s worth is only measured by its contribution of society and others. Individuals are not treated as ends in themselves, whose dignity is to be respected..., with full humanness.

The question of how to “cover up” Rudolph’s disability is further example of the notion of disability-as-static. Being born with a visible disability, such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy or a red nose, may define a person as fundamentally different, despite no other evidence to the
contrary. For years, parents of children with Down syndrome were advised to institutionalize their children or to withhold necessary, life-saving medical treatment from them. They were defective and had no worth or ability to contribute to society. Baby Doe, a child born with Down syndrome in Bloomington, IN, was allowed to die of starvation because her parents refused to authorize life-saving stomach surgery (Mental & Physical Disability Law Reporter, 1982). Wolraich, Siperstein and Reed (1991) surveyed medical and surgical physicians and found a relationship between the doctors' prognostications and their decisions about treatment, implying that some physicians continue to hold static beliefs about the capabilities of children with Down syndrome. Analysis supporting a rationing of life-sustaining medical equipment has been conducted in the medical ethics literature as claims are made concerning the cost-benefit value of such expensive equipment (Wilkinson, 2006), whether withholding treatment is ethical and compassionate (Anon, 2007), and whether prenatal screening for disability is justified (Gagen and Bishop, 2007).

Recent medical advances have enabled the detection of a fetus with Down syndrome by the end of the first three months of pregnancy, several weeks earlier than conventional screening. There are concerns that the number of abortions of children with Down syndrome will increase as a result of this new screening technique. Weiss (2000) suggests that the disappointment of parents at the birth of the child who “fails to meet a socially defined construct of perfection can result in a parent’s choosing, at least temporarily, to ignore the child’s best interest” (p. 1142). Static views of disability contribute to this concern, so that while a generation or two ago children with Down syndrome were systematically placed in institutions, now they may be systematically aborted. When these children are viewed as having no useful value to society, elimination of them is acceptable; rational. The well known disabilities rights activist, Marsha Saxton (1988), who has spina bifida, campaigned against genetic testing for any inherited traits because of this tendency to only evaluate humanness through utilitarian principles of worthiness to the society.

In the history of how children with disabilities have been treated and in the K-12 field of special education, such mechanistic and utilitarian philosophies are manifest in the application of static and over-determined views of disabilities. Societal treatment of children with disability has changed over time, from killing them in ancient Greece to creating institutions for them 19th century. While institutions may have improved somewhat the lot of individuals with disabilities, these “training schools” operating in almost every state of the United States, still separated them from society and were essentially warehouses, many with shackles in their basements (Blatt, 1974). In fact, some disability rights activists have compared the institutionalization of individuals with disability with the Nazi holocaust (AAMR, 1999). In the later twentieth century special education and disability rights laws spurred the movements of normalization and de-institutionalization, resulting in community-based housing. “Full inclusion” allowed children with disabilities placement and participation in the general public education classrooms.

These changes in philosophy and practice were considered social advances that more closely pulled people with disabilities closer to their rights to engage in the social contract of the good life. Nussbaum (2006), in discussing the Rawls’ “justice as fairness” theoretical framework, where justice assumes rational decision-making, claims that the intellectually disabled would not be able to make rational decisions or reason out the social contract. Unless individuals with disabilities can make decisions or reason, then they may have a limited place in the greater society. As a result, Rawls does not consider the issue of justice for individuals with disabilities, assuming that that will
work itself out, once a just society is achieved. Rawls’ claim appears to accept a more static, overly
determined and reductionistic view of disability which assumes that including individuals with
disabilities into the greater society has little purpose. We argue that this limits and reduces the full
conception of humanness of all people and places people with disability at a greater risk for
exclusion from the social contract. When Rudolph experiences the loathing, fear and rejection from
his community, he accepts his fate, at least at first, as does the rest of society.

Nussbaum argues, however that a just society is one where individuals live with and toward others
and includes notions of justice for all individuals, including those with disabilities from the
beginning. Her capabilities approach suggests that individuals do not need to be productive to be
worthy of inclusion in society.

**Static Views of Disability in Schools and Schooling.**

Contemporary federal mandates in the laws, No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with
Disabilities Education Act in 2004 require that all students must have access to the general
education curriculum and achieve academic proficiency on state and district required assessments.
These laws require that test data for all subcategories of students, e.g. economic disadvantage,
disability, race, limited English proficiency must also be disaggregated from overall assessment
data. Those subcategories of students that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) result in
their schools being designated as Schools In Need of Improvement. This designation causes
increased funds to be siphoned from the general school population into remedial programs for the
children in subgroups who have not performed up to par.

Often students with disabilities are the subgroup first identified as not making AYP on these
assessments. Parents of students with disabilities often bemoan that they are blamed for the decrease
in funds available for general education. They are often criticized by other parents who hold the
view that special education funding takes away resources from others. Those others are valued as
having a higher probability of making significant contributions to the community. This schism
reinforces the static and over-determined view of disability that contributes to concerns over the
funding of special education. As resources dwindle at local and state levels and various constituents
vie for the available funds, in some communities there has been an increase in the lack of tolerance
for funding mandated programs for special education.

Language may also buttress unchanging views of individuals with disabilities, perpetuating their
lower status in the community. Even in the call for papers for this journal edition, the hermetical
implications of language use are powerful. People with disabilities are referred to as "disabled
people" in the call for papers, making the disability of prime importance, rather than using the term
“people with disabilities.” The latter may be considered only politically correct, but does stress the
humanness of the person over the disability which often defines only a small part of their total
existence. It is not Rudolph’s character or intelligence or abilities that defined him. Despite the fact
that Rudolph was the best “jumper” in his cohort of bucks, he was defined by his red nose.

Views of disability in society are slow and hard to change. As researchers, we have seen recent use
of the antiquated term “handicapped children” in a syllabus for the preparation of secondary
teachers. This term is derived from the phrase “cap in hand,” often assumed as the only viable
means of employment by individuals with disabilities. Degrading language perpetuates the focus on
the differences so that one often cannot see into the humanness - we see the wheelchair and hearing aides and spasticity rather than the person. This creates an invisible attitudinal barrier based on static and over-determined etiology. This may be the greatest obstacle that individuals with disabilities face both in and out of the schoolroom and in society as a whole. As Snow (2007) asked, “Do you want to be known primarily by your psoriasis, gynecological history, the warts on your behind, or any other condition?” A static view of disability ends up an essentialist view of disability with the disability defining your very being.

**Radical Freedom and Constructions of Disability.**

The teasing and name calling endured by Rudolph and Herbie, made them believe that they were “misfits.” Both begin to see themselves as the names they were called and believed that they needed to leave their community as they brought no worth to it. This is analogous to one of the conditions used to determine disability status by the American for Disabilities Act, where one is considered as eligible for disability status if one is treated as though one has a disability, such as a red nose. The effects of disability, whether they are true physical impairments, such as muscular dystrophy or cerebral palsy, sensory impairments such as deafness and blindness, or socially constructed disabilities are exacerbated by the perception and language used by others. Because of the obvious facial characteristics of children with Down syndrome, the assumption of their capabilities is often made prior to any interaction with them. In fact, outdated notions of the cognitive abilities of children with Down syndrome often predetermine their welcome into general education and society in general. Nussbaum would argue that while ADA may provide disability status to some individuals, these same individuals will not have access to the greater society unless society is “redesigned” (p.167).

Application of the early Sartre on “radical freedom” (1956) claimed that disability does not restrict freedom. He claimed that ethnicity, race, and other conditions or situations do not eliminate our freedom either to choose between alternatives (even if alternatives are limited) or limit our ability to authentically accept our situation (as a target of prejudice, as disabled, etc.) The radically free thinker knows that it is only the attitude towards a “disability” that restricts freedom and capacity. Using a Sartre analysis initially Rudolph and Herbie do not realize their freedom to choose a different way of believing in themselves until they find the Isle of the Misfit toys. They had no role models encouraging them to believe in their abilities or who believe in their worth. Parents, coaches and even Santa himself, abandoned their role as teachers. Sartre suggested that teachers are facilitators who help the child to attain personal freedom. If society does not produce teachers with the philosophical stance that allows the teachers to see beyond the disability, what recourse do individuals with disabilities have but to flee as Rudolph and Herbie did or to accept a self that has no free will? Individuals with disabilities have a difficult role in defining themselves without teachers, parents and society helping them to appreciate and believe that they can, rather than they can’t.

Kierkegaard (1959) has a similar theory about choosing to take responsibility for your own self, including features that you did not will or make, like your parents, race, or physical attributes, abilities and disabilities. Like Cartesian dualism, this notion of radical freedom in both Sartre and Kierkegaard can downplay the disability to the point of denying the disability by splitting free consciousness from the physical state of disability. For example, one segment the deaf population denies that they have a disability, sees themselves first as deaf and argues that the context matters.
when determining their “disability.” From a Sartre and Kierkegaard tradition, one might suggest that their advice to teachers, parents and others who interact with individuals with disability would be to empower and develop the freedom self efficacy in all children, and particularly in the development of individual with disability. The delicate balance between the recognition of the reality of the disability, the real limitations that may accompany it, and the kinds of accommodations that may be needed, and the acknowledgement of the full potential of the human must be maintained. Specially, teachers, as social agents, must not allow outdated conceptions of disability to predetermine their expectations which limit educational achievement.

Kliiever and Landis (1999) proposed that a static view of disability has inhibited the literacy growth of individuals with disabilities. They suggested that institutional understanding of disability, that is, an understanding of disability that accepts “universal assumptions” about them restricts their development, viewing these individuals as unable to participate as literate members of their communities. “We assumed he couldn’t read because he had Downs” (Kliiever & Landis, 1999, p. 89). Much of the research prior to 1990 on literacy training for children with developmental disabilities suggests that literacy training has been de-emphasized beyond very basic, functional levels and tend to end prior to adolescence (Browder and Xin, 1998). Additionally functional literacy programs for individuals with developmental disabilities generally consists of decontextualized drill and practice (Ault, Wolery, Doyle, & Gast., 1989). Instead of focusing on meaningful activities, it assumes that understanding is not possible. Reconstruction of our basic assumptions about the abilities of individuals with disabilities challenges institutional and static notions of disability. Increasingly, descriptive studies with children with developmental disabilities in the literature suggest these children respond to stimulating, literacy-rich environments (Hedrick, Katims and Carr, 1999, Katims, 1991, 2000). Koppenhaver, Pierce, Steelman, and Yoder (1995) reported that for children with disabilities who require augmentative communication devices, their demonstration of emergent literacy learning seemed much less dependent on cognitive capability than on learning opportunities. There appears to be a positive correlation between beliefs that children can learn and richer learning experiences and a wider array of texts in both the home and the school. Unless educators, parents, and society reject institutionalized or static notions of disabilities, stop showing films, such as “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” that perpetuates this, and grasp a dynamic view of potential and humanness, many individuals of this group will continue to have restricted access to developing their individual freedom and thus their full potential.

To ensure the education rights of children with disabilities, special education laws were enacted by the federal government in the 1970’s to ensure the right of individuals with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. At the time these laws were enacted many children with disabilities did not attend schools, were summarily excluded from schools, and/or were attending school programs with substandard conditions. Special education laws were necessary to ensure that individuals with disabilities were able to access full societal rights. As Nussbaum argues in a just society such laws would be an inherent entitlement. In schools today special education entitlements work extremely well for those whose parents are able to understand and interpret the law and advocate for their children. For others whose parents may not have cognitive, financial or other means to advocate in their child’s behalf, programming often continues to be substandard. In a just society this would not be the case.
Mind.

Must one prove oneself as having worth to be accepted by society, as Rudolph did? Rudolph eventually rejects the institutionalized notion that one with a red nose has no worth. He realizes that running away from his difficulties won’t solve his problems and so both he and Herbie decide to return home. They begin take on a free thinker stance, and reject the tacit knowledge that they are defined by their difference or disability. They prove their worth, especially their utility, to their community, by capturing the Abominable Snowman and lighting Santa’s sleigh. In their success others come to reject the conventional wisdom of static disability, and see their mistakes in rejecting Rudolph and Herbie because of their differences. The misfit toys are found homes and everyone lives happily ever after.

While this is a comforting ending to the story, soothing our conscience and the troublesome treatment of Rudolph and Herbie for their differences, the banishment of the toys to the Isle of the Misfit Toys, and the hunting of the Abominable Snowman, the author absolves society from any further introspection of its treatment of individuals with disabilities. In fact, at the end of the story it is easy to forget that Santa was a bully, banishing Rudolph from the reindeer training, despite Rudolph being the highest jumper of his peers. We dismiss the treatment of Herbie, who only wanted to fix teeth and was told by the Head of the Elves that he was a misfit, and teased by his elfin peers. These characters have proven their worth, and views of disability, while comforting are not changed. The happy resolution of the problem was indeed fictional and perpetrates static and over-determined views of disability in all the children who view it each holiday season.

One wonders at the end of the story, however, had they not proven their worth whether their freedom to think and act radically might wane with time? Would their ability to maintain their self esteem and self efficacy have diminished? Perhaps the potentials or capacities, as Nussbaum calls them of some individuals is not perceptible by others. Does this mean that they do not exist?

Educational opportunities that provide children with disabilities and children without disabilities to work together in classrooms with teachers who are able to balance utilitarian views and view’s of justice and fairness may be the key toward the development of communities that embrace a fuller conception of humanness, worth and justice. Such inclusive school programming may allow children to perceive each other as children first, not as “disabled children,” reindeer such as Rudolph as a reindeer, not as a “red-nosed reindeer” and “broken toys” as worthy of being loved, instead of placed away from society. Such school programs would not demand that inclusion be based on productivity, but on the basis of social justice.

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