The Making of the ‘Problem Child’:

Egerton Ryerson and the Liberal Project of Ontario Public Education

by

Hunter Knight

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Social Justice Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

What makes a problem child? In this thesis, I search for the conditions of possibility for the ‘problem child’, or a student who is constructed as someone who does not belong to the classroom. I focus on the works of Egerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent at the genesis of Ontario public schooling, who proposed supposedly universal ‘common’ schools as well as residential schools, segregated schooling by race, and institutionalized schooling for disabled students and lower-class students. Rather than creating contradictions, Ryerson’s plans for common schools and separate schools are manifestations of his liberal philosophy, which supported a vision of public schooling that would produce a future civilized state. This conceptualization relies on the production of categories of uncivilized difference, which education can then manage and control. The figure of the ‘problem child’ shows that the very philosophy that promises universal education is dependent on the exclusion of many from that promise.
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The ideas within this thesis are a continuation of many things that I have been thinking and writing for years now, and they would not have been possible without the outstanding professors, teachers, and advisors who encouraged me, again and again, to question the stories that we tell about history and the now. Thank you to Susannah Ottoway, Bill North, Serena Zabin, Marv Hoffman, Tynia Burton, and Amy Millikan. Thank you to Eve Tuck for the very timely course I took while beginning this thesis, in which I read for the first time many of the authors I work with here – including Lisa Lowe, whose constructions of liberalism and empire finally provided insight into the contradictions of public education and the ‘problem child’.
Writing a thesis can often feel like a lonely process, and it was only through sharing bits and pieces as they developed that I was able to continue. Thank you to the members of Tanya and Diane’s reading groups, who understood better than anyone. Thank you to my family and especially my parents, who made me talk about my project: my mom wanted to make sure she could tell her friends what I was writing, and my dad was the first person who understood, immediately, when I was finally able to provide a coherent summary. Thank you to Sara Cantor, who (in our almost daily phone calls across three time zones) patiently listened to the most detailed dilemmas, and offered hope, laughter, and the best road trip we’ve taken (so far) to keep me happy and grounded. And thank you to Lynn Ly. She encourages me to challenge everything, think beyond, work with more curiosity, and live with more joy than anyone else: making me a better writer and a better person. This writing is a production of countless conversations over countless meals that made this thesis feel important and alive. Thank you to the Ly family, who provided many of these meals, for keeping me well fed and laughing in my first year in Toronto.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Finding the Problem Child

“I wanted to feel as if history was not destiny”
— Dionne Brand,
_A Map to the Door of No Return_

Everyone always knows who the ‘problem child’ is. Ask any student, any principal, or any teacher, and they are always able to point out the student who reliably causes trouble, misbehaves, acts out, causes a fuss, and is difficult for their classmates, their teachers, and the school. Their reputations often precede them: at one school I worked at, a parent sighed at the realization that even the fifth grade teachers knew the name of her first grade son. I have worked in elementary schools for the past five years, in four different cities and towns across the United States and Canada. In every school, adults tried to couch this term. The euphemisms, as well as the implied description underneath them, were the same at a rural special education school for students with diagnosed behavioral and emotional disorders, where some students were understood to have “more issues” than others; an urban inner-city school, where some students were narrated as being “higher-need,” some needs so high they were said to be nigh-impossible to meet; and at a suburban school, where staff could use air quotes and an exaggerated tone to refer to “the ‘bad’ kids.” All of these descriptions only make sense if the ‘problem child’ is understood as a natural and objective role that some children happen to inhabit. My thesis will investigate the historical origins of this role in the production of mass public education, arguing instead that the creation, maintenance, and exclusion of the ‘problem child’ is foundational to the development and success of the mission of public schooling.

In describing different euphemisms and strategies that teachers use to narrate the ‘problem child,’ my point is not to villainize teachers but rather to illustrate that this role is a constant across a variety of schools in different places, regions, and countries. Its prominence is illustrated by the fact that these narrations are not exclusive to teachers: euphemisms and descriptors of the ‘problem child’ are also shared by administrators (who might say “you again!”)
when a certain student arrives at their office) and by students (who might protest when being paired with a partner who will “mess things up”). My argument that the ‘problem child’ is ubiquitous is not a controversial one, given the wealth of literature (dating back decades) on ‘dealing with’ ‘difficult children’ in the classroom, as well as regular newspaper articles trumpeting the overwhelming negative effects in schools of increases of students with ‘behavioral issues,’ and/or diagnoses associated with such issues such as ADHD or autism.¹ These documents as well as everyday narratives from teachers in schools (many of which are cited in these books and newspaper articles) indicate a widespread acceptance in the ubiquitous existence of ‘problem children.’

However, in order for this idea of the ‘problem child’ to make sense, there must be a foundational belief that there exists a broad category of students with internal deficiencies who will always cause trouble in schools: a belief that should give us pause. This is a central question, rather than assumption, for my analysis that follows. Why does there seem to be a ‘problem child’ in every school, every grade, and every classroom? How is this possible? Further, there is the contradiction that the ‘problem child’ poses to public education, which purports that public schools are the places that all students will be educated. If this is true, then, how is it that there ends up being students defined as problems to, for, and within the very places that they, as students, are supposed to belong? Instead, is there something about schooling itself that seems to readily and reliably manifest this contradiction of the ‘problem child’?

In this thesis, I decenter the ‘problem child’ from the personhood and body of the students who are saddled with this constructed role. The ‘problem child,’ as I use it here, refers to a construction of a student as someone who does not fit normative expectations for a student

¹ For a sampling of the extensive literature on ‘fixing’ the ‘problem child’ in school, see Crone, Horner, and Hawken, 2004; Molnar and Lindquist, 2009; Turecki and Tonner, 2000; Davis, Culotta, Levine, Rice, 2010; McNamara and Moreton, 2012; Raths and Burrell, 1963; Jacoby, 1926. Recent news articles highlighting the threat of the ‘problem child’ argue that ADHD is “an epidemic” (Rock, 2013); that teachers are “[struggling] to deal” with increases in behavioral issues (GazetteXtra, 2016); that schools where students “are ‘the absolute extreme,’” “violence is on the rise” (Williams, 2016); that “pupils with behavioural issues are overwhelming” teachers and “vulnerable” students (Secret Teacher, 2016). See also Dybvik, 2004, King, 2016, and Smith, 2008 on narratives of school responses to the “growing problem” of autism diagnoses.
in a classroom, and as such, is more likely to be excluded or expelled from classroom space. It is through this regular exclusion that the continued production and presence of the ‘problem child’ can be traced. I am not talking about any real young people who have been so named and/or excluded. Instead, I use it here as a way to reach into the history of public schooling: in tracking its arrival and existence as a conception that could possibly be held about students, and its emergence as a rationale for exclusion, it is possible to unravel parts of the myths and truths about what makes a school a school. I search for the conditions of possibility for the production of the ‘problem child’ in order to explore how what public education excludes supports what public education is.  

I am hardly the first one to do this decentering work, to ask what negative labeling processes for students say about the institutions doing the labeling. Within the education world, there is substantial pushback and activism around the bias inherent in labeling students in negative and exclusionary ways, whether those labels are ‘problem child,’ ‘difficult kid,’ or some of the equivalencies of those labels in special-education-speak. Special education is one site in which this labeling process, where the subjective opinions of adults are made into objective truths about students, is most visible. As a documented process across North America, it is possible to see that Indigenous, black, and/or low-income students are much more likely to be in special education (Project Ideal, 2013; Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012; Harry and Klingner, 2014), and to be over-represented in the most stigmatizing label categories, such as mental retardation or emotional disturbance (Greenhouse, 2015; Zernike, 2001; Zipper and Hing, 2014). The reason for this research and advocacy is illustrated in the very real consequences for students once negative labels of non-normalcy are applied. Students with special education labels are often subjected to specialized support services, which most of the time occur in time spent

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2 Many writers, including many in phenomenology and critical theory, use the term ‘conditions of possibility.’ Here, I align my use of it with Lisa Lowe (2015) and Jodi Byrd (2011), both of whom use this phrase in order to structure, at the level of sentences, their research as work that deconstructs the stories we use to tell about the present. While the arguments of Lowe and Byrd are quite different, their use of this phrase indicates that their writing is a dismantling act, an act of trying to uncover the logics behind acts and narratives of colonialism and empire. I aim for my research here to do similar deconstructing work in breaking down the empire-born logics of schooling.
outside of the main classroom. Unsurprisingly then, researchers in the US and Canada have found that students with special education labels have access to fewer educational opportunities (Parekh, Killorn, and Crawford, 2011), are less likely to graduate from high school (Education Week, 2015), and are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system (Zipper and Hing, 2014).

Much of the response to this research and activism has been attempts to influence teacher education and special education referral processes. As a white woman in a teacher education program nominally focused on social justice, a central part of my education was learning paths and strategies to resist the process of expelling students of color from the classroom. The implication behind responses such as these is that this might be an institutional problem, but it is one that was born from and supported by individual prejudice – and thus can be dismantled by a focus on changing prejudice at the individual level. While the historical and contemporary presence of racism, classism, and ableism among teachers is undeniable, the fact that the history of public education across North America is marked by exclusions – from residential schools for Indigenous students to racial segregation for students of color to institutionalized schooling for disabled students – suggests that there is something far deeper going on, something more intricately and intimately tied to the processes of schooling itself. Why does the naming of non-normative students and their subsequent exclusion seem to be such a consistent and enduring part of public education? Or, what work is the ‘problem child’ doing for schools?

In seeking the answers to these questions, to find the ‘problem child’ within the institution of public schooling rather than in the students who have been so labeled for a least a century, I investigate the origins of one public state-run education system: that of the province of Ontario, Canada. While education and schools had long existed in a variety of ways in a region that the settler government then called Upper Canada, starting in the mid-nineteenth century there was a tremendous transformation in the systematic and centralized production of education

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3 See, for example, the development of Response to Intervention (RTI) in US special education legislation, which was included in the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2006. This strategy instructed teachers to try a variety of “interventions” with students before advancing them into special education programming. For more information, see US Department of Education, 2007.
as a state-run institution (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. x). The majority of this transformation, which made schooling a nationally organized and controlled endeavor, occurred under the leadership of Egerton Ryerson. Ryerson was Chief Superintendent of Schools in Upper Canada from 1844 to 1876, and most of the foundational education laws were written by him or under his direction (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 95). Ryerson’s Department of Education was an overwhelming bureaucracy, with four different subdepartments that coordinated the production of 38,000 items for publication a year – greater than that produced yearly by the Colonial Office in Britain in its management of the entire British Empire (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 138). By the end of his tenure, government-directed schooling was firmly established, and well supported by taxpayers with their money, their faith, and the enrollment of almost all of their children (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 337-338).

It is within this context of Upper Canada, then, that I turn to the words of Ryerson in order to better understand the philosophic rationales behind the specific systems of schooling that were produced in this province. I look exclusively at writing by Ryerson not with any illusions that an immense system of public education can ever be indebted to one man alone, but rather with an understanding that Ryerson can act as a spokesperson for the beliefs of his geohistorical context. Historians of education point out, often in an attempt to dethrone Ryerson as the sole “Founder of the School System of Ontario” (as his statue in Toronto names him) that his ideas were not very unusual. Houston and Prentice (1992) point out that ‘school reformers’ in Upper Canada generally had the same British imperial worldview and shared a goal for education reform in order to reform the national population (p. 98); Lazerson (1978) notes that most of the reforms that Ryerson promoted in Upper Canada were also adopted across Western Europe and the United States during the same era (p. 4). In this context, Ryerson as an individual

4 Despite Upper Canada’s political status as a British colony run (largely) independently by a settler government, the rhetoric of education reformers and other politicians emphasized it as a state and a nation unto itself, although some politicians, including Egerton Ryerson, were always intent on emphasizing its British nature. Ryerson named Upper Canada as an equal player among, as he termed Western Europe and the United States, the “most enlightened” countries (Ryerson, 1894a [1846], p. 189).
was regularly accused by his political opponents of being an autocrat and a dictator in the development and management of schooling (Houston and Prentice, 1992, pp. 115, 121), suggesting that his power for influencing Upper Canada schools was far greater than other politicians around him, even though their views were not very different philosophically. With this in mind, I also choose the words of Ryerson instead of any of his contemporaries (who likely shared many similar views), because it is evident that his words carried influence. While I resist thinking of him as exceptional, positioning Ryerson as one representative but influential founder of Ontario’s public schools also allows me to push back against a conception of public schooling as a natural or organic institution of the modern state, and rather as a production of a very specific time, place, and subjectivity.

In order to examine the philosophy that guided the manifestation of Ontario education, I investigate several different proposals that Ryerson produced as his plans for the schools he would then construct. First, I examine his *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* (1846), which was his initial proposal for how and why Upper Canada should build a system of free ‘common’ schools. I then put this document in conversation with four other documents that Ryerson wrote over the course of his tenure: his *Letter on Residential Schools* (1847), which recommended practices in separate schools for ‘Indians’; *An Act for the Better Establishment of Maintenance of Common Schools in Upper Canada* (1850), which regulated segregated schools for ‘coloured people’; a *Draft of Bill, Relating to Vagrant and Neglected Children in Cities and Towns* (1862), which suggested church-run schools for ‘vagrant and neglected children’; and a *Report of an Inquiry in Regard to the Instruction and Care for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind* (1868), which drafted recommendations for institutional schools.

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5 Ryerson and his contemporaries used ‘common schools’ to refer to the central network of schools that were nominally universal – common, in this sense, meaning shared by all. I occasionally place ‘common’ in quotation marks to emphasize that this word, in reality, referred to the central system of public schools from which many people were excluded.
for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind.’ In all five of these proposals, Ryerson constructed categories of people as either normative or non-normative to his ‘common’ schools, and in doing so, outlined a school system that would serve a vision of a future ‘civilized’ state.

In putting these four documents for separate schools in dialogue with one work on common schools, it is possible to see that Ryerson’s educational proposals are grounded in liberal philosophy. Through the logics of liberalism, Ryerson promoted the project of public school creation as a project of creating a ‘civilized’ nation. This conceptualization enabled and supported the contradiction of the co-existence of separate schools and schools that were supposedly ‘common,’ or universal, in that it constructed categories of people as separate from this universal. In fact, the very existence and success of the common schools depended on the creation, maintenance, and regular exclusion of people circumscribed within categories of difference as contained within separate schools. In placing proposals for separate schools next to each other, I examine the consistent narratives born from liberal philosophy that Ryerson uses, as they refer to and construct versions of problem students, in order to uncover what their creation says about his overarching educational plan.

In doing so, I push back against narratives of particularity and exceptionality that are prominent both in Ryerson’s rationales for separate schools and in everyday stories about the ‘problem child.’ This project works in conjunction with the works of writers such as Alexander G. Weheliye, Lisa Lowe, Jodi A. Byrd, and Ashon Crawley, all of whom search for the ways in which examining relationality across dimensions of oppression and subjugation illuminate what Weheliye (2015) terms “a totality” (p. 12). Weheliye writes that writing in terms of relation, as opposed to terms of comparison or exception, opens possibilities of seeing how the relations compose the whole and, in doing so, also opens the possibility of seeing new ways in which relation can occur (p. 13). He notes,

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6 My focus in examining the proposals for separate schools is to investigate how and why Ryerson relied on and helped reinforce descriptions of constructed categories of people. Here and throughout this thesis, I use the terms that Ryerson used in quotation marks in order to clarify and emphasize that my focus is these categories and their construction as fictions, rather than on any real people who may have been encompassed within them.
Relation is not a waste product of established components; rather, it epitomizes the constitutive potentiality of a totality that is structured in dominance and composed of the particular processes of bringing-into-relation, which offer spheres of interconnected existences that are in constant motion. (p. 12)

My project works in conjunction with broader projects of relationality in that it explores, through placing Ryerson’s proposals next to each other, the processes of bringing-into-relation. I investigate how Ryerson requires the ‘problem child’ in order to constitute the normative student, and how bringing these constructions into relation with each other (which includes creating geographies of exclusion) defines the purpose of his educational system as a whole.

In order to illuminate this process of bringing-into-relation, it is necessary to untangle Ryerson’s arguments about the path of education (much of which is recognizable in contemporary arguments about the purposes of schooling), which are grounded in liberal philosophy. In questioning liberal philosophy and searching for its implications in Ryerson’s thinking, I work to write towards what Lisa Lowe (2015), following Foucault, calls “a history of the present,” or a project that “refuses the simple recovery of the past and troubles the givenness of the present formation” (p. 136). Placing Ryerson’s thinking as the product of a particular time, place, and subjectivity is an attempt to disrupt any sense that the way that Upper Canada public education system evolved was based on a natural or logical progression of history. In effect, the foundations of Upper Canada schools, like many if not all public education systems in North America, were grounded in the liberal worldview dominant in the thinking of nineteenth century intellectuals of the British Empire.

I follow writers such as Lisa Lowe and Radhika Mohanram in their work defining liberalism as a philosophy that constructs concepts such as freedom and universality for white European men on the basis of the denial and restriction of these concepts to others. Following Lowe, the philosophy of liberalism, drawing broadly from European political philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, and G.W.F. Hegel, includes:

The narration of political emancipation through citizenship in the state, the promise of economic freedom in the development of wage labor and exchange
markets, and the conferring of civilization to human persons educated in aesthetic and national culture – in each case unifying particularity, difference, or locality through universal concepts of reason and community. (Lowe, 2015, p. 3-4)

Lowe argues that the promises of liberalism, of progress, equality, and freedom, are “commensurate with, and deeply implicated in, colonialism, slavery, capitalism and empire” (p. 2). Part of Lowe’s work in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* is to track these implications, in which both colonial rule and colonialism through imperial trades was accommodated, rather than contradicted, by notions of ‘liberty’ (p. 15). While Lowe largely works on an international historical scale, Mohanram (1999) notes the same contradictions in close readings of works of philosophy by liberal thinkers. She writes that Locke’s constructions of ‘universal’ ideas of identity and consciousness depend on a developmental timeline, and the existence of a “marked body” as the beginning of this timeline: a body that symbolizes the absence of consciousness, the not-there-yet pre-existence of subjectivity (p. 38-39). This construction of identity erases social relationships of domination and oppression, such as those colonial ones that Lowe tracks, and creates a conception of the ‘universality’ of subjectivity that depends on the exclusion of “marked bodies” from the possibility of accessing that subjectivity. Using this logic, liberal philosophy about individuals and humanity becomes intricately tied to the justifications and narratives for empire. As Lowe writes,

> Social relations in the colonized Americas, Asia, and Africa were the condition of possibility for Western liberalism to think the universality of human freedom, however much freedoms for slaves, colonized, and indigenous peoples were precisely exempted by that philosophy. (p. 16)

The liberal philosophy that constructed Western Europe and settler-colonial North America as the “most enlightened” nations of the world, as Ryerson termed them (Ryerson, 1894a [1846], p. 189), was produced not in isolation from but in direct engagement with the active violence of slavery, colonialism, and empire.

Further, these universalizing ideas of liberal philosophy (including constructions of the human, subjectivity, and consciousness) created colonial divisions of humanity in their definitions of who is excluded both rhetorically and materially from the ‘liberty’ of modern man
(Lowe, 2015, p. 6). These delineations of social difference – built from conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, ability, poverty, religion, and more - created categories of difference that marked distance from what it meant to be human through constructed internal deficiencies. Mohanram, in her work deciphering Locke (1999), tracks the way that this internalization is suggested. If the unmarked body, represented by a bourgeois white European man devoid of any characteristics of social difference, can transcend to consciousness (and in this process achieve disembodiment), then the inability of the “marked body” to complete this transcendence is an indication of internal traits of deficiency, drawn by Locke in parallel to the way that an animal is defined as inhuman by its body (p. 38). This process, in which categories of social difference are elaborated and then defined by constructed internal deficiencies, is both the logical result of liberal, imperial ideas of freedom and universality and the structure upon which those ideas and empire depend.

The creation of public school systems – which occurred throughout Western Europe and North America during the nineteenth century – was intimately wrapped up in the goals of imperial and colonial projects. Colonial officers such as John Stewart Mill constructed education as the connection between the individual person and the state, the manner by which a government could effect social control and force the molding of a national people and thus the nation itself (Lowe, 2015, pp. 112-113). This construction rested on the developmental framework used by philosophers of liberalism such as Locke and Rousseau (who wrote of the innocent/savage state of both children and Indigenous people (Smith, 2012, p. 51)), which narrated an idea that there was a progression through which untamed, uncivilized children/people could become civilized and perhaps even informed citizens of a republic – citizens which were necessary lest a representative government descend into chaos. Schools were one location in which this progression could be guided and controlled by the government. In this way, the very rationale that politicians used to advance public schooling worldwide – that a nation’s improvement would come through the educational advancement of its citizens – depended on a foundational developmental framework that positioned people in hierarchies of humanity.
Structured by this developmental framework, public schooling (and other social reforms developed in the same era) reproduced the hierarchical ordering upon which liberalism depended. Ryerson’s proposals for schools in Upper Canada depended on narratives and definitions of humanity, civilization, and the state that were produced within the context of liberal philosophy. As a result, his proposals for separate schools – dependent on a notion that there were categories of people who were uncivilized/internally deficient – were not exceptions but rather foundational components to his plan for education for the state. If the goal for public education was the future civilized state of Upper Canada, then that project required an act of constructing what it meant to be uncivilized and then the management of those constructed as such.

The creation of schools is a spatial practice. In designating separate schools, Ryerson and his contemporaries relied on and reproduced a belief that different peoples belong in different spaces. In spatializing difference in this way, constructed hierarchies of humanity become naturalized. As Katherine McKittrick (2006) writes,

> If who we see is tied up with where we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial boundaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place. (p. xv, emphasis original)

The process of creating separate schools is a spatial practice that reifies the boundaries of social difference, and transforms social categories of difference into categories for governance (Lowe, 2015, p. 6), where constructions of internal deficiencies become justifications for state involvement in the form of management and containment. This is not incidental to the work of modern education and schooling-as-nation-building, but rather intricately tied to it. The notions of modernity and civilization that liberalism espouses are not possible if all othered people can be transformed into active citizens of the nation, as much as that might be suggested in the rhetoric of universalism. Rather, separate schools are one of the primary ways that those encompassed within categories of difference are structured as being within categories of governance: brought into a relationship of management and containment with the state. It is only
through the successful maintenance of this management relationship that the future civilized state, such as that that Ryerson and his peers dreamed of, was possible. As Lowe (2015) writes,

> What some have represented as a linear temporal progression from colonial abjection to liberal freedom actually elides what might be more properly conceived as a spatial dynamic, in which forms of both liberal subject and society in the imperial center are possible only in relation to laboring lives in the colonized geographies or “zones of exception” with which they coexist, however disavowed. (p. 16)

Ryerson’s plans for separate schools rests on a narrative that there are people who are temporally deficient, behind the standard of civilization that he positions as a requirement for entry into his ‘common’ schools and the role of citizenship they promise. My argument here, following McKittrick and Lowe, is that the liberal philosophy which positioned some students as ‘ahead’ and some students as ‘behind’ was actually a spatial one, in that the existence and success of those in common schools, part of the ‘imperial center’ of Upper Canada, relied on the simultaneous creation and spatial exclusion of those in separate schools.

Through this examination of liberal philosophy, it is possible to see that the ‘problem child,’ or non-normative student of the classroom, is not only produced by the system of public education, but is foundational to the success and maintenance of the public education system. As a politician guided by liberalism, Ryerson’s ultimate goal for education – the civilized state – depended on the creation and then management of the uncivilized. The citizen, the constructed participant of the civilized nation, could only be rhetorically constituted as such (as a free, normal, rational man of the state) with the simultaneous construction and maintenance of an othered subject: those within separate schools. Further, his image of a civilized state rested on the elimination of all forms of conflict and uncivilization, an elimination in which he attempted to achieve through the development of separate schools, in which all those who potentially would exist separate from the mission of the state are brought into a forced, managed relationship with it. It is only through the maintenance of this violent relationship that Ryerson’s vision for the future state and his goals for the system of public education are possible.
To begin my analysis of Ryerson’s proposals, I focus first on his document for common schools. In Chapter 2, “Embryonic Problems: Ryerson’s Plan for Education and the Liberal State,” I examine the Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada for the ways in which it defines the goals of schooling and the normative subject of Ryerson’s ‘common’ schools. In an Upper Canadian context that was marked by political upheaval and economic distress, Ryerson positioned his method of schooling as the system that would fix all future ills by producing a civilized population and thus a civilized state. With the production of the state as the goal, his educational project proposed a schooling system that would be Christian, universal, and practical in order to form a mass of citizens who would be peaceable and productive. In doing so, he constructed the normative student for his common schools as someone who would be able to ascend to consciousness and temporally progress towards a state of civilization: a liberal developmental framework that marked this normative student as a white, upper-class, able-bodied settler, or the only type of person that was conceptualized as able to change across time.

In Chapter 3, “Developmental Milestones: Ryerson’s Distinctions of Humanity,” I place Ryerson’s works into the larger context of empire in order to ask: what were the conditions of possibility for him to imagine that people could be defined into categories of difference? I examine language in both his proposal for common schools as well as his proposals for separate schools in order to highlight that all five documents follow the same logic: one in which categories of difference, or of those who are uncivilized, work to compose the category of the normative citizen or human, the assumptive subject of Ryerson’s common schools. I track Ryerson’s definition of categories of difference and his elaboration of them into categories for governance, a step that enables him to situate their role in relationship to the state. Constructing people as within categories for governance opens up not only the possibility, but also the necessity (in a state-run, liberal education program of the school building the future state) of constructing separate schools.
I examine in more detail the proposals for these schools in Chapter 4, “Growing Pains: Ryerson’s Proposals for Separate Schools.” Here I examine similarities and differences across the different proposals that Ryerson issued between 1847 and 1868 in order to show that in all four of these proposals, his purpose was to establish a system of governance to define, manage, and contain embodied difference, and, in doing so, make possible the primacy and success of the ‘common’ school system as well as his vision for a future civilized state. In order to do this, I analyze how Ryerson constructs categories of ‘Indian,’ ‘coloured people,’ ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ and ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ completely separate from the people he intended them to represent. I discuss educational strategies used by those people who were encompassed within these categories that existed before, during, and after Ryerson’s proposals, in order to resist perpetuating Ryerson’s ‘truths’ as well as to illustrate the resistance that was always already occurring in all of these situations. I avoid equating the categories themselves – which would require ignoring their fictionality – and instead compare how Ryerson’s proposals worked to bring them into relation with each other and with the normative subject for common schools. In doing so, it is possible to reconceptualize the production of separate schools and non-normative ‘problem children’ as foundational to the rhetorical and material creation of the common school system.

Underneath all of this discussion of proposals, however, is the very real construction of a school system that was shaped by all who built and inhabited it: Ryerson and his contemporaries, and generations of teachers, administrators, parents, and students. The connection between the schools and the state was never lost on those whom Ryerson constructed as outside the purpose of ‘common’ schools, who perceived from the beginning that access to and success within them was key to accessing success with the state (Burke and Milewski, 2012, p. 223; Wan, 2014, p. 2). This led to resistance and activism that helped change the Upper Canada school system into a contemporary Ontario school system that Ryerson might have difficulty recognizing – or maybe he would not. In Chapter 5, “The Problem With Foundations,” I conclude this thesis by recognizing the important activism that has dismantled much of Ryerson’s segregationist work,
and questioning whether a system can be changed when its foundational philosophy remains untouched. I turn towards the definition of Behaviour Exceptionality, a special education label used by the Toronto District School Board, in order to illustrate the ongoing use of strategies championed by Ryerson: the construction, maintenance, and exclusion of those within a category of difference in order to constitute the normative student and define space for the educational project of building a future ‘civilized’ state. I ask about the implications of this label given my argument from the previous three chapters: does this mean, in fact, that attempts to change the ‘problem’ of the ‘problem child’ must begin in changing the meaning of public education itself?

And in this way I return to the quotation from Dionne Brand with which I began this introduction. In the case of public education, is history destiny? I hope that this work, rather than ending on a fatalistic note, opens up further possibilities for thinking about education and schooling, and what it means for individual people and the state. Lisa Lowe (2015) writes that her deconstructive work, in tracking the path of liberalism through colonialism, empire, and slavery, is a strategy of writing in the “past conditional temporality,” a tense that asks what could have been (p. 40). The power and potential of this tense rests in the fact that there is always more than one possibility to how the present was constructed: the deconstruction of narratives and spaces that present as natural and true makes it possible to imagine alternative histories, knowledges, ways of being, and other conditions of possibility that could have been (p. 175). Ashon Crawley (2015) describes this space, where truths and logics of the world are unsettled, as otherwise, which is a space separate from dominant, colonial narratives about the human that has always existed, continues to exist, and will exist. The otherwise is a space and potential that has always existed in schooling. This is the tense, the space, and the hopefulness into which I write this work. I hope that in resisting and questioning the narratives about how we see and think and believe the ‘problem child,’ I can open new spaces in which to think of alternative ways in which to see and think and believe education, schools, and students.
Chapter 2
Embryonic Problems:
Ryerson’s Plan for Education and the Liberal State

“To educate ‘all the brats in every neighbourhood’ is just the very object of this clause.”

— Egerton Ryerson, 
Ryerson Memorial Volume (Hodgins)

“As Franz Fanon has argued, the problem of creating and legitimating a national culture ‘represents a special battlefield’”

— Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 
Decolonizing Methodologies

As soon as you start questioning the figure of the ‘problem child’ as something other than a true, natural description of a student, you run up against questions about the nature of schooling. If the ‘problem child’ is not a problem inherent to an individual person, then what is happening in the classroom to make them so? If they are perceived as a problem, then what is the non-problem way to be in the classroom? Or, what does it mean to be at school? In this chapter, at the beginning of my exploration of the ways that schools create and foster the production of ‘problem children,’ I turn to the reasonings behind the development of the institution of public schooling in one location: Upper Canada, the territory which the settler-colonial government now calls Ontario. I explore the Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada (hereafter Report), published in 1846 by Egerton Ryerson, the Chief Superintendent of Schools in Upper Canada. In this document, public schooling is constructed and defended as the arena in which, through the guided development of progressively more advanced people, a more civilized state would be born. Under this construction, the institution of public schooling and the normative student within it were written into being to serve the success of the state.

7 Since it was known as Upper Canada for most of Ryerson’s tenure (it became Canada West after Confederation in 1867), that is how I will refer to the territory now known as Ontario. It is also worth noting that although Upper Canada was first considered a separate colony (before Confederation) and then a province (after), the rhetoric that Ryerson uses points to an understanding of it as an equal player among, as he called them, the “most enlightened” countries, although he always emphasized its British nature.
This Report was the first significant document that Ryerson completed at the beginning of his extensive and formative tenure as Chief Superintendent. He was appointed to the position on September 28th, 1844, and by October 2nd he had applied to study the school systems of the settler-colonial United States and “the most enlightened nations of Europe” (Hodgins, 1894, p. 138). His 300-page Report was published on his return, encompassing systems that he had seen, conversations that he had had, and dozens of quotations from other politicians that supported his arguments. This Report was the first time that Ryerson elaborated at length his beliefs, both for his political peers as well as the public, on what public education should look like, how it should function, and why the entire system was crucial to establish. Its internal publication was quickly followed by the Common School Act of 1846, the first law of Ryerson’s tenure. Both historians and contemporaries of Ryerson pinpoint the year 1846, marked by this Report and the law that followed its intentions, as a turning point in the development of Upper Canada public education (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 119; Curtis, 1989, p. 351; Hodgins, 1894, p. 8). John George Hodgins, Ryerson’s protégé and assistant for his entire superintendency, wrote in 1894 that this Report “largely formed the basis of subsequent School legislation in Upper Canada,” (p. 8) emphasizing its importance as a philosophical foundation for the decades that followed. In addition, the fact that Ryerson’s administration republished it in 1847 in pamphlet form in the number of 3,000 copies (Hodgins, 1894, p. 8) suggests that Ryerson himself held a strong stance on the importance of the ideas contained within – and, possibly out of a desire to rally a public to his side in a divisive political climate, that he believed these ideas should be disseminated.

My goal in examining this Report is to unearth the philosophy behind Ryerson’s educational plans, a goal that leads to a focus not only on what he states as important, but also the way that he states it. Or: the language that he uses matters. Creating a system of mass

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8 These nations included France, England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden.
9 Hodgins, as a close student and partner of Ryerson, is surely biased in all of his writing on Ryerson’s life work. However, as someone who was with Ryerson throughout his career, I trust that those documents that he highlights as important were important to Ryerson. For this chapter, I choose this document because of the importance awarded to it, biased or not, because my goal is to unearth the dominant philosophical underpinnings to Ryerson’s worldview.
education is in large part a process of organization. The language of Ryerson’s *Report* contains clues to how he structures his world, which determines the possibilities for his imaginings of his educational system’s organization. For example, even as he claims in this initial document of his career that he is proposing a universal system, he defines this universality through creating borders along lines of race, class, and ability: the groundwork for exclusions in the form of separate school systems that will manifest in later years. In examining Ryerson’s *Report* and other documents throughout this thesis, I refuse to discard his rhetorical flourishes and moments where he pauses to illustrate a compelling point. Instead, I highlight and focus on this figurative language – particularly metaphors, comparisons, imagery, and repeated themes – as crucial tools in uncovering the outlines of Ryerson’s worldview, and how education fits within it.

This worldview is hinted at in the brief quotation from Ryerson at the head of this chapter, in which Ryerson states both his goal (universal education) and implies that there are some types of people – “brats”– that it is especially important to educate. This conception of education, which I will elaborate on in my analysis of his *Report*, positions education as the guided formation of all people (especially the “brats”) in order to produce moral and social progress for “the neighborhood”/society. Lisa Lowe (2015) points out that education under this narration becomes the “synthetic link” between individuals and the state, in which the development of one supports the progress of the larger entity (p.112). This narration rests on liberal philosophy, which both provides the developmental framework upon which this notion of improvement depends and also defines what it means to be civilized, or to be a successful nation with no problems/“brats.” Focusing on the details of Ryerson’s language, within his political and discursive context, allows me to unearth this liberal philosophy, a philosophy that guided and motivated both the language that he uses as well as the educational projects that he would propose. For, as I will argue in later chapters, it is the liberal language in Ryerson’s *Report* that shows that his later plans for separate schools were not aberrations from his educational project as illustrated here, but rather directly anticipated by it.
In discussing liberalism, I follow Lisa Lowe (2015) in her construction of it as a political philosophy that narrates freedom through participation in the state (as completed through structures of citizenship, education, law, property, and other arenas of national culture) while depending on the existence and continuation of colonialism, slavery, and empire: violences which both provided the conditions of possibility for the very thinking of these freedoms as well as the experience of these freedoms by the white European man. In both the philosophy and the practices of governments and states who narrate their power using this philosophy, universalizing concepts such as reason and community mask criteria of citizenship and subjectivity that define the ability to self-govern as one that is exclusive to upper-class, able-bodied and minded, white European men (Lowe, 2015, p. 4; Shah, 2001, p. 8; Mohanram, 1999, p. 53).

In other words, liberalism requires a relationality (between ongoing slavery and constructions of what it means to be free, between philosophies of universal human attributes and an strict denial of these attributes to constructed groups of people) while denying that this relationality exists. In unearthing Ryerson’s liberalism in this chapter and beyond, I search for how, in constructing a vision of a future society, he is completing a process of bringing-into-relation: defining what is normative by defining categories of difference. This means that as Ryerson is constructing what a school is, he simultaneously constructs the problems that exist within it and creates a dependency on the continued existence and management of these ‘problems’ in order for his vision for society to function. Liberalism, the very philosophy that successfully promoted public education in a number of countries in the nineteenth century,

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10 In this broad definition, Lowe is attempting to generalize the broad contributions of a number of different philosophers, who manage these contradictions in a variety of ways. In my discussion here with Ryerson, I define community as his imagined future in which there would be no conflict: a space that requires the suppression of all difference as he defines it. I follow Nayan Shah (2001) in his definition of the citizen and the subject: “the idea of the citizen emphasizes the equality of the independent individual in political participation and in access to privilege and resources, while the subject is constituted in disciplinary practices in places such as schools, prisons, factories, hospitals and clinics that inculcate the individual self with the norms of the population” (p. 7).

11 I owe the phrase and the construction behind ‘bringing-into-relation’ to Alexander G. Weheliye (2015), who refers to it in his argument for writing that uses the language of relationality as opposed to comparison or exception, which erases the process of bringing-into-relation that constructs what he terms the totality (p. 12-13).
depended on intimate violences that produced, maintained, and excluded categories of difference.12

In this way, my approach to this archival material (including the Report as well as the other four documents I analyze in the following chapters) differs from that of most historians who have analyzed much of the same material. Rather than seeking to narrate what happened and how, my starting point both in my initial archival work and in writing this thesis is and has been to search for rationales and justifications for exclusion that presage the everyday narratives around ‘problem children’ today. This approach has meant, from the beginning, prioritizing those documents and those experiences of exclusion and marginality rather than those that claim universality, generality, or prominence. I chose to examine the Report not as a major document that defined how all schools would be established, but as a document that illustrates the extent to which the intimately imagined connection between schools and the state made exclusion foundational to the Upper Canadian educational project from the beginning.

This approach required an archival search that stretched, within the confines of documents from Upper Canada, across decades, governmental departments, and archives with varying degrees of accessibility.13 I searched for documents produced by Ryerson in which he

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12 I use ‘intimate’ here following Lowe (2015), who challenges the notion of intimacy as the personal sphere of the individual and instead uses it as a method to view close connections in contexts that are usually drawn as vastly different and thus make visible world processes that create the human (pp. 17-21). While Lowe discusses vast geographical connections that I cannot cover (à la her title, The Intimacies of Four Continents) I use intimacies here to discuss the ways that Ryerson, in constantly evoking distance mapped both spatially and temporally between the subjects of his common schools and those he defines as ‘savage,’ is actually creating an intimate relation between constructions of normalcy and difference, in which one construction cannot occur without the other.

13 Many of these archives came from the extensive work of John George Hodgins, Ryerson’s assistant for his entire career in the Department of Education. At the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, after Ryerson had left his post as Chief Superintendent, Hodgins took on the role of Official Historiographer of Education. Working from the (prodigious amount of) documents that had been produced by Ryerson’s administration, as well as newspaper articles, speeches, and letters published during the same era, Hodgins edited dozens of volumes. The version of the Report that I will be working from, for instance, comes from a series in which there are seventeen volumes alone, each numbering in the hundreds of pages. While presumably not engaging a particularly wide readership beyond political circles, all of these volumes were preserved in public university libraries and are now available for free, with bookmarking and searching capabilities, online at www.archive.org. The same goes for most of Ryerson’s writings, which are now out of copyright and scanned and searchable on Google Books. However, some documents, such as Ryerson’s Letter on Residential Schools, were not seen by Hodgins as worth compiling or published by other sources at the time. As such, they are much more difficult to find (see Chapter 4 for my discussion of the archives for the Letter in particular). As a result of this archival situation, I
proposed exclusions, some of them well-known in Ontario (such as his *Letter on Residential Schools*, despite it being more inaccessible in the archives), some regularly discussed in historical works (such as the *Separate Schools Act*, which established parameters for segregated schooling by race and by religion), and some of them ignored by almost all scholars of Upper Canadian education (such as his *Report of an Inquiry in Regard to the Instruction and Care for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind*). These documents are vastly different, in terms of context, content, and impact, but bringing them into conversation with each other and with Ryerson’s *Report* allows me to position them as central, rather than marginal, to the story of Upper Canada education.\textsuperscript{14} Just as I began my project by refusing to believe that the ‘problem child’ was an individualized phenomenon in present day schools, I also refuse Ryerson’s assertions that his separate schools are prompted by a constructed population’s essential marginality, which have excused them from most historical analyses. Instead, I search for what all of these documents illustrate about the educational system as a whole.

This means, similar to my methodology in examining Ryerson’s language, that I do not search for any chronology across these documents, nor do I examine them in chronological order. I am not looking for how Ryerson’s opinion developed or changed (although I do note moments where it does, such as his opinion on compulsory education), but rather I search for themes across all of these documents, noting contradictions and similarities in order to map how

\textsuperscript{14} This is also a challenge to traditional historical narratives that address few of these proposals for separate schools, if any at all. While I use the work of Susan E. Houston and Alison Prentice (1992) for accounts of the Upper Canada educational and political context, their historical and archival work is unhelpful for much of my thesis because their attention to segregated schooling by class and race is structured by narratives of exceptionalism to the main system, and they fail to address completely residential schools or institutional schooling for disabled students. While this text is the most modern and comprehensive summary of *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (as their book is titled), Houston and Prentice neglect to mention the schooling of many students. This approach further marginalizes the educational experiences of people that Ryerson marginalizes, and also ignores the implications that Ryerson’s texts on separate schools hold for the definition of public schooling as a whole.
he builds, organizes, and justifies his world. This allows me to explore, while acknowledging the different circumstances that informed each document, Ryerson’s consistency in his commitment to education as a machinery to produce the civilized state, defining students as normative or excludable according to their functionality to his vision of what it means to be ‘civilized.’

Tracking this consistency is only possible with a focus on one individual person within the broader context of Upper Canada educational politics of the nineteenth century. Focusing on Ryerson allowed me to examine diverse documents while assuming a level of consistency in worldview, and choosing someone with such prominence within the system allowed me to make broader arguments about the impacts of his liberal philosophy. My decision to focus on Ryerson was incidental rather than planned, occurring after I discovered, (as many other writers on education in nineteenth century Upper Canada do) that it was impossible to ignore him – and that it was actually more useful and interesting to focus on him, as a representative for a larger domestic and international trend of politicians who positioned education as a key element in the development of the modern state. He authored almost every single education law within the period of his superintendency, a period which saw the development of a huge educational bureaucracy and the enrollment of almost every child of Upper Canada in schools. More than anything else, the influence of his writings and legislation is shown in the fact that by the time he left office in the 1870s, there was a well-developed culture of schooling: “‘going to school,’ at least until the age of thirteen or fourteen, was becoming a habit” (Houston and Prentice, p. 200).

Whether or not he played a major role as an individual person, the documents and writing that Ryerson produced held influence and shaped the production of education in Ontario, and it is with these writings that I structure my argument.

I begin my investigation into the foundations of the ‘problem child’ and Ryerson’s Report by discussing the context in which it was born: Ryerson’s personal background and the

15 For a succinct historiography of Ryerson and arguments over his level of influence (which were especially strong in the 1970s, when historians posited strong correctives to narratives such as Hodgins’ that positioned him as a hero), see Burke and Milewski, 2012, pp. 4-7.
political and educational context of Upper Canada in the mid-nineteenth century. From there, I move to an examination of the document itself. I examine the dominant themes present in his report (Christianity, universality, and practicality) and his construction of the normative student for his schools in order to narrate the story that Ryerson tells about education. Through examining Ryerson’s explicit statements and rhetorical implications throughout these themes, I illustrate that his intended purpose for public education is the creation of a more ‘civilized’ state, which requires a regular elaboration of those who are and who are not welcome/expected in this future state, and thus in his schools. In this way, I track how this document, in imagining what schools and students can be, depends on a regular recalling of what they are not.

**Egerton Ryerson and Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada**

Ryerson’s personal background was shaped by religion, education, and a belief in people changing (on a trajectory towards becoming more civilized). Only fifteen years before his appointment as Chief Superintendent, Ryerson had been a Methodist missionary in an Anishinaabe village at the Credit River outside of Toronto, where he worked with young people in both schools and agricultural projects (Hodgins, 1911b, p. 99). His first exposure to being a leader in education, then, was as a white minister tasked with bringing Christianity and civilization to an Indigenous population, supporting the combination and conflation of education, Christianity, and civilization throughout his work and life. He followed this work with a tenure as the editor of a Methodist newspaper in which he advocated for more Methodist representation in an elite world primarily led by Anglicans, and then founded and led Victoria College, which would later become part of the University of Toronto (Houston and Prentice, 1992, pp. 41-43). Ryerson’s Christian faith worked well with his liberal political philosophy in that both supported a belief in the power and inevitability of a progressive developmental timeline.

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16 Goldwin S. French (1978) tracks this final theme to Ryerson’s background as a minister, arguing that “human improvement” was a foundational part of Ryerson’s faith (p. 49).
Ryerson became involved in the Upper Canada political scene during the 1830s, during his time as an editor and then as President of Victoria College. The 1830s and 1840s were decades of high stress socially, economically, and politically in Upper Canada (McDonald, 1978, p. 82). There were coordinated rebellions in both Upper and Lower Canada from 1836-1837, and the Irish famine prompted a huge spike in the immigration of poor families to Canada in the 1840s. In political circles (within which Ryerson became an outspoken and controversial player), there was a deep concern for the unity of Upper Canada, both in terms of an immediate fear of an American-style rebellion against Britain, and in terms of how to create a culture and identity for a future country when so much of the population was foreign-born or Indigenous, both of which were constructed as threats to Upper Canada’s colonial British national identity.

The immigrant population of Upper Canada was significant. Even before the Irish immigration that followed the famine, Houston and Prentice (1992) write that in 1841 just over 50 percent of the Upper Canadian population had been born in Canada, and a corresponding 46 percent were under age fifteen (p. 280). While the majority of statesmen and politicians (including Ryerson) were British descendant, only half of the population was English, Scots, Welsh, or Irish. The Irish comprised twenty-five percent of the population alone (p. 280). Combined with the turmoil of the 1830s and 1840s, this level of (non-British) diversity suggests that it is not surprising that Ryerson and his contemporary political elites felt an urgent need for some sort of system that would support a unified national culture, especially one that re- emphasized ties to Britain. As such, this national culture would necessarily exclude those people who were indigenous to the land the state occupied: as Jean M. O’Brien (2010) writes about local historians in nineteenth century New England, and is equally true for politicians in Upper Canada working contemporaneously,

In the way they construct narratives about non-Indians, they implicitly make arguments about what counts as legitimate history, and who counts as legitimate peoples. Thus, even when the subject matter of local texts is not explicitly about Indians, it is frequently implicitly so. (p. xviii)
Houston and Prentice base their statistics on work by D.H. Akenson (1984), who works from an 1842 census that includes an unquestioned category of “Canadian Born” (p. 16). Neither Houston and Prentice nor Akenson interrogate whether this category includes Indigenous people living in Upper Canada, an interrogation that is especially important given the fact that demographic methods like census-taking have historically been used as tools of colonization by actively erasing evidence of Indigenous peoples (O’Brien, 2010, p. xvi) – an erasure that is evident in the broad census category of “Canadian Born.” Given the fact that nineteenth century statements about ‘Canadians’ very rarely included Indigenous people, and the fact that their inclusion would have produced very different numbers than those mentioned above, it is likely that these statistics about immigration were produced from a settler-only or settler-majority census. Whether or not they were included in demographic measures, their continued existence likely increased the feeling among political elites of Upper Canada that there was a threat to the British nature of the state. “This country,” Dionne Brand writes of Canada a century and a half later, “in the main a country of immigrants, is always redefining origins, jockeying and smarming for degrees of belonging” (Brand, 2001, p. 65).

Those “jockeying and smarming” in the nineteenth century focused their attention on education, with the idea that schools would create a better and safer future state for people like them to belong. As Curtis (1989) writes,

Educational reform…was inextricably connected to questions of the form of the colonial state. All the fundamental questions concerning educational organization – who needed to be taught, who could educate them, what they needed to know, how they should learn it, who should pay for it – these and other questions were answered only by answering at the same time questions concerning the state: who would rule, how, of what would rule consist, how it would be financed. The struggle over education was at once a struggle over political rule. (p. 347)

School legislation had been in place for decades by the 1840s, and many children in Upper Canada were already in schools that were supported by government funds. For wealthy children, education often came in the form of private schools or tutoring, and for less well-off children there were often common schools in towns organized by the community. In general, schooling was primarily directed by local and parental control (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 95). The
political and economic turmoil of the 1830s and 1840s impressed upon most politicians that some kind of education reform or increase in schooling was needed, especially with frequent publications declaring (with questionable statistics) an intrinsic connection between illiteracy and crime (Graff, 1978, p. 192).

It is in relation to this context that we can best understand Ryerson’s educational plans and endeavors. Ryerson, as he rose to prominence, believed that what Upper Canada needed was not just more education, but rather, more centralized education, which would give the government the ability to make sure any and all children of the state did not (literally) get the wrong ideas. When there was a brief struggle over his appointment as Superintendent of Schools because he was seen as partisan, he took this as even further proof that his plan was necessary: a plan in which all forms of conflict, down to political partisanship, could be eradicated by a proper, unified, state-controlled school system (McDonald, 1978, pp. 84-86).

**Ryerson’s Report and Plan for Schooling**

Rather than examining the complete *Report*, I will be working from a condensed version edited by John George Hodgins, Ryerson’s protégé and later his historian, contained within Volume 6 of his *Documentary History of Education in Upper Canada from the Passing of the Constitutional Act of 1791 to the Close of the Rev. Dr. Ryerson’s Administration of the Education Department in 1876*. Within this edited version, the majority of the sections that were cut were those which spent considerable amount of time detailing the governmental school structures of other countries, while the sections that defined what education meant to Ryerson were left in whole. I selected this edited version both to allow me the space to pursue other writing by Ryerson, but also because I trust Hodgins’ editing for the purposes of which I am examining the *Report*. My goal is to see how this *Report* defines education and the school system Ryerson is about to create. Hodgins, in his belief that this *Report* was foundational to the legislation that followed, was likely to err on the side of including more information that was directly related to what was eventually enacted. In other words, if there is the chance that
Hodgins, who is editing in the 1890s but was with Ryerson the moment this was published, is not faithful to the 1846 intentions, it is likely instead that he is faithful to the way that this document formed Ryerson’s actions in the future.

In his *Report*, Ryerson defines education as a system that will serve the success of the state. He begins by clarifying that his conception of education is not about acquiring pieces of knowledge, but about shaping the character of a people:

> By Education, I mean not the mere acquisition of certain arts, or of certain branches of knowledge, but that instruction and discipline which qualify and dispose the subjects of it for their appropriate duties and employments of life, as Christians, as persons of business and also as members of the civil community in which they live. The basis of an Educational structure adapted to this end should be as broad as the population of the country…the whole based upon the principles of Christianity, and uniting the combined influence and support of the Government and the people. (Ryerson, 1894a [1846], p. 142)

He continues by naming five components of this vision: Christian morality, universality, practicality (in terms of building habits for life), the development of both intellectual and physical powers, and the teaching of specific subjects (which he then names and illustrates). Here, I examine the first three components that Ryerson illustrates, both at the moments in which he defines and defends them, and in their pervasive presence as themes that structure his thinking about both the philosophy and mechanics of schooling throughout his report, including in his discussions of the other two components. These three themes are already present in these first words of the *Report* quoted above: Christian morality as the basis for the principles of education, universality in the anticipated reach of education, and practicality in the focus on producing people prepared for future lives. In exploring this report, I examine each of these components named in turn in order to illustrate the ways that each organizes Ryerson’s project of schooling as a project to produce the success of the state. I then turn towards how Ryerson’s *Report* constructs the normative student: a student who is already positioned, in childhood, as one who will be able to developmentally progress towards citizenship within the nation.
Ryerson’s Report: The Theme of Christian Morality

Ryerson’s section on the importance of the foundation of Christian morality to schools takes up a considerable number of pages, even in the edition edited and condensed by Hodgins. Ryerson himself acknowledges this, and in his rationalization it is possible to see the purpose that this foundation of Christianity serves to his vision:

On a subject so vitally important, forming as it does, the very basis of the future character and social state of this Country, — a subject too, respecting which there exists much error, and a great want of information, — I feel it necessary to dwell at some length, and to adduce the testimony of the most competent authorities. (Ryerson, 1894 [1846], p. 151)

In this rationale, Ryerson frames the importance of Christianity to the future development of schools in terms of what it contributes to the state, establishing that the overall goal of schooling is to form the nature of the state: ideally, a state founded on Christian morality. In describing the discussion about Christianity in school as a subject in “which there exists much error,” he is referring obliquely to the ongoing debate over separate schools for students of different Christian sects (which would be established only four years later). He claims that he is not against separate schools (p. 147), yet he argues instead that a universal system guided by general Christian principals could appeal to everyone in a way that would make these schools unnecessary. While historians argue that his repeated claims that his system could be immune from religious controversy display Ryerson’s arrogance (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 115), I see this arrogance as consistent with his broad hopes for education: Ryerson believed that if everyone was educated/Christian enough, the state would reach a higher level of civilization and all conflict (including religious conflict) would cease.

Ryerson begins his section on the necessity of a moral education with vivid examples of what awaits any country that thinks schooling can be accomplished without religion. “Such teaching,” he writes, “may, as it has done, raise up an army of pugilists and persecutors, but it is not the way to create a community of Christians” (p. 147). He refers to the state of New York, where supposedly such a thing has occurred, and notes that although they all consider themselves very educated, their government is filled with arguments, constant debates, and no signs of the
unified opinion that a proper Christian education would ensure. Indeed, he notes, “Attila and his Huns doubtless believed themselves to be the most civilized people on earth,” with the subtitle along the side summarizing: “what Attila lacked we can supply” (p. 149). In this way, Ryerson establishes Christianity as a system of power that assures the civilized nature of both citizens and state. With an implied developmental framework, he defines the Christian, educated, future world produced by his school system by using the specter of ‘Attila and his Huns’ as a rhetorical tool to represent a racialized and uncivilized past.

This framework is emphasized in other sections that note the threat that a non-Christian education carries. Ryerson quotes a Reverend Doctor Potter, who states that in American schools without a Christian foundation,

The culture of the heart and conscience is often sadly neglected; and the child grows up a shrewd, intelligent, and influential man, perhaps, but yet a slave to his lower propensities. Talents and knowledge are rarely blessings either to the possessor, or to the world, unless they are placed under the control of the higher sentiments and principles of our nature. Better that men should remain in ignorance, than that they should eat the fruit of the tree of Knowledge, only to be made more subtle and powerful adversaries of God and humanity. (p. 150-151)

In including this quotation, Ryerson continues to construct his definition of schooling by emphasizing a duality: past/future and uncivilized/civilized is presented along with lower propensities/higher sentiments. The higher sentiments are tied to the heart and the conscience, while the lower propensities are tied to slavery, another racialized term that connotes the developmental past and in so doing further constructs the future freedoms promised by education. As Ryerson builds this definition of Christian education, he establishes negative, non-Christian elements (the uncivilized, lower-propensity-driven, racialized past) as not only

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17 See Lowe, 2014, p.13-14 on liberal philosophers’ relegation of slavery to a temporally distant past, despite its continued existence in the ‘new world.’ In this selection from Rev. Dr. Potter, slavery is not an indication of the developmental past of world civilizations (as Lowe is describing), but rather of the developmental timeline of the human: the language indicates an immature state with an inability to control, a state in which one is controlled by the body itself. In using the word slave, Potter suggests an ‘earlier’ stage in world civilization progressions while illustrating an ‘earlier’ stage in human development progressions. This is a subtle suggestion (between the constructed developmental timelines of the world and of the human) that Ryerson takes up in other places in his Report, which I examine in more depth in my discussion of how he constitutes the normative student.
different from his future state, but as a threat to this state. The lack of Christianity creates danger, a danger both to the non-Christian person (who will not experience the ‘blessings’ of ‘talents and knowledge’) but more importantly to society. The non-Christian, educated or not, is a threat to the civilized world (as the figure of Attila the Hun was/is narrated), and also to “God and humanity.” When Christianity and non-Christianity are narrated not only as different, but also in direct opposition, then Christian education becomes an imperative if ‘civilization’ of the state is to be ensured and protected.

As he continues writing on Christianity, Ryerson emphasizes that his true goal in building a Christian foundation to education is establishing a Christian foundation for the state. Ryerson writes of Ireland, where the school board published a book called “Lessons on the Truth of Christianity,” and suggests, “I dare say the series of this kind of books will be completed by one or more publications on our duties to God, to the State, to our fellow men, etcetera” (p. 156). For Ryerson, Christian individuals create a state founded on Christian values because lessons of morality can be equally applied between people, God, and nation. The implications for the state with a population without a proper moral education, then, are dire:

> [In] our own imperfect system of Popular Education…the omission of Christianity in respect to Schools, and the character and qualifications of Teachers, has prevailed to an extent fearful to contemplate. The Country is yet too young to witness the full effects of such an omission, —such an abuse of that which should be the primarily element of education, without which there can be no Christian education; and without a Christian Education, there will not long be a Christian Country. (p. 150)

Ryerson’s fear is for his country, in which a civilized state is only possible as a state founded on Christian values. Curtis (1978) writes that Ryerson’s version of a common Christianity “involved, first of all, the creation of a form of social order in which subjects would willingly accept political forms, would respect political authority even if it appeared to be unjust, and would reject violent political activity” (p. 358). Any person who sows discord – perhaps by questioning the state – is not a true Christian, and is thus not civilized, or properly educated. In underlining this connection between the individual docility and state success, Ryerson uses
Christianity in order to define the necessity and the urgency of education as a national civilization-fostering project.

*Ryerson’s Report: The Theme of Universality*

This nation-building project of education can only possibly be successful if it is universal. Or, more specifically, if those who are the biggest danger to the nation are forced into education. In the moment when Ryerson first elaborates the component of universality within his educational plan, soaring rhetoric of equality turns quickly to threat: “the branches of knowledge,” Ryerson writes, “which it is essential that all should understand, should be provided for all, and taught to all; should be brought within the reach of the most needy, and forced upon the attention of the most careless” (p. 142). This rapid change of tone betrays Ryerson’s belief, from the very beginning of his *Report*, that there are going to be some people who will not willingly go to school. These people, in his opinion, are those for whom school is most crucial, because in denying education, they are denying the influence of the state.

Ryerson stops short of suggesting a law forcing compulsory education, but just barely. Given how passionately he describes the wonders of this policy in other countries, it seems likely that he holds off on an endorsement for political reasons rather than for personal beliefs (and in later years, he became a vocal advocate for it). He settles for an emphasis on generalized universality, beginning by illustrating the connections between illiteracy and criminality. This connection, declared unquestioningly by many nineteenth century Upper Canada politicians, was a connection that constructed literacy not through the specific skills it represented as much as through the habits and training it was presumed to produce (Wan, citing Graff, 2014, p. 7).

Ryerson writes, following this narrative, “pauperism and crime prevail in proportion to the absence of education amongst the labouring classes, and that in proportion to the existence and prevalence of education amongst those classes, is the absence of pauperism” (p. 143). Ryerson provides a vivid illustration of the dangers this causes to the state:

To a young and growing country, and the retreat of so many poor from other countries, [education] is of the greatest importance. The gangrene of pauperism in
either cities or states is almost incurable. It may be said in some sort to be hereditary as well as infectious, —both to perpetuate and propagate itself, —to weaken the body politic at its very heart, —and to multiply wretchedness and vice. (p. 143)

The threat in this passage is presumed to live within, if not actually be, the bodies of the poor. This bodily tendency towards criminality, something that can be thwarted in childhood with education, is never mentioned as afflicting middle- or upper-class people. With such a danger present, he writes that if a parent refuses to educate their child, “the State will protect the child against such a parent’s cupidity and inhumanity, and the State will protect the community against any parent…sending forth into it, an uneducated savage, an idle vagabond, or an unprincipled thief” (p. 207). On the same page, he continues:

In neglecting education, [the parent] wrongs his child – dooms him to ignorance, if not to vice, —to a condition little above that which is occupied by horses and oxen; —he also wrongs society, by robbing it of an intelligent and useful member, and by inflicting upon it an ignorant, or vicious, barbarian. (p. 207)

With these arguments, the uneducated person has been transformed from someone diseased to a savage, a beast of burden, and a barbarian.

Historians note that while Ryerson was clearly eager and/or desperate for lower-class people to be educated, he was not actually interested in changing ‘divinely ordained’ class structures. Rather, he was interested in forcing the lower class into ‘respectability,’ encoded as bourgeois social values (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 308). In doing so, reformist historians note, he displaces all of the social problems of nineteenth century Upper Canada onto the people who were experiencing the brunt of these problems, blaming “their lack of morality, their unwillingness to work, and their propensity to delinquent behaviour” (Lazerson, 1978, p. 7). What is missed by this historical analysis is that Ryerson’s strategy of ‘blaming the victim’ is not about individual people: rather, it is about the state. Paradoxically, this rhetoric supposedly illustrating universality is instead illustrating the limits to this universality, defining, along lines of race, class, and ability, whom education will manage and contain.

These boundaries are delineated using language of threat, especially threat to the nation. The metaphor representing the state as a human body (as in, ‘the body politic’) was regaining
favor at this point in history, especially with the coinciding rise of the industry of public health (another institution that focused on fixing wrong elements of the nation). Bourgeois white economic classes identified their own enlightened self-care and hygiene, contrasting this with the poor hygiene (equated with poor values) onto the working class and/or racialized people, effectively using connotations of ‘disease’ to solidify race and class distinctions (Shah, 2001, p. 4). While connecting disease with race has existed in Europe for centuries (see Savage, 2007, for examples of massacres of Jewish people during outbreaks of the plague), the discourse of public health provided new strength to this connection with its language of infection, as used by Ryerson here. Rowan Savage (2007), tracks this language into twentieth century rationales for genocide (p. 411), and you can see the embryonic version of those narratives in Ryerson’s 1840s language: the disease of the country lies within known degenerate bodies.

The use of the disease of gangrene in particular, a disease that creates dead tissue, brings up vivid images of disfigured bodies. As Garland-Thomson (1997) notes of cultural representations of physical disability, including but not exclusive to disfigurement, “a highly stigmatized characteristic like disability gains its rhetorical effectiveness from the powerful, often mixed responses that real disabled people elicit from readers who consider themselves normates” (p. 11). The use of gangrene in particular, and the following words that describe the way that, if unattended, this ‘infection’ could bring down the nation, is clearly meant to inspire a strong sense of horror that rests on a horror of disability contained within Ryerson’s assumed able-bodied readers. With a foundational understanding of the “visible world as the index of a coherent and just invisible world,” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 11), Ryerson uses the language of disability to make visible the structure of Upper Canadian society and clarify the threats that it faces. In doing so, he establishes what, and who, does not belong in Upper Canada. While gangrene as the metaphor for pauperism can be ‘cured’ with education, it is obvious that those people who actually have gangrene have no place in Ryerson’s future nation.

The use of the words ‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’ do similar work. Ryerson uses these highly charged, racist terms to emphasize the central problem with parents who do not educate their
children: they are introducing anti-modern figures into a ‘civilized’ society. While Ryerson lists other problems that uneducated people will cause, especially in their inability to produce labor for the state as an “idle vagabond” or inability to be a “useful member,” the rhetorical value in these passages rests most significantly on the images of the savage and the barbarian. In calling up these images, Ryerson defines his intended future for Upper Canada by constructing uncivilized figures who have no place in it. This is further emphasized by Ryerson’s construction of Canada as a “young country.” Narrating Upper Canada’s ‘age’ in this way either relegates peoples indigenous to Canada to an earlier uncivilized stage of development and/or erases them in order to establish European settlers as the first people who have started the country’s growth (see O’Brien, 2010, for a further description of this practice of ‘Firsting’). Either way, Indigenous people are removed as citizens of Ryerson’s future Upper Canada – but not, as seen in the evocation of savages and barbarians, as potential threats.

Ryerson’s discussion of universality, then, opens up a particular contradiction. His rhetoric constructs figures of difference that are outside of his dream for a future, civilized Upper Canada. At the same time, his argument for universality is that education for everyone would eliminate all such threats by forcing the people who embody them into a relationship with the state. This contradiction, while unaddressed in Ryerson’s report, anticipates his future production of separate schools. In these schools, Ryerson constructs categories of people as needing additional, more forceful education for the successful management and containment of the threat they represent to the state. I address these schools in following chapters: schools where the goal was not to make citizens, but to create governable subjects.

**Ryerson’s Report: The Theme of Practicality**

While the beginning and end of Ryerson’s Report are constructed around arguments for Christian morality and universality, the bulk of his writing is spent detailing exactly how the schools should be arranged and what should be taught. Universality and Christianity play a large role in forming these ideas, but the rationale for much of the specific subjects and teaching
methods for schooling is their practical applicability to the student’s life as a citizen serving the nation:

The very end of our being is practical; and every step and every branch of our moral, intellectual, and physical, culture should harmonize with the design of our existence. The age in which we live is likewise eminently practical; and the condition and interests, the pursuits of our new country, under our free government, are invested with an almost exclusively practical character. (p. 147)

For Ryerson, a practical education did not mean an education of practical skills, but rather an education that built a foundation of “habits, predispositions, and loyalties” (Curtis, 1978, p. 351) that students could then rely on to live a life of rationality that would benefit their government, and its “interests” and “pursuits.”

While he occasionally isolated literacy as a subject that is important solely for its subject matter (see Wan, 2014, p. 10, on the continuing practice of equating literacy with all education and links to citizenship in itself), his directions for almost every other subject are that it be taught in a way that will build skills for the student’s life as a citizen. “The state of society, then, no less than the wants of our country,” writes Ryerson, “require that every youth of the land should be trained to industry and practice” (p. 147). To this end, rote education is despised in that, while succeeding in producing memorized knowledge, it fails to add “vigour to the mind,” and Ryerson, in a nationalist move, blames the United States for its existence in Upper Canada (p. 159). Instead, Ryerson argues that material should be taught in ways that enhance “perceptive powers,” “reflective faculties,” and “moral sentiments” (quoting Horace Mann, p. 160). When expounding in more detail on specific academic subjects, he highlights the ways in which their teaching should be directed in order for the student to be the best citizen: history should be taught in a way that the student “learns the origins and character of his Country’s laws and institutions, the sources of its prosperity, and, therefore, the means and duties required for the advancement of its interests” (p. 189). Natural philosophy is key for the skills of observation it can foster in “tracing the sources of human action and the operations of civil government” (p. 192). He spends several pages expounding on the importance of teaching music, because “music is allied to the highest sentiments of man’s moral nature: love of God, love of country, love of
friends. Woe to the Nation in which these sentiments are allowed to go to decay” (quoting a report from the Boston School Committee, p. 188). Ryerson illustrates the importance of physical education with an anecdote: “It was young men thus trained that composed the vanguard of Blutcher’s army; and much of the activity, enthusiasm and energy, which distinguished them, was attributed to their gymnastic training at school” (p. 161). Later, Ryerson includes a frightening analogy in which he connects a practical education to settling Canadian land, equating the process of schooling with the process of building a settler-colonial state:

A popular writer quaintly remarks, that ‘teaching a pupil to read, before he enters upon the active business of life, is like giving a new settler an axe, as he goes to seek his new home in a forest. Teaching him a lesson in history is, on the other hand, only cutting down a tree, or two, for him. A knowledge of natural history is like a few bushels of grain gratuitously placed in his barn, but the art of ‘ready reckoning’ is the plough, which will remain by him for years, and help to draw out from the soil an annual treasure. (p. 179)

It is with the practical nature of education that future citizens will be formed with the abilities necessary to literally build and fortify a nation.

Or, in other words, practicality, along with universality and morality, will define the future civilized state of Upper Canada, a future state where all social problems will be fixed. Ryerson quotes an inspector of prisons in Scotland:

So powerful is education as a means of national improvement that, with comparatively few exceptions, the different countries of the world, if arranged according to the state of education in them, will be found to be arranged also according to wealth, morals, and general happiness. (p. 143)

If the state successfully controls education, then the state will effectively control the future of the nation. Ryerson underlines the citizen-state connection in discussions on governability, quoting an “enlightened” Archbishop of Ireland on what types of governments require which subjects: “if [the lower orders] are to be governed as rational beings, the more rational they are made the better subjects they will be of such a government” (p. 146). He also discusses this connection in

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18 Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher was a Prussian general who led armies in several key battles against Napoleon, including the Battle of Waterloo.
other areas: on teaching singing, he writes, “if vocal music were generally adopted as a branch of instruction… it might reasonably be expected that, in at least two generations, we should be changed into a musical people” (p. 187). What the citizen is, the nation will become.

Ryerson returns to this connection at the end of the report, when he recalls the metaphor of the nation as a human body. Arguing against theoretical rebuttals that his plan is too ambitious, he writes, “the common people; — ‘the bone and sinew’ of the country the source of all its wealth and strength — should be provided by the State, with the means of a Common School Education” (p. 194). While implying that, with public schooling, the state is giving something to its population, the metaphorical substitution of these people with the very bones and connective tissue that hold the state together suggest that this gift is something that the state needs more than the people do. Ryerson clarifies this in his final summary of the first section of his *Report*:

The object of education is to prepare men for their duties, and the preparation and disciplining of the mind for the performance of them. What the child needs in the world he should doubtless be taught in the School. On this subject we should judge, not by what has been, or is, but what ought to be, and what must be, if we are not to be distanced by other countries in the race of civilization. (p. 193)

In his final words, the object of urgency and focus of Ryerson’s concern is the state and its potential to dominate other states. Defined as a player (and someone with a shot at winning, given his sure inclusion of Upper Canada as one of the more ‘enlightened’ nations) in the “race of civilization,” Upper Canada must become more modern, more liberal, and more civilized. All of these descriptions depend on a developmental timeline, a progression in which it is better to be ahead than behind; better to be educated than to be barbaric, sickly, or criminal; better to be a civilized state than to fall behind and descend into savagery. He uses this framework along with the construction of borders along lines of race, class, and ability to construct the purpose of education as the production of the future civilized state.
Ryerson’s Report: The Normative Student

Tied to his image for a future Upper Canadian state, Ryerson’s image of the normative student of his schools also depends on a developmental framework. While Darwin had yet to publish his theory of evolution, Ryerson, along with many of his contemporaries, often conceptualized the framework of societal development (from savage to civilized) as a natural extension of the framework of human development (Smith, 2012, p. 51). This occasionally leads to a conflation of pre-historic, savage, less-than-human people with the idea of the child: he writes of students’ need for “humanizing influences” and that they should learn in a ‘natural’ progression, as the “earliest inhabitants of the world” did (Ryerson, 1894a [1846], p. 202 and p. 183). This also means that as subjects ready to progress on an established timeline towards modernity, children are naturally malleable and ready to be molded. In this way, the educational system that Ryerson describes hinges on a definition of a child as a young person who has an innate ability to transform into the modern subject. Education may help define in what shape the children are molded, but their malleability and their capacity for transformation is taken as a given and required for any of Ryerson’s system to make sense.

This focus on transformability is most immediately seen in Ryerson’s difficulty in referring to children in the present tense. Children exist most clearly for Ryerson in terms of the future adults they will become: the child as that which makes the adult, or as “father to the man” (p. 150). For example, he claims that teaching reading is foundational because it will “determine the future character of the pupil” (p. 165), that a moral foundation “must have its basis deeply and surely laid in childhood” so it can lead to an adult moral life (p. 149), and that the alphabet is important because it begins “a charming passage, conducting from the prison of ignorance into the palaces of general knowledge and wisdom” (p. 167). Conversely, a lack of education will show itself not in the child, but in the adult: if a child has a poor teacher, and “the example be not good, early bad habits in the pupil must be the immediate and necessary consequences, and that consequence is often irremediable through life.” Adults are determined as fixed, identifiable subjects, and children as non-adults are mutable. While it is possible Ryerson had a “solid
conviction that all behaviour was learned,” (McDonald, 1978, p. 95), the learning could only happen in the developmental stage at which transformation was ‘naturally’ occurring.

When he does refer to children actively in the present tense, he is still trapped in a sense of transformation and progression forward in time and outward from themselves. When writing on reading, writing and arithmetic, Ryerson notes that these subjects “[constitute], in a great degree, the roots of the tree of knowledge and the primary elements of intellectual power, — involving so deeply the interests and character of every child in the land” (p. 179). He suggests that they learn geography in the “natural method”, from those locations smallest and closest to them and then moving towards locations larger and more distant (p. 182). He dictates that writing will be interesting if the child first names those objects and places familiar to him and works outward from there (p. 166). In this way, Ryerson positions the child as forever growing up and out: learning about things further and further distant from his own individual person (while still grounded in the student themself as the center) will cause growth in the tree of knowledge contained within their growing-older-body, reaching towards adult subjectivity.

While Ryerson is hardly the first or the last person to conceptualize children as adults-to-be (and it is difficult today to imagine an educational system organized around something other than this understanding), this developmental framework cannot be equally applied to every individual. Mohanram (1999), studying liberal philosophers Locke and Freud, notes that the development of identity and subjectivity is reserved for those subjects whose bodies are not considered static, trapped within themselves: “the bodies of women, perverts and blacks occupy a more ambiguous space, marked as primitive, undeveloped, forever aspiring to play ‘catch-up’ with their straight white male counterparts, who are already situated in modernity” (p. 53). While Ryerson proposes that his education model is for all children, it is only accessible to those subjects who can access spaces of developmental temporality. For those people who are defined as the anti-modern/uncivilized – enumerated by Ryerson in his Report as ‘Attila and his Huns’, barbarians, savages, and gangrenous people – there is no possibility of entering a temporal space that progresses towards modernity and the subjectivity that Ryerson reserves for adult citizens.
This means that of all those who enter his ‘universal’ education system, only those who will become white bourgeois men are guaranteed the rewards of his common schools: being able to assume, without challenge to their capabilities of reason and higher consciousness, the roles and responsibilities of citizenship, and of leading a ‘growing’ country.

Despite the foundational exclusionary nature of his educational model, it seems that Ryerson truly believed that education could make citizens – or at least erase uncivilized tendencies – from every person in the state, including those who were not able-bodied white bourgeois men. Indeed, his time as a missionary likely required this belief that it was possible that those he constructed as uncivilized could move towards civilization. However, the figure of the citizen (the end point of the normative student’s journey through public schooling) is discursively constructed by uncivilized, anti-modern figures, which means that any school system that establishes the citizen as its end point is going to be selectively successful in guiding students to reach this goal. Locke, a foundational liberal thinker, defines the superiority of consciousness through “a disavowal of difference” (Mohanram, 1999, p. 38), a philosophical foundation to Ryerson’s contention that education can make a citizen out of any child. However, this ‘superiority of consciousness,’ in which the body is transcended and unmarked, requires the existence of a different body that is marked by race, class, or ability. “By dint of their visibility,” these othered bodies “cannot ‘progress’ into consciousness” (Mohanram, 1999, p. 39). Moreover, the discourse of development implies that these othered bodies are made so by traits that are deemed or conceptualized as internal to the body (Mohanram, 1999, p. 38, and see also Oliver, 1996, p. 20). In other words, if Ryerson believed that his education truly was universal, then he would see the failure of othered, ‘visible-bodied’ subjects within that system as a result of problems internal to the individual students.

In this way, the developmental framework of Ryerson’s *Report* allows him to rationalize the contradiction posed by his arguments for universality. His claim that his educational system will be universally applicable rests on the belief that any person can progress into an adult defined by individual subjectivity: the superiority of consciousness, which will grow with the
‘tree of knowledge,’ can overcome all difference. He would then logically see the failure of those children with othered, visible bodies as a result of their own internalized inability to access the requirements of rationality and consciousness required of subjectivity. Rather than contradicting his broader philosophy of education, Ryerson’s consistent use of race, class, and disability to construct the outside of his normative citizen and state only cements his place in the liberal archive. As Lisa Lowe (2015) writes, “as modern liberalism defined the ‘human’ and universalized its attributes to European man, it simultaneously differentiated populations in the colonies as less than human” (p. 6). This essential contradiction, that the belief that the goals of education are accessible to all is founded on the fact that they must be inaccessible to many, would, however, become something that Ryerson would have to deal with in a practical sense throughout the rest of his career as he continued to define the borders of Upper Canada’s system of public schooling.

Very shortly after publishing his Report, Ryerson published the Common Schools Act of 1846, part of which included a new title and role for himself as Chief Superintendent of Schools. The 1846 law (which included as well new, very high taxes) resulted in “hostility bordering on rage” (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 120) from the tax-paying population, as well as acts of protest that included all schools in the city of Toronto shutting down for a year (Axelrod, 1999, p. 37). Despite this initial reaction, this legislation marked the beginning of a long and industrious career in which Ryerson worked to remake Upper Canada’s schools in the image of this Report. And, if we can trust Hodgins, he achieved quite a bit of success. Houston and Prentice (1992) write that “even his critics cannot fail to consider [Ryerson’s program] staggeringly successful within the context, at least, of its own purposes” (p. 115) – purposes that we can see defined in this very first Report.

And so what does this mean for the young people of Upper Canada? While Houston and Prentice (1992) argue that the turn of the century was marked by “virtual universal enrollment, if
not regular attendance,” (p. 337) it is again worth questioning who is summarized in the statistics upon which that statement is based. Many immigrant families, black families, and Indigenous families immediately saw the social value in a system that was organized to produce individuals fluent in the language of the state, and actively fought their way into a public school system that was not constructed for them (Burke and Milewski, 2012, p. 223; Wan 2014, p. 2; Child and Klopotek, 2014, p. 12). This meant that accompanying this high attendance at “common schools,” as they came to be called, arrived passionate arguments about who really belonged there. Ryerson’s response to these debates is anticipated by his Report, where his definition of public schooling is constructed on a framework of bringing-into-relation: the normative student, future citizen to serve the state, depends on the construction and maintenance of categories of difference, or people defined as ‘problems’. Following the way he framed the urgency of his plan for public schooling around the threat of difference to the security of the state, Ryerson’s actions in determining education policy for people whom he constructed as different was guided by strategies of containment and exclusion – as seen in the establishment of separate schools. In order to develop these separate schools, he had to construct people within categories for governance, a construction that defines students in a contrasting but intimate relation with those he defines as normative in his Report. I now turn to Ryerson’s construction of these categories for governance, and their essential role in the production of separate schools.
Chapter 3
Developmental Milestones: Ryerson’s Distinctions of Humanity

“I know we marched into schools to the same classical music, we wore the same uniforms, we walked with writing slates hung around our necks, we sat at the same desks, we read from the same Royal Readers perhaps, we drank the same condensed milk, we ate the same butter from cows in Jersey or New Zealand.”

— Dionne Brand,
_A Map to the Door of No Return_

“Even as it proposes inclusivity, liberal universalism effects principles of inclusion and exclusion; in the very claim to define humanity, as a species or as a condition, its gestures of definition divide the human and the nonhuman, to classify the normative and pathologize deviance.”

— Lisa Lowe,
_The Intimacies of Four Continents_

Education is one of the most visible roads of empire. When Dionne Brand writes in the quotation above of her sense of familiarity with others lining up for customs at the London airport, this familiarity comes from a shared experience of empire that is primarily founded in schooling. The universality of this experience across geographically distant parts of the British Empire extends from uniforms to desks to textbooks, and its production is founded on notions of humanity derived from liberal philosophy. The production of mass education in this way, with striking similarities in implementation despite immense differences in context, relies on a conception of the universality of consciousness and the human mind. It requires a belief that vastly different people in vastly different places can all follow the same pathway to become the same version of ‘educated.’ Education, as a road of empire, is a road of identical textbooks and uniforms and desks and music because it is a road that depends on imperial ideas of the universal nature of the human.

And as Lisa Lowe reminds us in the following quotation, attempts to define the nature of the human simultaneously establish the nonhuman, outside the parameters of the ‘universal’. The
educational projects of Upper Canada, directed by Egerton Ryerson, followed this trajectory. Defining schools as sites of production of the citizen is simultaneously an act of defining a ‘problem child’: the definition of the normative student requires a definition of a non-normative student, who does not fit the expectations of the classroom and will never be ready for citizenship. In the previous chapter, I analyzed Ryerson’s language in his *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* (hereafter referred to as his *Report*) and illustrated how his system of education was created to serve the production of the civilized state, which required a normative student of his proposed ‘common schools’ who was defined along borders of race, class, and ability. In this chapter, I look at how these borders also defined the non-normative student by creating constructions of categories of difference. I then address Ryerson’s response to these constructed categories of difference: through the established link between schools and the state, Ryerson elaborates these categories into categories for governance, in which specialized schools would force those marked as ‘different’ from the ‘civilized’ world into governable subjects for the state.

In order to do so, I begin the project of placing Ryerson’s *Report* alongside four of his proposals for separate schools. The four proposals include his *Letter on Residential Schools* (1847), in which he gave his opinions on the best way to educate ‘Indians’; his *Separate Schools Act* (1850), in which he legalized the production of separate schools for ‘coloured people’; a *Draft Bill* and accompanying letter (1862), in which he proposed a system of church-run schools for ‘vagrant and neglected children’; and a *Report of an Inquiry* (1868) in which he presented his thoughts for the best ways of educating ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’. Rather than

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19 As noted in the previous chapter, the period of time in which Ryerson was superintendent spanned over thirty years and Confederation, during which the region known as Upper Canada became Canada West. Since it was known as Upper Canada for most of Ryerson’s tenure, this is how I will refer to this region now known as Ontario. Ryerson’s vision of it usually conceptualized it as a country unto itself, with an identity that was nonetheless strongly British.

20 I place the titles that Ryerson awards these categories of people in quotation marks in order to emphasize that my focus lies in the ideological constructs of these categories as powerful fictions rather than any people that they were meant to encompass. My phrasing and organization for this distinction is influenced by Jean O’Brien’s (2010) introduction to her historical study on New England local histories from the mid-nineteenth century, where she writes that in looking to analyze ideological constructs instead of refuting claims, she is ‘resisting making
discussing a progression of thought or how his philosophy developed across time, I discuss similar themes across all five of these documents in order to unearth how Ryerson conceptualized and rationalized constructed notions of difference. As I noted in the previous chapter, I analyze these documents in this manner in search of Ryerson’s philosophy about the school, the individual, and the state, and what this philosophy illustrates for the educational system as a whole. In this chapter, this approach allows me to highlight the similarities across all five documents and illustrate that Ryerson’s proposals for separate schools were not aberrations from his original educational proposal; rather, all five serve the same liberal goals of creating and controlling difference in order to produce the ‘civilized’ state.

In analyzing these constructions of difference, I situate Ryerson within the broader intellectual and political realms of the imperial world of the nineteenth century. Ryerson’s liberal philosophy of what makes a state, a citizen, and a human were not produced in isolation but rather in an organic exchange with other intellectuals and politicians trafficking in many of the same ideas. This philosophy produced ideas on categories of social difference that, in defining structures of humanity, justified and rationalized the continued existence and expansion of empire and colonialism. Ryerson, as the Chief Superintendent of Schools in the settler-colonial British state of Upper Canada, was an active participant in this project. His state-run public schools – including both ‘common’ schools21 and separate schools – reified categories of declarations about what is ‘true’ because this whole project is really about contesting the ‘truth’ that New Englanders are trying to make” (p. xvi). In examining these ideological constructs as constructs, I work to dismantle, as O’Brien does in her work, the very notion that there is some ‘truth’ to be known at all in categories that are fictions.

21 Ryerson and his contemporaries used the word ‘common’ as in ‘common schools’ in the understanding of shared among the public. While I refer to the same group of schools as Ryerson did when I use the phrase ‘common schools,’ I do so with an understanding that the public that this school system was for was a ‘public’ minus everyone that Ryerson established segregated schools for, i.e. the white, middle- to upper-class, able-bodied public. Occasionally I place it in quotes to emphasize that ‘common schools’ never extended as far as the term ‘common’, as conceptualized by Ryerson and his contemporaries, implies. I use Ryerson’s Report in this chapter both as a document that describes Ryerson’s plan for the overarching school system (in terms of his broad philosophy of education that he presents within it) as well as a document that describes an educational plan unique to the ‘common’ schools (in terms of the specific practices that it recommends). This interpretation is supported by the
difference in ways that advanced settler-colonial imperial aims, both domestically (justifying continuing genocide and land seizure from Indigenous people) and internationally (establishing the continued political and social dominance of upper-class, able-bodied white people). As such, I situate the language that he uses in his documents among language being developed by his peers and counterparts in other Western European or American imperial spaces in order to highlight his role as one individual within a larger liberal imperial project.\textsuperscript{22}

I borrow the phrasing of categories of difference/categories for governance from Lisa Lowe (2015), who writes:

To observe that the genealogy of modern liberalism is simultaneously a genealogy of colonial divisions of humanity is a project of tracking the ways in which race, geography, nation, caste, religion, gender, sexuality and other social differences become elaborated as normative categories for governance under the rubrics of liberty and sovereignty. (p. 7)

This thesis as a whole is tracking the consequences of an underlying liberal philosophy in the production of a public education system. In the previous chapter, I focused on the “genealogy of colonial divisions of humanity” inherent in Ryerson’s philosophy in his Report. In the following chapter, I will discuss in detail Ryerson’s proposals for separate schools. In this chapter, I pause, refusing to see as natural or logical the production of any system of segregated schools. I ask: what preconceptions about humanity did Ryerson need in order to believe it was possible to divide a population into categories of people? What purposes did it serve for his school system? It is with these questions in mind that I examine, across all five documents, his ongoing

\textsuperscript{22} As noted in previous chapters, my exclusive use of documents by Ryerson in this study of the Upper Canada education system is not to argue that one individual can be responsible for an entire system, but rather as an analytical tool. Focusing on one actor who had a large amount of influence (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. ix; Walsh, 2008, p. 648; Hodgins, 1889, p. iv) yet was pushing for reforms that were generally adopted in Western Europe and the United States in the same time period (Lazerson, 1978, p. 4) allows me to use Ryerson’s documents as a case study: what are the implications and consequences of a liberal project of education, a project that was occurring in multiple nations at the same time?
constructions of categories of difference and reconceptualization of them as categories for governance.

**Categories of Difference**

In his *Report* (1894 [1846]), Ryerson outlines categories of difference when he illustrates that which is distant from his construction of the normative student of his school, from the citizen-to-be of his imagined future state. At times, Ryerson makes these moves explicitly, when he calls up inhuman figures to symbolize what an educated person is safe from becoming: a savage, a barbarian, a gangrenous body, and a human who is no more than a beast of labor (pp. 143, 207). At other times, Ryerson defines a non-normative student in his description of how a normative student can be expected to act or behave. When he is listing the academic subjects that should be taught at common schools, Ryerson places particular emphasis on discounting and dismissing rote learning, favoring instead illustrations of learning that promote high levels of engagement. This engagement on the part of the student is symbolized by the activation of five senses (Curtis, 1989, p. 353). He places particular emphasis on seeing (“the best organ of communication with the mind”), hearing (learning is always guided by rapt attention to the teacher’s voice), and speaking (the highest purpose of reading is rhetorical reading, or “speaking the language of nature”) (pp. 166-167, 169, 186). In defining a singular prized method of learning that depends on sensory engagement, Ryerson casts any students with sensory impairments outside the bounds of the normative way to exist in a classroom.

Similarly, Ryerson’s description of education as a process of growing into citizenship implicitly organizes categories of difference. Ryerson situates the education of children on a developmental timeline, arguing that children should learn in a ‘natural’ progression as did the “earliest inhabitants of the world” (p. 183; conflating constructed human development with constructed societal development), and positioning all of their learning as geared towards the production of a to-be-formed adult (viewing the child as the “father to the man,” p. 150). This conception of growth, of a guided ascendancy into a higher, more civilized subjectivity defined
by mental advancement, depends on a notion of universal human consciousness. As seen in Ryerson’s conflation of children with prehistoric people, this conception of consciousness requires the simultaneous creation and maintenance of what Radhika Mohanram (1999) names as ‘marked bodies’ (p. 38-39): bodies, often defined along racial lines (the “earliest inhabitants of the world” often coded as similar or identical to Indigenous people who live in the present), that represent the inability to leave the body and arrive at a subjectivity defined solely by the mind.

Ryerson’s description of the normative student, including rhetorical illustrations, depictions of learning, and conceptions of growth, defines borders that organize non-normative ways of being. His conceptions of normalcy and what he believes he can expect from ‘all’ students in a universal system of public education rely on liberal definitions of the human and the limits to extending these characteristics of humanity. Within this philosophy, the ‘universal’ human’s attributes are exclusive to those of a bourgeois white European man (Lowe, 2015, p. 6). Alexander G. Weheliye (2008) notes of this process of definition, citing Sylvia Wynter, that “black subjects, along with natives, the insane, the poor, the disabled, etc., serve as limit cases by which man could define himself as the universal human” (p. 323). If we can take him at his word, Ryerson truly believes he was creating a system for everyone in Upper Canada, meaning that he expects his curated path towards learning and development into subjectivity fit for a citizen would be accessible. This assumption means that those who cannot complete this educational path, because they are constructed outside the bounds of Ryerson’s normative student, are defined individually as problematic and marginal rather than symptoms of an inherently unequal system.

This suggested inherent marginality is reinforced by moments when Ryerson compares and conflates notions of difference, emphasizing their distance from his constructed norm. In his Report (1894a [1846]), he compares a state of being uneducated with “Attila and his Huns” as well as with children who hear nothing (pp. 149, 163). He defines poverty as a scourge similar to gangrene, using a disabling bodily disease as a metaphor for economic status (p. 143). When he is making his final argument for compulsory education, he pulls out all the stops, constructing an
uneducated person as a “savage,” an “unprincipled thief,” “an ignorant, or vicious, barbarian,”
and as occupying “a condition little above that which is occupied by horses and oxen” (p. 207).
In this final argument, these comparisons construct uneducated people as marginal to society by
establishing the supposed marginal status of other groups – some of which are named (thieves, barbarians) and some of which are implied (humans as horses and oxen carries images of
enslaved people). He makes similar rhetorical moves in his Letter on Residential Schools (1898
[1847]), where he argues that “the labouring classes,” in “ordinary civilized life,” are controlled
by their feelings in a way identical to the “North American Indian” (p. 73).

These rhetorical illustrations betray the interlocking constitution of these categories of
difference, which was and continues to be far from neat. The categories that Ryerson used for
defining separate schools were both overlapping (even Ryerson likely would have defined people
as ‘vagrant and neglected children’ among his category of ‘coloured people’ and seen ‘Indians’
among a group he defined as ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’) and co-constitutive, articulated
with other categories of social difference in intimate and regularly changing ways – an
interaction which Alexander G. Weheliye (2015) describes as “spheres of interconnected
existences that are in constant motion” (p. 12). Ryerson’s moves to organize categories of social
difference by constructing them through metaphors of, referents to, and conflations with other
categories of social difference works to define difference as natural, internal, and inherent.

Ryerson’s overlaps between and across categories of difference were a product of the
imperial context of the nineteenth century, in which there are abundant examples of political and
intellectual contemporaries of Ryerson’s making similar conflations in order to support
missionary/educational projects of the state. In Canada and Britain, white Christian people
bemoaned, on the subject of lower-class children, that “these Arabs of the street are as wild as
those of the desert” (quoted in Smith, 1996, p. 30), a depiction that was more frequently
summoned when they were trying to raise money for the “domestic heathens” who were just as
needy as the ‘heathens’ abroad (quoted in Prochner, May, and Kaur, 2009, p. 99). ‘Savages’ in
distant colonies were depicted as “deaf to the world” and ‘the deaf and dumb’ were “dark,
benighted, fearfully savage people” (quoted in Cleall, 2015, pp. 26, 27). These processes of bringing shifting and changing categories into relation with each other makes it difficult for scholars to isolate the development of individual categories: Radhika Mohanram (1999) writes that within liberalism, the distance between race and class is very short (p. 38), Esme Cleall (2015) discusses how “concepts of ‘race’ and ‘disability’ are difficult to disentangle” (p. 23), and Brian Klopotek (2014) argues that even though the end goal of segregated Indigenous education was accumulation of land for the state, it was justified by many of the same intellectual and emotional arguments used for acts of racial segregation (p. xi).

Rather than attempting to separate these fictional categories, my work illustrates that Ryerson’s conception of the normative subject of schooling is one site among many in the imperial nineteenth century in which the ideas and goals of the liberal state are produced through shifting definitions of difference. The production of notions of difference is a necessary component of Ryerson’s structuring of the normative student of his common schools, and in turn establishes the conditions of possibility for Ryerson to think of separate schools. This is reinforced by comparisons between categories of difference, which work to define them as truthful: holding one category as a constant for another category emphasizes it as an established, naturalized space for a group of people constructed as inherently different. As seen in the previous examples by Ryerson and his contemporaries, racial differences in particular articulate and organize these intersections, working to keep categories of difference at a distance from liberal humanity (Lowe, 2015, pp. 7-8). In the case of Ryerson and the Upper Canada public school system, constructions of difference work to solidify Ryerson’s definition of the normative student and support his liberal vision of the natural supremacy of the white, able-bodied, bourgeois settler in the future Upper Canadian nation state.

**Categories for Governance**

Moving from defining non-normative categories of people to proposing separate schools for these categories of people requires a transition. The proposals for separate schools require,
more than their relationship to the normative human, that these social categories of difference be reconceptualized in terms of their relationship to the state: as categories for governance. It is possible to see this process in Ryerson’s Report, where he defines difference not only as something aberrant to the norm, but as such as a threat to the “future character and social state of this Country” (Ryerson, 1894 [1846], p. 151). In constructing education as state-building, schooling becomes the pathway through which individuals are changed, shaped, and fixed to suit the purposes of the nation. Those categories that are constructed outside the bounds of the normative student, then, are not outside the bounds of public education. Rather, categories of difference become the areas in which the most ‘fixing’ needs to occur, because they are constructed as that which is most marginal to the role of citizen, and the act of serving the state. Through this framework, these categories of difference – which are defined by characteristics constructed as internal to the people encompassed within them – are elided into categories in need of governance, in which these supposedly internal traits become the starting point for strategies for state incorporation.

In reality, the people that Ryerson constructed as marginal to the white settler society of Upper Canada were only sometimes so. Even when considering the context of his common schools, there is evidence within the archives that many people he would have classed within a category of difference attended schools along with the subjects he constructed as normative to his schools. There are records of black children attending common schools in Upper Canada throughout the nineteenth century (before and after racial segregation laws), and politicians in Toronto, a center for abolitionist work, spoke proudly of the racially integrated schools there (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 299). Prior to 1850 and before the systematic development of residential schools, Indigenous children were permitted to attend common schools (Child and Klopetek, 2014, p. 12). A panic that developed among politicians in the 1850s that ‘vagrant

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23 The exception of Toronto as an integrated city is likely not due to its ‘enlightened nature’ (as Ryerson and other politicians claimed) but rather to the small number of black people who lived there in the nineteenth century (around 2%, as compared to 30-40% in towns that faced fights over segregation) as well as residential racial segregation, which meant that few white students actually went to school with black students (McLaren, 2004, p. 34).
children’ were roaming the streets and not attending school likely only seemed to be a problem because many if not most children – including those who otherwise would have seemed ‘vagrant’ – were in school (Houston, 1978, p. 256). In addition, there were often preexisting educational practices occurring in many of these communities, which I will discuss more in the following chapter.

Ryerson ignores these presences and practices and defines marginality to society unilaterally by distinction from the definition of the normative subject of his common schools. This was a common move, one that Ryerson shared with many other educational and political elites of his era, and supported by the ways that these categories were positioned in relation to each other outside of the bounds of the human. As such, there was a tendency towards similarity in their construction as categories for governance in terms of the specific strategies that Ryerson and others suggested. If the ‘problem,’ or source of their marginal status, is separation from the civilized modern state, then the ‘solution,’ in terms of education, is schooling that forces civilization and modernity upon them. Most often, this came in the form of Christianity. It is no accident that every category of people subjected to the proposed segregated schools I analyze here was also subject to aggressive missionary efforts, often but not always directed or encouraged by the state.

Missionary work, occurring alongside and often within education, functioned both within Britain and in colonies such as Upper Canada as part of the imperial project. Those written into constructed categories of difference ‘needed’ Christianity for the same reasons they ‘needed’ the educational project of the state: “to overhaul their domestic arrangements; regulate their sexuality; dress them ‘decently’; teach reading, writing and often English; [and] ‘morally’ reform them” (Cleall, 2015, p. 27). These missionary and educational projects (often one and the same) focused on altering the details of people’s lives in order to externally and internally change them into subjects perceived as governable by the state. The intertwining of these two projects can be seen in the popular project of missionary ‘infant’ schools, established by British people at various sites defined by empire with a goal of “hastening the adaptation of heathen peoples to
European modes of civilisation and Christianity” (Prochner, May, and Kaur, 2009, p. 83-84). These infant schools were established by missionaries for indigenous peoples in New Zealand and Canada, urban poor people in Britain, and there was interest in their development for blind or deaf children as well (Prochner, May, and Kaur, 2009). The educational projects of Ryerson can be seen through the lens of the British Empire, which worked to extend the imperial project (‘civilization’) through education.

Ryerson’s push for the development of ‘civilization’ through Christianity is evident in both his Report and in his proposals for separate schools. However, his emphasis on Christianity in his proposals for separate schools carries a much more forceful note, supported by his belief that there are distinct populations with different distances to ‘civilization.’ In his Report for common schools (1894a [1846]), he describes Christianity as a guiding force for education, the necessary foundation in order to make sure that schooling produces civilized people (p. 142). By contrast, Christianity in his proposals for separate schools is not about creating civilized people, but about somehow changing internally different people so they can be brought into relation with civilized society. In discussing schools for “the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind” (1911a [1868]), he cites a principle of one such school who claims that the end goal of “[restoring] our Pupils to the society of their fellow-man” is only possible with “impart[ing] to them the consolat...ons of Religion” (p. 223). For his proposal addressing “vagrant and neglected children” (1894b [1862]), Ryerson justifies separate schools by arguing, “in addition to the apparatus of the present School System,” for this category of people, “there is no hope” without “Religious influences and exertions” (p. 180). He begins his Letter on Residential Schools (1898 [1847]) by announcing, “the theory of a certain kind of educational philosophy is falsified in respect to the Indian: with him nothing can be done to improve and elevate his character and condition without the aid of religious feeling” (p. 73). Ryerson uses Christianity as the tool with which to make someone an acceptable member of his civilized state. As such, for those who are constructed into a category of difference, no governance, or containment in the state, is possible without it.
In this way, Ryerson’s proposals for separate schools and common schools work, with completely separate educational structures, in completing the same educational project of a liberal state. As common schools develop citizens, his separate schools bring all aberrant subjects into civilization, and together they ensure that Upper Canada will not be distanced by other countries “in the race of civilization” (Ryerson, 1894a [1846], p. 193). The disparity between these two pathways can be seen in Ryerson’s proposed careers for the graduate of his ‘common’ schools and separate schools. The students in his common schools are fostered and supported to become the leaders of Canada’s army (p. 161), its lawyers and economists (p. 189), and the statesmen in its government (p. 191). Alternately, in his Letter on Residential Schools, Ryerson establishes that, for ‘Indians,’ teaching farming is the only realistic endpoint (1898 [1847], p. 74), and in his report on schools for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind,’ (1911a [1868]) one of the primary purposes of schooling is learning manual trades (p. 223). The end goal for those in common schools is a life of Christian citizenship and leadership, and the end goal for those in separate schools is incorporation into the labor force: sites in which they will be governed, rather than become those who govern. Transforming ‘uncivilized’ into ‘civilized’ was not the same as making citizens: it was about making the uncivilized governable. Rather than being distinct, Ryerson’s proposals for common schools and for separate schools were intimately related: neither could exist without the other, and without both Ryerson’s overarching vision for his school system (both the act of thinking it as well as its ultimate fruition) is impossible.

Ryerson’s proposals for separate schools rested on naturalized constructions of social categories of difference that defined people as ‘problems’ to the state. These constructions, organic to the imperial context in which Ryerson lived and worked, relied on and reproduced processes of bringing-into-relation in order to define the liberal conception of the human, the foundation for the normative student of Ryerson’s schools. Bringing-into-relation, a term that I owe to Alexander G. Weheliye (2015), is a process in which the totality – in this case, Ryerson’s
school system – is built through organizing constructed categories by their connections with each other in ways that support that same totality (p. 12-13). The role that such categories have in the production of the normative student of the common schools means that notions of students as ‘problems’ to schools (and the nation) were foundational to the development and production of Upper Canada’s educational project. Ryerson’s construction of his normative student depends on the creation of figures of difference; his organization of his educational path through a notion of universal consciousness depends on maintenance of different ‘marked bodies’ who cannot access this consciousness; and his definition of public schooling as creating a ‘civilized’ state depends on the management of difference-marked-as-dangerous. In this way, the social categories of difference that Ryerson used to define the people who would attend his separate schools (‘Indians,’ ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind,’ and ‘coloured people’) were far more intimately related to his understanding of the normative student rather than to any of the people he claimed to categorize. I turn now to the details of Ryerson’s proposals for separate schools in order to examine further the implications of this foundational logic in the organization of the beginning of Ontario’s public school system. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate how the production, maintenance, and regular exclusion of students marked as ‘problems’ was not only foundational, but essential to the success of Ryerson’s system of public education – and the implications of this continuing relationship today.
Chapter 4
Growing Pains: Ryerson’s Proposals for Separate Schools

“If who we see is tied up with where we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place.”

— Katherine McKittrick,
*Demonic Grounds*

“You cannot exclude unless you assume you already own.”

— Aileen Moreton-Robinson,
*The White Possessive*

The routines of today’s ‘problem child’ are dictated by space. Being told to sit in the corner of the classroom; asked to stay at a desk while the class sits on the carpet; sent to another classroom; sent to the principal’s office: all of these are spatial routines, defining the classroom as a normative space only for some students. In turn, these arrangements reify the ‘problem child’’s position as someone who does not belong, who does not fit into the expectations for the classroom. As Katherine McKittrick (2006) notes, the organization of space plays a deceptive role in making the arrangements of people seem, as she coins it, ‘commonsensical.’ Geographies are determined and defined by humans, and are an intricate part of creating and recreating relationships of subordination and oppression. Difference is naturalized and made to seem unquestionable by the “idea that space ‘just is,’ and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true” (p. xv).

In this chapter, I study the development of proposals by Egerton Ryerson for separate schools for categories of people, in which Ryerson proposed new geographies of schooling. I argue that Ryerson’s vision for the school system of Upper Canada (and the future, ‘civilized’ state it was intended to create) was only possible with a geographic vision that supported the creation, maintenance, and exclusion of difference as accomplished by these schools. Ryerson was the highest-ranked school official in Upper Canada for over thirty years and proposed and oversaw the changes that made the Ontario public school system what it is today. In exploring
documents produced solely by Ryerson, I do so with an understanding that he was prominent yet representative of his time, and also to help maintain a clear focus on the developing dimensions of the school system. It is with this focus on him that I can ask: what grounded Ryerson’s need, over the course of twenty years, to repeatedly propose more separate schools?

I do this analysis with a view to the broader context of Ryerson’s thinking, which includes the intimately entwined educational and imperial worlds of North America and Western Europe in the nineteenth century. While Ryerson’s context was individual, he was an organic intellectual of the British Empire and the way he structured his world was shaped by imperial liberal philosophy. Writing on this philosophy, Lisa Lowe (2015) argues,

Contrary to the common claim of the civilizing mission, liberal notions of education, trade, and government grew out of the conditions of colonial encounter, and were themselves precisely philosophical attempts to grapple with and manage colonial difference within an expanding empire. (p. 106)

Ryerson’s separate schools followed the narrative of the civilizing mission, in that they were constructed as supplying the remedies that people constructed as uncivilized ‘needed.’ However, following Lowe’s argument above, these proposals for separate schools can be reconceptualized as serving the purposes of the state rather than the people supposedly educated within them. The civilizing mission of these schools can be see in the goals they often shared with missionary projects who served the same population (often within the schools): goals of transforming those within categories of difference into civilized subjects more easily governable by the state. As such, education under liberal philosophy is a tool for managing and containing constructed, colonial difference.

In this way, separate schools, rather than being afterthoughts, were crucial to the scaffolding of Ryerson’s system. Schools, with an ultimate goal of building a civilized state, had a primary purpose of shaping subjects for that state: shaping that either took the form of creating

24 I borrow the construction of this phrasing from Lisa Lowe’s (2015) introduction of John Stewart Mill (p. 106). The work from Lowe in the remainder of this paragraph is from the same introduction. Mill was a philosopher and administrator working in a completely different context than Ryerson, yet produced many of the same ideas in terms of education and how to govern constructed categories of difference – an indicator of the shared liberal philosophy among British imperial elites of the nineteenth century, and how the project of education was a project of empire.
citizens (as Ryerson’s common schools aimed to do) or, in the case of separate schools, managing and containing difference as a problem to the state. This conceptualization is derived from liberal philosophy, and as such is not unique to him in the global context (indicated by his international tours to see how other countries were creating separate schools (Ryerson, 1911a [1868])) or even to the Upper Canada context. Part of the reason that I see Ryerson as representative is that each of the separate schools he proposed existed in Upper Canada previous to his proposals. As Chief Superintendent, however, his proposals had the power to structure the entire school system much more broadly than any individual schools governed in more local fashion that had existed Ryerson’s organizational hand was pressed to work on Upper Canada in its entirety. By incorporating separate schools into the geography of his educational project, he worked to ensure the supremacy of a white settler school system and state.

In this chapter, I study Ryerson’s proposals for separate schools for categories of people he defines as ‘Indians,’ ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind,’ and ‘coloured people.’ While I compare the different strategies that Ryerson takes in defining and defending his constructions, I do not equate the categories themselves – an act which would require actively ignoring their fictionality. I acknowledge their essential constructed, fictional

25 See Neeganagwedgin, 2014, for an account of residential school development in Upper Canada before Ryerson; Neff, 2004 for descriptions of alternative education possibilities for poor children in Upper Canada before compulsory education; Ryerson 1911a [1868] for his own admissions that private schools for deaf children and for blind children already exist in Upper Canada as he writes to suggest them; McLaren, 2004, for accounts of enforced racial segregation before Ryerson’s Separate Schools Act of 1850.

26 In this chapter, I analyze Ryerson’s proposals but not the eventual enactment of his proposals, since many of these were carried out by other entities (such as the Residential School system) or after his tenure (such as the development of industrial schools for what Ryerson would have called ‘vagrant and neglected children’). Focusing his texts as opposed to the entire school systems allows for a more concise analysis that emphasizes the logics under which the separate systems were constructed.

27 I wish to reiterate here that I place these categories in quotation marks because my work here is devoted to the analysis of these categories as fictional creations, constructed without any relation to the subjects that they were supposed to represent. My project, in illustrating that these categories were about serving the success of the totality, of Ryerson’s overarching plan for public education, destabilizes the idea of neutrality behind the building of these categories.

28 In addition, any act of comparing these categories themselves is an attempt to think of relationships between people encompassed within these categories as grounded solely in “violence befalling community” (Crawley, 2015). I work to avoid any comparison that positions these categories as something real and maintainable, which would
nature yet avoid discarding these categories of difference as useless. Alexander G. Weheliye (2015) argues for a methodology of relationality, which makes it possible to see “the constitutive potentiality of a totality that is structured in dominance and composed of the particular processes of bringing-into-relation” (p. 12). In previous chapters, I described Ryerson’s construction of the school system through this lens of bringing-into-relation, exploring how the normative student and the school system as a whole was constituted by the writing of relationships with and between categories of difference. I continue that bringing-into-relation discussion here by discussing how each category is constructed away from the concept of the human, thus establishing the definition of the normative student. I then build on this by suggesting ways in which the production of these schools defines a relationality between the subjects who were educated within them, the subjects of the common schools, and the imperial state. While a full exploration of that developing and changing relationality between these schools and their students is beyond the scope of this paper, I search Ryerson’s proposals for indications of what that relationality might look like. Through placing these proposals side-by-side, I can examine the work that all of them do for the whole.

Rather than discuss each of these proposals and their respective schools in turn, I organize my discussion around dominant narratives that arrive in each in order to build the conditions of possibility for Ryerson’s vision. While I do note the specific ways that some proposals made specific contributions to the functionality of the broader system, my focus is how the repeated production and definition of these categories further reified the common school system’s dominance and success. In each of these proposals, Ryerson establishes a population with defined borders and actively ignores and effaces any education or schooling that may have been occurring within these borders. Each of these populations as defined by Ryerson had encourage the “ceaseless pulse of violence” that, as Ashon Crawley (2015) writes, is the “epistemological frame by which modernity enacts itself.”
preexisting strategies to negotiate and access education in a variety of ways, and Ryerson’s proposals can be seen as specific attempts to suppress or control these existing strategies. He then constructs this established population as inherently different from the normative subject of his ‘common’ schooling system, often ascribing this difference on the body. With this construction unquestioned, he moves on to propose a separate school system that manages this defined-as-different population, with a management that focuses on their forced incorporation into the state, but defining their place within that state at the margins. The production of proposals for separate schools worked to reinforce the school system, through methods both ideological and material. As a whole, their regular appearance reaffirmed both common schools and the state as places of ‘civilization’.

**Categories of Inherent, Bodily Difference**

The development of Ryerson’s proposals of separate schools required a conception of some categories of people as requiring specific forms of management and containment in the form of schooling. This was not universal or ahistorical and can be read as reflecting “normative categories for governance” (Lowe, 2015, p. 7) in that each category was constructed by its relationship to the state. Despite variations in the circumstances that led to the production of each proposal, Ryerson makes similar strategic moves in the rationales behind his proposals. In each proposal, Ryerson paints images of inherent, bodily difference in order to establish an illusion of defined boundaries around a constructed category: boundaries that then support a justification for school segregation. This emphasis on bodily difference in particular is key, because, as Theri A. Pickens (2013) writes, “to have a body is to be a subject – the very epitome of the Western liberal subject – and to be a body is to be an object” (p. 22). Emphasizing bodily difference is an act of defining categories of difference by their pure inhabitance in their bodies, their inability to control their bodies, and thus their ‘need’ to be governed. In this section, I examine each individual proposal in turn in order to show how the acts of proposing separate schools always center on this initial, violent act of definition.
Difference Established in Ryerson’s Letter on Residential Schools

The construction of ‘Indian’, prior to Ryerson, was a term already embedded with violence, slavery, and genocide (Byrd, 2011, p. 71). In addition, Jodi A. Byrd (2011) points out that its origin story – the narrative that Christopher Columbus ‘thought’ he was encountering people from India – is historically muddled. There is evidence that Indigenous people from what was later named the Americas traveled to Europe before Columbus’s arrival, as well as maps and stories that described islands such as Barbados, and the Antilles, whose very name (‘before’ and ‘island’) indicates a knowledge that the island lay in front of something else (p. 72). Either way – whatever Columbus truly ‘believed’ – Byrd notes that the naming is “an ‘Orientalism’ transplanted and remapped onto the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and it carries with it all the discursive attempts to control and to narrate the place of peoples into an already established world” (p. 73). Following this tradition, of controlling and narrating the place of peoples indigenous in the Americas into the established [Upper Canada] world, is an integral part of what Ryerson is doing in his Letter on Residential Schools (hereafter Letter).

Child and Klopotek, in Indian Subjects: Hemispheric Perspectives on the History of Indigenous Education (2014), speak broadly about Indigenous education prior to the arrival of European colonists throughout the Americas. They note that for Indigenous peoples who did not use writing systems, knowledge was transferred orally using a variety of different methods and traditions. These techniques were effective both in maintaining histories of land and people across the span of thousands of years and in maintaining community structures and customs (p. 2-3, see also Neeganagwedgin, 2014, p. 32). In the nineteenth century, people indigenous to the area being constituted by settlers as Upper Canada, like other people living within the borders of the settler-colonial state, accessed education and schooling in a variety of ways. In Upper Canada, this likely included orally based traditions such as, in Anishinaabe communities, the use of a medicine wheel (Chartrand, 2010, p. 10) or in Wendat communities, story-telling to teach a moral code (Sioui, 1999, p. 36) (neither of which were isolated to these communities nor
mutually exclusive). Alongside the development and continuation of these practices, some Indigenous communities sought resources for community schools from settler governments.

There were some people, like those living in an Ojibwe village on Credit River, who were subjected to the missionary work of Methodists like Ryerson, who led schools in their communities (Hodgins, 1911b, p. 99). Occasionally, missionary schools such as these actively employed Ojibwe teachers and missionaries, and used a bilingual curriculum (MacLean, 2002). There were also many communities in Upper and Lower Canada, including those of Huron-Wendat, Abenaki, and Mohawk peoples, who established schools run by community members (rather than by settler missionaries) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, often with a goal of preparing access to higher education and teaching literacy in French and English (Peace, 2011). As common schools run by the state were developed through the first half of the nineteenth century, Indigenous children were among those who attended them, at least up until 1850, and likely later as well (Child and Klopotek, 2014, p. 12).

As a whole, programs of residential schools for peoples indigenous to the Americas, rather than providing education in which there had been an absence of it, actively worked to disrupt existing intergenerational systems for passing on knowledge (Child and Klopotek, 2014, p. 3). In 1847, Ryerson wrote his Letter in a response to request for advice from the Assistant Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Ryerson’s Letter fails to question an implied understanding between the letter-writers that the production of schools for this population of people is not only the ‘duty’ of the settler-colonial state, but is also (as opposed to state-run schooling for everyone else in Upper Canada) something that is bureaucratically organized within the Department of Indian Affairs rather than in the Department of Education. While Ryerson himself did not implement residential schools – a process which largely occurred after his tenure and which was, as opposed to other separate schools addressed here, located in a different governmental department – almost all of his suggestions were later followed.29

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29 The fact that this Letter went to a different department means that it is much more difficult to find than almost all of Ryerson’s other writings, which were exhaustively compiled by his protégé, John George Hodgins, and then, a
Ryerson begins his letter noting that the initial letter requested “such suggestions as I might be able to offer as to the best method of establishing and conducting Industrial Schools for the benefit of the aboriginal Indian Tribes” (Ryerson, 1898 [1847], p. 73). Several sentences later, Ryerson offers the goal of these schools as providing “a plain English education” (p. 73). This opening implies a mutual understanding that there is some benefit that ‘Indians’ could incur from government-imposed schooling, as well as a claim that there is a lack of English education among ‘Indians’ (and that this is a problem that needs to be fixed). Ryerson’s outline of the reasons an education different from that of the ‘common’ schools is necessary for this category of difference is work to reify the boundaries of this construction of ‘Indian’:

[Religious instruction] I conceive to be absolutely essential, not merely upon general Christian principles, but also upon the ground of what I may term Indian economics, as it is a fact established by numerous experiments, that the North American Indian cannot be civilized or preserved in a state of civilization (including habits of industry and sobriety) except in connection with, if not by the influence of, not only religious instruction and sentiment but of religious feeling...the theory of a certain kind of educational philosophy is falsified in respect to the Indian: with him nothing can be done to improve and elevate his character without the aid of religious feeling. (Ryerson, 1898 [1847], p. 73)

This repeated emphasis on the necessity of religious feeling (as opposed to religious instruction, which Ryerson advocates for almost everyone throughout his writings on education) originates from an underlying belief about innate, unchangeable characteristics of the ‘Indian’. He notes that “even in ordinary civilized life,” the actions of “the mass of the labouring classes” are determined by their feelings when they have not been educated (p. 73), but ‘the labouring classes’, as Ryerson uses them here to help his reader understand the ‘Indian’, are the exception rather than the rule in “ordinary civilized life,” where one can presume that people change.

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This letter, an attachment to “Statistics Respecting Indian Schools,” published in 1898, is much more difficult to find online and in person, accessible online only through Library and Archives Canada as “MIKAN no. 2069786” under a misspelling of Ryerson’s name as ‘Tyerson’. For more information on the context surrounding the production of this letter, see Ryerson University’s Aboriginal Education Council (2010).
Ryerson uses the concept of religious feeling to narrate schooling as a process of doing a
necessary altering to the internal functions of ‘Indians.’ This is echoed in other writings on
residential and missionary schools for Indigenous peoples throughout the British Empire. Sarah
de Leeuw (2007) writes that the curriculum in residential schools in British Columbia intended
“for colonialism to embed itself in the subjective and non-material places of First Nations
students’ thoughts, perspectives, and memories” (p. 349), and Prochner, May and Kaur (2009)
quote a colonial teacher who noted that any education short of resocialization would be like
“putting new wine into old bottles” (p. 92-93, emphasis in original quoted text).

In this Letter, Ryerson uses scientific phrases to create an air of objective analysis around
his construction. Language such as “Indian economics,” “experiments,” and “educational
philosophy” essentializes his constructed category of ‘Indian’ as something that is grounded and
real, embedded in the bodies of the different other. This difference is bound to the past tense.
Ryerson’s use of the phrase ‘preserved’, for example, brings to mind images of scientific
samples suspended in formaldehyde, constructing the ‘Indian’ as both in the past (not in
civilization) or unable to progress at all, like the preserved specimens. Either way, Ryerson’s
‘Indian’ is in a state of nature, the state of pre-civilization, in a subject position that is fixed and
unable to progress into a role in a settler-colonial society.30

**Difference Established in Ryerson’s Draft Bill**

The term ‘vagrant and neglected children’ came into use over the course of the 1850s and
1860s. While it was commonly conflated with and used to represent a category defined by lower
socio-economic status, this alternate language was used to frame poor or working-class children
as essentially without parents, or at least without parents “worthy of being called by the name”
(Ryerson, 1894a [1846], p. 202), in order to define a ‘need’ for state intervention. By the 1860s,

30 For a further description of this subject position, see Byrd, quoting Moreton-Robinson, 2011, p. xxx.
state-run schools were prominent and were, for the most part, free. Rapidly increasing enrollment suggests that these schools had widespread support (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 232).

However, in a difficult economic climate and in the absence of compulsory schooling laws, there were also many children who were not enrolled. Beginning at least in the 1840s (and likely earlier), politicians collected anecdotes from prison officials in order to illustrate correlations between illiteracy and crime (Graff, 1978. See Ryerson, 1894a [1846] for many examples). In the presence of such rhetoric, the continued absence of some children from school was the cause for much alarm, as illustrated by this judge from Niagara:

Witness the juvenile offenders in our prisons! Witness the Arabs in the Streets of our Cities! Witness the empty benches of many of our Common Schools! Witness the heathen state of some of our School Sections, in which Schools have been absolutely shut up! Witness the increasing dens of vice. (Quoted in Hodgins, 1911b, p. 26)

If common schools were supposed to ensure ‘everyone’ became respectable, middle-class citizens, then those who did not go to school were imminent threats.\(^{31}\)

In contrast to the absence of parenthood that ‘vagrant and neglected children’ suggests, historians have found instead that lower-class families actively sought out and demanded education, but common schools did not often meet their needs. In some cases, families found alternate schooling in institutions such as private schools or children’s homes that were not tracked by Ryerson’s Department statistics (Houston, 1978; Neff, 2004; MacLeod and Poutanen, 2008). It seems, if anything, that this ‘problem’ was mainly a Toronto issue, and likely the result of a high immigration rate and a depressed economy that provided little support (Bennett, 1988, p. 72). In addition, Susan Houston (1978) suggests that the very existence of a school system where all children were supposed to be enrolled and present established an impression of a “critical social problem” of vagrant children (p. 256). The existence of ‘vagrant and neglected children’ on the streets and ignoring educational opportunities, however, is established as a

\(^{31}\) For a further examination of the phrase of ‘street Arab’/’Arab of the street’ to construct lower-class children as threats in the nineteenth century British Empire, see Smith, 1996.
concrete fact and the impetus for Ryerson’s *Draft of bill, relating to vagrant and neglected children in cities and towns* (hereafter *Draft Bill*) (1894b [1862]), which he published, along with a letter describing the reasons for its necessity, in 1862. He pronounces: “there are large number of Children of School age not attending any school” and immediately declares that it is the government’s duty to “prevent such Children from growing up in ignorance and vice” (p. 176).

Much of the *Draft Bill* and the attached letter are devoted to constructing this category of ‘vagrant and neglected children.’ He quotes a judge who notes that Toronto streets “still present the miserable spectacle of idle, untaught children…a crop too rapidly ripening for the dram shop, and the prison” (p. 177). Ryerson announces that “it is equally Christian, and much more humane and patriotic, to prevent crime, than to reform the criminals; to extinguish the fountain from whence the crime flows, than to reform its victims” (p. 178) and concludes with a quotation from a Judge Gladstone: “as the sap rises from the ground in the vegetable world, so it is in the structure of human society. With a stagnant lower class, no community can be well, no Country can be powerful, or secure” (p. 180). Each of these plant or organic metaphors can be read as separating the category of ‘vagrant and neglected children’ from normative society, positioning those within this category not only as aberrant, but as a threat to national security.

The quotation from Gladstone is not the only mention of class: several times throughout the *Draft Bill* and the accompanying letter, Ryerson switches between referring to the population his bill is directed at as “vagrant and neglected children” and “children of the poor.” The easy conflation between the two terms reinforces a conception that to be a parent who is poor is to be a poor parent, or barely better than none at all. Ryerson’s insistence on framing the *Draft Bill* under the label ‘vagrant and neglected children’ leads him into constructing of a category of children from working-class or poor families not as those with less economic capital, but instead as a category of children who are inherently more likely to lead lives of crime.

The images used throughout this *Draft Bill* and attached letter consistently rely on metaphors of growing: just as children are ‘growing up’, they also may be ‘ripening’ or about to pour from a fountain of crime. The implication is that there is a chance to save these children, to
stop them from becoming criminals, but that chance is time-sensitive. The announcement of this bill for this specific category of ‘vagrant and neglected children’, however, establishes this time-sensitivity as something unique to this category: not all children are understood as criminals-to-be. The metaphor of children as ‘ripening’ for the prison suggests an image of each child as a fruit – perhaps one poisonous to society – that is getting closer and closer to its full poison every day. In other words, even though Ryerson’s title for this social category of difference suggests parental neglect, the definition of the child’s difference from and opposition to society rests in their internal degeneracy. The parents are at fault not for creating degeneracy, but for failing to stop it by bringing their children to school. Those trapped within Ryerson’s construction of ‘vagrant and neglected children’ are made inherently almost-criminals.

Difference Established in Ryerson’s Report of an Inquiry

In 1868, Ryerson was asked, by the Governor-General of Upper Canada, to include in a scheduled trip to Europe and North America visits to schools for “the Deaf and Dumb, and the Blind.” In his succeeding Report of an Inquiry in Regard to Instruction and Care for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind (hereafter Report of an Inquiry) (1911a [1868]), the construction of a large category of ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ is clumsy enough that even Ryerson comments on it. Supposedly constructed around people who experience hearing or vision impairments (but those who experience both go unmentioned), in naming this broad category Ryerson ignores the vast variance within these people who experience such impairments, his own admission that ‘the Deaf’ are sometimes also people who speak, and that even if ‘the Deaf and Dumb’ and ‘the Blind’ are accepted as valid categories they remain very disparate populations. Instead, even though he believes that ‘the Deaf and Dumb’ and ‘the Blind’ should have completely different methods of schooling according to their ‘needs', Ryerson still notes that institutions for both constructed categories of people “go hand in hand…I know of no Country in which the one is established without the other” (p. 231).
This claim of the relationship between the categories of ‘the Deaf and Dumb’ and ‘the Blind’ requires a preconception of a humanity that is defined by “the five senses of man” (p. 222); the relationship rests in their shared deprivation from this conceptualized wholeness. Regardless of any actual impairments and the variance experienced by the people who have them, the act of constructing a category encompassing all of those with audial or visual impairments is an act of defining them by their separation from a constructed humanity. In order to force this similarity, Ryerson defines the identity and true nature of the people contained within this category in the (wrong) way their bodies function. Throughout his Report of an Inquiry Ryerson repeatedly emphasizes – to a degree that suggests he believes he is arguing against popular opinion – that ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ have “all the intellectual and moral faculties of man,” despite their ‘deprivation’ (p. 222). Despite this repeated assurance, Ryerson’s construction of ‘the Deaf and Dumb’ and ‘the Blind’ as helpless, incapable, and permanently separate from the civilized world paves the way for the argument for segregated schools by defining their bodies and their existence as something that needs to be managed.

The foundational sense of deficit forms Ryerson’s thinking throughout his Report of an Inquiry. This comes up most frequently in his appeals to inspire the reader’s sympathy and sorrow. For example, ‘the Deaf and Dumb’ can

Behold the works of God and man, but are without the power of language to learn, or magnify either; they feel all the wants and sorrows of humanity, and are susceptible of its pleasures, but are destitute of speech to express their wants and sorrows, or to receive and impart those pleasures. (p. 222)

In introducing the section on ‘the Blind’, he notes that while “the intellectual powers” are “unmaimed,” “the Blind see not the beauties or workmanship of the outward world, nor even the ‘human face divine’” (p. 232). Ryerson’s repeated emphasis of positive traits establishes a reader who assumes that there is nothing human at all within this category. In always pairing these positive traits with the human and religious experiences that ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ have no access to, Ryerson does not refute this assumption of lack of humanity, but instead positions it as a lack of humanity in which there is hope for (some) salvation – salvation that
could be awarded by those who are Christian enough to see this potential. He encourages a conception of the separation between ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ from the rest of society in writing of the necessity that they “learn the world” (p. 232), and his surprise whenever he encounters students at schools for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ who seem to him to be intelligent.

Ryerson repeatedly emphasizes the “Christian humanity” of those who even consider educating ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind.’ In a departure from his usual narrative path in education reports, Ryerson takes a moment to review the history of deaf education in Europe, going back to an English monk in 650. While presumably vastly incomplete, this narrative is arranged around the “noble,” “charitable,” and “zealous” work of the (hearing) educators, to the neglect of any depictions of their students (p. 224). These narratives, which continue in Ryerson’s description of existing schools and educators for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind,’ combine with the regular appearance of descriptors such as “helpless” (p. 235) to construct ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ as a group of people that is inactive and passive, waiting in the margins of society for men Christian enough to care about their salvation. Ryerson fails to question this marginal status. In doing so, he naturalizes a marginal position of ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ as something that is an inherent effect of being less than human.

Difference Established in Ryerson’s Separate Schools Act

Ryerson actively resisted writing into law separate schools for a category of ‘coloured people’. In 1847, he wrote that segregationist laws would be “a disgrace to our Legislature,” and tried to shift the responsibility for defining disputes over segregation to school trustees, to avoid the admission of something as “insidious” as racial segregation into the law book (quoted in McLaren, 2004, p. 40). However, in 1850, the Act for the better establishment and maintenance of common schools in Upper Canada (known more commonly as the Separate Schools Act, and hereafter referred to as such) (1911b [1850]) allowed for the creation of separate schools for “Protestants, Roman Catholics and Coloured People” (p. 213). While a conception of a category
of difference is necessary for Ryerson to be able to write this law, there is little in the historical record that defines the ways in which Ryerson understood ‘coloured people’ as inherently different. Building a record for this construction, as opposed to that of the other categories of difference discussed previously, requires looking at constructions of this category that Ryerson encouraged rather than only what he vocally espoused.

The growth of the common school system grew parallel with efforts from white families to resist integration within it. While there is evidence that many other students who may have been encompassed under other social categories of difference did, at least at the beginning of Ryerson’s tenure, go to common schools (Child and Klopotek, 2014, p. 12; Houston, 1978, p. 256), the reaction against ‘coloured people’ is by far the strongest. The Chief Justice of Upper Canada’s Supreme Court felt compelled to speak on it, musing that segregationist sentiment derived:

Not so much from the mere fact of difference of colour, as from an apprehension that the children of the coloured people, many of whom have but lately escaped from a state of slavery, may be, in respect to morals and habits, unfortunately worse trained than the white children are in general and that their children might suffer from the effects of a bad example. (Quoted in Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 302)

The belief that this was one location of white people’s construction of ‘coloured people’ was correct, although ‘apprehension’ was an understatement, and it was rarely exclusively linked to slavery. In letters to the Department of Education and newspapers, white people declared that ‘coloured people’ spoke rudely, had bad manners, dressed messily, and that they were concerned “‘African barbarism’ might ‘triumph over Anglo-Saxon civilization’” (quoted in McLaren, 2004, p. 33). These sentiments were shared by white abolitionists, who held concerns about lingering bad habits from slavery (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 302), as well as by white missionaries, some of who traveled from the United States to establish private segregated schools in Upper Canada, efforts that were often resisted by the black community (McLaren, 2004, p. 37).

In fact, black people had a long history in Upper Canada by the nineteenth century, and before the extension of common schools had similar education patterns to white people: they
went to school when and where they could (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 299). Especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, there is evidence of regular economic success for black families, and Toronto in particular had a sizable affluent black community (Adams, 2011, p. 11; McLaren, 2004, p. 34). After the abolition of slavery in Canada in the early nineteenth century, there was an increase in settlement in Canada from black people who were former slaves, along with black people immigrating for economic reasons. By 1850, towns and cities in southwestern region and Niagara peninsula were composed of up to one-third black residents, and it was in these towns that the most fierce fights over segregation occurred (McLaren, 2004, p. 31).

While the sentiments of white people about ‘coloured people’ are vivid, most of the evidence in the historical record about local clashes around segregation is visible in the active campaigning from black people. Many people wrote to officials, including Ryerson, fighting to access the schools they paid taxes for (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 303; Knight, 2012, p. 232). White parents, on the other hand, rarely wrote to school officials or Ryerson with desires for segregation, instead working at the level of the local school board to declare their common schools ‘private’ or gerrymander districts, or even taking the step of removing their children from an integrated school until it was forced to close because of low attendance (Knight, 2012, p. 228). Even Toronto, which was hailed as a model of integration and, as such, of “good sense and Christian and British feeling” according to Ryerson, integration was more likely less of an issue because of several factors other than an interest in inclusion. In reality, there was a very low percentage of black people (estimated at two percent), and residential segregation that resulted in few white students actually going to school with black students (McLaren, 2004, p. 34). There were several schools developed by black communities, including at least one that was considered so successful that many white students chose to attend it (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 300).

The context of education for black families in Upper Canada before 1850, then, was one in which the rhetoric of provincial school officials, including Ryerson himself, claimed that they were welcome in common schools, while white families and municipal officials enforced segregation against ‘coloured people’ where they could. Black families were forced to pressure
the government for their children’s education. This dynamic, in which the white population was able to manipulate the system to suit their needs while the black population was forced to appeal to higher powers to change it, established a system of power in public education that, even before the Separate Schools Act, positioned black people as demanding to get into a school system that was clearly responding to the needs and desires of a different population. It structured black people, forced to present their case for education, as something other than the natural subjects of common schools.

This was enhanced by the writing of segregationists as well as by Ryerson’s own construction of the citizen. In previous chapters, I have outlined the way that Ryerson’s construction of the future citizen and normative subject of his schools depended on the creation and maintenance of constructed categories of difference. This liberal notion of the human carries particular implications for blackness. Simone Browne (2015) notes, following Sylvia Wynter, “the organizational framework of our present human condition that names what is and what is not bounded within the category of the human…fixes and frames blackness as an object of surveillance” (p. 7) The focus of black people as ‘objects of surveillance’ as a necessary result of the definition of the ‘human’ explains the particular furor caused by the existence of black children within common schools. Locating the problem of the furor within the bodies of ‘coloured people,’ and the reactions that they seemed to provoke, explains why it seemed something unfortunate, but unavoidable, to Ryerson.

While he may have resisted putting this law into writing, Ryerson allowed de facto racial segregation to occur under his watch even before the Separate Schools Act passed, suggesting that it was not racial segregation he was opposed to as much as coming across as a racist politician. While Ryerson claimed that he wrote this act “with extreme pain and regret,” and that he despained that “the prejudices and feelings of the people are stronger than law,” this statement loses force when facing the fact that his predecessors effectively forced at least one town to integrate, and that they had done so without the system of accountability (withholding funds) that Ryerson had set up himself and never used in this context (McLaren, 2004, pp. 41, 40). Whether
or not he believed all of the components of the construction of this category by the public or not, Ryerson’s production of the Separate Schools Act both depended on and enhanced the naturalization of a defined category of ‘coloured people’ as different from the normative subject of his schools, and as a possible category of governance in Upper Canada.

In the structure of the act, Ryerson ties the category of ‘coloured people’ to the religious categories of Protestants and Roman Catholics:

> And it be enacted that it shall be the duty of the municipal council of any Township, and of the Board of Trustees of any City, Town, or Incorporated Village, on the application, in writing, of twelve, or more, resident heads of families, to authorize the establishment of one or more separate schools for Protestants, Roman Catholics or coloured people. (Ryerson, 1911b [1850], p. 213)

This establishment of these three categories of people who have the right to petition for a separate school, of which the two religious ones are mutually exclusive, implies that the category of ‘coloured people’ is also mutually exclusive. While Ryerson likely did not believe that all black people had no religion, he establishes two categories defined by Christianity and one that is not, a separation that implicitly encourages the established construction of a category of ‘coloured people’ defined as uncivilized.

Following this act, schools for Protestants and Roman Catholics were generally created as families requested them. Black families, however, found schools being created for them and, subsequently, that their children were barred from the common schools. Ryerson’s refusal to do anything about this contrary interpretation, despite repeated appeals from black families, reaffirms that his previous refusal to write this act, as well as his capitulation, were focused on concerns for (his, white) nation than for ‘coloured people’. It also indicates that he was comfortable with an indefinite exclusion of ‘coloured people’ from his ‘common’ schools and future state.

**Categories to Govern/Manage/Contain**

After he had defined social categories of difference as definitively separate from humanity and the normative subject for his common schools, Ryerson, in each of his proposals,
defines separate schools. In contrast to his proposal for common schools, the purposes of his separate schools are to civilize, not to create citizens. This requires seeing schools as governing sites, places where difference is managed and contained, which has a variety of consequences that can be read in the shape that ‘education’ takes. The purpose of these proposed schools extends beyond Ryerson’s educational system. Ryerson is taking steps to create a future ‘civilized’ state, or one in which the continued (white, able-bodied, wealthy) leadership is ensured. This requires the incorporation (‘civilization’) of those within categories of difference into the state, but incorporation into a defined space at the margins of society.

**Government/Management/Containment in Ryerson’s Letter on Residential Schools**

In his *Letter on Residential Schools*, the ‘civilizing’ schools that Ryerson proposes for ‘Indians’ are about preparing people for lifelong governance and separating them from the land they are indigenous to. He encourages a focus on labor from a very young age. After eliminating the possibility of any kind of trade apprenticeship because it would be too bureaucratically difficult on the government’s end (something that rarely stopped him with his common schools, where he built a massive bureaucracy), he settles on agriculture as “the chief interest, and probably the most suitable employment of the civilized Indians” (Ryerson, 1898 [1847], p. 74). He then suggests – that for a student population that should start school, he believes, at around four years old – that they should spend eight to twelve hours a day in the field in the summer, with two to four hours of instruction. While winter would lead to a decrease in time doing agricultural labor and more in lessons, he suggests that gymnastics should be implemented to ensure extensive physical activity. During planting, harvest, and seed sowing, and during the entire season of autumn, he ruminates that there will likely be no time for academics at all (p. 75). The timeline for graduation would be after four to eight years of ‘education’, depending on their “capacity to manage for themselves” (p. 77). In complete contrast to his suggestions for common schools in his *Report*, where, for even those he admits will end up in low-paying trade work, he writes of the necessity of inculcating a joy of reading, this *Letter* illustrates instead a
goal of inculcating a tolerance for extremely hard physical labor from a very young age, with very limited time for reading at all.

The image that Ryerson paints of the final results of his imagined schools are of ‘Indians’ incorporated within the state in the agricultural sector. He writes that ideal schools should “render them objects of desire by proprietors,” and notes that “it would be a gratifying result to see graduates of our Indian industrial schools become overseers of some of the largest farms in Canada” (p. 76-77). While he mentions in passing that it would also be nice if graduates owned their own farms, the emphasis is that he hopes to make ‘Indians’ into people that other people – white people who went to the common schools – would then employ. The goal is to bring ‘Indians’, almost unmanageable subjects, into something that can be governed by the state. All the better if this governing is done in tandem with someone else – from the churches he proposes to control the schools (not only to ensure internal change with true religious feeling, but also to lessen potential embarrassments for the state (p. 74)) to the owners of the farms.

It is hardly a mistake that Ryerson seems to have trouble imagining ‘Indians’ owning the farms that they work on. The underlying implication here – as ‘Indians’ become civilized and thus become “objects of desire” for someone else to own their labor – is that there will no longer be any land owned by ‘Indians’ because ‘Indians’ will no longer exist. As Jean O’Brien (2010) notes, a construction of ‘Indian’ that defines them as a people that can never be modern (as Ryerson does) means that when people who would have been classified that way adopt traits of modernity, such as the Western-European dress, habits, and beliefs that Ryerson’s school would force them to adopt, they cease to then be conceptualized as ‘Indian’. This forced participation in and then removal from the construction of ‘Indian’ allowed for politicians like Ryerson to rationalize the ongoing occupation and continuing seizure of the land of Indigenous people by the government of Upper Canada. In becoming employed agricultural laborers, Ryerson’s ‘Indians’ are erased as people with sovereign rights to Upper Canadian soil. As Child and Klopotek (2014) note of state-run education for Indigenous peoples in the Americas,
“assimilation, in itself, was the stated rationale…but the desire for unimpeded access to indigenous land and resources has always been the less obvious driving force” (p. 4).

**Government/Management/Containment in Ryerson’s Draft Bill**

Education for ‘vagrant and neglected children’ follows a similar procedure as the one that Ryerson suggests for ‘Indians’: containment and management, with the aid of religion so as to force internal change. Ryerson himself notes the overlap between the two categories of difference, writing that the “zeal” of Christianity has been incredibly powerful both in ragged schools (schools for poor children in England) and “in heathen lands” (Ryerson, 1894b [1862], p. 179). It needs to be emphasized more in these schools, as opposed to his common school system, because without exposure to strong religious zeal, “there is no hope for the Criminal, the Vagrant, or the Pauper” (p. 180). Ryerson also argues that the employment of religious groups is a satisfactory patchwork solution in the absence of a law for compulsory education. While that law remained unwritten, the “zeal” of religious groups will help them “anxiously seek” ‘vagrant and neglected children’ in a way it was not yet legal for the state to do (p. 180).

Ryerson makes sure to note his bitterness that he is forced to write the *Draft Bill* because of the refusal of politicians to embrace compulsory education. Part of the reason, he admits, is the “utter unwillingness” of politicians to infringe on individual and parental rights (p. 178), and the other part is that the containment required would be impractical. If education was compulsory, Ryerson writes,

> It would be necessary to provide a Building and Officers for a Reformatory School, and Premises connected with it for cultivation, for learning Trades, with prison-like enclosures. Then provision must be made for the thorough Religious Instruction and training of the inmates. The expense and difficulties connected with the management of such an Establishment are such as a Municipality will not incur, and such as the Government and Legislature are not likely to undertake. (p. 178)

If ‘vagrant and neglected children’ were forced to go into the common school system, the government would have to build a “prison-like” building. As Ryerson defines this category as almost-criminals, it is impossible for him to imagine their entry into a school that does not treat
them as such. He was not alone: there was a common concern, one that ran parallel to a concern for the ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ that if they did all arrive at school, middle-class parents would suddenly pull their children out en masse rather than allow them to intermingle (Neff, 2004, p. 6). The only ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of these students was identified as containment.

Despite the panic at the ‘vagrant and neglected children’ roaming the streets of Toronto, this Draft Bill did not become law because politicians opposed to Ryerson saw, in this bill, religious interference in the school system (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 307). It is notable that this opposition to religious interference failed to appear in the development of residential schools, and suggests a hierarchy in which categories of social difference were seen as closer to society. While there were never official schools established for ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ Ryerson’s prediction came true: along with compulsory education laws in the 1870s arose laws for industrial schools, pushed especially by teachers, for “vagrant, incorrigible, or refractory youngsters who might disrupt the common school classroom” (Houston and Prentice, 1992, p. 307). The common school system was built on conceptions of creating citizens and thus a civilized nation, and as such the only space for the uncivilized was a forcibly contained one.

**Government/Management/Containment in Ryerson’s Report of an Inquiry**

Similar to Ryerson’s suggestions for ‘Indians’ and ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ his proposed schools for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ are guided around producing internal change. This internal change is dedicated towards the goal of “[restoring the student] more completely to the intercourse of society” (Ryerson, 1911a [1868], p. 223). This is completed through learning manual trades, both to help them become “usefull members of [society],” but also to, in general, develop “industrious habits” and to help them “[acquire] the knowledge of an ordinary life” (pp. 228, 223). Ryerson praises those who forestall the inherent tendency of the ‘the Blind’ to idleness, the solution to which is “action, action, action…No listlessness, or idleness, is encouraged, or permitted” (pp. 235).
This emphasis on education directed towards creating governable subjects, as opposed to creation of citizens, leads to a diminished vision of possibility for and capability of ‘the Deaf and the Dumb and the Blind.” Ryerson quotes school leaders who suggest late starting ages – age nine or age twelve – and does not note the contradictions when these same leaders remark that ‘the Deaf and Dumb’ are academically behind hearing students, or that ‘the Blind’ seem to arrive “dull, timid, and inactive,” as if they have had no prior experience with normative school behavior (pp. 223, 234).

At the time that Ryerson was writing this Report of an Inquiry, there had been schools for deaf people in the United States for decades, and there was an unexpected (by hearing people) resulting development of a Deaf community.32 Many (but not all) students learned sign language and interacted with other deaf people for the first time, and adopted identities that, in contrast to Ryerson and other educational reformers’ constructions, positioned deafness as positive, something to be proud of. In the United States, one of the immediate results of the development of this culture was the rise of a movement, led by hearing people, for deaf education to focus on articulation (teaching deaf people to lip read and speak verbally) at the expense of sign language. The goal of this movement was to discourage the further development of a separate Deaf culture and force incorporation into the (hearing) nation (Edwards, 2012, pp. 4-6). While Ryerson seems to be writing in ignorance of this debate, the moves of his contemporary counterparts in the US, such as Horace Mann, to advocate for articulation, speaks to the underlying purpose that schools for deaf people held under a liberal philosophy of education: a process of containment and management in order to create governable subjects, not citizens. The threat of Deaf culture – which at one point included a proposal to create a Deaf state in the US (Winzer, 1997, p. 363)—was a very immediate threat to Ryerson’s definition of the nation.

32 I use the term ‘Deaf’ with a capital ‘d’ to refer to the Deaf community that began to develop at this time. As R.A.R. Edwards (2012) writes, “in the field of Deaf Studies,” this capitalized term “is used to refer to those physically deaf people who came together to form a distinct community with its own language, culture, and mores” (p. 4)
Government/Management/Containment in Ryerson’s Separate Schools Act

As noted previously, the Separate School Act was (perhaps intentionally) ambiguous about the process of establishing segregated schools for ‘coloured people.’ It was unclear whether the act justified towns in establishing ‘coloured schools,’ as they were called, or whether these schools had to be initiated by the black people within the town. Ryerson did little to clear up the confusion, even when it does not seem that this trouble existed for the Protestant and Catholic populations addressed in the same act. When black families resisted or complained to Ryerson in writing about segregated schools being established against their will, and their children’s forced enrollment in them, he lamented their case, expressed sadness that the act was being misinterpreted, and occasionally suggested that the black families sue at their own expense (Knight, 2012, p. 229). When, alternately, school trustees wrote to Ryerson about the best ways to keep ‘coloured children’ from their schools, he suggested they establish segregated districts, writing that black students did not “have a right to attend any school they may fancy to attend,” despite the fact that there seemed to be no barriers to white students doing so, some of whom attended ‘coloured schools’ without difficulty (quoted in McLaren, 2004, p. 42).

If Ryerson did believe that ‘coloured people’ had a right to or even a place in ‘common’ schools, he never did anything to support this. In building his position of Chief Superintendent, Ryerson had granted himself additional administrative power, including the ability to withhold funds from schools, but he never showed any inclination to respond to requests for integration with anything other than a sympathetic note. In doing so, he actively and passively encouraged racial segregation, and the ‘coloured schools’ that resulted built the definition of ‘coloured people’ as a governable category that was separate from society.

While in the Separate Schools Act document, as opposed to the other documents examined in this chapter, Ryerson does not define what segregated schools for ‘coloured people’ should look like, it is unsurprising, given the racist vitriol that resulted in segregation, that town school boards rarely gave ‘coloured schools’ their appropriate share of government funds. The Anti-Slavery Society of Canada reported, only two years after the Separate Schools Act, that
education at separate schools was inferior and teachers were poorly qualified and poorly paid (McLaren, 2004, p. 43). Ryerson’s suggestion that black people sue proved futile: in 1854, the Supreme Court ruled that, “if a separate racial school had been established, black students had to attend it, no matter the quality of the school or its distance from home” (quoted in McLaren, 2004, p. 42). For many black students, especially those who lived far from the closest segregated school, this meant no education at all. Tracey Adams (2011) notes that, of those who stayed, rising education requirements in the late-nineteenth century meant that black people in Upper Canada who had grown up in the segregated education system were less likely to be able to access job opportunities (p. 42). Many historians attribute a large part of the significant outmigration to the United States by the black community during and after the American Civil War to the “worsening conditions” and hostile environment in Upper Canada exemplified by the public school system (Adams, 2011, p. 18; Knight, 2012, p. 235).

Categories Possessed to Establish the Center

Each of these proposals works to shape the overall project of Ryerson’s school system, and wrapped up in this project is a logic of possession. In narrating this possession, I follow Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015), who uses the term “possessive logics” to conceptualize the rationalizations that justify the reproduction of the ownership and control of the nation. This includes, as illustrated in my examinations of the proposals previously, understanding possession in terms of having the power to position social categories of difference as definitions that are ‘known’ and ‘true,’ and possession in terms of who controls and will control ownership of the state. A conceptualization of possession in this way – in which both manners of possession are intimately connected in their production – allows us to see these proposals as integral to the manifestation of Ryerson’s vision. Separate schools are necessary in order to produce a future ‘civilized’ state, or a state in which the comprehensive power of white settlers is complete.

Ryerson’s proposals work towards this ultimate possession using techniques of relationality in order to establish the supremacy of the ‘common’ school and the normative
student. Throughout this chapter, in positioning these proposals next to each other, I have highlighted the commonality in Ryerson’s moves to distinguish each category of difference from an unspoken normative center. This is a process of bringing-into-relation (including bringing categories of difference into relation with each other as well as bringing each of them into relation with the normative) that supports the production of the entire structure by reaffirming the borderlines of the normal and abnormal. Ryerson’s educational system as well as the production of the ‘civilized’ state rest on the continued manifestation of othered subjects in order to establish the primacy and borders of the (future) citizen.

Further, these proposals position possibilities for future relationality. In addition to rhetorical constructions, Lisa Lowe (2015) argues that the liberty and freedom of the European man occurred through the subordination of colonized and dispossessed peoples “whose material labor and resources were the conditions of possibility for that liberty” (p. 6). Ryerson, an Upper Canadian leader within the imperial project that Lowe describes, both benefited from the movements of empire (such as those that Lowe illustrates, including settler-colonialism and the flows of people and materials that produced capital for his nation) and reinforced them through the structuring of his own educational system. Since I work solely with proposals here, I cannot speak to the broader relationality created with the material labor and resources of the colonized and dispossessed people of Upper Canada, many of whom were subjected to the separate schools that Ryerson proposed. I can, however, point towards the beginnings of these relationships that are suggested by Ryerson within his proposals.

As I mentioned previously, it is not an accident that Ryerson’s plans for ‘Indians’ centered on them working land without any ownership of it. In possessing ‘Indians’ as something defined by him – and thus as an identity that he can also deny – Ryerson provides the conditions of possibility for the further takeover of Indigenous land. In this way, Ryerson’s proposal for residential schools suggests future material possibilities for the expansion of his future state. Along the same lines, the suggestion that ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ and ‘vagrant and neglected children’ learn trade work is not only about incorporating categories of difference into
society, but also about creating classes of people who will be devoted to (and only suitable for) productive labor for the state. Each of these situations suggests a broader system of relationships, in which the material and resources of people in separate schools were forcibly marshaled towards the production of the ‘civilized’ state.

These schools are moments in the historical record in which groups of people are classed as non-normative to Ryerson’s common school system, acting as traces of the origins of the ‘problem child.’ Further, in creating defined spaces for these invented categories of people, Ryerson was drawing a map, writing into being a geography in which categories of social difference have different spaces. This mapping was structured according to Ryerson’s unique vantage point at his moment in history, organized by his knowledge and his priorities (see Psathas, writing on Alfred Schutz, 2005). The production of space masks Ryerson’s white, classed, abled vantage point as one that is “seemingly stable,” and naturalizes the differences that are defined by its organization (McKittrick, 2006, p. xv).

In this way, Ryerson’s production of separate schools establishes the white settler supremacy of the nation as something natural, true, and expected. The fact that Ryerson continued to produce proposals for separate schools over the course of twenty years – directly in the face of his rhetoric about the ‘universality’ of his school system – indicates that there was some regular need that the production of these schools was servicing. The building of white supremacist settler-colonial state is dependent on these strategies of naturalizing hierarchies of difference, of “spatial colonization and domination” (McKittrick, 2006, p. x), which are rationalized by the logics of liberalism. Ryerson’s school system relied on the existence of both common schools and separate schools in order for the structure’s ultimate purpose, the ‘civilized’ state, to be made possible. The ‘freedom’ of the citizen is defined by the continued oppression of the marginalized subject. Without separate schools and the containment of the ‘problem’ students within them, Ryerson’s vision for education is impossible.
The separate schools that Ryerson proposes are not only traces of the origins of the ‘problem child,’ but also point towards its future development, in that these schools are fundamental steps towards the distinction of people within certain social categories of difference as inherently not-belonging to the space of the classroom. The subjectivity of people encompassed within categories of difference is not defined or eliminated by the production of separate schools: they remain actors defining educational spaces before, during, and after Ryerson’s proposals. The eventual manifestation of Ryerson’s schools into reality – the building of residential schools, industrial schools, institutional schools, segregated schools – was actively shaped by people who lived, learned, taught, and sometimes died within them. These schools were often spaces in which long-lasting oppression was entrenched, and they were also sites of contested possession (a possession which, as the rise of Deaf culture from schools shows, did not always belong to those whom Ryerson intended), and of resistance. Since Ryerson’s era, there has been an incredible amount of advocacy work that has resulted in the elimination or transformation of many of these separate schools. In the following Conclusion, I investigate the implications of work in the face of that activism: how influential are these foundations of public education in Ontario that I have explored? Is it possible to reform an educational system that relies upon liberal philosophy and thus the regular maintenance and exclusion of people constructed as ‘problems’? Or does any reformation require addressing the meaning of education itself?
Figure 1. Statue of Egerton Ryerson, Ryerson University, Toronto. Text below figure of Ryerson reads “Egerton Ryerson, Founder of the School System of Ontario.” Photo taken by the author.
Chapter 5
Conclusion: The Problem with Foundations

“Thus it is that the fame of Dr. Ryerson as a successful founder of our educational system, rests upon a solid base. What has been done by him will not be undone; and the ground gone over by him will not require to be traversed again.”

— John George Hodgins, 
*Ryerson Memorial Volume*

Foundations are supposed to hold up, support, and define whatever comes next. What do you do when the foundations turn out to be foundationally destructive and violent? John George Hodgins’ words in describing the legacy of Ryerson come from the 1889 *Ryerson Memorial Volume: Prepared on the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Ryerson Statue in the Grounds of the Education Department*, encouraging a conflation between the tall stone foundation underneath the gigantic figure of Ryerson (see Figure 1) and the vast network of public education structures constructed for Ontario. In light of the arguments I have made about the dangers of Ryerson’s philosophies and actions, these words (and the statue as well) begin to seem eerily ominous. In the previous chapters, I have illustrated that the liberal philosophy that structured Ryerson’s thinking about education required a continual construction, maintenance, and exclusion of people as ‘problems’ to the functioning of schools. This ‘problem child’ process both relied on and reinforced the categorization of people into categories of social difference, and in doing so it laid the groundwork for systemic discrimination for generations to come. With this particular foundation in mind, Hodgins' words seem like a warning, or maybe even a challenge: what would it take to undo what has been done by Ryerson, to traverse again the ground gone over?

The origin of my questions for this project was the conundrum of the repeated appearance of the ‘problem child’ in narratives and experiences of contemporary classroom life across North America. It is evident, then, that there still exist students who are defined as not fitting the normative expectations for a student in a classroom. However, there has been tremendous resistance and educational activism, much of it from students and parents who shaped and/or were shaped by separate schools, that challenged many components of Ryerson’s school system.
The last federally-administered residential school in Canada closed in 1996 (CBC News, 2014), the last segregated school for black children in Ontario was closed in 1965 (Cole, 2016), and there is a broad push across North America for greater inclusion of disabled students into mainstream classrooms (in Ontario, see Zegarac, Drewett, and Swan, 2008). This activism has often focused successfully on the elimination of separate schools. If the spatial organization has changed, what has happened to the liberal philosophy that produced it?

In order to briefly explore this question, I turn to documents from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). While a focus on the TDSB alone is different from the province-wide framework that I have used throughout the rest of this thesis, elaborations beyond legislative definitions are often slightly different from district to district, making it easier to focus on how one specific district explains the provincial legislation when searching for a parallel to Ryerson’s explanatory documents. In taking some brief time to search for evidence of liberalism in schools in Ontario today, I look at the TDSB as representative of what one of the inheritors of Ryerson’s educational philosophy and legislation has done with his work. It is also the largest school district in Canada and fourth largest in North America (TDSB, 2014b), and as such is ripe for an exploration on how ‘problem children’ continued to be produced today.

To begin with, the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) current mission statement is eerily reminiscent of Ryerson’s introduction to his educational vision in 1846. The TDSB writes, “our mission is to enable all students to reach high levels of achievement and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values they need to become responsible members of a democratic society” (TDSB, 2014a). Ryerson, in his *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* (1894a [1846]), begins,

> By education, I mean not the mere acquisition of certain arts, or of certain branches of knowledge, but that instruction and discipline which qualify and dispose the subjects of it for their appropriate duties and employments of life, as Christians, as persons of business and also as members of the civil community in which they live. (p. 142)

Both mission statements are structured around building the skills and practical abilities of students in order for them to become responsible citizens for the state. This conception of
schooling is reliant, as I illustrated in previous chapters, on the creation, maintenance, and exclusion of an othered subject who is constituted as a ‘problem’ to the school system and the nation. In Ryerson’s era, these ‘problem children’ were organized and managed within structures of separate schooling into which they could be molded into governable subjects. If the purpose of public schooling in Toronto is still founded on the same philosophy, then where are the ‘problem children’ being created, maintained, and excluded today?

In public schools, exclusion can happen in a variety of ways: sending students to the principal’s office or another teacher’s classroom, setting up a time-out chair in the corner of the room, having students sit in the hallway, or even sending them to seclusion rooms (isolated rooms designated for the containment of disobedient students). Seclusion rooms, as one example, are inconsistently regulated in both the United States and Canada, and they are usually justified as necessary tools to protect teachers and other students from violent and aggressive students (Clibbon, 2015). Narratives that there are some students who ‘need’ to be locked away in order to make education possible/safe for other students brings to mind Ryerson’s belief that ‘vagrant and neglected children’ would be such a destabilizing force that if schooling was compulsory, the Education Department would have to build “prison-like enclosures” (Ryerson, 1894b [1862], p. 178). The fact that there are regular exposés (Vogell, 2014; Molgat, 2015) that highlight that seclusion rooms are usually used for nonviolent offenses and for reasons of convenience (Richards and Bloom, 2012) suggest that, just like Ryerson’s category of ‘vagrant and neglected children,’ the category of potentially violent students is constructed and fictional, a strategy of the creation, maintenance, and exclusion of ‘problem students’ that is naturalized by the spatial organizations of schools.

Many of these students who are narrated as ‘potentially violent’ are also described as disabled and/or as belonging in special education (Richards and Bloom, 2012). Often, they are described under emotion- and behavior-based special education labels, which exist in almost
every school district across North America. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education names this category Behaviour Exceptionality, and the TDSB publishes a publicly available document that illustrates how they work with this Ministry definition. How does this construction do similar work that Ryerson’s constructed categories did? This label seems to echo the same logic that Ryerson used: naturalizing and internalizing difference, continuing to make the ‘problem child’ the one at fault for their own exclusion.

**The ‘Behaviourally Exceptional Student’**

As mentioned previously, Behaviour Exceptionality, while a specific definition created for use within the TDSB, fits into a larger category of emotion- and behavior-based special education labels that are used in most school districts across North America. Emotion- and behavior-based special education labels, as a whole, are used to classify those students who have a subjectively understood ‘exceptional’ level of difficulty ‘controlling’ emotions or behaviors in the classroom: in other words, they are students who are classed as non-normative to the classroom, the same as the students within Ryerson’s separate schools. While not a psychiatric label in themselves, these labels often lead towards psychiatric testing for diagnoses such as Emotional Behavioral Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Anxiety Disorder, if the student has not already been diagnosed with one or several. While, hypothetically, these school-based labels can be applied independently from psychiatric testing

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33 These labels go by a variety of names internationally, depending on who governs special education. United States special education legislation includes a category of “emotionally disturbed” (US Department of Education, 2004) while the British Columbia Ministry of Education uses a category “R” which refers to “Students Requiring Behaviour Support or Students with Mental Illness,” indicating the overlapping diagnosed/not diagnosed nature of these categories (BC Ministry of Education, 2009). In England, categories of students technically do not exist, but “Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties” is used as a descriptor in official documents (Thomas, 2005, p. 60).

34 In asking this question, I am not comparing categories but rather comparing how these categories are shaped and narrated in similar ways to serve the purpose of public education. As I noted in Chapter 4, comparing these categories would requiring accepting fictional categories as holding some sort of truth and smoothing over and eliminating drastically different historical contexts in which they were produced.

35 See Kehra Taleb (2007) for a much deeper analysis of the possible routes that the formal psychological identification of students can take. Taleb notes that in her site of analysis (French language schools in Ontario) schools occasionally tried to push students out to other schools rather than engage a formal identification process.
and diagnosis, they come from and encourage a similar frame of thinking: if a student is not fitting normative ways of being in a classroom, there must be something wrong with them, their body, or their brain.

This is reflected in the Ministry Definition of Behaviour Exceptionality with which the TDSB description of the category begins, in which the focus remains on inherent problems contained within the student. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, Behaviour Exceptionality is:

A learning disorder characterized by specific behaviour problems over such a period of time and to such a marked degree, and of such a nature as to adversely affect educational performance and that may be accompanied by one or more of the following:

a) An inability to build or to maintain interpersonal relationships
b) Excessive fears or anxieties
c) A tendency to compulsive reaction or
d) An inability to learn that cannot be traced to intellectual, sensory, or other health factors, or any combination thereof  

(TDSB, 2015, p. 43)

In these very first sentences, this ministry definition constructs a problem and localizes it within the student’s body. The word ‘exceptionality,’ which connotes aberrance from an unstated norm, is normally used in a positive sense. Here, the abundant use of negative language (“problems,” “disorder,” “inability,” “adversely,” “compulsive”) makes it clear that in this case, that aberrance is an indication that there is something wrong. That problem, that ‘wrong,’ is located within the ‘behaviourally exceptional student’: a subject whose fear, anxieties, and reactions are off-kilter, abnormal, and not to be trusted.36 When this document constructs a student as having “excessive fears or anxieties,” then any situation in which the student experiences fear becomes a symptom of something wrong with them rather than something wrong with the environment. This same logic follows in the definition’s descriptions of interpersonal relationships, reactions, and even the ability to learn: it defines something as expected as normative in the classroom (interpersonal

36 As I did with the categories that Ryerson constructed in Chapters 3 and 4, I use quotes here when referring to the ‘behaviourally exceptional student’ in order to emphasize that I am not speaking of any actual students who may have been given this label. Instead, my focus lies on examining how this role, this image of a student, is narrated as an objective truth using the same paths of logic that Ryerson used.
relationships, ‘normal’ levels of fear, ‘normal reactions,’ the act of learning), and then places the student’s lack of that normative behavior as problem contained within the student themself. This is encouraged, later in the document, by the note that there may be a need for a psychological assessment, a suggestion that implies that the ‘problem’ exists within the student’s brain. This suggested connection – a construction of abnormal behaviour naturalized by a discursive connection to a bodily impairment – is the same that is used by Ryerson in his report on schools for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind’ (1911a [1868]), where sensory impairments are an implied cause of characteristics such as being “helpless,” “idle,” and academically slow (pp. 235, 223, 234).

The note that the student may contain within themselves an ‘inability to learn’ is crucial in mapping those within the Behaviour Exceptionality category as non-normative to the classroom. As I noted in Chapter 2, the primary criteria for a student of Ryerson’s ‘common’ schools is that they are able to progress through time: to grow and change until, eventually, they are able to reach a level of humanity appropriate for citizenship. It is hard to imagine a school system not founded on this developmental framework, in which Grade 2 automatically builds on (for normative students) the progress that has occurred in Grade 1; an ‘inability to learn’ stands in stark contrast to this naturalized state of progression. The frozen, unable-to-progress narrative that an ‘inability to learn’ suggests is re-emphasized later in the document, which includes notes that the student might be unresponsive to “sustained efforts,” challenged “in interpersonal, social, and/or emotional development,” and need support in “adaptability” (p. 43, 44). This depiction of a student as static brings to mind Ryerson’s construction of ‘Indian,’ a fictional constructed subject whom he hoped to “preserve” in civilization through residential schools (1898 [1847], (p. 73). Positioning students outside a developmental framework places them outside the borders of the project of schooling.

The logic constructing the ‘behaviourally exceptional student’ thus presents them as completely separate from the normative student and, as such, a student for a different educational program (the logical progression that likewise led Ryerson to plan separate schools). The
suggested programming includes several possibilities, all of which focus on changing this subject, constructed as unmanageable, into someone governable. This suggests that the goal of this programming is not the success or well-being of the student, but control of the student’s body. The first level of intervention programming, named Intensive Support Programming for Behaviour, begins:

Regardless of the form of program intervention, the goals for these students are to:
- Decrease inappropriate behaviour
- Increase positive behaviour
- Acquire new skills
- Transfer new skills to other settings

Particular areas of focus include social skills training and the development of self-control, adaptability, and responsibility. (p. 44)

While the initial description of the ‘behaviourally exceptional student’ focused on internal problems, this description of the ‘solution’ is focused on entirely external solutions. The Support Programming is not intended to calm the student’s compulsive reactions, or to soothe their (“excessive”) fears or anxieties: it is to manage and control the outer manifestations of the assumed internal deficiencies. These extremely vague goals, in which “inappropriate behaviour” is decreased while “positive behaviour” is increased, suggests that the ultimate goal of this Support Programming is the appearance of a controlled body, as subjectively perceived by the adults around the student. Further, the vague focus on “skills,” clarified by the following sentence that this likely refers to “social skills…self-control, adaptability, and responsibility” guides the student towards tools that would assist in the outward perception of a controlled body.

In addition, even though an “inability to learn” is one possible expression of a ‘behaviourally exceptional student,’ there is little to no mention of academic support. While there is a general mention of a regular “focus on student achievement” (p. 44), academics are only mentioned in the program for Secondary Schools, in which the description for the Focus on Success Program mentions, “behaviours may be due to academic frustration as well as social/emotional issues” (p. 44). However, the only program objective of the Focus on Success Program that correlates to academics is to “improve work habits and increase credit
accumulation” (p. 44). Rather than supporting the student academically and focus on the actual process of learning, this objective instead outlines a focus on “work habits.” This focus on learning habits and skills in order to build a governable body is similar to the suggestions that Ryerson proposes for ‘the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind,’ where he writes that the goal of learning trade work was to help them develop “industrious habits,” and help prepare them for an “ordinary life” that they were constructed as separate from (Ryerson, 1911a [1868], pp. 228, 223). This focus on habit and skill development repositions school for the ‘behaviourally exceptional student’ as not for academics, but for practicing incorporation into society by learning to be regulated and controlled. In fact, while the Behaviour Exceptionality is described first and foremost as “a learning disorder,” the word ‘learn’ or any of its variants never appear in any of the suggested programming.

The Creation of the Normative Student

What purpose does the ‘behaviourally exceptional student’ serve for the TDSB? The suggested programming, similar to Ryerson’s separate schools, is not meant to aid the academic success of the students it contains. Instead, like the categories of difference that Ryerson constructed, Behaviour Exceptionality, and others like it that construct definitions of emotionally and behaviorally aberrant students within schools, is used to define the normative student and provide the conditions of possibility for the success of the TDSB school system as a whole.

First, this is done rhetorically. There is not a document that outlines exactly what is expected of students within its schools, but the production of a Special Education Plan that outlines all the different ways that students can be ‘exceptional’ is, similar to Ryerson’s separate school proposals, a relatively efficient way in completing the same purpose of outlining the normative student (which Ryerson’s proposals define through negation as white, able-bodied, upper-class settler). This is an essential part of constructing Behaviour Exceptionality as a disability, or, more accurately, as a version of disability that defines it as an “individual abnormality” – a definition that depends on and reproduces a belief in a normative subject
(Titchkosky and Michalko, 2009, p. 4). In examining this label, it is possible to see the shape of
the normative student that it outlines: someone who does not have “excessive” fears,
“compulsive” reactions, and who has observable relationships and an ability to learn. This
definition is both very specific, in terms of outlining a normative subject in terms of their
emotions and reactions, and very vague, in that all of these characterizations are subjective.

In this vagueness, it is possible to see how the constructed categories used and
reproduced by Ryerson continue to define the patterns of application of emotion- or behavior-
based labels, in which black, Indigenous and/or low-income students are all overrepresented
(Harry and Klingner, 2014; Greenhouse, 2015; Project Ideal, 2013; Chiefs Assembly on
Education, 2012). The process of assigning a label of Behaviour Exceptionality is a process in
which subjective perceptions of student behavior (in which prejudices like racism, classism, and
ableism, which were reinforced for generations by Ryerson’s separate schools, reliably play a
part) are reorganized into objective definitions of who a student is, a process in which that
prejudice is erased in favor of establishing an individual plan of action. Even in the elimination
of many forms of segregated schooling, the overrepresentation of black, Indigenous and/or low-
income students in special education labels means that they are continuing to be defined as non-
normative subjects of schooling.

The Behaviour Exceptionality label is also a process of spatially organizing difference
and normalcy in the same manner as Ryerson’s separate schools. The least intensive
programming option allows the student to be in a separate classroom for up to fifty percent of the
day (TDSB, 2015, p. 44), meaning that any student who has a Behaviour Exceptionality label is
likely to be absent from the regular classroom for a significant part, if not the majority of the day.
The construction and then regular exclusion of a student defined as non-normative to a classroom
maps the geography of the school, defining the classroom as a space for a normative student who
is more likely to be a white settler, not lower-class, and whose emotions and behaviours are
perceived as ‘under control’. Whether or not the TDSB accepts or disavows Ryerson’s goal for
schools as the creation a future ‘civilized’ (i.e. white settler) society, in examining the Behaviour
Exceptionality label it is possible to see that the TDSB is still making the same moves that Ryerson did in making this same future possible through the maintenance of categories of difference. The Behaviour Exceptionality label works to naturalize hierarchies “by repetitively spatializing ‘difference’” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xv) in order to define, for current students and for a future society, which people belong, and which people do not.

I return here to an argument from Lisa Lowe (2015) that I discussed in Chapter 1: “what some have represented as a linear temporal progression from colonial abjection to liberal freedom actually elides what might be more properly conceived of as a spatial dynamic” (p. 16). In her argument, Lowe is discussing the relationships between the liberal lives in the imperial center and the colonized geographies that provided the conditions of possibility for those lives. While I speak here of a different dynamic, the confusion between the temporal and spatial dimensions remains: the implication for the ‘behaviourally exceptional students’ is that they will grow into normative students over time. This implication is seen in commitments within the definition that promise that Support Programming will “be reviewed regularly with the intent to return to the regular class” (TDSB, 2015, p. 44). However, my analysis of this label shows that the definition of Behaviour Exceptionality, rather than supporting temporally progressive development for the labeled student, constructs a spatial relationship between the normative student and the contained and managed ‘behaviourally exceptional student.’ In reconceptualizing the dynamic as such, it is possible to see that, in the same way today as in Ryerson’s proposals of the nineteenth century, the ‘problem child’ is a necessity that is produced by and for schools in order to create the educational space of the public school. While it is constructed separately from any students so labeled, the students are the ones whose educational pathways are diverted.

**Conclusion**

The fact that this process is visible in both contemporary and historical eras in public schools in Ontario points to the continued influence and foundational nature of liberal philosophy. While the imperial and colonial spatial logics around difference may have changed
spaces, they continue to be enacted and narrated throughout today’s public schools. They have not been erased. The logic behind the establishment of public schooling – that in order to create a successful nation, the children of the nation must be guided as they develop – rests on a liberal understanding of hierarchies of humanity, or of certain types of people who are more civilized, more developed, or more human. Public schooling, as an institution to shape this development, rests on the construction, maintenance, and exclusion of those who are defined as uncivilized. The resulting emphasis on making ‘problem children’ into governable subjects further reproduces the hierarchies and systems that form the liberal nation. While I examined the foundations of public schools in Ontario and special education plans from Toronto, the fact that my argument rests on the contradictions and oppressions inherent to liberal philosophy means that my work suggests implications for all systems of public education founded under liberal philosophy. Indeed, the multiplicity of emotion- and behavior-based special education labels across North America – and evidence that application of these labels is on the rise (Slee, 2012, p. 903) – suggests that the liberal philosophy of education is alive and well, and continuing to depend on ‘problem children’ to define schools.

So what does this mean for us today? Analyzing the foundations of public education is relatively depressing work, and my argument raises questions about the very ways we define why we go to public school, why we send our children to public school, and why we believe in public schooling as an institution. If public schools are not for building responsible people or a good society, then what are they for? It is important here not to forget the ways that schools, as institutions and spaces, are not solely defined by the bureaucratic people and organizations that define them on paper. While it was beyond the scope of this thesis to incorporate lived experiences of schooling into this discussion, the fact remains that schools have always been shaped by all people within them – administrators, teachers, parents, and students – which includes people who have and continue to imagine and achieve different spatializations (see McKittrick, 2006). As Ann Laura Stoler (2006) writes on intimacies including processes of education, “habits of the heart and comportment have been recruited to the service of colonial
governance but never wholly subsumed by it” (p. 4). There have been many times before, during, and after Ryerson where some of the dominant voices defining schools belonged to students and/or activists working to change them. Some of those changes can most visibly be seen in the closing of separate schools, and in the maintenance of some of these separate schools by communities who have transformed them – as has been the case for some residential schools and schools for deaf students today (Dyck, 1997; Roshowy and Benzie, 2016; Roshowy, 2014).

While, in the long term, my argument poses questions about the nature of education and public schooling as a whole, in the short term there are multiple student/activist efforts that are steadily working to change the system of education into one in which they can learn.

When looking at the long term, I hope that this thesis, in unpacking and questioning the narratives through which the shape of liberal education is justified, has opened up new spaces to think about schooling. Initially, I wrote that I was hoping to, following Lisa Lowe (2015), write in the past conditional temporality – a tense of what-could-have-been that “suggests that there were other conditions of possibility that were vanquished by liberal political reason and its promises of freedom, and it suggests means to open those conditions to pursue what might have been” (p. 175). My search for the ‘problem child’ led me to the very conditions of possibility for the success of the public school system. I hope, in exploring those conditions, that I opened up space for imaginings of new conditions of possibilities, and new dreams for what it might or could mean to be in public school.

37 Thanks to Dr. Ellen Hibbard, who brought current protests and activism by the Deaf community in Toronto to my attention when she spoke eloquently at the 2016 Reclaiming Our Bodies and Minds Conference about the closing of Deaf schools and the current appointment in Toronto of a superintendent of schools for the deaf who has no knowledge of ASL or Deaf culture.
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