

**STORIES FROM THE FRINGE:  
AN INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY OF FIVE YEARS  
IN A SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM**

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## STORIES FROM THE FRINGE: AN INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY OF FIVE YEARS IN A SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

"...we must study teaching as teachers. For us, teaching *is* research and research *is* teaching and daffodils often come before the swallow dares." <sup>1</sup> Madeleine R. Grumet

" ...in telling the stories within the stories of our lives, we evoke the meaning that events have for us and we reveal the process and structure of our knowledge." <sup>2</sup> C.T. Patrick Diamond

### I. INTRODUCTION

The two quotes above suggest the very personal nature of the inquiry that I've attempted in this project. The writing that follows is certainly from a teacher's perspective and qualifies as research, if we notice the word "search" within the term "research". As Diamond (1992) notes, this search is essentially a search for "the stories within the stories of our lives" and for me, the narrative that follows has not come easily. The seeds for this project emerged from an inner questioning of the efficacy of the position of "special education teacher". This initial question has remained and branched into several related areas, as my position as a special education teacher has evolved.

The actual writing of this project has been similar to the experience of psychotherapy in some respects. The process has required several years to complete, as I've tried to search for essential themes and stories to get at these themes. I've often been filled with self-doubt and considered pursuing other questions, which I wasn't passionate about, but which might be easier "write up". I've at times felt totally inadequate to the "teacher-researcher" task and quite prepared to "retreat" back into the anonymity of my teaching. However, much like therapy, there have come flashes of insight when I realized that this searching was worthwhile, both personally and professionally. At these times I've felt compelled to share these questions with others.

This project is in some ways the culmination of an earlier Independent Study (Ed. 5910) I wrote called "Initiating the I.O.P. in a Rural Alberta School". In that study (1989), I attempted to document the process we undertook to advocate for, and begin offering the Integrated Occupational Program in our school in Foremost. Since that time several important changes have occurred within this program. Principally, there are now two full time special education positions at our school; a resource room (grades 1 to 9) and a Cooperative Ed./I.O.Program (grade 9 to 12).

It is this second position, which I am now involved in coordinating and teaching within. Central to our transition to this program was the approval of our proposal for federal government funding from Canada Manpower's "Stay in School" program and the subsequent receipt of substantial funds for the program.

After five years within both of the above mentioned programs I felt that there might be something unique about these rural special education classrooms that needed documenting. However, I doubt very much that I would have felt compelled to write autobiographically had it not been for the "integration" question that began sweeping through special education circles in Alberta and elsewhere.

## II. PURPOSES OF THIS PROJECT: EXPLORING THE MEANING OF INTEGRATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Through selected stories from five years in an evolving special education position, and the interpretation of these stories, I intend to offer a hermeneutic of special education, around the question of "integration". Essentially, my purpose is to attempt to deconstruct this concept, by looking at the different meanings that have come to be attached to the term. The stories I've selected will hopefully highlight some of conflicting interpretations surrounding this term.

There are three related strands to this project. Firstly, this project has a "critical theory" focus. In essence this involves my attempt at the finding of a "voice" in order to reflect upon my teaching realities. This critical component contains elements of Schon's (1983) notion of the "reflective practitioner".

At its most basis this critical stance (which provided the impetus to start the project in the first place) is the attempt to engage in autobiographical professional development. I'm convinced that the act of reflecting, writing about and interpreting one's teaching reality should be considered as a professional development activity. This idea has been around for some time, but in order for teachers to actually engage in this process requires certain changes in how we see ourselves professionally. At least it did for me.

As Diamond notes,

" By understanding ourselves and our teaching worlds we we may be better able to initiate and to participate in the social and personal."<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, is the notion of interpretation of one's teaching reality. As Gadamer, Ricoeur, Madison and others have noted, it is impossible to get outside of the hermeneutic endeavor.

We live in interpretation, however, we don't always consciously try to delineate our interpretations in writing. For teachers, this formally interpretive turn is somewhat foreign. Most teachers I've been around don't feel their stories have any literary or heuristic value. This again becomes a critical theory issue; a question of empowerment, of seeing our teacher's vision as somehow worthy of being shared with others.

It is always related to relations of power, as well. Teachers have been traditionally led to believe that they teach, while others study and research education. This has always seemed a bit odd to me. It would seem that teachers are indeed in a unique position to reflect, discuss, and yes even write about teaching. With an awakened interest in qualitative methods of research in the social sciences, the problems of validity and generalizability have been altered irrevocably. As Donmoyer (1990) explains,

" Even statistically significant findings from studies with huge, randomly selected samples cannot be applied directly to particular individuals in particular situations."<sup>4</sup>

I will have more to say about this in the section concerning the notion of "integration". It is my belief that this term has almost ceased to have any agreed upon meaning and must be interpreted in each locality for concrete individuals.

In my position, the term has meant a variety of different, sometimes conflicting things. I want to explore, through the storying and reflecting process, several of the main interpretive schemes for this term "integration". The central purpose of this study is to "call into question" the term integration and attempt to extend and broaden the meanings this term suggests.

This emphasis on the plurality of meanings associated with education today, and especially special education, points to the postmodern. It is this postmodern flavor that I feel signifies a central theme of this project. This project is in no way intended as "the answer" to any particular question. In fact, it is intended as a firm rebuttal of the notion of absolute answers to educational questions. Although the "integration movement" in Alberta schools isn't phrased in absolute terms, it does in fact leave the door open for individual school boards, superintendents, or school administrators to act in a fundamentalist fashion. It is this "creeping fundamentalism" that I see as the most serious threat to providing quality alternatives in schools. I hope to make some connections between this form of absolutism and the "integration movement" and offer my interpretation of a more democratic (ie. locally driven) alternative to the direction being taken by Alberta Education.

In a project of this nature it is impossible to include all the poignant stories that seem relevant. The stories that I've chosen to include are there for either of two reasons: 1) They are powerful stories in a literary and pedagogic sense, that illustrate an aspect of my classroom reality that I feel needs to be interpreted or, 2) They help to "tease out" a more comprehensive picture of the unique aspects of this classroom I inhabit.

This first story will serve as a brief historical overview of how my position evolved, as well as an introduction to a couple of the main themes I will be pursuing in the remainder of the project.

### III. FINDING A CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

After 10 years of teaching in special education classrooms from grades 1 to 11, I began to notice a shift in the perception of special education by academics, some administrators, and the public. After a period when few people understood what special educators did (and there was much discrepancy between any two special education settings), certain serious reservations began to be expressed concerning the benefits of "resource rooms" or any form of "pull-out" program where students came out of regular classes for work in a "separate" room.

In this short introductory story I would like to come somewhat clean as to my most obvious biases and presuppositions, while at the same time documenting how I found a central question to re-search in the Master's program.

At about the same time that I began teaching in a special education classroom (1984), the 'regular education initiative', which had already made an impact in the United States, began making inroads in Canadian education. Respected educators such as Donald Little (1987) were calling for special education to be absorbed by regular education; Little refers to 'special-ordinary education' as the resulting hybrid. <sup>5</sup>

Of course, in society as a whole there was a move toward the 'integration' of handicapped people into the mainstream of society. Laws in the United States and Canada stipulated that all students could demand the right to an education equal to that enjoyed by everyone else. Many advocacy groups challenged school boards to provide for the physical inclusion of physically and mentally challenged persons into regular schools and regular classrooms.

The original impetus to tell stories about my special education classroom came as a response to what I saw (and still see) as some ill advised curricular decisions being made in many jurisdictions, under the umbrella of so-called 'integration'. While I found many elements of the "integration" movement very compelling, I still felt there was a need ( in some areas, at certain times, for certain kids) for "resource rooms" or more generally for alternatives in education.

As a result I began to find myself defending the need for resource rooms to everyone from colleagues to university professors, who often saw these rooms as discriminatory, redundant and outdated. I felt that the 'resource room' was being labelled and categorized as a certain kind of predictable entity, when the reality I had experienced from talking to and working with other resource room and regular classroom teachers, was that these rooms were very divergent and idiosyncratic. If this divergence was the norm for resource rooms, then was it wise to act as if everyone understood what these rooms were all about? Was it wise to inadvertently legislate them out of existence, when we weren't really sure what their functions were, except in global generalizations in policy handbooks.

The more that I began to consider my objections to the arguments for "total integration", the more I felt very ill at ease concerning my position. What was it that I was defending? Wasn't it true that some "special education settings" were not empowering for children? What are the characteristics of this classroom, the "resource room" that make it beneficial and pedagogically unique? It became apparent to me, that I didn't really know what I was defending.

The attempt to find out the answers to some of the above questions has led me to look more deeply into the only special education setting that I have direct access to; my own. Although I was beginning to get a sense of the central questions I was interested in looking at, I still needed to find a 'vehicle' for actually carrying out the research and reporting it.

#### IV. FINDING THE TEACHER'S VOICE: NARRATIVE INQUIRY AND IMPROVED PEDAGOGY

After deciding upon the topic for my project, I was faced with the problem of methodology. In yet another Independent Study (Sociology 4990) entitled "Critical Theory, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism and Pedagogy", I wrestled with this question of methodology. As a result of this questioning I was persuaded that some form of 'narrative inquiry' would best allow for a teacher's voice to speak to the provocative questions underlining special education in the 1990's. I will elaborate on this approach to research in the following section.



Part One : Developing a Methodological Orientation  
The University Experience

Although it might seem awkward to do so, I feel it is accurate to suggest that the narrative approach to writing about classroom events that I have attempted to use in this project came in large measure from a series of courses I took within the Masters program at the University of Lethbridge. In fact, the Master's program has changed my teaching in many ways, but most significantly, it has increased my reflectiveness about my teaching reality. This in turn has made it easier to see areas of my pedagogy and relationships with students, that could be improved.

The first course that really unlocked the door for me to a world of new possibilities for educational research was a Curriculum Studies course (5200), taught by Dr. Richard Butt, which attempted to involve students in a series of autobiographical writing activities in order to reveal the presuppositions and biases that each of us brought to the act of teaching. In many ways the writing we were required to engage in was a form of psychotherapy; perhaps "writing therapy" to be more accurate. I was amazed at the events in my past that I was able to reconstruct and build upon to see why I acted in certain ways in a classroom. Although, we received no concrete solutions to the problems associated with trying to improve our instruction, I believe most students involved in Dr. Butt's course felt enriched, both personally and professionally by the writing and sharing that occurred. In fact, I suppose it was the first time I had seen teachers open up and share their personal lives with other teachers. I was used to the closed door approach to the sharing of pedagogic stories.

Of course this approach has been documented by Dr. Butt (1987) (1989) and his students (1986), as well as by several other researchers, (Diamond, 1992), (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990), (Elbaz, 1983). Even though I was very positively disposed toward the autobiographical approach that Dr. Butt advocated, it would be another 4 or 5 years before I actually saw this particular approach as having anything to do with my own research interests. Just another example of the inherent advantages of being a part-time graduate student, I suppose!

The next major influence upon my search for an appropriate research methodology was a course entitled, "Interpretive Inquiry in Education", taught by Dr. David Smith. This course was essentially a survey course, in which we were exposed to a number of research traditions which fit loosely under the umbrella of qualitative research. It was this course and Dr. Smith's pedagogic approach which gave me the introduction to areas such as Semiotics, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Post-Modernism. What was important for my development of a methodological focus, was that each of these areas was looked at from the eyes of an educator. I came to realize that it was indeed possible to write about educational realities and call it "research".

What emerged from this course is still driving my research interests; I came to see the research act as consisting of the "deep questioning of something" that is ultimately intended to making things better. This was precisely the orientation I felt I was looking for (and that fit with the questions emerging within Special Education) and so the central question that emerged at this time was,

*"What is it about the resource room experience that renders it significant pedagogically?"* I had come to feel that many people in education were dismissing the resource room concept without really understanding what it was. The main reason I saw for this happening was that most resource rooms were quite unique; each having certain idiosyncracies that other rooms didn't have. This is not to suggest that I felt there were no bad resource rooms. I had seen some that would certainly qualify, however I didn't see that that invalidated the idea of resource rooms anymore than poor regular classes reflected badly on all other rooms.

I became interested in the hermeneutic perspective to research embodied by Gadamer (1975) which stated that, "The essence of the question is the opening up, the keeping open of possibilities." <sup>6</sup>

When I read this again, five years after I first read it, it still hits very near to what I see this research project as being about. We cannot shut down areas of educational reality simply to satisfy something loosely called "integration". We must be cognizant of the kinds of alternatives that exist for students in schools. Resource rooms and more recently I.O.P. and Cooperative Education are nothing more than alternative educational environments, that sometimes prove beneficial for some students. It is this "deep questioning" of the goals and structure of special education the must be kept open and pursued further.

My project started out with a very definite 'critical theory perspective'; I wanted to keep the question of resource rooms open, because I didn't feel all the important 'voices' had been heard by the people with power over these kinds of decisions. I also began to notice that some educators and university people had already made their minds up on the issue. I kept thinking, "Yes, but they haven't been in my room."

While I still adhere to this critical stance, I feel there are other areas that also inform my writing. There is a definite interpretive interest to this writing as well; it is impossible not to interpret the significance of one's life-world, however hermeneutics makes this a central component of it's research agenda. I became intrigued, if not outright puzzled by writers such as Jacques Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, and Ricoeur. It was this interest that led to the independent study (Soc. 4990) I just completed. Without retracing the steps of that study I would like to mention one final influence upon the research approach I would pursue in this project.

In the summer of 1990 I was extremely fortunate to enrol in Ed. 5801, "Understanding Pedogogy in Curriculum Discourses".

This course was taught (facilitated might be the best word here) by a gifted educator, Dr. Ted Aoki. Undoubtedly it was Ted's approach to pedagogy which has had the most profound and direct influence on how I was to proceed with my own research interests. In this course the first thing that became evident was that Dr. Aoki was not interested in imparting any wisdom of his own concerning the correct path to take in this endeavor. He claimed not to know himself, but was persistent in asking students in the class to move the discourse along. He offered some contributions when we were having difficulty, but for the most part he simply encouraged us to bring our ideas back to the group to enrich the dialogue. He did however ask us to read "The Art of the Novel" (1986) by Milan Kundera and a book of readings on Continental Philosophy called, "The Question of the Other" (1989). The first book concerned a prominent novelist's attempt to get inside the craft of writing. The second was a collection of essays around the concept of the "Other"; a concept which is central to the business of teaching.

It was this abiding interest in Others that pervaded Aoki's approach to pedagogy. He insisted that the students take control of the major components of the course. His comments consisted mostly of clarification and fleshing out of other's comments.

One of the central points which Aoki made in this course concerned nurturing, what he called the "polyphony of voices" in education. What he seemed to be suggesting was that some of the voices in education had not really been heard properly. His suggestions concerning narrative voice and the recognizing and telling of "pedagogic stories", crystallized the precise position I had been coming to for some five years. Part of the course requirement was the attempt at the writing of these stories (my first powerful story of my classroom came from this assignment). Dr. Aoki even went further in this effort at promoting the teacher's voice.

"Voices of Teaching" (1990) is a collection of teacher writings, which Dr. Aoki edited. These stories by Canadian and American teachers, were among the first published stories I had seen that got at, what I felt, were some of the central emotions connected with the art of teaching. The other thing that Dr. Aoki did with the publication of this book was make a statement concerning the importance of teacher stories. This was the final push I needed to begin writing and rewriting.

### The Relationship Between Autobiography and Biography

It was later, during reading for my final Independent Study, that I discovered (or rather re-discovered) that the Autobiographic method I was leaning toward in my project, had a rich tradition in Sociology. Denzin (1989) referred to this method (which includes autobiography and biography) as "Interpretive Biography" and defines it as,

"...the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories, and narratives which describe turning point moments in individual's lives."<sup>7</sup>

In his most recent work, Jerome Bruner (1987), building on the implications of Ricoeur's work, recognizes the significance of autobiography as a method of re-creating our lives.

"We seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative...Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographic narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives."<sup>8</sup>

Using this approach to write about the world of classrooms, students and teachers involves some unique differences, especially for a teacher. The writing I am involved with has both the biographical and autobiographical interwoven, because of the special relationships between students and teachers. I am trying to tell the stories of students, while I am trying to tell my stories. Some of the stories are purposely from "my" perspective, some are written with conscious attention to how I think the students would write their stories and now (more recently) some of the stories are actual transcription of student stories.

In the final analysis, they are my interpretation of a shared life-world in a school. As Derrida and other post-structuralists have pointed out however, language is not inherently neutral and therefore all biography and even autobiography has an element of fiction within it. The good interpretive account must be able to interest the reader in much the same way that a compelling story does.

Denzin eloquently notes the relationship between these 'stories' and an objective reality.

" Along the way, the produced text is cluttered by the traces of the life of the 'real' person being written about." <sup>9</sup>

### Ethical Concerns

In this type of research activity, one's reputation enters the picture, because if the narrative inquiry is honest (in the sense of attempting to honestly portray the events you see as important to understanding the phenomenon in question), then some of the stories told may reflect poorly on our abilities as teachers. This then was the first major obstacle I found to actually writing certain stories. The question becomes, "Do I as writer, purposely distort the story (or leave certain sensitive parts out) in order to preserve my 'public self'." This is the point at which the transformative or growth possibilities of teacher/research become possible. The main criteria for including a particular story, should be whether that story exemplifies a theme or issue that seems significant to the writer. In the case of educational autobiography, the story should have the potential to raise certain pedagogic questions or call certain educational discourses into question. Not only should stories not be included simply to bolster some preconceived hypothesis one has about a research question, but they should also not be excluded simply because they might cast the teacher in a less than positive light. Otherwise, this form of research is simply a literary endeavor with limited pedagogic significance.

With the above criteria in mind, it must be pointed out that there may be times that stories are excluded (or events of time and place fabricated) in order to protect the identity of students, parents or other teachers. However, these types of omissions or distortions should be noted within the narrative, so as to give the reader, at least an impression of the kinds of issues or stories that were omitted.

In the case of the present project there were very powerful and important stories that had to be omitted for ethical reasons. Stories which crossed into the domain of familial or social problems had to be omitted from the text. In my experience, the milieu of the resource room seemed to foster a higher degree of openness in some students than they might display in the regular classroom. For that reason (and perhaps others such as smaller class size), I was privy to personal stories from student's lives, which affected their attitudes and performance in school. These stories were often blurted to me in a private moment with a student, but sometimes even came out in the context of a class discussion.

While the specific stories can't be included in this text, it is my feeling that they point to an important, often overlooked, function of alternative classrooms; their potential as sites for "at risk" students to explore and share their feelings. If this was the only benefit of alternative classrooms, it would be worth the price.

A related ethical concern involves the problems surrounding the inclusion of stories which reflect negatively on other school personnel (colleagues, administrators, school board members).

In this study, I have had to be sensitive to the degree to which I identified specific people, particularly if this identification cast them in a less than positive light. In a case such as this, I've tried to portray people in an anonymous fashion.

### Advantages of Teacher Biographies

Teachers have a privileged position to do biographical and autobiographical research, especially types of Action Research that will impact positively on their practice of education.

A further advantage of most 'resource room' settings is the smaller groups of students that one sees and a less clearly specified (mandated) curriculum content. This made it easier to zero in on individual student stories, because I knew the students better on a personal level. A further advantage that I enjoy in my current position is that I have seen these students over a number of years, unlike most regular classroom teachers. This allowed me many more journal examples for each student and a longer time frame to access which stories are most appropriate to include or exclude.

Another advantage I see with using a story approach to explaining this evolving classroom, is that the classroom is rich in stories. These life stories speak far more deeply about this classroom, than looking at academic indicators of these students success or failure. That is not to suggest that there wasn't a great deal of academic success evident. It is simply that the academic indicators were the result of a certain type of existential climate. It is that pedagogic climate that I'm attempting to portray.

Also these stories allow for multiple interpretations other than my own (the hermeneutic circle). The reader can bring their own interpretive biases to these stories and quite possibly come to a different assessment as to their significance (or lack of). Of course, I was the final editor in terms of which stories actually made it into this paper and this suggests a certain responsibility to include material which doesn't purposely distort the flavor of this "life-world". It would be hermeneutically inaccurate however, to suggest that it is possible to completely avoid distortions and I am quite certain that my biases colored the selection process for the stories. So be it.

## Part Two: The Influence of Program Advocacy at the School Level

### The Early Days

I want to try to give some flavor for the early years of my involvement in the resource room program. I will offer a couple of stories from this period to give some background for the material which will follow later.

I had come from Bow Island, where I was in a grade 1 to 3 resource room situation. In many respects my duties (diagnosis, testing, developing I.E.P.'s for each student, remedial work, evaluation and reporting to parents) were quite similar in the two positions, however I had responsibility for the upper elementary grades as well as junior high school. Herein lies the problem that began to develop as early as 1987.

It was early in the school year 1987 and I was beginning to see why the previous resource room teacher had emphatically insisted that I would need some paraprofessional help, if I wanted to "survive in this room". At the time I was seeing 23 students in grades 1 to 8, for varying amounts of time. I had absolutely no "preparation time", like the other teacher's in the school. It was all taken up with an ever increasing number of students. Of this group of 23, there were at least 4 students, who could be classified as having more serious learning difficulties (mildly mentally handicapped, severe language disorder). These four students came to me for their entire language arts and math program; they were more than two grade levels behind their peers in these subjects and therefore qualified for more resource room assistance.

Of the rest of the students, most I saw for between 3 and 5 forty minute periods per week. They took the regular language arts and math and came to see me from another class, sometimes Social studies, science, computers, etc. We tried to change the classes they came from, so that they didn't miss any one subject for too long. These decisions were always made in close consultation with both the student and their parents.

For some students, particularly the junior high students, the resource room functioned as a remedial room, where we provided assistance with concepts or assignments, they were having difficulty with, from the regular classroom. For all of the students we saw, one of the central components of our job was work on student's self esteem. This often happened quite informally. It meant listening to stories that they wanted to talk about from their weekends, etc.

With the elementary students, we had more freedom to try our own methods of improving student's skills. We spent much of our language arts time actually reading to students, having them read to us, retell stories we'd read or reconstruct stories in writing.

Writing in journals were a regular part of this agenda (this journal writing has changed over time, it now is divided into "personal journals" and "topic journals"; this last one being where students get ideas for larger writing assignments. Grammar became an individualized segment of each child's program. In their writing, when they started using dialogue, we worked on quotation marks. Sometimes, we had small mini-lessons with the entire group, on some aspect of mechanics, such as semi-colon use or outlining skills. In the math area, we again used small teaching segments for difficult concepts, supplemented by lots of drill and practice (usually on the computer). We weren't under the same compulsion to move onto a new area, before there was a sufficient degree of success with the current concept. There was continual review of earlier concepts, to keep them fresh for students who had difficulty remembering them. Although there were some students who came to the resource room for a temporary visit and returned to the regular program after two or three months, the more common practice was for students to come to the resource room for assistance over a period of several years. I will leave for later my interpretation concerning the efficacy of this practice of "pullout resource room" assistance.

Although I realize that the notion of coming to the resource room is held in dread by some students, my overall experience suggests that how the room is perceived within the school environment is very much a function of the personality of the teacher and the type of climate that is promoted in the classroom.

During my first year in the resource room, I had several students, who had never been to the resource room, come to me asking if they could come in to the room. One boy, Pete, told me, "Mr. Cassell I'm having real problems in math and reading, I just can't seem to keep up. I think you should probably test me to see if I qualify. Pete was in grade five at the time. After testing him and speaking with him informally, it became quite apparent, that he had very few learning problems. He just thought it would be a great diversion to come to my room for awhile.

It would be wrong to suggest that all students felt this way however. There were two or three students I came across in five years, who, for whatever reason, didn't feel comfortable with the idea of coming to the resource room. In a couple of cases it seemed, the concern may have been with the parents. Of course, these students were not made to come to the resource room; that would have defeated the entire notion of the room.

#### From Teacher to Pressure Group

I found that I had support for my idea concerning getting some paraprofessional help in the resource room. At parent-teacher interviews, the parents were almost unanimous in their agreement with the need for more help in the resource room.



It is important to remember that, at this particular date (1987) in this school, there was no one suggesting that these students be "totally integrated" into regular classes within the school.

They were convinced that their son or daughter required some form of "extra assistance" outside of the context of the regular classroom. While I can't say I didn't reinforce this notion, it was certainly the prevailing climate that I encountered, when I started working in Foremost.

As one of the more vocal parents told me at that time, "I've had to go over to that County Office before and argue with them to get special help for my kid, if we have to do it again we will. I'll just phone Betty and Mary and we'll go in and talk to the Superintendent."

A related incident convinced me that the power brokers in education in my area; namely Superintendents and school boards, either misunderstood the real value of these rooms or simply didn't think we could afford the expense to help these "at risk" students.

As my Superintendent of that time told me, "Don, these kids certainly won't be the future leaders of our society, so why should we put all this extra money into educating them. Wouldn't the money be put to better use in 'gifted education' ". I couldn't believe he said that, but it did help to realize the "mindset" we were dealing with. I believe this "let's save a buck" mindset is still around in the present rush to "total integration".

A short time after this, when I, along with a group of parents, began advocating for an Integrated Occupational Program for Foremost School, I was told by the Deputy Superintendent that it would be nice, but it just wasn't at all possible. However, at the same time that he was paying lip service to our goal, he was closing down a resource room in another school within the county. It was at this point that I realized that it wasn't good enough to simply teach students; there had to be a certain "critical theory" component to one's daily work in education.

In fact several parents did go in to express their views to the school board. I wrote several letters to the Superintendent, enlisted the support of my principal at the time, and eventually was asked to come to a school board meeting to explain to them why we needed a full-time resource room Aide. I didn't know it at the time, but this was to become an annual (sometimes semi-annual) trek to the board meeting. Over the next 3 years I would be back to argue for a second special education teacher to be hired for the Integrated Occupational Program.

We were successful in getting a full time Aide and, as I mentioned in the Introduction, we finally got a full time high school position to go along with the resource room position. As important as it was to get the extra assistance in the resource room, of equal importance was the changes that the advocacy process had wrought in my teaching reality.

By having success in advocating for program changes I came to have more of a stake or investment in the program and therefore, put more into the job because I felt I could have an impact on the directions the program was taking.

This is a major interpretive point concerning the positive growth potential to be gained by having direct input into program changes. I'm not sure all school administrators would agree, but I believe you get better teachers, if they come to realize that their views are being taken seriously. It would be inaccurate to suggest that this power was just handed to me. There was opposition to our plans to expand special education; some people felt the money should be spend on the "gifted" students in our school. Some wanted to simply cut back on the resource room help for some students, in order to keep the program manageable.

Of course an interesting byproduct of beginning to "call special education into question" in a Heideggerian sense, is that many other teachers and researchers are involved in a similar discourse and in the past couple of years I've begun to actively seek out forums (conferences, conventions, etc.) where these questions are being discussed. Some of the most thoughtful and powerful interaction has occurred within the Masters students at this university and it was by being challenged to actually formulate my 'position' concerning integration that I began to see the complexity and even contradictoriness of special education. Through these discussions with colleques and others, my own understanding of the multi-layered or multi-voiced quality of these questions was extended a great deal.

## V. INTEGRATION AND THE CONTRADICTION THAT IS SPECIAL EDUCATION

It was an article by Esther Sokolov Fine (1989) that came the closest to getting at the inherent ironies connected with teaching and learning in the resource room environment.

"In schoolings's attempt to marginalize difference into special classrooms, a further and unique contradiction is created. In this situation 1) students who are different become as marginalized as it is possible to be within the school, and 2) a small community of unusual people, who often have been the targets of the heaviest forms of silencing and regulatory practices permitted in today's 'progressive' schools, are gathered together for some form of alternative, less tightly specified program. Often within a such classrooms or small communities, which usually consist of eight students, a teacher, and an educational assistant, 'differences' are renamed 'learning styles' and are enshrined as rights. It then becomes possible for these sites of experience of 'difference' to become sites of experimental curriculum. Here hitherto-silenced voices might have an opportunity to insert themselves into discussion and participate in the development of plans for the classroom... It is thus that the school system has constructed on of its most glaring sites of contradiction --classrooms that are the *most* marginalized and marginalizing spaces within the greater structure of the school community but which have the potential for becoming among the least marginalized and marginalizing forms of moment-to-moment schoolings experience that we offer in or schools today."<sup>10</sup>

Fine has done a marvelous job of delineating the sense of contradictoriness that most special education teachers (at least the one's I've spoken with) feel today.

We have all seen and felt the marginalizing that can result for both students and teachers in special education settings, however, as she notes, there is also much potential for growth and empowerment that comes from these rooms as well.

My classroom contains many of the paradoxes that Fine alludes to, although there are some differences in degree. For example, I have a sense that the marginalizing that she speaks of, is not nearly as pronounced in our school, as perhaps it might be in others.

I'm convinced that rural communities, because of their closeness (everyone knows everyone else), negates some of the sense of separateness that resource room students feel.

In the stories that follow I want to get at my impressions of how this contradictoriness has worked itself out in my particular classroom. I also want to give some notion of both ends of this continuum and where we're at today in Foremost, in terms of the notion of integration of students. These stories will hopefully lead into a deconstructive look at "integration"; I want to attempt to broaden the notion of what integration is really about, which for me is the integration of young people into their communities and the world of their future.

### My First Attempt at Integration

It was early December (1989) and I had been wrestling with the concept of "integration" for some time. I had made a point to go into most of the elementary classrooms, where I had students. I wanted to see the students in the regular classroom environment, in order to get a better idea of just where their learning difficulties were most predominant.<sup>11</sup>

I also wanted to create more of a spirit of sharing between myself and the regular classroom teachers. Most of these episodes were quite beneficial, for me at least, and the regular teachers put up with me, although I sensed that most of them were somewhat uncomfortable with me in the classroom. This was to be expected, as this was a somewhat novel experience for them.

The only time teachers went into each other teacher's rooms were during school evaluations or special events. Although my excursions into the regular classroom went well, I was still convinced that I could have a more direct influence on the student's learning difficulties, during the time when they came to the resource room.

It just seemed there were less distractions, less stigma; I also noticed that for most of the students I was seeing in the Resource Room, the pace of activities and concepts in the regular classroom left many of them floundering academically. However, I was also unnerved by some other teacher's I had spoken with who spent all of their time in the regular classroom; assisting students with difficulties and helping the regular classroom teachers to modify learning tasks. Perhaps I was indeed missing the boat; maybe I was just dragging my heels on full time integration, because I personally found it threatening to my own ego. With these nagging doubts as a daily reality, I began to try some "integration experiments".

Mary (in grade 8) spent over half of her school day in the resource room and had been following this type of arrangement from the early grades onward.

Although, she certainly qualified for this amount of time from a diagnostic standpoint, I began to feel that she was becoming far too dependent on our little world in the resource room. The term that kept coming up was "learned helplessness"; she was simply too dependent on other people and not attempting enough for herself. This was only natural when one thinks that most of her academic time was spent in either one on one sessions with me or in a small group setting, where she still had direct access to assistance from the teacher or a paraprofessional. She had learned that if she waited long enough, I would usually come to the "rescue" and supply the answer for her, on many occasions. As her mother told me more than once; "she is a master at manipulating people". I felt she needed more variety; she needed to be challenged to a greater extent.

I decided that if Mary and the other students were ever going to get back into the regular classroom environment for the core subjects (language arts, math, social studies and science) we had to get started now. I spoke with the Social studies teacher, to ask if it would be alright if Mary and I sat in on his class for one unit, in order to assess if she might be able to handle the academic rigor required in the regular program.

With the benefit of hindsight, I probably picked the wrong class. Maybe I was hoping it would fail, so that I wouldn't have to be "integrated" too. I think it's more complicated than that however.

The social studies teacher's response was, " Fine, no problem, but do you think she'll pick up very much." I told him not to worry about that, I would be there to help with the difficulties she might encounter and anyway, "It's just an experiment".

It wasn't the academic concepts that proved to be the biggest problem however (although this would have certainly been a challenge for her also). It's important to realize that Mary knew the other students in this class quite well. This was the only grade eight class in the school and she had been with them, at least half of the time, since the first grade.

We went into the classroom for two days (40 minute periods). Several things became readily apparent. First of all, we were on display somewhat, as would be expected. I was sure this would lessen with time, as the students came to understand what my role would be in the classroom. Secondly, and of more significance for the success of this experiment, was the overall climate in the room. I hesitate to use the term "out of control", but from my perspective that phrase was quite accurate. The teacher was constantly trying to stop students from responding out of turn or in an inappropriate fashion. Several of the students took the opportunity to "visit" with me as their classmates were in the middle of presently oral reports. I was instantly in an uncomfortable position of wanting to assume more control of the direction the class was taking, but without feeling I had the authority to do so.

There were 4 or 5 students in the class, who were totally disrespectful to the teacher and each other, and they seemed delighted to have a new audience to perform for.

I began to feel that Mary and I were in the middle of a Drama presentation. Maybe they were acting this way for our benefit. Maybe it would improve as the class became more accustomed to our presence. I discussed this with the teacher and he assured me that this was their "normal" behavior.

The other thing I noticed was Mary's response to the class. She has some difficulty with maintaining her attention (Attention Deficit Disorder) and of course she became totally involved with the behavior of certain students in the class and seemed to pick up very little of the academic substance of the class.

After the second day, I asked Mary what she thought about being in the class. She begged me not to put her in "that class" again. She wanted the safety of the resource room, where things were considerably more predictable. In this instance I decided that it was in no one's best interests to pursue the "experiment" any longer and we returned to the safety of the resource room environment.

It is important to keep a couple of things in mind, before interpreting this story. Most importantly, this particular class was the only Grade eight class in the school. If we wished to attempt to integrate Mary within her grade, it would have to be with this group. That is not to say that perhaps things would have been different in another classroom, I'm sure they would have been. However, this points up an important difference between rural and urban schools. There are more choices, more flexibility is possible in city schools. In the city we could have tried another grade eight social studies class or even another grade eight subject; perhaps even another school, if we felt the need. In Foremost none of these options were available. This is one of the reasons that the term "integration" means distinctly different things in the city or the country; I would contend these differences in interpretation of the term occur between school jurisdictions and even between schools in the same area.

I don't want to imply that because of this experience I became convinced that "integration" didn't work. Obviously, this situation had a lot of factors which mitigated against it's success. What I did come to realize was that the attempt to "integrate" had to be carefully thought out and planned for. I also came to realize that not every classroom was facilitative of "integration". One had to be selective.

I think this story does point toward a point that Fine was trying to make in her writing; which is that there are times when "integration" can in fact achieve the opposite results by promoting feelings of insecurity and segregation in the mind of special needs students, just as some resource rooms can sometimes promote a sense of safety and belonging.

This contradiction is one that I don't hear policy makers acknowledging at all.

This story helped me to get beneath the term "integration" and see it in a more human form. For Mary, at that point in time and with that group of students, in that classroom, the "integration" that should follow from her presence in a regular classroom, was not going to come. In fact, I was convinced, that her presence in the room, would only serve to exacerbate her feelings of being on the outside looking in, with respect to her classmates.

I was concerned about Mary in this situation, much as a parent would (in loco parentis). I wanted her to "fit in" and be accepted by her peers, but of course I knew, in this class at this time this wasn't likely to happen.

Therefore I tried to shield her from this pain. By going into the room with her, I actually felt something like the pain she felt at being seen as different. When I went into the room with her, I felt on display and vulnerable in a strange way. My selfhood felt threatened.

In essence, Mary and I both knew about the deeper meaning of integration that I'm alluding to. We both knew that just putting Mary in the regular classroom, even with teacher assistance, would help to integrate Mary into regular everyday society, which of course is nearer to this deeper meaning of integration. For Mary, the real "integration" would take much longer to achieve, and would require the "growth", not only of Mary's social skills, but those of her peers, as well. It would go deeper than that however. Mary's real search for integration, is for a sense of integration within herself. A feeling of belonging; a feeling of physical and intellectual closeness to a group. I believe that special education classrooms can have a major role to play in building a "scaffold" for developing this deeper sense of integration.

We have tried other experiments, (most were more successful than this one), to facilitate Mary's in-school integration, as well as the integration of other students. However, the most successful integrative experiences for Mary, and several other students in the program, haven't come within the school walls. They have come in work experience placements, within the community. Again special education can and should help facilitate the transition to this "real world" after formal schooling. The stories that follow will look more closely at our attempt to address the problem of delivering appropriate special education services at the high school level. By looking at how our program evolved as it moved into high school and the community itself, I will be attempting to look at "integration" in phenomenological terms.

### The Provincial and the Local: Different Interpretations of Integration

Before turning to the more personal stories concerning our program and how it responded to the challenge of integration, I would like to lay the groundwork for the discussion by looking at the provincial governments's position on integration of special students and how that policy is being debated in educational circles. The Minister of Education recently released a Consultation paper in which the proposed policy states,

"Integration into a regular classroom setting should be considered as the first option for placement of exceptional children."<sup>12</sup>

The policy continues however with,

" Other program options should be maintained wherever possible to meet the diverse and unique needs of each student, and parents and students must have informed choice and meaningful participation in decisions about placement and program." <sup>13</sup>

At first glance this policy would seem to be eminently comprehensive and fair, with respect to maintaining existing alternatives in schools. However, in a letter written by the Minister of Education, introducing the consultation paper ("Educational Placement of Exceptional Students"), he states,

" We are doing fairly well at integrating exceptional kids. Over 90% are currently fully or partially integrated into the regular classroom. But we need to do better." <sup>14</sup>

This begins to sound as if Mr. Dinning believes that the goal of 100% full integration is an attainable, not to mention measurable goal. I have concerns with regard to both of these facets of the integration model being advanced. Firstly, I'm not at all convinced that the integration that Mr. Dinning speaks of, can be measured as accurately as he's suggesting.

But leaving this aside for a moment, the more serious shortcoming of this position is that it could easily lead school boards into the notion that they might be able to "do better" at the game of integration, as Mr.Dinning suggests, and therefore they really wouldn't need special education at all.



Especially, in the rural areas, if the students were even physically "integrated" into regular classes, there would not really be a reason to employ a special education teacher.

Prior to this particular "consultation paper" by Alberta Education, the debate over the meaning of "integration" had been raging for some time. In January of 1991, the A.T.A. News interviewed Fran Vargo, who was the director of research and policy review for the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. In response to a question concerning the wording of their Action Plan, she responded,

" One of difficulties we run into is ...teachers and administrators will talk to you about ...integrating children within the regular classroom, but when you get right down to it, they're pulling kids together for classes that I presume in their minds don't count because they choose things like music and art... That isn't integration. That's throwing kids together for things that don't seem to matter very much." 15

She goes on to specify how this would change the current special education policy in the province.

" Kids with mental disabilities are never going to be functioning at the same level as their peers who don't have a mental disability...Teachers first have to look at this as another level of ability in the classroom. For some kids it's ...a pretty low level of ability, but you'd be surprised at the remarkable things teachers are doing." 16

The point that is just below the surface of these comments is that the resource room would become redundant. She does however set the final parameters for special education services.

" There will be instances in which a child will not be able to function in the regular classroom for a period of time... but those will be small in number."17

In the very next issue of the same magazine a special education teacher from Calgary responded to Ms. Vargo's interpretation of integration.

" I teach in a public junior high school where there are two special education classes for students who are trainable mentally handicapped. These students are now integrated into areas where they will experience success and where they will benefit in a positive way. I believe that mentally handicapped students are best placed in as many nonacademic classes such as Phy. Ed., art, drama, industrial arts, home economics, along with inclusion in activities such as assemblies, student council, intramural, and social activities. We are providing the special education student with many outlets for social integration, which in the case of trainable mentally handicapped students is far more critical and worthwhile than academic integration."<sup>18</sup>

I include both perspectives in some detail, in order to show the range of positions, that exist concerning this notion of integration. Although, the students I taught would not be classified as trainable mentally handicapped, they display their own unique range of learning difficulties (from language disorders, to mildly mentally handicapped to learning disabilities). What this last teacher was saying for me, was that it wasn't possible for the government to know or understand which combination of regular and/or special education services would be most useful for his class of students. To this spirit of local autonomy I had some degree of sympathy. This was the kind of problem we faced as a group of our students entered high school. There was really no program, as such, for these students. Some of them were not quite ready for the General Diploma program, some were not even at this stage. What we attempted to do has really involved developing a transitional program. In the stories that follow I hope to highlight the traits that make this transitional Coop Ed. Program "integrative" in a phenomenological sense.

#### Cooperative Education and the Integrated Occupational Program: Integration Beyond the School Walls

##### Advantages of the Resource Room Environment

Before moving on to a discussion of the fundamentally new program, I moved into, it might be useful for me to delineate the qualities of the Resource Room, that I thought (and I still think) were unique and pedagogically important. There were several curricular and organizational advantages that I tried to promote in the Resource Room.

1) The individualized pace of instruction allowed students time to fail and learn from their failures, without getting behind and experiencing a loss of self-esteem. They weren't required to move onto new concepts before they had mastered the previous concepts. Without the curricular constraints of the regular classroom, we could focus on building up student's feelings of control over their learning.

2) An outgrowth of the first point was the greater degree of student input into the direction of their learning. Related to this was a greater tolerance for informal oral language, which in turn helped to find out student interests and sources of problems. When students felt involved in the planning of learning tasks they took more interest.

3) The resource room leant itself nicely to a Whole Language approach to literacy development, which started with the language and experiences that children bring with them to school and build from there. Students were given more choice over writing topics, their was much more informal journal writing encouraged (using various formats) and less formal grammar instruction (but more "in context" mini-lessons when it came up in student writing. The use of themes fit nicely with the smaller groups and also made it easier to cut across curriculum boundaries to integrate subject areas.

4) Again, because of the smaller numbers, we had greater access to technology such as computers, video cameras, etc. We had three computers and two printers in our classroom and therefore the world of desktop publishing became possible. We created student newspapers, advertising campaigns, and posters in several subject areas. Students with writing difficulties (handwriting, organizing problems, spelling) could have more regular practice on word processing software and keyboarding software. Math difficulties could be at least assisted with using software and specific CML modules that we could tie into.

5) Again because of less stringent curricular timetabling we were able to use innovative curricular approaches; such as developing a Horticulture program (from seeding, to watering to, to advertising, selling and banking assests), Creating Video Advertisments, and a Job Shadowing occupational component for junior high students.

6) There is less time spent on formal instruments of evaluation. For this reason evaluation can become more focused on improvement of skills in certain areas, rather than being focused on grades and competition between students.

All of the above factors, plus others I haven't included, were elements of the resource room experience which I liked and felt could be helpful to high school students as well.

I believe that these factors helped to promote the academic and social integration of our students. Students who were continually experiencing failure in the regular program, began to respond to the slower moving pace of this curriculum.

Many of our projects were specifically designed with the student's self-esteem needs in mind. There isn't much point in attempting to upgrade student's academic skills, unless they feel secure enough in themselves to strive for success.

Many of these students had been consistently seen as failures in the regular program and so they needed an evaluative scheme that fostered success, rather than measure them against every student in the province or school. I also believe that we were able to foster a feeling of closeness among the students, because of the smaller numbers. For the most part I was able to bring most of these concepts into the new position I moved into. However, there were other issues that complicated the implementation of our program.

### The Integrated Occupational Program and Cooperative Education

This program became known under various names, depending on the audience one was speaking with; the Integrated Occupational Program (provincial title), the Cooperative Education Program (federal title), and even the General diploma Program. As mentioned, I've already tried to document the initiation process we undertook to get the program.

Before moving onto the heart of this program with some vignettes, I want to allude to the most frequent problem area we experienced in the first two years of our program's existence. This was in the area of trying to mesh the requirements of two or more programs; in this case the problems involved attempting to offer the Cooperative Education program, which stressed a work experience component with the Integrated Occupational Program.

The Integrated Occupational Program contains academic courses in the 16, 26, 36 strand in the core subjects, as well as requiring 40 high school credits in any of several occupational strands. I was involved in teaching most of the academic courses within I.O.P. as well as coordinating the work experience component for each student.

The student who completes 80 credits in the I.O.P. receives a Certificate of Achievement. Of course in a smaller school, it isn't possible to just offer one strand in a separate classroom. Therefore I was required to teach split classes containing I.O.P. and Diploma students, (English 13-16, Math 14 - 16).

In one sense this has considerable "integrative" potential for certain students. The students in the I.O.P. were all former resource room students, who had received language arts and math instruction in the resource room. They were now being integrated with the English 13 students, who had until the end of grade nine, been with the regular class.

This is where the contradictions and paradoxes start again. For the the I.O.P. students there is a degree of integration possible. However, for the Eng. 13, Math 14 or Science 14 student, you are removing them from their peers in English 10 and placing them with "special needs" students. So, in fact might you not be integrating some at the expense of others. My response, is that theoretically you could, but it is the job of the teachers and administrators involved in the program to see that it doesn't happen. I will admit that in our experience, some students had initial problems primarily in the interpersonal area. Some students hadn't interacted in class situations with other students and we had to mediate some conflicts. However, once students realized that each student's program is somewhat unique, they seemed to not worry as much about categorizing themselves or others. Within our program currently we have students who will take a full Certificate of Achievement and nothing more. There are several others who are bridging back into the Diploma strand, (English 16, English 26, English 23, English 33), after taking some I.O.P. courses.

Are we segregating or integrating? I'm not sure the question has meaning anymore without talking about individual students and their perceptions of where they're going and how they feel about their progress toward their goals.

#### A Transitional Problem

Our central problem wasn't related to the controversy surrounding defining "integration". It was more of a bureaucratic tangle which involved the "integration" of different requirements for the two programs: I.O.P. and Cooperative Education.

Cooperative Education is administered by the federal government under Canada Manpower. It was a "stay in school" initiative financed by this federal branch that was funding our program. Without this funding, we wouldn't have a program at all. The main requirement for this program was that students complete 200 hours of work experience and job preparation per year.

While we agreed with the spirit of this requirement, we had problems fulfilling it for all of our students. If they were I.O.P. students it was possible for them to take their occupational courses as work experience and qualify as Coop. Ed. students, but we also had several students who were more concerned with fulfilling requirements for a General diploma. In this case they couldn't fit 200 hours of work experience into their program.

We received a reminder of the 200 hour stipulation from the regional director of Canada Manpower's program. She was the same person who would be coming to our school to evaluate our Cooperative Education Program.

She was the person who recommended whether we continue to receive grant monies from the federal government. Only about half of our students (5) actually would be getting the 200 hours of work experience. The rest were over 125 hours, but not near 200. I, along with others, began to lose sleep over the implications of this fact. What if this person came, told us that all of our students had to comply with this regulation. We couldn't change their programs because that would jeopardize their chances of getting the Diploma. We had another problem also, we are in a town of 600 people, with a limited number of work experience sites. Even with the excellent participation of all the businesses in town, we still couldn't get enough sites to be able to fulfill the time requirement for all our students.

Needless to say as the day approached when the evaluator was to come from Canada Manpower, we were full of trepidation. Although we were prepared for the worst, we were pleasantly surprised when Ms. Doyle assured us that the program would continue, even if only 5 students qualified at this time. She talked to employers, teachers and students about the program and was pleased with what we were attempting. She gave us a vote of confidence along with a couple of suggestions for expanding the program (Appendix ). It is important to note however, that without this degree of flexibility, our program and many like it would not be possible at all. This is somewhat different than the situation in the urban areas, where they can have many more students in their I.O.P.; so large in fact that in Calgary and Lethbridge, separate I.O.P. schools were established (Allan Watson, Jack James, Shaunnessy).

One can argue, whether these separate institutions promote integration or not (not without seeing them in operation), but because of their numbers, they didn't depend on federal grants ( to the same extent) to keep their program afloat. Having visited all of these schools in the last 2 years, it is obvious that there are some fundamental differences between these "big-budget" schools and our "alternative program".

In order to give some of the flavor of our program, I will next reconstruct a "typical" day in this classroom. This reconstruction will attempt to highlight the significant features of this classroom as they've evolved over the last 2 years, as well as begin to show the relationships between students and between students and teacher that have developed.

#### Another "Typical" Day in Cooperative Education

First of all there really isn't anything like a typical day in this classroom. However there are certain predictable routines, as well as certain kinds of interaction, certain types of curriculum activities, as well as an overall tone or atmosphere, that I hope to hint at.

### Curriculum Activities

It's a bright morning in May, about 8:30 A.M., when the boys arrive. They see me and make a motion like turning a lock. "Yeh, here you go guys. They'll need lots of water this morning because the afternoon will really heat it up in there." I throw them the keys to a separate building behind the school, where we have our greenhouse room. It's actually the old E.C.S. room, but we kind of took it over in order to grow tomatoes and flowering annuals each year. I "stole" the idea from Jack James High School in Calgary, when I visited their I.O.P. school. They had a multi-million dollar school, with state of the art shops (Autobody, Beauty Culture, Food Services, child-care services), which do a marvelous job of helping students get out of the school and into the community. Horticulture was the one area, that seemed possible for our school.

This is the fourth year we've grown plants. The students do most of the seeding, transplanting, watering and selling of these plants. At the moment, because these students are now in high school, we are calling the course Special Projects 20. We have students working on computer layout for the yearbook, working as library assistants and Phy.Ed. helpers. These two senior high students essentially "volunteered" for the Horticulture project. They had been involved in previous years; they liked the sense of independence they got in this separate building and I believe they actually learned to like working with plants.

The boys are watering before school, because they don't get this class until after lunch and they know the plants will need water before then. They have a sense of ownership of this project which is quite different than what I see from them in their academic courses, although I'm beginning to see some growth in that area also.

This year we have about 500 tomato plants, plus hundreds of Marigolds, petunias, snap dragons, and other annuals. During the last two weeks of class time we've been involved in transplanting most of the tomatoes into individual milk cartons and beginning to plan for the annual Spring Plant Sale.

We raise about two or three hundred dollars, after expenses, which goes toward field trips, novels and other things the students agree upon. We have a bank account which the students have signing authority on. They are responsible for keeping a complete ledger of withdrawals for supplies and deposits. The beauty of this program is how easily it cuts across curriculum boundaries, so that we can justify it in Science, Math, Language Arts (Advertising), Business Education, etc. The other important facet of the Horticulture program is that most students don't think of these tasks as school-related to the same extent as the core courses and their degree of self-directedness is proportionately greater than in some other courses.

This greater degree of dependability didn't develop immediately however. There were lots of times when some of the tasks like watering or cleanup were not adequately done and some plants died or we had a mess to clean up the next day. Over time though, and with peer pressure from the other students, who didn't want to do someone else's job, the level of responsibility went up significantly.

This type of activity helped facilitate a smoother transition to work experience settings for the students also. They already had some exposure to a "simulated work setting" and had some idea of the level of expectations that employers wanted, even if the specific tasks would be different. In many respects it was activities like Horticulture that probably did more than most academic classes to move along the student's integration to the world outside of the classroom doors.

The first formal class of the day is English 13/16/I.O.P. Nine (I have one grade nine student for IOP Language Arts and Math. She is involved in most the theme work we do, reads different novels, but engages in similar writing and discussion activities). Although this is not "typical", the students are actually engaged in an activity related to Language Arts. They are writing scripts for later videotaping and as I arrive they are rereading a couple of rough spots, trying to come up with some dialogue that "works".

" OK. so after we shoot the scene where we are sitting in the trunk of Frank's car drinking beer, we end with the line, "Let's go get some more beer and meet at Bill's house to get ready for the party." Right then we fade the camera out and fade back in as we drive away."

As I come through the door, they look up and one student says, "Look at how keen we are on this stuff Mr. C. I think we're ready to videotape this commercial right now." We spend a few minutes discussing where they are at with writing the shooting directions to go with the script. The camera person must know when to fade in and out or a scene, when to zoom in on a person, etc.

The idea for this videotaping assignment in English came from an informal discussion that occurred in my classroom one Monday morning. The students were discussing the latest "bush party" they had attended on the previous weekend. Of course, they were discussing who had been drinking too much and made a fool of themselves. Sometimes it was one of these students themselves. I had always seemed to get drawn into the role of advising them about the dangers of underage drinking and drinking and driving, but it hadn't really had much impact on them; although they did seem more ready to let me in on these stories, when they found out I wouldn't phone their parents immediately.



The idea for the videotape involved a story they told me concerning one their friends, who they had allowed to drive home, when they knew he was drunk. I mentioned to them that they had the makings of a good "Impaired Driving Video", which would fulfill one of their writing assignments for the month. From there I pretty much got out of their way. They became consumed by the details associated with the filming of this "commercial". At one point in the filming they decided that it would be important for the authenticity (my wording) of the video, if they could get one of the local RCMP officers to participate.

I went along with them to the local detachment and verified their story. The police were only too happy to comply, when they found out the concept we were trying to promote and eventually they shot a very professional looking video, complete with accident scene and the final graveyard shoot.

The police were really happy about our promoting of their message concerning drinking and driving to the very group of students who needed it most and the students were quite taken with the idea of being in a video with the local RCMP officers. (They thought it might help them in times of trouble). Another group of students utilized the local Fish and Wildlife Officer to shoot a video on the poaching of wildlife. Later, in the year we used the Video concept to recreate scenes from "Romeo and Juliet".

Again, this activity satisfied the academic requirements of the course, while providing some degree of "integration" to the larger society. It also provided a vehicle for a reverse form of this integration, whereby segments of the larger society, (in this case the RCMP officers) had the opportunity to interact with teenagers in a nonconfrontational situation, that could only enhance the relationship between the police and students.

I believe it is this broader notion of "integration" that is necessary in order to truly say that we are helping students adapt to a changing world. A related form of language arts activity was writing articles for the county newspaper, "The Commentator". Students wrote about various school activities (sports, speakers) as well as contributing certain writing assignments. They did most of the editing of articles and their name appeared in the byline in the newspaper. Again, the self-esteem needs of the students were met, as well as providing a opportunity for "real-life" writing. They seemed more concerned with the details of correct grammar and spelling, when they knew the entire community would be reading their piece.

In between classes I talk to Fred, an English 23 student in the diploma program. In his earlier school years, Fred had been a "regular" resource room student. He was now on a complete diploma program.

" So Fred how is social studies going," I asked. Not bad, I'm getting about 60% on the tests and assignments, so I can get my credits for sure. I'll just have to study for the final quite a bit."

Fred embodies the notion of "successful integration", as far as I'm concerned. He learned very young that, in order to be successful, he had to work quite hard. Unlike most of the students I see, he does homework consistently and completely.

He has been tremendously motivated by the idea of moving toward a complete diploma route, as opposed to I.O.P. Every time he successfully completes a high school course, he becomes more confident. He is almost certain to gain his general high school diploma next June. Fred's early time spent in the resource room doesn't seem to have hurt his chances of successfully adapting to more "mainstream" classes. However, there is one other explanation for Fred's progress and that is his high level of independence and responsibility.

Fred's parents told him from a very early age that he could achieve anything he wanted if he tried hard enough. Even though others (especially in early elementary school), were predicting limited academic success for Fred, his parents showed total faith in his abilities. They also gave him lots of responsibility, at a young age. He had chores to do around the house and yard. Therefore, it seems that Fred didn't ever become dependent upon the resource room experience or use it as a crutch. He used it as a springboard. Of course, it can work both ways.

We have Science 14 before lunch. Some of the students have just returned from a morning round of work experience and inevitably, that is what they are discussing with each other. It is almost like, at this stage of their school careers, whatever is happening in the "real world" is more worthy of discussing than school events. This notion concerning the motivational power of the "real world" is most readily seen in the work experience settings, but we have been able to bring it into our program in some sense also. The horticulture project is one attempt at this bridging between the world of work and schools. Another one was some work with recycling.

In Science today, the students were asked to phone various towns and cities in Alberta, to find out about their paper recycling projects. Some of their calls got no results, (the projects had closed), but in some instances we got a lot of information. One thing they learned very quickly is that at this point in time, there is almost no money to be made in paper recycling.

All this interest in paper recycling caused us to phone Alberta Environment to find out about the grants they made available to communities trying to start paper recycling. We found out that it is usually better for the village or town council to apply for the funding, so our next step was to go to a village council meeting.

Two students and myself went to the meeting and the town was interested in the idea, but wanted us to find out the approximate costs, etc. We gave them the grant that we had mailed away for and they agreed to apply for the money after we had completed a survey of the costs and amount of paper and cardboard generated in the town. We spent several days going around town, asking the business people some questions to determine the approximate amount of paper they generated.

What really got the ball rolling was a visit to our school by Ralph Klein, Minister of the Environment for Alberta. He heard about our efforts to get paper recycling going, told us that if we applied for a grant, he would guarantee it would be accepted and got his picture taken with several students. Great political points for him perhaps, but also a tremendous boost for the students, who could see the immediate relationship between in-school subjects and "real world" concerns like the environment. It would be totally inaccurate to suggest, that these kinds of school-community connections were made every day, but we did consciously search for every opportunity to tie the two together.

Another way we did this (in Science especially) was to frequently have quest speakers come in from the community or else go on field trips to see things in action (Trans Alta, A.G.T. demo, trip to Canadian Montana Gas, visit by Wildlife Biologist trying to reintroduce the Swift Fox to Southern Alberta). These activities served the dual purpose of broadening the student's educational horizons, while also introducing them to many occupational areas that they might not have been previously aware of.

After lunch, I teach Math 24/26. I have six students (5 in Math 24 and one student in Math 26. Although I teach a mini-lesson every day, the students complete assignments at their own pace. Our school is hooked up to Alberta Education's Distance Learning system in Barrhead, and in my Math classes I enter the students onto the CML, so that they can complete supplemental exercises at their own pace. This frees me up more to work individually with students who are experiencing more difficulty with the material.

Today, we are locked into a session of "Income Tax" and the students are busy working through an actual section from the most recent version of the Income Tax return. There is a lot of informal "on-task" talk between the students. "Where do you get the amount for line 273?" someone asks. "Read what it says below line 272. You take 19 percent of line 272 and that is what you enter as the total for personal deductions," replies another student.

I enter this dialogue when it is obvious they have gone astray or are getting overly frustrated (I remember the frustration of completing my own Income Tax for the first time). I've broken the form into the logical units and they complete exercises on each section, before completing a total return.

Repetition is quite important for some students; they need the time to try multiple attempts of each section. Once again, although certain sections of the form prove harder than others, the students never say, "Why do we have to fill out these forms?" They know that they aren't very far removed from the realities of Income Tax and so they are much more ready to listen to my "mini-lessons".

During the last ten minutes of Math some students want to get neW Time Sheets for their work sites. Very quickly the discussion turns to some aspect of work experience.

"I've got to give a perm today. I helped give one to my Auntie Martha. I was kind of nervous, but Debbie told me what to do and I just followed her instructions."

" We were working on changing the brake shoes on the Fertilizer truck. The mechanic showed us how to put one on and we did the other. It wasn't really all that hard."

" Bob told me that they might have a summer job for me in July and August. I can finally make some money for a change."

Two stories come to mind that illustrate the integrative potential of work experience.

#### Bob's Story

Bob had real difficulty with most forms of communication; especially those formal communication tasks demanded of him during school hours. Over the years, it became a fairly typical scene for Bob to have difficulty responding to some question and simply give up and refuse to answer at all. This became a fairly habitual response to any learning task that Bob felt threatened by. I was always perplexed and sometimes annoyed by this behavior; at times it almost seemed as if Bob purposely made little effort to respond. This led to several inappropriate pedagogic techniques that most teachers have used at one time or another. The following notes came from my journal notes.

"Then the inevitable happened. I would ask Bob to demonstrate to me his understanding of the concept or skill. I would hover around him and try to wait for his demonstration of competence. However, it was not a truly silent waiting, it was full of the air of expectancy. You could almost hear my voice before I intervened verbally. 'Come on now Bob, you know this stuff! Think about it! Do we need to do a few more examples? Are you really trying with this stuff? etc. etc.' Sometimes I could feel myself getting angry, even though I knew Bob was genuinely trying to respond. He could always sense my anger even before it manifested itself and this only compounded the problem. It was in his eyes. He looked trapped. He was suffocating in this pseudo-silence and the longer we sat together, the less chance there was for a response from him."

During Bob's first couple of work experience stations, he exhibited some of the same type of passive attitudes. He would never volunteer any information or ask his employer questions, if he didn't understand something.

Finally, last year we placed Bob with a local employer, who had several employees (some student weekend workers). In this position Bob had the opportunity to see most of the local people, at one time or another.

I spent some time helping Bob to get oriented to the tasks he was being asked to perform. However, it wasn't in my ballpark anymore. After the first semester I talked to the employer about Bob's performance. He wasn't totally displeased, but felt Bob was still quite passive and wouldn't ask any questions. He would still stand around without asking what he should be doing. The employer felt Bob needed to stay for another semester and Bob was quite willing, so we arranged it (remember the problem of limited work sites).

Something very interesting happened. We were involved in a teacher's strike and missed two weeks of classes. Of course students weren't obliged to go to work experience classes and many didn't. When I went in the employer told me that Bob had been at the store, "Almost every day for 5 or 6 hours." He started to work with the other high school students, who worked at the store and watched the routine they went through on the job. The employer said he was quite amazed, but Bob started to loosen up and communicate with the staff and customers more. He was also more interested in doing the tasks required on the job. As one of the other employees said. " He's a way more talkative now, especially when you get him going."

I found this to be a very profound realization concerning my role with respect to my student's education. For a teacher, especially one who has taught some of the same students for seven years, it is important to feel that you are having a positive "impact" on the students you teach.

I was always very concerned about the way these students were treated by other students and the public at large. However, my role was only as a facilitator, to help these students move to the community at large. It was obvious that this was the "independence" that I was trying to coax out of Bob earlier, when I ended up smothering him with expectations.

I learned then that if I truly wanted the students I taught to get beyond the "learned helplessness" that comes from an overdependence on others (teachers, parents), I had to build a scaffold that would allow them to integrate with the larger community they would be moving into. What I heard from Bob's employer and the other employees was that Bob was beginning to make the transition to that world of work.

I saw variations of this with other students as well. Several of my students, who have the most serious academic difficulties (reading, writing, math), are among the strongest work experience students we have. They are more concerned with their image in the public eye than they are in the school setting (this is not always true, but is a trend somewhat).

### Bert's Story

Bert's story is in a way a mirror of the contradiction within the special education framework.

Bert is an outgoing, verbally confident teenager, with a great sense of humor. At one point in his school career he was convinced that he couldn't be successful, because of some quite pronounced language arts difficulties (particularly written language). He was intimidated by the fact that no one could read his writing, because of the spelling and grammatical errors.

Since that time he has learned to compensate a great deal for his problems with the written language. His oral skills are great, however he still has to work very hard on the written skills.

When he arrived in grade ten he was quite anxious to get a good work experience site. He was interested in mechanics and really wanted to work on motors. He has a lot of experience with mechanics on his Dad's farm and he knew what he wanted. He went so far as to go to the employer himself and ask if they would take him for work experience. He has since that time, asked me about the new Alberta Apprenticeship Program and written for information. He wants to begin an apprenticeship, while he is in high school (this is now possible) and is constantly asking for my advice concerning the next step he should take.

Obviously, Bert is extremely motivated by the idea of gaining work skills that he can make use of later. He also wants to get some type of certified training, such as an apprenticeship, so that he can perhaps use it as a partial source of income. The major benefit for the school, from Bert's participation in work experience, is that he is now knows where he is going and knows he needs certain courses to be able to do it.

He is one of the most committed students in the program, with a high chance of being successful.

It would be unfair to suggest that these two work experience stories are completely typical. They present, some examples of the positive spinoffs for some students in work experience. Not all students made the same degree of growth in the work experience settings, but they were almost unanimous in wanting to go out again.

#### The end of a "typical" day

I have simply highlighted some stories that might serve as a way into the discussion concerning the legitimate place (if there is one) for special education programs, especially rural ones. These stories present merely the first brush-strokes on the canvas that is the classroom. It has been far too diverse to even attempt to be comprehensive. I have attempted to find stories that highlighted certain aspects of this program and its students that I find representative and instructive.

I have avoided the darker stories, not only for ethical reasons, but simply because they are not often as related to the school and our program, as they are to other influences.

## VI. REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF INTEGRATION

This fall, for the first time in ten years, I was back in the regular classroom (teaching the new Career and Life Management Course). I had never really considered that I would have to "integrate", but I had indeed been in another world on the fringe of "regular" education.

Most of the students, who I have been involved with in the resource room and the Integrated Occupational Program are now in the last year or two of high school. Of this group, three are probably going to complete their Certificate of Achievement, while the rest are trying for a high school diploma. Of this latter group, two or three will no doubt require an extra year of grade twelve to complete this diploma. Not one of these students, who received considerable early resource room intervention, has dropped out of school. This is contrary to the record prior to the introduction of a junior high resource room program and the newer I.O.P/Cooperative Education Program. For me, this suggests that our "home-baked" hybrid has merit.

However, that is not to suggest that the transition has been without problems. Several students have had to repeat diploma courses such as Social 23 and English 23, primarily because either their study habits were somewhat deficient or because their reading and writing skills were not quite up to the standards of these courses.

The interesting thing though is that they didn't seem to get overly negative about having to take the courses again. I think the goal of integration was such a powerful motivator for them, that having to retake a course or two seemed a small price to pay. Mary is now in grade ten. She is absolutely committed to being a success in high school.

" I studied until 1 A.M. for your science test, last night. My mother asked me questions and she finally said, 'Mary, you've got to get to bed or you'll never wake up in the morning.' Then I got up at 6:05 to study some more."

Mary is working so hard, she is actually challenging some of the students, who formally called her names. They are worried that she might actually beat them on the first unit quiz and she just might.

I am also convinced that the confidence that these students gained from seeing a measure of success in the I.O.Program, helped them to persevere, when they might have given up several years earlier. In a way they had internalized the "scaffold" that we had attempted to provide in the resource room and now they could proceed in a more independent fashion.

My own integration back into the regular classroom seemed to mirror some of problems that the students must have encountered. I found myself intimidated by a classroom full of students, rather than the five or six faces I had faced for the preceding ten years. My self confidence was certainly not what it should have been and I struggled during the first week or two of classes. I had some discipline problems, which I attribute to this lack of confidence as well as to certain reservations that some of the students displayed concerning my ability to teach "regular" classes. I had to win their confidence in much the same way that my former students had to fight for acceptance in this classroom as well. I wasn't totally familiar with the subject material (I inherited the course at the end of the summer through timetabling changes). Overall, I came to appreciate the struggle that many of my students must have faced as they attempted to integrate, both academically and socially with their peers.

In an era, when education is increasingly being urged to "be accountable", "encourage excellence", "cut costs", and "move toward 100% integration of special needs students"; we seem to be heading away from a deeper commitment to the needs of actual human beings, in our schools. Schools and communities are amazingly divergent in the way they respond to the calling of educating young people and rather than homogenizing the delivery of educational services, we must allow for a degree of autonomy in the way these services are delivered in individual schools and communities.



It seems, not only contradictory but inappropriate for Alberta Education to offer a "Vision Statement" which suggests the goal of 100% "integration" for special needs students, while also offering an Integrated Occupational Program, with a separate Certificate of Achievement and separate courses. While one can argue that this high school program promotes the eventual integration of students, I believe the same thing can be said for most resource rooms and learning assistance programs.

From my perspective, one simply leads into the other and I don't see how we can expect all students to prosper at one level, without educational alternatives that we are advocating at other levels. Both resource rooms and the I.O. Program exist because we recognize that not all students learn at the same rate or excel in the same environment.

What I've tried to argue for throughout this project, is the importance of the idiosyncratic programs developed out of the intersubjective dialogue between parents, students, and teachers within unique communities. We live in the uncertainty of a postmodern world of multiple interpretations of reality. The absolutism which marked traditional ways of viewing institutions such as education is no longer appropriate. Classroom teachers, at all levels of education must resist the autocracy which masks itself as "the new solution" to pedagogic paradoxes. The practitioner's interpretations of the essential contradictions of his/her profession are an essential ingredient in any discourse which claims to be democratic in nature. This project was my humble attempt to enter the dialogue.

## VII. POSTSCRIPT ON THE MEANING OF INTEGRATION

It occurred to me, somewhat after the fact, that even thinking there was "a" meaning for "integration" was inaccurate. One's perspective is forever colored by one's position in the event. I've found that this question has not been resolved in any final sense for me, even as I try to conclude this project. Rather the opposite has been my experience. The question just keeps evolving with each new experience I have with students and as a parent. For me, this interpretation of the term "integration" has involved a journey through many degrees of ambiguity and outright contradictions.

I've also come to understand in a very subjective way the notion that there is seldom one "fixed meaning", which a community of inquirers can agree upon for any concept; especially not for a term which has such a breadth of possible interpretive directions as "integration". In these final vignettes I am trying to get at a deeper sense of the term integration from the perspective of teacher, parent and student.

What is integration for the teacher? It involves a feeling of connectedness with a school's center, rather than existing at the rim of the wheel. For me it involved an inner journey that accompanied the outer changes in my program as it changed from resource room to Integrated Occupational Program to Cooperative Education and the general diploma program. This journey, in some ways parallels that of several of my students as they moved between programs in the system.

It was only by finally teaching in a so-called regular classroom again, that I came to really see the differences my special education program had enjoyed. The smaller numbers and the less specified curriculum had helped create a more informal oasis within the institutional structure of the school. In a sense this freedom had helped insulate myself and the students from some of the depersonalizing aspects of the regular class experience. With fewer students, I could spend less time marking large numbers of assignments and tests and more time actually interacting with individual students. Discipline became much easier and less necessary as the students and I became closer than might have been possible in a larger group.

However, much as the students felt the need to try their hand at the game of integration, I began to sense the need for change in my professional life. In many respects I brought on my own integration. By lobbying for and helping to create a new program at our school I was simply responding to the needs of a small group of students, who would have certainly been jeopardized without some curricular flexibility.

As these students began to reach the end of their high school career, I began to realize that I had to change also. Although, there would undoubtedly be more students coming into our program, it was this particular group of students that I had gotten quite close to over the past seven years. It was a special relationship that changed my teaching dramatically, but the time had come to try something else.

I needed to recharge my teaching in a regular program; perhaps as much as the students I taught, also yearned for 'normalcy'. I began to realize that I had exhausted myself in special education (at least for now) and needed a different interpretive perspective; one that a 'regular' classroom might bring.

What does integration mean for a parent. In many respects it is similar to some aspects of the deep relationships that a teacher forms with his/her students over several years. It is the joy of watching three distinct individuals develop within one's own family unit. Each different and incredibly "special" in their own right. It is the deep concern that only a parent can have; not only for the academic growth of these children, but for the deeper human development of one's son or daughter. It is a concern that teachers recognize the 'special' qualities of these children and nurture them rather than attempting to homogenize them for the sake of classroom unity or in response to the latest curricular pendulum swing.

For a parent, integration is a two-edged sword. On the one hand we want our children to be integrated into the community of the school and also into the larger community. Essentially we want them to fit in! On the other hand, we want them to become independent thinkers, who feel strong enough to stand against the group mentality, if that means doing what they know is right for them and morally justifiable.

Much as the resource room teacher, who provides a "scaffold" for students, within a particular subject area and then tries to carefully remove it, parents aren't sure often, when to begin dismantling the scaffold and allowing children to "go their own way". In a postmodern world that tends to promote normlessness and alienation, parents and teachers must provide nurturing roles while simultaneously challenging students to think at higher cognitive levels. Once again the ambiguity in this term "integration" breaks through the surface.

And finally what of the student and the idea of "integration"? In many ways, this masters program has afforded me an important opportunity to think again as a student; with all of the range of triumphs and tragedies that this world signifies. In the world of the student, "integration" implies the search for an identity; it involves coming to feel confident in one's abilities to live and interact in this milieu. The student in an alternative program has some of the same crises of doubt that I consistently felt as a "part-time" graduate student. The sense of being outside of the core; living on the fringes, is a sentiment that I'm quite sure I share with many of my students.

If this project has been about my attempt at finding a narrative voice, in order to reflect on pedagogic issues, then I see many parallels with some of my students, who are currently attempting to find their voices, within the regular high school program and beyond the school walls into the world at large. Like them, my progress in this area has come haltingly and with much self-doubt and a certain degree of anxiety. But then, this is the stuff that a life is made of!

## VIII. ENDNOTES

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8. Bruner, Jerome, "Life as Narrative" *Social Research* 54 (1). 12, 15.
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11. Since I've moved into the high school, the new Resource Room teacher has gone into regular classrooms more regularly, particularly in the Elementary grades. She seems to feel more comfortable than I did with this practice and the teachers in our school seem more responsive to this practice now. I would argue however, that this may be because she is seeing a different group of students than I saw, with a different constellation of needs. She still spends about half of her day with students in the resource room setting.

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15. "Clarifying the Meaning of Integration" *A.T.A. News* 25 (9) (Edmonton: Alberta Teacher's Association, 1991) 4.
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**X. APPENDIX: SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS**



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Edison F. Bardock, Superintendent  
P.O. Box 485

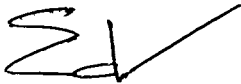
### MEMORANDUM

To: Mr. Don Cassell  
From: Dr. E. F. Bardock, Superintendent of Schools  
Re: Class Visit - Ralph Klein  
Date: September 18, 1990

At our Board Meeting September 17, 1990, the Reeve, Mr. Ed Torsher, indicated that the Hon. Ralph Klein, Minister of Alberta Environment, had expressed a great deal of interest relative to his visit to your class. He felt the Board of Education were on the right track with these students and he was impressed with your program and class interest.

Continue the excellent work. The Board are very pleased with the progress reported to date.

Sincerely,



E. F. Bardock

E6/90

EFB/sk1

cc: Lowell Leffler  
Ed Torsher  
Ben Widmer  
Garth Swennumson  
Lloyd Strain  
Don Laqua



# County of Forty Mile No. 8

*Shirley Leverton, County Administrator*  
Box 160  
Foremost, Alberta T0K 0X0

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*Edison F. Bardock, Superintendent of Schools*  
Box 485  
Foremost, Alberta T0K 0X0

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April 2, 1992

Don Cassell  
Teacher/Coordinator  
The Cooperative Education Program  
Foremost School

Dear Don:

Thank you for the write-up concerning the evaluation of the first year of our Cooperative Education Program. It was an excellent summary. It also helped point out some of the new directions that will help improve the program. Well done.

I also attached the newspaper clipping from the Commentator and I am certain that this will be appreciated by Mrs. Doyle.

Please go ahead and make the arrangements for the luncheon. This is an excellent Public Relations tool and with the way things are going these days, you can't get too much P.R. Please submit all your bills and costs once the final amount has been determined.

I will let you know if we receive any other feedback from Mrs. Doyle.

Yours truly,

Lowell Leffler  
Deputy Superintendent of Schools

LL:gr  
L1/92  
Enclosure

# Kids finish high school with special program

by Carolyn Pittman

Foremost School is keeping high school students in school by teaching work and labor skills through a federal government program.

High school teacher Don Cassell says a program called Co-operative Education sponsored by Canada Manpower and the County of 40 Mile has been responsible for keeping at least 10 students from dropping out.

Local businesses in Foremost have been 100 per cent behind the program, says Cassell. Students are required to work 200 hours per year at a business and when completed, students receive a certificate of completion.

A provincial education program called Integrated Occupation is used for academic lessons.

"The program encourages students to stay in school and continue and possibly return to the diploma program," says Cassell. "The students are also taught job preparation skills such as how to do a resume, interviewing skills and how to act on the job."

Cassell says he found through years of teaching special education at the elementary and junior high levels that there wasn't really a program for the students at the high school level.

So Cassell and a group of parents lobbied the school board to sponsor the program and also applied for grant money.

The school received \$73,000 for four years from the federal government. The school board contributes 15 per cent the first year and assumes a larger percent-

age of the program's funding each year. The school is currently in its second year with the program.

"A lot of these students will go directly into the work force after they get out of grade 12," says Cassell.

The skills they have learned while in the program will help the student get and keep a job, he adds.

"The reason for the whole success of this is the business community and the parents who have been so supportive," says Cassell.

"It requires a little more leg work by the teacher to keep a check on the students at work but it's really worth it."

County school counsellor Bev Flower has contributed greatly to the program by teaching job skills.



Employability Improvement Programs  
Suite 1440  
9700 Jasper Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5J 4C1

7880-1  
#J20568-1

March 5, 1992

Dr. Edison Bardock, Superintendent  
County of Forty Mile #8  
Post Office Box 160  
Foremost, Alberta  
T0K 0X0

Dear Dr. Bardock:

Thank you very much for the hospitality which you and Lowell Leffler afforded to Clayton Allan and myself during our recent monitoring of your Co-operative Education program. Basically, I feel that your Co-ordinator, Don Casell is doing a very good job of managing and promoting the program and is meeting the objectives as stated in the original proposal. A couple of areas, however, that I would recommend for improvement are:

1. Increase advertising of the Program within the School and the Community, and
2. Have a student handbook developed and distributed to students; this should result in an increase of students in the program by September 1992.

I was particularly impressed with the emphasis put upon career planning for the co-operative education students and the encouragement the students received from your staff to complete their high school education. I was also happy to hear that you plan to expand the program to another high school in your area in the near future. Lowell and I discussed the financial implications of this planned expansion and he will advise me of the request for additional funds as soon as the decision is finalized.

Continued Success with Co-operative Education.

Sincerely,

Helen Doyle  
Program Consultant

*copy to Don Casell  
Bill Ressler*

c.c. Alberta Education

HD/mm



EDUCATION

Office of the Minister

402 Legislature Building, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5K 2B6 403/427-2025 Fax 403/427-5582

April 23, 1992

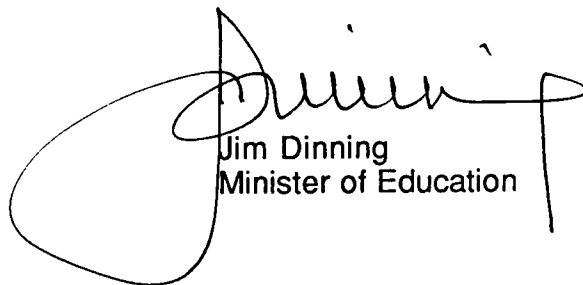
Mr. Don Cassell  
Foremost School  
Box 430  
Foremost, Alberta  
T0K 0X0

Dear Mr. Cassell:

I was very pleased to read in the 40-Mile Commentator about your successful Cooperative Education Program. I commend you for getting this program going in your school. The practical job related skills your students learn will make a real difference as they move into the workplace.

Congratulations!

Yours sincerely,



Jim Dinning  
Minister of Education

cc: Mr. Ben Widmer  
Chairman of the Board

Dr. Ed Bardock  
Superintendent of Schools

# THE COOPERATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM AT FOREMOST SCHOOL

## OVERALL PROGRAM ASSESSMENT - 1991/92

By: Don Cassell, Teacher/Coordinator

The Cooperative Education Program at Foremost School began during the 1990/91 school year (prior to our receiving funding from Canada Manpower). Through discussions with classroom teachers and parents, it was determined that there was a group of students in our school, who were at risk of dropping out of school and in need of a program with a more work oriented focus.

This year we have 4 students in Grade 11 who are fully involved in the Cooperative Education program (taking the full 200 hours of work experience). Also at the grade 10 level, we have identified 5 or 6 students who should be entering the program full time in the fall of 1992. There are also a number of junior high students who are potential candidates for this program.

### ACADEMIC COMPONENTS

As Coordinator and instructor in this program I am responsible for teaching a variety of the academic courses that both the grade 10 and 11 students take. This year I have taught English 13/16, English 23/26, Science 14, Science 24, Math 14, Math 24, Special Projects (Horticulture), and Occupations 16/26. The Job skills training has been taught in our CALM 20 course, by our counsellor. For the most part the students find the expectations and assignments in these courses to be much more achievable than was the case previously, when they had to take the more academic courses. This arrangement has also proved much more beneficial for the students, as opposed to having them take their academic courses via Distance Learning modules. These students need the benefit of actual classroom instruction rather than a Tutor marker that they must fax their lessons to. In this way any problems they encounter can be dealt with immediately and they don't get frustrated as was previously the case.

Some of the students in the Cooperative Education program will be attempting to fulfill the requirements for a General Diploma and several of the students (3 at this point) will be receiving a Certificate of Achievement from the Integrated Occupational Program. It is very important that these students continue to have an opportunity to move between these two academic programs, so that there is always an alternative route for them to take. It is also important for them to be challenged to improve academically and the flexibility of having two academic streams to move between is an ideal motivational component of our program.

### WORK EXPERIENCE

We have placed all of our Coop. Ed. students in 13 work sites in the Foremost community. For the most part we have been able to find work sites that the students are interested in gaining experience in. However we do have some concerns, with the requirement for 200 hours of work experience. Some of our grade 10 students (particularly the girls) will have run out of viable work experience sites by the time they enter Grade 12. The problem of course is the limited number of work sites within the community.

Also, a couple of the this year's grade tens have expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of taking two work experience rounds next year (to make up their 200 hours). They don't feel there are enough work sites in occupational areas that interest them. I realize that this is a requirement of the Cooperative Education program, however, I'm simply passing on the information I'm receiving from some of the students.

The employers in our business community seem to be very pleased with the students we are sending to them. Through our formal visits to the work sites and informal discussions with them it is apparent that they are happy to be involved in our program and want to continue with it.

We have recently asked our counsellor, Mrs. Beverly Flower to help with the administration of the the work experience component of the program, because of my full teaching duties. In this way, we can maintain better contact with employers and work experience students, and head off any potential problems that might occur.

During March of this year, in an attempt to increase the public visibility of the program, we had the local newspaper interview us and publish an article on the Cooperative Education program at our school. The article certainly cast our program in a positive light and we will be attempting to get more coverage in the future (hopefully with pictures of our students actually working at the work sites). This kind of media attention is not only beneficial to the students already in the program, but it helps to attract future students as well.

We are in the process of organizing a Cooperative Education Appreciation Dinner for the business people, who take our students. This dinner, which will be held some time in May, will give us an opportunity to publicly thank all our employers for their support. It will also give them a chance to bring back any concerns or suggestions they have with respect to the future direction of the work experience component of Cooperative Ed. We will again ask the local media to cover this dinner (and hopefully get a group picture of the employers for the paper).

Also, in this regard, we are looking into the having some of our Industrial Education students make wooden plaques, to be given to each work site, as a visible reminder of our appreciation for their support. In the past we have send out laminated posters, but we thought we would like to give them something more permanent.

Overall, the direction of the Cooperative Education program is a positive one. There is an obvious need in our school that is being filled by the program and I don't see that need diminishing in the foreseeable future. Hopefully, as the program becomes more known, we will be able to increase the number of employers who will take our students (perhaps even utilizing businesses which are outside of our immediate area). I am hopeful that the program could be extended to other communities within the County and I would be willing to help in any way possible.