

**SWIMMING WITH ARMS ONLY  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES  
OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

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## Dedication

To everyone who has made a difference in my life.

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## Abstract

This project is a journey of both personal and professional reflection that spans over a period of forty-five years. I have attempted to document my life under the consideration of the themes that surfaced while writing narrative accounts. Parents, inclusion, friends, and society were areas that resurfaced as I researched and wrote this project. The introduction gives an overview of my life as a person living with spina bifida and then examines the history of inclusion and how society has viewed the disabled. After examining my life and the society in which I live, the project looks at my practices as a special education teacher. Reflecting on my life, my practices and where I wish to go from here based on my new understanding of self completes the project.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*Carefully I walk down the stairs towards the water. As I gaze down I can see the bottom of the pool, the perfectly measured tiles at the bottom create a checkerboard effect. Painted along the side of the pool is the height of the water, not too deep. I will be able to stand, without worrying about being able to breathe. This is good. I do not want to jump into the water too quickly: I want my body to adapt to the water temperature, put my head in slowly without feeling a sudden shock of cold water pounding on my scalp.*

*Holding both railings carefully as I descend the stairs, I wonder what the water temperature will be today. Sometimes it can be warm and inviting, not as hot as a bathtub, but comfortable for swimming. Other days the water is cooler, less inviting, ensuring visitors must move in order to stay warm. My feet touch the water; it is cool, yet inviting. I let go of the railings, submerging my body up to my shoulders. Once acclimatized, I ask myself, "What shall I do now?" I decide to take the plunge, submerging my entire body.*

*I swim towards the deep end using the crawl to propel me, my arms cut cleanly through the water, my breathing in synchronization. At the far end of the pool, I stop. I turn to resume swimming, but hesitate. What am I doing? I cannot do this; I panic holding onto the side, not wanting to let go. I remind myself that this swim is important to me and to others in my life. Cautiously I start back, I swim, and then I rest, either by holding onto the side of the pool deck or by treading water. I feel tired but exhilarated, scared but happy*

It is with a similar trepidation, but confidence that I begin work on this project. I have put off telling this story far too long. I have been reluctant to examine my life, my accomplishments, and how I have spina bifida. Part of me is proud of my

accomplishments and wants to share my life; the other half wants to remain silent, not revealing my inner feelings or drawing attention to the fact that I do have a disability. People have told me I have a duty and a right to tell my story, to be proud of my accomplishments. They tell me that by sharing my story, I will help others. I am still uncertain if I have done anything remarkable, but I have come to the realization that for my own sense of self and for the betterment of my students, I need to look at my life and my practice as a special education teacher. Teachers, in order to improve, need to continually examine their practice, reflect on what they are doing and make the necessary changes. I want to be a better teacher and person, so I will begin my journey sure that I will discover things that I need to change in my practice and in my life.

When I was twelve years old, I underwent major spinal surgery that required a hospital and rehabilitation facility stay for eight months. During the first fourteen weeks of my hospital stay, I lay on a striker frame. Every two to three hours nurses would place a stretcher canvas over me and strap me in. I felt like the filling in a sandwich, crushed between two slices of bread. They would then take out the pins which attached the bottom board to the frame, count to three and flip me over. If I had been lying on my back, I would now be face down gazing at the floor for the next two hours.

After this phase of the recovery was complete, I found myself in a lumbar jacket, a plaster cast which started at the top of my head, went around my neck and then down my trunk, ending at the waist. I stayed wrapped in plaster for another three to four months, before liberation took place. After eight months, I went home.

Shortly after my release, I entered a swimming marathon at The Ontario Crippled Children's Centre. My parents were present the day of the marathon, supportive and proud

of my participation in this event so soon after my release from hospital. They had always encouraged me to do my best and not to let anything deter me from accomplishing what I wanted. The swim was one- hundred lengths of a regulation-sized swimming pool. I remember swimming back and forth, enjoying the freedom of moving through the water. I had missed being able to get into a pool during my prolonged hospital stay. Swimming was something that I learned when I was three-years old, shortly after I started to learn to walk. It was as natural to me as breathing. I also vividly recall a woman experiencing difficulty swimming because her legs had grown tired. An organizer encouraged her to continue the swim using only her arms. The lady replied dumbfounded that it was impossible to swim without using your legs.

I found this incredibly funny. I was completing the entire marathon without stopping, using solely my arms to propel me through the water. My legs slow me down and cause fatigue over prolonged use. How could someone not be able to swim with only his or her arms? What was so hard? Surely, everyone can adapt to a situation and carry on in life?

I was born in 1957, when few people with spina bifida survived. Spina bifida is a birth defect, occurring during the first four weeks of pregnancy, where the spine does not form, exposing the spinal cord. The extent of the damage, which is extremely varied, cannot be determined until after the baby is born. The damage results in limited brain signals to and from muscles and body organs below where the damage has occurred, reducing normal body function. The most common effects are limited use of lower limbs, bowel and bladder limitations, and average mental capability. People with spina bifida frequently have one or more related defects a common one being hydrocephalus, or

“water on the brain” (SBHAC, 2001). Examples of secondary conditions associated with spina bifida are latex allergy, tendonitis, obesity, skin breakdown, gastrointestinal disorders, learning disabilities, attaining and retaining mobility, depression, and social and sexual issues. Singer and composer, John Cougar Mellencamp, and Olympian, Jean Driscoll, are two well-known celebrities who have spina bifida. John has suffered few effects from the birth defect; Jean Driscoll, confined to a wheelchair, has undergone several major surgeries. I have undergone seven surgeries relating to my condition. Many people with spina bifida undergo dozens.

*My opinion of self*

I am sure it comes as a surprise to many people that I did not really accept my disability for many years. I appeared to be well adjusted on the outside, smiling through life, involved in many activities, making friends easily; rarely allowing my disability to depress or discourage me. I remember on occasions when I did feel sorry for myself how my parents would remind me of their pride in me and my accomplishments, how everyone marvelled at all that I had done and accomplished, and how I never seemed to let anything get me down. They were right, but what I failed to recognize was that my unwillingness to acknowledge my disability was denial. My aversion to look at people who were disabled, and to answer questions about my disability were all symptoms of denial that I had differences. Acceptance at the surface level where I lived my life through my activities appeared to be in place, but it was not present underneath where it really counted. I now compare it to being overweight.

You learn to adapt to the extra poundage. You learn to walk with the extra weight unaware of how tired it makes you, or the extra effort needed to move. You wear bigger

clothes that you hope will camouflage your true physique, modify your activities to meet your physical body, avoid mirrors and promise yourself that you will do something about the situation starting tomorrow. If someone points out the extra pounds, you become angry, defensive, or make a joke about it, but you feel uncomfortable. You will not lose the weight until the need for change comes from within. It was not until I accepted my physical body that I could achieve inner peace and accept the assistance that I may need at times with a cheerful heart and gratitude, instead of anger and embarrassment.

As I have grown older and more accepting of my situation, I have really heard what my friends and family think about, as they put it, “my supposed disability.” My friends have lost sight of my physical limitations because I do not demonstrate a disability. The way in which I live my life, my attitude and my determination erase the crutches and the scooter from their conscious perception of me. One of my friends told me that the only time the fact that my carcass did not work the same way as theirs meant anything was when we were going to a rock concert in the 1980s and that he thought maybe we could get up close instead of being stuck at the back of the stadium. He was willing to use my disability at that point to get us good seats.

Do I wonder what my life would have been like if I had not been disabled? The query is one that everyone born with a birth defect has probably given thought to at least once. In my situation, I have occasionally wondered if life would be different, but it is not something upon which I dwell. Instead, I lived in denial of my disability for many years, not admitting to myself or to others that I had any limitations in my life. To think about being disabled and what it would be like if I were not would be admitting that I did have a disability. The crutches were there, but I tended to ignore them, getting angry silently or

aloud, when people drew attention to them. To this day I will, only on the rare occasion, venture into this discussion with a trusted friend.

I have not ever “seen myself” as a person with a disability. When I dream, I am not aware if I have crutches, or a scooter to assist me in my mobility; I just move. When I am awake, I do not carry within my consciousness a vision of myself navigating down a street. I am aware of the crutches when I pick them up, when the weather is bad, or the ground is uneven and I must watch where I step, but I quickly forget about them and go on with what I am doing. Mobility aides are a necessity, always attached to me in some way, but they are not, in my opinion, a defining part of me, shaping who I am. I accept as true the adage, if life gives you lemons make lemonade. I do not sit in a dark room feeling sorry for myself, stare at a television, or watch from the sidelines as the world passes by. I hold a positive outlook on life, living each day to the fullest.

Over the years, the issue of my wanting to be normal has surfaced in conversations with friends, strangers, acquaintances, and colleagues. The question comes in many formats such as: Do you wish that you could run or ride a bike? Would you like to climb a mountain or dance the two-step? The question they really want to ask is, but are apprehensive in doing so is “Do you wish that you were not physically disabled, so that you could do what everyone else does?”

I do not know anyone who wishes to be physically disabled. Naturally, I desire to do many of the activities previously mentioned, (well, maybe not climb a mountain; I`m afraid of heights). Everyone has dreams and goals in life; some are achievable while others live on in dreams. I would love to be able to draw but my life will not end or be any less fulfilling because stick people are the height of my artistic talent. Definitely being

able to ride a bike would be exciting but having never done it, I do not miss it. I have always maintained one thing. I am grateful that, if I must live my life as a disabled person, I am glad I was born with spina bifida and not disabled later in life as the result of an accident. I cannot imagine what it would be like to lose the ability to walk. I know how difficult it has been to lose some of my mobility as I have aged. I cannot imagine how people such as Christopher Reeve or Joni Eareckson Tada feel confined to a wheelchair as an adult.

If I had felt cheated in life because of my disability, then perhaps I would have talked about it more. I get so angry when called a *cripple* or *handicapped*. I am not crippled; I can get around just fine with my crutches. I have no memories of crying because I had spina bifida. I have shed tears over hurtful things that people have said or done, but that is a normal reaction to being hurt. In my research, I found websites that focus on writings from disabled people. I was amazed at the number of people who were angry at being disabled. One woman talked about throwing her braces and crutches across a room as a child because she was angry at being disabled (M.A.P., 1997).

What I do know is that I have lived a full life: an honours student, student council vice-president, disc-jockey, student-handbook editor, musician with the Scarborough Symphony and Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestras, university graduate, and union activist, to name a few of my activities, over the past forty years. I am also a daughter, sister, niece, cousin, friend, teacher, mentor and advocate. Above all, I am a person who passionately loves life, living each day to the fullest.

*Shirleyan Johnson*

In March 2002, I attended a Women's Retreat in Grand Prairie, Alberta with friends. The speaker was Shirleyan Johnson. The topic of her workshop was "Do I have to be ME?" By the end of the conference, I had found a kindred spirit, someone with whom I could identify in many ways. Although her physical disability is far different from mine, much of what she said about her early attitude in life rang true. Shirleyan was involved in every activity possible as a child and a teenager. She did not allow anything to stop her from achieving her goals, refusing to submit to the crippling effect her lack of fingers and toes could have had on her life. When she was in her late teens, her pastor sat her down and told her that until she accepted herself for whom she was, both inside and out, she would never be happy or content. Running around and giving 200% to look normal and feel accepted by her family, friends and community was not the answer. Shirleyan went on to tell the audience that she did not change over night and was very angry and hurt when her parents agreed with the pastor. She eventually reached this conclusion and went on to be, although still a very active individual, a person who was more content with life and her role in it. My friends all smiled and looked at me.

Shirleyan without the support and encouragement of family and friends firmly believes that life would be very different today. Shirleyan envisions a life where she would be unable to meet with the challenges of being a full participant in today's world while dealing with a disability if it had not been for the love and support of her family. This theme also runs through this project. Family and friends are my passion. I cannot imagine my life without them.

I have many interests and pastimes, but one that I have enjoyed the most over the years has been swimming. Unfortunately, the pool is no longer accessible for me in the town where I live. There is talk of building a new pool soon, and then I can resume swimming. In the meantime, I will take a different swim, a swimming marathon that will take place in my mind as I examine my life and my practices as a teacher with the goal of becoming a better person and a better teacher in the process.

*Yes, I swim but I do it with arms only. On a quick glance, I do not look any different from other swimmers but there is no movement of water to indicate that my legs are working with my arms to cut through the water. One can swim without ever paying attention to strokes, breathing, other swimmers, or water temperature. I am set to begin the marathon, one in which I will explore water that is familiar but unfamiliar. I must undertake on this quest of self-examination.*

*A marathon is a test of endurance and strength. When swimming a marathon one must be in good physical and mental condition in order to meet the goal of completing the distance. I believe that presently I am at my peak condition. I now realize that I have swum great distances without analysing what I have done or why I have done it. For the first time in my life, I am ready to examine my strokes, the water that I swim in, the coaches that have brought me to where I am today and the role of the lifeguards who continually watch over my swim.*

*I hope to learn from this marathon, how to improve my strokes and breathing while being more aware of my surroundings. What makes me the swimmer that I am and how do I improve? I have always wanted to be a better swimmer. Now is the time to learn how to be one.*

## Chapter 2: Historical View of the Disabled

### *Historical Perspective of Disabled*

People with disabilities are depicted in religion, the media, and history. Found within these are constant reminders of a disabled person's "proper" role as either an object of pity or a source of inspiration. Internalised by both disabled and non-disabled people, these images result in social stereotypes, more often than not creating artificial limitations and contributing to the discrimination and minority status hated by most disabled people. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the President of the United States, attempted to conceal the fact that he was disabled. Because of society's views toward the disabled in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a *cripple* was not an appropriate choice for president. In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, people with disabilities "were viewed as flawed in moral character as well as body" (Gallagher, 1994, p. 30). In his private life and away from public view, FDR used a wheelchair for mobility. When in public there were many strategies in place to conceal his disability from the America people. The press went so far as not to report when FDR fell in public (Gallagher, 1994). His image had to be that of a perfectly, healthy male.

Throughout history, many societies have viewed the disabled as unworthy of life. The Spartans abandoned their fellow humans who had disabilities to die, while Ancient Greeks perceived persons with disabilities as preventing the formation of a perfect world. The Romans assisted disabled adults, but left disabled children to die. With the emergence of Judeo-Christian beliefs, a person with a disability represented God's displeasure or a sign of parent's sin. There was also the ever-present belief throughout history that the disabled person was possessed. The Enlightenment began a change in society's perception; the new definition of disability became "a biological inadequacy." The focus

now centred on the correction of the particular inadequacy by institutionalising individuals, until they performed in an acceptable manner (Makelprang & Salsgiver, 1996).

*Eugenics.* The Eugenics movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is a glaring example of how some people felt about not only the disabled, but other minority groups. Eugenics, loosely defined, was the attempt to improve upon the biological heritage of humanity through selective breeding that included encouraging some, while discouraging other, groups to reproduce. Eugenics promoted the notion that people with disabilities had nothing to offer society. Society feared that propagation by the disabled would produce more disabled people. Therefore, laws were passed to prevent the marriage of or reproduction between people with disabilities. This led to increased institutionalisation in conditions that were subhuman.

Within the Eugenics movement resides the Nazi program to exterminate “non-Aryans” and others not seen as desirable in society. During the Nuremberg trials, the judges failed to consider the killing of handicapped people as severe as the extermination of Jews. There were no reparations made to the families of those physical disabled that died in the camps, no one was ever punished for their murders (British Council of Disabled People, 2000).

*Alfred Adler.* Alfred Adler was one of the first psychologists to recognize the affect of organ inferiorities on the perception of self (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Adler believed people who are known as a whole person are influenced by the relationship held with society. These healthy people will strive for social success and acceptance. He believed that a person’s self-concept (who one is and what one is worth), self-ideal (goal)

and world image (relationship with the environment) are the basis of the lifestyle that he or she create for him or herself. Adler's theory states people need work, friendship, and love for positive psychological growth.

This striving for superiority in self-concept may be frustrated by feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, or incompleteness arising from physical defects, low social status. pampering or neglect during childhood, or other causes encountered in the natural course of life. Individuals can compensate for their feelings of inferiority by developing their skills and abilities, or, less healthily, they may develop an inferiority complex, which comes to dominate their behaviour. Since everyone has problems, shortcomings, and inferiorities of one sort or another, Adler maintained that personalities emerge through the ways one compensates for, or overcomes those problems. Each person develops his or her personality and strives for perfection in his or her own particular way, in what Adler termed a style of life, or lifestyle. An individual's lifestyle forms in early childhood, partly determined by what particular inferiority affected a person most deeply during the formative years.

According to Adler, those with organ inferiority are no exception to the rule; they, too, are striving for perfection. The children with organ inferiorities, often overburdened by their infirmities, find it difficult to feel that the meaning of life is contribution to society (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Adler believes that unless they find someone who can draw their attention away from themselves these children are likely to occupy themselves with their own sensations and not with their environment. As they grow older, they may feel inferior and discouraged because of comparing themselves to others without organ inferiorities. Children with organic weaknesses can turn this *minus* situation into a

*plus* depending up on their creative ability to reorganize their skills accordingly and by personal interpretation of what constitutes success. Many children have unusual faculties for usefulness and make great contributions to society. Adler believes that, because of their struggle, the disabled are strengthened and go further ahead.

Adler could have used me as a textbook example of a person with organ inferiority that went ahead in life, strengthened by my struggles. I drew my attention away from self and focussed on activities and the people I encountered. Growing up, I reasoned that I needed to give 200% in order to be accepted, fearing rejection and isolation by society and my peer group if I could not keep up with them. I believed well into my adulthood that the number of friends, social activities, and groups I was involved in were the measurement of my acceptance. I subscribed to the theory that no one would notice the manner in which my legs worked if the mind, mouth, and arms were active and fully engaged. Camouflage of my physical shortcomings was possible by overcompensating. I was involved in activities almost every day of the week. No one was going to accuse me of being a poor crippled girl who stayed home and twiddled her thumbs.

*Disabled Portrayed in the Arts.* Portrayals in literature and popular culture, too, shape our images of disability. A non-disabled person depicts disabled characters such as Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, as in need of care. Authors, in history, also exaggerated a disability as an emblem of a character's sinister, evil or morally flawed nature. Herman Melville's, Captain Ahab, who lost a leg to Moby Dick and his mind in his pursuit of revenge, is one example. Disabilities that make characters - such as Captain Hook, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and Lenny, the mentally retarded character in

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* - more ominous are given to reflect society's deepest fears and prejudices about people with disabilities.

### *Historical Perspective of Education and the Disabled*

The word “inclusion” in the school context has historically referred to the placement into the regular classroom of students with challenges who had been isolated from the general school population. In the nineteenth century, special education, as we now know it began with Itard’s study of Victor, the Wild Boy of Avalon. Education reflects what is important to society at the time (Winzer, 1999). Considering the fact universal education for all children became popular during the early 1900s, one must regard with awe the fact that education for children with disabilities first became available for the deaf, blind, and mentally retarded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Why was the education of this particular group in society deemed to be important? Perhaps the comparative ease with which the deaf and blind can be educated was a factor.

From 1880-1910, segregated classes materialized in urban areas to keep order in school, and protect the education of other children and the time of teachers (Winzer, 1999). The 1940s witnessed a dramatic rise in the frequency of special education classes because medical advances allowed people with disabilities, including those with illnesses such as polio and rubella, a longer life.

During the 1960s when civil rights came to the forefront of American culture, the concept of normalization of children with disabilities first gained recognition in the work of Bank-Mikkleson (Winzer, 1999). He argued that persons with disabilities had a civil right to live, attend school, and work in the same environment as others. Advocates of normalization believed that society should view persons with disabilities as individuals

who deserve fair and humane treatment, with the opportunity to live in a normal family and participate in community life.

In the 1970s, regular teachers and administrators did not always act responsibly in providing instruction for students with special needs. Studies in the 1970s indicated that children with exceptionalities received an inferior education delivered by inferior teachers in inferior facilities. It was not until the close of the decade and into the 1980s that the true movement towards integration began to take place. With the passing decades, integration has become further entrenched in North American beliefs as institutions strive to include all people regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and physical or mental capabilities. However, it was not until 1989, that children with special needs, for the most part, left the segregated environment in British Columbia.

#### *History of Educational Inclusion in British Columbia*

There is a long history of special education in the province of British Columbia. This history was documented by the Special Education Review and released in 2001 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001). Special education in British Columbia began in 1890 with the first recorded legislative appropriation to provide for the education of deaf children to attend the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Putnam-Weir Survey of the School System in 1925 recommended the modification of curriculum for the mentally handicapped, and the establishment of opportunity classes and special schools and facilities. In 1955, funding to maintain students in regular classes came into existence through legislation. This system, with some adjustments, remained in place until 1982.

During the 1970s and 80s, the Special Education Division of the Ministry of Education came into existence (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001). This department drafted the first guide for school districts to assist in the development of programs and resulting funding criteria. Revisions and refinements to the Ministry of Education *Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines* took place, with more emphasis on the need for Individual Education Plans and program evaluation. The Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982, as it related to the provision of special education services in Canada, became a factor in the education of students with special needs (Winzer, 1999).

Despite statements endorsing education in the least restrictive environment for all students, no changes occurred to the B.C. *School Act* until the tabling of the *Sullivan Royal Commission Report* in 1988. The commission made recommendations concerning the rights of special needs learners and their parents and the need for extended social and educational services to assist these learners in meeting the educational challenges that they faced. The commission also called for clarification of the various ministry mandates in providing services to students identified by Inter-Ministerial Committees (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001).

In response to the findings of the Sullivan Commission, revision of the *School Act* took place in 1989. The new legislation stated that all school - age children resident in the district were entitled to an educational program designed to improve the interests and abilities of the learner. In the mid 1990s, revision of special education guidelines took place, and ministerial orders passed in which the definition of students with special needs, Individual Education Plans, and the placement of students with special needs were

embodied. The public and educators, the *Report of the Special Education Advisory Committee to the Minister*, the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as well as the *Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education* and a *Framework for Action*, form the basis of the present *Special Education Services* policy issued in 1995 (Ministry Education, 2001). The need to work towards schools where everyone is included, differences are celebrated, support for learning is sustained, and there is an appropriate response to the needs of the individual came from the 1994 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Salamanca Spain (UNESCO, 1994).

The concept of the least restrictive environment is the basis for inclusion in the regular school system and is fundamental to the ministerial order endorsed by the Provincial Government of British Columbia. In Canada, each territory or province mandates its own educational guidelines (Hill, 1988). The British Columbia government's change in public education policy, introduced in September 1994, began with the work of the Special Education Advisory Committee in 1993. The goal was to remove any barriers to providing appropriate education to all students. The exception to this was the education of students who create severe disruptions in the learning environments of other students (Ministry of Education, 1998).

The B.C. government maintained inclusion by funding a variety of support services throughout the 1990s and in the first two years of the next decade. With changes to the funding and support of Special Education in Bill 28, the future face of inclusion in School District #59 remains uncertain. Gone in British Columbia are the targeting of funds to directly support students with special needs, and the limit of students with special needs

that can be placed in a classroom (BCTF, 2000). Employees of SD#59 learned at a meeting with the Superintendent of SD#59 in April 2002, that it was the intention of the board to continue with the current practice of inclusion of students with special needs in the regular classroom for the upcoming school year and near future.

History paints a picture filled with rejection of people with special needs. It tells a story of isolation, pain, and suffering throughout the ages. It is only in very recent history where one finds evidence of acceptance. Situations occur where a variation from the norm begins to exist, the reason for which often remains unknown. It is from these situations that change emerges. Change does not occur overnight or because of the efforts of one person. It takes hard work on the part of many people for change to take hold and flourish. Each small victory in the fight for inclusion of people with special needs has helped to make the dream of many people a growing reality. My story is one small piece of the inclusion movement.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

The research method one chooses should be in harmony with the interest that makes one an educator. Phenomenological research attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences. It is retrospective, reflecting on actions that have already occurred. It provides direct assistance in obtaining deeper understanding of everyday life (van Manen, 1997). In using a phenomenological approach, one examines what it is like to be human, to be thoughtful of our lifeworld.

#### *Max van Manen*

Max van Manen (1997), when discussing human science of which phenomenological research is a part, describes a human being as a person who signifies-gives and derives meaning to and from the “things” of the world, (p. 13). As humans, we experience life through 'things'. Existence does not occur in a vacuum unaffected by surroundings; instead, response arises from interaction with people and lived events. Response can be immediate and short term in nature, or it can find its way into the subconscious and become a part of one's being.

Max van Manen (1997) gives importance to autobiography as it focuses on uniqueness of personal experience and the priority of self. Our experiences throughout life develop self and our frames of reference from which we draw as educators and people (van Manen, 2002). Teachers teach from their heart and their head, adapting to the children and their situations. Pedagogy, according to van Manen (1997), requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience. A phenomenological approach does not look at how to teach but leads a pedagogue to achieve a better understanding of the

learning experience of a child. It is only through examination of the situations and relations of living with children that the pedagogic significance is seen.

*Ted Aoki*

Aoki (1989) supports the notion of human/world relationships being significant to curriculum inquiry. Curriculum is broader than the narrow context of school. It is more than teachers, students, and course content. In looking at relationships that exist between humans and their world, examination occurs of what it is to be human, to become more human, and to act humanly in educational situations (Aoki, 1989). All people come into a situation with filters created by past and present experiences. Science, for instance, may generate an enthusiastic response from teacher but the other may be less than enthusiastic about the subject. The result is that the interaction between the two individual teachers affects the delivery and reception of the course content. Aoki (1989) describes three orientations to curriculum inquiry, one of which is the critical inquiry orientation.

The root of critical inquiry is reflection, the relating of a person to self and his or her social world. Aoki (1989) puts forth the notion that improvement of the human condition through uncovering explicit and hidden assumptions is the basis of critical reflection. It is through normative knowledge, knowledge of thought and action, that improvement of humanness and the human /social condition occurs.

Critical reflection leads to an understanding of what is beyond; it is oriented towards making the unconscious conscious. Such activity allows liberation from the unconsciously held assumptions and intentions that lie hidden in values, norms, images of humans, assumed knowledge, and perspectives. Critical reflection uncovers the true interests in personal or social condition. Implications come to light for actions by a new level of

consciousness and critical knowing. Dealing with these issues is critical for growth to occur. Narrative inquiry is a method by which this reflection occurs. It is important to examine what has occurred within one's teaching. By using written expression, it allows the writer to release feelings, and examine situations with greater clarity.

*Marne Isakson*

Marne Isakson (1996) reflects in her article written in collaboration with David Williams about the value of reflections in her teaching practice:

I could not recall some of the more memorable stories. I did not let that bother me because there were many more stories from any class period on any day. I came to understand that the particular stories and events were not as important as the act of reflecting itself. Reflection helped me teach all my students more effectively.

whether they were part of the event I reflected on or not. (p. 13-14)

Isakson believes that writing provokes thinking one otherwise would avoid and, at the same time, prods one into uncomfortable areas that would otherwise be dismissed (p. 15). In using written reflections, Isakson was able to make connections to her teaching that improved her practice, and also helped to her to experience emotional release from incidents that were disturbing to her. The writing process and reflection on the contents was a useful for the author to examine her practice as a teacher. This knowledge gives me confidence that narrative inquiry is a valid tool for me to use in this project, as I want to examine my practices and my life through reflection of written accounts of my work coupled with research on my topic.

### *Narrative Inquiry*

Connelly and Clandinin (2000) offer further support for the use of narrative as a viable research method. They bring forward the notion that matters of lasting importance are in the whole and that the whole lies in an examination of the situation in the past, present, and future. They say that teachers use their own “personal practical knowledge” in a classroom that comes from a person’s experience that resides in the person’s present mind and body, and in the person’s plans and actions (p. 25). Knowledge is the power we have to alter the future. Our knowledge changes as we progress through life, gaining new experiences upon which we can redefine and examine our past and alter potential future actions. As we live in the present, experiencing life each day, our perspective of the past changes, causing us to see past events in a new light. From this new perspective, we can then plan a future path.

Narrative inquiry broadens the examination of one’s lifeworld and its manifestation in practice. Reflective thinking relates to personal reactions and associations. It is concerned with feelings, moods, memories, and associations. Intuition, emotion, imagination, and memories all contain information that can be of help in making decisions regarding programming. Narrative inquiry shows the power of story to shape personal and collective history (van Manen, 1997). By coming to terms with our assumptions, we are better able to expose their shallow and concealing characteristics and put them in their rightful place. If we do not do this, then we cannot truly learn from our past and its memories, improving on life, and the way in which we live and experience it.

The process of collecting a personal history is a difficult but rewarding one. There are many aspects of one’s life to consider when constructing a narrative account

(Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). My aim in implementing the method behind narrative inquiry, critical inquiry, and phenomenological awareness is to become more empowered. to be a more knowledgeable and aware teacher, as well, as a more complete and total person. I have never given myself permission to examine my life; the impact that my physical disability and the resulting life experiences have on how I teach my students, interact with colleagues, parents and friends. It is my intention to examine myself, and how experiences have influenced my reactions to the world around me.

The stories that make up life help shape that unique, personal history. According to Max van Manen (1997), it is essential to dislodge and confront unexamined assumptions in order to examine life experiences. I trust that the process and reflections of the project will make me a more reflective teacher, better able to examine decisions that I have made and will make my life and the lives of my students. I want to learn from both my past and present teaching practices and, in doing so, change my future practices.

The difficulty in using this method is that language is not capable of allowing us to express our *lifeworld*, enabling everyone exact understanding of what we are feeling or saying. Each one of us has our own experiences and words to describe something. This makes it difficult for us to have full understanding of each other, despite cultural and life similarities. I fear my words might misrepresent my true feelings and the events of my life. Careful consideration of the words used is of paramount importance.

### *Purpose of Project*

This study will attempt to capture my life as a student, as a teacher and, most importantly, as a person. The educational practices discussed will arise from my work as a special education educator during my career in British Columbia.

My research will come from research literature as well as my own personal history. A melding of the two is essential, if, at the end of this marathon, I want to move forward in my practices as an educator. In this project, I will examine and reflect on the important role of parents, friends, school, and society in my life's journey, using events from both my educational and personal life. The role of parents in the life of a child with special needs is a significant focus of this project. Sommerstein and Wessels (1997) say that the actions of parents assist in dispelling the negativity surrounding their child's disability and the perceptions which society holds. In turn, the negative attitude is replaced with an attitude of not "fixing" his or her child but redefining what a "winner" is. Naylor (1986) promotes the notion that parents have a major influence on their child's attitude toward work and life, education and career decisions. In addition, in order for any program to be successful, parents need to be willing partners in their child's education (Tilton, 1996). I hope to discover if my personal biases and educational practices have interfered or assisted in the work I do with my colleagues and the students in their classrooms. My goal is to share with my colleagues, the knowledge that I have uncovered through my practice and research as well as the process of self-reflection.

In this project, I will also examine how society views the disabled. I am interested in how various events reflect the values, ideals, and customs of a society. Accordingly, I will devote time to examining the historical evolution of acceptance of the disabled by society from the time of the Greeks to the present. I believe this information, makes it possible to deal with the present and the future of inclusion of disabled people in schools and society.

My reflections upon the process will attempt to examine how the project has affected, and will continue to affect my practices and philosophies, both in my professional and personal life.

## Chapter 4 - My Parents

The American Heritage Dictionary (2000) defines a lifeguard as an expert swimmer trained and employed to watch over other swimmers, as at a beach or swimming pool.

When I think of swimming, and the role that my parents play, they were my lifeguards. As lifeguards, they had a tremendous responsibility in providing a safe environment, keeping a careful watch over everyone in the pool. Lifeguards must not only watch and be cognizant of the loud play, the swimmer who is swimming laps, and those who are playing or visiting in the pool and on the deck, but they must also watch for the person who gets into trouble and does not yell for help. As well, lifeguards on duty are responsible for keeping guard over the swimming instructors, coaches and general pool safety. They must watch to ensure that things are running smoothly, everyone is safe. As we were growing up my parents watched over my brothers and I as any diligent lifeguard would watch the swimmers in the area they were supervising. The pool was our family and the community in which we lived. Our parents allowed us the freedom to swim but would warn us if we were getting into dangerous water and, when needed, throw us a life preserver. There were clear boundaries around where we could, and could not swim. There were rules to follow. Scrutinized carefully were friends and activities. My parents trained only by life experience and the wisdom of the lessons, learned along the way.

We see your lovely young daughter, with her physical disabilities and her positive attitudes, and we congratulate you. Obviously, [sic] you have given her love and acceptance. You have supported her and helped her to feel secure. You have refused to over protect her, and you have treated her “just like your other children”-

disciplined her and given her respect and responsibilities. That has helped her tremendously to value and respect herself. (Mariposa Ministry, 1995, ¶. 1)

The above quote reflects the parenting I received, although it took many years to fully appreciate the depth of contribution in my life. Growing up, like many children, I failed to realize the impact of my birth on my parents. No one ever talked about the sacrifices made, tears shed, or changes made to the family lifestyle. Never discussed were weddings, proms, grandchildren from an only daughter, the never-to-be-had dance recitals or skating lessons. Under no circumstances has guilt or obligation been a part of my relationship with my parents. Never have I felt life would have been simpler or more fulfilling for them and my brothers if I had not been born. My parents taught me to be an independent and self-sufficient individual. They helped emphasize my abilities, not my disabilities. There was no special treatment or pity expressed for this daughter. At home, they expected that I complete my share of the chores and be an active family member. At school, the expectation was to perform my best in academics and any activities I joined.

Where would I be today without them? How did I become such a strong, independent, and successful professional? I came with no instruction booklet. How were they able to raise successfully three children, one with spina bifida? The answer that they found, like many other parents, is simple; love, respect, and acceptance, three key elements that I, and many others, believe everyone must experience from significant others in order to be successful. Lollar (1994) supports the theory that parents' adjustment and attitudes towards a child's disability affect the attitudes of a child. Parents can assist their child, especially one with a disability, in achieving a sense of pride and positive self-esteem. My parents provided the positive atmosphere I needed in order to succeed.

They accepted my physical being while continually encouraging me to strive to be the best person I could be emotionally, physically, socially, and academically. It was their love, acceptance and, I believe most importantly, respect of me and for my potential that allowed me to embark on the journey that my life has become. My parents maintain that my tenacity, stubbornness, and resilience elevated me to where I am today. They have difficulty accepting the important role that they have played in my success. I maintain that without them, the road would have been more difficult, if possible at all.

### *My Siblings*

My parents never tried to stop my brothers from developing interests in sports and being physically active. Had my parents prevented them from pursuing their passion for sports, I believe that there would have been resentment. A valuable lesson that I learned from my family is that we all have certain things that we cannot participate in; I am not unique. Everyone has different interests and abilities: we need to accept and celebrate our differences. The contribution of each family member is significant and helps to create who we are as a unit and as individuals.

The fact that my brothers and I were treated the same by our parents has had a tremendous impact on my attitude in life. My parents saw us as equal. Therefore, I felt that I should be treated the same everywhere. I did not want or demand special treatment because of my disability. Reality was that I walked with crutches, but it was not something upon which we dwelt. If my brothers asked a question about my disability, they received a straightforward answer. There were no special counselling sessions, family conferences, and sibling - or parent - support groups in my childhood. In truth, I would have to say that my brothers actually know little about my condition. It was not important

to my family. If I needed help, my family provided it without fuss or bother. The reason behind why I needed the help was not important. My family helped themselves; they set the priorities and outlook established around my condition and the role it would play in our lives. Family members, and not an outside agency, advocated for my bid for independence and an equal place in society. Winzer (1999) would place my family within the social-support theory.

My parents have been sensitive in the way that they talk to my brothers about me, never placing a burden on my brothers as we were growing up to do things for me. They were never told to treat me specially or differently, merely that we all need to be considerate of each other and our needs. My parents, upon their death, do not expect my brothers to “take care” of me. I am extremely fortunate that I am financially able to meet my needs, and that I do not have to rely on family and government support. What I can depend on from my brothers is their love and respect. I know that if I needed their help, it would be available without question or hesitation, just as mine would be for them. One brother told me, years later, he got into a fight at school because some of the kids had made fun of me. I never knew that and I doubt that my parents knew about the fight until now. He said that he would have done it for any member of our family; it was just the right thing to do, to defend your family. He did not like someone on the outside putting down a member of his family.

Winzer (1999) discusses the various roles and reactions that siblings of a child with a disability may encounter. She cites various authors who have examined the issue only to discover that there is no one way in which siblings will react to a sibling with a disability. Because my parents expected me to pull my weight in the family and did not put any

demands on my brothers to look after me, I believe that my brothers do not feel anger, resentment, or jealousy towards me. Winzer also discusses reactions of siblings who are embarrassed about having a disabled sibling, or disappointed. I have never felt these sentiments from my brothers. In fact, they have always introduced me to their friends, never showing embarrassment or discomfort. I have gone with my youngest brother and some of his friends on a week trip. My sister-in-law includes me in “girls night out” with her friends when I am visiting. No one hides me or makes a big deal about my disability. My family and I do not make my disability into an issue.

#### *Elementary School and My Parents*

When I was old enough to attend school, my parents made life-altering decisions. Until that point, we had lived with my maternal grandparents. The location of the closest school meant driving me to school every day. My parents, who wanted to buy their own home, went hunting for a house within walking distance to a school. The location of the house with a large yard was across the street from an elementary school. My mother, who had wanted a fireplace, did not notice the absence of this item until months later, her own needs coming second to those of her children. When my parents contacted the school, there was no hesitation on the school’s part; they welcomed me warmly. I am not sure why the principal allowed me to register so easily. Perhaps it was the confidence in my abilities that my parents exuded, the I will not take no for an answer look that they can give when they could be challenged, or, maybe, the principal was ahead of his time. Whatever the reason, I was to be a member of the neighbourhood-school community.

My parents attended parent-teacher interviews, but there were no special meetings to plan my educational future, or to discuss my physical needs. This was before the days

of Individual Education Plans. At first glance, it may appear that my parents did not play an important role, or that they did not advocate for me, but this is not the case. They taught me to stand-up for myself in all situations. Primarily, they taught me to look at myself as a person, not as a person with a disability. Yes, they acknowledged my physical limitations, but they reinforced that my physical appearance and abilities were not the features that defined me. What counted was inside of me. I believe they intrinsically knew that if they demonstrated confidence in my abilities and did not ask for special consideration, staff members at the school would take their cue and deal with me in the same manner as they would any child. My parents took the challenges I faced in stride, which in turn helped not only the school, but it helped me, too, to develop the outlook I have in life. The positive relationship among my parents, the school, and me continued throughout my elementary - school education.

In my quest to be normal, I hated to have my mother drive me when there was, in my parents' opinion, too much snow for me to walk to school. I was embarrassed, not by my mother's presence, but because I perceived others would see me as incapable of being independent. When the severity of the weather dictated, my mother would leave my youngest brother with a neighbour while she drove me around the corner to school. My mother received no compensation for the gas or time it took, but it did not matter to her. What mattered was that I got to school on time and safely during the winter months.

During one particular winter, I made a rather large fuss about walking to and from school with my friends. Whether it was to foster my independence or to stop an argument, my dad took a shovel that morning before leaving for work and cleared the sidewalk through the schoolyard so that I could walk to school with my friends. Having heard this

story as an adult, it served as a reminder to me how many sacrifices my parents made without ever asking for thanks, or bringing attention to their acts. It was important to them that I felt that I belonged, that I had a positive self-image and that I did not give into, but that I rose above, my physical limitations. In walking to school, I felt normal.

While attending an event at the neighbourhood high school with my Grade 8 class, I experienced a fall. I remember sitting down in the auditorium, my head throbbing, when one of the other kids in the class beside me yelled out that I was bleeding. At first, I did not want to leave. I did not want people staring at me, but the bleeding would not stop. I remember being angry with everyone staring when I did leave. I went to the hospital and was stitched up and sent home. That same day, the high school contacted my elementary principal to inform him that, in their opinion, it would be better for me to attend another school better equipped to meet my needs. The principal phoned my parents to tell them of this development. The next day I recall sitting in the office listening to a telephone conversation between my principal and another principal at a nearby high school. This school would be more than pleased to have me attend. They were impressed with my marks and had other students with disabilities in attendance. Instead of running off to my defence, my parents allowed me to handle the situation with the principal's assistance.

Their actions showed confidence in me to advocate for my education, as well as, confidence in the school system to provide that education. Had the principal been unsuccessful in securing a placement for me in a high school, I know that my parents would have advocated on my behalf. Am I disappointed that they did not attempt to force the neighbourhood high school into enrolling me? No, I am not because they always did what they thought was best for me. Perhaps their actions would have been different and

they would have fought to have me attend the catchment school, but I welcomed the opportunity to make new friends and attend a school with a swimming pool.

### *Parents and Independence*

Linda Rowley, a parent of a child with special needs, writes of the difficulty for parents to envision children as independent young adults living on their own, making important decisions and directing their own lives. She states that the independent living skills children need have their foundations laid in childhood. She also points out the importance of fostering self-esteem and competency through many opportunities to play an active part in their own cares (Rowley, 1999).

Lollar (1994) expresses the notion that it is often difficult for parents to encourage children with disabilities to be independent. Furthermore, Lollar says that there is a tendency for parents to protect daughters more than sons, discouraging community living, and self-sufficiency. Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Shonkoff and Krauss (2001) argue that the mother-child relationship plays a central role in the development of young children with disabilities. Although I agree that my mother played a critical role in my development, both my parents were central to my success and moulded me into whom I am today. My parents experienced no difficulty envisioning me as an independent person. They believed in my independence from the day that I was born; every skill taught to me assisted me in achieving independence.

My mother taught me skills necessary to maintain a household. I learned to cook, bake, write a check, balance a budget, vacuum, dust, change a bed, and do laundry. I became an expert at holding a crutch in one hand while running the vacuum with the other. Instilled in me was pride in maintaining a clean home where family and friends

were always welcome. My disability was not an excuse for not keeping a clean room or house. My mother's reaction when she discovered I had hired a cleaning lady to clean my house every two weeks was that it was unnecessary since I was perfectly capable of doing housework myself. When my mother later discovered that one of my cousins had hired a cleaning lady as well, she relented.

My father tried in other ways to help me in my bid to be "normal." He built boxes on tricycle pedals so I could try to ride a bike. He also made an extra step to get into the house and van with greater ease and independence, and installed railings on both sides of the staircases at home with the same purpose in mind. My father educated me in the finer interests in life: hockey, baseball, curling, and motorcar racing. My education at the feet of my father also included: car maintenance, how to tell when a storm was coming, how to be a good judge of character, and information about farming. He and my mother both instilled in me a strong work ethic.

Both of my parents aroused in me a passion for travel. I can remember driving throughout Southern Ontario on many weekends to see new things, and visit friends spread across the region. As a family, we camped our way to many destinations throughout North America. They encouraged all of their children to travel the world, experiencing what life has to offer.

My parents gave freely of their time to chauffeur me to various activities. From the age of three, I took swimming lessons at a pool downtown, miles from our home, meaning that the evening was devoted to my swimming lessons. My lessons became a family affair. My parents and my grandmother would come to watch. The instructors allowed my oldest brother to take lessons as well, even though the classes were for disabled children

and he was able-bodied. When I became involved in music, my parent took turns with other parents driving us to rehearsals and lessons a minimum of three times a week. At the same time, they played chauffeur to my brothers' practices and games. We went as a family to watch games and concerts.

### *Pain and Parenthood*

My parents are proud of my accomplishments, but heartache has also been present. It is not necessarily the things that I have said or done, but the attitudes of others and the trials that I have undergone that has been the source of much of their pain.

No parent wants his or her child to experience pain, physical or emotional. I know that my parents would have gladly undergone any of my surgeries for me. At times when I have expressed discouragement, my parents have been there to support me and lift my spirits. I know it hurts them that I am unable to do the things that others take for granted. I can recall conversations with my parents and see tears in their eyes as they told me they would gladly trade places with me if they could. Instead of dwelling on the negative and the difficult situations that occasionally arose, they choose to accentuate the positive in life. The way they have dealt with their pain has been an example to me, one that I have adopted. There are times, however, when the pain does surface.

My father has related a few stories to me over the years of the pain my mother has felt resulting from my condition. The stories, when they did surface, were usually because of a fight between my mother and me. I, like most teenagers, felt that my mother did not understand me or care about me. One time I said a horrible thing to my dad about my mother not caring about how I felt about having a disability. My father would let me know just how much my mother cared. His purpose was not to hurt me or to make me feel

guilty, but to show me how much my mother did care. My father told me how my mother walked the floors crying with me in her arms when I could not sleep as a baby, blaming herself for what had happened. I also learned as a teenager how, when I was a child she would stand by the dining room window, watching me run to catch-up with the kids on the street as we went off to school or to play. It hurt her to watch as I struggled to keep up with the other children. In her heart, she wanted the kids to slow down and walk with me, but how many kids do you know who slow down and wait for others on a regular basis? Did she call the other parents and insist their children walk with me. No, she did not; although, I am sure she was tempted. Instead, for the most part, she, along with my father, allowed me to find my own way and fight my own battles. Of course, she suggested that I slow down and walk properly, telling me that the others were not worth it if they could not wait. My mother also tells stories of how it upset my father to see the kids run ahead or to watch others do things knowing that I would never be able to enjoy those activities.

I am often amazed at how they have been able to keep their hurt in check and promote the positive attitude that they are famous for amongst family and friends. As people of action, they do not wallow in self-pity or what could have been. My parents raised me as “just another child.” Schloss, Alper, and Jayne (1993) use the term *self-determination* to encapsulate the important cognitive and emotional aspect of independence. They suggest the best choices made are based on what a person believes is best for themselves, not based on consideration of parents’ standards or judgements. Without emotional independence, physical independence is hollow. My parents have encouraged me to make my own decisions in life. They are willing to give advice if asked for (sometimes even when I have not asked for input) but they are also respectful of my

decisions as an adult. Karen Snyder Travis (2001), the mother of a child with spina bifida writes, “Sometimes you have to let your children experience the work it takes to run the race, so that they can enjoy the reward of their labour” (p. 43). Once I started teaching students with exceptionalities, I began to not only sense what my parents had experienced but also more fully realize the role that their involvement and modelling have played in my success.

I need to be able to swim the marathon independently in order to enjoy my success. If my parents had never allowed me to swim then I would have been an observer on the pool deck of life and not a swimmer enjoying the sport of life. They were and continue to be excellent lifeguards. They made sure that I was safe, but allowed me the freedom to swim using the strokes that I knew, adapted to my abilities.

## Chapter 5: Peers and Relationships

Synchronized swimming is defined as, “a sport in which swimmers, singly or in groups, perform dance-like movements often in time with music” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000). I have always been fascinated with synchronized swimming, amazed at how the swimmers are able to navigate through the water moving in time to the music. I am especially fascinated with the team event.

Hours of rehearsal time are needed to make it look effortless. Each swimmer brings to the routine his or her individual style and personality but, when united, they work together to be their very best. Discussion takes place among team members and their coach when they are creating the routine and learning new skills. When there is more than one person, team members need to connect personally to create the relationship necessary to work together. The swimmers might not be the same type of people or feel the same about the routine, but when they are in a competition, or practicing the routine, they work to support each other. They complement each other, making each team member complete.

My friends are a part of my team, and my life. I am a member of more than one team, with each team bringing something unique and special to my life. I enjoy being with others, whether it is for work or for pleasure. While, I realize that I am an individual and sometimes I need to perform solo, it is with a team that I obtain the greatest joy and satisfaction.

### *Nature of Friendships*

Having written a variety of Multiple Intelligence tests over the past ten years, it is no longer a surprise to me that interpersonal intelligence consistently emerges as my strongest learning modality. I learn best from people and my contact with them. I thrive

on time spent with people, making connections and learning from others. When I feel out of balance with someone, it disturbs me until I can rectify the situation. The relationships shared with my family, friends and colleagues are a significant part of my life and who I am. People in my life hold for me the most significance, not accomplishments, or material possessions.

I want each friend to be just that, not a nurse, errand person, housekeeper, or handyman. I would like people to spend time with me because they enjoy my company and not out of a moral sense of duty, obligation, or pity. It is not the job of a friend to continuously assist me when I am incapable of completing a task independently. There are times when friends do and should help, but not on a daily basis. In a friend, I want a companion, someone with whom I can share time, adventures, experiences, feelings, and passions.

Relationships result from bonds that evolve through shared activities and interests. but when the bond severs the relationship often disappears. In my life, I have enjoyed many friendships; some have stood the test of time, while others have disappeared. Left behind are playmates, fellow musicians, and school friends as I have gone on to explore new territories. I have taken with me the lessons learned and the memories that are important and satisfying, that have helped to form me into the person I am today. As an adult, I have developed true friendships with people whom I trust and respect and with whom I have a common bond. These are not fake relationships created by a school program, or by someone's need to serve another.

The activities in which I have participated, and continue to do so, allow acceptance on a level playing field with able-bodied people. It is in these activities that I have

developed my friendships. My interests have lain mostly in the fine arts, cooking, travel, union work, swimming, games, and reading. In these areas, acceptance for my contributions exists. It does not matter whether I can walk or bike ten kilometres, dance to the latest music, ski down a mountain or carry a canoe and backpack through a forest. It is not important that I am included in all activities that people enjoy, but in the ones which are of personal interest to me.

### *Early Years*

At age five, when my family moved to the suburbs, my life changed. Previously, most of my socialization had been with adult neighbours and family members; I have no recollection of children my age in the old neighbourhood. In the new neighbourhood, children of all ages lived and played together, a group of them coming to check out the new arrivals before we had officially moved into our home. When we did move in, placed in the backyard to encourage our home as a gathering spot were a swing set and a sandbox that my father had built. Friends were welcome to come and play in the yard. What my parents had not counted on was their independent daughter combing the street for children to play with in their yards, driveways or in the park. I sought out new friends and experiences as a child, as I do today as an adult. Through interaction, I learned appropriate socialization skills and how to make and maintain friends.

Shortly after moving onto the street, I went exploring the backfield with some neighbourhood children. This was a new experience to me, an empty field full of tall grass, tree stumps, and animals. Included in the animal population were frogs. I was fascinated with the thought of going down to the pond where the frogs lived to watch them and the tadpoles swim. After watching the frogs for a while, we all went home to get

a container in which to collect polliwogs. Knowing my mother, I am sure she told me to watch out and to be careful. Off I went carrying my glass jar into the field with my fellow tadpole collectors. Instead of standing by the edge of the pond and collecting the tadpoles, the children waded into the water. Not to be out done, in I went crutches and all. As I bent down to put my jar into the water, I lost my balance and fell in. I was able to regain my balance and complete the task. However, when I went to get out of the water I found myself a prisoner of the pond, my crutches imbedded in the mud bottom. When we had tried unsuccessfully to release my crutches, one of the boys went to get help. Soon he arrived back with his father, a policeman, who quickly rescued my crutches, minus the rubber tips, and me. My mother was not thrilled to have her daughter arrive home, soaking wet, under the escort of a policeman. What stands out for me is the fact that I was included, from the beginning, in the activities of the other children on the street and that this incident did not keep them from inviting me to play with them again.

Gary Bunch, a professor at York University, is an advocate of inclusion for children with special needs in the community and the school. He maintains that it is shared experiences with the neighbourhood community, which result in total inclusion (Bunch, 2001). He firmly believes that younger children, if given the opportunity to experience inclusion in a natural setting, will be accepting of a child with special needs.

The friendships that I had as a child were full of adventure, activity, and fun. In the winter, we built snowmen and snow forts, and played street hockey. In the summer, on the agenda were baseball, hopscotch, swinging on swings, and sliding down slides. I went with my friends to summer playground programs and attended throughout the school year Friday night gymnastics at the school. I had friends at the various youth groups to which I

belonged. I attended many of the local birthday parties and, in return, I often had fifteen girls come over to help me celebrate my birthday. I have trouble identifying with stories I read where children with special needs had no one attend their birthday party or invite them to theirs. This is so foreign to what I experienced. I felt included in activities, but I also silently experienced the occasional bout of frustration and pain when my friends would go riding their bicycles, or roller skate down the street. These were two things that, despite many attempts, I could not accomplish.

### *Easter Seal Camp*

When I listen to people talk about their days at camp, they relate stories about the people and the shared adventures. They tell of letters written during the year and visits with camp friends. As a child, I went to Easter Seal Camp for two weeks. There I was involved in a variety of activities, including swimming, music, drama, arts and crafts, nature crafts, and a variety of sports. During the year, like me, the other campers that I associated with, were busy in their own lives and came together solely for the purpose of attending camp, not to make new friends. Had we lived in the same communities I doubt that any one of us would have chosen to be friends or develop a relationship with one another. I enjoyed the different activities and the adventure of going away, but did not feel comfortable with many of my fellow campers.

When I reflect back to my time as a camper at Easter Seal Camp, I realize that I felt there was a difference between the girls who were in a regular classroom setting similar to my situation and those who were educated in special schools or classes for the disabled. I gravitated towards the former group, feeling a shared life experience with them. After all, if they went to a regular school they must be normal too. I think we all felt that we were

not handicapped and did not need to develop lasting relationships with others whom society had lumped together under one label. To us, the handicapped were the other girls, the ones who did not fit into our world. They did not talk about the same things or have the same experience with the outside world.

### *High school years*

When I started high school, I made new friends with whom I participate in school activities such as band, drama, and student council. Friendships also formed at school with students in my accelerated class, a group of thirty students chosen to complete their five-year high school program in four years. Some friendships existed outside of school, but geographic dispersal, after-school jobs, homework, and commitments to family and neighbourhood friends made it difficult to get together on a regular basis. My parents were willing chauffeurs when I did get together with my school friends. However, during this stage of life, I was busy with my music and swimming, as well as family activities that, when added together, did not leave much spare time.

My mother wanted me to maintain friendships with people in our neighbourhood but I was reluctant to do this so mainly I felt abandoned by the group. If they had wanted to maintain contact, I thought they would phone. Perhaps they felt that I should have phoned them. It does not matter now. Another reason for my reluctance centred on the lack of common interests shared with them after elementary school. We now had different teachers, friends, and experiences. The only relationships that continued from my elementary school days and children in the neighbourhood were those connected by involvement in shared music endeavours. My mother was concerned and suggested that I join a local church youth group, but since we were no longer in attendance there, this did

not interest me. Instead, I went to a church youth group with some of my friends from the musical theatre group. It was a different denomination, but I had fun and enjoyed the contact with my friends outside of school. They accepted my presence and included me in many different activities.

*Feelings of Rejection.* Despite the acceptance felt at school and in my music, there were also times in which I experienced rejection and isolation as a teenager. I sometimes felt left out of the special things that teenagers did on weekends and in the evenings; like going to the mall, cruising around the streets to talk to friends and going out on dates. I went to friends' houses and movies, and was involved in family life and activities but I never felt included in the cool things members of the popular group appeared to do in their free time. In my own mind, from time to time, I would silently wonder if I would have been included in more activities had I been able-bodied. I remember one occasion in particular where a male student who was new to the school invited me to go off campus for pizza with some other students, many of whom were involved with sports. I was ready to go when some of the others quietly said something to him. He looked over at me, said something to them, and came over to where I was waiting. He said that they were in a hurry and perhaps I could come another time. There was never another invitation. Was my rejection by the group because I would slow them down or was it because I was not a jock?

Upon reflection as an adult, I realize the similarity of my feelings regarding isolation and insecurity to those experienced by most teenagers. All people experience rejection in some form during their life, in particular during the teenage years. My disability had little impact, I believe, on the true friendships from school that I

experienced. While, my physical appearance and abilities may have deterred some people from reaching out to me in friendship, there were people with whom I really liked to spend time.

By focussing my attention on the friends that I did have and the activities in which I was involved, I believe that I saved myself from a great deal of heartache and potential danger, be it physical, or emotional. I have watched too many children who, in their attempts for peer approval, have become involved in situations that have left serious scars. Some have dropped out of school in order to spend time with members of a group who pretended to like them; others have been manipulated into giving money, performing illegal acts, or being the unwitting source of entertainment. All teenagers go through the process of searching for and discovering themselves, feeling insecure at times. The lesson that I had to learn was the difference between exclusion and inclusion. It is a lesson that I still struggle with at times.

*Dating.* Dating is one topic that always elicits a reaction from people when they think back and discuss their high school days. I did not date in high school. Perhaps it was because of my disability, or perhaps it was because I was so busy in a variety of activities, or did well in school and scared off the boys. I did not know how to let boys know I was interested. Crushes, however, were definitely experienced.

I remember vividly one boy on whom I had a tremendous crush. I would live for the times that he would talk to me. I thought he was so cool and accepting of me until one day. He was talking about his new girlfriend and how much fun they had together. Suddenly, he looked me square in the face and told me that he would consider dating me if I were normal. Maybe he thought that he was letting me down easily, or maybe he

thought he was giving me a back-handed compliment. All I know is that I was devastated. Here was someone I considered a friend and a potential boyfriend telling me to my face that he could not overlook my physical disability. My respect and like for that person popped like a balloon as I stood there gazing at him. To this day, I still remember that feeling and, in all honesty, have difficulty in trusting completely any man who shows an interest. I even go as far as to do things unconsciously that might scare them off so that I will not get hurt again. When I shared the story from my high school years with a trusted friend, she was ready to find the gentleman involved and do serious physical harm to this person. She did have a wonderful perspective on the entire incident. She told me that he probably would not have dated her because he would not like her hair colour.

Found in discussion of dating is embarrassing yet true feelings I had at that stage in my life, regarding others with disabilities. During my high school years, a boy with physical disabilities was attracted to me. One day when we were riding the elevator together, he tried to hold my hand. I could not escape the elevator quickly enough. I carried within the internalised oppression that others might find out and tease me about liking “the crippled boy.”

This boy and I shared a class, in which the teacher sat us together near the door. On more than one occasion, he tried to hold my hand or put his arm around me during class. This was before the days of sexual harassment awareness, but expectations existed that students were to behave with certain decorum in class and the hallways. The teacher did nothing about the situation. He thought that it was cute that *we were interested in each other*. The attitude of the teacher in this situation is common. I was not prepared to be cute. I took matters into my own hands. I found a new place to sit. Soon afterwards, I

moved into the accelerated program, and my class schedule changed. The boy and I nodded to each other in the hallway until he quit school before graduation.

### *A Turning Point*

My family has been, and will continue to be, an incredible support to me, but, as with most of us, as we grow older, I have found my friends have taken on a greater role in my daily life, hopes, and dreams. In the late 1970s, a pivotal point in my life occurred when I made a new friend. The relationship we developed during that summer stands out as a major defining moment in my life.

Five years ago, I received word that my friend had suddenly died. Even now, I find it difficult to believe that this individual is no longer walking amongst us. The impact this person had on me, and thousands of others, is testimony to the power one individual has to alter the lives of others. I feel his presence daily as I work with my students, or in countless other activities in which I am involved.

I met this person while employed in a summer job. From the first day of orientation, this person had a way of making everyone feel at ease and included. He was the seasoned veteran on staff, and people gravitated towards him. He was quick with a joke, a smile, and a one-liner. Yet, he could also be very serious and offer sound advice and counselling on many topics. Returning staff members told us rookies to watch this man in action; he was an expert at what he did, energy in motion. When the kids came, the true strength and talents of this individual kicked into high gear. He was a born leader, a kid at heart, who could take any activity and make it fun. He would do anything to get a laugh from children, to get them involved and feeling good about themselves. Take for instance Backwards Day where, for one day each session, the schedule of the day reversed. In the

morning, as we gathered at the flagpole for taps, waiting for us was this adult standing with his entire cabin of ten boys dressed in nothing but diapers. They had really gone backward. The grins on those boys' faces told us that they were having a blast. They were participating in something that was fun and made them feel good about themselves.

I quickly began to expect the unexpected when it came to this human being and their antics that summer. The campers loved him and he loved them, treating them with both dignity and respect. He saw their inner soul and brought it to the surface. He helped them to accomplish things that some had only dreamed of: camping out in a tent on a beach, cooking their own hotdogs on an open fire, participating in sports, and going to dances. The campers were children with multiple handicaps, developmental delays, some living in a sterile hospital-like environment fifty weeks of the year. He opened my eyes and made me ashamed of the thoughts and actions that existed within my subconscious and conscious mind. These kids were like me; they wanted to do things like the other kids. I was no better than they were. I had a lot to learn from them and, in turn, they could learn from me if I let them. I could show them that it was possible to achieve their goals. I could show them that there was more than one way to do something; they just had to find it.

My relationship with my new friend did not end that summer; we were to remain best friends until his death. For twenty years, he was a mentor for both my professional and personal life, an example to follow, a confidant, someone to whom I could turn for comfort or for affirmation. He made me feel good about what I had accomplished. Despite his many achievements, he maintained a humble persona.

I have taken from his book and applied the lessons he taught me and others about the important things in life, such thing as the need to empower all children to be the best

that they can be, and to enjoy life to the fullest each day. He made the community his classroom, teaching his students not only the academics of which they were capable, but also the skills needed to be as independent as possible in life. What he taught them was self-respect and self-love, to have pride in their accomplishments. As a father, he instilled this as well in his children; the three girls that he and his wife adopted were all people with special needs. When he died, over 3000 people gathered to pay their respects and celebrate his life. I can never be what he was, but I attempt to use the lessons I have learned to teach my students what is important in life.

I knew it in my head, but it was from this individual I truly realized that the real person exists inside, and not in the shell of our physical bodies. People who cannot look beyond the physical body are the disabled ones, not those with the deformed body. It is our attitudes that make us disabled, not the physical being. There existed a disability in some of my attitudes. I was handicapped, crippled by own unwillingness to look beyond the outside package of people with physical disabilities.

My friend and I shared the same perspective of life and how it should be lived. Everyone should live, embrace, explore, and experience life to the fullest each day. Friends and family are the most treasured gifts we possess and we learn from each other. My friend taught me by words and example that it was our responsibility to teach and encourage others with limitations to adopt this life style and philosophy. I have allowed my family and friends since then to teach me lessons and point out truths about accepting myself, and being proud of my accomplishments.

*Saskatchewan Friends*

During my years in Saskatchewan I continued to find peace with myself. I had always had good self-esteem and been active in life, but it was there that I achieved the true feeling of contributing to society and a sense of belonging somewhere outside of my family. I had a job and lived independently. People nurtured me as both a person and a teacher. I began to see that I did not need to be involved in everything to be accepted. I even tried to enjoy being alone with my own company. This was a long time in coming and did not happen overnight.

I believe that we can have many mentors in life. Different situations dictate diverse support systems. In the tiny town in which I lived for ten years, I found many mentors. In that community were people who lived alone and were peaceful in their situation, people who showed me that independence can be found in many forms, people who helped me to become a better teacher and control the anger that would well up inside when students did not behave in the manner that I thought they should. These people helped me to discover myself.

It was here in this community that I also began to explore my spiritual self. As I have already alluded to, I had attended church and church groups during my life, but they did not have a deep meaning for me. My parents stopped going to church when I was in Grade 7 but did drive me to Sunday school until high school, when I quit attending.

When I first moved to Saskatchewan, I roomed with a lady who went to church every Sunday. I started to go with her. I quickly found a group of people with whom I enjoyed spending time. Some of my colleagues attended the same church. I soon discovered that these church going people were not boring or stuffy; they knew how to

enjoy life without the bar scene or getting drunk. They had a peace about them that, although they were not free from problems, allowed them to be joyful and happy.

Everyone was welcomed in their midst. I felt that I had come home. Over the years, this life has become a significant part of who I am. I have a faith in which I feel secure. I know that I am not alone and who I can turn to in times of good and bad. My faith has given me even further confidence in myself. It was the missing piece in discovering and accepting me for what I am. I know that although the outer shell is not perfect, my true self lies inside of me. I can enjoy my own company, although I still prefer to be with people. The difference is that now I know I do not have to be with people all the time to be accepted. The change did not come quickly; it continues to this very day but I am a better person because of my faith and the people with whom I share this bond. Many of the people that I met twenty-two years ago in Saskatchewan are still among my closest friends.

#### *What Friends Bring to My Life*

Friends have brought humour into my life. My friends and I see the funny side that can exist in being disabled. One particular chum and I engaged in a rather lengthy project, over one summer, of writing down the thousand and one uses of my crutches. Creativity flowed freely that summer and I still laugh at the list tucked away in my filing cabinet. Others also make jokes about lost toes as my scooter occasionally runs over their feet, how unfair it is that I get the best parking spots and that I always have a seat wherever I travel with my scooter. We have used the drive-through service at restaurants on my scooter eliciting many stares and some chuckles. As we reach middle age, some of us have joked about how people will never know when I am old since I already need a crutch or cane to aid me in walking.

These friends do not attach importance or significance to the crutches. They allow me to “swim with my arms only” through life. They are considerate when they involve me in activities. The amount of preparation required for anyone to do something depends upon the activity. Sometimes, one can be spontaneous while other situations need careful planning. For example, it is quite easy to decide at the last minute to go to a movie or go shopping, but to take a trip overseas requires more preparation. It is the same in my life. I have friends with whom I have gone tenting, on nature walks before there were accessible trails, and on trips throughout the world. I have taken care of up to four small children for a weekend and been included in the daily life and activities of my friends. No one says, “You cannot do this because you are disabled.” They just provide the assistance, when I ask for it, needed to make it happen.

Recently, I have developed other friendships that mean a great deal to me. Sometimes people appear and quickly become an integral part of my life, so that it feels like they have always been there. We have spent many hours talking about life, interests, goals, values, and pet peeves. We enjoy each other’s company and many of the same activities. What has happened is a joining of minds and spirits who value each other for who and what they are and, at the same time, are willing to overlook the short comings that each other possesses. Present are the qualities of a true friendship: ones that are especially important to a person with physical differences. There is an acceptance of both one’s inner and outer being.

One of these friends has a philosophy about life that we have discussed at great length. Through these discussions I have learned more about what one needs to be accepting of others with differences, allowing friendships to exist with a variety of

different people. I have come to a deeper realization that there exist as many similarities as differences between people of different religions, cultures, genders or physical and mental abilities. We ought to learn from and celebrate both. This friend believes that the very beauty of people exists in their diversities. As teachers and human beings, if we nurture these ideas, we help to achieve and promote acceptance of everyone by others and by themselves. Whatever a person's position in life, it is my hope that he or she could take this philosophy and apply it to his or her daily life.

When I envision my friends and the relationships in which I have been involved as a synchronized swimming routine, many different images come to mind. The music played and the routine developed depends upon whom I am swimming and interacting with at the time. Sometimes I have the picture of a slow moving, classical routine, while at other times I have visions of a disco, or a two-step done in the water. Each one is unique, but helps me to prepare for the next routine. I am able to complete these dances in the water because of the lessons I have learned from friends and shared experiences

## Chapter 6: My School Years

Swimming should create the least possible water resistance; there should be a minimum of splashing so that forward motion is smooth and not jerky. My school years represent good swimming. There were no major splashes. I went daily to the pool where I worked out, interacted with others, and learned valuable lessons to carry me through life. I experienced academic success and the usual insecurities about my peers during the school years, particularly as I moved into my teen years. For the most part, I was an accepted member of the swim team, allowed to compete with the others and attend the various meets. I believe that excellent coaching received both at home and at the pool enabled me to be successful.

The British Columbia Teacher's Federation recently sponsored a media campaign promoting the impact teachers have on their students' lives. The advertisements show a variety of teenagers and adults paying tribute to a teacher. As I watched these commercials, it caused me to stop and reflect on the impact my teachers and school experiences had on my life.

### *Elementary School*

The teachers at my elementary school were ahead of their time in instituting inclusion. In 1962, inclusion was rare and yet there was no opposition from the staff when my parents went to enrol me in kindergarten. Coeyman (2001) writing in response to President Bush's promise to leave no children behind quotes Peter Kuriloff, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. "Up through the 1960s you could simply exclude many of these kids (special needs) from schools" (p. 1). I was an exception. My parents give a great deal of the credit to the

principal of the school. His willingness to risk enrolling a student with physical limitations established the tone of my elementary education even after he left the school. The staff took up his example. I never felt as if I was a burden, a pet project, or a token. Leadership is essential to the success of inclusion. If the principal does not support inclusion, then there exists a strong possibility that segregation and isolation of special groups will occur (Pearpoint & Forest, 1993).

From the very beginning, I was just another student, involved in all aspects of school life, from academics to physical education classes, music, field trips, and intramurals. My teachers expected me to participate to the best of my ability when it came to physical and, of course, academic pursuits. When there were activities that I could not participate in, I was assigned an official job. Even though I would never qualify for a district track meet, I was encouraged to try the different track and field events at my school. The rule was I had to keep my crutches behind the jump board for one of my attempts to count. I am sure I created anxiety for the staff as I joined in baseball games. I played hopscotch and ran around the yard with the other students. Here was truly an inclusive community, welcoming all people and making them a part of the school.

These amazing teachers went beyond the call of duty for me. During my elementary years, I spent three extended periods in the hospital, and at home, convalescing. My teachers came to the house and to the hospital to deliver homework and teach me new concepts, without pay from the school board. They also refused offered financial compensation from my parents. They gave of their own time to ensure that I would complete my school year and stay on the Honour Roll. I have a vivid memory of one of my teachers coming to the hospital to bring my books and missed assignments. I was

lying face down on a striker frame. Undaunted, my teacher got down on the floor, lay under the frame and proceeded to provide instruction concerning the work I had missed. This same man took our class on a field trip to his parent's farm at the end of the school year. I had just returned to school from many months in hospital and rehabilitation. He insisted on including me on the trip. To reach the destination for our lunch, it was necessary to cross a small creek. Fearing that I may fall and injure my back, he carried me across the creek. The only problem was that he nearly dropped me! I think he shook for a week afterwards.

All of the students in my class adored and worshiped one particular teacher. Ahead of his time in classroom practices, his lessons were fun and involved the use of multiple intelligences and co-operative groups. I taught my first real lesson in his class, realizing in the process that teaching was a possible career choice. He made his classroom a welcoming and inclusive community, long before *community* became educational jargon. I definitely was an equal and included citizen. I remember him encouraging me to go skating with my boots and a chair on the outdoor rink in our schoolyard with the other kids during gym class. When it came to field trips there was never any question or concern as to my participation. As a class, we attended plays, went tobogganing and skating on the weekends, as well as field trips during the school day.

### *High School*

In high school, I had the privilege of teachers who were supportive of my presence in the regular classroom. No one ever told me to slow down; you cannot do that. They applauded my efforts just as they would those of any student. As well as being in an accelerated program and a member of two bands, I was a prefect and vice-president of the

student council. When my classes went on field trips downtown using public transit, provision for transportation by cab existed. The school allowed a friend to accompany me in the cab when I chose this option. I participated in our school trip to Europe, visiting six countries while cruising the Mediterranean Sea. My opinions and participation throughout the planning phase and the trip itself were welcomed. Our chaperones wrote in my autograph book that they would welcome me on any trip they took, even one to Mount Everest. They never saw me as a burden.

The high school I attended had three floors with the elevator located at the far end of the building. Adaptations to the timetable and extra time to go to my next class were provided when needed.

My entire physical education program was adapted to meet my abilities and needs. Since I could swim and the school housed a swimming pool, a counsellor constructed a personal schedule that allowed me to take the required health components with one class and then join different PE classes using the pool in that block during the remainder of the year. I was able to receive the required physical education credits for graduation while participating in a program where I could compete on an even playing field with other able-bodied students. I even managed to win a few races against the boys in the class when the skill involved swimming with your arms only. The others never seemed to master the trick of swimming without kicking their legs. My physical education instructors not only included me in every activity, but also found ways to allow me to excel physically by including these races using only arm strokes to navigate the pool. However, it was also in this building that I had my first encounter of real prejudice directed at me by an adult. It came from a teacher.

*Prejudice.* I felt a certain air of hostility coming from a particular teacher the very first class. At first, I laughed off my feeling, attributing it to teenage attitudes; but the feeling would not disappear. Eventually I shared with him my feelings. I was shocked at the response. The teacher told me to my face that I did not belong in a regular school, bluntly stating that I took up space and time in the school. He held the opinion that no “crippled” people belonged in a regular school. Furthermore, this teacher did not encourage students to be involved in extra curricular activities. In other words, I did not have a prayer of acceptance by this person. A feeling of mutual hatred soon developed. I dreaded going to that class; luckily, we were on a two-day timetable that meant I only had to suffer seventy minutes every two days. My parents thought that I might be over-reacting and broached the subject at the first parent-teacher interview to ascertain if my perceptions were correct, something that he confirmed. I remained in that class and earned an “A” despite the teacher. The other students in the class were aware of the situation and supported me throughout the year. At the end of the year, despite my average he tried to demand that I write the final exam. He claimed that I had missed too much school due to illness and a concert tour. I was humiliated and upset, punished for illness and participation in field trips while others were not. My intention was to leave the next day to attend and be a mentor at a music camp outside of the city, run by the school board. Writing the final exam would have been not only unfair, but also difficult under the circumstances. I went to the office and stated my case to the vice-principal who, in turn, went into the lab and took my name off the list of students to write the exam. He was aware of the situation and supported me. I went to music camp the next day.

When I look back at the experience, I realize that it made me a stronger person but it left scars to this day. I did not take another class in that discipline until my Education degree, when it was a requirement. I still have feelings of helplessness and anger when I try to work with students, or help teachers to adapt or modify curriculum in that subject. My parents, the students in the class and the vice-principal stood up for me, but the scars remain.

*Peers in the Classroom.* The fact that I have few negative memories of school indicates to me an acceptance, or at least tolerance by my peers. I did not have many close friends in high school that I saw on weekends or evenings, unless a school activity was involved. In elementary school, I had attended a neighbourhood school that allowed for contact outside of school. This was not the case in high school. My experience demonstrates the important role of the neighbourhood school in helping students form strong bonds outside of the school environment. Because I was not geographically close to my classmates, I had little contact with them on weekends and during the summer. I did develop socialization skills during this time, but they were limited to the more formal environment of school. Relationships outside of school depended mainly upon organized activities and family activities.

I do not remember exclusion from playground and after-school activities until my last year in elementary school. During that year, hormones and pre-teen behaviours kicked in. Many of the kids in my class were interested in drinking, smoking, and the opposite sex. I found boys interesting, but I was motivated to do well in school and was involved in many activities outside of the school building. There were students with whom I associated outside of school, but rarely with the “cool” group. Then again, how many

people do you know who were involved in the cool group? Were the members of that group happy? I doubt it. I did not need to hang out on street corners to keep busy. I may have wanted to spend some time with these kids to feel that I could belong anywhere, but it was not essential in my life. Teasing by some of the boys occurred because I had developed quickly for my age. Some would pretend interest in me, then laugh and walk away. At school, I was accepted in classroom activities because of the atmosphere that the teachers created and because I excelled in academics. As an adult, I can see that I was accepted and that I was merely experiencing situations that most teenagers experience with peers. Perhaps I felt the isolation more because I had been in the hospital for almost my entire Grade 7 year, a time when many children start to make significant changes in their activities and outlook. Whatever the reason, I did feel accepted for the most part in school and learned how to socialize with able-bodied peers.

Art Shapiro, professor of special education at Kean University, promotes the philosophy that segregated special education classes do not provide the opportunity for children to learn how to function in a non-disabled world (Shapiro, 1998). During my first year of high school, two other students with physical disabilities were in my homeroom. I was not happy with this situation. The school had assured me that this would not happen, but here they were in my homeroom. I found it hard to believe we were in the same class by accident; there were twenty Grade 9 homerooms.

It became quickly evident that these students were struggling both academically and socially to keep up with their able-bodied peers. Both had trouble socializing with other students, despite good verbal communication skills. They felt safe in the knowledge that they could eat lunch in the Health Room and that a support group, Los Amigos, existed in

the school for students with physical disabilities. I, on the other hand, refused these services and went off to explore the world of high school, never to return to the Health Room or the Los Amigos. I wondered about these students and their lack of desire or perhaps ability to socialize with able-bodied peers. I discovered later that they had previously attended a school for the physically disabled where children received physical and occupational therapy, accompanied by an academic program when time permitted. Many students attending these schools were not taught the entire provincial curriculum, even when they were capable cognitively, nor had they learned to, or been provided, the opportunity to socialize with able-bodied peers. Unfortunately, both of these students dropped out of school, failing to complete high school.

The majority of students attending my high school had never experienced a peer with a physical disability in their elementary classroom or school. None of my classmates from elementary school attended my secondary school, which meant making an entire group of new friends. Even with my outgoing personality, it took time to form friendships with others who had brought pre-existing peer groups with them. For someone who had never socialized with able-bodied peers, the challenge must have been overwhelming at times. For the able-bodied students, it must have been a challenge to accept students with physical differences at a time in their lives when appearance is of utmost significance.

*Inclusion Debate.* Would placement in a neighbourhood elementary school have helped to make the two disabled students academically and socially successful in high school?

There will never be an answer to that question, but I believe my success grew directly from my elementary school experience, the general acceptance I felt, and the friendships developed. Being involved in a neighbourhood school helped me to develop relationships

both in and out of school in my early years. It prepared me to meet both the academic and social challenges of high school. Pearpoint and Forest (1993) cite a study done in Colorado to determine where children with disabilities were five years after graduation. What they discovered was most of the students with disabilities were at home watching television, not working. According to the parents, the reason their children were isolated from society was lack of friendships. The school had not met the children with disabilities social needs (Pearpoint & Forest, 1993). In my case, I had developed friendships and I believe that has been a key element to my success.

Gary Bunch, a professor at York University, is an advocate of inclusion at both the elementary and secondary level. He is currently working on a report about the effect inclusion has on able-bodied peers in schools. His research, based on interviews with students, indicates that not only did students in inclusively-structured schools know the names of peers with disabilities, but that there were academic and social relationships present (Bunch, 2001). Teasing and insulting behaviour occurred with less frequency in inclusive model schools. Students surveyed considered those students who tormented peers with disabilities to lack maturity. Students educated in an inclusive model rarely mentioned placement other than in the regular classroom for peers with disabilities.

Those students surveyed believed that peers with disabilities could succeed at their own level and that it was a peer responsibility to support them in their work. Few saw the need for an exclusionary model of education. The students surveyed in the inclusion model had been involved in such a model for their educational career. Students educated in a special education model, where exclusion of students with disabilities is practiced alleged that this was the best model for students with disabilities. They believed that these

students could only have their needs met in a separate model system (Bunch, 2001). As inclusion becomes more the norm, this research suggests students will grow in their acceptance of students with physical needs in the classroom and as peers and friends.

When I started high school, I soon had friends who included me in school life. Even though many had never experienced a student with physical disabilities in school before meeting others and me in Grade 9, they accepted me because of our common interests music, drama, and the accelerated class. Many of the students in Bunch's study had little in common with the special needs students (Bunch, 2001). Some of my fondest memories of high school came from practicing and performing in band concerts and school musicals.

My high school graduation was delayed by a teacher strike. When I went back for the ceremony, it was nice to see many of the familiar faces and find out how people were doing in their first year of university, but I did not miss nor long to be with my old friends. Time had come to move on, to meet new challenges and new people. I needed a new pool to swim in, and new strokes to learn. University was to provide the new pool and strokes.

### *University*

Once again, I found acceptance, but it was different. The maturity level of the people involved was perhaps a factor. In addition, I shared common goals with these people. They were of a certain intellect that helped them to see beyond the crutches. To no one's surprise, I became fully involved in university life, joining clubs, being a disc jockey at the radio station, working on the school newspaper, and making new friendships. I enjoyed my classes and the professors. I felt at home.

The four years at the University of Toronto went by very quickly. When I had first applied to go to university, I had wanted to attend the downtown campus that held, in my mind, greater prestige than the suburban campus. Family friends pointed the difficulty they had experienced as able-bodied students getting to classes on a large campus spread out over downtown Toronto. I gave in and attended classes at the Scarborough campus. It was a decision that I will never regret. Not only were classes and facilities all under one roof, but there existed a more intimate atmosphere than that of the downtown campus. After my first year, the average class size was twenty-five to forty students. The size of class allowed for more interaction with fellow students and professors. The academic standards were high, and yet there was an atmosphere of family. Friendships came more easily in the smaller classes than in the large classes on the main campus. I felt at home.

When I attended Queen's University to complete my education degree, I felt the need to prove myself as competent and capable, perhaps even more so because I was receiving formal training for future employment. I remember that critical to my decision was the placement office where Queens would attempt to match their graduates with employment. Another consideration was the physical layout of the education building. The residence was attached to the main building which made my life easier than trying to attend classes at the University of Toronto Faculty of Education, which was located in downtown Toronto.

My parents drove me to Kingston to look at the campus. When we arrived, I did not want to get out of the car and visit the campus. My parents were firm in their decision that I would go in and look around, saying that they had not driven all that way for me to sit in a car, look at the outside of a building and go home. Time plays tricks on the mind. None

of us is completely sure as to why I did not want to get out of the car. Perhaps I was sure no one else would be walking around, or driven to the campus by their parents; friends, boyfriends, husbands probably, but not their parents. My parents offered to stay in the car while I walked around. I am sure that they experienced hurt; perhaps they perceived that I was reluctant to walk around with them. I do not remember that being the case. I remember a sense of needing to look normal. Perception was so important to me at the time. If someone saw me with my parents, perhaps they would think that I was not capable of being independent, or a friend. They might see me as someone who needed care and special treatment. In my mind, I did not see anyone else needing to visit and look around the campus. I was probably worried that others who might see me would think I was an oddball who needed to check out the building early. I never thought for one minute about the many students who go on tours of the campus ahead of time. I did get out of the car that day, with a reported scowl on my face, only to return a while later with a grin.

As this was a one-year program, there was not the same opportunity to develop close ties with classmates. Having said that, ironically, I did find a best friend that year that has stuck with me to this very day. The other thing I gained were valuable lessons about self-perception. The first lesson I learned was although I might have been mature in many ways; I needed to do some growing up. My perceptions of what belonging in a group means and what it looks like were especially immature. I expected to be included in everything. This did not happen. Instead, I was excluded from many activities outside of residence life. I was angry and hurt when not included. The boys on the floor below did not ask me out, but they did date the other girls on my floor. Another floor mate and I discovered a list where the boys had rated everyone on the floor. I was not acceptable to

them. Other friendships with fellow students added to my realization that acceptance amongst people would happen outside of school and laid on activities, but not everyone would be willing to look beyond the crutches. I also realized that the crutches were not always the reason for exclusion. I needed to become comfortable with my own company and myself. I also came to realize that inclusion in every activity is not a necessary condition of friendships or equality. This journey, which is still ongoing at times, has been a long and sometimes painful one.

Throughout my school years I needed, and still strive for, recognition as someone who can swim without a lifejacket. I believe I will not drown if left on my own, that I am capable of swimming a marathon without getting into trouble, that I can use a variety of strokes to get the job done, adapting to various situations that come my way. My coaches have taught me well.

## Chapter 7: Society and the Disabled

One can swim in natural settings such as oceans, ponds, rivers, and lakes. The place where I am most comfortable swimming is a pool. I like the access it provides, the controlled temperature, and knowing what lies at the bottom; I do not have to worry about rocks, weeds, and other possible hazards. Although cracks and other damage can occur, a pool is a safe and familiar environment. A swimming pool is, “a structure, often a concrete-lined excavation of rectangular shape, that is filled with water and used for swimming” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000).

In my life, I often wish I could restrict my swimming to such a pool. Unfortunately the calm, safe environment in which I prefer swimming does not always exist. Instead, I find myself swimming in a variety of places: rapid-filled waters, large oceans, calm lakes, and shallow creeks. Sometimes, when I try to stand, there are sharp, jagged objects, or seaweed at the bottom that make standing difficult. In times like these, I tread water, but that does not always work. Large waves can result in my swallowing mouthfuls of water. My arms grow weary, as I try desperately to keep my head above water. However, despite the hardships I still swim, and it is usually a fun, relaxing and enjoyable experience. Over the years, society has become more tolerant and accepting of the disabled, but there is room for improvement. People still need to learn there is a place in society for everyone to work and play together, even though some of the minds and bodies may be weaker. Primarily, one must have a positive feeling of self in order to survive and be a contributing member of society. Throughout my life, I have strived for acceptance in society without consideration of my physical limitations. Because I would not accept myself as being disabled, I refused to feel sorry for myself and accept what I perceived as

the pity of others. I believe that I think, feel, and react like an able-bodied person; yet, people expect me to react differently. Many people do not like questions of a personal nature, especially if asked by a total stranger. When asked why I walked with crutches or could they help, I was rude to people. I was not crippled. I would look the other way, not answer or walk away. Do I ask them why they have red hair, are overweight, or wear that hideous outfit? Why should people offer to help me on ice or over other difficult terrain, carry packages or ask questions about my physical limitations? Strangers stared, not understanding that a broken body did not necessarily mean a broken mind.

Girls with disabilities, however, confront two stereotypes: the "passive, dependent" female and the "helpless and dependent" person with a disability. As a result, they often get a double dose of assistance that can lead to a kind of dependence called *learned helplessness*. (Lang, 1982. p. 2.)

No one has ever accused me of being passive, helpless, or dependent. My obsession to be independent has been a motivating factor in my life, with recognition as an active, contributing, and accepted member of society crucial to my emotional well-being. Throughout my entire life, I have striven to belong whether it is in school, in my job, in peer groups, or in the community in which I live.

Disabled people are adjusting on a daily basis to difficulties that many people face only in a crisis. When some able-bodied people break a leg, they learn to walk with crutches, to navigate stairs and rough terrain, to carry things, and to place crutches so that others do not trip over them. People assist them when necessary while others stare and ask what happened. This is life for many disabled people. Incidents from my past come to

mind when I think of people's reactions to my disability. They reflect how society reacted to me as a disabled person and how, in return, I reacted to the situation.

### *Childhood Perspectives*

I remember as a child crossing the street with my family, when a man came up to us and pressed money into my hand for the "poor little girl." Before my parents had a chance to return the money, he vanished. A passer-by told my parents the gentleman was wealthy and not to worry about it, but I remember feeling uncomfortable that he did not give money to my brother or the other people on the street. I was embarrassed, even at a young age, to think that I was an object of pity; it felt wrong to receive this money and to have someone feel sorry for me because I walked with crutches. As I grew older, there were other instances of people making sympathetic comments about how terrible it was that I was crippled. I hated attention focused on my disability instead of my abilities.

When I was a teenager, I reacted with hostility to stares. When people tried to hold open doors for me, I refused to say thank you, which embarrassed my poor parents. I would decline assistance from anyone, including my family, to the point of physically pulling away when my parents offered assistance on ice or snow. I would look away when others stared, or say "nothing is wrong" when little kids or grown-ups would ask me what was wrong with me or point out my crutches in a store. When people tried to offer me a seat, I was reluctant to take it, thinking that it would make me look more disabled if I accepted the offer. As is still the case today, I prefer people to ignore my disability. People are well meaning but, in my opinion, some do not know how to act around a person with crutches.

I can distinctly remember one incident that occurred as an adult that demonstrates the attitudes of many members of society twenty years ago and the need to educate the public about the disabled. Recovering from recent surgery, I was using a wheelchair to complete some Christmas shopping. This was no small concession. I hated to use a wheelchair at that point in my life. I felt that people would stare at me and not see me as being capable. My friend was pushing me as we went through a checkout counter. As I was placing my purchases on the counter, the cashier asked my friend if she was going to pay for the items. At first, neither of us understood what the cashier was insinuating. When my friend responded that the items on the counter were mine, the cashier rang the items through and then, looking directly at my friend, asked for the money. My friend quickly responded by telling the cashier that she did not intend to pay for my items and she should ask me how I wished to pay. The cashier turned red and quickly rang through my items, muttering how was she to know that I had money to pay for the items.

By this point in my life, although I was disgusted and hurt by the cashier's actions, I was able to later laugh at the situation. I had begun to internalise the lessons that I had learned from the campers. Although incidents like this one did not occur often, they did happen enough to make me wonder about the treatment of an individual with poor verbal communication skills, spastic movements, or someone confined to a wheelchair on a daily basis. As my outlook in life changed, I learned to laugh at these situations and feel sorry for the person who delivers the thoughtless remark or tactless stare. Makas (1990) notes, as a society, we will become more tolerant and accepting of differences through education and exposure to them

### *Positive Attitudes*

Makas (1990) completed a study of disabled and able-bodied people examining perceptions of positive attitudes. In her study, respondents with disabilities saw positive attitudes of non-disabled people reflected when disregard of the disability was apparent. or a defence of civil and social rights of the disabled occurred. The able-bodied respondents believed reflection of a positive attitude included being nice and helpful. The disabled saw themselves being categorized as needy when this occurred. What the study showed was that both groups needed further sensitisation to the discrepancies in communicated perceptions. The study suggests that it is appropriate to tactfully correct a person who makes a statement or behaves in a manner that demeans or insults the receiving party. The content of the comment will be lost if anger is used to correct the other party. It is when this understanding is achieved that one can move onto a greater understanding of what positive attitudes entail for each group. I had to learn tact, but before I could do that, I had to accept myself.

### *A pivotal event*

The summer of 1976, when I was twenty-one years old, stands out as a defining moment in my life. During the course of that summer, I learned about tactfully dealing with people who asked questions, looking inside all people to see the beauty and the true person that exists within. Many of the actual events of that summer remain a blur. What I do remember is that my mother prodded me to apply for a summer job working at a camp for handicapped children. I applied for the job, with much reluctance. When I was hired, I had many mixed emotions. I was not sure if I knew enough about crafts to be successful and I definitely was not sure how I would feel about working at a camp with handicapped

children for an entire summer. I had not been comfortable with many of my fellow campers when as a child I had attended the same camp. Now as an adult, I was leaving my comfort zone again and dealing directly with multiple-handicapped children. Would I survive an entire summer? What would be the nature of the relationship shared with staff and campers? Would I find acceptance by the rest of the staff or be treated like one of the campers? How would the campers react to me?

Two truths surfaced that summer and both have influenced my life to this very day. The first truth was, not only did I survive the summer, but also I enjoyed my experience working with children who had physical and/or mental limitations. I took pleasure in experiencing their love of life and their determination to succeed in everyday things. I learned from these children how to ask for, and refuse, assistance. I witnessed that it was okay to ask for help when needed; no one thought any less of you. People were happy to help and appreciated knowing the when and how. I came unwillingly, at first, to the realization that I did have a connection with the campers.

The second truth was harder to swallow. Throughout the summer, I felt accepted both personally and professionally by the staff. I participated in various activities, never feeling less than a full, contributing member of the staff. Although my job description did not include a cabin assignment, I assisted in cabins when available. On the last day of camp, all staff received an evaluation of their work by the camp director. My evaluation was good, not outstanding, but acceptable. What dumbfounded me lay in the concluding section. The director indicated the limited role I could play, in working with all campers due to my physical limitations, needed review before rehiring me. Here was an organization, the prime purpose of which was to provide opportunities, programming, and

services for children with physical and mental challenges, and yet one of their directors was reluctant to rehire me because of my disability. His evaluation expressed more concern about my inability to pick a child up from the floor and put them into a wheelchair, than what I could accomplish in my job description. I was being denied the ability to “swim with my arms only,” to find a way of accomplishing tasks, of contributing, in my own way. How could society accept the disabled, if a representative of an institution that supported life experiences for the disabled could not accept the role that I could play?

Until that defining moment, I had never wanted to be a role model for other people with disabilities. I was just beginning to be truly comfortable, after the experience of the summer, to be around others with disabilities. As I read the evaluation, I was angrier about the rejection that I had experienced due to my physical limitations than any discomfort that I may have been feeling about the label of *disabled*.

My attitude did not change immediately nor did I become completely comfortable in my own skin at that moment. The events of that summer remained with me and later served as a catalyst for true acceptance of my disability, an acceptance that in turn allowed those with differences to be a part of my life.

### *Journey to Employment*

The journey that I took to obtain my first teaching job is one that illustrates the attitudes of society in the 1970s and into the early 80s. Although I was supposedly dealing with educated professionals, I encountered behaviours typical of society at the time.

When I was in my final year of high school, my family became aware of money available for post-secondary education of people with disabilities. My parents, being

practical and realizing the cost involved in further education, greeted this news with happiness. My reaction was quite different. I did not want any government handouts. In my mind, I was quite capable of paying my way through school. If I took this money, I would be admitting to a disability, something at that time I was not prepared to do. My father pointed out the reality that I eventually would be more than paying out in income tax what the government gave to me. This was not a handout. The government was investing in an ensured future source of capital.

I gave in and completed the paperwork. I received a full bursary to attend university with my final goal being two degrees, an honours degree in history, and the other in education. The government of Ontario paid my tuition, books, and transportation. I could concentrate on my studies and my parents did not have to worry about finding the money for me to attend university.

During my fourth year at University of Toronto, I met with Social Services once again to discuss the next phase of my life. I went into the meeting armed with my plan to now obtain a Bachelor of Education degree. This time I received a response different from four years ago. My caseworker had other thoughts and was adamant that I should attend community college, forgoing my plans to enter a Faculty of Education. The committee believed their reasoning to be very practical. I needed to be prepared to work at a desk job, something that would provide a steady income and be physically manageable. Perhaps, they suggested, secretarial work or accounting would be appropriate course selections. Another factor in their eyes was the scarcity of jobs available for Ontario teachers in the public school system at that time. School boards could afford to be selective. What were the chances of a board hiring a rookie teacher with limited mobility?

I was willing to take the chance, but the ministry was reluctant. I quickly informed the worker that I had no intention of going to a community college or surrendering my goal of becoming a teacher.

Their response was unexpected. Denial of funding for my second degree was eminent due to the uncertainty of employment. If I wanted to take a secretarial course, there would be no problem in receiving financing. I was shocked and angry. How dare the government, try to dictate what career I could choose or the courses in which I could enrol? Was it not a waste of taxpayer's money to deny the funding needed to complete the educational requirements of my goal? I had earned the first degree, a prerequisite to enter a faculty of education. Without further training, my degree in history was not highly marketable. Suddenly, it became very important to me that I receive the government's money and show them what I could accomplish. I began to raise objections. I was capable and independent. I could complete my degree and get a job. I was willing to relocate in order to teach. Would it not be a waste of money to pay for half of the goal and then not allow me to complete the final part?

At our next meeting, the caseworker brought forward the news that the committee had considered my remarks, reviewed my application, and recommended a university that was accessible for the disabled. The problem was that I did not want to attend that university. I had my heart set on the University of Toronto or Queens. Financial support came reluctantly, only after careful scrutiny of my achievements, both academic and extra-curricular. I again received my tuition, book allowance, as well as a living allowance, covering food and residence costs. I was off to Queens University.

### *Present View of Disabled by Society*

Do I believe that society has changed its view of the disabled since my birth? Overall, I would have to say society is more tolerant and accepting of the disabled. There is greater awareness of the need for accessibility and assistance while maintaining the person's dignity.

There are many social movements for and by disabled people and/or their advocates. These movements have not only changed the way the handicapped think about themselves and their potential, but have also shaped the way the society at large views disabled people. Declaration by the United Nations of 1981 as International Year of Disabled Persons brought to the forefront the issues of the disabled. The theme for the year was full participation and equality. This meant full equality in society, access to community services, and recognition of disabled rights as human rights (Hershey, 2001). At the Rehabilitation International Conference in the previous year, the issue of improved institutions for the disabled was discussed. Only 10% of the delegates to that conference were disabled. Representation of the disabled was by the able-bodied (Hershey, 2001). Today, the Internet is full of web pages devoted to the rights of disabled groups, and support groups for the disabled and their families, educators, medical personnel and other interested people.

*Work force.* The number of disabled people active in the work force according to was a little over 40% in 1986 (Statistics Canada, 1990). Factors that effected employment opportunities included accommodations in the workplace, lack of job-seeking skills, lack of equal opportunity, limited job opportunities, and level of education. According to Nessner (1990), only 5% of the population with disabilities had achieved a university

degree and 29% of the same population had grade nine or less. Because of lower rate of employment and pay, persons with disabilities tend to pick inexpensive, passive, or solitary leisure activities such as: watching television, reading, relaxing, listening to music and walking (Day, 1990).

*Improvements in society.* As more disabled people become active within society, changes continue to occur in accessibility to schools and public buildings. Crichton and Jongbloed (1998) examine policy development in Canada aimed at removing barriers to the disabled Canadians' participation in society. One example of a law passed was the National Building Code in 1990 to provide minimum standards of safety and design, including ramps, stairs, washrooms, public telephones, doors, viewing positions in theatres and sporting events, parking, recreational areas, curbs and sidewalks. Many of these changes dramatically improved the quality of life for all disabled people, as well as the elderly and young mothers. Having accessible parking and building access are two of the major policy changes which have directly affected me, making my life easier.

As part of a recently completed review of the *Blind Persons Act*, the National Federation of the Blind: Advocates for Equality (2001) highlights the importance of differentiating between the needs of the blind and the disabled when it comes to the training of dogs and legislation governing the certification, access rights, and offences. This report brings to the attention of the review committee the differing needs of people with disabilities. There is no one size fits all for the disabled. The recommendations of the *Report on the Public Review of the Blind Persons Review Act* (2001), written by the chairperson Harley Johnson, recognizes the need to protect the consumer and human rights of persons with disabilities, meaning they needed to revise the Act to align it with

today's realities. The recommendations of this report acknowledge the importance of recognizing the changing ways in which persons with disabilities can achieve independence. The recommendations of the *Report on the Public Review of the Blind Persons Review Act* (2001) include recognition for greater access to all public services and facilities, the need for the services of assistive dogs for people living outside of large urban areas, and the protection of the rights of all dog owners. One other important recommendation is for a public campaign to heighten awareness of the purpose and use of assistive animals. Mr. Johnson and his committee saw the importance of communicating to the public why these dogs are important and the role they play for their disabled owners. This report reflects the shift occurring in how people view the disabled and their needs. With the use of assistive dogs, the disabled will be able to venture outside of their homes with greater ease and comfort.

*Travelling disabled.* In my travels, I have come to realize how advanced are the North American accessibility laws, for and attitudes towards, the physically and mentally challenged. In the late 1980s, while Canada was passing accessibility and other laws aimed at improving the life of the disabled, I travelled to Hong Kong and China with a long-time friend. It was the first time I had travelled with a wheelchair; I was nervous and anxious. On previous trips throughout North America and Europe, I had some interesting challenges but nothing that was insurmountable. Cobblestones and long walking tours were conquered. Bathrooms in Europe were challenging but manageable. For the most part, I was able to be part of the crowd. This trip to South- East Asia I felt would be different because the wheelchair would present new challenges to my mobility.

On one tour, our guide, a local university student, frequently and openly stared at us as the day progressed. Finally, unable to contain himself, he commented to my friend how impressed he was that she had taken me to Hong Kong. My friend responded in turn that we frequently took trips together and that I was an excellent travelling companion. The tour guide looked puzzled and expressed his amazement that she would take me out of the hospital more than once to go on a large trip. We quickly realized that he assumed I lived in some type of residence for people with disabilities. My friend took great pleasure in explaining that I was a teacher, drove my own vehicle, and lived in my own house, while she rented an apartment and did not drive. The guide experienced trouble processing this information.

According to our guide, in Hong Kong and China, the majority of disabled people resided permanently in residential care facilities. It was unnecessary to consider accessibility since integration of the disabled into society did not, as a rule, exist. We were dumbfounded; this was the late 1980s. During the rest of our time in the Orient, we watched for disabled people but found none of Asian descent. The only person on crutches we encountered was an American tourist who had fallen and broken her ankle. She also commented on the lack of accessibility in Hong Kong in comparison to North America. By the time I departed Hong Kong, I am sure many locals either scratched their heads in wonder or shook their heads in disgust at my vacation in their country. I know that six Chinese men hold within them a memory of assisting me onto a tour boat, wheelchair included, because of the lack of safe and appropriate accessibility for all passengers. I almost showed them that day how I could swim using only my arms. There are also two hotel employees who went home one night to tell the story of the crazy Canadian tourist

lady who tried to get her friend in a wheelchair into the hotel by bumping her up a tall marble slab, only to lose her footing and end up underneath the wheelchair. Those two employees never again let us try to enter the hotel unaided. I wonder if accessibility for disabled people has improved in South-East Asia.

*Athletics.* The Kennedy family's promotion of the Special Olympics for the mentally challenged and Rick Hansen's Man in Motion Tour have brought to the forefront sporting events for the disabled. Jean Driscoll, a wheelchair athlete, in her acceptance of the 1991 Amateur Sportswoman of the Year award, talked about the respect that wheelchair athletes have gained in recent years. The wheelchair athlete's place is alongside able-bodied athletes, no longer relegated to the status of invalid or victim (Driscoll, 2000). Sponsorship by major corporations for wheelchair athletes demonstrates the acceptance of the Paralympics and other sporting events for disabled athletes. *Sports Illustrated for Women* naming Ms. Driscoll Number 25 on their Top 100 Athletes of the Century placed her alongside other great athletes such as Billy Jean King, Chris Evert, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Bonnie Blair (Driscoll, 2000). The world of sports for disabled athletes has dramatically changed since the first recognition of athletes with disabilities at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Today the Paralympics take place in the same year and country as the Olympics. We see disabled athletes as athletes, like their able-bodied counterparts, gifted in their chosen sport. People watch with interest sporting events involving disabled athletes.

*Relationships.* This is one area where, again, disabled people are finding acceptance but there is still stigma and stereotypical reaction to people with disabilities as life-long partners. The task of finding another person with whom to establish a long-term, intimate

relationship is more difficult for people with disabilities than it is for those without (Nagler & Nagler, 1999). Love relationships between disabled and non-disabled people have problems such as physical dependency, the opposition of family and friends, and social stigma. Hahn (1990) examines the social components of sexuality and desire between disabled and nondisabled adults. Dr. Hahn, himself a polio survivor, discusses the delegated role of the disabled person to one of a platonic and valued friend. If the friendship does develop into a physical relationship, chances are that the relationship will fail due to a variety of outside interferences, as well as, frustration in the sexual relationship itself. Many personal relationships between disabled and non-disabled people are without thought to the disability until the courtship process begins. Needed at this point is a frank, open discussion about the sexual needs of the disabled partner.

Very few disabled persons, myself included, look for sexual relationships, instead focusing on securing companionship and love (Hahn, 1990). I have discovered that relationships I have shared with non-disabled men have ended once they entered into the stage of courtship. Physical activities, opinion of others, reality of the disability and fear of a physical relationship with a disabled person are reasons given as to the dissolution of the relationship. It will only be with time and exposure to the disabled in society, that able-bodied people will recognize that disabled people have the same needs as they do for companionship and sexual relationships. Only then can perhaps both groups look to each other as possible life partners.

Before one can enter into a successful relationship, self-esteem must be present. Meister (1988), based on a report entitled *Dawn Canada: Disabled Women's Network Canada Research Project*, collected the thoughts of 245 disabled women across Canada

on impediments to the development of a strong and positive self-image for women with disabilities. The findings were extraordinary. Housed within the report and the subsequent discussion paper are stories of women who could not obtain jobs because of inadequate clothing, lack of front teeth, poor education, lack of transportation, and a host of other reasons that the average Canadian cannot comprehend. These women live in poverty, like other Canadians, but feel at an even greater disadvantage because of restricted access to jobs and housing. This report is full of stories of women who felt little self-esteem. We cannot expect these women to enter into healthy relationships with the opposite sex, when they have feelings of worthlessness and are often unable to enter into courting due to lack of money and transportation.

*Media.* The media has played a role in promoting the cause of the disabled. By demanding advertising, movies, and television that present more positive and realistic portrayals of disabled characters, the disabled are promoting their cause with the public. Television programs, such as Family Law, ER, Judging Amy, and The Young and the Restless, depict disabled women as lawyers, doctors, mothers, and secretaries. In the movies, we see disabled characters in a variety of realistic situations including: parents, professionals, lovers, and everyday people. The media also play a key role in the depiction of the disabled in real life. Rights and issues of the disabled come into the homes of all Canadians, through television and print media. A recent murder/suicide in Kelowna brought forth an outpouring of support for the parents who committed the act while prompting fear amongst advocates for the disabled that acceptance of similar acts of compassion will be viewed favourably by society (Matas, 2002). The majority of

Canadians associate names such as Sue Rodriguez and Tracy Latimer with the issues of mercy killing and assisted suicide.

I am sure every person over the age of twelve had an opinion regarding the death of Tracy Latimer. Robert Latimer, Tracy's father, admitted that he had taken the life of his daughter, who he said suffered constant, excruciating pain as a result of the form of cerebral palsy with which she was afflicted. Latimer was convicted of second-degree murder in 1994; the trial and subsequent reaction to the outcome is currently still news.

During the seven years preceding the original trial, a new trial, based on evidence of jury interference, again found Latimer guilty of murder. A constitutional exemption allowed his sentence to be reduced to less than two years and temporarily freed Latimer. The exemption overturned, Latimer went back to prison. An appeal of the original sentence took place and, finally, the Supreme Court upheld the life sentence, with no parole for ten years (O'Malley & Wood, 2001). The various court actions depict the division of Canadians on this issue. At the centre of the controversy are such issues as euthanasia and rights of the disabled. Would leniency open the door for mercy killing, or delegate the disabled to the role of second-class citizens? The Crown saw Latimer as a cold-blooded killer who denied a child a life that had value and quality. Others, such as Justice Ted Noble who granted the constitutional exemption, called the crime a compassionate homicide and portrayed Latimer as a loving parent (O'Malley & Wood, 2001).

The media has played a role in bringing this story and the issue to the forefront. Sobsey (1994) uses the findings of a *Calgary Sun* poll in comparison to the poll of the Latimer jury to substantiate his belief that the Canadian media distorted information

released to the Canadian public from the trial. The *Calgary Sun* poll indicated that 92% of the five-hundred respondents thought Latimer justified in killing his daughter, where a jury of his peers had no trouble in convicting Latimer. Sobsey (1994) indicates the chances of obtaining such different results in two polls are much less than one in 10,000. The article goes on to show how the language used to describe the trial in the media, coverage of related topics such as his wife and neighbours support of Latimer, and Tracy's disability and pain, promoted public sympathy for Robert Latimer. Subsequent polls in newspapers across Canada showed overwhelming support for leniency in this case, as well as, for others where the victim was disabled (Sobsey, 1994). What is interesting, and often ignored, is the reality that in order to convict Robert Latimer, the Crown merely had to prove that he did commit the crime and it was premeditated. They were successful in their bid.

Whether or not you agree with the outcome of the Latimer trial, it does illustrate the influence the media has on the face of the disabled in society. The media brought the issue to the home of every Canadian citizen. Depending upon the reporter, Latimer was depicted as either a hero or a villain. The publicity of the murder and the subsequent court actions have continued to bring not only this case, but also others of murder and assisted suicide, to the forefront of society. Both sides present strong arguments in the media. We see more examples each year of frustrated parents who no longer are able to care for their disabled child, take the child's life and often their own in desperation. What we need to remember is the right to life. We need to ask who decides what constitutes a quality life.

*Attitudes Today.* Today the disabled are demanding that others respect their humanity. Not looking for 'Jerry Lewis' type handouts, the disabled desire respect and an

opportunity to participate fully in the broader society. Since the 1980s there has been increased recognition of the disabled and their contributions, but needed still is greater acknowledgement of the disabled in major social, economic, and political contexts

Swimming in today's society has changed since my birth. The temperature has become warmer and more enjoyable and the pool is more accessible. There are still dangers lurking, but the water is friendlier, more inviting. I hope that it will continue to be that way.

## Chapter 8 - My Practice

Swimming consists of moving through the water using a variety of strokes, each having a specific movement and different purpose. At some point, coaches have taught you the rudiments of swimming strokes, treading water, diving and drown proofing with lifeguards insuring your safety. Eventually a time comes to take the lessons learned and put them into practice without your instructor. I aspire to take the lessons that I have learned in life and lend a hand to others in their efforts to swim. I hope others receive in turn the pleasure that I do from the activity.

I have always wanted to be a teacher. My plan was to teach in Ontario, preferably within driving distance of Toronto, in a regular intermediate classroom. I saw my classroom as being interactive, with active learning taking place. I envisioned a room where cooperative learning occurred on a daily basis. I wanted there to be active learning. If that was not possible, then I wanted to teach French and Social Studies in an elementary school. I wanted nothing to do with primary or secondary students and definitely did not want to teach students with special needs, so how did I end up in Northern British Columbia working in Special Education? Somewhere along the way, I took a “right” turn.

In the late 1970s, the only teaching positions in Ontario were available mainly in technical education and French immersion. The chances of anyone, especially disabled women, obtaining a teaching job in Ontario were slim. The determination that had stood me well to this point in my life once again came into play. I found assistance in locating employment by using the Queen’s recruitment officer. His job was to assist education students in locating and obtaining employment in their chosen field. Despite my enthusiasm and confidence, it became evident that securing a job would be difficult, initial

contacts with school boards were discouraging. I had drawn a line on a map at Sudbury, Ontario. I would go no further north than this city to obtain employment. In the meantime, I graduated and had my name placed on the sub list in Kingston, Ontario for the months of May and June.

### *My First Job*

The fateful call came on a May afternoon in 1980. The placement officer from Queen's phoned to ask how I felt about Saskatchewan. There was a job in rural Saskatchewan that fit my profile, along with five other fellow graduates. I remember shaking after I got off the phone with excitement and anticipation. This was a real job prospect. Southern Saskatchewan could not be that bad. It had to be flat which would be good for accessibility. I could work in a smaller community and then eventually teach in Saskatoon or Regina. My father was a good, decent person raised in the prairies; surely there must be others there like him there.

The call from the superintendent came the next day. He was very impressed with the resume Queen's had sent. We chatted about my musical background and the courses I had completed towards my degree. During the next week, the phone lines between Saskatchewan and Ontario heated up daily; then came the critical call. The superintendent had spoken to the principal and they were definitely interested in hiring me for the position. The principal had only one question, would I be willing to coach volleyball and curling? I remember my throat quickly becoming dry as the Sahara Desert, dry. It was time to tell the truth. In my defence, I had not lied; I had merely overlooked disclosing on my application that I had a physical disability. The superintendent was surprised.

Apparently, none of my references had alluded to my disability either. He said that he would talk to the principal and get back to me.

There was silence for a week. I must confess I felt letdown and somewhat defeated. My disability, it appeared, had finally prevented me from achieving something that I wanted. Just about the time that I anticipated receiving a “thank you for applying” letter, the superintendent resumed contact. He apologized for the time lapse between calls. “The board would like me to come out for an interview, at my own cost,” he said. Of course, they could not guarantee me the job over the phone, but they were definitely interested and wanted to check me out in person. I, too, wanted to check them out. The only catch was I needed to be there by the end of the week. We discussed the logistics of transportation and the necessary overnight lodging. When I got off the phone, I made two phone calls, one to the airlines inquiring on flights from Toronto to Regina. The other was to my parents. I might be debt free, but I was still a student lacking the resources to fly to Regina without seven day’s notice. My parents were apprehensive but encouraging. They knew I needed to go out and attend the interview.

What happened next was three days of excitement and activity. I journeyed back to Toronto from Kingston and caught a plane the next day for Regina. There I travelled by bus, stayed overnight in the local hotel, was interviewed at 7:30 a.m. at the school, signed a contract, hopped back on a bus at 10 a.m. and found myself landing in Toronto at 11:30 p.m. that night. My mother took one look at me and knew that I had taken the job. She was worried about how I would manage in a small town. My father, having grown up in this atmosphere, was confident that I would be just fine. Small towns were friendly places where people help each other.

I counted myself lucky. I had a job and my parents' support. It was only much later that I discovered it had taken a great deal of persuasion by the superintendent to hire me. He finally had to be blunt with the principal and tell him that it was more important in the board's eyes to hire a qualified teacher than a volleyball coach. The rights of the disabled had just reached that small prairie town. They were about to witness a person swimming through life in, perhaps a unique way to them, but one that got the job done.

### *Saskatchewan*

My first teaching assignment was to teach upper intermediate and secondary school. I taught French, History, and Health in a Grade 1-12 rural school. It was not at a preferred grade level but I had a job. I could move back to Ontario in a year or two, once the job situation improved. Before signing the contract in June 1980, the superintendent promised to find me, housing that met my needs. There was not enough time for me to find a place to live and return to Regina to catch my plane later that day.

When I arrived, with my parents two months later, I expected the promised housing to be waiting for me, but there was none. I looked at two rentals, neither of which met my physical needs. Both suites were on the second floor of houses, with staircases that were difficult to navigate. My father, being very frustrated at this point, told the school trustee and secretary-treasurer that it would not be an inconvenience to take me back home since he was going back anyways. I thought my teaching career was over. I would be black listed for walking out on a job. Just when it looked like I would be going back east, a secretary in the school board office offered me room and board until I found suitable accommodations. I had found a place to live; now I could start teaching.

I taught a variety of subjects and grade levels during my ten years in Lafleche. I taught almost every subject at the elementary level, as well as a variety of courses at the secondary level. I switched between elementary and secondary classes throughout the day. Because of the small population and the wide range of subjects and grade levels I taught each year, the students became my children. I went to their dance and piano recitals, and their athletic activities. When they were sick, I felt concern. The school was an extended family, and each grade level became a nuclear unit within that larger family.

During my second year of teaching the principal asked me to work thirty minutes each day with three boys who were experiencing difficulty in reading and comprehension. I was the only person in the school with any course work in Special Education. Reluctantly I agreed to work with the boys on a trial basis. This type of teaching was not what I had agreed to when I moved to Saskatchewan. I had completed Special Education classes on the advice of faculty members at Queen's who pointed out the merits of these courses on a resume. Initially, I was reluctant to take the courses, fearing that people would see Special Education as a *natural field* for me to enter. I wanted to be a *teacher*; I did not want to be a *teacher with a disability teaching the disabled*. I wanted acceptance on equal terms with my colleagues which, at that point in time, meant teaching a full academic load, not small groups in a special education class.

What I had dreaded became something that I anticipated with eagerness each day. I gained personal satisfaction when they achieved a new skill. When my students were successful, I felt successful. I was able to build their low self-esteem and help them to realize that they, too, could have goals such as graduating from high school. I worked with these students to achieve their best. I used examples from my own life and overcoming

obstacles to encourage them to continue when they felt discouraged and ready to quit. It became a challenge to help them find new ways to learn, to retain knowledge and skills. My work involved mainly remediation in mathematics and language arts.

Three remedial students stood out over the decade I spent in that school. One was a non-reader who, by teaching him a variety of strategies, and working with him on an individual basis each day, was able to complete Grade 12. This student received little encouragement or support from home. He often came to school dirty. In that small town, his learning difficulties and poor appearance had led to isolation. As we worked together, discovering his talents, improving his academic skills and personal hygiene, the student achieved greater acceptance by his peers, the school, and the community.

The second student stood out because of his determination to succeed. He put an incredible effort into learning. He worked hard to improve his skills and appreciated any assistance offered by teachers, his parents, or his peers. He never complained about his learning difficulties. He had a cheerful disposition that has carried on into adulthood. When I left, he wrote me a thank-you card for all of my work with him over the years. Today when I visit Saskatchewan, I always enjoy spending time with him and his family.

The third student made a terrific impact on me both professionally and personally. The student had undergone two kidney transplants before the age of eight years. Both transplants had rejected, resulting in regular dialysis. He also suffered from daily, multiple seizures and was behind academically. He found it difficult to concentrate in school and was frequently absent. When in attendance, he was in my classroom without aide support. What I learned from this experience was the value of inclusion.

The other students in the class accepted this student without question. They often helped him when he had trouble with his work. When he was absent, without prompting, they would deliver his missed work to his brother. When he had seizures, which were very frequent, the students were able to help if needed. If not needed, they continued to work while the teacher was busy tending to the needs of their classmate. The students learned first hand; independence, how to be self-reliant, and compassion without pity. They included him in their activities whenever possible. They admired their classmates' desire to be in school and be included in all activities. It made them want to help him achieve his dream.

This attitude had begun to develop before my arrival, but the students revealed in later years, that my influence was also critical in his total acceptance. His classmates, and other students in the school, saw how I had learned to overcome my disability and become a teacher. They saw by my example and attitude how all people had the right to be included and had something of value to offer.

No one made the comment that I had dreaded. My colleagues, my students, and their parents appreciated my skills and the effort I put into the students' program. They did not see my work as the appropriate job for the "handicapped teacher." This job was not easy. it was demanding and time consuming. It meant that I had to be familiar and comfortable with all subjects as well as with strategies to help students overcome learning disabilities. It was not a job for someone who wanted an easy pay cheque.

Over the years, the amount of time that I spent in Learning Assistance increased. I still enjoyed the contact with the other students but the satisfaction in that work was

dwindling. I realized that it was not the course work I enjoyed but the students themselves. In reality, I had become hooked on Special Education.

### *Moving On*

During my last year in Saskatchewan, I wanted a change. I felt a need to move to a larger location. The town was beginning to decrease in population. The public school had amalgamated with the Catholic school, which meant that I worked in two schools each day, something that was physically demanding and draining. Many of my colleagues and close friends were also looking for employment outside of the district. It was time to make a move.

I applied to a variety of boards in both Saskatchewan and Ontario seeking employment. I wanted to continue working in the area of Special Education but I also thought about regular classroom teaching. I decided to apply for both types of position. My hope was to secure employment near Toronto or in Saskatoon or Swift Current. Fate had other plans for me.

In 1986, I had gone on vacation with friends to British Columbia. One of our stops was the town of Chetwynd to attend a wedding. I remember looking at the beautiful scenery thinking that I could live there. Four years later, I found myself, compliments of my best friend, at an interview for a job to teach in Dawson Creek, one hundred kilometres from Chetwynd. I received a job offer working in the area of Special Education at the middle school in town. I called the other boards for which I had interviewed, but they were unable to offer me a job at that time. This time I made sure that suitable housing was available before I signed my contract. I decided to take my chances and move to Northern British Columbia with my best friend who would be working in Chetwynd.

Ironically, twenty-four hours after signing the contract, I received two job offers, one in Swift Current and the other two hours north of Toronto. Fate had spoken.

### *Central*

When I began teaching at Central Middle School in September 1990, inclusion was a relatively new concept. Unaware of this fact, I arrived under the assumption that everyone embraced the concept of an inclusive environment. I fervently believed that all students belonged in regular classrooms and that my colleagues shared the same belief. I was also under the illusion that every teacher instinctively knew how to meet the educational needs of any student with special needs with the support staff able to assist. I quickly realized that I was seriously mistaken.

In 1990, there were two aides to support students in the entire school. There was no Individual Education Plans or formal case managers to oversee student programs. I team taught Grade 9 classes and was responsible for two periods of Grade 7 Learning Assistance. There was little collaboration with my teaching partners due to a lack of common preparation time. Colleagues were told, not consulted, as to the placement of *my* students and I in their room. These teachers had no formal training in special education and therefore avoided my students. My responsibility lay in the completion of any modifications and marking of assignments, as well as acting as a scribe or assistant. Limited opportunities existed for the students to mix since teachers assigned mostly individual work. In proceeding years, when I was given opportunities to choose teaming partners, and common preparation time was timetabled, the program was more successful. However, the perception of me as the person responsible for *those students* persisted.

During my second year in Dawson Creek, I discovered that students with mild mental disabilities enrolled in Central Middle School, but those with physical disabilities and/or moderate to severe mental disabilities remained in elementary schools until they entered high school at an appropriate chronological age. Lack of facilities, support staff, and a willing and trained teacher were the reasons given for excluding disabled students from Central. After a great deal of persuasion, the administration and district staff expanded our program's boundaries to include all students with special needs.

As the number of students increased, as did government regulations governing the education of special needs students, it became necessary to adjust my schedule and role accordingly. Individual Education Plans were required for students tagged with Ministry of Education funding. I worked with teachers, support staff, parents, and students in creating a meaningful education program for the students. Within a short time period, the number of support staff grew from two to twenty. Until 2002-2003, a cap of two-designated students per classroom was strictly enforced. With the imposition of the present collective agreement for teachers, restrictions no longer exist. Now classes can have an unlimited number of designated students registered. The teacher and two aides, with alternate materials and strategies that I have suggested, face the challenge of delivering a program to meet the needs of both regular and special- needs students.

Frequently tested is my self-confidence in providing the best program for my students. At times, I feel like a fraud. I question my capability to direct the educational path of children with special needs. How do I know what is best for each student and their family? Can anyone truly know the best program, and the best learning environment? I have training and my life experiences to guide me but, in comparison to many of my

students, my life has been relatively easy. I sense both teachers and parents believe that I should possess the solutions and materials needed to create the perfect education for each child, as well as the time to prepare all the programs and help each child and teacher on a daily basis.

My personal philosophy, stemming from life experiences and training, calls me to encourage the student and the family to reach for their dreams and not to listen to others who want to categorize or stereotype others. I strive for my students to reach their maximum potential, to think of themselves as a human being and not as a disabled-human being. I yearn for them to want to do their personal best and not to try to accomplish something to please others. I want them hold their head up with pride. I want them to be a part of life and not to sit on the outside looking in.

I must constantly remind myself as a professional that my situation is different from many students whose cases I manage. It is difficult for me to remember that success for each of my students will be different from what I have achieved. I had goals that were unique to me and I should not assign them to others with physical or cognitive disabilities. A school-leaving certificate emphasizing life skills, employment, and the development of friendships may be appropriate goals for many students. Educators and parents do not expect all children to be the same or have the same needs, so I wonder why I should expect that of my students. By carefully examining each child, his/her unique needs, and situations, creation of a program to meet those needs can take place but no situation is a textbook case, easily and successfully implemented.

Some Dawson Creek residents appear to believe that Central Middle School does not provide adequate academic instruction and a safe environment for our school

population. This perception is particularly disturbing for the parents of children with special needs who already have concerns that the requirements of their child will not be met in a larger school. This is a time of uncertainty for parents of students with special needs who want their child to feel included and a part of the community, but at the same time that realize the gap is widening between their child and his/her peers. As a special-education teacher and case manager, I am privy to many struggles, fears, aspirations, and accomplishments that parents experience raising a child with special-need. Some parents fear that the school system will fail to satisfy the often-unique needs of their son/daughter. It is my goal to help alleviate the fears of parents and provide the best program possible for their son / daughter.

Sommerstein and Wessels (1997) believe the actions of parents can dispel the negative attitudes about their child's disability and the perceptions which society holds. An attitude of not "fixing" a child but redefining what a "winner" is can make the difference in how the child sees him or herself and is viewed by the community. These positive parents instill in their child the message that she or she has unique gifts and challenges, and are capable of achieving a happy and fulfilling life. An open and honest attitude by parents accompanied with a positive vision will help to create a path of success and self-worth. These situations are the easiest to work with as an educator and reflect the experiences I had growing up.

It is when I deal with parents who do not share my philosophies that I feel discouraged and a failure. Studies such as those completed by Kirk (1962) and Wegerink. Hocutt, Posante-Loro and Bristol (1980) show that problems associated with parent involvement are not due to the actual involvement but more because of the developing

nature of the situation of the student as ageing occurs. When I work with parents, I must remember the concern my parents had for my education, their determination for me to receive an appropriate education. If my parents were concerned, then what emotions must parents experience that has children with physical needs who also display low-cognitive and reduced-academic abilities. Studies such as those mentioned above help me to realize that my experience is not the norm and that I must look to outside resources to gain a broader picture of how parents may be feeling about their child and his/her future. Many of the parents that I deal with do not have the luxury of a child with potential to be completely independent.

In order for any program to be successful, parents need to be willing and involved partners in their child's education (Tilton, 1996). Such parental involvement frequently enhances self-esteem, improves the child's academic achievement and parent-child relationships, and helps parents develop a positive attitude towards school along with a better understanding of the school process (Brown, 1989). My goal as a Special Education teacher is to create an environment where the parent trusts the school and the child enjoys and benefits from a program that provides him or her with an optimal learning experience, both academically and socially.

Even the most realistic parents, however, have fears. Saddened with the reality that their child can experience teasing and rejection, and struggles in the regular classroom, they seek advice. Questions that parents repeatedly ask are: *How are other children treating my child? Does my child fit in with others? How can we help our child maintain healthy self-esteem as she/he learns to deal with differences? What should my child's school program include?* It is in dealing with these situations that I again look to my past

for some answers. I try to be honest with parents and students sharing some of the wonderful experiences I had in school but at the same time, being realistic that I did not fit into every aspect of the school life. I use the perspective I have gained as an adult, that if the child with special needs does receive some rejection and teasing by peers that although it is not appropriate, it is a common occurrence at this time in a child's life.

I want students to feel included in the school community, knowing how important recognition and acceptance had been for me. I want that level of acceptance for my students. During my early years at Central, there was little interaction between teachers and the students with special needs. I did not understand the reluctance of teachers to embrace students with special needs. I believed that if the teachers were accepting, then open-mindedness by peers would naturally occur. My frustrations led me to examine my own life.

I realized that teachers accepted me not only because of my presence but was also because of my attitude, and my parent's attitude. Acceptance came from teachers working with me, realizing that I had potential as an academic student. My personality and determination to live life to the fullest eased my inclusion. The school did not close doors or relegate me to the corner to do my work. They embraced the opportunity to know and include me, and as a result, I realized my potential.

I expected my colleagues would know how to accomplish this and being willing to include all types of students. I did not take into consideration the comfort level, personalities, interests, and expertise of colleagues in working with students who have special needs. I did not consider the fact that inclusion had been imposed by school and district administration, adding to the reluctance of teachers to participate. I also failed to

realize that I was relatively easy to include because of my academic abilities. Students who are significantly below the cognitive, social, emotional and academic levels of their classmates present different challenges than those limited only by their physical disabilities. I needed to show teachers how to work with students. I needed to give teachers the support they needed such as materials, aide time and emotional support. Starting with willing participants was another factor that I realized was essential. The teachers I had in school were willing to include me; I needed to seek out willing teachers at Central Middle School.

It is now an exception when teachers do not acknowledge students with special needs, and make them feel a part of the school community. I smile watching daily encounters in the classrooms and hallways between teachers and students. I see other students, influenced by the lead of their teachers and support staff, including students with special needs in activities. Studies by Helmstetter, Peck, and Giangreco (1994) and Stainback, Stainback, Moravcek, and Jackson (1992) found that students develop positive attitudes toward students with disabilities based on the experience of having disabled students in their classrooms. Helmstetter et al. (1994) also noted that inclusion enhanced student friendships and relationships, with greater understanding and empathy evidenced. Demonstrated on many occasions is how, when a classroom or a school works together, a natural acceptance and inclusion of all students will occur with greater frequency and ease than when a child works in isolation from peers.

I believe teaching is more than academics; it is about preparing students for life beyond the classroom and the school community. It is about helping students to set personal standards, both in academics and in life. Teachers realize that one must have

respect for oneself before there exists respect others. People hurt themselves by not showing self- respect. If one acts out against others, one is hurting themselves and not just others. Teachers try to instil acceptance, respect, and tolerance for different philosophies, religions, cultures, life styles, abilities, and economic backgrounds in students. Teaching is about expecting students to reach for their ultimate potential Teaching is taking life lessons, the good and the bad, and hope that others will obtain a positive message from them. These are some of the lessons involving the basic principles of life that I have learned along the way in my life. I want my students, whether they have the cognitive level of a forty-year old university professor or the ability of a five-year old to achieve optimum learning while gaining self-respect and respect for others, something needed to function in society.

As a Special Education teacher, I have implemented many personal lessons learned while swimming through life with arms only. I try whenever possible to have the students learn in real situations and develop skills to assist them in reaching their maximum independence. Swimming is not a dry-land activity. Few lessons learned on the deck are internalised; most learning occurs in the water engaged in the act of swimming. I encourage my friends and colleagues to look beyond the disability to see the true person. Most importantly, I strive to have all students, regardless of ability, be accountable for themselves and their actions. I encourage teachers and others in the school to treat students with physical limitations the same as any other student in the school. If they are doing something wrong, correct them. If they are trying their best to learn a new skill, encourage and praise them. Include them, when possible, in all activities within the

school. With some creativity, there are boundless methods to implement inclusion practices. The only limitation is the mindset of the individuals involved.

## Chapter 9 – Reflections

*As I touch the pool deck, a feeling of elation envelops me. Exhaustion prevents me from climbing out to celebrate my accomplishment. I have completed an enormous task, something I never conceived of attempting. Organizers and fellow participants congratulate me. Emerging from the water, I glance over to see family and friends waving and cheering. Present since the beginning, they have encouraged and supported my efforts. When I started to falter, they gave me words of encouragement and nourishment.*

*The marathon was, for the most part, an enjoyable experience. It gave me opportunity to think, to test my strength, to prove to myself that I was capable. As the marathon progressed, I persevered, despite the exhaustion and the pain that sometimes shot through my body. I was determined to finish and to rise from the water triumphant. As I neared completion, I contemplated plans for the future. What would be my next step? How would I use what I learned to assist me in being a better swimmer?*

In 1969, when I swam my first marathon, I emerged from the pool exhausted and proud. Pride registered on her face, my mother came into the change room to lend any needed assistance. I remember asking, “What is my father doing?” She replied that he had gone for a walk and would be back soon. Affected by my swim, he needed to leave the pool area. To this day, I get emotional remembering that marathon and my parents’ reactions. They were especially proud of my accomplishments, as I had recently been released from hospital after an eight-month stay. I walked away from that day satisfied with my accomplishment and convinced that my parents were proud of me. When I re-examine that day as an adult, after having read and studied the works of Connelly and Clandinin (1998), and Aoki (1989), I have a greater understanding and appreciation of the

emotional investment that my parents made in my journey for independence, self-worth, and a complete life. I am also able to use my feelings and reactions, as well as those of my parents, to better analyse my personal and professional reaction to situations in the present.

Witte-Townsend (2002) suggests that through purposeful lingering and remembering meaning is born. It is in meaning that we come to know ourselves, realizing the significance of past, present, and future in learning who we are, what it is to be alive and to be human. Memories assist us to proceed through life and discover our place in it. By remembering both our personal and professional life, we have a wonderful opportunity to examine from where we came, where we are, and where we are going to in the future.

I have come to understand that the filters through which I viewed my life as a child are not the ones that I used as an adult when completing this inquiry. Completing this study has given me a new perspective with which to view my life and the impact it has on my teaching practice. I have uncovered some of the true interests and events in my personal and social condition that Ted Aoki (1989) says are uncovered through critical reflection.

During the writing of this project, there have been many periods of lingering over memories, attempting to bring meaning to them. At times, I lingered too long, stopping to wallow, remaining stuck in the past. Former behaviours and attitudes resurfaced. I am not proud of some of my moods and actions during this period. I eventually realized that I would benefit from this personal self-examination, both personally and professionally and this realization helped me to move on and continue the journey.

Marne Isakson (1996) believes that one of the benefits of reflection comes from examining the uncomfortable places in one's life. In completing this study, I have experienced the emotional release that she claims as one of those benefits. I have been able to capture, on paper and in my mind, incidents and reflections of my life, giving me a clearer perspective of who I am and what the future can hold. The inquiry permitted me to deal with important matters previously tossed aside or buried in my subconscious. I have faith that I have become, and will continue to be, a better educator and person because of this inquiry.

I have become conscious of my tendency to impose personal expectations on others of how life should be lived. At times, my personal experiences and philosophies clouded my professional practice and perception of my students and their decisions. I need to remember that people must discover their own life path and that students are no exception.

During the course of my research, I came to appreciate not only the uniqueness of my life but also how it could have been quite different had one element not been in place. I am a very fortunate person, blessed with extraordinary family, friends, and teachers whose love and support have provided a solid foundation from which I gained strength as I build and live my life. They do not restrict my swimming to the shallow end of the pool wearing a life jacket, safe from danger. Instead, they encourage me to join them swimming and playing in the deep end.

I have a deeper understanding that my family and friends can express support and encouragement but unless I have the desire, the ambition and the drive to succeed their efforts are in vain. Further, I can understand that not all people with disabilities share my desire to appear normal. Some seek the companionship of like people. Although it is

difficult, I must also accept the fact that there will always be people who when they look at “my” students or me they see the disability.

Because of this self-examination, I now admit, without guilt, that I have played a significant role in the success of my life. In the past, I would not accept credit for my accomplishments. I usually wanted to give it to others. I questioned if I received praise because I was not able-bodied. Did people feel obligated to offer affirmation because of my disability, or were they acknowledging my accomplishments in spite of the disability?

People throughout out my life have told me that I have courage. I do not see myself as having courage. To me courage is overcoming cancer, burying your children, dealing with a disabling condition after having lived able-bodied, or standing up for your beliefs when it means that you may lose your life. Through assessment of my life and values. I acknowledge that I still desire recognition as an active, successful, and independent person to feel complete. I do not want to wear the label of “active-disabled” person. If labelled, I want it be as a *person, teacher, friend, and daughter*. Despite my growth, I still fight demons regarding how I envision myself. There are times, when I am alone, that I feel rejected wondering if I have done something to offend people or if they have tired of dealing with my disability and the difficulties that it sometimes creates. Needed is further examination of these feelings to fully understand them and how they affect my interactions with others and my teaching practice.

### *My Practice*

Through self-reflection of my life and practices, I have greater confidence that parents and staff look to me as a qualified teacher, successful in her practice. I believe that there are benefits from the empathy I bring to my work concerning the struggles and

triumphs of my students and their parents. I have a determination that my students receive an education and experiences that will benefit them beyond the confines of the school environment.

In completing this inquiry, I came to realize that I must become more confident and assertive in working with the teams that support the students whose cases I manage. When inclusion first began at Central Middle School, I was reluctant to criticize or demand too much from my colleagues. I was willing to write programs and find materials, doing all the work needed to support students. As long as the support staff and I were knowledgeable about the students and their program, I felt that inclusion would exist. Now I recognize that I have done an injustice to both the students and staff.

I appreciate better that not every teacher possesses the comfort with inclusion that many of the teachers in my schools did. Those teachers did not have any special training, and yet I was included in all aspects of my school program. Because of these personal experiences, I expected that all teachers would be able to deal with special needs students if given some support. I realize that this is not the case. Needed is education for teachers and support staff on how to work with special-needs students within their classroom. Needed is guidance in how to promote interaction and friendships with peers, including all students in classroom activities. If all students are to be included in the classroom community, then teachers and support staff need encouragement to interact with and meet the needs of all students.

Roberts and Smith (1999) cite structural and physical, and organisational arrangements in a classroom, the disabled child living outside of the school neighbourhood; or a perceived lack of skills or knowledge in interaction with peers who

have a disability as factors that stifle interaction of able-bodied and non-able bodied students. Teachers need to be aware of these studies and others like them that will help to promote inclusion.

*Suggestions for Improvement in the present environment*

*Monitor class size and composition.* In order to ensure the best learning environment for all students, close attention to the number of students with special needs placed in each class is essential. Needed is diligence in insuring an equitable workload for teachers now that a guarantee concerning class size and composition no longer exists. The temptation to load teachers with more special needs students than they can affectively accommodate can occur, especially with those teachers with excellent records in teaching children with special needs. The reason for their success may be, at least in part that they had the time and support staff to work with these students and support staff.

*Provide clear, practical, purposeful, and supported Individual Education Plans.* Goals, strategies, resources, and assessment tools are crucial if the student is to benefit from their IEP. Without a clear, practical, and purposeful document, the IEP is merely a piece of paper. More care in writing, monitoring, and supporting Individual Education Plans will assist all parties in providing an appropriate education for all students in the class. Increased observations and participation by learning assistants and special-education teachers in the various programs, accompanied with team meetings to solve problems, provide further resources, determine when goals have been met, and what the next step will be, is one method of achieving this desired practice. Assumptions that teachers and support staff independently ask for help whenever needed is dangerous. Often requests for assistance happen only when the situation becomes critical or when

there is an immediate need for new ideas, strategies, and resources. All members of the team must understand, know how to implement and put into practice, on a daily basis, the contents of the IEP. Student needs, and not those of the teacher or support staff should generate the Individual Education Plan and its implementation.

Provision of written material promoting inclusion practices within the intermediate and secondary classroom can assist the team in inclusion practices. These materials should include philosophy, practical strategies, and suggestions for inclusion and the meeting of goals/activities embodied within the Individual Education Plan. This information will promote the use of the IEP by all team members.

*Promote the concept of team.* Teachers and support staff need time to meet, build, and discuss upcoming activities, lessons, students in the classroom, and inclusion strategies. By providing time each week for the classroom team to meet, greater opportunities may be present to include all students within the classroom. When any part of the team is not compatible, disaster often occurs. Inappropriate matches usually occur when the timetable or the expertise of one person dictate partnership. When the adults do not make a good team, physical withdrawal of the named student from the classroom, allowing for separation of the two adults involved often occurs. When this occurs, missed are opportunities for students and teacher to form bonds, socialize, appreciate, and enjoy each other. When feasible, changes to create a better team, one in which relationships will flourish with both adults and peers, are to be encouraged.

An aide should be part of the team, not the person responsible for the education of the student with special needs. Inclusion works best when support staff work with all students. Teachers' involvement on a daily basis with all students is to be encouraged.

regardless of the student's program. The program for child with special needs should not be a mystery to the teacher; something that can be quite common in a middle and secondary school environment. If a team member is experiencing difficulty in fulfilling his/her role, guidance and suggestions to correct the situation is appropriate. If problems still exist, then outside intervention is called for to alleviate the situation. This is not a move for power or control; it is for the sake of the students involved and other team members.

Communication and collaboration with other educational partners is one reoccurring theme in the literature. Aziz (1997) suggests, "The most powerful support (for inclusion) is having a positive attitude and being a good listener" (p. 1). Giangreco (1996) lists ten recommendations for teachers. He states "teachers who teach students without disabilities have the skills to successfully teach students with disabilities" (p. 1) and suggests ten strategies for success. Many involve effective communication and collaboration. The collaborative strategy of forming teams of experts that share a single set of goals, pursued in a coordinated way, requires establishing school-based teams, such as those that exist in SD #59. The strategy of clarifying shared expectations focuses on communication of expectations for the student and the teacher. McConnell's (1996) start-up strategies for inclusion also include pro-active problem solving, recruiting outside expertise, and including all staff in decision-making. Ayres and Hedeem (1996) also suggest that teachers need to engage in active, collaborative, creative-problem solving with their colleagues and students. Collaborative and competent support staff can assist the teacher in developing and maintaining classroom routines. Teachers must communicate their concerns, be

assertive and explicit in asking questions, and specify what support they need from other team members.

Further development of the existing teams would help improve the delivery of special education. An environment that allows for the incorporation of individual strengths along with flexibility in supporting students, delivering programs, and achieving outcomes is desirable. Individual programs that occur within the entire school community, supported by a school team, help to promote inclusion and the building of team. Strong, natural support can foster students' sense of belonging, thus encouraging success.

*Foster the formation of natural peer relationships.* The theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) states that children will form intentions to interact positively with classmates with disabilities if they value the action themselves and if others who are significant to them want them to do it. I want to foster an environment in which friendships grow that are real, not forced because of a sense of moral obligation or duty resulting from adult requests is crucial for successful inclusion. Working towards maximum independence is crucial for students with special needs but at the same time, care that the activities assigned do not widen the gap between the student on an IEP and their peers is critical.

In September of each year, education of students concerning the special needs students in their classes would help to promote a climate of understanding, empathy, and hopefully, interaction. Periodic check-ups and opportunities to train students in how to interact and assist the student will allow relationships to develop without fear and uncertainty. Peer tutoring and mentoring activities have the potential to stimulate students' sense of membership in school. The interaction could take place in many different forms

including assistance with academic lessons, being a friend, social and life skill development. Students feel a part of the community when active participation in school activities should occur with their peers. Leadership class, art, drama, music, and intramural sports teams have traditionally enhanced students' sense of school membership by providing them with a special "niche" in the school community. These are wonderful opportunities for all students to work together and promote friendships.

*Communicate with parents.* Good communication with parents and team members helps achieve student goals. It is the responsibility of parents to advocate for their child and my responsibility to deliver a successful program benefiting their child. Home support is essential for a successful program. The chances for long-term retention of new concepts and skills increase if parents participate in the program. Successful partnership with parents is possible with good communication, the teaching of desired skills in all settings, and promoting shared goals with the student. If parents and school share the same vision then students have a greater potential of achieving success. When there is limited co-operation with the home, the child often experiences frustration in the differing expectations between home and school. Progress and transition of skills to environments outside of the school setting do not occur with the same degree of success.

Naylor (1986) believes that parents have a major influence on their child's attitude toward work and life, education and career decisions. During the late 1980s, Naylor encouraged parents to assume a positive role and be actively involved in the career choices of their children. Parents helping their child to explore different careers, examine the lives of successful people with disabilities, and assisting in the identification of

strengths and interests will create a positive atmosphere for their child to start his/her life as an independent adult. This is especially crucial in the pre-teen years.

Frequent contact with parents would promote an atmosphere of trust and sharing. Information is attained regarding new interests or dislikes, health changes, development of social interaction outside of the school environment, and the transfer of skills to the home environment, if frequent contact occurs. Contact should not be limited to the special education teacher. Parents also want to hear from the classroom teacher how their child is progressing. Some students are unable to bring home an accurate picture of the day, leaving out details. Some parents are uncomfortable in phoning, feeling that they are intruding. Other parents are uncertain of what they truly want for their child in the school setting and therefore avoid making decisions or avoid the school staff.

### *Is Total Inclusion Necessary?*

A colleague and close friend who teaches primary school shared a personal story about the importance of inclusion for schools. We have discussed on many occasions the importance physical presence plays in promoting acceptance of children with special needs. We have discussed many aspects of the issue including society's acceptance of people with special needs. We have asked questions such as; did acceptance outside the four walls of the classroom exist for these children? We have speculated on the place that people with special needs will hold, as this generation of children grew into adults and how accepted they will be. Will the tolerance, acceptance, and inclusion that schools strive for continue to flourish in the outside world? My friend found some possible and disturbing answers at a school assembly.

My friend continually strives to create a community of acceptance in the classroom and feels each year she is successful in achieving this goal. She was dismayed that students from her classroom made fun of an intermediate-aged student with special needs whose behaviour had drawn the attention of many students. After the assembly, she spoke to her class concerning their behaviour and the need to accept all people. After finishing the story, I asked my friend the reason she felt this incident had taken place. After a few moments of reflection, she realized there were no students with special needs in her classroom that year. Exposure to accepting others with physical and/or academic differences had been limited. She was left with the following questions. Is it necessary to have constant contact with students who have special needs in order to maintain acceptance and tolerance?

### *Conclusion*

When I started on this marathon, I had predetermined the conclusion that I would write. I was convinced the culmination of research and my reflections would reveal the need for all students to be included in a regular classroom. I projected into my summation that without inclusion students with special needs would return to institutions, segregated schools, and hospitals. I believed that if I promoted the segregation of a single student that I would be struck by lightning: viewed as a failure and a hypocrite. I had the conclusion written and was ready to submit the project when insomnia hit.

I found myself tossing and turning at night, playing in my mind the story of my life. I saw myself as: an educator, a student, a union activist, a Christian, a person with a physical disability, a person who strives for independence, as a family member and as a friend. I evaluated my own reactions over the years to others with disabilities and my

reactions today to both students and adults with physical and mental challenges. I wondered where I would be if I had been educated in a segregated school? I thought about living a life different from the one that I presently enjoy. Would I be happy and complete? There was no answer forth coming.

I realized I must overcome my own insecurities and need for approval, and be more conscientious and diligent in my job. To fail at this is to fail, not only my students but also, myself. I made the following commitments. I will be more conscientious in my job as case manager, where I oversee the program and its implementation. If I see or hear about problems involving support staff, then I will deal with it immediately. Either I can work with the aide in solving issues around program and its delivery, or if it involves discipline or evaluation, I can refer the matter to administration. I will perform weekly checks with all support staff to discuss the student programs and to assess if they are in need of assistance.

My thoughts then went into what I truly believed about inclusion. During my waking hours and in the course of my work, I talked to teachers and support staff about supporting students with special needs in the regular classroom. Support staff, provided with materials by the teacher or I, is predominantly servicing the students. The students are not receiving direct support from teachers on a daily basis.

Many teachers are frustrated with their inability to meet the needs of all students. The responsibility of educating the average student is more challenging and demanding than ten years ago. Teachers need support for these students and feel overwhelmed without adding the special needs students into the equation. They want support staff to assist all students. This does not occur on a regular basis because students with aide

support often need direct assistance or constant monitoring. The aide and their student are also out of the classroom environment for a portion of the day. When in the classroom, the students are often working on an individual program in isolation from their peers. Small-group work can occur but it depends on the students' needs and their cognitive levels. I started to think about how much students actually were included with their peers in academic classes.

A common theme continually emerged in my thoughts. Why are we attempting to include students into classes where they are isolated and are not having their needs met? Are we not isolating them even further by having them work on a separate program which shows everyone the lower levels at which these students achieve and function? There is little opportunity for inclusion of students more than four years behind grade level in reading, writing and computational skills. Where the students are truly included is in physical education and other option classes. Special events in a classroom and in the school, as well as, break time and lunch are other times where inclusion occurs naturally. Teachers interact with students more in these situations than when trying to teach a classroom of students academic subjects.

I next explored in my mind peer relationships and acceptance. What would be the impact of acceptance by the community on a social and work base, if students with special needs were not fully included in all regular programs? Would my students have friends once they left school that would advocate for them when needed and include them in their lives? The answer came to me out in the community.

On three different occasions within a two-week span, I saw five of my former students in community settings. All hold down a job in the service industry and live in

supported housing. They are engaged in community activities. They are happy and have friends. Who are their friends? They are other people, for the most part, with special needs. Able-bodied and able-minded people spoke and interacted with them on each occasion I observed. The young adults responded and were happy to talk with them, but their attention quickly returned to their friends. Like anyone, they had chosen to socialize with friends who have similar interests and abilities to their own.

I recalled a conversation with a friend who told me that her son with special needs was making good progress on all goals within his individual program. Her son was well liked in school and everyone knew him. When they were out in the community kids and adults would come up and talk to her son. At school, her child's day was divided between classes where inclusion with the main stream population and smaller classes where basic reading, math skills were taught to students of similar abilities. My friend believes in this as the best system for her child. However, what about students? What is best for them?

I have been both a classroom teacher and a special educator in primary, intermediate, and secondary classes. I have been involved in a variety of program-delivery models including a segregated school as part of my university training. I would not recommend the latter for students with special needs. Instead, I feel that it is time to meet the needs of students with special needs in the environment that is most appropriate for them and not in a one-size-fits-all model.

It is time to alter what the box looks like. Instead of trying to include all students into one model, examine each child and his or her personal needs. Intellectually capable students should be in most or all classes with their peers. Students who need some adaptations should also be included at all times, with support when needed. Where I start

to see a difference is with students who need a program entirely separate from peers in academic subjects. Needed is an examination of life goals, capabilities and social needs of these students and, only then, make a decision regarding best placement. I would never recommend a separate building or facility. What I believe is needed is a small classroom setting where basic math, reading and writing skills can be emphasized. Part of the program would be a life skills component where students would learn skills to help them reach their maximum independence. There should be an emphasis on learning for life as well as for fun. I am not suggesting that schools hold back any student. Education should always seek to assist special needs students to reach their maximum potential.

Would the students suffer because they were isolated? I do not believe that this would be the case because I see them being included for part of each day, as well as, at breaks and lunch. I watch the students in Life Skills class enjoy themselves and feel free to learn using materials and activities designed for their academic level. These same students often sit quietly in a regular classroom, embarrassed to use materials provided and limited in their interaction with peers.

When would socialization with the other students in the school occur? I envision inclusion occurring in option classes, physical education, assemblies, special activities, breaks, and lunches. I see inviting students into different classes to be involved in appropriate activities. Schools that are more than places of academic learning, where encouraged is a response to the personal, emotional, and other skills needed, will meet the needs of children that frequently go unmet in traditional school environments.

I realize that my proposal goes against present School District #59 Board policy and school district practice but I believe that the time has come to re-examine what the current

philosophy is costing some children in this school district. The policy talks about meeting the needs of individual students and provided the best education for everyone, but is the policy achieving that? I am not sure that my proposal is the answer, but I feel the need for exploration of possible changes, particularly at the middle and high schools.

As a Special Education teacher, I try to be caring and empathetic, a champion of my students' rights but I am also a pragmatic person. My job is to provide an educational program for students, preparing them for life outside of the school community. Needed is the chance to learn basic skills to achieve maximum independence, while developing interests, hobbies, and friendships, in the most appropriate environment. I feel that it is my responsibility to teach not only through classroom lessons, but also by example of what life has to offer. I feel a need to instill in my students a sense of pride in their accomplishments and a determination to meet any obstacle in their path. Most of all I want them to look beyond the label that the school and community might place on them and find their own personal label to wear proudly. I want them to know whom they are and that they are capable of fulfilling their dreams.

As a person with special needs I had to mourn for that what I could never have, celebrate what I could accomplish, realize that no one is included in everything, and then by accepting my situation, create the best life for me. I was either going to let spina bifida define me or I was going to define it. I have not allowed my impairment define me. I did not permit the outside world to define me. I have defined myself. I hope my students experience the joy of overcoming some of their limitations, as I did. As Helen Keller said. "The richness of the human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome."

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