# SHARING SAM'S JOURNEY:

# THE INTEGRATION OF ONE CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis is a documentation of the experiences of one child, diagnosed with Down Syndrome and autism, in a regular elementary school classroom over a three year period. The focus of this investigation was on the intensive 'peer buddying program' that was developed in order to support this child's language acquisition and socialization. The buddying program's purpose was twofold. First, there was the need to increase this child's opportunity to engage in activities with his peers, to help him acquire essential communication and social skills. The second, equally important purpose was to provide regular opportunities for the other children in the classroom to take an active and important role in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

This thesis examines practices that encourage the creation of an inclusive and supportive classroom environment, for all students, particularly those diagnosed with significantly challenging special needs. It builds on my previous research as an active member of the Teacher Action Research Group (TARG) at Simon Fraser University. Particularly relevant to my investigations were the studies done by Kelleen Toohey (2000) on the assignments of school identities, and on the effect on their access to the knowledge and resources of the classroom. I used Vivian Paley's (1992) accounts of her efforts to address inclusion in her classroom, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning in classroom communities as a framework for the development of the buddy program.

This thesis explores identity, power and accessibility to resources in public school classrooms. It examines practices that encourage children to construct worlds that are rich, dynamic and fulfilling to them, while providing a learning environment that is encouraging, supportive and challenging. I present my data in narratives of the classroom as I describe Sam's, his classmates, and my journey toward understanding more about classrooms and their possibilities.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# My Journey

*"There have been easier worlds in which to be either a student or an educator."*

*(McDermott, 1999. p. 11)*

## Introduction

Classrooms today are facing great challenges to try to meet the needs of a diverse and changing population in a world where 'new' knowledge and information becomes obsolete before educators can even teach it. The school world, as a reflection of the greater world, is faster and more intense than ever before.

We as educators are hard pressed to develop curriculum, instructional material and programs to meet the needs of all our students and at the same time try to maintain our position in a traditional educational system that has its roots in a much different world. Teachers feel frustrated and overwhelmed by the demands of the job, and parents are concerned with preparing their children for the bigger, more competitive world. District personnel and administrators are challenged to meet budget restraints, demands for greater accountability and the educational needs of the students, while trying to

support educators in the classrooms.  With this endless sense of panic to learn more, do more, with less and less financial support, it is easy to lose sight of the children, who are depending on us.

As a teacher in the public school system for over twenty years, living in a middle class white majority neighborhood, I have been concerned by the inequities and imbalances that take place on a daily basis, in our schools and in our communities, as a result of this fast paced, chaotic and competitive society that we have created.  Frequently I observe subtle and overt expressions of discrimination and exclusion of children and their families.  I have witnessed the confusion and despair of parents who desperately want their children to have access to  the same educational and social experiences that other children have.

Each of us comes into this world with a variety of natural talents, traits and challenges.  Life experiences, circumstance and chance are blended into the mix and help to create the identities by which we are recognized by our communities.   Many of us are fortunate, through birth and circumstance, to have a comfortable place in society and there is little that will stand in the way of our success.  We are able to fit within the socially created norms.  This becomes a place of comfort, from which we are then able to view, judge, and perpetuate the ranking, ordering and exclusion of others.  But for many of other people's children,  the impact of  socially constructed measures of success creates feelings of inadequacy and a sense of failure.

Particularly concerning to me is the effect this ranking, ordering and labeling has had on our children within the walls of our classrooms.  This regularly occurs with the

knowledge and encouragement of the 'professionals', whose primary job is to nurture, encourage and teach our young citizens. Over time, in our educational system, certain skills, behaviors and attitudes have been identified as being most important for school success. These have been arbitrarily identified and sustained in our schools, regardless of current research which questions their validity, and they allow for the exclusion of, and discrimination against, children.

As explained by Foucault (1984), our educational system has its roots in practices of the 17th and 18th centuries, in institutions such as prisons, factories and hospitals. These institutions organized large groups of individuals by judging, sorting and ranking them according to sets of standards created by a few individuals who held positions of power. By focusing on this identification/remediation, it has been very easy for educators to overlook many other relevant factors in the lives of children. This system provides society the opportunity to ignore and discount other facets of many children, and in turn control how these children are perceived in their school environments.

It is within this system, as a reflection of our larger communities, that our children are regularly labeled and excluded based on arbitrarily identified norms of society and our school system. Through this process, the complex natures of our children are simplified and streamlined. They are seen as specific kinds of citizens and learners. The result is that many are denied the experiences and resources accessible to others. Their knowledge and expertise remains unknown and their voices unheard.

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. (Foucault, 1972, p. 212)

I, too, both as a child and young adult, accepted the identity that was created for me in the school system. Early in my educational years, I settled into the identity that had been prepared for me. I understood and never questioned my position. I was seen as a quiet and polite student who did satisfactory work, but would not stand out as one of the 'high achievers'. I was not expected to be particularly powerful or demanding, nor was I driven to success. I was not asked to take on powerful leadership roles in the classroom, nor was I expected to actively participate in discussions or presentations. This identity allowed me, rather limply and half-heartedly, to go through the motions of completing my education, and finding my place in the world.

But unknown to the institution of school, in other places, where my voice was heard, I held quite different and powerful positions. Working in the yard with my father, cruising the Gulf Islands and Sunshine Coast with my family, I was seen as capable and confident. I showed expertise in many areas. I could certainly hold my own in my role in the church, being involved in choir, youth group and teaching Sunday school. At home, I confidently pounded out tunes on the piano. I strummed love songs on the guitar and played a variety of instruments in community bands. I gained tremendous experience working with children with special needs by volunteering with numerous organizations. I

was a young entrepreneur, with a babysitting business that had thirty -seven families as clients!  As a young child, I was one of the best tree climbers, and I spent time with all the neighborhood boys, bike riding and flying down the big hill in the old red wagon.  I could fly further off the swing than anyone else dared.

But there was no blending of my two worlds; no opportunity to use my skills and talents to make a difference in my education.  These fluid, diverse and shifting identities remained hidden during the years of my formal education, with the school identity firmly ingrained in everyone's minds, especially mine.

On reflection, I do recall teachers in my past, who were curious about me,  who challenged me to try different roles, and who believed in my potential, even when I didn't believe in myself.  I am sure that they are unaware of the impact that they did make on my life, but each time I feel drawn to slip back into that restrictive school identity, I see their faces.  They, like so many other educators, were teachers who had a vision for all children - or me, at least - beyond the limits of our traditional school.  They actively and persistently struggled to ensure that I was seen and heard.  They were able to move away from the limitations of labeling and ranking and see the possibilities in me, and presumably in other students as well.

I carried my history, my story with me as I moved into my professional career.  It is because of this history that I  have been  drawn to discover the hidden identities of my students and make room for their complexities within the walls of my classroom.   I feel honoured to become a part of the lives of my students and their families, to be given the opportunity to really get to know them.  I marvel at the diversity of these young people.

I realize that my view has not always been shared by my colleagues. I have seen professionals, unsure of how to deal with children who did not fit within the expected norms of the school, turning their backs on these students, requesting alternative placements or throwing up their hands in frustration. I have seen children laugh, taunt or ignore those children who have been identified as being inferior, or different. I have had parents demand that their own children not be expected to sit near or work with specific children. I have witnessed children being excluded from activities. I have seen the look of distrust and disdain in the eyes of those more privileged. For many of our children, our classrooms, which should be places that challenge the mind with new ideas and ways of seeing the world, become places where some members of our society feel unwanted, unsafe and misunderstood.

I taught for many years in primary classrooms before I decided to take a position in a district program for children who were identified as having severe social, emotional and behavioral challenges. After years of working with these wonderful, talented and fascinating children and their families, and feeling their frustration at a system that showed so little respect or tolerance for its members, I realized that I needed to look for something different. I recognized that it was not only children with official labels or diagnoses who were being excluded, but that many children , for many reasons, were being denied access to the resources and experiences of their peer community. I resolved to try to create a classroom community that would actively and willingly support and include all its members. To do this, I chose to return to the regular classroom.

It was during this time of change in my teaching life that I become involved in a teacher action research group at Simon Fraser University.  This group brought together people with a variety of professional titles; teacher, researcher, professor, video ethnographer, who all wanted to take a closer look at the practices that were routinely used in our schools.  Through our weekly meetings I was given a wonderful opportunity to share my frustrations and uncertainties and take a serious look at some of the current educational research and the theories on which the research was based.  With this knowledgeable support system, I began to clarify some of the issues that I felt were most important to me.

Particularly relevant to me was a study done by Kelleen Toohey (2000).  Her study looked at the school identities that were assigned second language learners and the effect that these identities had on these children's opportunity to access the knowledge of the classroom.  She saw the learning of language to be a struggle to appropriate others' voices and to 'bend' these to their own purposes, and she argued that language learning was situated within the social interactions of the community.  Contrary to other researchers, Toohey saw 'successful' language learning as not dependent on the motivation and intellectual ability of the individual student, but on the opportunities for active participation, legitimacy and access to the resources of the community.  Children who were seen as being 'unable' maintained that identity, and their learning environment provided them with the experiences and resources that would support this identity.

My early study as a teacher action researcher drew from Toohey's understanding of the importance of opportunities to access community resources and practices.  From

there I began to look at the anthropological research of Lave and Wenger (1991). They examined the notion of apprenticeship by studying a variety of models used around the world. Through this research they came to realize that all learning is situated in particular social relations and physical environments. They saw learning as "an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" as "'legitimate peripheral participation [LPP] in a community of practice"(p. 31). They propose that LPP is a "descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent" (p. 35). LPP explains the important and active role of all members of a community. It recognizes that newcomers must be able to access the resources and expertise of the community's old timers while gradually increasing their involvement in the community's activities. In some communities, the roles of all members of the group are important and respected and those roles would shift and change over time and situation. Within this theoretical concept, there is the acceptance of the legitimate movement and shifting of roles within the social practices of a community.

Lave and Wenger saw that in some communities, by being a legitimate peripheral participant, members were able to participate in a way that was satisfying and positive for them and at the same time, their participation was a relevant and important part of the group's work. Members were encouraged in some communities to do as much as they could do and they had the opportunity to broaden their participation when they were ready to do so. They were provided the opportunity to appropriate both the language and the behaviors of those members around them who are experts. Their roles were

important and necessary to the learning of the group. Working together provided the opportunity to achieve what could individually be impossible.

When I applied this to the classroom, it became clear to me that the educational practices that were most beneficial to my students were those that allowed all students the opportunity to access resources and knowledge. Further, I recognized that although the experiences and contributions of community members would not look the same, the knowledge, skills and resources of all members were important, relevant and valuable. Educational practices that demanded the building of inclusive, active and cooperative learning communities would support the best learning environment for all our children.

With these ideas in mind, I began to wonder how this type of learning community could possibly be created. As previously outlined, our educational system focuses on the identification and ranking of our students. It lends itself to the exclusion and rejection of many students. Walking down the halls of our schools, seeing the children sitting outside the classroom doors or next to the principal's office, I wondered if fundamental changes in our system were possible. How could I begin to make a difference?

I began to read the stories told by Vivian Paley (1992), a teacher who also struggled to make a difference in the system. Paley's stories told of her worries, confusions, contradictions and celebrations as she worked and learned with young children. Her vast experiences as a teacher did not make many of her daily classroom dilemmas any easier to solve. Children were being excluded, feeling left out and unappreciated. One of her greatest concerns was the power of exclusion. In her book, You Can't Say, You Can't Play, she tried to address this particular issue. By recognizing

the school as a public place, in which everyone should have a legitimate place she initiated the rule, 'You can't say you can't play' in her kindergarten classroom. This rule had a dramatic effect on the expectations and the experiences of all the community members. It did not solve all the problems, but it created a new and different way of looking and experiencing learning in school. In our weekly meetings, my research group spoke at great length about Paley's ideas and how they might work in our own classrooms. We related Paley's stories to Toohey's concerns about the effect that inequitable distribution of knowledge, resources and materials have on the learning opportunities for children. A few of us decided to look more closely at exploring this rule in our classrooms.

Personally, I was much inspired by Paley's simple, yet powerful, philosophical shift and I wanted to initiate this rule with my students and monitor the effect it had on their educational and social experiences. For the first time, I really began to believe that there was the possibility for change. Paley had identified a specific practice that encouraged the inclusion of all members and could also support the academic, emotional and social growth of all children. In my grade two classroom, I discussed Paley's rule for the first time. I told my students about the discussions I had had on this issue with my university research group about this, then asked for their opinions. I explained that in our learning community we were going to try to not only share our materials, workspace and games, but we would also share our knowledge and expertise with each other. We would attempt to create a classroom environment that would allow everyone to have the resources they needed to experience success in their learning.

The children at first were enthusiastic, and then confused. This was certainly a different way of being at school. Comments such as, "I don't want to play with him"," don't look at my work", "there isn't room for anyone else to join us", were deemed unacceptable responses. Each child had a place within our walls, to be supported, encouraged, comforted or helped. As they pondered how this rule would impact on their our lives they began to create scenarios in which one person would surely have to be excluded. "What if's..." rang loud and clear. My response was that if a problem arose, we would need to deal with the specifics of the problem and come to a resolution. Once this was accomplished there was no reason for someone to not be allowed access to the group. It was a simple rule that I tried to enforce, encourage, and most importantly, model at all times. My students knew that no one would be asked to leave the room to work someplace else, and no one would be left to struggle through an assignment on their own. We had a responsibility as a community to work through challenges, conflicts, disagreements or misunderstandings without removing any individual's right to be a part of the community. As had been the case with Paley, having this rule did not solve all the problems in my classroom, and it did not take away hurt feelings or angry words, but it did give us a different way of looking dilemmas. The 'what if's' eventually stopped. One day, one of my young students came running into the classroom after recess with a look of dismay on his face, and asked, "Why can't you make everyone in the school follow the 'you can't say you can't play' rule?"

As I began to investigate the challenges of creating an inclusive classroom community, the more I was struck by the power of the identities that were assigned to

children in our schools.  If we were going to create a place for all, what could we do with these labels that were attached to our children that contradicted our efforts to include? With the assignment of an identity comes the opportunity  for excuses be made, to justify why inclusion can't possibly work for certain individuals.  As a teacher who worked with students who had been identified as having such severe challenges that they needed separate classrooms, I was perhaps particularly sensitive to these issues.  However, I also understand why it is so easy to slide back into this pattern; struggling within the constraints and overwhelming demands of our jobs, we can be quick to label, identify and sort our children in a valiant effort to somehow make the system we have created work and to bring order and structure to our classrooms.  But when we stop to catch our breath, and once again revisit our journeys with these children, are we able to recall more than just the label?  Are we able to remember those special talents, skills and knowledge that each of these young people possess?  Are we able to recognize the many opportunities that we, personally, as members of a classroom community had to learn from these individuals?  Did we give these children the opportunity to step out of their assigned role in the classroom and become active and knowledgeable members of our learning community?

Barbara Rogoff (1994), writes about the 'socially situated nature of learning': "...learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others" (p.209). Children learn best when they actively participate in the socio-cultural activities of the community.  It is recognized that learning occurs when children experience a variety of roles in their learning communities and growth occurs through the sharing of language

and resources. Unlike the teacher led instruction model in which knowledge is fed to the learner by the teacher, the community of learners model sees children learning best when they are actively involved in their learning, when they are learning about things that interest them and when they are using their expertise to support their peers. "This argument is based on a theory of participation, in which learning is seen as a function of ongoing transformation of roles and understanding in the socio cultural activities in which one participates." (Rogoff, 1994, p. 214.)

I believe that it is through the building of a healthier community in our classrooms that we are able to understand the needs, passions and capabilities of our students. It is through dialogue that we are able to  gain understanding and expand our horizons as learners. As long as we continue to be curious about our world, ask questions and really listen to the answers, we will make a difference in the educational lives of all our students. Sam's[1] story is just one example of how it might happen.

Sam has been a student in my classroom for three of the last four years. He loves to go on the swings at recess, cuddle with our guinea pig, run around the gym and read books. He draws great pictures and goes wild with the paintbrush. His smile lights up our classroom and he is considered a precious friend to all. Sam, just like everyone else, faces challenges and struggles, and it is our responsibility as his friends to support him in any way we can. Sam is diagnosed with Down Syndrome and autism. He is just one child in a community of many who are on a journey, and as their teacher, I am lucky to share the road with all of them for a while. In my classroom, we as a community of

learners, have become participants in this one friend's educational journey. We are helping Sam find his own road and are traveling down it together, enjoying the breathtaking sights and the camaraderie that can develop when you are given the opportunity to get off the super highway and take a less traveled road.

## *The Project*

This project has been an attempt to try a different path through the educational terrain with a group of children. This is a story of one classroom community who tried to create something different for themselves. It is an attempt to explore the relationships between people, over time, as they try to build an inclusive and supportive educational environment in which all members have the opportunity to explore, learn and grow.

The learning community, in which I was a member, was made up diverse group of participants. It is through the story of one child's journey that I will attempt to identify how these children supported each other. As I try to articulate the most important aspects, I begin to realize that the essence of this project is the building of relationships in the classroom community. It was an opportunity for children and adults to work together to support the needs of all classroom participants. This is not a program, there are no manuals, no rules or reminders, no student activity sheets. This is merely the story of one group of citizens who are trying to make a difference in their world, and one teacher, looking for the possibility of a different educational road.

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[1] The school, city, adults and children have been assigned fictitious names to protect their anonymity.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how we as a classroom community tried to create a valued and honored place within our walls for Sam. As a teacher my intentions are always to recognize the strengths and frailties of my students and provide each with a learning environment in which they feel safe. Sam is just one child within my classroom walls whom I needed to nurture and encourage along his educational road. Although his story stands out because of his significant life challenges, our experiences with Sam reflect what I believe a learning community should be about: all members working together, supporting each other and developing creative solutions to educational dilemmas. Sam was in my classroom during his Grade 2 year and he returned for Grade 4 and Grade 5 when I accepted a position as an intermediate teacher in the school. The buddy system that was developed began with my young seven year old students, but for one year, continued until Sam moved on to Grade 6 and remained fairly consistent through the years. By the third year, approximately sixty children had participated and each had brought something special and unique to their relationship with Sam. For many of the children, these relationships have endured and deepened.

*The Research Site*

The buddying project undertaken was situated in a suburban elementary school. The community itself is a well established 'village' within a larger city. There was little movement out of the village, although recent extensive housing developments have resulted in a rapid influx of residents. The economic and ethnic picture of the community is beginning to change.

The school, located in a middle class single family residential area is a dual track, English/French instruction school.  Most of the English track students live within walking distance of the school.  The French Immersion students come from a greater, though similar geographical area.  In the school population there is an unusually high number of families in which English is the first language in comparison with the overall population makeup of the city.

*Methodology*

I used ethnographic methodology, with the majority of the data being collected through video taping by Simon Fraser University Video Ethnographer, Linda Hof.  The project began in September 1999 and continued until June 2000 and then resumed in September 2001 until June 2003.  During these times, the focal child, Sam, was a student in my classroom.  Approval was gained from all agencies involved and permission forms were sent home with the children, and returned with signatures of parents and guardians indicating permission for me to observe their children.

Sam has been enrolled in this particular school since kindergarten.  He was diagnosed with Down Syndrome at birth and was during the initial months of the study further diagnosed with autism.  He is the middle sibling in a family of three children and lives with his mother and father.  Sam has had a Special Education Assistant at school with him full time since beginning kindergarten in September 1997.  His family has taken a very active and supportive role in his educational life.  He participates in a variety of

activities outside of school.  His mom encourages his school friendships by inviting classmates to participate in Sam's community activities.

Linda Hof, the video ethnographer, visited the site once a month throughout the study.  Video taping focussed on Sam and his buddy for approximately 1 1/2 hours a visit. Interviews with important people in Sam's life were also conducted over the years of the study.  I have transcribed selections from the video tapes of the classroom interactions and of the interviews.  During this initial year and continuing to the present, I have formulated research questions that look at issues of inclusion and the socially constructed identities of the children in my classroom.  I began to look closely at how we could support each child, as well what effect that inclusive behavior would have on the way we would see ourselves.

Because of my personal life experiences and those of my professional life, I am interested in the school stories of these children as they participate in our classroom community. With my previous experience as a Special Education Teacher and classroom teacher, I wanted to look at ways that we could slow down this chaotic rush and begin to see each of our students with more clarity, to help make all their educational journeys successful.  I was interested in finding ways within our educational system to best meet the needs and dreams of each child, while not losing sight of the goals and demands of the larger community.

This thesis explores the issues and concerns of identity, power and accessibility to resources in our classrooms.  It examines practices that encourage children to construct worlds that are rich, dynamic and fulfilling to them while providing a learning

environment that is encouraging, supportive and challenging.  I present my data in

narratives of the classroom and organize these narratives chronologically, as I describe

Sam's, his classmates', and my journey toward understanding more about classrooms and

their possibilities.

# Chapter 2

# The Story Behind The Journey

*"Our personal journeys reflect how we see the world and how, as individuals we structure and engage in pedagogical and  communicative practices."*

*(Dei. 1996. p.14)*

## Introduction

To initiate changes in our educational system and to encourage the creation of learning environments that are supportive and challenging for all our students, it is important for us to examine the practices that are currently being used in schools.  Then by looking at the roots of these practices and their value in the educational lives of children, we are able to make informed decisions as to whether these are the best practices to support learning in all our children.  Once we have identified the strengths and weaknesses of the system, we can expand our own knowledge of other possibilities for our classrooms.

## Assigned Identities

Our educational roots in this country  are based on a system by which children are sorted, organized and ranked according to sets of arbitrarily identified skills and abilities.

These identified skills are often those which look at children's ability to work "neatly", quietly and independently.  This "work" is specific--it involves specific tools and materials and specific skills with those tools.  It also involves a specific presentation.  It is my belief that many of these identified skills and attributes are not necessarily the most critical when looking at the overall educational experiences of our children. Nevertheless,  it is often these that are seen as criteria for the identification of the successful learner and the failing.  In our schools, children regularly have identities given to them and I believe that these school identities then become the markers by which all their work is judged.  The bright child is expected to excel and therefore, her "excellent" work is noticed.  The reluctant learner's hesitations or refusals are also expected and are added to the evidence file that marks this child a poor learner. "This positioning of individuals is a socially achieved process, over which, it appears, the individual has little say.  Identities, from this perspective are assigned" (Toohey, 2000, p.3).  Through this process, children become restricted in their learning  experiences and thereby limited in their possibilities for the future.

The system of assigning an identity to an individual does not stop with 'academic markers' but continues to include groups of people, who based on economic, racial, cultural, social or historical indicators are assigned a set of expectations, possibilities and goals for the future.  Foucault (1984) saw that categories were being created into which individuals and groups of people were being slotted. Holland (1998) discusses Foucault's theories and states that:

Discourses and their categories...originate outside their performers and are imposed upon people, through recurrent institutional treatments and within interaction, to the point that they become self administered. Categories carry as association to those who use them and are subject to them--an association with power..." (Holland p.62)

Assigned identities in schools are often based on behavioral expectations and the speed with which specific academic milestones are reached. "They are not categories that can ever capture the good sense of what children do...They directly conspire to prevent all of us from understanding the condition within which the child's life is constructed." (Varenne & McDermott, 1999, p. 3) These created categories become accepted by all and used for the benefit of those in power. In many of our schools, the successful student- the one most likely to succeed is often the one already in a position of power, the white middle class student who is seen as competent in 'important' school skills, such as sitting quietly, printing neatly, dressing stylishly. Local knowledge, personal skills and interests and historical experience are not seen as important or relevant. This has a dramatic affect on the educational opportunities and resources available to many students. It becomes an overwhelming, sometimes impossible feat for people to move away from the expectations of the institutions to construct new and different identities.

> And so the full gaze falls on the individual child. The metaphorical journey that started with a child growing and adults lovingly in attendance has been transformed into adults anxiously measuring how far the child has journeyed and arguing endlessly about why there is not more progress to show. It may

take a whole village to  raise a child, but in America, at the most

sacred of times when lives are in balance, the child stands alone

for the village to judge. (Varenne & McDermott, 1999, p.107)

## *Educational Discourse*

The lives and future possibilities for our children are controlled greatly by the

decisions made by those in power.  These are the voices of authority that are often listened

to and left unchallenged.  To provide opportunity for  reform in our schools we must begin

to recognize that these authoritative voices are not the only voices that can be heard, nor

are they necessarily the wisest.  I turned to the theoretic framework of Mikhail Bakhtin.

His theories about of the multiplicity of language and the achievement of voice were

helpful to me in understanding these issues.

Bakhtin (1981) speaks of the authoritative voice, the voice of the father, that

dominant voice of society that is able to remain in control and in turn resist reform in

our institutions, and - of specific interest to me - it is a powerful voice that encourages

the maintenance of the system.  "[It] permits no play with the context framing it, no play

with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative, stylizing

variations on it.  It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass;

one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it"  (p. 343)

Bakhtin argues that one unitary language does not exist, nor  is there one

authoritative, voice of truth.  But when the voice of authority is left unchallenged, those

in power are able to control and manipulate the system so that people are marginalized,

excluded and denied access to the resources of society.  It is by challenging this voice,

that people create opportunities for change.  Bakhtin (p. 345) believes that it is the internally persuasive discourses that provide us with the opportunities to accept, reject and assimilate the word of others.  Internally persuasive discourses are "tightly interwoven" discourses, that are open, changing and expanding as new and different voices enter our consciousness.  New ideas, new thoughts come to us and mingle with old thoughts and words.  "The internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's".  As we face new ideas, new experiences, we struggle to weave these new words into our own words.

> "When thought begins to work in an independent
> experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a
> separation between internally persuasive discourse and
> authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those
> congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch
> us." (Bakhtin, p. 345)

Teachers, who are willing to listen to the intent of the authoritarian voice and challenge the words that close doors for our children, become role models for not only our children, but for society as a whole.  Bakhtin also sees language as being historically and socially situated.  It resides within the people, cultures and experiences of each generation.

In any given historical moment of verbal ideological life, each generation at each social level has its own language; moreover, every age group has as a matter of fact its own language; its own vocabulary, its own particular accentual system that, in their turn, vary depending on social level, academic institution and other stratifying factors. (Bakhtin, p. 290)

Each utterance is unique in its potential and demands a response that in itself will be unique. Each person speaks a language that is constructed by way of that person's history and in turn affects the future through their voice. There are multiple languages, changing, intersecting and merging throughout society. Languages are constructed and used in different ways, at different times and for different purposes. Individuals deal with many different languages in their lives and they are able to respond to each of these languages in ways that create meaning for them. "One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of an other or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse" (Bakhtin, p. 348).

For children to gain the knowledge, skills and understanding to become responsible citizens of our world, they must have access to the languages of their society and their voices must take powerful positions in their communities. It is within the walls of the classroom that children are able to experience the richness of our society. When limitations and restrictions are imposed by labeling and categorizing students, children are unable to access the same languages and therefore knowledge and resources as others.

Complementing Bakhtin's notion of the multiplicity of language, Holland (1998) recognizes the fluidity of identities. According to these theorists, identities are created through the languages of society, and like language are shifting and changing and multiple. Languages and identities are historically, culturally and socially constructed and therefore provide the opportunity for children to participate in diverse dialogues, access the experiences, history and knowledge of the world's cultures and situate themselves in positions of power and expertise. "The identities we gain within the figured worlds are thus specifically historical developments, grown through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organization of those world's activity" (Holland, pg. 41). People have the power to remake the identities they have been given, to construct identities that challenge the system and create new expectations, new goals and new possibilities. For our students, much of their world revolves around their educational environment and it is in this setting that there is the possibility of exploring new ways of being in our greater world.

Although, for many children and educators there appears to be little control or say over the identities that have been assigned to students in the school setting, these theories of the multiplicity of identities open the door to the possibility of challenging this notion. In Toohey's observations, the practices of the classroom teacher served to reinforce the individual's assigned identity. I propose that there are practices that instead can challenge these imposed limitations and encourage more powerful and influential positions for all children.

*Social Learning Theory*

As we move from general theories of language and social interaction into the specific social field of the classroom we can examine the educational theories of L.S. Vygotsky, (1978) to identify practices that allow children to access multiple languages, explore a variety of identities and to participate in a learning community that creates new opportunities. When looking at this project, Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development becomes relevant. We can begin to envision a learning environment that looks quite different from the traditional teacher led classroom. Vygotsky ( p. 209) believed that it is not enough for educators to identify the level of actual development in a child, but to identify what a child is able to do with the guidance, direction and collaboration of an adult or one who is more experienced. Vygotsky stated that "...this difference between the child's actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult [as defining] the zone of proximal development." He saw this zone as having "...more significance for the dynamics of intellectual development and for the success of instruction than does the actual level of development" (p.209). He goes on to explain that it is in this 'zone of proximal development' that the potentials for instruction can be determined. That what the child does today with direction and through imitation will be what he does independently, tomorrow. "Instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development. When it does, it impels or wakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development" (p.202).

For children to achieve their learning potential, they must be working within their zone of proximal development. Where better can that occur but within the walls of a classroom, a place filled with individuals learning at varied levels. Children have limitless opportunities to imitate and receive direction from the rich experiences and knowledge of their peers. At different times and in different situations, each and every child is working just ahead of the development of another.

In her study, Toohey (2000) clearly concluded that the practice of removing children from their classroom can have destructive consequences. In the article, "Assigning marginality: 'The case of an "ESL/learning disabled' student" (2000) she refers to Vygotsky (1993): "Why do the higher functions fail to develop in an abnormal child? Not because the defect directly impedes them or makes their appearance impossible... Underdevelopment springs from what we might call the isolation of an abnormal child from his collective." (p. 20) Sam lives his school life within the walls of the classroom, and we live with him. By looking at Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, a road of development and learning becomes clearer, as does the recognition that Sam's peers can play a significant role.

Sam's initial diagnosis of Down Syndrome and its implications were of great importance in developing an appropriate learning plan for him in his early school years. But it was the more recent diagnosis of that dramatically changed the framework on which his educational plan should be built. I felt that it was within this framework that Sam's peers could have the greatest influence. I hoped the children's interactions, their

play and their conversations would support, encourage and enrich Sam's school experiences.

*Autism*

The first systematic study of autism took place in Boston in 1943 when child psychiatrist, Leo Kanner identified eleven children who displayed unusual tendencies to withdraw from social contact. These tendencies were observed in very young children. He labeled this condition as Early Infantile Autism. Initially, it was assumed that the children were "severely feebleminded or with the question of auditory impairment." (p. 739) After testing the children and interviewing the parents, Kanner realized that "the common denominator in all these patients [was] a disability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life." (p. 739)

Cumine, Leach and Stevenson (2000), described Kanner's use of the term 'Early Childhood Autism' with defining features being:

- A profound autistic withdrawal;

- An obsessive desire for the preservation of sameness;

- A good rote memory;

- An intelligent and pensive expression;

- Mutism, or language without real communicative intent;

- Over-sensitivity to stimuli;

- A skillful relationship to objects.

Cumin et al. described Wing and Gould (1979) study that looked at a large group of children under 15 who had been identified as having any kind of physical or learning disability or abnormality of behaviour and they then identified the 'Autism Triad' of impairments:

- Impairment of social interaction;

- Impairment of social communication;

- Impairment of social imagination.

Wing and Gould discovered that many children showed similarities to the group identified by Kanner but didn't fit the criteria exactly. The term 'Autistic Spectrum' (Wing, 1996) allowed for a broader definition of based on the Triad of Impairments.

While explaining the impact of on the experiences of people with the disorder, Happe and Frith explain the 'theory of mind'; the ability human beings have to think about thoughts. "It is this ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others that is captured by the phrase... it allows us to empathize, to communicate and to imagine others' hopes and dreams" (p.177). With impairments in social imagination, communication and language, people with autism are often unable to 'think about thoughts', or to create pictures in their minds of what 'might be'. Each life experience becomes unique, without frame of reference to which a person can make sense of experiences. For the autistic person, it's nearly impossible to find comfort and understanding in our social world.

> If autistic people lack the ability to 'think about
> thoughts', their own as well as others', then they are like strangers
> in a foreign land, because the world we inhabit is a social world.
> The most important element in our surroundings is human.  We
> make sense of behavior in terms of mental states.  Without such
> a theory of mind, the social world must be a terrifying,
> unpredictable place.  No wonder the autistic child often fights
> against it, or withdraws from it physically or mentally. (p. 193).

If we are to acknowledge this as a problem that many people with autism have, then it should be possible to create a learning environment in which there is regularity, and predictability, where children with autism can feel safe.  We can teach coping strategies to help them understand our social world and in turn, we as a community of learners can learn strategies to provide a safe and comforting environment for these children.

Peer intervention programs for children with autism, have been initiated in the past, with varied results.  Lord (1995) discussed what she felt were necessary components of a program that would provide children with , positive social experiences with their peers. Many of the peer intervention models involved creating well structured and controlled settings for these interactions.  Lord identified five principles that many of the programs share:

- Peer intervention must be conducted in a positive environment in which interactions with age mates are pleasurable.

- Peers are supported in their interactions with the autistic children and adults, but are not directed how to behave.

- The temporal and physical structure of the group is deliberately varied around the needs of the group members.

- Sessions must occur with sufficient frequency so that group rapport develops.

- Set specific goals for each autistic student in the intervention and evaluate progress after a specified time.

As I reviewed the literature and studied the notions of many theorists and educators I formulated a  picture in my mind of the changes that I felt were needed in our educational system.  With these ideas I developed a philosophical framework on which I would build my learning environment.  I have analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of my practices, constantly questioning their relevance and importance in the education of children.  I have retained some practices over the years and many others have been discarded.  The following chapters  are a summary of my own personal and professional journey as I tried to untangle the complex and controversial world of education, and to create a learning community that opened possibilities for all learners.

The development of Sam's individual educational plan (IEP) was based on the knowledge of educators with experience working in the field; however, Sam's buddy program moved far beyond the carefully scripted and controlled guidelines that have previously been attempted.  It grew, changed and strengthened as a reflection of the shifting identities, languages and relationships of the participating members.

# Chapter 3

## Sharing Sam's Journey - Grade 2

*"He is strong and beautiful but fragile. I have to build a safe and secure place*
*for him and let him know that we - the class and I - will be there for him.".*
*(Ladson Billings, p.111)*

*Getting to Know Sam*

In September 1999, when Sam came into my Grade 2 classroom, he came with

a diagnosis of Down Syndrome.  He already had a large and detailed Individual

Education Plan (I.E.P).  This document is a comprehensive plan, required by the ministry,

which outlines the specific goals for students with identified educational challenges.  Sam

also had very supportive school team dedicated to his identified needs.  He had been

given the support of a full time Special Education Assistant in his first year of school and

Pippi had been working directly with him ever since.  His parents were actively involved

in his educational planning and his school experiences.  Sam had many adults involved in

his life both in the school and in the community.  I must admit that I was very frightened

and overwhelmed as I read through his file.

I have spent much of my professional life working with children with

significant challenges and have enjoyed my experiences with these children, their

families and other professionals as we develop school plans that will address their social, emotional and educational needs.  I have enjoyed building personal relationships with the children and I have felt that I was good listener and someone that children could trust. When I first met Sam, I did not feel the same confidence.  As a seven year old, Sam had limited verbal language.  To communicate his needs he was limited to some basic words, sign and gestures and the trust that his caregivers would recognize his needs.  I was frightened by the fact that I did not know how to communicate with my young student. Here, he would be depending on me to care for him, to teach him and to keep him safe and I was feeling very inadequate.

Over the next few days, I watched Sam, I listened to Sam and I thought about Sam.  I thought about him while driving to work.  I thought about him at home while I watched my own children play.  I thought about him when I observed him in my classroom and out on the playground.  I talked to his parents, to previous teachers, to his SEA and to other professionals.  My fears turned to curiosities.  How could I give Sam the best educational possibilities, the best access to the resources of the community, and the best opportunity to be an active participant in our classroom?

Watching Sam stare out of the classroom window or rock back and forth, alone in the corner of the classroom, away from the enthusiastic interactions of his seven year old peers, I realized that I did not have enough understanding about his needs and challenges to build a positive and relevant educational program for him.  I felt the sole diagnosis of Down Syndrome would not provide the best framework onto which his educational program should be built.  I encouraged Sam's parents to pursue further

clarification of his diagnosis. It was after further assessment that the diagnosis of autism was added. It became clear that the challenges that Sam faced were far more complex. We needed to create a plan that would not only address his intellectual development but also address the significant issues that are connected with , specifically impairments in socialization and communication. With this information and the support of a knowledgeable team of experts, I knew that we would need to make some dramatic changes to his educational plan.

Although I have been greatly concerned about the effects of labeling and the regular assigning of school identities in our students, I understand the relevance of receiving accurate information about my students. This diagnostic information must be used to initiate the most effective and inclusive educational plan for each child. I need to have as much knowledge as possible about my students so that I can support them in the most compassionate and productive manner. It is only when diagnoses are used to label children, and thereby limit a child's access to a supportive learning community, that I take offense. The information I received about Sam, through reports and assessments of experts in the field, were used for the sole purpose of meeting his needs, and for the development of necessary support systems to enable him to maintain a place within the classroom.

I recognized the profound effect that autism had on Sam's ability to access the resources of our community, to become a participating member and an active learner. With a dual diagnosis, Sam faced great challenges in his life, although he already had an extensive adult support system in place. What Sam needed were regular opportunities to

develop meaningful relationships with his peers, to address the issues of socialization and communication within a child's world.   I knew that this would be my focus, my contribution to Sam's life experiences.   I also knew that Sam's peers could greatly influence his experiences, that they could provide a rich learning environment for him.   In what better place could Sam participate in social interaction, social communication and social imagination than within the caring walls of our classroom?

## *Grade 2*

For me, facing 20 pairs of curious eyes, 40 wiggling feet and 300 dancing fingers in one small classroom setting has always been an overwhelming experience.   As with every classroom, the academic, social and emotional needs and desires of these children were great and the time, resources and energy of the teacher are limited.   Looking closer, with the help of thick student files and memos from concerned professionals and parents, I also became aware of all the 'special' challenges that were attached to these enthusiastic young learners.   Labels such as learning disabled,  gifted, severe visual impairment, creative, behavior disordered, elective mute, shy, hyperactive, defiant, swirled around in my head…and most central in my thoughts was Sam.

Sam had developed a close relationship with Pippi who had been working with him since he entered kindergarten.   She seemed to be able to understand what Sam wanted and needed.   She generally was able to work around any resistant behaviors.   In the past, most of his school day had been spent working directly with Pippi.   His classroom participation involved being guided through tasks with hand over hand

direction.   But when I observed Sam at work, his gaze was often just beyond the activity at hand.   He seemed 'disconnected' from the rest of us.   Pippi's  fondness for Sam was obvious to all - and he certainly returned the feeling.   It was for Pippi that Sam saved his biggest belly giggles, when she cheered his accomplishments or tickled him in that tickly spot at the back of his neck.   Sam was in our classroom, doing school activities, but it just didn't feel like enough to me.   We weren't really a part of his world and he was not a part of ours.

I could have just left things as they were but something really bothered me about Sam's school experiences.   He was certainly cared for and kept safe at school.   But I wondered whether any of  his school experiences were really relevant or important to him?   Did he feel connected to his school community and the people with whom he shared his classroom every day?   In the flurry of seven year old activity, in a classroom that encouraged playing and working together and where helping was expected,  I would watch Sam, staring out the classroom window, rocking back and forth in the comfy big chair or gazing just past our eager faces.   What was he thinking?   How was he feeling?   Did we frighten him with our wild squeals and energetic play?   I was greatly troubled by my unknowing.

I also wondered how the other children felt about Sam.   Did they also feel unsure of how to relate to him? Did they have questions they needed answered?   Did they also want something more for Sam?   Did they think 'something more' was possible?   I became increasingly dissatisfied with the school experiences that we were providing Sam.   I needed to create something different for him.   Somehow we needed to travel

down Sam's road, walk beside him and share experiences with him. The only way that I felt Sam could really become a part of our classroom community and develop friendships with his peers was for us to personally share ourselves with him. I looked around my classroom at this sweet group of caring young children. I really wanted Sam to get to know us. I wanted the opportunity for all of us to share our knowledge, stories and friendships with Sam.

*New Learning For All*

I realized that I would need to make use of all of the resources I had available to me so that we could meld into a productive and positive learning community but I would not be able to accomplish this alone. With my class list in hand, I counted up the support personnel that were attached to my students, the professional experts: Pippi worked with Sam for the full school day. Another student with severe behavior disorders and blindness had a part time Child Care Worker. The Speech and Language Pathologist had two of my students, as well as Sam, on her case load. We had access to the District Support Team. In the best interest of all my students, I wanted to get my support personnel into the classroom. In that first year, at various times throughout the week, our classroom had access to a Child Care Worker, a Special Education Assistant and a Speech and Language Pathologist.

I carefully reviewed Sam's educational plan and identified the most important aspects of the plan. Sam needed consistency with established routines. He needed to be able to have access to a visual schedule of his day so that he would know what could be

expected.  He needed methods to communicate with his peers.  He needed to learn skills that were relevant and important to his growth and development.  Then I began to explore ways in which Sam's classmates could actively support Sam's learning.  I decided that I wanted to address Sam's communication and socialization impairments by developing a buddy system; one that would allow Sam constant access to the language and interactions of his peers.  Ultimately, I wanted to put him in the center of his community.

As a result, the buddy program began to emerge and develop.  I decided that I would have Sam working side by side with a buddy throughout the school day.  I would rotate through the class list, so that every child would have the opportunity to work with Sam approximately every four weeks.  Next to Sam's desk, a special 'buddy desk' was set up.  On the desk surface were a number of brightly coloured stars with encouraging comments attached, for the buddy's use.  Inside the desk were the 'tools of the trade'; wooden puzzles, special felts and a variety of activities and games that the buddy would use with Sam.  There was a large pocket chart by the classroom door that listed all the children's names with their pictures attached.  Once a child had the opportunity to be Sam's buddy, their name went to the bottom of the list.  It quickly became the first stop in the morning on entering the classroom.  Who would be Sam's buddy today?

Next, I realized that the children in the class would need specific skills and knowledge to make this program work.  If would be ridiculous to expect Grade 2 students to know how to interact or work with a child with such significant challenges without some kind of formal instruction.

I invited the Speech and Language Pathologist, Mrs. Adams to come into my classroom and formally teach communication skills to the children. She explained the importance of helping Sam focus on the communicator, keeping language simple and direct, giving him wait time when requesting a response from him. She helped us understand that by using the language 'first this, then that', Sam would be able to make sense of our expectations. "Sam, first read book...then guinea pig." Mrs. Adams worked regularly with the children for a month and then became a resource person and an enthusiastic supporter of the program. Over the year, Mrs. Adams would spend time with Sam and his buddy of the day, to introduce new concepts and ideas that we could then use in the classroom. The children were given the opportunity to practice these skills with each other and with Sam. This gave the children some useable skills, not only for their interactions with Sam, but also to use in their other social relationships.

The role of the Special Education Assistant dramatically shifted as well. Instead of working along side of, yet separate from the other children, Sam would be immersed in the community of his peers. Pippi's role became much broader and more complex. She had the opportunity to use her creativity and talents to develop and participate in the activities of the classroom community. She had the time to better acquaint herself with all the children and then she was able to explore ways to support their developing relationships with Sam. She needed to understand their personal strengths and challenges so the activities that we designed would be appropriate. The children also needed to develop their own relationships with Pippi so that she would become a person they could trust, someone to whom they would turn for help and who would listen to their concerns.

Pippi would regularly take small groups of children out of the classroom to talk about Sam's special needs and their role as his buddy. They needed to understand that as adults, we would continue to be 'in charge' within the classroom. We would be there to support, instruct and guide them while they worked with Sam- their role was to be a working buddy, a friend to Sam. This role was so significant because as adults, we could never have that kind of close peer relationship with Sam. They were extremely important to Sam because they would be able to teach Sam 'kid stuff', the things that have importance in their culture. The children also needed to learn about the specific challenges of autism and Down Syndrome. They learned how the skills they were teaching Sam related to his educational plan.

These meetings also gave the children the opportunity to explore their personal thoughts about people with special needs, their uncertainties about their relationship with Sam and their mixed emotions about taking on this new role. We hoped that the children would be able to express their concerns in a safe and non threatening environment. We wanted the children to ask questions and look at some of the preconceived ideas they may have generally about people with special needs and specifically about Sam. They needed clarification about what Down Syndrome and autism entail. They needed to learn facts about these disorders and be able to process the information and fit it into their personal understandings. In the training sessions, they were allowed to openly and honestly discuss these issues.

Pippi:          ...and that's what its all about.  Sam is not quite at the level that you guys

                are at; he's still doing stuff that's kindergarten work but that's where his

                development is, right?  You guys all know that.

Nat:            He's like two years behind us?

Pippi:          Yeah, maybe a couple more years than that.  But, you know what?  That's

                okay, because he's learning, right?  He just learns at a slower pace, right?

                We know that.

Nat:            We learn like...what you are trying to say is like...we learn fast and he

                learns kinda slow?

Pippi:          Yup, that's it, because he will eventually learn.  Okay, where were we

                at?

Mike:           ...and Sam is like...Sam is um...he...lots of kids go different, turn

                different, sometimes they go Down Syndrome...sometimes they don't.

Pippi:          Yup, yup, there's lots of kids that don't have...all...everything that we

                have.

                And when they learn differently, we have patience for that, right?

                They're not stupid, by any means, nobody's stupid, right?  They just

                learn diffic...differently.  Some people learn things very easily, but other

                people, it takes them a long time to learn things.  So we should have the

                patience to let them learn, right?

(Video transcript, March 13th, 2000)

The children also needed the opportunity to try and make sense of some of Sam's specific behaviors.  Sam often engaged in repetitious behaviors such as body rocking and arm flapping.  The sessions with Pippi gave them a time when they could gain the knowledge they needed to feel comfortable working with Sam.  Often, it is the lack of factual information that makes people feel uncomfortable.  In the following transcription, Nat was trying to figure out what these repetitive behaviors meant and how they fit into his world.

Nat:        Why does Sam kinda do that? [rocking back and forth in his chair, flapping]

Pippi:      Remember?  That's called stimming.  When he does this demonstrates] this is called stimming. Right?  And what is our job at that time?  Kate?

Kate:       [very quietly, looking shy] Rub his back.

Pippi:      What was that?

Kate:       [louder this time]  Rub his back.

Pippi:      We rub his back like this [demonstrates on child next to her] and say, 'No, Sam'.  He really likes doing that, right?  He really, really, really likes doing that and it's just a part of him.

Nat:        It probably feels like, you know when we sit sort of like that [demonstrates by moving in his chair] it squeezes...I think...it probably makes a tingly feeling.

Pippi:      Yup, but you know if you watch adults, they sometimes stim...have you

ever seen people tap their hands while they're sitting there, or have you

ever seen people that tap their feet?  People find that very comforting.

Nat:                  You could do it right now.

Pippi:                I don't do it, but some people do.  What we try to do...all we try to do is

try to discourage it, right?  We go over and put our hand on his back and

say, 'Sam, don't do that' and he will stop.

(Video tape transcript, March 13th, 2000)


Over time, the children developed an understanding of when Sam needed some

time to rock and when it was time to bring him back to the task at hand.  It was very

natural for a child to reach over a small hand and gently rub Sam's back and for Sam to

immediately respond to the reminder.  Often Sam's rocking behavior increased when he

was feeling overwhelmed by his environment, during school assemblies, when different

people were in the classroom or if we were doing a different type of activity.  Sometimes,

Sam was just bored or uninterested in what was happening and would get lost in his own

thoughts.  His friends' gentle rubs did not bring attention to the behaviors, nor did they

punish his behaviors, but let  him know his friends were aware of his discomfort and

were close by.

Suggestions were also made of ways that they could include Sam into their

outdoor play.  By talking together they began to see that just like them, Sam had strengths

and favorite activities:

| | |
|---|---|
| Pippi: | So it would be great idea if you could play with him.  You know what he likes to do...He likes to run around that basketball court, doesn't he? |
| Many voices: | Yeah, yeah!  And play football. |
| | |
| Pippi: | But if we take the football out and we say Sam, do you want to play catch?  He will. |
| Nate: | I played frisbee one time with him.  He was pretty good at throwing!  I could barely catch it. |
| Pippi: | Yup.  That's right.  So you've got to...You have to initiate it.  You've got to say, "Come on Sam, let's play together!" and all that kind of stuff. |
| Nate: | I probably should... something that I got for my birthday...it's the kind of football, you know?  It's a football with the kind of tail?  He might like that. |
| Mike: | I should have brought my toy football for Sam.  He probably would like that. |
| Pippi: | Yeah, Yeah!  You've got to try different things, right  You've got to say Sam, do you want to go on the swings?  Do you want to go down the slide?  Right?  And those are things that you can ask him. |

(Video transcript, March 13th, 2000)

*Becoming a Buddy and Building Friendships*

We felt that, for this program to work, the students must not feel deserted.  They must not be left to feel frightened or unsure of any situation that may arise.  Not only must the buddies feel safe enough to continue working on this relationship, but Sam must feel safe enough to begin to connect with his buddy.  Many times, especially in the early days, Sam was resistant and non compliant.  Many times the buddies felt unsure of how to react to him or understand what he was trying to tell them.  At no time did we want the relationship between the buddy and Sam to be uncomfortable or unhappy.  Pippi was there, close at hand to smooth any difficulties before they got out of hand.  We were extremely protective of the fragile relationships that were beginning to develop.  With time and patience I believed that all the children would move into a more comfortable and predictable relationship with Sam.

For many of the children, especially those who were quieter or displayed less confidence in their social interactions, Sam's buddy program was an opportunity to feel more powerful.  Kate was one of the first children to be Sam's buddy and her turn also came on a day when we were video taping.  With the camera pointed at her interactions with Sam, you could feel her initial discomfort.  Pippi carefully positioned herself within Kate's sight and proceeded to coach her through the math activity that Sam was doing.  Kate's frequent glances towards Pippi sent the message that she was feeling unsure or uncomfortable.  Throughout the task, Pippi would join the work, modeling language that Kate could use with Sam and then step back.  Words of encouragement could be heard off camera as Kate continued to work through the task.  Kate's growing confidence

became evident as she sat up taller, began to use a louder and clearer voice and smiled proudly when Sam successfully completed the task.

Buddying with Sam has given Kate the opportunity to try being a different kind of girl in a safe and supportive environment.  She was able to put away her shy, non - speaking identity and try the identity of a confident expert for a while.  Little moments like these reminded me that this program was not only a positive experience for Sam but for all of us.

Over the first months of the program, the children became more comfortable with the language that worked best for Sam.  They confidently set up his daily schedule using Picture  Communication System.  This system was developed to assist children with a variety of disabilities to communicate with others.  For Sam it was important to have established routines in his life.  Not only did he have his daily schedule, but on his desk he had the next two activities of the day attached onto a small chart with velcro.  The chart said "First....Then....".  The children quickly incorporated this language into their communications with Sam.  When Sam found an activity frustrating or undesirable, reminders of first this job and then this activity helped keep him on track.  In the following interaction, Darren was attempting to get Sam to participate in the drawing of a poster with a group of children.  Sam was not interested in the activity and wanted to go to look out the window, one of his 'choice' activities.  Darren had the skills and the tools to independently work through this situation with Sam, with Pippi just beyond the camera, to provide support and suggestions, if necessary.  He displayed many of the important components of successful communication as taught by Mrs. Adams.

| | |
|---|---|
| Sam: | (Squirming in chair, looking toward window, making moaning sounds) |
| Darren: | Sam, four minutes.  Colour first, then window. |
| Sam: | Noooooo! [Sam turns around in his chair] |
| Pippi: | [from off camera] tell Sam, 'first colour, then window'. |
| Darren: | [Kneels down directly in front of Sam and looks into his eyes] Sam, first colour, then window. |
| Sam | Okay. [Sam turns around in his chair to reface the group and the poster] |
| Darren: | [Takes Sam's hand holding the crayon and colours with him] Two more minutes Sam, then window.  Good job, Sam! |

(Video transcript, March 7th, 2000)

Sam also had the opportunity to become the expert while working with his peers.  One of his classmates, Alan, had lost his eyesight in the summer before Grade 2. This sudden loss had a devastating effect on him as he struggled to make sense of his changed world.  I wondered how I could possibly expect this child to take on the responsibility of supporting another child with such significant special needs.  After a quick discussion, Pippi and I realized that we could not exclude this child from his buddy day and would have to deal with any problems as they arose.  First thing in the morning as Alan and Sam worked on one of Sam's favorite wooden puzzles, the first difficult situation arose.  Using his fingers to trace the shapes, Alan was unable to find the correct spot to place the puzzle piece.  Over the next few minutes, Sam gradually became aware

of the dilemma, took the piece from Al's hand, then put it into the correct place.  He looked over at his buddy and smiled.  "Thanks, Sam!" came the response.

In our efforts to help our students, especially those with special needs, it was easy to overlook or miss opportunities when these children could feel powerful and capable.  By stepping back, by not becoming rescuers, Sam was able to reach out and become the helper.

An important component of Sam's program was 'down time', an opportunity for him to move away from the hustle and bustle of a busy primary classroom and retreat into his own space.  Into his daily schedule, there were times when Sam could choose one of his preferred activities.  Originally, these choices were: looking out the window, computer time, or books.  These activities were done within the classroom, but in isolation.  Sam would became upset if anyone came near or tried to share the time with him.  He gaze was steady and he seemed to be unaware of our presence.  It was difficult for all of us to 'bring Sam back' when it was time to make a transition to other class activities.

I remember how, one day, early in the year, a parent in the school gave us two guinea pigs for class pets.  These tiny creatures quickly became a vital part of Sam's program.  His favorite choice activity became "PIG".  His buddy would gently put a towel over Sam's lap and then place one of the guinea pigs down, before sitting next to Sam's chair.  Together they would stroke the animal, talk to it or just sit quietly thinking their own thoughts.  Sam was able to have his 'down time' but no longer was sitting alone.  The guinea pigs provided a common ground. Glancing over at the two children, sensing

the calmness, the distant look in both their eyes, I often wondered if these little friends had been able to visit Sam's special world and if the experience was as serene as it looked.

## *Sharing With Sam*

As a part of our daily routine, all children were assigned a 'sharing day'. This was an opportunity to bring special treasures from home, share amazing talents or tell wonderful family adventures. This  important part of the day  encouraged all of the children to speak from a position of power on a topic of personal expertise. As a hesitant public speaker, I felt that it was important to provide opportunities for children to address anxieties around speaking in front of an audience in a supportive and caring community. Each child came and sat in the big comfy chair with me as they 'shared'. Children did as much as they wanted to do depending on their level of comfort. For some children, their initial contributions would have been limited to holding up an object. Then I talked about it with them. The rest of the children are always eager to ask questions and provide their own experiences and tales about the sharing topic. Sam also was assigned a 'sharing day'. In the early days he would bring a photograph and hold it up for the class to see. In later months he might share his special sight word books that had been prepared for him. The children would ask questions and make comments. Sometimes Sam would respond and other times not. But at the conclusion of his sharing time, the class would break into spontaneous cheering and applause. Over time Sam came to anticipate this reaction and smile broadly at their response.

In the days before the buddy program, the adults responsible for Sam's learning went to great lengths to create 'natural reinforcers' for on task and appropriate behaviors. Often it was a guessing game to come up with ideas to encourage Sam to keep working, to accomplish adult prepared jobs. There were often concerns about Sam's slow to develop fine motor skills and we consulted numerous experts about the best strategies to use. But as time went on we, the adults in the room began to learn many things about children and friendships and what really important learning could look like. When as teachers, we were willing to step back and encourage other experts to do the teaching, everyone's learning experiences became richer and more relevant.

One morning during sharing and snack time, the camera caught a valuable learning moment, that would not have occurred without the buddy program. All the children were huddled around the big chair while an excited classmate chatted about her week end adventures. In the far back corner, disinterested in the story, my wiggly Leroy was off task. If I had been a more attentive teacher, I would have noticed his unfocused behavior and reminded him of good audience skills. However, lost would have been a precious teaching moment. The Video Ethnographer's attention was diverted from the front of the group when Leroy whispered to her, "You've got to see this." After opening his Dunkeroo package, Leroy had offered Sam a tiny cookie. He then showed Sam how to dip the cookie into the miniature container of chocolate icing. Sam, didn't need much instruction and was quick to pick up this new skill. Leroy was absolutely thrilled with the success of the lesson. They continued dipping and nibbling together until all the cookies were gone. Leroy then showed Sam how they could finish the sweet treat by

dipping their fingers into the icing and licking them off.  This experience, this learning would not have been accessible to Sam if he were working directly with an adult; in fact, this would have been seen as inappropriate and unsanitary behavior and halted immediately.  But Sam was learning 'kid skills'- those important things that separate children from adults and make childhood such a special time.  Sam and Leroy were being two little boys, sharing a common language with a wonderful, natural reinforcer!

One of the other components of our buddy program was regular Sign Language instruction for the class by Pippi.  Because of Sam's limited language we had been exploring alternate methods of communication, and he had been learning sign language since kindergarten.  The children loved participating in this activity and they were quick learners.  Soon they were comfortable signing all the letters of the alphabet and were beginning to communicate with each other.  Pippi started to teach the signs that went with songs that the children were learning in music class and they began performing them at assemblies. Sam would stand proudly on stage always surrounded by his friends.  The parent of one of my students was enrolled in a Seniors Support Care Worker Program at the community college, and he became interested in the children's eagerness to learn a new skill in order to  communicate with Sam.  He saw the benefits of a signing program for seniors who were unable to communicate their needs effectively.  For his final project he invited our class to be guest speakers at the college.  This wonderful group of seven year olds performed their songs and spoke confidently about the importance of the buddy program.  The adult students learned many things that day, inspired by these young children's dedication and caring of their special friend.

*Moving On*

As the first year of the program neared an end, I felt great sadness in having to say good bye to this wonderful group of children. I felt that the success of the program was the direct result of having such a sensitive and compassionate group of children to work with. I wanted our experience to go on forever. Not only were the children moving on to new classes, but a new elementary school was opening in the neighborhood and many of my students were changing schools. It was with heavy hearts that we said our good byes. On the last day of school, just before dismissal time, Sam's mother came into the classroom, wanting to speak to the children. She presented us with a special citizenship award for the kindness and caring that we had shown Sam. She stated that, for the first time since her son had started school, she had felt like just another Mom dropping her son off at school; she knew that he was happy with his friends, learning and growing and being just a kid.

# Chapter 4

# Becoming 'Big Kids' - Grade 4

*"Working with Sam makes me feel closer to Sam and to the other kids."*

*(Carl, classmate)*

*"I used to feel bad for people with disabilities until I met Sam, because he always has a big smile and a great attitude. I used to always think that they hated life. And he is a great guy, he has a great sense of humor and he's getting pretty smart. He knows his ABC's and 1- 2-3's."*

*(Jake, classmate)*

## *Introduction to an Intermediate Classroom*

In the 2001 school year, I accepted a position as a Grade 4 and 5 teacher at my school. Though I was excited about the prospect of working with older children, I really wondered how my 'way' of teaching would be accepted by the students, parents and administrators. Many of the inclusive practices that I had initiated in the previous year were not uncommon in the primary grades, but were less noticeable in many of the intermediate classrooms I had observed. With the introduction of letter grades on the report cards, there seemed to be a greater shift towards students' individual accountability and accomplishments and less opportunity to share knowledge, resources and materials. It was one thing to work and play together in the primary grades, but once

letter grades become an important part of assessment and evaluation, it was assumed that there would be different classroom expectations. Children must do their own work or how would they be evaluated? There could not be all that chatting and sharing of ideas or how would all the learning outcomes be achieved. How would the "You can't say 'you can't play'" rule fit into the formula?

By Grade 4 and 5 there were also certain students who had well established school identities. In the past, these children, often seen as 'behavior problems' would have been removed from the classroom setting to prevent them from disrupting the learning experiences of the 'hard working' and 'motivated' students and to prevent the loss of valuable teaching time. I decided to make every possible effort to keep these students inside the classroom. A few parents expressed their concerns about the influence that these students may have on their own children's learning experiences. Support personnel also encouraged the necessity of removing these students for more intensive and individual intervention. I found that challenging the ideas of others and attempting to create a different kind of learning community can be met with distrust, confusion and frustration by those who are comfortable remaining in a system that works for them or at least adheres to the expected norm. I made the decision to continue incorporating inclusive practices in my classroom, but to also inform those interested in my philosophical reasoning.

I reflected again on Toohey's (p.92) notion that some practices often restricted student access to classroom resources and that resources were not always equitably distributed between children, affecting their success. "Children sit at their own desks, use

their own materials, do their own work, and use their own words." She saw that "...access to peers and their words and ideas are differentially distributed resources for children in classrooms that have major effects on their possibilities to participate in classroom activities and thereby, learn" (p.125).

I decided that one way I may be able to physically shift this inequity would be to exchange the desks for large tables and to create a general classroom pool for materials and tools. Although using tables in a primary classroom is a relatively acceptable practice, most intermediate classrooms that I have visited are filled with uniform desks, marking the spots of those who are developing independence as learners.

And so, on an August morning, before any of my colleagues had returned from summer vacation,  I hesitantly and self consciously began to remove 26 desks from my classroom, without making a scene.  As I plowed through the dark storage area,  claiming 6 wobbly, archaic, long rejected tables, to replace the customary individual desks, I began to question my decision.  But as soon as I redesigned the structure of my classroom, I felt proud and excited about what I was trying to create.

*Settling Into Grade 4*

Into this new learning space flew 26 young students, each with their own vision of their educational flight, each with their favorite friends, their best academic skills and their greatest challenges.  There were surprised looks when the tables were discovered, and concerns expressed when classroom materials were pooled.  Shocked looks greeted my explanation of seating arrangements; that each day, students would sit at different

tables, with different classmates. I explained to both students, parents and curious observers, that I hoped this would allow all members of the classroom community to become personally connected to each other, to begin to understand and appreciate the diversity of skills, experiences and knowledge of others. It was an opportunity to see beyond the school identities and get better acquainted with each other.

For those who were carrying old grudges, there was the reassurance that the arrangement was only for one day. It was my job as facilitator to be very aware of tensions between the children and make sure that I also positioned myself at different tables during the day. I felt that the physical arrangement of the classroom began to invite the sharing of ideas, the supporting of one another, the building of a community of learners. By shifting the structure of our classroom setting, I hoped that I would be able to also shift the power imbalances within my walls.

After a year apart, many of my Grade 2 students rejoined me in this classroom. I was thrilled to greet them and Sam at my classroom door. What different feelings I had when I thought back to my initial fears in 1999. I was excited about the prospect of working for another year with Sam and my returning students. Old friends were being reunited and new friends discovered. Oldtimers and newcomers working in a community of learners. My head swirled with new ideas and plans for the school year. I was eager to reinitiate the buddy program as soon as possible.

In the midst of my enthusiasm, however, I was not aware of the challenges and insecurities felt by my students. Those children who had participated in the buddy program in Grade 2, my old timers, had been away from the system for a long time and

had lost some of their confidence.   Not only were the newcomers immersed quite suddenly in a different style of classroom community, but they were also learning new ways of interacting and working together.  For many of my new students, this was a first experience in sharing a classroom with Sam and participating in the buddy program; two dramatically new experiences for a group of ten and eleven year olds.

It wasn't until the end of the year, when some of the children were interviewed that I realized that the members of  my classroom community experienced the same fears and uncertainties that I had felt during those early fall days, two years ago.   As explained in the following transcript, many children had felt uncomfortable with buddying and in my excitement to recapture the enthusiasm of the first year, I did not recognize or appreciate those feelings in my students.

| | |
|---|---|
| Jake: | Like... I used to be afraid to go up to him [Sam] and say' hi' and say 'high five'.  At the beginning of the year when we didn't have the buddy program, people would...wouldn't want to do it, because they would be like...scared or something...and I remember Carl was the first person to want to it.  And then right when recess started he said, 'I don't want to do this, it's too hard.' |
| Carl: | Yeah, I know. |
| Jake: | Now its way easier, because we understand him more. |
| Mark: | Yeah, when we first started, nobody wanted to really do it because they were kind of scared...cuz they didn't really - you know what I mean - |

know Sam.  But then when we got just past Christmas...then everyone

was looking up on the board and counting how many days it was until

their turn...and they'd like, count down the days till it was their turn with

Sam....We go...like in alphabetical order to see who's Sam's buddy.  So

nobody can say, no it's my turn.  And we get into little tiny fights about

who is going to be Sam's buddy.  So I think that this has been the best

year for me too.

(Video transcript, June 13th, 2002)

Looking back now, I wonder why the children were unable to share their worries

with me, and if I had known about their concerns whether I would have done things

differently.  I have gained so much more respect for these young children.  They were

able to move past their own fears and uncertainties, demonstrate no outward indications

of discomfort and continue to work, play and learn with Sam.  They persevered in their

interactions with Sam until they reached their own level of comfort and confidence.  In

retrospect, I realize what an important role Mrs. J. played in this fragile period of

relationship building.

This school was the first opportunity that Mrs. J, Sam's new Special Education

Assistant, had to work with Sam and to be involved in the buddy program.  In past job

experiences, she had worked with individual students either on the periphery of

classroom activities or outside of the classroom in alternate settings.  The buddy program

gave her the opportunity to remain in the classroom throughout the day and to work

closely with all the students.  She was able to use her expertise to create engaging learning experiences for Sam, and to support the buddies as they developed confidence working with him.  Sam and all his peers came to appreciate Mrs. J., and to count on her for guidance and encouragement.

## *Classroom Practices and Routines*

As we started our year, I introduced the children to the practice of sitting at different tables with different classmates each day.  Before the children entered the room in the morning I would randomly place their name tags on the tables.  Each morning they scurried in to see who their table mates would be.  Sam and his buddy would also sit side by side at the different tables.  A part of Sam's morning routine was to get his buddy's name card from the pocket chart and then find the table where both his name and the buddy's name had been placed.  He then would go and get his buddy and invite the buddy to their table.  In the morning busyness of the classroom Mrs. J. and I were unaware that Sam, on entering the classroom, would quickly check out the buddy chart to see who was at the top of the list.  On occasion, we found out that he had moved the name tags so that a particularly favored child's name appeared at the top of the list, out of alphabetical order.  Such sophisticated thinking!  Sam was quick to find his friend and get started on the day.

Sam was working on increasing his functional sight word vocabulary as a part of his learning plan.  We decided to incorporate the name tags into his reading program. Once everyone was settled, Sam and his buddy would go around to each of the tables and

collect up the name tags.  Sam would be asked to find a child's name from the selection

on the table.  Not only did he learn to recognize all the children's names, but this became

an opportunity for Sam to greet each of his classmates and have a short verbal or non-

verbal exchange.  The children chatted with Sam enthusiastically, encouraged him to

make eye contact with them and respond to their greetings by saying their names.  Sam,

as he became familiar with this activity began to develop individual responses to his

different friends,  high fives, special giggles and 'kid talk'.  Looking back on these

experiences, the children spoke about how important it was for Sam to have these

interactions and to participate in the language of a child's world.

Mark:	It's helping Sam to learn to adapt to  being around a lot of kids.  Like

before he'd get...like really frustrated if there were too many people

around him at once, but now he's fine.  And he loves getting high fives.  If

he does a good job, you give him a high five.  And now he's learning to

shake people's hands too...when he's greeting them.

Jake:	Yeah, and we're teaching him a whole lot of words like 'whassup' and

this...stuff!

(Video transcript, June 13th, 2002)

One example of the richness of his experiences as an active community

participant took place during the daily attendance taking.  It has always been Sam's job to

take the attendance sheet to the office, and the task over the years had become a boring

and mundane exercise.  With the language experiences that Sam was regularly a part of,

this routine activity became an opportunity for him to participant in a rich and playful

dialogue.

Our daily ritual of taking the attendance, which had carried over from Grade Two:

Teacher:          Sam, could you take the attendance to the office?

Sam:              Sure. [No eye contact, takes the sheet and walks out the door.]

My voice of authority had directed him and Sam responded without thought.  But

by thinking about  Sam, by connecting with Sam and recognizing his immersion in the

languages of his peer group, we were able to create the possibility of something more.  In

this short dialogue, Sam challenged my authoritative voice, used the language of his

peers and participated in a playful dialogue.

Teacher:          Sam...Sam...Could you take the attendance... to the bathroom?

Sam:              Sure.

Teacher:          To the bathroom!?

Sam:              [making eye contact, pausing]

Teacher:          Could you take the attendance to the bathroom? [smiling and

                  exaggerating the tone]

Sam:              No!

Teacher:          ...to the gym?

Sam:              No way!  [smiling, anticipating next comment]

Teacher:          ...McDonalds?

Sam:              Donalds!  Cheeseburgers!

Teacher:          Could you take the attendance to McDonalds?

Sam:              Office!  [giggling and patting teacher's shoulder]  Jacob!  [his buddy for

                  the day]  Attendance...office!

(Field notes, November 29th, 2001)


Each day, for this brief moment, Sam and I played; we got silly and we laughed. The other children participated by giving me suggestions of really ridiculous places that we could take this important school document.   Sam would wiggle and grin in anticipation of the silliness.  Most important to me was the opportunity to share our worlds and to enjoy our friendship.  I was able to participate with Sam in the same friendly banter that I had always cherished with my students.

Every morning, Sam and his buddy were responsible for feeding the guinea pigs. Katherine, the teacher in a neighboring classroom brought fresh vegetables each day for both her class guinea pig and ours.  Sam would wash the vegetables and then, using a small plastic knife, would chop them up and refill their feeding bowls.  This provided Sam with the opportunity to practice necessary daily living skills in a relevant and rewarding way.  It was nearly impossible to not respond to the cheerful chatter of guinea pigs anticipating a delectable treat.

Once the morning jobs had been completed: the nametags, the attendance and the feeding of the guinea pigs, it was time for Sam to settle down to his other instructional activities.  'Puzzle time', a carry over from Grade 2, was another opportunity for Sam to work on the objectives of his Individual Education Plan.  Sam's puzzles, large wooden ones, with little handles attached to each piece, had followed him through the years.  He still expressed the same pleasure in choosing and completing his favorites for the day.  I must admit that if I were in the position to be working on 'puzzles' with Sam daily, I would quickly tire of the same cat puzzle, house puzzle and zoo puzzle.  I would have been eager to find new ones, or encourage him to try a different one. However, in doing so, I would have destroyed a wonderful learning experience with my adult impatience. But Sam's buddies seemed to enjoy the predictability and repetition of the familiar puzzles and through their enthusiasm, the puzzles have given Sam multiple opportunities to develop a variety of skills.

| | |
|---|---|
| Mrs. J.: | What do you want?  The cat? |
| Sam: | I don't want it.  I don't want it. |
| Mrs. J: | Do you want the…? [showing Sam two puzzles] |
| Sam: | House. |
| Matt: | Sam? |
| Sam: | [looks directly at Matt] |
| Matt: | Where does this  go?  [indicating a puzzle piece] |

| | |
|---|---|
| Sam: | ...window...help! [struggling to get the piece in and indicating that he wants Matt's assistance] |
| Matt: | Good job Sam! [working together to get the piece in] |
| Mrs. J: | [giving Matt instructions]  Did you talk about the puzzle?  What's there Sam? [Pointing to a piece] She's cooking.  What's behind the door? [lifting a piece]  Who's that? |
| Sam: | She's reading a book. |
| Matt: | What 's he doing? [pointing] Is he sleeping? |
| Sam: | Yup. |
| Matt: | What's that? |
| Sam: | Bed time...getting late...time for bed. |
| Matt: | [points to another part of the puzzle] |
| Sam | Wash... he's in the shower...its my shower...***shower. |
| Matt: | What's this? |
| Sam: | She had the laundry...laundry...laundry...[to Mrs. J.] Look, she has the laundry...washing machine.  He's outside in the garden.  [looking at another part] |
| Mrs. J: | Look at the garden. |
| Sam: | 1-2-3-4-5-flowers. |
| Matt: | What's that? |
| Sam: | A phone. |
| Matt: | A telephone. |

Sam:            Telephone!

(Video transcript, January 24th, 2002)


Although Sam had done this puzzle many times, the opportunities for language development and dialogue remained.  During the entire interaction, Sam, Matt and Mrs. J were engaged in the activity and looked to be enjoying the experience.  Not only was Sam practicing language skills, but he was also developing important fine motor skills, with his manipulations of the small puzzle pieces.

For children with autism, it can be very difficult to enter the world of make believe and play, especially with others.  Impairments in the development of imagination often limits the child's 'playtime' to routine activities that do not involve the connecting of play things to the 'real' world.  Once again, it was through puzzle time that Sam began to manipulate materials in an imaginative and interactive manner.


Rachel:        Beth, which puzzle do you want? [looking at the puzzles on the table]

Sam:           [pushing a bike puzzle piece along the table]   Brac...brac...brac [making sounds to go with the bike's movement]

Beth:          What's that, Sam? [pointing to the piece Sam is playing with]

Sam:           Bike.

Beth:          [hands Sam a horse piece]

Sam:           ['walking' the piece on the table] horse... neigh, neigh. [taking another piece] Ribbit! Ribbit!

Beth:          [also walking a piece along the table] Not 'ribbit'.   That's an elephant

               and that's a tiger [pointing to the pieces]

(Video transcript, January 16th, 2002)


Each of the three children - Sam, his buddy Beth, and Rachel, who had just joined

in - were obviously enjoying their playtime.  There were smiles on all of their faces and

they looked intently at each others' play.  Sam was an active participant in an imaginative

scenario.

Although the children in my class were intermediate students, there were many

activities commonly done in the primary grades that were still appropriate for Sam.

Calendar time was an example of an activity that Sam was just becoming interested in.  I

felt that to create a challenging and inclusive learning environment in which Sam could

learn, I needed to expand definitions of what seemed 'age appropriate' in an intermediate

classroom.  So on the bulletin board, I had two calendars posted.  On one side was Sam's

calendar with many of the typical primary activities.  On the other side was our French

calendar and weather graphs.  Each morning, the class recorded daily temperatures,

amounts of precipitation and struggled to identify the type of clouds in the sky.  Sam

would go outside with his buddy and check the weather.  Was it rainy?  Was it sunny?

Had we felt the wind on our faces?  Together they would complete the simplified version

of what the rest of the class was doing.  My students were also trying to uncover the

mysteries of the French language, a curriculum requirement for Grade 5.  Parallel

primary style calendars were displayed in both French and English.  While Sam and his

buddy counted the days in school,  recited the days of the week and months of the year,

the rest of the class followed the same activity in French.  I think that the familiarity of

'calendar time' made the learning of French less intimidating for many of my hesitant

students.  Sam and his buddy would also practice using sign language to identify the days

of the week and months of the year.  It seemed quite natural for all of these components

to merge together as a learning experience for all.  Everyone was able to participate as

much as necessary in ways that were comfortable, relevant and challenging to the

individual.

One of the goals of Sam's Individual Educational Plan (I.E.P) was to increase his

understanding of the spatial words, such as 'over', 'under', 'in' and 'on'.  We had been

given a variety of commercially produced activities and games that would 'teach' these

concepts, but they really hadn't worked for Sam.  Together, with Mrs. J. and the children,

we decided to create our own story books to illustrate these difficult concepts.

Enthusiastically, Mrs. J, with camera in hand, led groups of excited students off to create

a special learning tool for Sam.  The result was amazing.  Sam had a library of books that

were filled with photographs of him and his friends, exploring all those strange words.

There were pictures of Sam 'between' two friends and Ann was 'under' the table.  Meg

was sitting 'on' Beth.  Sam's favorite page was:  'The guinea pig is on Kate's head!'  The

children loved making the books with Sam and Mrs. J.  Sam and his buddies spent many

happy times reading and rereading while laughing about the silly stories.  In addition to

the fun, Sam was also working towards achieving one of his identified goals.

*New Friendships-New Understandings*

As the children got to know Sam and became personally connected to him, they began to notice things that we as adults had overlooked.  One really important observation by a child completely changed our perceptions about what Sam knew and understood.  In the past when looking at books or watching a video, Sam would repeat over and over, 'What's that?'  At first, patiently and then with minor irritation, we would explain what was going on.  As soon as an explanation was given,  Sam would once again ask, 'What's that?'  We assumed this that this was a form of echolalia, a repetitive speech pattern often heard in children with autism.  It was one of his peers who one day redirected the question back to Sam,  "What is that, Sam?"  Sam's response was to explain what he saw.  This question had significant communicative value for him, although we were so slow to recognize it.  This was Sam's way of saying, 'Hey, I know what is going on!  Ask me about it!"  This was not just a repetitive echoing back of words he had heard, but a deliberate attempt to share his understanding with others; social communication  It took his friend, his peer, to help us understand.

Early in the school year we went on a field trip to the local museum to learn about how artifacts and documents were properly preserved.  We also learned the importance of preserving our family histories so that the stories could be passed down to future generations.  My students became enthusiastic detectives and began collecting stories, pictures and artifacts of their own family histories.  Because of the diverse histories, family situations and available knowledge, I was careful to keep the assignment broad

and simple.  "Talk to your families about what they would like to share and preserve about the family."  Over time, the project took on a life of its own.

Parents, grandparents, family friends all began to dig into trunks and forgotten boxes for pictures, report cards, and special treasures.  Each child and each family did as much as they felt comfortable with.  For Sam, his world revolved around the present, his family and his friends.  Mrs. J. and Sam's mother worked with Sam to create a poster showing pictures of all the important people in his life and some of his most exciting life experiences.  On presentation day, the children crowded around Sam as he took centre stage.  "Look at Sam at the waterslides!"  "I didn't know that Sam could horseback ride, I've never tried."  "Look at him ice skating!  Sam's a really good ice skater; I've been with him."  Sam's project was an opportunity for the classroom community to recognize Sam's diverse talents and abilities and to relate to his very familiar interests.  He was able to move past his label of 'special needs child' to be seen a just a kid, with multiple identities, multiple interests and multiple talents.

*Being There For Sam*

Although I have never been actively involved in team sports, many of my students were avid athletes, involved in multiple community sports teams.  Our twice weekly visits to the gym were the highlights of everyone's week.  Suggestions of popular games were bantered around as we tried to make our way down the hall without causing too many distractions for the other classes, hard at work.  Upon entering the gym, Sam would take his customary laps while his classmates settled down for my instructions.  Often we

would play a game; indoor soccer, hockey, basketball, dodge ball. Whatever the chosen activity Sam would take his spot on a team. In the heat of the game, with the score tied, Sam was always remembered by his friends and the ball was tenderly passed to him so he could have a shot on goal and his efforts were heartily cheered. With Sam's participation, the children were reminded of the purpose of the game. That competitive drive to win eased, as they acknowledged and then shared Sam's pleasure in just playing the game.

The children continued to participate in competitive sports, and they became aware of the inequities that were reinforced in many organized athletic activities. In the spring, as the school began to prepare for the track and field season, Sam's mother mentioned how much Sam loved to run and how it would be so nice for him to participate in a track meet. I went to the children and asked them what they thought about Sam participating in a running event. They enthusiastically supported the idea and we decided to put him in the relay, with Mike volunteering to run with him. I spoke personally to all the children on the relay team, most from other classes and they were quite supportive of the idea. We spent time practicing running in the lane and passing the baton. Mike knew that if Sam changed his mind, he would take over in the race.

Unfortunately, this simple act produced amazing amount of controversy; I was shocked at the response of some of the adults in the school community. They saw Sam's inclusion in one track and field event as unfair to all the other children;  Didn't I know that not only did he not try out for the team, but he was taking up a spot that a 'real' athlete could fill?  My grief and anger over the blatant discrimination against our dear little friend was overwhelming. But I also felt great joy in realizing that our children

could make a difference. They carried on, regardless of the controversy and taught an important lesson to many.

Sam loved the swings! Every recess and lunch, as soon as the bell rang he would be out the door, across the field to the same familiar swing on the primary playground, with Mrs. J. in hot pursuit. When he arrived at the swing, he would throw his body, stomach down, over the soft seat and swing back and forth back and forth, lost in his own world, far from the smiles and squeals of his friends. If another child happened to get to Sam's particular swing before he did, Sam would be devastated, and inconsolable. Usually, the child with the swing would unhappily give it up and we would guiltily feel grateful for a reprieve. During discussions with Mom, we decided that we would attempt to change this behavior, to open up more possibilities for Sam. First of all, we decided that, now that he was in Grade 4, he should be swinging on the intermediate swings with his peers. We also thought that by sitting up on the swing he would be able to see all the playground activity around him and possibly become interested. Although this seemed like a relatively simple task, for children with autism, the need for maintaining predictability in their world is very powerful. Such a big change in his routine would be difficult for him. We wanted Sam to feel safe and cared for at school but we also wanted to help him face new challenges in his life and experience success. We decided to discuss the plan with the class and see if they had any suggestions. Together we decided that five minutes before the recess bell rang, all the children in the class would head outside through the back door and go to the swings on the intermediate playground. They would enthusiastically encircle Sam and lead him to the 'big boy' swings. For the first

week, Sam gladly went out with them, but as soon as he heard the recess bell he would hop off the 'big boy' swing and return to his old favorite. We, as impatient adults, were frustrated and nearly ready to quit, but the children stuck with the challenge and within two weeks, Sam was happily sitting up on his new swing, amongst his very proud friends. This was a very important step in Sam's life which may not have happened without the loving support and understanding of his buddies.

It was a warm June afternoon, and silent reading time had just begun. Children hot and tired after lunchtime adventures are tucked away in corners and under desks around the room  On the couch, Jake had settled in with his adventure novel and Sam had arrived with his Paddington book, ready to sit down beside him. They exchanged friendly smiles and began reading. Jake glanced over and saw Sam with his tongue sticking out of his mouth. He smiled and quietly copied Sam, blowing a 'raspberry' sound. They smiled at each other and Sam said, "Stop it!" The two boys resumed reading. In a short moment the boys were once again making their silly raspberry sounds. One of the girls reminded Sam to 'keep your tongue in!' and told Jake to stop encouraging Sam. Jake responded with, "Why? He has a life!" But quickly both boys once again settled down to 'silently read'. Soon, Jake's attention once again was  diverted from his book to Sam's book and they began looking at the pages together. Quietly, Jake started to sing to Sam, "Put a smile on, put a smile on..." and he gently tickled him under the chin. Sam began to giggle and returned the tickle. Within moments, Sam's deep, contagious belly laugh rang out throughout the class. Those two silly little boys were rolling around on the couch, tickling each other, blowing raspberries and laughing

hysterically with the whole class quickly joining in.  So much for silent reading!  (Video tape excerpt, June 6th, 2002)

Over the year, as had been the case with my Grade 2 class, the Grade 4 and 5 children also developed their own special relationships with Sam.  Although they received support and direction from the adults in the room, the camaraderie, the friendships were genuine.  The children were ever so patient and gentle in their interactions with Sam.  When he was lost in his own world, a friendly hand would give him a quick backrub.  When a banana needed peeling or a zipper got stuck, there was always a child ready to respond to his "Help, please."  The tender looks and warm smiles that greeted Sam each day,  the encouragement, the proud cheers for a job well done I believe provided Sam with a learning environment that was supportive, enriching and relevant.  He was seen as a cherished and active participant in our classroom community.  What I hadn't realized was that this relationship carried over beyond the walls of the classroom, away from the eyes of the teachers.   I really  became aware of the impact of this buddy system on a spring day, near the end of another school year.

*Friday Night at the Fair: A letter from Sam's mother*

It was a Monday morning, and I was greeting the children at the classroom door, when three of my students told me that they had seen Sam and his family at the local fair. They said that they went on some rides with him and had a lot of fun.  I was pleased to listen to their enthusiastic chatter, but quickly tucked the story away as the math books came out.  It was not until later in the day that I discovered a letter from Sam's mother

sitting on my desk.  In our lives, we never know the significance of small acts on the people around us.

I had to share our experience with you.  One Friday night I took Sam and his sister to the Fairgrounds.  While we were enjoying the fair and Sam and his sister were going on rides, we met up with 3 students from Sam's class.  The kids were all happy to see one another and the girls invited Sam to go on rides with them.  Well you have never seen such a happy guy!  Sam said, "Bye, Mom" and off he went, with Mom shadowing of course!

I stood watching Sam and his classmates on a 4 seater ride together.  They made sure he was belted in properly, they even had the ride attendant come over and help them, and off they went-Sam had the biggest grin on his face and was thoroughly enjoying himself.  I stood there watching with tears in my eyes (I'm such a wimp!).  The kids hung out together for about an hour.

Mrs. R., I know you realize the value of inclusion and acceptance of others.  I hope you know how much this means to parents and  their children.  I believe the main concern for a parent of a child with special needs is for their child to be included in school and the community, and when you see this acceptance and inclusion spill over into the community as what happened Friday night at the fair, it is testimony that you have taught these children the importance of just that.  When I have spoken with some of the parent's of Sam's classmates, they express to me the importance of what their children are learning;  not only does Sam benefit, but so do their children.I thank you, and my family thanks you, from the bottom of our hearts.  Sam's sister said to me, "Gee Mom, are Sam's

friends ever nice to him", and I said "Yes, and so is Mrs. R.. for teaching her kids about inclusion."

Sincerely,

Sam's Mom

On another morning, a mom in my classroom shared this story. Sam had been invited over to play with her son and after a couple of hours of Nintendo playing and fooling around. The mother pulled her son to her side, and commented about how proud she was of him to spend so much time with Sam. Her son looked up at her with a confused look in his eye and responded, "Why? Sam's my friend, we're just hanging out." Adults often get bogged down by barriers, by society's rules, by our own expectations of what is possible. When children are given the opportunity to walk down different roads, with some of those expectations removed, they show us how endless the possibilities really are.

Throughout the year, there were many moments when things did not go well, when, as a teacher, I became frustrated or angry with the choices or behaviors of the students in my class. We struggled to plow through long division, sentence structure, and how electricity works. We experienced the joys, problems and challenges of any classroom; however, I believe that all of us left that classroom feeling a lot more compassionate and a lot more understanding of the experiences of our neighbors.

In many ways, the children had moved away from their role of helper to the role of caring friend, a role that is reciprocal.  Although my goal for this program had been inclusion, I would have never envisioned the deep and lasting friendships that would develop between these children.  More than anything else, a simple joy of being together began to  blossom.

# Chapter 5

# Growing Older, Growing Wiser - Grade 5

*"The children have much to teach us, if we but stop and listen."*

*(Paley, 1989, p. 136)*

*New Challenges*

Even though I have taught for over twenty years, a wave of uncertainty and nervousness always passes over me as the first school day in September approaches. I still do not feel confident that I am fully prepared for what may greet me in the school year. The greatest thrill and the biggest challenge for me is the knowledge that there will always be surprises, that I will always be faced with new problems and I will always be struggling to come up with creative solutions to these dilemmas. The expected or anticipated will rarely happen in quite the way it might have been envisioned. In the fall of 2002, another school year began. I opened my classroom door to another 26 Grade 5 students with Sam among them. Once again I faced the task of creating a productive and caring learning community.

I must admit that I did face many challenges that school year. They began as soon as the children entered the classroom and continued throughout most of the year. It was

a year when my philosophy and my practices were often challenged and I had to work hard to ensure that my students were able to access the resources that they needed. Some of my students had been in my class previous years and they were quite comfortable with my classroom practices. Others, new to my class, were unfamiliar with my teaching style and unsure of my expectations. I found that the blending together of the old timers and the newcomers was not as smooth as I would have hoped. There were many factors that could have contributed to the difficulties, perhaps the children's ages, personalities and historical experiences. I felt that one of the key causes of the difficulties were directly related to the school identities that had been attached to some of the children in the past. The children also seemed keenly aware of what traditionally made a 'good student' in school. Some were quite vocal on their opinions of how their classmates should be ranked and ordered and were often forthright in the identification of what they saw as their peers' shortcomings.

*Tentative Relationships*

One of my initial challenges and one that needed to be addressed regularly throughout the year was my expectation that all members of the classroom community would be included in activities and that the resources of the classroom would be shared by all. The initiation of the 'you can't say you can't play rule' was met with many grumbles and complaints and in some cases outright hostility. There seemed to be many old frictions and conflicts that had been brought by my students into the classroom. Friends, who had been close for years, wanted to keep their relationships exclusive and

did not want to share their time or possessions with others. There were complaints about

suddenly having to share friendships and physical space with others whom the students

didn't know as well. A few children defied the rule by moving or hiding nametags in the

morning or moving themselves away from the table groups to a corner of their own.

There was one student who was blatantly excluded by his peers. Some students were

accustomed to being removed from the classroom for disruptive or non-compliant

behavior and didn't quite know what to do when they were not removed. Often I would

hear negative comments being directed at others. The competition to be 'best' was fierce.

Homework assignments were compared, assignment marks debated and letter grades

were a common topic of conversation. I felt overwhelmed with the fast, furious pace; the

children's driven need to be the best. This group of ten year olds really struggled to meld

together into a cooperative learning community. I wondered whether years of being

immersed in the traditional educational system had created this competitive, 'me first'

attitude.

Mrs. J. and I seriously questioned whether we could make the buddy system work

this year. We admitted to each other that we missed the gentleness and calmness of our

previous class. We realized that we would have to look more closely at each of our new

students, to look past the classroom behaviors and attitudes and learn more about them as

people. We recognized that many of the issues that arose in the classroom were a result

of the assignment of specific school identities that had been reinforced over time. We

had to set aside what was written in their school files and become curious about these

children. Once again, we spent much time early in the year listening to their stories,

chatting with their families, trying to grasp a more complete picture of each individual child to figure out what was happening for each of them.  I sat with them at their table groups, I talked to them on the playground, I visited with their parents.  I began to see their strengths, their talents, the knowledge that they could bring to our classroom.  I also was able to put into perspective their challenges and how I could support them.

It was important for me to remember that the basis of Sam's buddy program was my belief that every child should see themselves as an important member of their learning community.  My goal for the school year was not to supply Sam with gentle and caring buddies, but to offer all my students the opportunities to learn and grow in areas that were relevant to them.  My aim was to ensure that all classroom members had access to the resources and the learning opportunities that were important to them.  We decided to push on and initiated the program within the first few days of September.  We brought out the same calendar, the same puzzles and 'Auntie', the guinea pig.  Many of my students had worked with Sam in past years and were competent experts.  My newcomers needed guidance and support.  I was  pleased to see that the experienced children quickly and naturally stepped into this role, leading the new buddies through their early experiences.  When it came to Sam, the children seemed to be able to put away some of their historical issues.  Was it possible that Sam's buddy program could be a way to bridge some of the conflicts and to find a common ground?

I became very sensitive to the conflicts that arose in my classroom and found myself struggling to find the best way to deal with issues as they arose.  I recognized how easy it would be to fall back into the old, established traditional ways of dealing with

conflicts; punishment and exclusion.  I forced myself to look carefully at each issue and respond in ways that I believed were in the best interests of the children involved.  It would have been easy to make important decisions based on inaccurate assumptions, and to needlessly close the door of opportunity for children.

One morning, early in the school year, information was shared with me that Ron, the student who was designated to be Sam's buddy for the day had been overheard making derogatory comments and mimicking Sam's mannerisms.  This child was new to the school, did not know Sam, and had not yet participated in the buddy program.  His knowledge and skills in this area were limited because he was a newcomer.  My first impulse was to protect Sam from possible hurt and discreetly change the buddy list until I was able to address this issue with the child.   Then, I rethought my initial reaction.  I remembered that I was not the 'omnipotent' teacher, and that learning did not always need to come from me, the teacher.  I made no mention  of the earlier incident.  Mrs. J. and I proceeded, deciding to just keep a close eye on the situation.   As so often in the past, I was genuinely moved by my observations on that day in October

It was preparation day for our Harvest lunch, a special meal the children cooked and served to their families.  We were busy  organizing the food that we would serve to our families the next day.  This exciting day did not fit into Sam's regular schedule and it could have been cause for frustrations on his part.  Mrs. J. and I were also acutely aware of the possibility of difficulties with Sam's designated buddy.  We decided to just plow on through and deal with any problems as they arose.  Piles of vegetables for the soup were heaped in the center of the tables and the children eagerly began sawing through the

large carrots and strong smelling onions with their plastic serrated knives.  Hesitantly but

gently  Ron settled Sam with a pile of mushrooms to cut.   Sam responded immediately to

Ron's kind directions and they proceeded to happily chop vegetables for the soup,

pleasantly chatting to each other and to the other children at the table.   There was no sign

of Ron's earlier disrespectful comments and gestures.   Throughout the morning's

activities, there were expert buddies, close at hand, making suggestions, guiding and

encouraging this newcomer's developing confidence.  It was a peaceful and  productive

morning, with not a hint of a problem.   Later, while Sam and Ron happily played with

the building blocks, Mrs. J. and I relaxed.  We both felt relieved that we had not

sabotaged a rich learning experience by our own preconceived ideas and insecurities.  My

earlier urge to remove Ron from his buddy position and lecture him on being

disrespectful,  I am sure would have had a negative effect on this new and fragile

relationship.  By being able to work with Sam, Ron was able to gain knowledge and

understanding about him and in turn envision a far different picture in his mind about

Sam.  As the year progressed, Ron became a very special friend to Sam.  Near the end of

the school year, Ron spoke about how nervous he had been before his first buddy day, but

how much fun he had and what a great guy Sam was.  We are unaware of any further

negative comments from this child and he, like so many others, is quick to come to Sam's

side.  Important lessons had been learned by many of us that day.

Although conflicts continued to crop up in the children's interactions with each

other, they quickly became comfortable with their developing relationships with Sam.

He had learned all their names and they learned his routines.  They all had their favorite

shared activities and looked forward to their buddy time.  They began to express their enthusiasm for Sam's accomplishments and display amazing patience as he struggled to master new skills.  I realized that I could use their caring and compassionate feelings towards Sam to illustrate how we might look at other people, including each other. Seating arrangements and the pooling of supplies alone did not change children's attitudes towards their peers.  Many children still identified fellow students using the historically assigned school identities.  They were still limited in their access to the resources of the community and were not able to move into powerful positions.  The buddy program provided us with a different structure, a different frame of reference, in which  to place our daily conflicts and classroom dilemmas.  We began to preface our conversations about playground disagreements, incidents of exclusion and frustrations with the academic challenges of others with comments such as, "How would we have responded if it was Sam?  How would we have supported Sam in a similar situation?" Naturally, this did not resolve all of the problems that were faced in the classroom and on the playground, but it helped us think of others in more compassionate ways.

*Learning From Sam*

Our relationships with Sam also provided opportunities to look and talk about our own struggles.  Sam's daily challenges seemed so great and yet he continued to work hard at school and show amazing cheerfulness and perseverance.  Could we not then make the same efforts in areas that we found challenging?  Could we not show the same caring attitude to other children who struggled to read a novel, understand a math concept, sit

quietly through assemblies or be respectful to others? As a class we became more open and honest about our talents, strengths and difficulties. We began to try to support each other more and criticize each other a little less. We became more comfortable understanding that being fair and equitable did not mean that everyone's learning and classroom experiences would be the same; learning looked, sounded and felt different to different people but everyone's contributions were valuable and respected. Sam's buddy program became an example with which we could explain, organize and describe what was important in our classroom. Our developing relationships with Sam, encouraged all of us to look at our relationships with each in a different light. If it was so easy to be patient, gentle and supportive with Sam, could we not see other people in our community in a more positive way?

## *Working Together and Sharing Our Knowledge*

As the year progressed, we settled into a comfortable routine. Sam enjoyed his new friendships and the children were delighted to work and play with him. Many of my uncertainties at the beginning of the year were dispelled and I enjoyed the relationships that were developing between the children and myself. Concerns continued to arise, but I attempted to help the children address individual problems independent of historical conflicts. My general rule was, address the problem, come up with a fair and agreeable solution and then let it go.

Throughout the regular classroom up's and down's, Sam continued to work and play hard. We were all amazed with his rapidly expanding vocabulary, his active participation in classroom activities and his developing independence. Often I would catch myself panicking as I scanned the classroom, unable to locate him. There he would be, immersed in the clutter of work and friends.

Once again, we tried to somehow take advantage of classroom jobs to provide learning opportunities for Sam. I began to hide the attendance sheet and gave directions as to where he could find it. "Sam, the attendance is in the 'pig's' cage, it's behind the computer, it's between Karen and Sandy." Sam, with the help of his buddy, would hunt it down and then bring it to me and tell me where he had found it. Once he had mastered that game and knew all my favorite hiding spots, I changed the game again. Then Sam got to hide the attendance from me! Sam's parting words, before taking the sheet of paper to his favorite hiding spot was, "No peeking!" and I would immediately cover my eyes. He would then gently tap my shoulder and describe where he had hidden the paper. For days his favorite spot was inside the microwave, but with the help of his buddy he got move creative. "It's in the garbage can!"

Sam' s developing language skills opened many new doors for him. In Social Studies the children were learning about natural resources. Sam was included in a group who were exploring the fishing industry. Although the economic and environmental impact of the local fishing industry was beyond Sam's understanding, he did know about fish, so Mrs. J and his buddies helped Sam do his project on fish. They looked at pictures of fish, talked about where fish live and what they ate. The group made a trip to the local

pet shop and selected a beautiful goldfish that Sam named Cricket to keep the guinea pig company.  Sam joined his group on presentation day, shared his information and showed the children Cricket.  We were all very impressed.

During the school year, we had once again set aside time each week to learn sign language.  For Sam, it was important to continually explore ways in which he could confidently communicate his needs and desires to those around him.  Sign language was an important tool to support Sam's communication.  One of my students had a profound hearing loss.  With the support of his special learning assistants,  Rick accepted the role of expert teacher and he would lead us in our weekly lessons.  With his help, we further developed our signing skills, and many of the children became confident communicators in that language.  One child, Sandy, commented with obvious respect that Sam, "knows how to sign stuff...like I would have to look at someone else to know the sign, but he knows it just from someone saying the word."   I would smile as I looked around the classroom, watching the children and adults, roles and responsibilities shifting, abilities and disabilities becoming hazy.

Sam had also acquired a new program for his computer that had enabled him to use pictures and words to communicate messages; Sam chose from a vast number of picture symbols with  the printed word beneath.  With assistance, Sam learned to write his own stories and read them to the class.  For Mother's Day, with Mrs. J's help,  he wrote a wonderful poem for his Mom.  This program also provided a useful tool for Sam and his buddy to complete his daily agenda, a communication book that is sent home each day.  The children loved to participate in this activity and showed great pride when

Sam completed a story. Each new skill, each new opportunity provided Sam with a richer and more inclusive school experience.

In addition to developing communication skills, Sam's learning plan identifies self care skills and life skills as important components of his education. It had been suggested that Sam should be regularly participating in a cooking program, and that Mrs. J. should be taking him shopping and provide opportunities for him to prepare simple meals. We recognized that this was certainly a skill that all my Grade 5 students could use. Once again, we initiated a program that would keep Sam at the center of the community. Mrs. J would take a group of children to the store to shop for the necessary groceries. Sam learned how to locate items in the store, follow a shopping list and line up to pay for the merchandise. His buddies learned about comparison shopping, looking for deals and handling money. On returning to school, the group would prepare the food and clean up their workspace. All of the children enjoyed following the simple recipes and sharing the resulting treats.

## The Power of Friendships

As Sam's support team, we have continually looked for ways to gently challenge him and encourage learning and growth. Sam had now been swinging on the intermediate swings with his peers at recess time for most of the year. We recognized that once again he had become 'locked' into this routine. We decided that we would try to encourage Sam to spend the short 15 minute morning recess time kicking the soccer ball with a group of children. We discussed this with the class and it was unanimously seen

as a 'great idea'. As well intentioned as they were, in their enthusiasm to be freed from the restraints of the classroom, it was sometimes difficult for the children to remember to invite and encourage Sam to play. As with all children, when the bell rang, they were off eagerly planning their activities for the short break. It was not an easy task for young children to patiently wait and encourage a reluctant peer, when time is short and the games are starting.

James was one student in my class who never forgot Sam, and never showed any frustration or impatience with Sam's reluctance and resistance to certain tasks/requests. One morning, Sam was unhappy and unwilling to leave the classroom if it meant playing soccer. He wanted 'swings!!' As the precious recess minutes were ticking away Mrs. J., James and I tried every one of our tricks to get him out the door with the soccer ball. Finally, I told James to go outside and salvage a few minutes of his break time. James hesitantly and sadly put the soccer ball away and headed to the door. Suddenly, Sam looked up and saw him leaving. "James!" Sam jumped up from his chair, ran to the equipment box and retrieved the soccer ball. The two children headed out the door. Mrs. J. and I squealed with delight. Such a small and insignificant event, but with such profound meaning. Sam had chosen a friend over solitude! He had, all on his own, initiated play, had asked to be included.

As the spring concert approached, the school music teacher spoke to me about how we could include Sam in the program that she had developed for my class. She had decided that she would like to have my students on stage with the kindergarten class. The two classes would do a song together, then the little ones would sing a selection of

nursery rhymes and my class would conclude the performance with a beautiful rendition of Titanic on the recorders.  It sounded like a lovely presentation, but I was very concerned about Sam's involvement.  Playing the recorder was beyond his ability and although he often played the bells or tambourine we were looking for a way for him to be a more active participant.  Both of us recognized that the action songs selected for the kindergarten children would be both challenging and appropriate for Sam, but I worried about the image of my Grade 5 student standing amongst the tiny five year olds.  The Music teacher had worried that the kindergarten children would have a difficult time projecting their voices through the large gymnasium.  I suggested that some of my children could act as big buddies to the little ones, and help them with the songs and the actions.  Sam would then be one of the big buddies.  Making that suggestion, I wondered if any of my students would volunteer to sing nursery rhymes, with five year olds in front of a packed audience. It was another dilemma that I took to my students and was thrilled with their solution.  On the day of the performance, I had tears in my eyes while I watched my most rough and tumble boys encircle Sam and the kindergarten children and proudly sing and act out 'Hickory Dickory Dock'.

*Making Sense of Our World*

Throughout the year we tried to think about the challenges and the struggles of our fellow citizens.  Many of our class discussions and readings revolved around injustices, both around the world and in our smaller communities.  My students were ready to think and talk about their own life experiences, and to try to consciously develop

their personal set of values and beliefs.   Their relationships with Sam had made them think and talk a lot about the discriminations against people with disabilities.  They struggled with their own understandings of equality and justice.  I tried to provide them with opportunities to express their feelings, their uncertainties and to challenge the notions of others.

Some of the  children in my class openly struggled to make sense of their preconceived ideas of what people with disabilities were like.  They tried to put into words their developing understanding of humanity and social justice in the context of their relationships with Sam.  The following dialogue took place in the spring of 2003. The children were discussing not only their own feelings about Sam but also how they saw the future for him and others with disabilities.

Sandy:      I thought it would be more challenging for the whole classroom to...like...warm up and get used to him [Sam] but I was in his class in kindergarten and he didn't know signs that much.  He knew 'toilet' [signs word] and like ...um...the days of the week...and stuff...and he knew 'friend' [signs].  If he liked you he would go  'friend' [signs] and he had just pretty much the basics, like if he had to go to the washroom. But he was kind of shy and I though it was going to be harder to make friends with him because in kindergarten he was shy.  But this year he's been really great to be with.  He's a good friend and really fun to be with.

Karen:       I think when we all started the buddy program we were pretty nervous because we didn't know Sam very well.

Korey:       I think it's cool when you're his buddy...like, because you think he's learning things and he is...but you're also learning things, like, about him...learning things like what he learns...it's pretty cool because everyday you're Sam's buddy you learn something new and so does he.

Karen:       It's really great having him make us smile and stuff.

Sandy:       It's different than having...how would I say this...just hanging out with people that don't have Down Syndrome. It's a different change for you because you get to see what it would...kinda be like to have Down Syndrome and what he has to go through.  But you would think it would be more different...like him not being able to do work and like talking and reading and stuff like that as well as we can...but...it's not like he's dumb or anything.  It's kinda like he's...I don't know how to say it...I don't know.  Its different to be with him cuz you get to see it through a different personality...you get to be in someone else's shoes. It's just cool to see what it would be like if you had Down Syndrome...

Korey:       That's what I mean!  When you're his buddy, you learn something else and you just see that there's nothing wrong with him.

Sandy:       He becomes just...another person.

Karen:       Now I realize that he's just the same as everyone else...we're human beings...he's just the same as everyone.

Korey:        I think we're in the same problem.  It's like...you judge people before you get to know them and I think it's the wrong thing too...because they can't help how they are...and it's good to help them.  I think it's cool that we get to socialize with them just normally.

Sandy:        Like, before I met Sam, I thought that other...like people...kids...adults with disabilities as not like...not at the same level in smartness that I am ...and I would think that they would act like they were two or something.  But they are really not bad, they are just like us.  When you see someone like Sam and you get to know them...you understand what they would be going through and you don't even know that they have a disability...in a way.

(Video transcript-June 5th, 2003)


It was important for children to have the opportunity to think about, wrestle with and clarify their feelings and ideas about the people around them.  In this dialogue, I believe the girls were not only struggling to explain their understanding of Sam's position in society, but were also trying to use Sam's example as a frame of reference when attempting to understand their relationships with their classmates.  As a class we had openly discussed my concerns about ongoing exclusive behaviors during the year.  Their growing awareness of the feelings and experiences of others could help them in becoming more compassionate citizens.  Their experiences with Sam may  have helped

them see their fellow citizens in a different light.  Maybe there was the possibility for something more for many of the marginalized members of our society.

*Sharing Our Knowledge With Others*

As the year progressed, adults on the periphery of our classroom community became curious about what we were doing in the classroom.  People from community agencies outside of the school came into the classroom to observe our interactions with each other and with Sam.  Students from the Special Education Assistant program and pre-service teachers would visit us.  Our program provided the opportunity for open discussions about school practices and the possibility of something different for our schools and for our children.

As more and more people visited our classroom, I began to recognize the impact of our classroom practices in the greater community.  Visitors were amazed at how easily and comfortably the children interacted with Sam.  They commented on how very much he was immersed in the 'regular' classroom environment.  It had become second nature to find appropriate ways to provide valuable learning experiences for Sam within the structures of the Grade 5 curriculum in cooperation with his classmates.  What was noticed by visitors as outstanding inclusive behavior, was seen by the classroom community as 'just a part of school'.

Although I had my concerns at the beginning of the year and we did experience many ups and downs throughout the months, the buddy program remained strong.  I believed that during the final year of the study the buddy program played a greater role in

our classroom community than at any time in the previous years.  It had provided all

children with the opportunity to feel successful, important and capable.  It had given all

the children, regardless of their assigned school identities or their personal challenges, an

opportunity to participate in valuable and important work.  They were all seen as experts

in the roles.  The program was also a shared experience.  There was a common language

and common stories and common understanding among all the children in the class.

Regardless of the historic experiences and conflicts, time with Sam was seen by all as a

special shared experience.

At the end of the school year, I was the one who would be moving away from the

community.  I had accepted a teaching position at another school in the district.

Although I had always known that I would only be sharing a small stretch of my students'

educational journeys, I had become quite a comfortable fixture in the school.  After nine

years, I knew most of the children and their families and had enjoyed visiting with my

previous students and sharing favorite memories.  I must admit, I worried a lot about

Sam and what his future will hold.  I wondered about high school, post secondary, I

worried about next year.  I wished I had the power to provide him with a lifetime of

friends, support and love, but I couldn't.  The possibility for change in our society rests

on the shoulders of our children, Sam's peers.  I asked my students how they envisioned

Sam's high school experiences, what role they might be able to play in his life.  Luke

expressed concern that "maybe once in a while some people might make fun of him.  But

he'll probably have a friend stick up for him."  James responded, "If I'm in his high

school, I'll be his friend...I'm sure of that!"

# Chapter 6

# Possibilities - A Classroom For All

*"Rain does not fall on one roof and neither does the sun shine on one house*

*alone."*

*(African proverb)*

## Introduction

In this chapter, I will review my uncertain path over the past four years as I tried

to create a classroom environment that would reflect my philosophical beliefs.   My

realization that I wanted a more inclusive and less competitive learning environment for

my students forced me to make some fundamental changes in my classroom practices.

As I reflected back on this professional journey, I recognized the significant impact that

my participation in TARG (Teacher Action Research Group) at Simon Fraser University

had on not only clarifying my beliefs but also empowering me to make the necessary

changes.   Only when we as educators have the opportunity to critically examine the

practices that are commonly used in our school system are we able to make informed

decisions.   By meeting regularly with a group of concerned teachers and researchers, I

was provided with that opportunity.  We discussed the educational system in which I worked and this gave me a place where I could talk about issues and share my own experiences and concerns.  It was through this group that four years ago, I tentatively began to do research in my classroom.  I became more curious about my students and how I could best meet not only their educational needs but their social and emotional needs as well.

Now,  as an old-timer in teacher action research,  I believe that it is crucial for educators to travel down this questioning path, to refuse to accept the system as it is, just because it has always been this way.  When teachers are able to closely examine the impact of their practices, think and speak critically about their work and listen to the ideas of others, they have the opportunity to challenge the voice of authority that Bakhtin spoke of.  I believe that it is that authoritative voice of an earlier time that has the power to keep our educational system in a stagnant and unshifting mode. We do things this way because that is how it has always been done.  It is only  by challenging the authoritative voice that "demands our unconditional allegiance"(p. 343), and by listening to the voices of others, that we are able as teachers make decisions in our classrooms that are thoughtful,  creative and educationally sound.

In her book, <u>Teaching to Transgress</u>, bell hooks talks about the importance of educators reflecting on their teaching styles, and recognizing the changes that need to take place in order for our classrooms to become more inclusive.

> To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (1994, p. 130).

By creating opportunities for educators to connect with each other, to share their concerns, their fears and their dreams, teachers will be able to move away from the front of the classroom and connect with their students and their worlds.

Previously in my teaching career, I had struggled to follow the traditions of the well established school system. I assumed that there were specific practices that were necessary for the education of children. Even though I struggled to follow them, I was informed that for students to be successful learners these practices were necessary. These were the practices that Toohey addressed in her study. She recognized that, "As central practices, schools evaluate and rank children and thus manufacture identities for them" (p. 196). Further, she saw that, "Classrooms also organize particular ways for children and teacher to talk, read, write and listen..." (p.125) I felt that it was my lack of skill and knowledge that prevented me from organizing and maintaining my classroom in a similar manner. It was only when I was given the opportunity to think and talk for myself outside of the system, that I began to really question the validity of many classroom practices.

By questioning, thinking and observing, I was able to clarify what I thought my students' educational lives might look like. Then I began to identify the specific

practices that I would initiate or eliminate. These decisions were directly based on the ideas of theorists, educators and researchers that I have studied since becoming a teacher researcher. I realized that in my years of study and involvement with TARG, it was the stories of teachers that had been most influential. They have both inspired and encouraged me to think about the role I play in my students' lives.

I read the stories of many educators who were willing to challenge the system and make significant changes in their teaching practices. Instead of choosing to position themselves as the omnipotent supplier of knowledge, they became the curious learner, the questioner. In her personal quest for understanding, Paley (1995) positioned herself as a learner and openly sought the advice, the expertise and the stories of people whose life experiences have been different from hers. Although, as a teacher, she was in a position of power, a place where she could control and enforce the authoritative voice of the dominant system, she chose to listen to the voices around her and learn from their experiences and in turn increase her own knowledge. It became clear through her stories that she believed that educators need to move to a place in classrooms where the voices of all our community are heard and that the stories will be listened to, valued and bring new meaning to all.

As the stories are told, commonalities surface and a greater understanding and appreciation for community members develops. With appreciation and acceptance comes trust, and with that trust comes the opportunity for all members to support, encourage and include each other. It is then the responsibility of the teacher to imagine a better world for them. "This is as it must be. In the final analysis, it will always be the classroom

teacher who has the power to lift the spirit of the individual child and beat the drums for the communal dance" (Paley,1995, p.114.)

## *Building an Inclusive Learning Community*

> When I envision community, I picture a flock of geese flying south on a crisp autumn day. They have come together with a goal, which is of utmost importance to them all, survival. In this group there are those that have made this journey before, experts in the task and there are those that are young, inexperienced and making their first flight. Watching them fly overhead, I am unable to identify the competency of any particular bird; each does what it is capable of as it works towards the common goal. (Rowbotham, 1999)

When I first became involved in teacher action research in 1999, I reflected on my own education and my years of being a teacher. I was given the opportunity to discuss issues of identity and inclusion with informed and curious professionals. I wondered how I could create a community where everyone was welcome, where ideas were shared and where each members' knowledge and skills were respected, where we could fly effortlessly. How could I make this happen when people involved were of such diverse and unique backgrounds and held such varied experiences and perspectives?

The idea of creating an inclusive learning community for all sounded quite wonderful on paper. The picture of the satisfied, smug teacher contently traveling between enthusiastic, 'on task' and cooperative students. 'The flock of geese gracefully

flying overhead'. But this was not always my reality. Trying to create this community took hard work and determination. Even on the best of days, there were challenges, questions and uncertainties. I was forced to look beyond the more traditional methods of dealing with classroom dilemmas to try different strategies, often with disappointing results. It meant talking and talking and talking and talking with the children, with parents, with support personnel, with administration. It meant taking risks, questioning motives and learning from mistakes. This I tried to accomplish as I continued to struggle with my own history and school experiences, my own school identity. I must admit that through most of the first year and continuing, at times, to the present, I scurried to close the door of my classroom and tried to steer clear of those who might challenge my philosophical position and 'classroom management' choices.

With the encouragement of some of my colleagues, the support of my research group, and my concern for my students, I continued to explore ways to ensure an inclusive classroom setting. I realized my first job was to clarify my goals as an educator. I resolved that every child had the right to maintain their place in their learning community and we, as members of that community had the responsibility to create an environment in which everyone felt safe, cared for and academically challenged.

As in any classroom many of the children that I worked with had labels that often set them apart from the rest of the class. The children, as a result of the labels were often seen as needing special instruction or remediation outside of the classroom. Although often well intentioned, the removal of a child from their classroom learning environment,

further denied them access the resources and materials that they needed to be successful. These children often became a part of a downhill spiral. Removed from learning and support of their peers, they no longer had access to those important experiences. They were publicly identified as not knowing or unable, which added to their burden, as explained by Varenne and McDermott.

> Those who find themselves in this special position, whether
> because of physical, mental, economic, or neighborhood
> characteristics, have to put up not only with missing out on
> certain developments that come easily to many of their peers;
> they had to be doubly cursed and taunted by researchers focusing
> on them, separating them from their peers, making them special
> and then explaining why they do not have what others have and
> what should be done about it. (1999, p. 140.)

Toohey stated that "...schools and classrooms (like other communities) have customary ways of distributing resources within them. She argued that "access to peers and their words and ideas are differentially distributed resources for children in classrooms that have major effects on their possibilities to participate in classroom activities and thereby, learn" (p. 125.) She went on to state that "children had most opportunities for appropriating classroom language in situations when they could speak from desirable and powerful identity positions, when they had access to the expertise of their peers, and when they could 'play' in language" (p. 125.) This process of removing

children from their learning community was one way that the school system was able to inequitably distribute classroom resources.

In light of this, I decided that my students would be encouraged to remain within the classroom so they would have a greater opportunity to access the knowledge, experiences and materials that were important to them and experience success in their learning . By making this decision I was then faced with the dilemma of meeting the needs and desires of a very diverse group of children. I discovered quite quickly that it was not a simple task, nor was there an actual method or program that would ensure that this would happen. The exciting side to this problem was that I was able to use my creativity as a teacher to explore ways to make this happen.

To 'help' all my students it was necessary to make changes in my teaching practices. It was not enough to just maintain these children within the walls of the classroom. I needed to develop strategies and practices that would encourage positive learning experiences. Early in my study, one young boy, frustrated with a difficult day filled with conflict asked, "Why don't you just send me to the office?" Wearily, I responded, "Has that ever helped in the past?" He shook his head and smiled. "Then there is no point in continuing to try that. We had to come up with something different."

How would that 'something different' look? What changes would I need to make to the learning environment to increase the possibility of success for all my students? As I focused on creating an inclusive and accessible classroom community I recalled Rogoff's idea of a community of learners. She spoke of the importance of children being active participants in their own learning with the support of adults.

> Children and adults together are active in
> structuring shared endeavors, with adults responsible for
> guiding the overall process and children learning to
> participate in the management of their own learning and
> involvement (1994, p.213.)

She went on to explain that a community of learners is "... a community working together with all serving as resources to the others, with varying roles according to their understanding of the activity at hand and differing responsibilities in the system" (p. 214.)

From this perspective, children need to be active participants in their own education. If they were provided with opportunities to be both teachers as well as learners, then they would be able to share their expertise and talents. It would become possible for them to appropriate positions of power in the classroom and challenge the labels, the school identities that they have been assigned.

I decided I would try to shift some of the roles of my classroom members. I wanted to encourage my students to take more powerful positions in the classroom, to take active roles in not only their own learning, but the learning of their peers. I looked closely at the students in my class, to discover, skills, talents and knowledge that would be useful in our classroom. I wanted to provide opportunities for all members to be teachers, sharers of knowledge, experts. To begin facilitating that process I met with every family and learned about their interests, strengths and talents trying to develop a clearer picture of the children in my classroom, not just the school identities, but those identities that could easily be left hidden in our schools. I wanted all of the children with

each of their identities: the reluctant reader, the tree climber, the soccer player, the gentle big sister to come into my classroom. I did not want to only have access to a small sliver of each of my students. When children begin to see that their identities are multiple, fluid and shifting, they are then more able to challenge those assigned identities that have endured through their school experiences.

I also thought a great deal about Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation:

> 'Legitimate peripheral participation' provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice (p.29.)

This concept provided a framework onto which my vision of a learning community could be built. I could see that each member of the community made important contributions and in turn was able to learn from others. I was able to justify my belief that everyone had a right and a responsibility to be a part of the classroom. Learning and teaching could take place in the most unexpected situations. If as teachers, we limited our students' experiences to what we thought were most 'appropriate teaching

scenarios', we were denying our students the opportunity to access all the available community knowledge.

As I gradually began to adjust my classroom practices to reflect my beliefs as an educator the changes were noticed by others within the walls of the school. I received messages from parents of students in my class who did not want their child sitting beside another child, known for their disruptive and inappropriate behavior. I had visits from support personnel, eager to set up pull- out schedules for those students needing more intensive academic intervention. I welcomed the interested, the curious and the helpful into my classroom. I would explain the reasons for my classroom arrangements to those who asked. I would continue my efforts to create a more equitable, inclusive and caring learning environment.

Many shook their heads and smiled at my peculiar practices; others disagreed with my philosophy and questioned the educational value of what was happening in my classroom. I was often seen by parents as the 'non academic' teacher or the easy teacher. But there remained an underlying interest in what I was doing. Although they were not always able to articulate their reasons, many parents of children who had struggled with the more traditional classroom settings, requested their child be placed my classroom. One parent put it, "I know that my child may not make as much academic growth as in other classrooms, but I think that there is something else that you may be able to give him." By the end of the year this same parent commented on what a challenging and exciting year it had been for their child and that in fact they were satisfied with his academic growth as well! This conversation supported my belief that the academic

development of students would not suffer as a result of classroom modifications made to foster a more inclusive environment.

Building a classroom community, in which relationships are developed, connections are made and commonalities are discovered is central to all.  Children must know that they are accepted and treasured by their peers and the adults in their lives. They must be given the opportunity to share their knowledge, learn from each other and explore their shifting identities.  The classroom community must be a place where children feel safe to share their struggles and a place where they are always challenged to move forward.  Children must be encouraged to support and teach each other and in turn be willing to listen and learn.

I believe that creating an inclusive learning community necessitates having a curious mind and a sense of wonder and respect for the experiences of others.  It takes a willingness to listen to the voices of others and respect the participation of everyone.  It means demanding a legitimate and honored place within the classroom walls for all children, even when there are professionally acceptable alternative solutions.  Creating a community of learners means finding the best, not necessarily the easiest, road for all members.

## *Assigned Identities*

> The teachers defined us as obedient or naughty, fast or slow, popular or invisible, according to their preferences, and we accepted the roles we were given.  Few of us were able to recapture our self-image while in school...Those of us who became teachers adopted the conventional wisdom that teacher knows best and fashioned our classrooms in the manner of those who went before us." (Paley, 1989, P. xv)

As I began to revisit the old stories of my classroom over the time of this study, when I scoured over the video clips looking for 'special' moments, I realize that the eye of the camera has captured an image that is so often lost when looking through the eyes of an educator.  What the camera captured was the gentleness, the fragility and the beauty of children being with children.  The eye of the camera was not able to focus in on the thick school files sitting on the teacher's desks,  or recapture historical events that had created specific identities for these children.  On video there were no labels attached to the children nor assumptions made of how each story would unfold. The images do not tell tales of learning disabilities, of physical challenges or behavioral issues.  They show children using their skills and talents to make personal connections with their friend.  The stories recorded were moments out of time, as children negotiated relationships, solved problems and experienced varied roles within the walls of their classroom.

Though briefly mentioned in earlier chapters, there was very little attention given to the specific challenges and disabilities of the children who came through my classroom door, little recognition of their specific social, educational and emotional challenges.

"The more attention paid to the individual, the more 'determined' and the more restricted the person.  To respect the individual, politically and morally, one must analytically cast one's eyes away" (Varenne and McDermott, p.155).

It was through the buddying program that my students were most able to shed these weighty labels.  As they gained confidence in their roles as Sam's buddy, they drew on talents, skills and knowledge that were considered well outside the "school skills" that Toohey identified.  When the eye of the teacher no longer rests on the evaluation of these identified skills, the child, for a time can shed those assigned school identities.  "Take away the institutions or limit their sphere of relevance and the 'problem' disappears even if the difference does not" (Varenne & McDermott, p. 42.)   As the children worked and played with Sam, their friendships with each other deepened. Their confidence their roles as community members increased and the lens through which we had all viewed those school identities became blurred.  As a boy named Carl put it, "Working with Sam makes me feel closer to Sam and to the other kids."

## *And What About Sam?*

Inequalities and injustices in our schools are sometimes disguised and what may look like an inclusive integrated experience may in fact be very exclusionary for the child.  The competitive and fast paced agenda in our classrooms can make it very difficult for educators to be able to envision an inclusive learning community.   Teachers are told that students need to acquire certain knowledge and skills, and they as educators are

responsible for teaching all of the prescribed learning outcomes that have been identified for the grade levels they are teaching.

In the rush to accomplish these goals, with large numbers of students having diverse needs, interests and abilities, it becomes an overwhelming and frustrating task. Children identified with significant challenges move through the school system. They may have been given spots in our classrooms and support personnel to address their 'special needs' and 'learning challenges'. They may receive a great amount of intervention from adults who are developing and designing programs that will allow them some access to the regular classroom. Within this system there is often a struggle to find balance. How can the needs of these 'special' children be addressed and yet not disrupt the learning of the 'regular classroom students'. Although these children often maintain a physical place in their classrooms they continue to be marginalized, ignored and unknown by their peers and by their communities. Their voices are unheard, their stories are untold.

During the first two years of Sam's formal education, he worked one on one with an adult support worker, gradually developing the necessary skills that would lead to the achievement of the goals as outlined in his Individual Education Plan. There were often struggles to get Sam focused on the task at hand, and incentive programs were often initiated to 'keep him on track'. I recognized the important role that his classmates could take in his school life.

For a child with autism and Down Syndrome, the acquisition of language is a great challenge. For Sam, this was certainly one of the areas that deserved most

attention. It does not involve merely learning the words of a singular and unitary language, but situating those utterances within the rich expanses of his world. Sam, in his exclusive and controlled interactions with adult care givers and instructors, had limited access to the 'common tongue' of his peers. Language was being fed to him in a controlled, organized and sterile program, called language acquisition. Sam's isolation, with only the authoritative voice of an adult, had denied him the opportunity to experience the living languages of his world, the world of a child.

> When language is systematically unavailable to some, it is
> important that we not limit our explanations to the traits of the
> persons involved; it is equally essential that we take into account
> the interactional circumstances that position the people in the
> world with a differential access to the common tongue."
> (McDermott, 1993, p.283, in Toohey p. 5)

I decided that the children would take greater responsibility for supporting Sam's struggle to communicate. We didn't want him to be isolated, we wanted to know him, help him and learn from him. Through the buddy program we were able to build a support network so that he would always be able to access our language, our stories, and our knowledge. In our classroom we began to learn to listen to Sam's voice and respond. One child stated, "Sam has taught me to listen to people more carefully, not just their words".

Toohey recognized that much early research in second language learners concluded that successful language learning was dependent upon the attitudes, abilities

and motivation of the individual learner. "However, none of this research considered how social relations among learners, as well as among learners and those who judge their performances, might affect judgements of cognition, social adjustment or learning styles" (Toohey, 2000, p. 7.)

Like Toohey, I also wanted to look at how Sam's community could affect his language acquisition. As a child with autism, Sam's apparent desire to communicate with others was definitely limited - once his basic needs were attended to, Sam did not seem to be at all motivated to be a part of the rich language of children. According to earlier language researchers, Sam would not be a successful language learner. I believe that Sam's immersion into the common language of his peers, the unremitting and enthusiastic determination of his peers and the lessening focus on the structured programs of the adult world allowed him the opportunity to explore communication on a different level and voluntarily choose to participate in the social world of his community.

It was clear in early video tapes that Sam was unresponsive to the directions and utterances of either the adult workers or the structured language of the children. Once the children became comfortable in their role as friend and peer, they were more apt to use the language of the child, and their own personal variations on that. It was then that I observed a 'tuning in' on Sam's part, a curiosity and an attending to  the 'common language'. Sam was seen to make more attempts to communicate his needs and desires to his peers.

When Sam was playing with his peers, he was not only provided with constant opportunity to understand and participate in his culture, but he was working within his

zone of proximal development which Vygotsky believed was most appropriate for learning. His play activities were not scripted nor were his playmates meticulously coached or selected carefully for their capabilities. Just like any other child, Sam learned through imitation, practice and lots of mistakes. His experiences are not sterilized. He learned 'bad' words, he learned to negotiate turns and he experienced the sadness of his friends when he didn't want to share with them. When Sam was playing with his classmates, he was appropriating the language, the knowledge and the skills of his culture, that of a child. Sam's experiences were legitimate and real, he was working with knowledgeable experts who provided him with the opportunities for imitation of activities just ahead of what he could do alone. As one student said, "I think that Sam is learning a lot of stuff from the kids, like what to do wrong or what to do right. And people have to listen to Sam to really hear what he is saying."

Each day, I was inspired by my students and their ability to reach out to each other, to give encouragement and to learn together. From Sam, I learned to persevere even when the challenges seem insurmountable, to trust my friends and to enjoy the gifts we have all been given.

## *Possibilities*

"Every student must be able to claim ownership of her or his school and be able to say, 'this is my school, I see myself here, and I belong here'" (Dei, 2000, p.109)

Becoming a compassionate and caring citizen takes much more than completing commercially produced lessons or listening to guest speakers. It comes with an honest

belief and a declaration that each person in the community is valued, irreplaceable and necessary for the well being of the group. Every person must be seen as an expert and a source of important information. This cannot be artificially created; a child sees through false 'hurrahs' and becomes less confident in their participation. Time must be taken to really get to know each child and their family. What is important to the child must be important to the classroom community. Children will proudly share their knowledge and their skills if they know that these are valued by the community.

It has become clear to me that one of the ways to address labeling and exclusion in our classroom communities is through the development of personal relationships. By providing the opportunity for members to really get to know each other, there is the possibility to step outside the restraining walls of our educational system. I believed that when people begin to work side by side, to share their stories, they will be unable to maintain the 'them and us' position. This seems to be such a simple and unspectacular conclusion to come to; however when you spend time with others, ask questions and really listen to the answers, many things in life become much clearer.

Therefore, in my classroom, learning is seen as a social activity and participation by all members happens all the time. There are not periods of time in which cooperative and collaborative work is encouraged and then put away when the period is over. Children may always access the resources and knowledge of their peers. No one is ever left to struggle through a task alone. There is always the opportunity to work and support each other. I have deliberately nurtured these differences because when children are encouraged to do what they know they can do, and in turn are encouraged to share their

expertise with others, they are able to see themselves as capable and important in the lives of others.  They are able to challenge their positions in the school community.

Teaching is a craft that demands thought, creativity, experience, insightfulness and compassion.  The craft allows us to challenge many of the practices that have become acceptable in our system.  It gives us the opportunity to challenge the identities that have been assigned to our students and challenge the voices of authority that narrow our vision.  When we are willing to get to know the children and their families, we develop respect for the knowledge that they bring into our classrooms.  By sharing my own personal philosophy and experiences, and listening to those of others I realized that not only was there much that we could do to enrich Sam's educational and social experiences but also how much our own knowledge and understanding would grow.  Together we were participants in one friend's educational journey.  We were helping Sam find his own road and were traveling down it together, enjoying the breathtaking sights and the camaraderie that can develop when you are given the opportunity to get off the super highway and take a less traveled road.

My students have much knowledge and experience to share with others in our society.  They are now in a position to initiate and sustain monumental changes in our society.  We need to watch them and to learn from them, for children have so much to teach us if we are position ourselves as listeners.  A discussion between a group of adults, both parents and school personnel involved in Sam's life, took place near the end of the year.  They recognized the powerful positions these children do hold as agents of change.

Kate(a mom):    What I would like to see is the children carrying home more to the parents, because I know that we have.. Cody invites Sam over and Sam invites Cody over there, but does he go to a lot of other places to hang out at after school?

Ashley:

(Sam's mom)    No, no, he's not... and you get to a certain age where the birthday invitations stop coming and it's... he's not invited. We take... we have kids from his class that come over and we've gone out and done things in the community... skating or bowling or what-not... but Sam...it's not reciprocated.

Kate:    I think that' s what...

Ashley:    That's fear on behalf of the parents.

Pippi:    Oh yeah?

Ashley:    That maybe they won't be able to handle this child.

Mrs. J.:    That needs to be addressed also.

Kate:    ...and I've thought a lot about that also... thinking about it last night... I have to be honest, it kind of bothers me...not kind of. It bothers me!

Ashley:    It's hurtful for a parent... and it's hard too because he has two siblings and he sees them come and go with their social life and he's ready for it...and he's really ready for it.

Kate:    ...and the other children start off earlier, in kindergarten and it took him a long time to even want to... and until he wanted to ...and it used to be just the Nintendo stuff... but he's gone past that. Not just about 'Cody's

house...Nintendo!'

Kelly (S.E.A.):   ... the socialization.

Kate:             The going out for supper... the whole...everything you do.

Ashley:           Swimming, yeah!

Pippi:            It's interesting when you say that because it brings to my mind... I can

                  sort of understand the parents' fears, because they don't want to be

                  responsible if your child takes off.  They don't know.  They haven't been

                  brought up in that world of knowing how much trust and how

                  much they can give.   But I  think.- being an optimist - the people

                  dealing with it now, when they become parents...

Ashley:           Exactly!

Pippi:            So, your child is not going to benefit from that interaction because of

                  their parents, but when these guys become parents they're going to have

                  that experience...

Ashley:           It's not going to be an issue.

Pippi:            It's not going to be an issue because they are going to know that they

                  worked with Sam for five years and hey! That's no problem.  They are

                  not going to be afraid.  So we're making better parents out of them.

Ashley:           That's true.

Pippi:            That's one way to look at it.

Kate:             I do think that... I was saying that to Darlene last night... about Cody...

Pippi:        I don't know what we can do to change the parents now.  I don't think we can.

Kelly:        I get the feeling that... seeing the growth in their own children maybe is changing them now, but maybe we are not seeing it... that it's not such a big difference where they're ready to invite Sam to places because they may be still fearful, but I think subtly, as they hear the stories come home and maybe as the years go on, it might benefit.

Pippi:        Because... there's parents... adults have big time problems with tolerance and acceptance. I mean with anything!

Mrs. J.:        More than the little ones.

Pippi:        ... and that's what we're teaching now and again, we may not see it...

Ashley:        The benefits of it now ... You cross your fingers and hope that that is what all our hard work is about.

(Video transcript-June 5th, 2003)

"To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world." (Palmer, p. 6)  As a teacher, I want to guide my students down a personal road on which they have the opportunity to meet and connect with as many people as possible.  I want them to listen to their stories and experience the joy and sorrow that they uncover.  I want my students to develop relationships with their world because it feels good in their hearts and I want them to use their talents, skills and energy to try to make things better.

And what of the tomorrows?  What will Sam's school world look like when he leaves the small community of the elementary school?  What will happen when I leave the school next year and he moves into a different classroom?  What about secondary school?  Are the old patterns of exclusion so ingrained in our educational communities and in our society that lasting change is impossible?

I have tried to speak with my students about the future. They know that I am only walking along their road for a very short time, and I understand that their time in my classroom will become a distant hazy memory.  As a teacher, I am able to leave just a little bit of myself with my students.  But they will remain Sam's peers, his community and his future.  It is within their power to make lasting changes not only in the educational system but also to have an dynamic impact on how society chooses to look at its citizens.  These children are the ones who have the voices to demand something different, something better.  They can choose to maintain their position next to Sam, to cherish his friendship and to celebrate his successes.  Sam was just one example of what inclusion could mean and these children were just one small group of citizens trying to make a difference.

But will they choose to make that difference?  I believe so.  These children, Sam's friends, are powerful agents of change, and I certainly feel more hopeful for the future.

*Perhaps, by exploring possibilities, we can create an easier world in which to be*

*either a  student or an educator.*

# Appendix

# SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS

BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA V5A 1S6
Telephone:   604-291-4370
FAX:   604-291-4860

September 4, 2002

Ms. Suzanne Rowbotham
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education
Simon Fraser University

Dear Ms. Rowbotham:

**Re:  Sharing Sam's Journey The Inclusion of One Child with
Special Needs**

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of
Research has been approved on behalf of the Research Ethics Board.  This approval is in
effect for twenty-four months from the above date.  Any changes in the procedures
affecting interaction with human subjects should be reported to the Research Ethics
Board.  Significant changes will require the submission of a revised Request for Ethical
Approval of Research.  This approval is in effect only while you are a registered SFU
student.

Your application has been categorized as 'minimal risk" and approved by the Director,
Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board in accordance with
University policy R20.0, http://www.sfu.ca/policies/research/r20-01.htm. The Board
reviews and may amend decisions made independently by the Director, Chair or
Deputy Chair at its regular monthly meetings.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

c:      K. Toohey, Supervisor

/bjr

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