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A D V O C A C Y

PO Box 502
Epping NSW 1710

305/16-18 Cambridge St
Epping NSW 2121

Phone: (02) 9869 0866
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722

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Abstract

This paper contains a series of letters written in response to the Alberta Teachers Association document called "Trying to Teach" which raises problems in inclusive schooling. **Keywords: Education, School age**



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

"... the ATA supports the integration of special needs school-age children. However, provincial and local authorities need to ensure that adequate support is provided so that all students in the class are able to receive a sound education."

"To tolerate is to accept or respect the behaviour, customs, opinions, or beliefs of others."

These are quotes that could be taken from "The IA-A Handbook of Integration". Well, that's not where I found them. They were printed in the May 21, 1993 edition of the Edmonton Journal, as part of some responses to a critique of the report "Trying to Teach" by the Alberta Teachers Association. The criticism of the report was brought forward by some advocates involved in our association. Several members of the ATA felt compelled to express their disagreement with the criticism quite vehemently. Why is it then that despite the totally opposed positions of the two parties in this war of words, some of the basic ideas are identical?

For me, the solution to this apparent contradiction, lies in the fact that many members of the teaching profession live in a different world from the parents of special needs children. The report "Trying to Teach" comes indeed to the conclusion that the inclusion of special needs children into the educational mainstream is desirable. This conclusion, however, sounds extremely hollow, considering that it is preceded by about a dozen of reports that confirm that integrated education is one of the worst ideas the human mind has ever figured out. There are incredible horror stories about situations where integration has gone wrong. The point the report tries to make, is that currently there is not sufficient support in place to make integration viable.

All those of us who have found resistance when they tried to get their children into their neighbourhood school will know that this is not the reality we face. All those of us who struggle with so called "inclusive settings" for their children that are being administered and taught halfheartedly know that the aide alone does not make the situation successful. All those of us who have to listen to their school trustees saying: "Special needs students in a regular classroom is not exactly what we would like to see", know that sufficient support in the classroom is only the tip of the iceberg.

What really has to change are attitudes. Teachers and administrators have to learn to accept and to be sensitive to the needs of our children. Once they have taken that step they will have no trouble to find out that children with special needs have a very valuable contribution to make.

By emphasizing the need for teacher supports, the ATA report may have made an important point. However, the authors failed in at least two respects. First of all, through the selection of their examples, they created nothing but fear among their members. And secondly, it is not good enough to assume that the availability of more aide time will solve a problem that lies deep within the souls and minds of our teaching profession.

I hope you all have a restful summer.

Jochen Eggert

TRYING TO TEACH

In our last newsletter we sent out information on the Alberta Teacher's Association (ATA) document "Trying to Teach" prepared by the Alberta Association for Community Living. In the view of IA-A, there is a need to be extra vigilant to safeguard advances made in ensuring students with disabilities have ready access to quality inclusive educational placements.

One of the best safeguards is to let your voice be heard through writing letters to newspapers, politicians, schoolboards, and the ATA. These not only make people more aware of the issues in inclusive education, but help dispel many of the dated stereotypes about students with disabilities which still are prevalent, and in many cases being perpetuated by various educational organizations.

The following are a series of letter's published in The Edmonton Journal in response to the ATA document on May 5, 1993 and responses to them published on May 21, 1993. We encourage you to write to The Edmonton Journal with your feelings and reactions to them. It is only through this type of debate that the public at large can come to understand how harmful segregating students is and begin to voice their support for inclusive education.

Disabled children ATA bargaining pawn

The tactics of teachers do nothing to enhance their image in the community

I support the position of Joan Charbonneau, president, Alberta Association for Community Living, and Bruce Uditsky, association executive director, that educators are intolerant (Teachers intolerant of disabled-group, *Journal*, March 2).

Educators have never bothered to test

theories, and feel that they can generate hypotheses first (to segregate children with disabilities is the best way to teach them), then maybe conduct studies later.

The promotion of the doomsday scenario by projecting a declining education for non-disabled students when students with disabilities are included in the regular classroom is based on folklore rather than sound research. Good research has concluded that non-disabled students suffer no ill effects in academics, or social or emotional development when children with disabilities are included in the regular classroom with correct supports.

It has been known that when the public is so steeped in the lore of the backlash (against inclusive education), its spokespersons (educators), rarely need to bother to round up real data. Who needs proof? Everyone already believes the myth, "inclusion is harmful," as true.

Instead of real data, the Alberta Teachers' Association report provides horror stories on inclusion, pretending to be facts while offering none. This report serves a political agenda, while pretending that inclusion has nothing to do political events.

The public should be flabbergasted and disappointed by the ATA's bargaining tactics, using children with disabilities to improve its own position.

In light of the ATA's report, children with disabilities are worthy of being offered as a bargaining pawn. They want a scapegoat, they want a target and that the visible target not be viewed as self-serving.

Teachers' intransigence is threatening schools, and they must be challenged to stop using inclusion as a political opportunity to benefit themselves. Their tactics do nothing to enhance their image in the community.

Linda Porter
Edmonton

Excluding those who don't fit the mould

The fundamental arguments that have supported the backlash against the inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom have one thing in common: they are not true.

The statistics that teachers choose to promote the exclusion of children are the very statistics we should view with caution, such as, "Teachers find it difficult to meet the needs of seven or eight behaviorally-disordered children." This is an example of anti-inclusion theorists spreading souped-up scare rhetoric and alarmist fiction sounding the alarms about what they view as a scary trend.

Shame on teachers. And by the way, are not all children the responsibility of all teachers, not just the ones they select to want to teach?

Anti-inclusionists say inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom has brought too many changes too soon and is overwhelming school systems. To single out children with disabilities is unfair. Teachers are blaming the all-purpose scapegoat, charging the children with the crime. This is absurd.

The lies teachers have perpetuated with their mixture of apathy, self-interest, and callousness towards children with disabilities should not be tolerated by the community. On whom will they blame the ills of school when they have eliminated the presence of children with disabilities? It might be your child next.

We should be concerned about education that is reflective of a hierarchy and elitism system with a history of excluding those who do not fit the mould.

Paul Kohl
Edmonton

Integration of handicapped students proving more difficult than assumed

Two recent letters in The Journal are a shameful and unwarranted attack on teachers and their organization. They misrepresent the findings of the Trying to Teach report recently

released by the Alberta Teachers' Association. They also misrepresent the ATA's position on the issue of integration (Disabled children ATA bargaining pawn: Excluding those who don't fit the mould. May 5). The following information should be of interest to Journal readers.

Trying to Teach is the work of an ATA committee which examined trends and practices in education, particularly insofar as these impinge on a sound classroom teaching and learning environment. One of the trends examined was integration.

Many teachers support integration, however, they also cite examples where the integration of students without additional classroom support was creating an unsound classroom situation. For example, a Grade 4 teacher discussed the situation involving a class of 35 students, seven of whom had behaviour disorders (on medication) and one with diabetes (who constantly forgot her syringe and lapsed into a coma).

Are teachers opposed to integration? No! Our policy states that the ATA supports the integration of special needs school-aged children. However, provincial and local authorities need to ensure that all students in the class are able to receive a sound education. The report does not "blame the child." Rather, it stresses the need for the appropriate conditions so that each child's potential can be developed.

It is unfortunate that some groups and individuals have isolated this issue and are attempting to cast aspersions on the content and intent of a report that reflects the current classroom situation.

A careful and unbiased reading of the report will reveal concern, love and caring on the part of teachers and anguish that they are sometimes placed in situations where they cannot provide the learning environment children need. We welcome the co-operation of individuals or groups interested in improving the situation and providing the best possible education for children. However, we will continue to challenge those who misrepresent this intent.

Julius S. Buski
Executive Secretary
Alberta Teachers' Association
Edmonton

Joan Charbonneau, Bruce Uditsky, Linda Porter, Paul Kohl and other like-minded individuals are demonstrating the very intolerance they are accusing teachers and the ATA of having.

To tolerate is to accept or respect the behaviour, customs, opinions, or beliefs of others. The aforementioned individuals are promoting and perpetuating intolerance based on their ignorance of the issue of "ideal" integration versus "real" integration.

Do they spend enough time in a classroom to justify their comments and arguments? Have they engaged in any discussions with dedicated teachers?

For Porter and Kohl to cite research and studies indicates that they should be aware of the necessary supports required for the ideal integration to become reality. Are they willing to provide those supports? Many teachers could use assistants in the classroom.

To state that the ATA is using disabled children as a bargaining tactic is as smart as saying the Association for Community Living's purpose is criticizing others in order to get public and media attention. What is the real purpose of the association?

The image of teaching is not synonymous to *Welcome Back Kotter* or *Head of the Class*. Nor is integration of students with special needs as wonderful and idealistic as Corky portrays it to be on *Life Goes On*. However, the real message this medium sends is the ability to use a collaborative approach in confronting challenges.

Why is it when teachers are honest when asked what issues are a challenge for them in today's classroom they get lambasted? There is a genuine cry for help for teachers to effectively teach all students. Stop criticizing and begin collaborating with schools in solving this problem. If you expect tolerance, start showing it.

Brenda Sautner
Edmonton

The letter writers have missed the point that teachers are trying to make, although Linda Porter has at least expressed it: "Good research has shown that non-disabled students suffer no ill effects in academic, or social or emotional

development when children with disabilities are included in the regular classroom with correct support."

And therein lies the rub. This is too often not what is happening. What often happens instead is that disabled children are moved from a class of eight or 12 students with one full-time teacher and one or more full-time aides, to a class of 25 or more students with one teacher, and there's little or no help for the teacher in terms of training in dealing with or developing a program for the child. Few teachers have any training in special education.

Furthermore, there seems to be no consideration given to what is best for the disabled child - a child with a behaviour disorder is not best served in a split-grade class, where students must be able to work on their own while the teacher spends time teaching the other grade level.

And, sad as it is to say, inclusion is not suitable for everyone. We must be able to admit this and deal with it. I have been dealing with a multiple-handicapped (mentally and physically) member of my family for over 30 years - I have learned to be very realistic.

So please, give us some credit, we teachers know inclusion is here and increasing, but you would agree it is within our job description to make sure it is done properly, so that everyone benefits. Currently, it is too often a "dump" that saves the school boards money and benefits no one, least of all the disabled child.

In response to Kohl, who wrote that "anti-inclusionists say inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom has brought too many changes too soon and is overwhelming school systems," I would say: Read *Trying to Teach*. There are no less than eight "movements" currently affecting the school systems, and some of them are in direct opposition to others. It is the combination and volume of the changes that teachers find overwhelming, not just the inclusion situation. Do not take comments or conclusions out of context.

Cheryl Eddy
Sherwood Park

I feel compelled to comment on the views voiced by Linda Porter and Paul Kohl on the issue of the total integration of mentally and physically handicapped children in the classroom. I find the language in their letters inflammatory and insulting to teachers who have the almost impossible task of effectively teaching children of varied academic abilities in the same class. The added burden of trying to cope with handicapped or behaviourally dysfunctional children has placed an intolerable burden on them.

To say that "educators are intolerant" or that they "perpetuate lies with their mixture of apathy, self-interest and callousness toward children with disabilities" are calumnies of the worst order. It only takes a little common sense to see that "normal" children are put at a real educational disadvantage when taught in a class where the mentally and physically handicapped children require a disproportionate amount of the teacher's time and energy. No one can advocate a return to the "dark ages" where the handicapped were excluded and shunned from mainstream society, this would be cruel and unacceptable in a caring and humane country such as ours. However, I am tired of the strident special interest groups who push the rights of one segment of the population at the expense of others, in this case, the children in our public educational system.

We need a well-educated population in Canada to ensure our economic survival. We will not get this by fostering mediocrity in our school system with the wholesale and indiscriminate integration of the handicapped.

I look forward to the first legal action brought by a parent under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms trying to redress the fact that his or her child was unable to receive a satisfactory education within the present integrated system.

Gill Taylor
Chairman, Education Committee
Edmonton Chamber of Commerce

ALBERTA TEACHER'S ASSOCIATION

While the ATA tries to state their goals are no different than ours when it comes to inclusion,

the "Trying to Teach" document and their own newsletter make me think otherwise.

The ATA seems hung up on discussing horror stories. Sound educational practice is to build on students strengths. Even in special education, this is the current trend, assessing to find a students strengths and building on these rather than focusing on the student's weaknesses. The ATA seems focused on looking at the problems of inclusion but not an analysis of why it can work in some classrooms, schools, and school boards. Perhaps they are afraid of the implications. Let me elaborate, instead of focusing on the negative and highlighting stories of failure, what if they focused on positive stories of teachers, schools, and school boards in Alberta who are successfully including students. Why not examine how inclusion can be done, what makes it work, and how to make it work better. A logical approach, or is it?

The ATA seems to be letting the voice of those who are not able to include all children be the loudest. Perhaps the fear is these teachers lack of expertise to do quality inclusive schooling will be exposed and students can no longer be blamed. I have been to schools who are not afraid to try to include children in Alberta, who don't try to intimidate parents into seeking out district sites or making them listen to the fact their child is a burden on the resources of a school. In these schools they have a positive attitude which allows them to figure out how to make it work, dealing with issues as they arise and not waiting for the opportunity to throw their hands up in the air and tell the parent "we told you so, now what do you want us to do."

With so much negative rhetoric around, I might be afraid to let my voice be heard as an educator in support of inclusive education. We can tell the ATA where to go to find the positive examples. You can do this by writing to them about your child. Seeing these examples will let them start building from a position of strength, not from one of weakness.

Am I overreacting? Just yesterday I looked over the latest edition The ATA News. In my

own biased way I suppose I feared it would only contain negative commentary on inclusive education. Unfortunately, I was right.

In the Speak Out column, there is an article by Sam Osachoff, a retired teacher from Edmonton Public Schools, entitled "Educational Leadership Needed in Alberta." Mr. Osachoff sees the government to blame for poor performance in schools and weaves in the menace of integration to the system.

Schools and teaching staff accept that some of the blame rests with them for poor achievement scores. However, the major share of the blame belongs with the destructive mainstreaming policies of this government that began about 15 years ago and continue today, mainly to cut costs. Teachers have with some resistance, moved from curriculum and discipline management, to crisis management and are slowly being pushed towards disaster management...

... one of the "benefits of the Education Departments cost saving policies is the loss of a general student's fair and equal access to teacher time caused by mainstreaming special needs students into regular classrooms...

... Keeping that same Charter of Rights in mind, Mr. Jonson could be asked to think about the democratic rights of those 85 to 90 per cent of students in the same classroom with the access to teacher time? Has putting special needs students in the same classroom made them substantially less than equal?

Not every special needs student will be able to benefit in a regular classroom environment. And if all such students are in regular classroom environment, without assessment based on scientific criteria, (editor's comment: no such assessment exists to determine if a segregated or inclusive placement is appropriate) does this not substantially shift the focus of education away from the main body of students who are also

human and have problems as well? Or does the much-touted Charter of Rights accord them less than their equal and fair share of access to teacher time?...

The other significant reference to inclusion is a series of articles on a full page two, being titled "Mainstreaming opposed by deaf community" and "Parent trades integration for school for the deaf."

I would ask that people write to the ATA with their success stories so educators can begin to build on their collective strengths. We need to learn from these positive experiences, from educators who have figured out how to do it, not be shut down by those who can't or won't. Write now to Larry Booi, Alberta Teacher's Association, 11010-142 Street, Edmonton, AB., T5N 2R1.

IA-A PRESIDENT SPEAKS OUT

Your child's future is at risk by your silence. The backlash against inclusive education is all around us. In this issue we have asked you to ensure your voice is heard. The following is a wonderful example of what we mean. Jochen Eggert responded quickly to an article in his local paper, The Sherwood Park News, from May 5, 1993 titled "County Takes over Robin Hood," by reporter Mia Groleau, with a letter to Trustee Gary Willman which was also sent to the newspaper.

His local paper printed his letter on May 12, 1993 under the title "Disagreeing with counsellors views on education." Another letter was printed the same day signed Disgruntled Taxpayer, with the title "Councillors should be made accountable for comments on school issues."

County takes over Robin Hood

Due to declining enrolment and changing philosophies, school programs run by the Robin Hood association will become the responsibility of county public schools.

The private school for handicapped students has been in operation in the county since 1963, said Ed Reidiger, managing director for the association.

Robin Hood currently offers programs for handicapped children and adults.

Reidiger stressed programs offered to handicapped adults will continue under the direction of Robin Hood. Responsibility for preschool and school aged students will shift over to the county.

Over 100 adults participate in a vocational program run by the association, Reidiger said.

Robin Hood also runs 23 local residences for 85 handicapped adults.

"Robin Hood will be alive and well and concentrating on adult services," Reidiger said.

Beginning as a partnership at the start of the next school year, all school programs once offered by Robin Hood will under the direction of the county schools by 1996.

Since 1983, enrolment in school age programs at Robin Hood has dipped from 50 to 11, said Marnie Craig, supervisor of special education for county schools.

Changing philosophies about integration and segregation could be a factor in the declining enrolment, she added.

Superintendent Gordon Welch said the programs will run as they are by the Robin Hood association now.

"We're not just throwing these kids into a regular program," he said.

Students at Robin Hood have their own classes with special teachers and opportunities for social integration with other students around the same age.

Trustee Gary Willman was concerned the board will now be responsible for the everyday

needs of the special students and not just their educational needs.

"This is the classic example of dumping on the system," he said.

"Special needs students in the regular classroom are not exactly what we'd like to see happen."

Craig pointed out present human rights legislation combined with parents' wished usually means students are fully integrated if their parents wish them to be.

Under the provincial school act, the county is responsible for most of the students who attend Robin Hood, Welch said.

The students are included in the enrolment figures for county schools at budget time, and the grant money is passed on to Robin Hood, he added.

The only costs involved in taking over the programs would be in washroom renovations at a cost of around \$2,000, said Craig.

Mia Groleau

The following is a letter from Jochen, dated May 6, 1993, was written in response to Mr. Willmans' remarks.

Dear Mr. Willman:

In the Sherwood Park News of May 5, 1993 you are quoted saying: "Special needs students in the regular classroom are not exactly what we'd like to see happen." This remark was made with reference to 11 students who are currently enrolled in a program of the Robin Hood Association, and who will be educated under the direction of county schools by 1996.

May I ask you what prompts your fear to accept these 11 students into your system? Do you need to keep your schools clean from students who don't fit your narrow definition of acceptable individuals? Our daughter Margaret is one of those children whose presence in a regular classroom is "not exactly what you would like to see happen." With pride, I inform you that she is learning by leaps and bounds, she has friends and is and all around happy girl who loves to go to school. She is in the girls' choir of the school and participates and contributes according to her abilities and to the fullest of her potential. All this not because

of, but in spite of the efforts of people like you.

Your comment also discloses a profound lack of knowledge about the issue of inclusive education (but since you are doing double duty as canceller and school trustee, you obviously don't have the time to inform yourself about every issue). Please take note, that there is ample evidence that special needs students learn in inclusive settings. On the other hand you will have a hard time finding scientific literature that supports the myth that the "normal" student population suffers from the presence of the special needs students in their classrooms. If any difference is noticeable, the opposite would be the case. Of course, all this applies only in the case that the inclusive classroom has appropriate support staff and services. And since I hear you crying "money", let me tell you that districts that have moved their special education programs into the regular classrooms, report that this change has not resulted in any additional cost. Your opinion is not in the least founded on facts or research, but purely on prejudice and political convenience.

Indicative of this attitude is also the comment of your superintendent. Mr. Welch is quoted as saying: "We're not just throwing these kids into a regular program." I would believe that many parents would take exception to the notion that their children are being "thrown" into any program. I certainly do. Using this kind of language uncovers the values according to which special needs children are treated.

On the other hand I was pleased to read that Mrs. Craig seems to see the light when she indicates that human rights legislation combined with parents' wishes usually guarantees inclusive education for their children. But what a sad state of affairs when it takes the threat of human rights complaints to do what is only right and just, but also reasonable and good.

I am looking forward to your prompt reply.

The June 4, 1993 edition of The Sherwood Park News continued this saga. Two more letters by concerned citizens were published. Gary Willman also responded by saying nothing to clarify his position (read his response and let me

know if I missed something in it). Jochen Eggert has scheduled a meeting with Mr. Willman for alter in July. Hopefully, Mr. Eggert will share the outcome of this meeting in our next newsletter.

Willman willing to clarify statements

To the Editor:

I am responding to numerous letters printed in your newspaper regarding the Robin Hood School article reported by you on May 5.

I welcome a call or meeting with any interested person who would like me to explain the meaning behind the words printed in your newspaper. Most often a few excerpts from a whole conversation may leave people with the wrong impression, as is obviously the case in this situation.

I realize the importance of my position in the County and I am working hard to keep the trust of those who elected me. However, I cannot control what is written about me.

May I extend an open invitation to any and all who take offence to my remarks to get in touch with me personally. If you truly want some form of understanding, please go to the source.

Gary J. Willman, School Board Trustee
Councillor, Division 9 County of Strathcona

Comment was offensive

To the Editor:

The May 5 edition of the Sherwood Park News included an article concerning the transfer of educational responsibilities for a number of students from the Robin Hood Association to the County of Strathcona.

As indicated by Gordon Welch, the county is simply assuming the responsibility for the education of resident children as required by provincial legislation.

The comment made by trustee Gary Willman was incredibly offensive.

As an elected official, and particularly since

he purports to represent the area of Sherwood park in which I live, I believe he should be called to account for his comment.

Children who experience some learning difficulties for whatever reason are entitled to an education. There are many people who believe and have demonstrated that children who are disabled can attend and benefit from being educated with their regular age peers.

I'm not sure who the "we" is in Mr. Willman's comment that "Special needs students in the regular classroom are not exactly what we'd like to see happen."

I have always found Sherwood Park to be an open and inclusive community. The message published by this school trustee, who is charged with the task of providing a quality education to all children in this community, is unacceptable.

It likely should warrant some concern by the school board chairman. Perhaps when he is finished being offended by the inappropriateness of the language around the pooper scooper promotion, he could worry about, and be offended by, the discriminatory remarks and inappropriate language of one of the school trustees.

I am truly concerned if the comments made by Mr. Willman reflect the collective attitude of the educational decision makers in the County of Strathcona.

A disgruntled taxpayer

Challenging Willman on special needs

To the Editor:

I was appalled by the remark of two weeks ago that "Special needs students in a regular classroom is not exactly what we would like to see."

I work in Robin Hood Association, however I was unaware that attitudes are so far behind the times.

I fail to understand how Mr. Willman has so little faith in the 11 students who are going to be integrated into our education system, or in the students that will be accepting them and enjoying their friendship.

There are, of course, going to be a few students who will not readily accept these

students, but my experience has been that lack of acceptance has more to do with lack of knowledge and understanding and unjustified fears.

The only way you fight attitudes like that is to educate, and the best way to educate is by example.

I myself grew up in an integrated environment, and I praise the Lord that my parents did not accept the archaic attitude of their times and "put me away in an institution."

You see, I developed a severe learning disability (Dyslexia) at 18 months as a result of a coma.

By moderate estimates I was not supposed to read or write, at least not as "normal" children did.

Thanks be to God that I had a mother who had greater faith in me than the "experts."

In later years, it was recommended that I be sent to a "special" school. We chose to stay in the public programs and pursue them to the best of my ability. But even as such I was usually put in "special" segregated classrooms, usually with kids who didn't want to learn.

In an environment like this no one can reach fullest possible potential. It was not until I was given the opportunity to be in a fully integrated environment in my junior and senior high years that my potential was reached.

I wonder if anyone has seen the similarities between the attitudes that we have of mentally handicapped people today and the attitude of the past that we now condemn.

Is segregating students on the basis of their learning ability any different from segregating people based on their colour or religious beliefs?

I am sure Mr. Willman would find a way to rationalize his actions. But Then, so did countless others of the past. Studies have proven that all people learn easier and quicker in an integrated, encouraging environment than in a segregated "special" school or classroom.

I challenge Mr. Willman to watch a program called "Kids Belong Together." Maybe he might learn something.

Sheri,
Sherwood Park

