

ries, and it shows no sign of abating—nor can they avoid the problems it causes. Schools have little choice but

to compensate by becoming caring communities, by becoming more like supportive families.

Our experience in the Child Development Project shows that, with effort and dedication, schools *can* become

### A Circle of Friends in a 1st Grade Classroom

Susan K. Sherwood

*Ann, Age 6. Severe multiple disabilities. Birth trauma. Head injured. Moderate to severe mental disabilities. Hemiplegia to right side of body but ambulatory. No right field vision. Small amount of left peripheral and central vision. Color-blind. Verbal.*

Pacing back and forth in the entryway, I pondered the details in my mind. As I anticipated Ann's arrival on the area agency education bus, I vacillated between calm conviction and near panic. Three days before, the special education teacher had greeted me with a request for a full-time integration placement. In light of my conviction to meet the needs of all students, my answer was instantaneous. Now I wasn't quite so sure.

As a teacher of young children for 18 years, I know that every class has a wide range of abilities and problems. This particular group of 21 students was no different. Their intelligence range, as measured by the Cognitive Abilities Test was 137-68 (excluding Ann's evaluation). Shane was reading at the 8th grade level; Sara had been diagnosed as learning disabled, James as hyperactive; Mike was adept at mathematics problem solving; Erica was a 6-year-old in puberty; and so on. Indeed, Ann was not so different. *All* needed to belong to our classroom community and to accept their own strengths and limitations before they could freely accept others. To develop confidence, instill love of learning, and enhance self-concept, the teacher builds on each child's uniqueness—creating a motivating and challenging atmosphere where all children are free to work cooperatively, learn from mistakes, take risks, and rejoice in accomplishments. Such a classroom community is a support system for each of its members.

Special educators coined the term "a circle of friends" to describe the framework of peers, friends, and adults in the natural environment that surrounds a child with severe multiple disabilities and offers mainstream support (Perske 1988, Stainbeck and Stainbeck 1987). Only the term itself, however, is new to the classroom teacher who has worked to build these relationships in his or her classroom all along.

Just as circles of friends draw the lives of children together, networking within the classroom links special educators and regular educators together in common goals. Our objectives for Ann were to help her (1) develop normal relationships and friendships with her peers; (2) build functional skills through normal 1st grade routines; and (3) continue work at her level toward functional academic life skills.

In social interactions, nonhandicapped children are good role models. By observing what they see, the handicapped imitate appropriate social behaviors and engage in fewer inappropriate ones (Donder and Nietupski 1981, Stainbeck et al. 1983). I was amazed at the ability of my students to provide structure for Ann's activities in the absence of an adult aide. For example, when Mike noticed that Ann needed assistance, he would gather the necessary materials, quietly approach her,

and firmly direct her task. On one occasion, when she flatly refused to participate, he unemotionally prodded her, "You have to because you're a 1st grader, and these are the things 1st graders do." Then, without a pause, with the same sense of purpose as an adult, he directed her to trace the letters.

Of course, to promote Ann's independence, we had to adapt basic 1st grade materials to enable her to follow directions and participate routinely. For example, to allow her easy access to her supplies, we affixed a wooden block to the top of her desk to hold pencils, crayons, and her name stamp in an upright position.

On some academic tasks, such as rote counting by one's and five's to one hundred, Ann was capable of full participation. At other times, we struggled creatively to supply her with parallel activities so that she could still feel part of the group.

We also initiated the "facilitator of learning" role for each supporting adult on our classroom team. This means that their primary purpose was to assist Ann's integration; however, each team member was to support *any* child when not directly involved with Ann. In this way, the other children did not perceive Ann as having a special helper.

As I reflect on this past year, I know that Ann's life has been touched in many ways by her peers and teachers because she was afforded a free and public education in a regular classroom. Yet the integration process isn't easy. At times, it can become all-consuming. With no right answers, however, we cannot allow ourselves to be constrained by past practice. Don't be afraid to try. We can capitalize on mistakes and transform them into learning experiences and opportunities to creatively solve problems. My vision for education is students, parents, educators, and administrators working cooperatively to make learning positive and empowering for each student within a *regular* classroom.

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