Bringing special children

back into local schools

When this century began, with relatively few exceptions all children went to the local school, regardless of their brightness or handicaps, or their parents' income. Like it or not, teachers dealt with every child. Then began a movement to remove the slow learners, the atypical, the difficult child. Schools focused on the 'norm'. The argument was that traditional schools could not cope with the exceptional and that the exceptional would be better served with special services elsewhere.

Now the pendulum shows signs of swinging back. Within the past year the Province of Ontario has ruled that school boards must provide special services for the exceptional as well. Just at a time that private schools, especially those focused on the above average are facing a resurgence, the handicapped are returning to the mainstream schools.

Not everyone is comfortable with this trend, not the least some of the schools whose specialty is the handicapped. Nevertheless, parents' chapters within associations for the disabled are proving to be powerful, persistent and effective lobbies.

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by Marsha Forest

Picture this. Maria, age 6, sits with her friends. They are listening to the teacher tell a story. Nothing unusual here you think. Now add this to the picture. Maria is in a wheelchair. She cannot speak or feed herself. Her file indicates that she is "severe to profoundly" physically and mentally handicapped. Should Maria be in this classroom? What is she learning? Are the other children getting less attention because Maria is here? Would you want Maria in your child's first grade class? Before you answer, picture something else.

Felicia, age 9, is in a special school for physically and mentally handicapped youngsters. She has been at this centre since she was five. A bus picks her up and delivers her home each day. In her class there are six other children. None of them speak. None of them feed themselves. All of them need help going to the washroom. They have a special teacher and an aide. Their program consists of developmental activities, lunch together, naps, etc. They have no contact with typical children their own age.

Maria and Felicia are real children — they are the daughters of Rose and Dom Galati who until last year accepted picture number two as inevitable for both their children. But, they had doubts and always asked hard questions.

The professional experts who dealt with them were always sympathetic and understanding. They told the Galati's "not to have so many expectations," to be "realistic." They were told to institutionalize Felicia as "she will never understand or feel anything." Instead, they kept Felicia at home. Their doubts and questions grew.

Through a unique pilot project with two schools in Toronto (Market Lane Public School and St. Michael's Catholic School) Maria was integrated into her age appropriate classroom along with the appropriate supports.

Everyone involved was nervous. The teacher was afraid. Did she know enough "special" techniques to help Maria? The parents were apprehensive. Would Maria be welcomed, accepted, or teased? The school principal was concerned. Would other parents complain?

Within one week all fears turned to dust as Maria won everyone over with her own unique personality and charm. She taught us all that she was first and foremost a child.

It is now two years later. Maria has been promoted with her friends and classmates. All the children are doing well. But the effect Maria has had on the entire school community is the key issue.

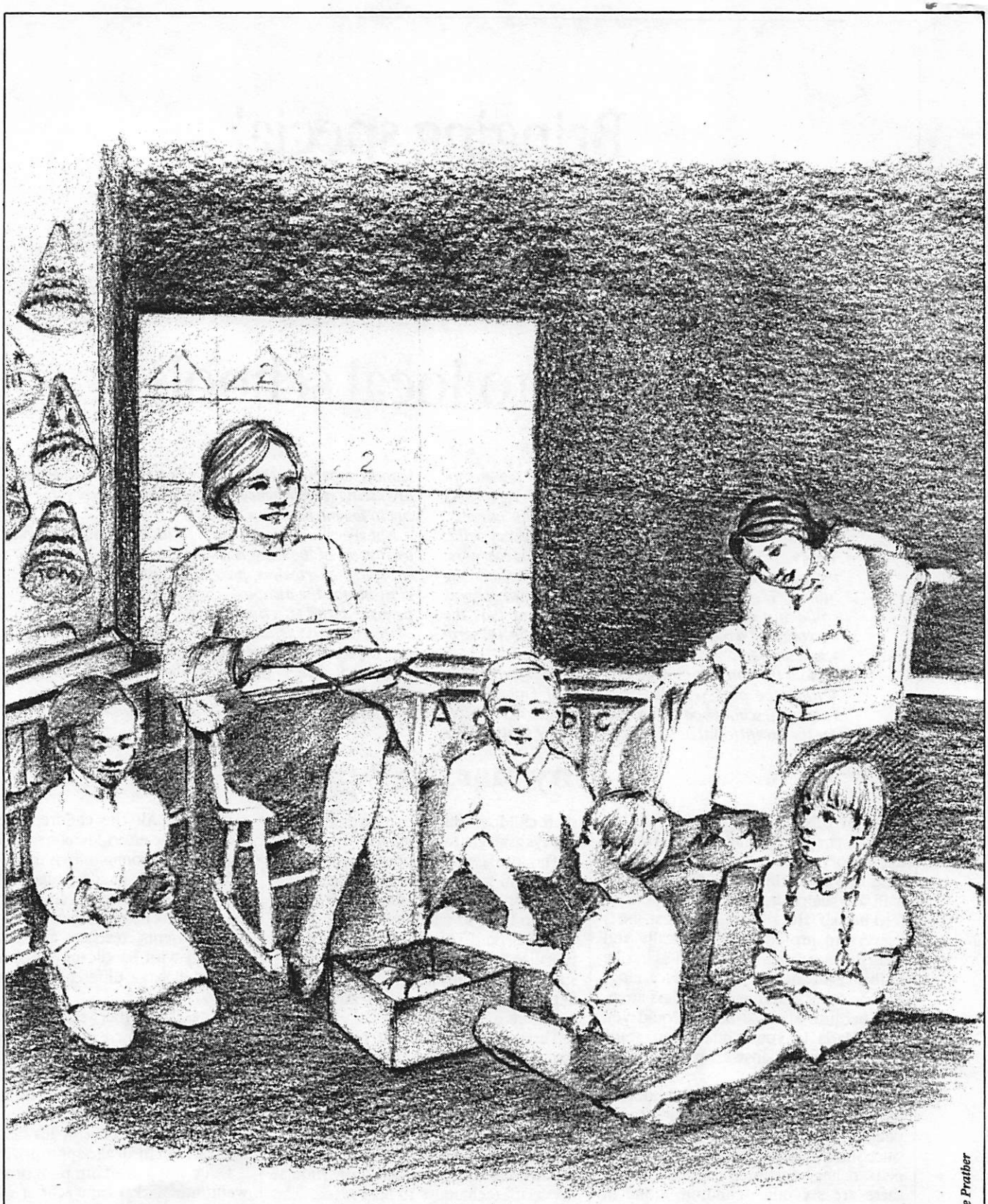
The typical children have become more sensitive, tolerant and understanding. They are better citizens. They are the future parents, teachers and friends of children with handicapping conditions. They will have different attitudes than we do.

Doug is another example. Labelled "autistic," Doug is a child who hits, pinches and screams. He rocks back and forth. His behaviour is, to say the least, not typical. Where should he go? The choices were: an institution, a special school, a special class or his neighbourhood school in an age-appropriate class.

Doug was part of our pilot project and went into Market Lane School where he has been a challenge for everyone involved.

He has an individualized program but is a full part of his regular grade class. His excellent teacher has made him "chair" monitor as one of his strengths is organizing the chairs and desks. Other children are game monitors, phone monitors, etc. Doug fits in with creative program modification and an accepting teacher.

And what happened to Felicia? Today



Drawing by Joyce Prather

she attends a Catholic school in Toronto and is a part of a fourth grade regular class. Her parents demanded services from their own Catholic school board in Mississauga which this year agreed to purchase services from Metro Toronto Separate School Board. Felicia goes by taxi to school each day.

Next year the Galati's hope that Felicia and Maria will both go to their own neighbourhood school near their home, their relations and the other kids on the block. In the meantime Felicia is a welcome new addition to a regular school.

In the past, children like Maria, Felicia

and Doug were in institutions, special schools or segregated classes. Today a new trend, spearheaded by parents of young handicapped children, is to integrate children (no matter the severity of their handicap) into their local neighbourhood schools.

The reasoning is simple, but common sense is rare these days.

Parents for years were sold on what many now think is the "wrong bill of goods." To put six children together who don't talk, walk or eat unassisted, just doesn't make sense. Children model or imitate other children. Children learn most from other children. It's called "socialization." One child who is different can be a valuable addition to a class of typical children.

But, but, but...I'll quickly outline some of the common myths and arguments about integration. You be the judge.

1. **"Segregated settings are more efficient."**
Do you want efficiency or education for your child? Is a long ride on a school bus efficient? What are your priorities: relationships, learning — or efficiency?

2. **"Segregated facilities are more accessible to wheelchairs, special bathrooms are provided, etc."**
Accessibility is more an attitude than a wheelchair ramp. Where there is the will, people in wheelchairs can be carried.

3. **"It's better for handicapped children to be among their own kind. Regular children can be mean."**
Just the opposite occurs. Integration in fact reduces the fear of difference, promotes friendships and understanding, leads to acceptance and tolerance, increases self-esteem, increases self-confidence and enables everyone involved to cope with real life in all its diversity.

4. **"The quality of education for the typical child will suffer."**
There is absolutely no data to prove this. When there is the presence in the classroom of one child who is different the quality of teaching in a properly integrated setting improves for *all*.

"In every case, integration of a handicapped child into a regular classroom has enhanced the classroom, the school and our entire community," says George Flynn, superintendent of special services for the Metro Toronto Separate School Board.

The overwhelming research in the past ten years on integration indicates that integration can work and be successful; that integration is the most desirable educational arrangement for almost all children now in special education programs; that the classroom teacher can be skillful teaching *all* children if she/he receives proper supports. That commitment is the key to making integration work.

It is dangerous to put labels on children. A label can be a "life sentence" and a "self-fulfilling prophesy." The only label you should pin on your child is his/her name.

I tell parents that their child may be slower or faster to learn. Your child may be in a wheelchair. My suggestion is always to say "my child Jane", and not my downs child, my retarded child, my cerebral palsied child.

This is not a matter of semantics. It is central to how you see your son/daughter and how you present him/her to the world.

To the Galati family Maria and Felicia are not a tragedy, not a curse but two beautiful daughters who have strengths and needs just like any other children. Their problem is not the needs of their daughters but society's attitudes about people who are different.

Ontario is playing a leading role in this new and exciting educational trend. Several school boards are welcoming all children no matter how fast or slow they learn. Notable examples are the Wellington County Separate School Board and the Hamilton Wentworth Separate School Board.

They are taking a *needs* based rather than a *label* based approach to education. They are child centred systems who believe that no school is complete unless it represents and welcomes the diversity of people in our society.

Blind children can be taught braille while other children are reading with their eyes in regular schools. Without friends and good social relationships, children do not learn language, reading, math, etc. We send children away because we are *program* rather than *person* oriented.

Parents can and are changing this. Parents can and are demanding that the doors of our schools be opened to everyone and not just those of us who walk, talk and learn easily.

Over three decades ago in the United States, Chief Justice Earl Warren, in an unanimous Supreme Court decision wrote: "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." This was in regards to racial segregation. Warren wrote: "Purposeful segregation generates a feeling of inferiority as to a child's status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone...The sense of inferiority affects the motivation of the child to learn and has a tendency to retard their educational and mental development."

These landmark words are now being applied to the educational placement of children with handicaps. Once you have seen the vision of children "being together" you can never turn back. *All* parents want the very best for their children — let's open our doors to *all* and not exclude *any*.

Resources I recommend are:

Biklen, Douglas. *The Complete School: Mainstreaming Special and Regular Education.* New York: Teachers College Press, Spring 1984.

Certo, Haring and York (eds.) *Public School Integration of Severely Handicapped Students.* Baltimore, Maryland 1984. Paul Brooks Pub & Company

Forest, Marsha. *Being Together* (a monograph) NIMR Press, Toronto 1984.

Kunc, Norman. *Ready, Willing and Disabled.* NIMR Press, Toronto 1983

Films and videos recommended: *The Disability Myth* Producer, Alan Allward. A Lauron Production. *Being Together* Producer, NIMR. A Mackenzie/Forest Production 1984.

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And the rest?

Parents can feel confident that when one special child enters the picture, quality will not fall. If five children enter a class, there might be a problem, but not with one or even two children with special needs.

Many argue that the quality will increase because the teacher has to become more creative in presenting information and children become more sensitive to one another.

What parents should worry about is not the child with the handicap but the *quality* of education the school system is providing. It is not that schools are bad, but so much of what goes on is boring, lifeless, dull.

Consider this. A small private alternative school exists in Toronto which is based on the premise that children learn best in an age diverse, ability diverse group. Thousand Cranes School is run by the energetic young director-teacher Donna Bracewell and includes five spaces for children with "labels", i.e. cerebral palsy, mental handicapped, etc.

The school is full of creative, talented children. What makes the difference? Good teaching, care, quality and hard work. It is irrelevant that five of the children are "labelled." What is relevant is that *all* the children benefit.

Parents must face the real dilemmas of an education system and not blame some little child who isn't learning at breakneck speed.