

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

Jennifer Goodall



Jennifer Goodall is a Middle School English Teacher at Centennial Regional High School in Greenfield Park. For the past two years she has worked with a wonderful class called "The Globetrotters". She loves working with Middle School students and she has a great passion for helping them develop portfolios. During her spare time she loves to read, write and spend time with her husband.

I'm a Possibility

I'm a Possibility,
just like Sarah and Matt,
who can both write a story
in ten seconds flat.

I'm a Possibility,
Look what I can do-
I can take an old car
and make it look new.

I'm a Possibility,
I care for mom and dad,
There are plenty of days
when they're feeling real bad.

I'm a Possibility,
I have a lot to offer, y'know,
you just have to look a little closer
if you want it to show.

I'm a Possibility,
C'mon don't you see? I'm trying real hard
to be the very best me.

I'm a Possibility,
even though I'm not like the rest,
There's just so much more to me,
than that number on your test.

I'm a Possibility,
I plan to do great things,
I just need you to help me,
Help me find my wings.

I'm a Possibility,
Please see it real fast,
'Cuz, I'm afraid if you don't soon-
My possibilities won't last.

Jennifer Goodall

It's All A Matter of Perspective

My heart swells with pride as I look around the room. Every student is working on something unique and different. Even more impressive, is the confidence they exude as they present their work to University students. Their audience seems mesmerized by their knowledge, enthusiasm and cooperative skills. They answer each question, without hesitation. They seem like little adults, rather than thirteen year olds. They move around the room, showing their achievements, proud of all they have done. Vincent is pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself, but he stops long enough to show his table his latest work. He is in his element! They are all in awe over his poetry and ask him questions about it. He takes joy in insinuating their interpretations are not quite right. I am not sure they know he is autistic. I watch the surprised expressions at the next table, as Abdul who is visually impaired and intellectually challenged, flips through his portfolio, describing his writing pieces, the process he undertook to complete each, and the self-reflection that evaluates his work, according to him. They seem just as interested in how the students who are watching him, perceive him. The students end their presentation with a digital slide show of their class web page, which catalogues a year's worth of learning, challenges and memories. They are serenaded with huge applause and questions.

"How did you learn to use that software?"

"How much time did that take?"

"Have you had a lot of experience with computers?"

They answer these questions in stride. They then leave so that the "teacher" session can begin. I immediately ask these first year University students what they noticed about the class, expecting to hear comments about their special needs. The first question, however, sets a different tone.

"Is this a special class?" a young girl in a blue top queries. Not surprised, I prepare myself to begin explaining the benefits of inclusion, when she continues, "like a gifted class, for high achievers?"

I smile and say, "They certainly do have gifts".

** * **

I introduce him to the class and he mumbles under his breath as they greet him loudly. I look at him expecting to see his excitement, but instead, I immediately sense his discomfort. He is staring at Stanley who is repeatedly banging his pencil on his gigantic plastic pencil case. I

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

see the judgment pass through the observer's eyes as he watches Melanie, her hand gently caressing Stanley's, as she tries to soothe him with soft words. Stanley ignores her and screams out our visitor's first name, repeatedly. He is appalled as Vincent gets out of his seat and paces back and forth while we are writing. His eyes immediately look for me to put a stop to this unusual behaviour. I see the surprise on his face when I simply ask Vincent how his story is coming along, rather than chastise him for leaving his seat. Later on, we discuss his student teacher requirements, and he asks me the question that has been burning on his lips for most of the day.

"Why are there so many problem kids in your class?" he asks.

"Well," I begin slowly, trying not to let the query upset me. After all, it is a fair and reasonable question.

"This is an inclusive school. Every middle school class has students with special needs. This particular class seems to have many, because several of the students have **visible** special needs including, medical problems, autism, Tourette's syndrome, visual impairments and intellectual challenges. I consider it a privilege to work with so many wonderful children. Also, the class as a whole has the right attitude to make it work. It is an environment of acceptance and support. Have you noticed this?"

"You mean it doesn't get on their nerves when Stanley has outbursts?"

"No, in fact, they always try to support him. They understand that he has Tourette's syndrome and they try to help him feel comfortable, and calm him down."

"I just don't know how he is going to make it in University, or past grade eight for that matter."

He realizes that he has to work with them in order to fulfill his university requirements- so he does. Each week I think he will suddenly realize all that he didn't see before. I never stop believing that he will hear their wisdom and see their gifts. On the last day of his practicum, I ask him (hoping to hear of his final revelation) how he found his experience working with this inclusive, unique, wonderful group of students. His response sends goose bumps down my spine:

"It is like being a zoo keeper, working with so many different kinds of animals".

* * *

I still remember that day, not quite two years ago, when I was handed the thick manila file folder describing each of the students in my soon to be grade seven core class. It was a few

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

weeks before my second year of teaching and I was filled with great expectations as I was about to fulfill a wish I had harboured for quite a while. As a core teacher, I would be working with the same students several times a day, seeing them for a variety of subjects. I longed for the opportunity to work with fewer students for longer periods of time; to have the chance to connect with them, and to provide more meaningful learning contexts.

And then I started reading. My optimism began to fade as I read profile after profile of disturbing information. Several students were listed as having behavioural and anger problems (the kind which scared me the most). Almost every second child existed in a far less than perfect world. Broken homes were the norm, and tragedy defined so many lives, -- parents had passed away suddenly or succumbed to drug addictions. Phone numbers were missing because of a lack of permanent residence. Also, the list of special needs seemed endless: learning disabilities, autism, visual and perceptual impairments, attention deficit disorder, Tourette's syndrome, intellectual challenges, and other unidentifiable issues. I worried about my lack of experience and wondered if my principal's expectations of me were too high. I hadn't decided if the statement that she made as she handed me the package was inspiring or foreboding:

"You have quite a class here Jen, -- remember that I don't hate you but that this is a compliment to you". She chuckled as she handed over the pile. Halfway through the it, I got angry with myself. All throughout University I was such an advocate of inclusion. In paper after paper, I ranted about the importance of allowing *all* children to work together. I chided those who felt differently and worried about teaching any other way. Of course, I still stood firm in my beliefs. I just worried how I would accommodate all those needs. That day though, I made a decision. I decided that this was my chance to see if what I believed in so strongly, worked.

I also decided that my class would not be a traditional one. How on earth would these children succeed if I gave them tests and essays in order to see if they were meeting the standards? I decided they would set their own goals and their own standards. Of course, as an English teacher I wanted to teach them about beautiful literature and have them write wonderful pieces. My first priority though, would be the children and their needs.

What follows are some of the stories of my inclusive classroom, after two years of working with these students and having officially "taught" them seven subjects. When I first thought about writing a piece for this volume, I reflected on the possible themes I could explore. And then it occurred to me. Each and every day when I enter my room, thirty young people teach

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

me about teaching. I turn to their stories and anecdotes because they have enlightened me in miraculous ways. My classroom is not perfect, and I certainly don't have all of the answers. There are good days and bad days, and sometimes it's a crazy world. *But I wouldn't want it any other way!*

When I enter the room with them now, a kind of magic occurs. Each student has shown me that they all have unique talents. Through working with these students, I have learned that these talents are not always immediately apparent. However, if I look hard enough, they appear. I cringe now, when I look back on some of their files and read things like, "child reads at a grade two level". **Anybody can look illiterate given the right context.** It really is a matter of perspective.

Throughout our time together, each child has experienced some form of success, -- a goal I thought impossible on that summer day when I first encountered those ominous files. The expectations are simple: try your best and achieve *your* goals. Given this context, children realize that they too, have knowledge to share. Suddenly, they are driven to new levels of learning. As described in the first two anecdotes, my very same class that is often referred to as a special needs one has been mistaken for a talent and gifted one by several visitors. These two anecdotes are about the same class of students, only weeks apart. It is very interesting that the same group of children can be perceived in such drastically different ways.

After having spent two years working with my inclusive middle-school class, I now believe the major reason for their success came from my perspective, as well as their own. I believed that they could do it, and I told them this every step of the way. In turn, they believed they could do it. This perspective did not change their abilities, but it changed their confidence and perceptions of themselves. This had a direct impact on their success. I no longer look at it as so many different needs, but rather, so many different gifts. I am constantly amazed at the diverse and different ways that each of these children think. The very first step then, and perhaps the most important one, involves *seeing*. The way we look at students directly affects what they do. If you want to see the magic, you will.

Vincent's Story: Seeing the Magic

He drags himself into the room, fully dressed in winter apparel and plops himself in the reading corner, oblivious to everything around him, including me, his teacher. He wastes no time

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

looking through the books of fiction and immediately dives for the encyclopedias. He sinks into the pillow and begins to read. Forty-five minutes later and three minutes before the first bell of the day, Vincent has not budged, despite the flux of incoming, busy students. The period begins, and with a great amount of urging, he moves to his seat. As I work with the class on their year long writing projects, I watch him from the corner of my eye and wonder if he is going to read that encyclopedia for the entire workshop. Suddenly, he drops the book, and scrambles for a pencil. I spot it on the floor, -- it is distinctly labeled in red with his name (his mother labels all of his belongings) and slip it on his desk. He immediately begins to draw a familiar pattern. As his map takes shape, he calls me over.

"Do you think Fort Hope is a good name?" he asks, continuing to add detail to his setting.

"Well that all depends," I say, "on what it is for".

"The town I am making for my story- it is for the town," he says, slightly impatiently.

"In that case, Vince, I think that it is a strong name, particularly if you want to imply that the port is somewhat promising," I respond, hoping to satisfy his query. He is satisfied with this response and reverts back to his drawing. I know that he probably won't write today, but there is no doubt in my mind that he is constructing something very important. Soon after, he returns with a story centered around this mysterious village of his. He has changed the name three times and then back to the original, in order to accord with the ever changing ideas in his head. I am not disappointed.

Vincent's profile simply cannot capture his dimensions. Knowing that he has Asperger's Syndrome, grants an observer only a surface knowledge of him and the way that he learns. Before I got to know the boy behind the encyclopedia, I spent a lot of time trying to get him to put it away. As usual, a student changed my perspective. As she was complaining about her ongoing difficulty with geography one day, Melissa whined,

"Ms. Goodall, it's not fair. I studied all night, and I only got a 74% on the geography quiz. Vincent reads the whole period, and he got perfect. It's like he can do two things at once." And I thought, it really is like that. We have all gotten used to the idea that Vincent is probably listening while he reads his encyclopedia. He pipes in with a comment or two every now and then, even while he is immersed in reading the entries under the letter X.

Vincent is an extreme example of a student who does not learn like the rest. He brings to light a fact that is true of every single student. Actually, all of them have their own unique way of thinking and learning. Often though, when teachers hear about my "inclusive" classroom, they

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

ask me if the "other" kids mind that there are exceptional students in the class. Not only did they not mind, but they felt honoured to be part of such a unique class. Each student in our class felt like s/he was chosen to be part of the group. They all helped to provide an environment of acceptance, and an environment where "fair" meant something different for each student. They realized that Vincent read while I talked, walked while he thought and lost a possession every two steps. They supported him with his needs (He had helpers who collected articles as he lost them!) and they embraced his brilliance. He is drastically different from most of them; however, they have learned that this does not mean he is less intelligent. Vincent often pointed out facts during a discussion that most of us had not heard about, including me. One afternoon's discussion based on our reading of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* stands out in my mind.

"As we are coming to the end of this tragic story, we are learning more and more about the holocaust. How do you feel reading about this?" I asked.

"Ms. Goodall, I can't believe those people just let that happen... they were monsters." Sarah spoke with passion, barely able to hold back the tears.

"Who are 'those people' that you are referring to?" I pushed her to think about the idea of responsibility.

"Adolf Hitler was responsible," Melanie said loudly, as a large chorus of "yah's" backed her up.

"Well actually," Vincent piped in, "while Adolf Hitler was responsible for most of the horrors that occurred during the holocaust, he was not alone... in fact, Stalin has been referred to as 'half-man, half-beast'..."

Vincent went on for about another five minutes, describing the other villains of the holocaust. As this conversation occurred early on in our first year together, the other students were captivated with the words coming out of this young boy's mouth. In his squeaky little voice, he taught us about the lesser known parts of history, that I wasn't all that familiar with. They now all see his magic too. It didn't take Vincent's peers very long to discover his gifts. Both his mother and I worried about his social integration near the beginning of the year. Through his own efforts though, Vincent developed a tight circle of friends who care for him, learn from him and respect him. They know he is different, but they don't try to label him or change him. In fact, they love his uniqueness. They smile as Vincent spends the period reading in ecology class, and walking in reading class. They watch in awe as he reads, on average, a book a day about topics that don't usually interest the average teenager, such as Canadian

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

Confederation. They listen with keen interest at his endless theories on life. They try to calm him down if he has gotten upset about misplacing something. If he throws a fit, they don't judge him, but try to sooth him. Most of all, they let others know that Vincent's ways are "normal." Many a substitute-teacher has been told by one of my students to let Vincent read his book while they are talking.

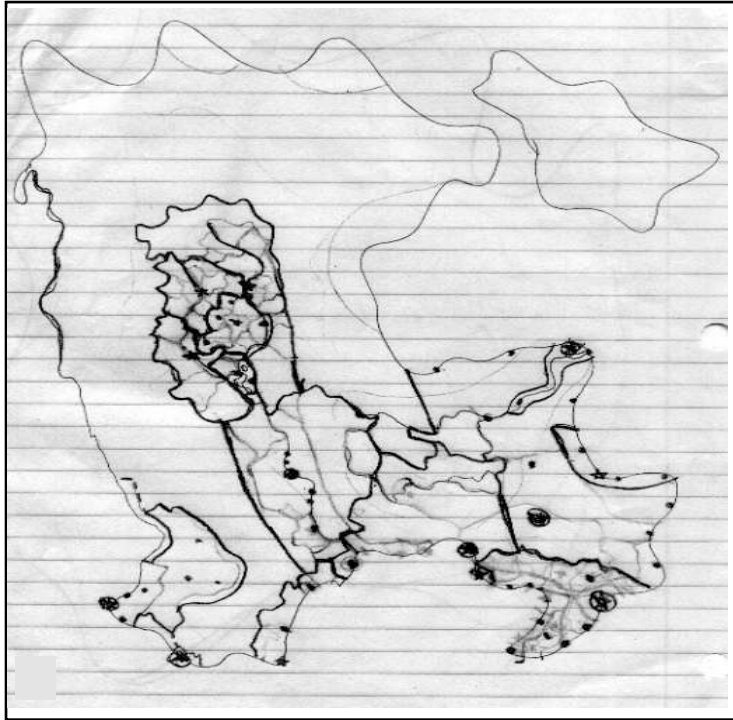


figure 1

"He is listening while he reads. Don't worry, he can do two things at once."

If ever they feel that there has been an injustice against him, they report it immediately, looking for the wrong to be righted.

"The substitute teacher lost patience with Vincent," they'll whisper to me, a look of utter disappointment on their little faces.

Oddly enough, however, it often takes teachers a long time to come to this realization. As Vincent's core teacher, I seemed to be the individual to whom some of his other teachers turned when they felt as

though they had "discovered" a problem. They often described his "grade two" handwriting or his spelling problems to me as though I was incompetent for not previously noticing them.

They also described his inability to focus and pay attention to what they were doing. They would note his constant reading and doodling of maps and flags, while they were "teaching." (See figures 1 and 2.) I always listened to their descriptions



figure 2

and then asked them if they were positive that he was not engaged in his "own way."

Almost always, a few weeks or a few months later, they would return with an anecdote that illustrated their new discovery of his brilliance. Vincent always finds a way to show them the gifts of his mind, whether it be through the sharing of an unknown fact during a discussion, or through a score achieved on a surprise math quiz. Vincent is a perfect example of a child who, despite his brilliance, can be lost in the educational monster. The education system has not been designed to allow his intellect and creativity to flourish. He does not colour in the lines, stay in his seat, or dot his "i's" and cross his "t's." He is a beautiful writer and a terrible speller. Many of his teachers never see beyond this and his unique "handwriting." It would be a terrible shame if his genius was lost in a world of blacks and whites.

Vincent not only struggles with others' interpretations of him, but his own demons. Often, his ideas get the best of him. He loves to talk about his complex and always highly unusual theories, but frequently gets anxious at the daunting job of transferring what is in his brain to paper. His spelling problems are a part of it, but mostly his distress comes from the sheer magnitude of his thoughts. He is so knowledgeable in so many areas, that he often has a hard time narrowing his lens. Planning his outline for our year long multi-genre project then, caused Vincent much anxiety and stress. Initially, he was very excited about the prospect: he loves choosing his topic. Of course, Vincent

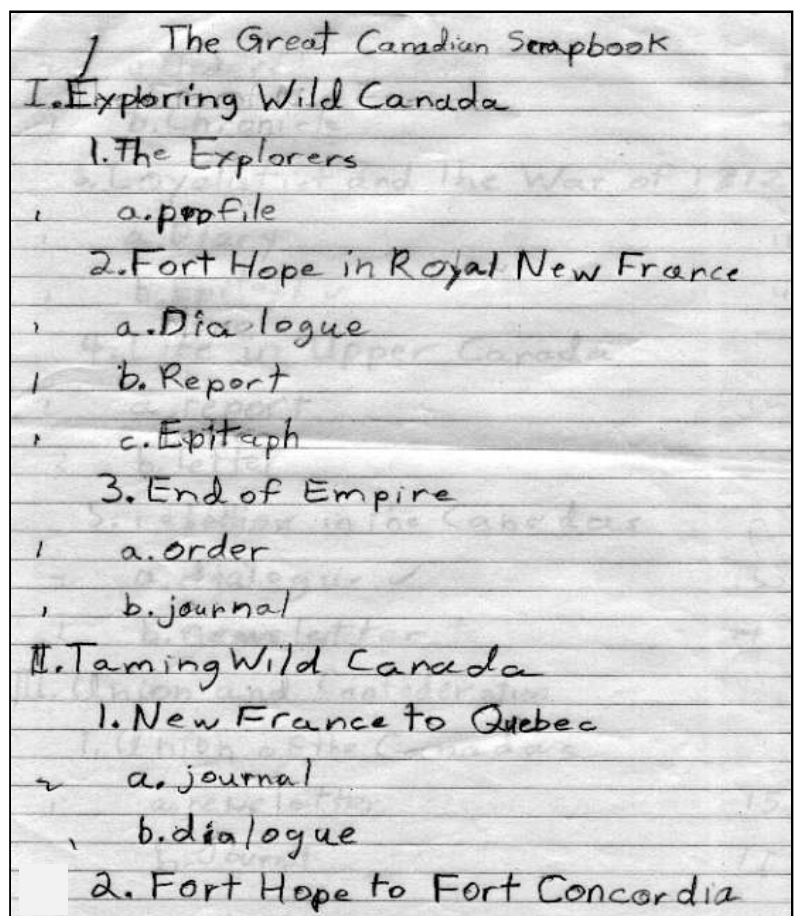


figure 3

decided to chronicle Canadian history, a topic on which he is quite well read. The school library's last count had him down for having taken out fifty-one books on the subject! Nonetheless, when it came time to actually write his plan, he would pace and whine. Pacing alone meant he was thinking, while pacing and whining meant he was stressed. One of the ways that I found to combat his anxiety, was to talk it through with him. I would even on occasion, write down what he was telling me, like a secretary, and then show him what he had verbalized.

While most students handed in a vague, one page plan of the possible ideas they might work with over the year, Vincent handed in two versions of a detailed, three-page plan that spanned across a hundred years of Canadian history, and that even included genre descriptions and sections according to theme.

I remember one particular lunch hour where Vincent was dreading the task of writing a poem. It had been due weeks earlier in fact, but I wasn't giving up. I could tell from speaking to him that he had an idea: he just couldn't get it out. That familiar sound came from his lips which can only be described as a combination of a whine and a moan. He didn't like that I had narrowed the topic to a theme to honour "National Anti-Discrimination Week." As a free thinker, this seemed to cut his creative process. Again, the long term commitment to the project seemed to phase him.

"Well, how long does it have to be?" he sputtered, as he penned out yet another map.

"There is no definitive length, Vince. A great poem is driven by quality rather than quantity," I said, trying to appeal to his intellect. I seemed to spark an interest, because he then said,

"So, a great poem can be one line long?" he cleverly asked, looking to challenge my statement.

<p>We All See the Same Sunset</p> <p>Everybody, From the poor child in Africa to the billionaire in the U.S.A. We all see the same sunset.</p> <p>Every religion, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Atheist We all see the same sunset.</p> <p>Every nationality, Canadian, Polish, German, French, English and Japanese We all see the same sunset.</p> <p>Every belief, Democrat, Socialist, Communist, Religious, Conservative, Agnostic, We all see the same sunset.</p>	<p>So ... Why do Jews fight the Muslims? and Muslims fight the Christians? We all see the same sunset.</p> <p>So... Why do the French fight the Germans? and the Germans fight the Christians? We all see the same sunset.</p> <p>So... Why do the Democrats fight the Communists? and the Communists fight the Religious? We all see the same sunset.</p> <p>People think they are superior to others, But... we all see the same sunset.</p>
---	--

figure 4

"Well Vincent, it all depends on the line," I responded very philosophically. I watched as he scrawled out something on a crumpled piece of paper. He pushed it forward. At first, I couldn't quite make out his handwriting. I gasped as it became clear to me. Vincent saw my face and came back the next day with a complete poem (see figure 4).

At some level, Vincent was expressing the most important lesson that my students and I learned over the past two years. Despite our drastic differences, we all want to learn and to succeed. This poem may never have been written though, if Vincent did not have the time he needed, the freedom to choose his own form, and the acceptance and understanding from those around him. Ultimately, what Vincent needs, any teacher can provide: a perspective that sees what he can do, and what he does.

* * *

Jake's Story: Beating the System

I wrote the poem below based on my experiences of working with Jake. It captures the essence of many young readers out there. For those of us who love reading, it is a hobby and

The Reader

With each sound he utters
from the book I chose,
(high interest, low vocabulary)
the fat, blue veins in his neck and forehead,
writhe and bulge.

"T-Th-o-u-g-gggh"

("that's silent," I whisper).

Each word he grunts, stutters

he gets out-

violently.

Immediately he releases the sound

(no time for celebration)

to try another-

impossible feat.

The 670 832 remaining words

waiting to be deciphered,

stare up ominously.

Beads of sweat form

on his thick, callused fingers

that deliberately trace each letter which I try to make

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

friendly,

gentle-

("the 'ph' makes a 'f' sound," I say, avoiding his averted eyes).

His six foot outline can no longer contain this humility (or my awareness)

But-

he is too worn out

to continue his facade,

when each spoken character

only leads to another.

There is no victory for him.

he accepts

what I give him-

Desperately.

(with no other choice)

and he continues to forge ahead-

Reading with Hate.

a joy. It is hard for us to imagine it being anything different. For some children though, it is the opposite, and brings about anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

"I finished the book Ms. Goodall." He drops the thick novel on my desk and begins to walk away.

"Whoa Jake, that was so fast, I'd like to talk about it with you."

"There's nothing to say, -- it was boring. I give it a 5 on 10."

"Well, what exactly did you not like about it?"

"No action."

And so it went. For the few months of school, it seemed, that Jake read at an amazing speed. He "finished" book after book and repeatedly gave the same review. "Boring, no action," and then he would choose a sufficiently low number on ten to conclude his critique. And so we played out this farce for what seemed like forever, as I tried to come up with some miraculous plan to deal with Jake's reading inadequacies. His first piece of writing about a valued artifact clued me in to the fact that perhaps he wasn't really reading (see figure 5).

MY GOLD MEATAL

I got that meatal in the aport brume-ball. I was the best gole
ni the chapionship. That why we won gold meatal.
We played seven game we won six game and one tied.
Are coash was so glad that he bot each a soda pop.
It was so fun, but my privite part hert because someone siwing the
stick inbetiun the leigs

figure 5

Towering over me by almost more than a foot, Jake was far from your average grade seven student. At fifteen, he was two years older than most of the students in our class, and he bore the scars of a less than perfect childhood. As I got to know him, I would often be struck by his harsh words. One day while discussing a novel's characters, Jake silenced the class when he said,

"The father's a jerk, a good for nuthin' just like my dad".

While Jake was glaringly honest about his family troubles, he hid his reading difficulties under a thick shield of pride. It seemed his sense of self relied on feeling that others respected him and thought that he is smart. And he is smart. Jake's formal educational results though, do not always communicate this idea to him and so, he fought against this notion every step of the

way, constantly trying to prove himself. At any given opportunity, Jake declared his technical expertise or athletic ability, to anybody who would listen.

Aware of the students' ever growing suspicion of this seemingly obnoxious streak, I decided that I had to use the areas where Jake felt confident in order to encourage the ones

where he did not. He was very comfortable reading the language of computers. In this domain, the words made sense, and he controlled the outcome. As one of our class' "technical experts," he became my "right hand man." Any time a computer froze, there was an

What is Hotmail?

Step 1

Look on your desktop and look for this item, Netscape Communicator.

Double-Click on this item.

Step 2

Type in <http://www.hotmail.com>

Then press Enter.

figure 6

unrecognizable error, or a wire mix-up, Jake could handle it in no time. It didn't take long for the other students to discover that if they wanted help, he was the one to call. In this role, he beamed with confidence. He took on the role of teacher, and he was patient, understanding and knowledgeable. This new side of Jake came out because he felt a sense of autonomy and power whenever he was helping others with technology. In fact, he even volunteered to prepare a workshop teaching grade seven students some basic computer skills. Jake wrote a slide show that includes step by step directions and clear visuals. In making it, he was constantly considering the needs of his audience, and their prior knowledge. He wanted to make it as "user-friendly" as possible. Jake then successfully presented it to several classes, to the great appreciation of many teachers, who saved themselves hours of "troubleshooting" while in the computer labs with their classes.

Figures 6 and 7 contain samples of Jake's slide shows.



figure 7

Jake took great pride in his slide show, and even wanted to make sure that the spelling was right- something he usually pretended to not care about. Despite his great experience in creating and presenting this project, at the end of the term, when it was time to select pieces of writing for his portfolio, he felt he had nothing to contribute. I suggested that he put his slide show in.

"Jake, what about the slide show that you put so much work into?" I urged.

"What? I can't put that in- it's not writing. I did it on the computer and I used graphics," he responded.

"Well," I continued, "aren't there words in it?"

"Yah, I guess," he said.

I continued. "Didn't you proofread it a million times before it was ready, and also organize it so it made sense to your audience?" I pointed out.

I was finally able to convince Jake that his slide show, was in fact a piece of writing that involved content, editing, organization, and that it communicated a very strong message. Even though it did not feel like writing for Jake, it met all the requirements of the new Quebec Language Arts Curriculum and more. In retrospect, this was an early step in our writing journey.

When it came time to complete more creative writing however, Jake put up another roadblock.

"I don't write poems," he told me.

"Really? Did you know that some people use the computer to write poems? A concrete poem, for example requires the use of strong images to convey meaning."

I tried to rely on Jake's prior knowledge and his positive experiences. We brainstormed a few ideas, until Jake decided his topic would be war based on his reading of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. We were both thrilled with the product, (see figure 8) but I was even more thrilled with the process. Jake thought long and hard about the different voices he wanted to capture, and he was able to use words and visuals to do so. He thought about his theme and audience and he integrated mediums to communicate his strong message. Had Jake been forced to do it my way, to say, write a sonnet on the topic of war, he probably would have failed. Together though, we beat the system, and Jake came out a winner. Jake's piece showcases his talent, not his failures. Of course, I do realize that Jake will not always have the freedom to choose his genre or topic or method of writing. These experiences, however, gave him a start and a positive experience with writing that he badly needed. A child can only handle so many failed spelling tests.

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

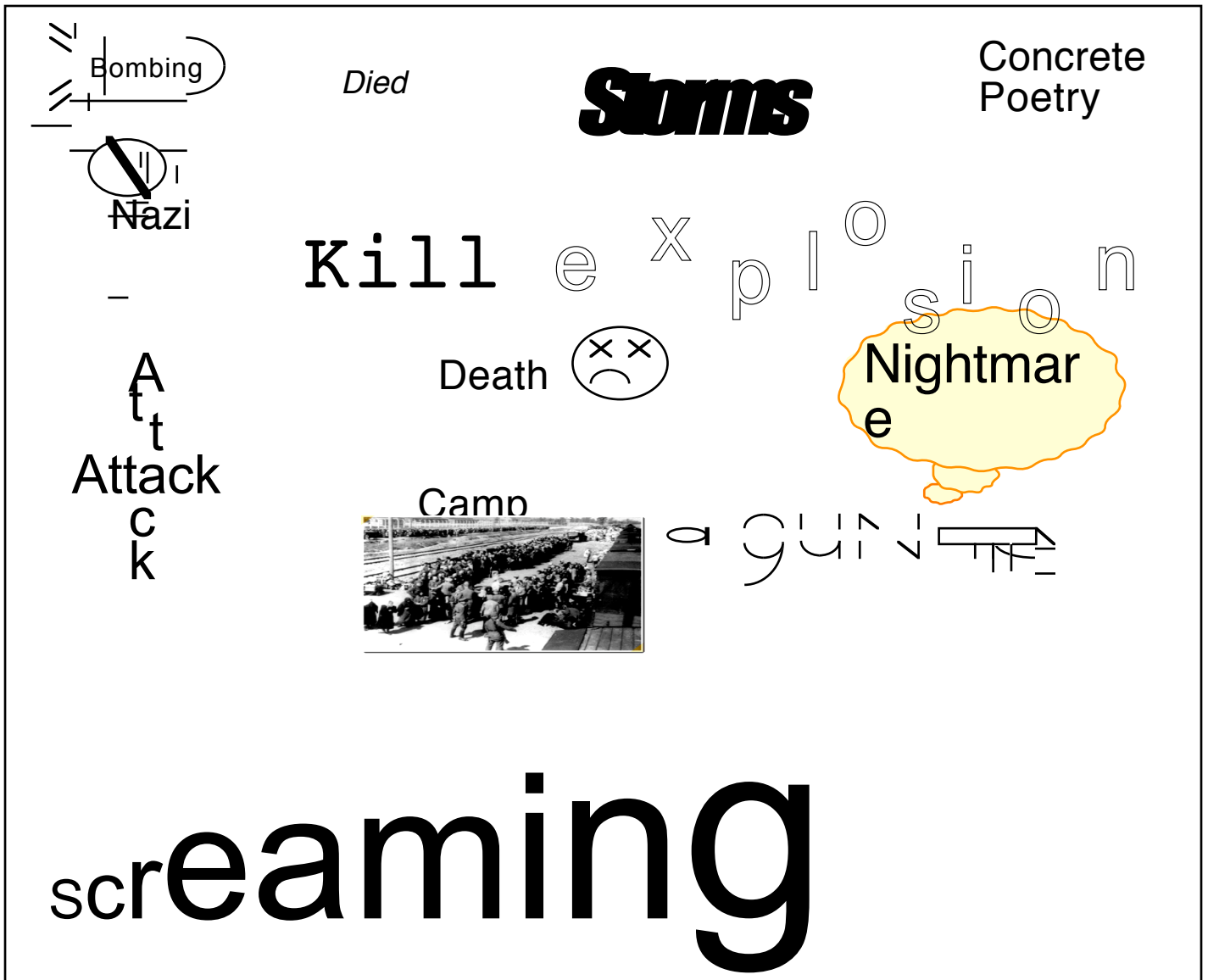


figure 8

Our next step was to tackle a more "traditional" assignment, one that I knew Jake would face a lot over the years, the Shakespearean essay! During our first year together, Jake realized that he did not have to keep up his facade anymore. He knew that I knew that he had a difficult time writing and reading. He also knew that I knew how smart he was in so many ways. Just the fact that he could admit to his difficulties and ask for help was huge progress and a giant step for him.

As we began working on the essay together, I recognized a habit that Jake had developed. While he had a broad spoken vocabulary, over the years he had learned to avoid using words that he could not be certain he knew how to spell. In other words, he limited himself to "sure things". This in turn, made it difficult for him to communicate in written form in a way that represented his ideas and himself. As soon as I put that discovery out on the table, Jake and I came up with

a plan. He would use the computer for his essay- even the first draft- and therefore consult the spell check regularly. For those words where he was so "off" that the spell check offered him nothing, I would help him out. And something beautiful began to happen. Jake began to take risks. He enjoyed playing with words and trying to come up with great sentences and eloquent metaphors. After all, he realized there were no negative consequences. He was experimenting and being rewarded with praise, as opposed to being penalized with a low mark. He took particular joy in what he considered to be "the perfect sentence!" (See figure 9.) Jake would never have dared to use the word "exquisite" if he had to spell it right all alone, and

Like fencing where the artist channels his anger on his opponent, William Shakespeare channeled his passion on his writing. His use of language is like no other. For example, his famous line from Hamlet, "To be, or not to be, that is the question," is exquisite because of its complexity.

figure 9

then be evaluated on it. Again, this experience provided him with confidence and a positive attitude. He was proud of his progress which he noted in his self-evaluation (see figure 10).

Jake is the kind of student who immediately has the odds against him. He has difficulty

What changes have you noticed in your use of spelling?

I have noticed in my spelling that I have reached a new stage of spelling. I reached this stage by practicing a lot! I also ask questions, make mistakes and get messy! Another thing I do is I look up the spell-check. Finally, I take risks in what I write to improve my vocabulary. For example, I was going for the word "fake," but instead, I used the word "artificial".

What did this piece allow you to learn about yourself as a writer? Please use examples.

By writing this essay I have discovered a hidden talent inside me! The talent that I discovered is sentence writing. For example, "Another activity that the Elizabethans would do is fencing. They would use fencing as an artistic channel for their anger, thus making it an enjoyable activity for others to watch too. Like fencing, where the artist channels his anger on his opponent, William Shakespeare channeled his passion on his writing." This sentence shows complexity and exquisite writing.

figure 10

controlling his anger and thus can be a behaviour problem in the classroom. He looks much older than the other students, and as result, feels like he has to act bigger and better. He does not welcome help because he is not used to it. His tough act though, is his shield which often ends up getting him in trouble. Reading the notes from Jake's elementary file, it is clear that he lived on that risky, fine line for a very long period of time. Working with him has taught me that deep

down, he wants the exact same thing that all students do, success. He also taught me that oftentimes, our educational system is set up for kids to fail. Jake had many experiences where trying his best meant receiving an embarrassingly low mark. So, he pretended not to care. The sight of this tall, "tough" boy walking around the classroom to show off his Shakespeare essay though, showed me that he did care. Sometimes there are more important things than standards.

* * *

Stacey's Story: Writing and Nurturing

Two weeks have passed and she has said four words to me ("Hi" twice, and "no," and "yes," once each). She is noticeably withdrawn from others and makes little attempt to interact with those in her group. I see her at lunchtime sitting in the computer lab working on her writing. She is almost always alone, always in her own world. Gently, I try to connect with her. I notice the novels that she is reading, and leave others on her desk that I think might interest her. She reads each one quickly and always returns them within days. She doesn't say it, but I can tell that she is grateful and that she likes this new arrangement. We can communicate through books, perhaps. Slowly, I start to ask her about some of them. These "book talks" are a beginning for us. I notice as Stacey starts to feel more comfortable with me, her writing starts to open up.

I don't Care

<p>I don't care, I tell myself I don't need them Because I am better than them They're just jealous, I convince myself They're worthless And I don't need them Because I am better than them I'm glad I'm not with them, I tell everyone They're horrible, mean, cruel I don't need them Because I am better than them</p>	<p>We were never even friends, I try to laugh and shrug They used me, who cares? But Because I don't need them I am better than them. I am! They hurt me, I fake a smile, pretending I don't care But they never will again I don't need them Because I am better than them They talked bad about me, I brush it off and turn away I hold back the tears But I don't need them Because I am better than them</p>	<p>I am better than them, I say over and over again But I will never really believe that I WAS them But I don't need them I don't... I don't need them, I shout But I say it no longer with confidence I'm hurting, I admit I cry freely, not caring who sees anymore But I don't need them Because I am better than them...</p>
--	--	--

figure 11

After several initial prose pieces, I discover that Stacey has a strong voice- it seems that she reveals a little bit of herself in each piece. I encourage her to try her hand at poetry. One of her poems strikes me with its honesty and pain (see figure 11.)

She spoke best in poetry, finding in its lines the ability to capture the contradictions of her existence. This is a pattern that persisted over a two year period. Lindsay's poetic voice provided her with an outlet, a chance to express herself loudly without having to say a word. It is both self-expression and therapy for her, a chance to yell, scream, vent, and sing in her otherwise mute world. Stacey had no difficulty with reading and writing. In fact, these activities were therapeutic for her; nonetheless, she needed my help.

Not all special needs and individualities are diagnosed with a formal name or code. Children often suffer their own individual trauma that affects and directs their learning and the way they are perceived and evaluated by teachers. Stacey's first term report card reflected this. Scattered with low marks and the repetitive comment "*needs to participate more in class,*" Stacey's talents had gone unnoticed for the most part. She is the kind of student who fades into the woodwork. She does not disrupt, nor does she call any attention to herself. In our classes of ever growing numbers, she gets lost. Often, her introverted behaviour is interpreted as apathy. Stacey though, is not apathetic; her pieces communicate her passion and love for writing.

Stacey benefited tremendously from our inclusive classroom because she discovered that difference was okay, and even more than that, valued. I believe the experience taught her to accept and love herself. Also, the freedom in the way that our class was set up allowed Stacey to find her voice, -- the one she previously never used. I know that had she not had choices in her portfolio and choices in her reading, she would have stayed in her silent world.

It is hard for me to find the words to describe how I worked with Stacey. It just seemed so simple and natural. Stacey needed an ear and an encourager. She needed someone to tell her that her writing was good, and praising her writing told her that she, too, was good. Initially though, her writing seemed stale and forced. It then occurred to her that I did not expect everybody to write the same thing all of the time. and what I wanted most was what she felt proud of. Slowly, she began to trust me, and to share her poetry with me, which, in essence, was a part of herself. Stacey's writing started her on a journey to get to know herself. Writing became her medium for self-actualization and, more importantly, for self-acceptance..

Slowly, Stacey's writing started to become less autobiographical (see figure 12). She

found joy in capturing others' voices.

Writing in a safe environment first allowed her to get to know herself, and once she did, she started to explore the world

beyond herself (see

To You.	
Observing and quiet, she sits in the corner, looking at nothing, she's seeing everything.	She sees your plan, and she knows everything Cross her path, and she'll look at her feet.
She wants you to know, that she sees what you're doing;	You're blinded from her, and she sees everything.
she sees what you're doing, she's looking away.	You've got a plan, and she's got issues.
And you're not blind, and she's not dumb;	She sees what you're doing, yet turning away.

figure 12

Tears of a Child
Just block it all out; Don't listen. Close your eyes. Shut your mouth. Hum loudly; It helps. Stomp your feet, Clap your hands. It'll all be over soon; Never lasts long. Think happy thoughts: Fairies and sunshine. After all- There's a rainbow after every storm. It's getting louder, The bickering and shouts. Just talk to your doll; She's always listened before. Don't cry, Just keep it inside. It'll all be gone soon; You'll see. Press it all down- in a tight ball, at the pit of your stomach; it should help for now. There's slamming and screams, Cries of pain. Shut your eyes to the world. And think happy thoughts, 'Cause that's always helped before. It'll be over soon- Then you can go to bed- And sink deeply into fairy tales, and peaceful dreams; You've always loved those. And when you wake up, You can wish you were asleep once more. Because the life you're living now, is no fairy tale.

figure 13a

figure 13). Stacey had a huge say in designing her own curriculum. She would write and read everyday and make her own choices. As a result, when she and the others were given choices, they were more likely to get involved and be interested. The learning and progress that Stacey made was exactly what she needed.

Stacey developed on her own terms. And I couldn't be more impressed with the results.

I am not sure that I would have known about Stacey's secret writing world, about all of her hidden talents had we been in a traditional class. If all the students had to do the same thing all of the time, Stacey would probably still be sitting in the back of the class, quiet as a mouse, and alone. Instead, Stacey learned that it was okay to be quiet, and most of all, okay to be herself.

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

Escape
Run. Escape the feeling of torture, Flee from the forbidden truth. Hide away the past, Bury the present, Forget the future. For all that which matters; is you.
Forget the problems of other's. Ignore the stares of hatred. Run from the shadows of night, Hide from the light of day. Protect yourself from all evil. In far better words; stop living.
Tiptoe away from problems. Skip rope away from difficulty. Bury yourself down under, For above is a world full of rage.
Complications are rather tough. Arguments are rather bitter. You'd prefer to keep it quiet; continue living on jaded apathy.
So hurry along your pace. Don't look back for fear of disgrace. Flee from all your troubles. Run.

figure 13b

Stacey learned that she was a terrific reader and writer with so much to share with the world. She is still soft-spoken and shy, but she communicates just as much, if not more, than any member of the class. Her success comes through in each of her poems and in the comfortable look in her eyes. She, too, is a success.

* * *

Jerry's Story: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

I watch him in the hallway as he opens his locker. As usual, all his belongings fall out as he does this. He stumbles to shove them back in with his right hand as he inserts his coat with his left. He slams the locker door shut and just makes it. This image captures Jerry's school experiences perfectly. He walks into class as the bell is ringing, hair disheveled and wearing the same clothes he has had on for a week. His hands hold no books or writing instruments. He walks to his seat, head down, and positions himself in a sleeping position. I greet the class and begin the mini -lesson. I walk by Jerry and gently tap his desk. He sits up. I whisper:

"Do you want to read about Harry Potter today?"

"Yes!" he answers and practically jumps out of his seat.

I set him up in the back with his book and an audio version of it that he can listen to it as he reads. He is engaged for the next fifty minutes. As the bell rings for the end of the period, he does not want to stop. He excitedly describes the plot thus far, and asks to borrow it to read at home. He does not want to stop talking about it. I usher him off to class only to see him sitting out in the hall next period. He has been kicked out again.

Success in an inclusive classroom is not always linear, constant, and clear-cut. Jerry is a student I have worked with for over two years, and for every tiny step he took forward, he took several back. His success was intermingled with suspensions, long term absences, hallway fights, and family problems. He is the poster child for why we have to differentiate in the classroom; otherwise, he could not be there. I have seen Jerry in other classes. Sometimes, he could sit there and appeared to be listening. He would even take the end of term standardized test, but have absolutely no idea what it is about. Often, he filled in the multiple choice boxes so that they made a pretty pattern. Jerry was physically in the class, and that was it. Without an individualized curriculum, his education is one of nothingness.

Jerry's file describes him as a child with severe reading problems, maybe even dyslexia. He struggled to read most chapter books. He also spelled phonetically but, in spite of that, enjoyed writing, because he could control it, unlike reading where he had to decode others'

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

messages. He has a large spoken vocabulary and is very up to date on current events. Sometimes though, he misspelled his own name. After spending a while with Jerry, I realized that his reading and writing challenges were really the least of his problems. This was a boy who had been rejected by his peers for most of his life. He was often teased because he was overweight. This was a boy who lost his mother to a drug addiction, and never knew his father. He was raised by his grandparents who tried, but had limited energy to work with him. On most days, Jerry was a kind person who wanted to do the right thing. When it was least expected though, he turned into a confrontational, angry and even aggressive individual. He has had a hard time maintaining friendships, partly because of this streak. At the same, he would do anything for a friend, including giving away his belongings. I have seen Jerry give up his lunch money on many an occasion to have the chance to spend some time with a peer.

For the first while, Jerry and I played the same game as I played with Jake. The "Let's pretend that I can read these classic novels at lightning speed" game. Jerry though, did not suffer from the same pride issues as Jake did, and he was comfortable asking for help. He just enjoyed the rewards of doing well. Jerry also loved to hear stories and talk about them. I noticed his intent expression when I would read out loud. He was always engaged and always wanted to participate in discussion of the reading. If asked to read a long and complex text on his own though, he would just pretend; the task was simply too laborious and daunting for him. I realized if I wanted Jerry to make progress with his reading, I would have to find an alternative plan. I found books that were adventurous, his favourite type, and that also came in audio form. He loved listening to them and followed along with the book. This gave Jerry the chance to read with the others and to honestly be able to pronounce that after two years, he had read four books, -- the whole *Harry Potter* series.

As with many special needs' students working on the computer was a real writing motivator for Jerry. It seemed to provide him with a feeling of power and control. He did not use the spell check, as he did not recognize the words spelled correctly, but he liked the "polished" quality and feel to his work when done on a computer. Jerry even responded to his reading using the computer. I would type in prompting questions in one colour, and he would respond in another. He loved this interaction and thrived on it. This communication satisfied another of his needs: love and attention. He would always end his responses with a question to ensure that I would answer back.

Jerry also used the computer as a creative tool. He is an excellent artist and so would

often draw images in response to a reading or as a piece in itself. I was able to use his art to inspire him to write. After having completed a self-portrait on the computer, I suggested that

me
 Me i am the same
 i bleed the same
 i have the same imotions
 but i am stell a reected
 a freak
 a nuthing
 but why i ask
 is it me
 or is it just what people see
 what thay see is a
 fat man
 and a louser
 but what i see is a
 kind young man
 with a hart
 but at the end am i
 what people think
 or am i what i think
 and that is my questoun

figure 14

Jerry accompany his with a poem. His piece both touched and broke my heart (see figure 14).

Jerry's poem attests to the fact that he needed a curriculum directed at helping his self-esteem. Sure, I could have spent my time lamenting what he couldn't do and have him take test after test with failing results. He was used to that. Instead, I decided that despite his lack of obvious progress, despite what sometimes seemed like his lack of effort, and despite his having never completed one homework assignment, to focus on the positive. He so badly needed that in his life. I decided to accept that Jerry's progress would not be typical. Each page read was an accomplishment, each time he brought his books to class a triumph, and each poem, a gift.

Jerry's writing captures both his pain and his hope (see figure 15.) It's honesty and sweetness reminds us that he is worth all of the special attention that he needs. Jerry's first two years in high school

<u>death</u>	<u>A rose</u>
death is a plague death is pain death is sorrow and death is me	What do you call a rose from any other name a flower that is sweet as honey a flower that blossoms in the wind that grows in the moonlight that sways at dawn by the sunlight that becomes a beautiful person inside its mind. With love,honor,and trust this is what a rose is and this is what it shall stay
<u>Life</u>	
live is the cure live is happiness life is my pot of gold life is like love and love is sweet love is passion love is life	

figure 15

provided him with this individual curriculum. I am very worried that the rest of his years in secondary school will not. While there were plenty of obstacles, he was able to interact with peers in a beneficial manner, and he was also able to discover some of the things that he is very

good at, including art, storytelling, and poetry. Being able to work with Jerry for a two-year period also helped him tremendously. In a normal one-year setting, it would have been difficult for him to make progress, considering his frequent absences and his "off" days. He is the kind of learner who just needs more time. Furthermore, the continuity and comfort with which he was provided offered him a chance to grow more meaningfully. I got to know Jerry well and could always recall his positive achievements. They gave me the chance to build on even the very smallest accomplishments. Also, because I taught him several subjects, I was able to help him connect information and make logical links across the curriculum. I could always start with what he knew. I had the opportunity to learn about him as a complete person. Finally, this elongated time span removed that feeling of rushing and stress that are so often found in school.

figure 15
Before Jerry can move on in school though, he has to sort out a lot of issues with himself. While I feel confident that Vincent, Jake, and Stacey have been able to make a place for themselves in school, even if the institution is not always set up to bring out the best in them, Jerry may not find this place in a traditional school. While he was accepted by the other students in our class, something always seemed to be holding him back. Every time I felt he was getting it together, some major obstacle would appear, and out of nowhere, he would get into a fist fight and be suspended for a while. He also broke his leg and missed three months of school. Jerry might eventually find himself in an alternate school setting where his emotional needs can be addressed more intensely. He needs to learn to love and accept himself in a more drastic way than the others.

Ironically, not all "success" stories sound successful. Certainly though, Jerry's success cannot be measured by the failing grades on his report card. I made peace with the idea that his success came in spurts. I did not let these circumstances frustrate me or allow me to give up on him. I just had to learn to change my perspective and try to work with what he could give. Once I had made this realization, I started to appreciate the individual triumphs he made each and every day. In the end, they all contributed to his progress. Unlike the others, who have a portfolio of work to show their growth, Jerry's package is not quite as concrete. Instead, it can be found in the little moments, when he was immersed in a Harry Potter book, when he was excited and wanted to discuss his reading, or when he wrote poetry from the heart. Jerry may never pass the exit exams required to graduate from high school, but I think he is a little bit closer to his own life goals.

* * *

A Curriculum of Nurturing and of Students

Often, when visitors have observed my class, they have asked how I got the students to help one another so much. They would ask how I "made" the kids so kind and nurturing with one another. I guess I never consciously thought about it before, so I usually stumbled to answer the question. I felt as if others might think I was flaky because I focused a lot on the students being compassionate and accepting of one another. In retrospect, I realize how much I emphasize and reward this type of behaviour. I also believe it is one of the most important factors in creating an atmosphere of acceptance and cooperation.

I was always conscious of myself as a role model and I took this very seriously. I addressed the students the way I wanted them to address me and each another. I did not raise my voice in an aggressive manner. I made a point to spend a lot of time discussing how to work with one another and how to hold a discussion. I thanked students when they helped out someone in need and I rewarded them with notes of praise. I shared their progress with one another, always making sure that all the students got a chance to shine. I caught them doing "good" things and told them when I did. As much as possible, I tried to provide students with nurturing. I listened to their problems if they needed an ear. I took note of their moods and tried to give them a break if they were having a bad day. I allowed extra time to students who were working hard and needed it, whether it be the way they learned, or the fact that they were having family trouble. Nobody complained of unfair treatment. In fact, the students let me know if another student was having a hard time with something.

Some might argue that this is not the role of a teacher. I have had heard this before. I have also heard that today's students are babied for far too long. I argue that we have to teach the children before we can teach the curriculum. The kinds of baggage that today's students bring into the classroom with them simply cannot be ignored. They need us to be more than instructors. I know these sound like little small things to do, but I have learned the great big results of practicing them each and every day. I have also learned that nurturing is a skill that can be taught and learned.

The students in our class were not only kind and accepting with one another, but helpful. This happened when Jake taught the class a computer skill, when a student showed a peer something I taught them, when Melissa acted as a stenographer for Vincent, and when my

student with Tourette's syndrome would get a calming hand on his if he was agitated. This happened everyday in our class and became the norm. All the students had the opportunity to become "teachers," thus providing them with opportunities to feel confident. A weak reader might be a great scientist, a challenged writer might be a technology whiz. Having the students participate as teachers was a "win-win" situation for all of us. I did not have to attend to the impossible task of fulfilling all of their needs all of the time; they got the chance to take on a leadership role and to feel proud of themselves.

I communicated to the students that I viewed us as a learning team, and that I was not the only knowledgeable person in the classroom. I know the "guide on the side" trend has been met with resistance by many teachers who see it as an excuse for a teacher to not have to prepare for their classes. The fact is that I am always prepared and that I always instruct the class in a formal manner for a few minutes almost every day. The focus, however, was on the students, not me, and most of my preparation developed from *them* and their needs and interests. If Len wanted to learn how to use a certain software for his digital portfolio, I would find out about it. I kept track of what my students liked to read and found books for them to borrow. I shared writing by students with other students who had similar interests. These small gestures reach individual needs in a way that is rarely done in our large classes. The students directed the curriculum because they *are* the curriculum.

There is no "recipe" for working with exceptional children. Like all students, their needs are unique. There are no lessons or handouts that will solve all of their difficulties. The recipe then, lies in each of them. I think each of the stories that I have shared shows the different approaches that I found myself taking to reach each of these special people. They will show you what they need as long as you are looking. At the same time though, common threads are apparent in each of their chronicles. Each of these students needed a safe environment to work in; they needed to feel as if their experiments and failures would not be held against them. They all needed to make their own choices so that they could show off their talents. They needed nurturing and encouragement. Most of all, they needed to feel good about themselves and feel as if they were smart.

Each child communicated their success to me in distinct ways: ways not measurable on a multiple choice test. Vincent transformed himself from a brilliant little boy who rarely felt comfortable in class and among his peers, to one who ran for class president and who formed a group of friends who admired him. At fifteen, Jake already has a portfolio of work experience

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

teaching classes about technology. His success is communicated every time he offers another teacher his services, and does so with pride. The look of fear in his eyes is now replaced with one of confidence. Stacey accepted herself and found joy in her work and accomplishments. The smile on her face when I read her poetry out loud, or lent her another book, said it all. Jerry had some wonderful moments. I will never forget our last day together. He was so proud to give me a bouquet of flowers. This kind gesture communicated so much for both of us. He knew I saw his talents, and I knew that he could be a positive and contributing member of our society.

In the end, I believe that the foundation of our class was one of nurturing and individuality. Without this foundation, I do not believe the tremendous learning would have occurred. Subject specialists may read this and be horrified. It is never easy to hand the control over to the children. Of course, we all want to make sure that they learn and that they master the knowledge of our discipline. In letting go though, I have learned that the students will take themselves farther than one could have imagined. Learning to learn and to work together is the hard part. Once this is mastered, they find the knowledge. The *course material* then, became secondary. It is the lifelong skills that they mastered that become important. As a result, they read more, wrote more, and developed more than I had ever hoped. In two years, *every student* in my "special" class had a thick portfolio (or two) packed with all kinds of writing, as well as two multi-genre books, an extended individual book list, a digital portfolio and many cross-curricular projects. The product was not our focus, and as a result, boy did they produce!

I look forward to the new Quebec Education Program that will validate the the process over the product, the child over the curriculum, and the individual over the standard. I worry though, that through its formalization, the program may get swept aside as just "another reform." The teachers who have always treated their students as distinct learners though, know that this is not simply an "improved" way of teaching or a trend; it is what the students need. As teachers, we have to welcome all the learners in our classes and lead them to a place where they can feel good about themselves and their work. They need to know that their voice matters, even when it is not as loud, or as articulate as the others. School needs to be a place where children find themselves instead of losing themselves. A very wise boy once told me that "we all see the same sunset," and he was right! He understood the beauty in the way we all see it differently. As teachers, we need to see the magic in each perspective, and let each and every one of them, shine.

I'm a Possibility: Creating an Inclusive Middle-School Classroom

References

Frank, Anne. (1997). *The Diary of a Young Girl* (The Definitive Edition). Toronto: Bantam Books.

Rowling, J. K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books.