

CRUCIAL TIMES

Community Resource Unit Inc.
Suite 5B, 19 Lang Parade
Auchenflower Brisbane Q 4066

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Ph: (07) 3870 1022 Fax: (07) 3371 3842
Email: cru@cru.org.au

EDITORIAL

Jane Sherwin

Readers are no doubt familiar with the terms 'social capital', 'community capacity building' and 'community development'. In this edition of **CRUCIAL TIMES** and at the coming conference we want to explore these concepts further. For example, what do concepts like 'community capacity building' mean for those involved in the lives of people with disabilities? What is a vital community? Is there hope for vitality in an era that is marked by declining communities?

In asking these questions, we are confronted by questions about how each of us lives our own life, and how we engage with others on a daily basis. The present era is one in which most people see less of family and friends, where more people find it difficult to maintain relationships, and where fewer people join clubs or seek to have a part on committees of community organizations. These trends are all signs of reduced social capital, yet in the disability sector we are broadly engaged in a struggle for true community living, based on a belief that people with disabilities belong in relationships with others, with those in their local neighbourhood, and in valued community roles.

In spite of current trends, across Australia there is plenty of evidence of inspiring efforts by people in small towns who, faced with declining social capital because of diminished populations, depleted businesses and facilities, and deserted public spaces, have rallied to rebuild a sense of vitality in their towns. Ordinary people – residents, farmers, teachers, shire councillors, ministers of religion, school students and older citizens – have been jolted from a

sense of the inevitability of their town's decline. They have joined with each other, felt the outrage, dared to imagine a vital future for their town, and together set about making it happen. Their efforts have not necessarily required additional financial resources; in each case, the rebuilding of the town and its community has begun with ordinary yet interested people coming together.

Those who are involved in the lives of people with disability can learn from these actions which reveal the power of having a vision, of grassroots efforts, and the power of collective action, leadership, and leadership renewal. There is power in having a mindset for capitalizing on opportunities, and in having an understanding of the complexity of problems. The actions that have been taken illustrate the importance of healthy, vital community behaviour such as participation, inclusiveness, consensus decision-making, collaboration, trust and respect for and by all its citizens.

The most significant thing that might be learnt from these revitalising efforts is the importance of valuing the physical and social environment in which we live, and of having the courage and inspiration to imagine something different. Contributors to this edition of **CRUCIAL TIMES** discuss some important aspects of these matters, helping us to reflect on our own behaviour and our expectations of each other in our everyday lives – they are aspects that will be further explored during three days in November when many people will come together at the CRU conference, *Relationships and Everyday Lives: building the heart of vital communities*. Your presence there is vital. ✕

CRU's MISSION STATEMENT

- To challenge ideas and practices which limit the lives of people with disabilities.
- To inspire and encourage individuals and organisations to pursue better lives for people with disabilities.

from the president

Mike Duggan

There is not a more avid campaigner for de-institutionalisation than I am, but what do we really understand about the closure of institutions and what is generally referred to as 'community living' for people with disabilities?

Now that most people with disabilities have moved from institutions to the community, what is life like after the honeymoon period of deinstitutionalisation? Many people are living alone in dwellings specially modified for their needs and have been allocated a certain number of support-hours, which in the majority of cases, is insufficient. Often this means people living alone, with many pressures and responsibilities bearing down on them – the pressures of managing households, managing support workers, and sustaining themselves wholly.

What does all this mean for people with disabilities themselves? At one stage of history, people with disabilities were placed in institutions supposedly for the good of the person with the disability as well as for the general community. Since little support would be found for the idea of institutions these days, this leads to many questions about where the real barriers lie that prevent people with disabilities having typical lifestyles in their communities with a variety of relationships, including close friendships. Do the barriers lie in a deep-seated belief that people who have disabilities can only ever find affection and solidarity with others who are also disabled? Is it that people who are supposedly non-disabled simply

don't find people who have disabilities all that interesting and therefore they don't want to associate with such people even when they have the chance, or is it that people who have disabilities (or who are black, or refugees from foreign countries, or who are old), are not seen as being the same as others with the same human needs?

We human beings are often referred to as 'social animals' or 'community creatures' although I sometimes wonder if we can honestly wear these labels. But maybe this is something we just have to make a conscious and concerted effort to achieve. To become 'community creatures' may be the only way that humanity is going to be able to advance.

Perhaps one way we can put this into action is to regard our neighbours as Brother and Sister. Often when I go down the street, I see aboriginies who inevitably greet me with "How ya goin', brother?" We have so much to learn from this group of people who have been marginalised in the community; we have so much to learn from all marginalised groups of people. If we are really going to advance our civilisation, we simply must be open to what marginalised people have to teach. Understanding the experiences of marginalised people may be one of the ways we will be able to discover the true heart of vital communities, finding that at the heart of vital communities is the human heart. ✠

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An excerpt from

TELLING THE UNTOLD: Families, Disability and Institutions **Stories of banned and unrequited love**

If not living in the community, and if not family and community membership, then what? In a timely reminder about the impact of 'institutions as solutions' CRU has released a new book that explores and articulates the experiences of a number of families who generously and courageously told what happened when their sons, daughters, sisters and brothers left the family to live in Challinor institution. While the struggle for community membership is a long and hard journey, the starting point for people with disability is that their families need to be supported to thrive and are assisted by well-timed, practical support. If policy makers, professionals, service organisations and the general community fail to provide such assistance to families the outcome is likely to be severed love and lives. The following is an excerpt from **Telling the Untold**, written by Beverley Funnell:



"In reading of the experiences of these families, some people might focus on the fact that each of the families had a child with a disability. It is likely that many might see this fact as the most significant experience that the families share, and that having a child with a disability is unfortunate or even tragic. For the families themselves, however, the tragedy is not about having a child with impairments; it was not in having the child, but in giving up the child that caused the greatest suffering. This is not to say that life with the child was without its difficulties, and elsewhere in the book many of those difficulties are described.

As we got to know the families it became clear that their shared experiences of separation, through the institutionalisation of one of their own, had forged a bond between them. It became clear that each member of every family has been affected, and that the life of each family member changed as a result of the experience. At the heart of the families' remorse is the deep sadness that was felt while a loved son, daughter, sister or brother was in exile from the family. Along with the sadness there is also a sense of having been betrayed by the authorities; the solution offered to families by the service system turned out to be no solution at all. As one of the narrators says of Challinor, "There shouldn't be places like that to fix the problem".

The age at which family members became institutionalised also varied. People went to live at Challinor at different stages of their lives and some stayed longer than others: the minimum stay was seven years (Jannyne); and the longest was fifty years (Clive).

The circumstances that precipitated admission to the institution also varied. In some situations it was a death in the family, or illness, or difficult behaviour that led to a breakdown in the home situation. In all cases, practical support for maintaining the family, as a unit, was unavailable to families. ▶

One of the most disturbing themes that arose was that of the overwhelming heartache and loss that was experienced by parents and siblings when they were separated from the member of their family who was lost to them through institutionalisation. A parent recalls:

We never really came to terms with Libby being at Challinor. Taking her back was always so hard. Everything became a ritual. It was so painful. Our relationship continued to deteriorate – John withdrew and I just went on cooking and cleaning. Just surviving and looking forward to Libby coming home on the weekend – and pleased in some ways when she went back, because it was so hard. The other kids didn't have much of a life when Libby was there. I couldn't get involved in their school activities.

All of the families say their emotions and thoughts were disturbed and painful following the departure of one of their members to the institution. It was not possible to continue family life as if the person had never existed, although advice to do so was often proposed by professionals. The parents of one child offer one of the many examples of such unashamed proposals by professional practitioners:

A Child Guidance psychologist said to us: "Put him in a home and forget him. Don't see him again".

Another of the narrators tells of the anguish and confusion that she felt about her daughter's removal to an institution. She recalls:

After the first time I visited Annie at the Centre it broke my heart to leave her there. I knew I could not bring her home, I don't think I could have coped. I don't know if it would have been that way, but that's what I thought.

Cassie remembers a particular incident that happened in the early 1970s during a visit to her brother; an incident that was to have a long-lasting impact on her and her father. Her mother, who died many years ago, was also present on that occasion and we can only assume that her reaction was similar to Cassie's:

There were rows of beds, maybe twenty in one dormitory. Mum, our young brother Peter and myself were standing outside the front entrance at the bottom of the stairs this day waiting for Dad who was inside, when I heard a whack and a scream. I was only twelve years old, but I knew the difference between a tantrum scream and when you're being hit. I knew it was someone being hit. I turned to my mother and said, "Do they do that to Timmy, Mum?" She just stood there looking at me. I remember the look on her face and the tears in her eyes. She didn't know what to say to me. I will never know the pain and heartache my parents endured back then."



The stories that emerge in these pages, and the analysis that is woven throughout the book, make all the explanations and excuses for institutionalising people with disabilities sound trite and pathetic. The devastating impact of institutionalisation on people with disabilities has been the subject of many books and studies; what this book provides is additional insight into not only how harmful institutional care is for people with disabilities but also how harmful it is for their families. For these reasons, *Telling the Untold* is an important book for the present. While many would like to think that these are stories of a dark past, that has been left behind in contemporary times, the book will compel thoughtful readers to look deep inside themselves and current service systems to question what has really changed. While we know that the door has not been shut on the institutional era, most people no longer dispute that it is in the community that people with disabilities will find the life that they seek for themselves.

Anne Cross, Preface, *Telling the Untold*

The Puzzle: What is a vital community?

*We asked **Sharyn Rowen** to describe a vital community and she depicts it as a jigsaw puzzle, needing all its parts in order to become a complete picture.*

Sharyn lives in the Stanthorpe community.

What is a vital community?

Perhaps it's like a completed jigsaw puzzle.

It doesn't matter where you start, it's connecting the pieces that's crucial.

Each piece of the puzzle has a purpose.

Each piece of the puzzle interlocks with the pieces around it.

Each piece is as significant as the other pieces.

No one piece is more important than any other piece.

Without each piece the picture won't be whole.

Take away a piece and the puzzle won't be solved.

If one piece is lost an accurate picture will never be achieved.

Each piece looks different, however, it fits.

Each piece has a valued role to play.

Together, all pieces strengthen the whole picture.

Only when all the pieces connect do we get a true picture.

A vital community is more than the feeling of being a valued member of the community – a vital community is a community where you *are* a quintessential part of your community.

WHY THE COMMUNITY NEEDS PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: An exploration of some assumptions

We asked Lorraine Zeni why communities need people with disabilities. What follows is deeply thoughtful and thought-provoking. Lorraine lives in Brisbane with her family and is well known to the South Australian community, where she lived until recently.

IN thinking about the question, *Why communities need people with disabilities*, it seems to me that there are a number of inherent assumptions in the question: assumptions about the notion of need; the nature of community; and the identification of 'people with disability' as some form of homogeneous group. When I reframed the question to consider how the community stands to gain from the presence of a diverse array of people with different qualities, needs, and abilities I also started to ponder a range of other issues including the cost to some people with disability. So I would like to share some of my thoughts with readers, being very clear that this is by no means more than the beginnings of a much broader discussion.

The dictionary defines 'need' as something we must have, something we cannot do without, like food and water – something we must have to survive. Do we need people with disability in our communities in order to survive? Can community, can we, survive without people with disability? There are many people who would be thinking, "Yes, of course we need people with disability". At the same time, I am conscious that there are those who would be unconvinced for an array of reasons.

When I think about this question in relation to my daughter, I wonder what it is that she brings to her local community that it actually needs, and why it needs it. Can the local community get by without her presence? Does she bring anything in particular that the community needs; needs that the community cannot meet in some other way given the diversity that is community?

Then I wonder whether the 'need' is a need at all. Is it more about a benefit, or an opportunity or potential; is it more a question of what we stand to gain? It seemed to me in considering these questions and numerous others that arose,

that one of the assumptions underlying this question of *why the community needs people with disability* is the notion of a 'grand plan' where everyone is meant to be how they are, including people with disability, and where there is reason and purpose in everything that happens, to the extent that no community is complete or whole or can become what it can be, without all of its parts. Further, in this grand plan there is a certain and specific composition in the diversity of society that is typical, desirable and indeed essential, and society cannot function well, or even at all, if some of its members are missing.

I actually like this notion myself but the more I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I became, because while all of the things that people with disability bring to a community have the potential to be enriching experiences for the other individuals in that community, eliciting qualities of compassion, understanding, giving and receiving, presenting opportunities for relationship which, in turn, extend outwards and benefit the community as a whole, I'm not convinced that the community actually needs people with disability in particular, amongst the diversity of people in a given community, in order to experience any of the things that may come from their presence. Further, the more I pursued this notion, the less comfortable I felt talking about people with disability as some kind of homogeneous group, as if someone with a cognitive disability brings the same needs, experiences, or offerings as someone who uses a wheelchair – maybe they do, and maybe they don't. For the purposes of this paper I haven't resolved this issue. That is another discussion, I think.

If we take the view that one of the things that people with disabilities have in common is that of being devalued by the community at large, does this not encompass other groups of people who may not have a disability, such as people

who are homeless, or people who are addicted to drugs? If we are saying that the community needs people with disability, are we also saying that communities need people who are homeless or drug-addicted too? What are we saying here? After all, doesn't the presence in the community of people who are homeless and people who have a drug addiction, present members of that community with opportunities to respond with understanding and compassion, and offer opportunities for relationships and challenging and enriching experiences? Are we saying that the community can only achieve enrichment and the qualities of acceptance and tolerance through the presence of people with a disability in particular, given the diversity of community? I'm not convinced.

I believe that the focus we have on the positive attributes of our sons, daughters, friends, neighbours and other people with disability, and on the potential of their lives, is the most constructive perspective. My experience tells me that not everyone in the community shares this view or may be ready and willing to engage with, to learn from, to contribute to, and thereby gain from the presence of people with disability in the community and in their lives. I know that if I have a person with a disability as a neighbour, or sitting beside me on the train, or shopping at the local shopping center, I am offered opportunities to engage, and to gain from what is possible in such engagements. But will everyone in the community take these opportunities and does it matter whether all of the other people in the community are willing to engage and gain from such opportunities?

I don't intend to try to answer these questions but as I pondered them, I reflected on what they meant for my daughter. She is soon to turn twenty, and I have pursued her place in her local community with great vigor and determination for all of those years and I will continue to do so as long as I am here. Over the years, I have seen some individuals enjoy and gain from their engagement with her, and their experience of her. At the same time I have seen others step back from her, retreating from her and rejecting her, resentful and angry that she is in their space.

As I think about her years of schooling, when she attended local primary and secondary schools, I would like to be able to say that those schools benefited, were changed for the better by

her presence, and that they needed her attendance and participation for that change and growth to occur. I would like to be able to say that they enjoyed knowing her, and that they valued what she brought and contributed to the school communities. But one of my prevailing memories comes from the end of her high school years, when I found myself sitting in a meeting with all of her teachers. As I sat and listened to her math teacher telling me that my daughter was an awful person, that he could find nothing about her of any worth, that her presence in the school was a waste of his time and energy, that she took valuable learning time away from the other students, I realized that their view of her had remained static. No one at that meeting, not the Principal, none of the other teachers, not even the special education support person, questioned or challenged what this math teacher said, and no one spoke up to offer a different view.

I believe there was a lot for the teachers and the school to gain from my daughter's presence, and I know that some did develop new understandings, and did gain. But I'm not sure that those few teachers who did change their views were able to sustain their efforts (or indeed if it mattered that much to them) to do things differently after my daughter left the school, or whether they were overwhelmed by the dominant culture that was indifferent or antagonistic towards my daughter's presence. Accordingly I'm not sure that they needed her there. Certainly, the hatred (a strong word I know, but I have no other word that will suffice to describe the response) that my daughter's presence elicited from a group of adults who were entrusted with the education and care of all of the students in the school, would strongly suggest that they really did, in fact, need her there, to confront and offer them an opportunity to change their hostile and hurtful views.

However the flip side of this is the cost to my daughter. For all of the relationships, learning and growth that could have occurred in my daughter's high school years, what we saw was her hurt, rejection, and damage done to her that resulted in anger and enormous frustration on her part. She could have shown them that aside from having an intellectual disability she is a person of considerable abilities and strengths; she has an enormously creative and strategic mind, and the capacity to problem-solve and orchestrate some

situations in very sophisticated and lateral ways; she has lived through enormous loss and grief with the death of her brother, the central figure in her life, her greatest friend, teacher and ally, and as a result she has developed a capacity for compassion and understanding of another's pain when she has the opportunity to show this aspect of herself. She can be very single-minded – an attitude which can bear positive fruit for her at times, but which at other times, can also be to her detriment. She is a generous and thoughtful person and she has a remarkable memory for facts that didn't seem to have any application within the school curriculum. All of these qualities could have been nurtured through her education, but they were not even recognised, let alone approached in a positive manner, by the school.

Did this failure by the school community to recognise my daughter's capacity to contribute in her own way extend to the community in general? In my experience, while there have been a few individuals who have sought to know, to understand, and to enjoy who my daughter is, her experience of the majority of the community during her childhood and adolescence ranged from indifference and intolerance to outright antagonism. We can talk about my daughter's presence and the presence of others with disability as a way in which communities can gain through diversity and richness, but we should also recognize that there are potential costs for at least some individuals with disability through the pain of rejection and other profoundly hurtful experiences. And what about those people who do not have families or allies around them to help them seek and shape their place in their community?

For those of us who share the view that my daughter, and other people with disability, must have their place in their communities, we can talk about the value that someone like my daughter has to her local community as well as talking about the value that her place in community has to her. And we can see the many ways in which we can all learn and grow and

develop as we all go about our lives. But are we saying that the community needs people with disability so that we can learn, be enriched, develop compassion and understanding, so that we can become more, so that we can gain? This surely implies that the purpose of people with disability, within the grand plan, is to meet *our* need.

In my view there is not an 'other' place for my daughter, or for any person with disability, but in and of, the community. I do not regret the decision I made in pursuing my daughter's place in community, and would pursue the same pathway knowing what I know now. I never expected it to be easy, and while I am clear that the hurts and costs to her of *not* pursuing my vision for her life would have been much, much greater, I still recognize that the costs to her have been significant and, as for any of us, have helped to shape who she is today.

I am aware that a number of things I have said may not sit easily with some people. This was the journey I took and it raised these questions and issues for me, so I am sharing them. I also felt that, when faced with a question like *why the community needs people with disability*, there is a tendency to focus on what we believe and what we dream for our family members, our friends. Also, we can tend to keep the extent of the pain of the cost to our family member or friend hidden, lest we might somehow be misunderstood or not seen as true to 'the cause'. I think we run the risk of romanticising the issues and sometimes I wonder if we even contribute, in some ways, to the notion of the burden of 'otherness' that people with disability have to carry. I have sought to step back from this and what has emerged is a questioning of some of the assumptions. What are we really saying and what do we really mean when we talk about needing people with disability in our communities? What are we saying about each individual's purpose for being, and about each individual's unique humanness, and the place we hold in community just because we are here? ✠

Supporting people to make connections

Karin & David Swift are a young married couple who, in writing this article, have reflected on their lifetime of experience of living with disability. They both work in the sector in various roles and offer some insights into how people can be supported to make connections with each other.

Our relationships with others is often what makes life worth living, providing us with a sense of self and a sense of belonging to family, friends and community. Both of us have had experiences with others who have a disability, and whose profound disconnectedness from family, friends and community has taught us the value of these connections – within our own lives and for others. In looking at how individuals in the community can make person-to-person connections with someone who has a disability, we reflected on a number of questions.

For example, if the question is asked, *What does it take to break down barriers so that two people can get to know each other, when one person has a disability*, there is danger in assuming that there will be difficulties for people with disability forming friendships with others in their community. This is a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. It is far more positive and valuing of the person to hold a basic belief that friendships are possible for all people. In other words, there is no disability that precludes friendship.

One suggestion to family, friends, advocates, support workers and people with disabilities is to spot opportunities that enable connections and

friendships to form naturally, by asking themselves: Where are the places that people meet in the community; what clubs or interest groups exist in the community; what hobbies or skills would the person like to develop? These questions should always be based on ensuring that the person with the disability is actually interested in a particular activity and that the focus of coming together is the activity itself. Most importantly, activities need to be real and natural – for example going to watch a local game of footy on a Saturday afternoon – and not a human service program where a bus-load of people with disabilities go line-dancing at an isolated venue. A person might use a service to go to the activity, but it is important for the activity itself to be real – something that all community members could go to.

In almost all life experiences and personal relationships there are elements of risk-taking. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities are not generally given opportunities to take these ordinary risks in life. Rigid service structures have often meant that a person's choices are narrowly constructed and that if a person tries something once and it fails, the person is never given that opportunity again. This is unrealistic and unfair because in real life most people make a number of attempts at such things as moving out of home, or getting a driver's license, but there is an unrealistic expectation that people with a disability have to get it right the first time. People need to be supported in the risk-taking that is involved in their personal development and finding direction in life. This requires a commitment from family, friends and support workers to go outside their own comfort zones and keep supporting the person to take up the opportunities that are perceived to be risky, given the person's disability. In our experience, one of the major ways a person can grow is through having a sense of achievement by being encouraged to make their own choices about their lives. Paradoxically, the sort of risks that

people with disabilities have so often been exposed to are ones that are known to cause harm – for example there is plenty of evidence of the harmful effects of institutional life.

Given that attraction is a big part of what brings people together, what is it that makes a person's qualities shine beyond their disabilities so that others will be attracted, and want to be with that person? There is no one 'it', rather there is a collage of qualities that shine beyond a person's disability and provide the inspiration for others to stay connected to that person. Attraction between two people is often found in shared life experiences such as enjoyment of one another's company, genuinely wanting to be in one another's lives, acknowledgement of individual gifts, shared love and pain, companionship, acceptance, appreciation of differences, healthy conflict, forgiveness, and a willingness to try new things. Some attractions between two people are often found in things as simple as finding a person to be a good listener or having a beautiful smile.

When thinking about some of the things that could be done when genuinely wanting to assist a person to make authentic connections with others, support workers need to value basic things such as the personal image that they portray of the person they are supporting. If this is done well and with dignity, other people will want to make connections with the person. In contrast, things are often said about a person

with a disability in a joking manner (and even by those who are there to support them) that cause harm by presenting the person in a negative light, making relationships uncomfortable and awkward. Valuing a person always involves communicating in ways that positively promote that person. It is important to remember that positive settings can also enhance a person's image. For example, if a person has a nice home, people are more likely to want to visit.

Knowing when to 'fade out' is an important judgment-call for anyone wanting to assist a person to make authentic connections with others, especially in social situations that are intended to promote natural connections. When opportunities arise, it is the role of support workers to step back and let natural relationships occur even though there may be costs involved to

the workers based on a belief that they may no longer be required in their support role.

The struggle to make real connections for people who are vulnerable in our community is one that concerns all of society, not just those who are vulnerable. It is only when we contemplate our own vulnerability to isolation, loneliness, and dis-connectedness that we can begin to understand the lived experience of a person who has never had the opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with others. ✕

The struggle to make real connections for people who are most vulnerable in our community is one that concerns all of society, not just those who are vulnerable.

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A good life is a human life. A Human life is a social life. The essence of human nature is to be in the company of others – companionship, fellowship, and connection to others are essential to our wellbeing. We embark from birth on a journey of the heart. The fuel for this journey is love, in all its manifestations. Love is the most pervasive and persistent aspect of our nature. It is an unquenchable thirst and a fountain of nourishment.

Al Etmanski

THE VITAL HEART OF A SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Melinda Ewin, a Brisbane parent, believes that the general community and school communities have a relevance to each other that should be more actively applied to the way all children are educated.

This article is about education. It is about an imaginary schooling system that differs from the current system which predominantly uses a 'one size fits all' mode of teaching. As a result, children with disabilities, who do not fit the one-size criteria, have to be made acceptable by policies of inclusion. I believe we can do better. Our children become a captive audience whilst at school and it is during this time that we are creating our future society. With a little planning and cooperation between school and community, schooling can become an experience that sets up our children for life.

I would like to tell a story describing the type of schooling experience I would love my children to have. Let me introduce the heroes of the story: my sons Angus, aged eight, and Declan, aged seven. Angus has autism; Declan is neuro typical, which means 'normal brain function'.

In real life I have to fight for Angus' right to be autistic almost every day. By this I mean his right to think, see, hear, feel, observe, react, and interact outside the 'one size fits all' mould. You see, I actually love my son's autism. I love the way his brain thinks. Attempts to 'make' him the same as other children only cause him stress and pain. While this experience is highlighted more vividly with

Angus, to a lesser degree it is the same for Declan, and for all children, I believe.

On the other hand, the imaginary school that my sons attend is a school that offers a curriculum of learning, social behaviour, and community participation. In this school, the learning phase looks at my sons' abilities and learning styles (that is, auditory, visual or kinetic) and then structures the curriculum around the learning style of each of them. Under this method of teaching, I see my sons full of confidence and exuberance for school and for learning. I see Angus excitedly describing a mechanical creation that is his project with other class members of similar learning styles. Declan is reciting poetry and has started writing his own. He loves to write now, which in the past, was something he hated. Angus still gets extra attention, but the therapists and school aides work alongside Angus and in conjunction with the projects he is attempting.

In this imaginary school my sons really enjoy the social behaviour phase. This phase teaches social responsibility that includes appropriate behaviour towards others and towards the self, as well as good habits and skills for a more stable and successful future. For instance, personal development focuses on promoting positive self-esteem and assertive skills. Members from the community often teach this phase to pupils.

The third phase gives the boys a high level of community contact. In this phase they are exposed to a diversity of people in the community, in the school setting as well as outside. The boys often hear from other parents about their country of origin, or the jobs that they do, and often grandparents drop in to tell their life stories. At other times the boys are involved in community service projects: Angus chooses a clean-up of the local environmental park, and Declan chooses to join a group performing for people in nursing homes. In this phase, the business community is also involved: there are visits to CSIRO research laboratories, a favourite for Angus; and visits to the Lyric Theatre and TV studios, Declan's favourite.

In my imagination, these are school experiences that my sons would enjoy. Sometimes I think that community and social responsibility stop at the school gate. For education to be truly inclusive, it needs to be porous with the whole community involved in the upbringing and skilling of children. An involvement by the whole community would provide opportunities that develop social networks and increase job prospects for all children. Further, it would address some of the social problems that are faced by all young people and not just those confined to the experiences of children with disabilities. I believe Angus is a spearhead for social change in school communities because school communities, by making changes that would address his needs, would also be meeting the needs of other members of the community. ✕