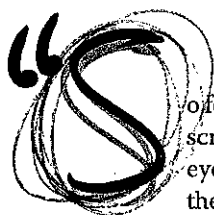


Speak Out for Understanding

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING
DISABILITIES CREATE A DOCUMENTARY
FILM TO SHARE THEIR WISDOM



“So few take the time to *sofu*,” says the young woman in the center of the screen. “Speak out for understanding. Open your mind. Raise your eyes to the unveiling of the face behind the mask, the crumbling of the stereotype. A collective journey. Our journey.”

It’s an awkward moment. Viewers wonder: *What does “sofu” mean? Why does this woman talk about it in such an impassioned way? And what am I supposed to “open my mind” to?*

That’s exactly what you’re supposed to think. Welcome to *Speak Out for Understanding*, a new film on learning disabilities created by a group of students at a Vermont high school. Made on a shoestring, the award-winning 32-minute documentary overturns a number of popular assumptions about learning disabilities — and tries to teach a new way of talking about the people who have them.

The film gives viewers a close look at the real lives of four students who have learning disabilities. We see Tucker Sargent shredding on a snowboard; Tanner Skilton acing a downhill slalom course; Grace Kirpan showing off her cross-country running medals; and Emma Wade playing saxophone in the school’s jazz band.

We also hear Tucker describing life with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; Tanner talking about the world as seen by a person with dyslexia; Grace and her mom discussing their experiences with Down syndrome; and Emma explaining how she knew “something was wrong” even before she was diagnosed with specific learning disabilities.

BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE AND RHONDA THOMASON
ILLUSTRATION BY RUTH ROWLAND

And we hear, in their own words, how students feel about the labels applied to people with disabilities.

"I don't have a problem standing up for who I am," says Emma. "I'd rather do that than conform."

THEIR OWN STORIES

When they step out as public advocates for their rights, people with learning disabilities often find themselves facing an uphill battle.

Educators have known for some time that it's important to use "people first" language – using terms like "children with dyslexia" instead of "dyslexics." In the popular media, however, it's often the disability that is mentioned first. Most newspapers still use the blanket term "the disabled," which some people with disabilities find confining.

More importantly, it's often "experts" who are doing the talking in the media, rather than people with disabilities themselves. The focus is usually about the challenges and the struggles people with disabilities face – not their skills and talents. Sadly, many people still use "retarded" as an insult, or casually joke about having attention deficit disorder.

In September 2007, speech pathologist Maureen Charron-Shea sat down with a group of students at Harwood Union High School in Moretown, Vt., where she teaches. Some of the students in her group had learning disabilities, and some did not. Charron-Shea asked them all the same question: "What if students with disabilities told their own stories? Would they be treated differently? Would they be better understood?"

The students took it from there. They proposed making a documentary film, using members of their own group as subjects of the documentary. At first, Charron-Shea didn't realize the scope of their ambition.

"I didn't know what I was getting into at the time," she says. "I

thought, 'well, maybe we'll make a little five-minute film on my laptop or something.'"

Instead, she says, "the idea and the vision grew and grew."

Students spent an entire school year working on the project. They gave up lunch hours and study halls, and even came in after school to work on the film.

"Occasionally we did something called an in-school field trip, where students got permission to be released from their classes for a half-day or a whole day [researching and filming] in the library," Charron-Shea says. "The teachers and administrators of the school were very supportive."

The young filmmakers went out into the hallways of their school, to ask fellow students and teachers what they know about learning disabilities. And then they turned the cameras on themselves, exploring their own journeys toward an understanding that being different just means that you're... well, different.

"We see and hear and do things in our own way," Tanner says in the film.

'I DIDN'T KNOW WHO I WAS'

In the film, Tanner talks about his struggle for access to the same opportunities available to other students.

"I have dyslexia, so they wanted me to work on my English skills, on my grammar and my punctuation and all those other things, instead of French or instead of going to a library class or an art class," Tanner said. "I had to do other things."

Tanner says he gets frustrated about the beliefs people sometimes have about dyslexia. "I've looked it up on the Internet, and it's usually defined as 'difficulty reading and writing,'" he said. "That's not all. That's part of it."

For Tanner, having dyslexia means working a lot harder in some classes, devoting more time to his studies, and realizing that this situation will always be with him. But he doesn't consider himself "disabled" and he notes that his way of processing information can be a good thing.

"We do and see and hear things in our own way," he said.

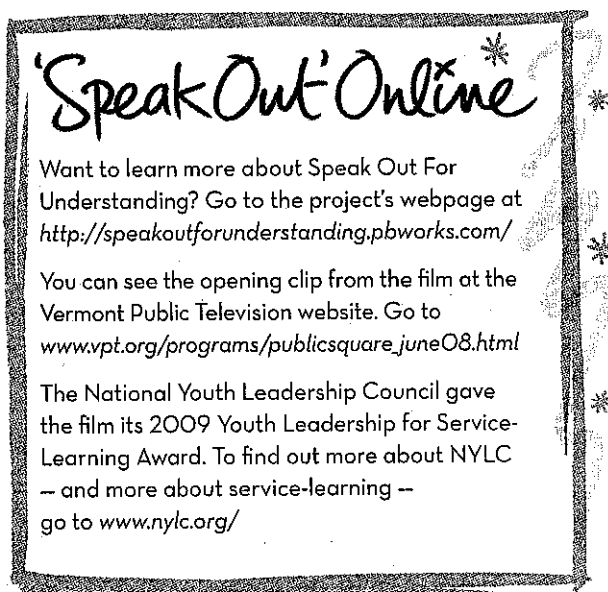
Emma talks about the self-discipline her schoolwork requires of her: the extra hours of study, the work after school and in study hall and her constant struggle with her own perfectionism. Emma's disability falls into the category of specific learning disabilities, or SLD – a broad category that includes a number of difficulties with fluency and auditory processing.

"I want to be able to get the work done," Emma says. "There's a certain quality that I have to reach, and if I can't do that, then that's very frustrating."

Tucker talks about his days as a "troublemaker" in elementary school, where he had trouble fitting in because of his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Tucker says he compensated by doing risky things and taking dares.

"I really didn't know who I was," he said.

Like all the students in the film, Tucker has come to terms with life in a school system where he is labeled as different



'Speak Out' Online

Want to learn more about Speak Out For Understanding? Go to the project's webpage at <http://speakoutforunderstanding.pbworks.com/>

You can see the opening clip from the film at the Vermont Public Television website. Go to www.vpt.org/programs/publicsquare_june08.html

The National Youth Leadership Council gave the film its 2009 Youth Leadership for Service-Learning Award. To find out more about NYLC – and more about service-learning – go to www.nylc.org/



from the "norm."

"It's used to categorize people, and it's saying 'oh, that person has a disability,'" says Tucker. "Everybody has their own disability."

THE OTHER SIDE

For Greg Sharrow, education director for the Vermont Folklife Center who worked with the students on the film, getting to this place of self-acceptance is the real point of the whole film project.

"One of the things that happened through this storytelling process was that we kind of got through to the other side," Sharrow said. "[We arrived] at a point in each of these young people's narratives where essentially they were talking about having achieved a sense of wholeness."

The interview process wasn't just about collecting information, Sharrow said. It was about helping students develop their own stories "until they arrived at a place of strength," he said.

"I've found that if you give children the language to talk about their learning and their challenges, then it's no longer so shameful; it's just the way it is," Sharrow said.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the students' new sense of self also leads them to speak out. Students with disabilities often live in a world of acronyms – ADD, IEP and so on. In their film, the Harwood students try to introduce their own acronym. The word "sofu" stands for "speak out for understanding," and the students urge viewers to do just that.

That advocacy pleases Charron-Shea. She notes that students with learning disabilities usually have Individualized Education Plans (IEP) that emphasize self-advocacy and an understanding of one's own learning style. The film project addressed those topics head-on.

Just as importantly, she says, the film project helped students develop a wide range of research skills and understandings about human rights, civil rights and social justice.

Speak Out for Understanding has developed a following outside the halls of Harwood Union High School. After the film's premiere at the school, Vermont Public Television picked up the story, broadcasting clips of the film and a group interview with the students. Soon, Charron-Shea was getting requests for copies of the film from teachers across the country. The project also caught the eye of the National Youth Leadership Council, which gave the project its 2009 Youth Leadership for Service-Learning Award.

Still, the best feedback has come from places much closer to home. At Harwood's commencement ceremony, a mother approached Charron-Shea and thanked her for the project, saying her son's participation in the film caused him to develop a real sense of caring for the people around him. "She said 'He's a different person now,'" Charron-Shea recalls. "And I just about started crying."

Charron-Shea's students are now finding new creative ways — like rap, wikis and visual art — to get out their message. Also in the works is a children's book that Charron-Shea's students hope to share with younger children to encourage self reflection and discovery of their own abilities.

Charron-Shea is happy that the film has found a wide audience, but she would much rather see schools doing similar work on their own.

"I'd like to see this project replicated because it is so powerful," she said. "It's the process, not the product. What's more powerful than engaging your own community in a conversation?"

INCLUSION ON THE BOOKSHELF

In fiction, children with disabilities are often still segregated, labeled, lonely and lost. These titles will help bring your school's library into the age of inclusion

BY CAMILLE JACKSON • ILLUSTRATION BY JESSE LEFKOWITZ

Dominic and Victor are two boys who do lots of fun things together. They make up stories about clouds, they go swimming, they tell each other ghost stories and they ride roller coasters together. Victor even cheers at Dominic's baseball games.

So begins the children's book, *My Pal, Victor/Mi Amigo, Victor* (Raven Tree Press, 2004). Written for new readers, the book shows us Victor through the eyes of his best friend Dominic. The illustrations suggest the boys are alike in every way. It isn't until the last page that we learn that the most important thing about Victor is that he accepts Dominic just the way he is. The two boys drape their arms across each other's shoulders and we see: Victor is in a wheelchair.

No big deal. The story is about friendship, not about Victor's wheelchair.

Books like *My Pal Victor* are all too rare in today's classroom. Three decades have passed since federal law mandated inclusion — ending, officially at least, a system that segregated students with disabilities from the rest of the student population. The publishing world has yet

to catch up. In children's books, characters with disabilities often inhabit their own separate world, where disability is the only story, and people are either heroes, victims or sidekicks.

Finding books that are disability-positive may take some digging, but it is worth the effort. Truly inclusive books serve to dispel stereotypes, prevent bullying and support students who are labeled "disabled."

"The reason to include socially inclusive books in the classroom is to educate everybody about everyone," said Patrick Schwarz, a diversity-in-learning professor at National-Louis University in Chicago and the author of *From Disability to Possibility*. "Prejudice is a learned behavior and the way to get away from it is through education and experience."

Students aren't the only ones who harbor prejudices. Teachers, too, often cling to misconceptions about the barriers to academic success for students with disabilities. A book with a positive message can welcome students who are hyper-aware of their difference — and foster a discussion that will set the record straight.

"Using stories of children with disabilities, both fiction and non-fiction,

is a strong strategy for helping children understand and consider disability as just another element of diversity," said Donna Bailey, an education consultant at the University of North Carolina's Center for Faculty Excellence.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 12 percent of people in this country have some sort of disability. With numbers like that, one would expect a strong market in books that depict disability in all its complexity.

But if you look at the bookshelves at a major book retailer, you might get a very different idea. Books about people with disabilities are often out of stock, improperly categorized or missing.

Few studies have been conducted to assess the availability of inclusive books on disability, but Canadian elementary school teacher Tracy Beck learned firsthand how hard the search for truly inclusive books could be. While researching a children's literature project for the Ontario Ministry of Education, she looked in libraries for books on disabilities. Only about one-fifth of the books she found contained messages that were inclusive.

"Many of the books were respectful, but not appropriate to sit and have story time about," said Beck, a graduate of the Ryerson School of Disability Studies.

Still, there are gems out there, if you know where to look. *Dad and Me in the Morning*, written by Patricia Lakin and illustrated by Robert C. Steele (Albert Whitman & Company, 1994) is a preschool tale about a tender father-son relationship. The son, Jacob, wakes early in the morning to a special alarm clock, puts in his hearing aids and sneaks into his father's room to wake him. Together they go to their special place and watch the sun rise over the lake near their home. The two use American Sign Language, but also communicate in other ways, "lip reading or just squeezing each other's hands."

When choosing books for younger

children, Beck advises, teachers should pay close attention to illustrations, to make sure the images don't reinforce stereotypes. The simple illustrations in *Susan Laughs* by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross (Red Fox, 2001) show an active Susan doing anything any other child can do. She sings, paints, throws, plays a trick on her grandmother, gets mad at her cat and rides a swing with her father. As in *My Pal Victor*, it is not until the last page that we learn Susan is in a wheelchair. The book is about Susan's personality and interests, not about her disability.

All the characters in a book should be presented as individuals with unique gifts and talents, as well as challenges, Beck says. Students need to see characters with disabilities holding culturally valued positions and engaging in age-appropriate activities, she says.

The title character Brian in *Brian's Bird* by Patricia Davis (Shen's Books, 2000) has a visual impairment. He uses his fingers to figure out his birthday present, a pet parakeet. Then, to his family's surprise, he teaches the bird to talk. When the parakeet escapes through an open door, Brian works with his brother Kevin to coax the bird from a nearby tree.

According to Beck, readers "shouldn't feel that the moral of the story has anything to do with disability." Still, when a disability is presented as just one of the challenges faced by a multifaceted character, students with disabilities may find a kindred spirit. In *Niagara Falls, Or Does It?* (Grosset & Dunlap,

2003) actor Henry Winkler and co-author Lin Oliver introduce us to Hank Zipzer, a fourth-grader with all the likability and resourcefulness of the best of children's-book heroes. Like so many characters in children's literature, Hank finds himself getting into all sorts of scrapes and misunderstandings in school. His dilemmas are often caused by the fact that he has dyslexia. He works his way out of his problems with pluck and creativity.

The 14-book Hank Zipzer series was based largely on Winkler's own experiences growing up with dyslexia. Experts say it's always a good idea to keep the author's perspective in mind when choosing books about disability. Does the writer have any personal experience with the topic?

In *Do You Remember the Color Blue: The Questions Children Ask About Blindness* (Viking Juvenile, 2000), the author Sally Hobart Alexander answers frequently asked questions about blindness. Alexander, who lost her sight at age 26, travels around the country giving talks at schools about her experience with blindness. She answers the practical questions — *how do you know what's in the fridge when you're hungry?* — and the philosophical ones — *is it better to be blind or Deaf?* Alexander's experience with blindness gives her authority.

Focusing on disability in this way might not be appropriate for students in earlier grades — who need to learn to see the person first, not the disability. But by middle school, experts say, kids want

BOOKS ON DISABILITY What to Look For

Are disabilities highlighted? When disability is the main theme of a book — or the only theme — the individuality, abilities and accomplishments of people with disabilities can be lost.

Disability as sickness Does the book suggest that there is something "wrong" with a character with a disability? Select books in which the characters are people, not problems to be "fixed."

Look at the illustrations Are people with disabilities portrayed as doers, thinkers and makers of things? Do they have social lives? Or are characters with disabilities shown as isolated and victimized?

People-first language As a general rule, choose books that identify people with disabilities as just that — people with disabilities. "People" should come first, descriptors like "with dyslexia" should come after. There are some exceptions, most notably people who embrace Deaf culture and are happy to be described as "Deaf people."

Tokenism Are characters with disabilities recognizable as individuals, or are they two-dimensional sidekicks?

Empowerment Is the character with a disability active and independent, or sick and in need of help?

BOOKS YOU NEED TO READ

Students aren't the only people who need to learn more about disabilities. Teachers' attitudes do much to create the classroom climate. Historically, the literature on disability in the classroom hasn't included many voices of people with disabilities. Here are a few titles that might bring a fresh approach to your own classroom practice.

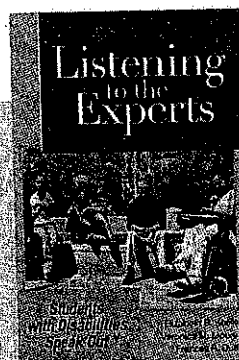
Listening to the Experts: Students with Disabilities Speak Out, edited by Elizabeth B. Keefe, Veronica M. Moore, and Frances R. Duff, with a Forward by Douglas Fisher, 2006. Composed of essays by students with disabilities, and their parents, peers and educators, this book offers insights on how to make true inclusion a reality in your classroom. \$22.95

ISBN# 978-1557668363

Brookes Publishing

1-800-638-3775

www.brookespublishing.com



to know more about the practical aspects of life with a disability. In particular, they want to know how to establish and maintain relationships with friends and relatives who have a disability.

Middle school children often develop an acute sense of embarrassment about their relatives — and relatives with disability are no exception. In *The Man Who Loved Clowns* by June Rae Wood (Hyperion, 1995), we meet 13-year-old loner Delrita Jensen, who loves, but can't stand to be seen with, her uncle Punky Holloway. Punky is a complex and well-developed character who has Down syndrome, and Delrita must come to grips with her feelings about all the facets of his personality. Cynthia Lord strikes a similar tone in *Rules* (Scholastic Paperbacks, 2008) in which a younger brother with autism becomes an annoyance to his older sister. He is, after all, a younger brother.

Teachers should choose books that depict children with disabilities as empowered with “no negative value judgments implied,” according to the educators at the University of Kansas Circle of Inclusion Project. The illustrations and text should offer genuine insights into another person, these experts say.

One good example is Josie, a 13-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, who appears in a series of free-verse poems in Tracie Vaughn Zimmer's *Reaching For Sun* (Bloomsbury USA, 2007). Josie feels embarrassed to be in special education classes, and

her home is on a grim patch of land being bulldozed for new development. But when an inquisitive, lonely boy moves in next door, she finds a true friend. Josie's cerebral palsy is not treated as a medical condition to be “fixed,” and the book does not highlight her difference, but instead draws on the similarities she shares with other teens struggling with social isolation.

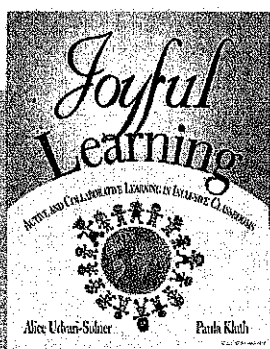
When a person with a disability writes a memoir, the public expects a story of perseverance and patience. For the classroom, it's important to get outside that box — selecting books that show the intelligence and creativity of the writer. One good example is Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Vintage, 1998). Bauby was the editor-in-chief of French *Elle* when he suffered a rare stroke that left only his left eye functioning. By blinking, Bauby used his left eye to patiently dictate this book. In it, he describes life with “locked-in” syndrome, but also the grand and adventurous life of his imagination. Ultimately, it's Bauby's deft writing that comes to the fore.

The lives of children with disabilities are adventurous, funny, romantic and active. There are many books available that contain characters with disabilities, but few that truly embrace social inclusion. The real story is so much more compelling than the stereotypes: if you dig deep and ask the right questions, you can find books that bring the real story to your students. •



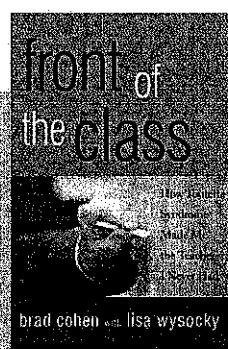
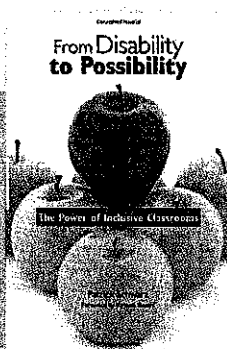
Disability Awareness in the Classroom: A Resource Tool for Teachers and Students, by Lorie Levison and Isabelle St. Onge, 1999. Worth the price, this book comes with a set of photographic cards that serve as talking points, allowing classes to get over their social discomfort in talking about disability. \$45.95
ISBN# 978-0398069537
Charles C. Thomas Publisher
(800) 258-8980
www.ccthomas.com

Joyful Learning: Active and Collaborative Learning in Inclusive Classrooms, by Alice Udvari-Solner and



Paula Kluth, 2007. Includes 50 different active learning structures, with examples, and provides a range of adaptations for students who may have movement, sensory, learning and cultural differences. \$30.95
ISBN# 978-1412941747
Corwin Press
800-233-9936
www.corwinpress.com

From Disability to Possibility: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms, by Patrick Schwarz, 2006. Starting with a redefinition of his subject — he calls it *possibility studies* — the author lays out a framework for giving all students the support



they deserve. \$21.25
ISBN# 978-0325009933
Heinemann
(800) 225-5800
www.heinemann.com

Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had, by Brad Cohen with Lisa Wysocky, with a Foreword by Jim Eisenreich, 2008. An award-winning grade school teacher describes how he maintained a positive attitude growing up with Tourette syndrome. \$13.95
ISBN# 978-0312571399
St. Martin's Griffin
www.stmartins.com

The fact that 18-year-old Kevin Laue's left arm ends at the elbow hasn't kept him on the sidelines. Playing for Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia, the 6-foot-10-inch college basketball prospect from California palms the ball with his right hand, and uses his short left arm as a clamp after catching passes. When he catches passes on the perimeter, Laue holds the ball away from his head; the way a water polo player readies a shot; on defense, he uses his nub to maintain contact with his opponent's back.

When Laue was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped twice around his neck, with his left arm wedged in between. The arm's circulation was cut off, severely stunting its growth, but its position had allowed blood to reach his brain.

"I think I got pretty lucky," says Laue. "My arm saved my life."

KEVIN LAUE TAKES HIS SHOT

AN 18-YEAR-
OLD'S
DISABILITY
HASN'T
STOPPED
HIM FROM
BECOMING
A COLLEGE
BASKETBALL
PROSPECT

BY ADAM
HIMMELSBACH
IN FORK UNION,
VIRGINIA

Laue's parents didn't coddle him. They bought him sneakers with laces and pants with buttons. And they signed him up for Little League, where he swung the bat like a polo mallet. When classmates asked about his arm, Laue said it had been devoured by a shark while he was surfing in Hawaii.

Laue made the varsity basketball team as a junior at Amador Valley High School in Pleasanton, Calif. But a broken leg cost him most of his senior season as well as his chances of being noticed by college coaches. So he enrolled at Fork Union for a postgraduate year, giving him a chance to play against tougher competition, and a chance to be seen.

Fork Union's basketball coach, Fletcher Arritt, says he often forgets that Laue is missing a hand. This season, Laue is averaging 6.9 points and 7.4 rebounds, helping Fork Union to a 7-3 record. The team plays against other prep schools that are filled with college recruits, as well as JV college teams.

Laue says he has received recruiting letters from Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., and Emory University in Atlanta, both in Division III. But he still hopes to play for an Ivy League university.

Arritt, who has sent more than 150 of his players on to N.C.A.A. Division I teams, says Laue should be a good prospect: "I genuinely don't think you can make a mistake with him." ●

Adam Himmelsbach covers sports for The New York Times.

I'M SMART IN A DIFFERENT WAY

BY MICHAEL ARNOLD

Down Syndrome is a "chromosomal anomaly." That means my chromosomes made a mistake when I was being made that caused a "structural" difference in my cells. Structure is the way something is made. The number of my chromosomes is different. The way they are put together in my cells is different from most other people's.

When I was born, the doctors thought I had Down Syndrome. I didn't have enough "traits" or "characteristics" for them to just look at me and tell for sure. They had to conduct a "cytogenetic investigation." That means a scientific study of cells from my blood. The doctors did a special study called a "karotype" of the chromosomes in my cells. Blood was taken from my foot to do the test. The test was done the day after I was born and still in the hospital. It took three weeks for the test answers to come back.

When chromosomes from my mom and dad came together to make me, a normal chromosome broke. The broken piece moved and stuck onto another chromosome. No one knows why. This is rare and doctors called it "spontaneous translocation." So in my cells, I have a short chromosome and the long one with the extra piece stuck on it. That is why I have Down Syndrome.

Besides my cell structure, and a few quirks we all have, I am just like everyone else! I go to school, like sports, have feelings, have different interests and things I like to do, and have lots of friends. I have some things that I need help with. I learn differently than some people do, but I am able to learn many things.

Sometimes it takes me longer to process incoming information, form my thoughts, and communicate with you. If you have introduced yourself and I know you, I don't forget who you are. Sometimes I know you because I have seen you but don't know your name. I have a great memory and will remember you! So when you see



Michael and his mom, Linda, advise straight talk on special needs.

me, don't think that I don't know who you are. Tell me "Hi" and I'll do my best to answer you! I want to be friendly! Sometimes I look away from you so I can concentrate and process what you've said to me. It doesn't mean I'm not interested or don't understand. That kind of frustrates me.

I am bashful, quiet and don't talk much unless I am very comfortable. I have a large tongue because of Down Syndrome. That makes it harder for me, than most people, to breathe and talk clearly. That's probably one reason I don't talk much. I'm afraid you won't understand me, might ask me to repeat what I said, or might make fun of me. It's frustrating, so I just don't talk a lot. Some people confuse "not talking much" with "not knowing very much." That isn't true. I know a lot!

I try to do many different things, so I am very brave. I'm in your class, aren't I? When I'm in regular classes, I learn about the subject. Also, I learn how to fit into the mainstream of life with you.

When I'm learning things or taking directions, it's easier for me if information is broken into basic tasks or chunks. Getting the answer or information back to you takes me a little longer. So sometimes it's helpful if there are different ways for me to do these things. That could mean talking, pointing, drawing, locating and showing things, selecting items or answers, or many other ways.

It frustrates me because some people think that

I don't know or understand things when I do. I'm smart, too, but maybe in a different way. We just need to figure out easier ways for us to talk!

So remember my report the next time you meet or see someone who isn't like you. Everyone is different. We are all unique individuals. No two are the same. God made us that way so we would have variety and be more interesting! ●

"Besides my cell structure, and a few quirks we all have, I am just like everyone else!"

Michael Arnold is a 19-year-old Oklahoma City high school student with Down Syndrome. His mother, Linda Arnold, helped him compose this report to share with classmates and teachers. As a member of the Respect Diversity Foundation's speakers bureau, Linda offers teacher/parent seminars on adapting curriculum and understanding the rights of those with special needs.

IN FOCUS

I Wish They'd Ask

by Joan Korenblit

As an itinerant writing consultant, I have the opportunity to teach in many schools. I've observed that students who have special needs often eat their lunches together, stay in the same part of the room when mainstreamed, even remain segregated when there is an assembly or a sports event, seemingly invisible to other students.

One day at the Dolphins' Special Olympic swim practice in Oklahoma City, Michael Arnold proudly handed me a copy of "My Special Chromosomes" and said, "I wrote this with my Mom." After perusing this thought-provoking essay, I explained that I'd like to share it with my writing students. Michael smiled his "okay."

The next day I selected a student to read "My Special Chromosomes" to my first-hour writing workshop.

"Wow, he sounds just like me — a regular guy who likes sports," a basketball player observed.

"I can really relate," said an 8th grade girl.

"When I first got my braces, I didn't talk much or smile. I think some people probably thought that I was not being friendly, but I felt shy."

When someone used the term "mentally retarded" in our discussion, I explained that

many people now prefer "special needs" or "differently abled." One student said, "I'm not good at football, but there's no term that labels me. Why do we need to label at all?"

The participants in my next class included Susan and Joey, two students with cerebral palsy, who use wheelchairs and regularly participate in Special Olympics. This time, I read Michael's essay myself. Susan raised her hand and said, "I really understand how Michael feels. I don't like it when people stare at me. If they're curious about why I'm in a wheelchair, I wish they'd ask me."

Joey added, "Lots of people act like I don't exist. They're probably trying not to stare and be rude, but I'd rather they smiled and talked to me."

Another student then explained, "When I don't look at someone in a wheelchair, it's because I don't know what to say."

"Just say what you would to anyone else," Joey explained. "I may not be able to walk or use my hands as easily, but I still have the same interests and feelings and thoughts as you."

After more discussion, the students eagerly wrote in their journals. I then asked them to divide into groups and invited them to share their journal entries. They always have the option to pass, but this time no one did.

Joan Korenblit is co-founder of the Respect Diversity Foundation, P.O. Box 5155, Edmond, Okla. 73083; www.respectdiversity.org.

Peeling Back the Labels

A child's ADHD diagnosis raises one parent's concerns about the stereotypes that too often surround the disorder

BY DANA WILLIAMS

I SUSPECTED IT BEFORE HE'D EVEN COMPLETED THE 1ST grade, long before the doctor announced the diagnosis. The stressful afternoons during which 30-minutes worth of homework morphed into two hours as my son flipped cartwheels or ran around the table to expend energy between math problems. The notes a half dozen teachers sent home about him squirming and fidgeting in his seat or blurting out answers. The directions I had to repeat over and over just to make sure he put away his backpack, took a bath and picked an outfit for the next day. Year after year, I had hoped these problems would disappear, but they now seemed to be getting worse and interfering with his schoolwork.

It was his 4th-grade teacher who persuaded me to have my son evaluated for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) last year. Other teachers had made the suggestion before, but because my son always performed so well academically, I didn't feel compelled to act upon their recommendations. Now, however, he seemed to struggle mightily to earn those same good grades, and his confidence suffered in the process.

Wanting to make sure my child was not counted among the misdiagnosed, I sought three opinions. Sure enough, a pediatrician, psychiatrist and a psychologist each arrived at the same conclusion: my son had ADHD.

MISINFORMATION LABELS, STIGMA

Finally, I had a clear explanation for the internal chaos that seemed to be holding my son hostage — and exhausting his teachers and me in the process. But as discussions about treatment ensued, it wasn't long before I noticed the judgments coming from friends and family. And it wasn't long before I recognized that yet another label had been added to my son's identity.

The ADHD diagnosis would provide the world with one more lens through which to view him. For too many, that lens can be extremely biased. Even with so many children today diagnosed with ADHD, misinformation surrounds the behavioral disorder and treatments for it. One of the more pervasive beliefs is that parents

who choose to treat their children's ADHD with medications to control the disorder are simply taking the "easy" or "lazy" way out.

While I'm aware that young people are routinely stereotyped based on a myriad of real or perceived differences,

I do worry about how my son's diagnosis will shift others' expectations of and responses to him. He and I have already dealt with the labels that come with his being a young black male, private-school-educated, reared by a single mom.

The results of a four-part study published in the May 2007 issue of *Psychiatric Services* suggest that my concerns are not unfounded. Conducted by researchers at Indiana University and Columbia University, the study examined Americans' views of children with mental health conditions such as ADHD. The results showed that large numbers of Americans believe children with ADHD are "dangerous to others," that rejection at school is a likely consequence of getting treatment, and that medications used to treat ADHD "turn kids into zombies."

Responses like these are enough to make many parents shameful and reluctant to openly discuss their child's condition. In some communities, such responses are enough to discourage parents from even seeking diagnosis or treatment. The consequent negative impacts on the way children with ADHD see themselves are compounded.

EDUCATING OURSELVES AND OUR CHILDREN

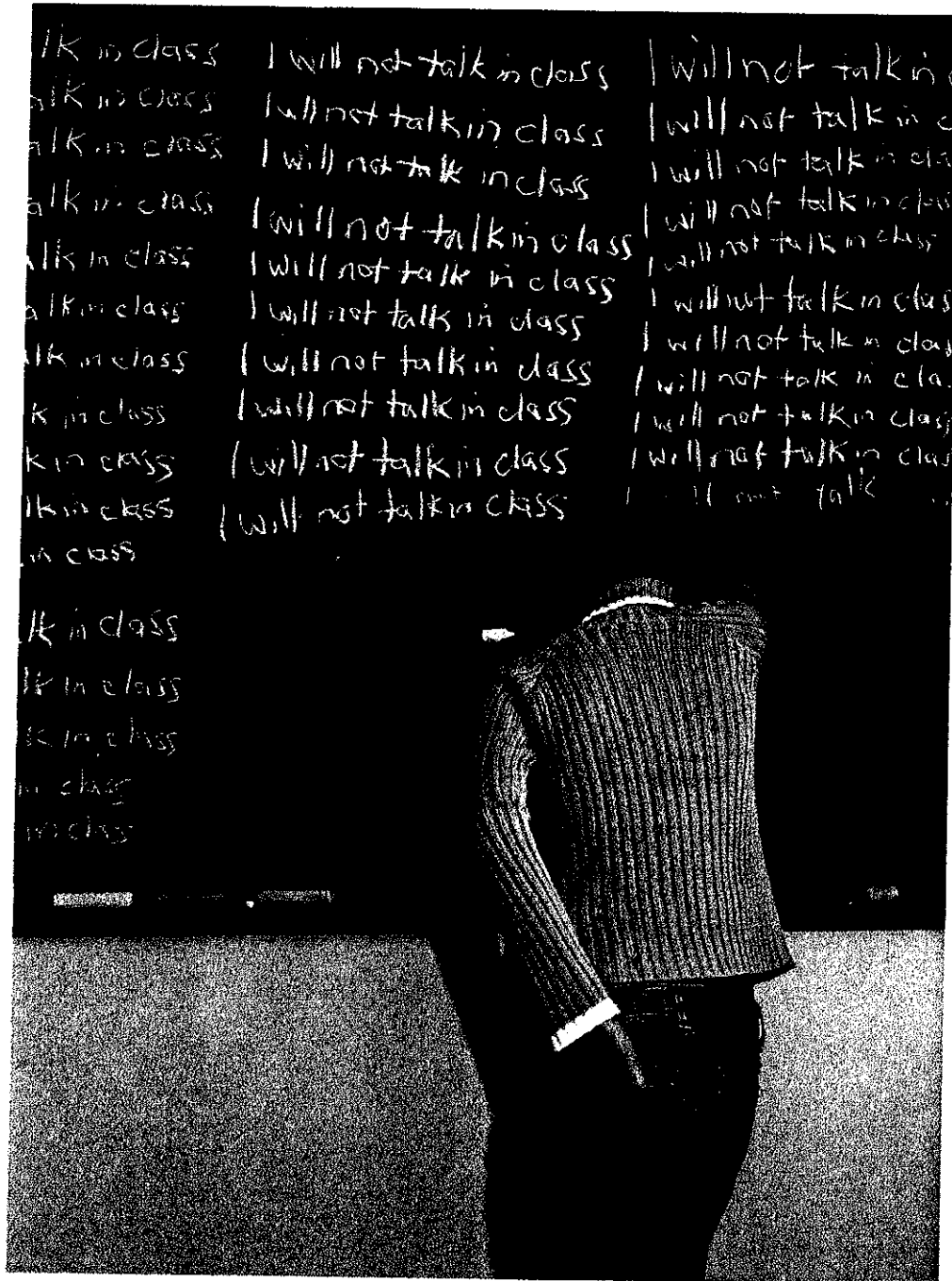
While admittedly concerned about how others would view my son's ADHD — and how they would view my response to the issue — I realized that allowing other people's biases to keep me from pursuing all available treatments to help my child was simply not an option.

New research shows that nearly nine percent of American children — approximately 2.4 million between the ages of eight and 15 — meet medical diagnostic criteria for ADHD, while fewer than half receive a diagnosis or treatment. And of those who are identified, only 32 percent are getting proper care.

In consultation with my child's doctors, I decided to pur-

PARENTING

A take-home lesson
for students' families



sue a course that included nonstimulant medication and behavior modification consisting of a highly coordinated system of limits, expectations, rewards and consequences. It included both home and school. For example, a weekly token system helps him stay on task by motivating him to earn good behavior cards each day that he remains focused, finishes all of his class assignments and follows classroom

rules. At the end of the week he trades in the cards for perks like extra basketball court time or a trip out for ice cream. I also provided my son with several tools such as colored reading strips and color-coded papers to help him keep his focus during schoolwork. And, as always, I seize every opportunity to remind my son how bright, capable and special he is.

Because most biases and stereotypes

are born of ignorance and misinformation, it's important that we as parents and educators do our part to educate ourselves — and our children — about differences such as mental health conditions and the treatments that exist for them.

My hope is that through increased awareness and honest discussion, others will learn to see all children — including my own — not as “labels” but as unique individuals with unlimited potential.

Since getting my son's diagnosis and pursuing the treatment his doctors recommended, I've seen a noticeable change. I'm no longer chasing my son around the kitchen table between math problems or helplessly watching him struggle through assignments he's always been more than capable of completing with ease. I have seen his confidence and

self-esteem rebound. To me, he's the same boy as ever — gifted, witty and precocious. He happens to have ADHD. •

Dana Williams is the Parenting columnist for Tolerance.org. Read her columns at www.tolerance.org; click on “For Parents.” E-mail her at parents@tolerance.org

“Does This Child Have a Friend?”

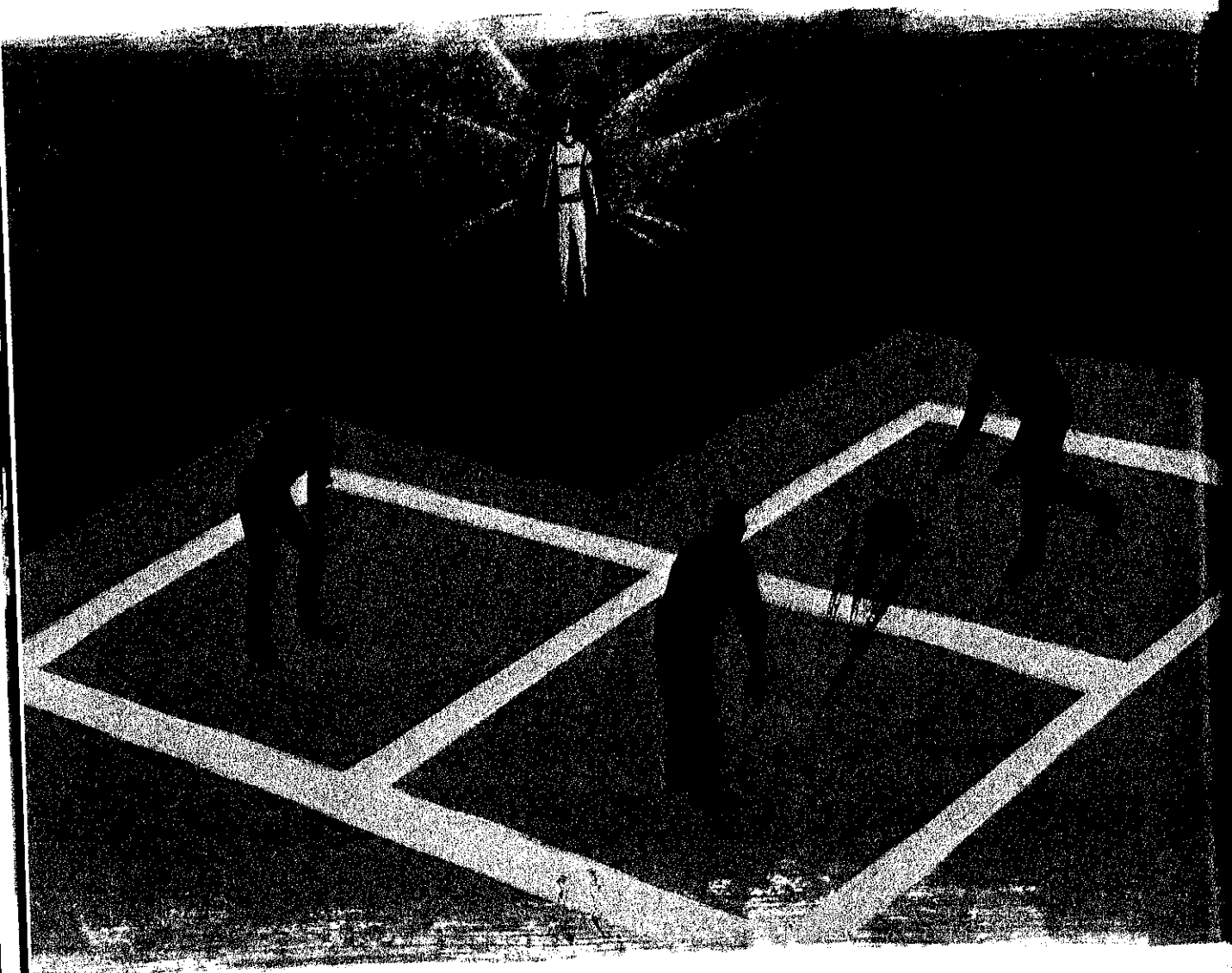
Segregated into separate classrooms for much of the day, left out at gym, not invited to the weekend slumber party — by middle school, students with disabilities can face overwhelming peer exclusion, even in schools with inclusive classrooms. Innovative social inclusion programs are turning the tide, reducing the social isolation of students with disabilities, ending harassment and stereotyping, and improving life opportunities.

BY MARY M. HARRISON • ILLUSTRATION BY DON KILPATRICK

Laughing and snapping pictures, students make their way around tables in the noisy, crowded rooms at Margarita's Mexican Grill in Santa Clarita, Calif. They stop to talk to friends, as well as the teachers and administrators who have joined them for dinner this Wednesday evening. The 40 or so students, from junior and senior high schools in the William S. Hart Union High School District, are participants in a program called “Yes I Can.”

J.J., a sophomore with brown hair falling over his ears, stops to hug the district's speech and language specialist. He pauses to mug for a photo with Elliot, another sophomore, whose smile stretches across his face. Spying other friends at tables across the room, J.J. takes off. “I'm loving this!” he calls out.

The dinner at Margarita's helps raise funds for the students' year-end rock concert. But the outing has another purpose — to give students with and without disabilities a chance to have a good time together. About half the students here tonight have a significant disability that in the past has isolated them, socially and sometimes physically, from their peers. J.J. has a form of autism called Asperger's syndrome, sometimes more problematic because it is unnoticeable in appearance.



Emily Iland is one of many parents here tonight, laughing and talking among themselves. Iland's son Tom, now a college student, also has Asperger's syndrome. In 2001, hoping to alleviate the harassment and social isolation Tom had experienced, Iland helped to bring the Yes I Can program to the Hart district. (See "Case Study," p. 29.)

Iland says parents understand the effects of social isolation at school — the often total absence of phone calls from classmates and activities with peers — in ways that teachers often cannot. At gatherings like the one at Margarita's, she says, "It's such a relief to see your kid happy, accepted, part of the group."

THE CAUSES AND THE COSTS

Social isolation and the harassment of students with disabilities are closely related problems that occur in schools throughout the country. Often, both problems begin in middle school, as children's elementary school friends fade from the picture.

Developmentally, says Martha Snell, a professor of education at the University of Virginia, middle school students possess

the tendency to mock differences, whether racial, economic or ability-related. As a result, Snell says, "you can predict that a person with a disability will be made fun of unless there are some things in those kids' lives to counter that, to say this is not a good thing."

Social isolation and harassment can feed each other — without meaningful interaction with students with disabilities, other students are more likely to make hurtful remarks based on stereotypes. In return, faced with the threat of being teased, students with disabilities are less likely to assert themselves. Without deliberate interventions, the cycle can be never-ending — sometimes with extreme personal and academic consequences.

If not addressed, social isolation can deprive students of important social skills needed for post-secondary school, jobs and happy lives — skills most other students pick up naturally as they enjoy give-and-take with peers. And harassment and loneliness undoubtedly contribute to a dropout rate that is double that of students without disabilities.

Students without disabilities lose out, too, when their peers remain isolated: They become more likely to absorb the stereotypes and fears about people with disabilities that pervade American society, and they miss opportunities to learn new perspectives from people with different life experiences.

Barbara Trader is the executive director of TASH, an international disability advocacy association at the forefront of social inclusion efforts. Trader believes that one of the most destructive attitudes in society is that people with disabilities are somehow less — less human, less likely to be aware of what's going on around them, less sensitive.

"Until a person establishes a personal relationship with another person who has a disability, they don't understand how wrong that is, how mean-spirited, how prejudicial," Trader says.

INCLUSION MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Many schools use inclusive classrooms — the placement of students with disabilities in general education classes — as a tool for integrating students into the school community. This is a good first step. Fewer schools, though, offer social inclusion efforts in or beyond the classroom.

Yet disability experts agree that informal interaction between students with and without disabilities is a necessary antidote to isolation and teasing.

Some school districts are taking heed, creating programs so students with and without disabilities can spend casual time together as peers, sharing common interests and socializing.

Called social inclusion programs, these efforts vary in design and structure, but the most successful programs reflect best practices identified by disability experts:

- opportunities for fun activities in relaxed settings outside of the classroom;
- one-on-one relationships between students with and without disabilities, based on equality and common interests;
- school-wide effort to promote respect for differences among all students — not a project relegated only to one class;
- expectations that young people with disabilities will express everything they need to engage in activities and that their needs will be met;
- discussions about disabilities that dispel myths and stereotypes;
- continuation of relationships/program involvement for a full school year.

In a twist that seems equally ironic and hopeful, young teens — the age group most likely to bully mercilessly — often seem the most enthusiastic about participating in social inclusion programs.

At Palmetto Middle School in Williamston, S.C., for example, teacher Jennifer Dorriety introduced an inclusion program called Gym Friends last fall (See "Case Study," p. 30). Seventy-five students volunteered — far more than she had expected. Fifty more volunteers have since asked to be included.

Recently, one of the 6th-grade participants encountered a group of 8th graders making snide remarks to a student with

CASE STUDY

CALIFORNIA

Yes I Can

In the mid-1990s, after parents in Minnesota begged for help for their teens' social isolation, staff at the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota developed the Yes I Can Social Inclusion Curriculum. Today, the program is used in secondary schools across the country as a class for credit, an after-school program or a part of service-learning initiatives.

In Santa Clarita, Calif., the 20-lesson curriculum helps students with and without disabilities get to know one another, learn specifics about disabilities and the misconceptions that surround them, learn communication and friendship skills, and work as teams to identify and eliminate barriers to inclusion in their schools and communities.

The students pair up, based on common interests, and plan activities outside of class. A student with strong social skills, with or without a disability, takes the role of mentor. A student who wants to build social skills, usually a student with a disability, is the partner.

At West Ranch High School, freshman Evan calls himself a "Yes I Can success story" whose grades went from straight F's to straight A's through the boost in confidence and new interest in school he received from mentors.

"Mentors give us a reason to come to school," Evan says. "We know when we come that we'll have some friends here. (They) accept us for the person we are. They always have our back."



a disability in the boys' bathroom. The 6th grader put a quick stop to it by saying, "You wouldn't treat your friends that way, and I don't like when you treat my friend that way." Then he walked the student back to Dorriety's classroom and explained what had happened.

Snell, the education professor, isn't surprised by the response of students at Palmetto. She says intervention with students in middle school can affect rapid change — especially when it involves doing things that are novel and fun.

A positive experience, which Snell calls "the biggest antidote to bullying," can cause middle school students to cease bullying and quickly turn into advocates, she says. "And from then on," she adds with a laugh, "they can almost get into fights as defenders."

Social inclusion programs can have spillover effects, too, slowly changing attitudes not just among participating students, but challenging the climate of the entire school. Aileen, a senior at St. Paul, Minn.'s private Cretin-Derham Hall, participates in the school's Friendship Club program. (See "Case Study," p. 31)

Her experience has made her reflect on peers' use of words like "retarded" as commonplace put-downs.

"At one point in life, I threw it around, as well," Aileen says. "But now, (with) my friends, I say, 'Hey, use a different word. You're taking something that's bothersome to you and putting a word to it that describes people. And they're my friends.'"

CASE STUDY

SOUTH CAROLINA

Gym Friends

At Palmetto Middle School in Williamston, S.C., special education teacher Jennifer Dorriety noticed how other students would smirk or giggle at her students' appearance when she walked them to the cafeteria.

Dorriety knew that the five students in her self-contained classroom, who have intellectual disabilities and mostly non-verbal communication skills, had gifts and talents to share with others.

"I don't want people to feel sorry for my kids," Dorriety says. "I want them to understand the disabilities and the limitations they may have and adapt their dealings to (those). But I also want people to know that (my students) are more than somebody who just needs to be taken care of."

Hoping to achieve those goals and reduce the teasing, and with the help of a Teaching Tolerance grant, Dorriety launched a program called Gym Friends. The idea is pretty simple: student volunteers spend their after-lunch recess in the gym,

ONE PASSIONATE TEACHER

People with disabilities have experienced a long history of exclusion from public schools. Prior to 1975, states could lawfully refuse to serve students with disabilities. That year, when Congress passed the first law guaranteeing an education to students with disabilities, an estimated one million students were being left out of the public education system.

The landmark law, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act, mandates a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities, with an emphasis on inclusive classrooms.

Yet in 2000, a report to Congress showed that less than half of all students with disabilities experienced inclusive classroom settings for 80 percent or more of each school day. The rates for students with significant disabilities were much lower.

Experts say the No Child Left Behind Act's emphasis on testing has compounded the classroom isolation. Expensive testing means social programs are put on the back burner in many schools.



helping the school's 22 students with disabilities enjoy new sports.

The whole group interacts, but Dorriety also partners each of her students one-on-one with a volunteer, to deepen the peer-to-peer understanding.

The program's impact has spread beyond the students involved, Dorriety says. Volunteers have taken steps to challenge and change attitudes of peers not involved in the program. Most of all, it's hard not to notice the high-fives and hugs — not smirks — her students now receive in the halls and cafeteria.

"Right now, no one is asking the question, 'Does this child have a friend?'" says Brian Abery, who helped developed the Yes I Can curriculum. "Research clearly suggests that for kids with significant disabilities, an ability to develop lasting friendships and a close circle of support has a lot more to do with their success later in life than how well they can balance a checkbook."

In this environment, how can social inclusion programs get off the ground?

Aberly advises starting small and being flexible. If one passionate teacher gains the support of administrators, he says, "the program will sell itself." ♦

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WEB EXCLUSIVES

Inclusion Made the Difference—Counselor Helene McGlaufflin shares her elementary school's successful approach.

Language Matters—Why does Teaching Tolerance use the term "students with disabilities" instead of "disabled students"? Why should you? This fact sheet on people-first language explains.

Visit www.teachingtolerance.org/magazine click "Does This Child Have a Friend?"

CASE STUDY

MINNESOTA

Friendship Clubs

Math teacher Paul Nyberg, whose sister, now deceased, had Down syndrome, was concerned that students at his private Catholic school, Cretin-Derham Hall in St. Paul, Minn., had few opportunities to get to know peers with significant disabilities.

After speaking with his principal, Nyberg reached out to parent Pat Leseman. Two of her sons attended Cretin-Derham, while a third son, who had developmental disabilities, attended a nearby public school.

The timing was perfect: Leseman and another Cretin-Derham mother, Rosemary Fagrelus, had recently formed a new community organization, the Highland Friendship Club, to provide much-needed summer recreation opportunities for their sons and other young people with disabilities.

Now that school had started, their club wanted to socialize with students without disabilities, and they needed a place to meet.

The Cretin-Derham Hall Friendship Club was launched a year later, and, today, it meets frequently with the Highland

RESOURCES

The *Yes I Can Social Inclusion Curriculum for Students With and Without Disabilities* (\$49) is a yearlong, 20-lesson curriculum that fosters the social inclusion of secondary students with disabilities in their schools and communities. Instructions for use are included; on-site training and follow-up by program staff also is available.

The Institute on Community Integration is seeking schools to pilot a related service-learning program for elementary, middle and high schools. **Yes I Can Program**
Institute on Community Integration
University of Minnesota
www.ici.umn.edu/yesican

TASH (formerly The Association for the Severely Handicapped) is an international membership organization of people working to build inclusive communities through research, education and advocacy. TASH offers professional development to educators and publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*.
www.tash.org

Easters Seals offers a wealth of information that could be used in social inclusion programs, including "Understanding Disability," "Myths and Facts about People with Disabilities," and "Friends Who Care."
www.easterseals.com

Teaching Tolerance offers grants (up to \$2,500) to help educators develop and implement innovative on-site projects in their classrooms and schools.
www.teachingtolerance.org/grants

club for art and music classes and other activities. Together, the groups host an annual interdenominational spiritual retreat and a dance. During basketball season, they meet for pizza and go to games together.

The partnership gives Highland club members the opportunity "to do what every other high school student does on Friday and Saturday night," Fagrelus says. "It's a godsend for our whole community."