

A Narrative Enquiry into the Educational Assistant's Perspective:  
Power Relations and Discourse in Inclusive Education

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Educational assistants facilitate inclusion by providing support for students with special needs. This thesis examines the structures and social environment in which educational assistants work, exploring the power dynamics affecting their role, and analyzing the discursive practices of historical documents, current policy, and research literature. These power relations, viewed through lenses of critical theory and deconstruction, come into focus as oppressive forces acting on educational assistants.

A narrative, crafted as a research fiction, explores these issues, and sheds light on the barriers which limit the contributions of educational assistants. My research suggests the educational community would benefit from exploring ways to grow beyond the limitations it imposes on educational assistants and to progress towards more collaborative relationships.

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## **Chapter I: Purpose and Audience**

The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the life experiences of Prince Edward Island educational assistants (EA). My goal in this project is to influence the practice of inclusive education in Prince Edward Island by identifying the limitations in the structures and assumptions of current practice, and by making recommendations for change in the status and treatment of educational assistants. The naming of limitations may help to emancipate the inclusive education community from some of its invisible constraints, and improve the quality of educational life for students with special needs. In order for this thesis to fully evoke the issues involved and have the potential to provoke change, the form has to be as accessible as possible. We construct our educational facilities with push button operated doors; we install chair lifts, and ramps, and sound systems, and provide whatever other support is needed to make our buildings usable to all, and we are mandated by law to do so. Following the same principle, I see as paradoxical the creation of educational research which is presented only in academic rhetoric and is accessible only to an elite few. The time, energy, and money I put into writing this thesis, and that which the academy puts into supporting me, are not well invested if only a few people read it. I intend to take a modified approach, to push against the edges of traditional thesis form so as to reach a wider audience, in particular educational assistants and parents of children with special educational needs. The requirement to present complex issues with balance and depth, in other words to be scholastically rigorous, will not rule out for me the use of form, voice, material, and literary devices which are outside the norm in educational research. The final section of this thesis will be a “research fiction” which is intended to be accessible to a wider audience as well as the academic reader.

The creation of a teacher normally requires 18 years of immersion in formal education before legitimate professional status is granted; the creation of an educational researcher almost always takes a minimum of an additional two years experience beyond this. What this means to educational research is that its practitioners may be so deeply habituated to the processes and assumptions of their work that they may have difficulty seeing beyond these assumptions.

My background is not in education. Thirty years of life experience away from formal education, many of them in low status manual labour jobs, stand between my undergraduate degree and my beginning work in educational research. Of my 40 plus years in the work force, only the last five are in education. The fresh pair of eyes I bring to this work will hopefully help lead to new ways of expression and new insights about the educational world in which I now participate.

I am moved to carry out this work not just by pragmatic considerations; the desire to “make it work better” but also by what I can only call spiritual considerations. In working in support for inclusive education I often find myself at a “connection point” between the able and the not-able, between the privileged and the marginalised, between the intellectually adept and those who function with limitation and difficulty, between the structure and the individual, between the children born to thrive and lead, and those who are marginalised from the time of their first breath. This experience of the interconnectedness of everyone, this interplay between possibility and limitation, privilege and deprivation, and individual and community, brings with it the desire, no, the need and responsibility, to do what I can in some small way, to bring my awareness to this part of the world in the hope that by doing so I might increase the awareness of others. This desire, need, and responsibility is the spiritual motivation for my work.

In experiencing myself in this context of humanity's collective welfare and collective potential for growth, my reasons for doing this work become clear and compelling. It is my responsibility to make my part of the world a better place, just as it is every person's responsibility to do so. This also serves as a test for significance. Does the work matter? If the work has spiritual meaning, then how could it not have academic significance as well? Thich Nhat Hanh (1995), a Buddhist monk, peace activist, and spiritual leader, expresses these ideas from the viewpoint of his spiritual tradition:

In Buddhism, our effort is to practice mindfulness in each moment – to know what is going on within and all around us . . . . When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, *and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy* (italics added). (p. 14)

Spirituality is one quality in the educational world I have rarely seen in my nascent career as an educator and researcher. I speculate this may be as a result of a long-standing fear of religious dogmatism, which is profoundly anti-intellectual, elitist, and intolerant of diversity, and thus has no place at the table of any kind of open inquiry or inclusive society. The claiming of religious authority shuts down any possibility for exchange of ideas, both in the mind of the claimant and the experience of those hearing it. (Apple, 2001, p. 130) Consequently the border between religion and the state, which is the basis of our schools, is carefully controlled. Unfortunately the quality of spirituality, and all the meaning and power it could add to our schools and our inquiries, is usually stopped at the border. I will measure my success also by the degree to which I am able to

express some degree of spirituality in my work, and by the quality of acceptance that expression receives.

Spirituality and religion are not synonymous. We can bring spirituality into our work in education without bringing in religion. Religion does not have a patent or monopoly on spirituality. Education is wise to stay clear of organised religion, but not, I believe, to banish all consideration of spirituality. The current dogma of managerialism and accountability in our schools is as oppressive of difference as religious intolerance. Apple (2000) describes how a dangerous mix of neo-liberalism, Christianity, and managerialism determine the ethos of school culture. This emphasis on productivity, competition, and normalised standards fails to address the part of our lived experiences which I am calling spiritual. Although spirituality is an awkward term, and it means radically different things to different people, I am using it here to designate that part of our experience which cannot be measured or packaged in terms of productivity. This is a lesson we need to learn from the practice of inclusive education. Those with intellectual disabilities cannot compete, cannot assimilate a multitude of knowledge and skills the way the majority of students can, yet their presence, their feelings, their lives matter just as much as those of every other student. Vanier (1998), in his beautifully moving little book, *Becoming Human*, states this case with eloquent simplicity:

There is a lack of synchronicity between our society and people with disabilities. A society that honours only the powerful, the clever, and the winners necessarily belittles the weak. It is as if to say: to be human is to be powerful. (p.46)

This means that what the educational community can learn from the weak and vulnerable members of society is just as important as what the educational community might be able to teach.

This inquiry moves away from positivist notions of knowledge by troubling the assumptions of a school system which at its heart is still exclusionary, and also by way of its form of presentation. My approach questions the use of the term “data.” Mason (2002) with reference to research practice in the social sciences, asks “Am I collecting data (excavation)?” or “Am I generating data (construction)?” (p. 110). There are traps to this line of thinking. The first is the either or question, which channels our thinking into one of the two categories presented, and leads us to exclude other possibilities. In this inquiry I will be using a collage of the experiences of educational assistants, from my memories, observations and conversations. I am *neither* collecting nor generating. I am telling stories to give voice to these experiences. The second trap is the use of the word “data.” The word “data” implies information which is very precisely defined and measured and is usually quantified or quantifiable. Its use is inappropriate in this type of qualitative research. I will be working with issues, experiences, emotions, principles, and interpersonal dynamics, and I will be using personal stories to bring those *qualities* to life. The narrative approach is appropriate to this inquiry because these *qualities* cannot be adequately expressed or evoked by other means. I see the use of the word “data” in narrative enquiry as a subtle form of distortion. The implied but non-existent precision suggests unfinished business, a failure to move fully into the qualitative research paradigm.

There is another trap in the use of the word “data.” The word “data” suggests information which is separate from the inquirer, which can be manipulated and controlled

by the inquirer. “Data” situates the inquirer outside the inquiry. A different metaphor is needed here. If we see the enquirer as a musician, playing in tempo and harmony with others, then picking up the theme and taking it in a new direction, then we see the inquirer immersed interdependently in what is going on around him, rather than separate from it. This metaphor shows an active and creative interdependence among inquirer, subject area, and frames of reference. The musician does not independently “make music.” He/she is bounded, framed, and guided by limitations of the instrument, rules of harmony, style of her musical education, personal influences, the history of music, current conventions, musical and social context, and so on. This applies even if the musician is playing solo.

Another metaphor might shed further light here. In any North American city, there are dozens of radio stations broadcasting at any time. This means nothing unless we take the trouble to build a receiver and tune it to one of these stations. The radio receiver consists of a pair of oscillators which are tuned in tandem with each other. When we tune the radio, one oscillator is tuned to the frequency of the transmitting station, the other is tuned to a frequency slightly different from it and in tandem to it. The intelligence we hear is the beats between the two oscillators. This is the superheterodyne principle. If we regard the series of transmitting stations as the larger world, and the receiver and the operator as the inquirer, then we see the superheterodyne principle in operation in the way the intelligence emerges. The inquirer is “tuned” to a particular aspect of the world, generates his own signal in tandem, and the intelligence which emerges is as a result of the beats between the two frequencies. The metaphor can be expanded beyond the immediate moment. The laws of electromagnetic propagation, the economic, cultural, and power relations operating in relation to the transmission of radio signals and their content, and the distribution of radios and listening habits can all be seen as metaphors for the forces

which shape any sort of research inquiry.

These metaphors are not perfect. None ever are perfect. What they do help to illustrate is the way in which any inquirer, and the process of the inquiry, and what emerges in the form of results, are all enmeshed in a multitude of factors, some of which can be seen and are at the level of awareness, and some of which are not.

Looking beyond the nature of the “information” to be used in this inquiry to the process itself of the inquiry, I am even reluctant to use the word “research”, as it is so loaded with connotations about objective knowledge and scientific discovery that its very use tends to colour and channel the thinking of a person using the word or a person reading it. I am also aware that to use the word differently, that is, to use it to signify very diverse practices that might have been excluded in the past from its pervue, is to give the word new meaning and new direction.

My intent is to write accessibly to audiences who might have been excluded in the past from reading and learning from research. At the same time this inquiry is an attempt to shed some light on interactions which are more complex than might appear with a superficial look. I’m also trying to develop a different direction from that which is usually found in a thesis on inclusive education. This requires that at some point I set aside certain scholarly conventions. Not all conventions, but certainly those that inhibit my need to explore the “unsaid” of current school practices. This portion of the work, which is intended to be more accessible to the general reader, is found in Chapter V, the “research fiction” chapter, where the voices of educational assistants are explored. I discuss the method of research fiction in my methodology chapter.

The intent of this study is to give a voice to educational assistants, a group that is not adequately heard within our educational system. There are many studies about

educational assistants in classrooms. They are all from the outside looking in, or from the top looking down. This study will be conducted from the inside looking out. I am an educational assistant, and as such my colleagues and I see the issues of inclusion and the collaborative nurturing of children's development through different pairs of eyes from those who study us from without. This study addresses a significant gap in the literature. The politics of research come into play here. Who will benefit from this study? Who *owns* the experiences? Whose point of view matters? Whose voice is heard and whose is not? Are there power relations operating here, and to whose benefit and whose loss? These questions build on the work of Maclure (2003) who discusses questions she might pose – or text itself might pose – to “open up” a research text to a deeper understanding. She tells us, “The hardest thing to see in any text is that which poses itself as natural and unquestionable” (p. 82). Her insights led me to see that the literature on educational assistants tends to be a collective expression of power, operating as “natural and unquestionable” and to the disadvantage of educational assistants.

I am part of this group being studied, and the answer to these questions is emphatically the experience and the voice belongs to the group being studied. Again, the power relations inherent in research are in the forefront here. As a member of the group being studied, I am in a position of simultaneous power and vulnerability. Without power, there is no voice. Without vulnerability, what is said may be suspected of lacking balance. There is a feedback component to the relationship here. The power which gives rise to voice gains more power through that voice. This study has strong political implications.

## **Chapter II: The Role of the Educational Assistant**

### **The creation of the educational assistant**

The evolution of inclusive education in PEI schools in the last twenty five years has seen children with disabilities moved from being kept hidden from sight, to being kept in separate institutions, to being kept in segregated classrooms within regular schools, and finally to full inclusion in regular classrooms with their peers (Coady, 2000). Children with disabilities often need extra support either outside the classroom, or in order to enable them to function in the regular classroom. This need for extra support has led to the creation of a new role in the education system. The position of teacher's assistant came into being to fulfil the need for extra support for the student, and for the teacher as well (Giangreco, 2001). A regular classroom teacher could not be expected to carry out her normal functions with special needs children in the classroom, without extra support. It was reasoned at the time of transition that the support for the student would be largely custodial in nature, thus there was no need for the assistant to be a fully qualified professional. Embedded in this reasoning was the unstated assumption that the student with special needs could not really be educated, and thus did not require a "real" teacher. The new role in the classroom, the Teacher's Assistant, solved two problems: It dealt with the shortage of qualified professionals, and it saved money.

### **Limitations to the role of the Assistant**

My own work as an educational assistant began as a retirement career, and I bring to it the point of view of an experienced and mature individual who has been away from formal education for 30 years. When I was first given a copy of the collective agreement for educational assistants I was immediately struck by the way the wording of the

contract limits the educational assistant's involvement in the educational process and community ( The Education Negotiating agency and the Canadian Union of Public Employees Union Local 3260, 2000). All work is done, "Under the supervision of a teacher." Educational assistants were listed as "non instructional personnel".

Postings for educational assistant positions always begin with the words "An educational assistant is required *to work under the supervision of a classroom teacher*" [italics added] which means that a typical posting notice will have that phrase repeated four to ten times, as many times as there are positions advertised. Educational assistants are not salaried, but are paid an hourly wage. They are laid off and draw employment insurance during school break periods in order to maintain some income. They are discouraged by their union from contributing beyond the explicit number of hours for which they are paid. The reasoning here is that if there is a requirement for them to be at the school for longer periods of time, the position should be changed so that they are paid for that time. Educational assistants are discouraged by their role descriptions from showing initiative, taking "ownership" of a student, or nurturing professional relationships. The net effect of these two forces is to make it difficult for educational assistants to authentically devote themselves to the needs of their workplace – which are the needs of the students they are there to support. Little or no provision is made for planning, preparation, or meeting time. There is no career ladder, no possibility of advancement within the ranks of educational assistants beyond seniority, which simply brings positions with more paid hours than those that are given to educational assistants with less seniority. Educational assistants new to the system typically are assigned positions of three and a half hours per day. Unless they take part time work elsewhere, their income from their educational work is on the level of the working poor – it is below

the poverty level. Educational assistants are given their assignments late in the spring for the following school year, and are routinely moved from one school to another as the need arises. There is no tenure, no security of placement. One result of this practice is that educational assistants are in a state of insecurity and high anxiety every spring, as they await the notification of their posting for the following year. This notice is routinely given in the last week or so of the school year. Postings change frequently, so educational assistants are often in transition from one school and one staff to another. This puts them in a vulnerable state. Positions with the most hours – five to six per day – are jealously guarded and sought after by the more senior persons. These sought after assignments are not full time, but in the order of 25 to 30 hours per week. Even the name of the role – teacher's assistant or educational assistant – implies an inability to function without supervision, or to take initiative or responsibility, or to bring creativity to the work. The role has been defined in terms of another's practice.

These power structures and the language that re-inscribes the power relations, habitually combine to create for educational assistants a workplace climate which has as its most striking and pervasive feature a constellation of limitations and conscriptions which determine what is possible.

In relation to the power of the language used, at the Spring 2004 Annual General Meeting of the P.E.I. Teacher's Assistants Union the membership voted overwhelmingly in favour of a motion to change the name of the role to from "teacher's assistant" to "educational assistant." The members do much more than assist teachers, and thus they find the title "teacher's assistant" to be limiting and demeaning. During contract negotiations that fall, the school board rejected this request and negotiations broke off. Arbitration binding to both sides approved the change. The persons working in P.E.I.

schools whose role is to facilitate the process of inclusive education by providing support for students with special educational needs, now go by the name of “educational assistants.” However, this attempt at gaining respect and changing perceptions inherent in the new job title was circumvented within a year by the Department of Education now referring to the role as “Support Personnel.” This will be discussed in greater detail later.

The role is also commonly referred to in the literature as “paraprofessional.” This term also conveys demeaning connotations. The relevant meanings of the prefix “para” as defined by Funk and Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary are:

1. Beside; nearby; along with.
2. In an accessory or secondary capacity.
3. Similar to but not identical with a true condition or form.

The limiting and demeaning nature of this language becomes more clear if we imagine what the reaction to this language would be if it were applied to the children with special needs. Would we consider calling these children “parastudents?” or “parachildren?” or “parahumans?” because (1) they work beside; nearby; or along with the other students, 2) they are in a secondary capacity, and 3) they are similar but not identical to the true form?

The point of this language is that those who take the full time role of working with students with special educational needs are presupposed by the educational community to be secondary and are formally so defined. Their role, as I mentioned earlier, has been defined in terms of another’s practice. My experience, within education and elsewhere, suggests that language that creates and enforces such a power dynamic between teacher and educational assistant is counterproductive. I suggest that the people working in the role of inclusion support need to be seen as professionals in their own right. Until this

change in the role and the perception of the role takes place, the creation of an inclusive community and the practice of inclusive education will always be compromised.

The language used creates problems not only in practice, but also in communication, including my own discussion. The term “paraprofessional” is only one of the many terms used in the literature and in policy to denote persons whose role is to provide support for inclusive education. These terms are not always synonymous, and I will discuss later how treating them as such has created some confusion. In an attempt, and it can only be an attempt, to provide some clarity, I will use the term “educational assistant” as consistently as I reasonably can. Where I discuss the work of another author who uses a different term, I will follow the use of that author’s term if changing it would be awkward.

Historically the teacher in a classroom has been very much the singular person in charge who makes all the decisions and carries undiluted and unquestioned power with that position. The residue of the set of assumptions surrounding this practice continues to influence interpersonal dynamics. The educational assistants’ collective agreement appears to be largely structured around the intent to avoid having the assistants being a threat in any way to the status, power, monopoly, and economic privilege of the classroom teacher. The protectionism works both ways. The different – and lower – educational qualifications and specific experience required to be hired as an education assistant often excludes licensed teachers or other motivated professionals from working in this role. Thus the collective agreement creates a vicious circle by which education assistants are perceived as subsidiary, a view which is internalised and reproduced in the self-selection and retention of future educational assistants.

This organizational climate suggests a number of questions:

1. How did current practice get to be the way it is? What is the history behind the way we operate now?
2. What do current policies and directives tell us about the dynamics of inclusive education?
3. How does the practice of leadership relate to the dynamics of inclusive education support?

I began with a review of abstracts on the ERIC database. I reviewed 30 abstracts spanning 35 years from the earliest use of paraprofessionals (as I stated earlier, I disagree with this term, but it is widely used in the literature, and I used it in this search) in the classroom to the present day. The decision not to limit the survey to recent work was made in order to obtain some historical perspective on the issues involved. The intent of the review was to compare the issues raised by researchers with the issues I have observed in current practice.

The studies were grouped by the issues addressed. Issues and number of studies were:

1.	Working relations / teamwork	13
2.	Roles and responsibilities	10
3.	Qualities* of educational assistants	6
	(* refers to personal characteristics)	
4.	Career development and training	4
5.	Regulations and laws	3
6.	Related service areas	1
	Total	37

The total number of issues is more than the number of studies because there is considerable overlap. Many of the studies address more than one issue, or multiple issues. For the purpose of this overview studies were attributed to one predominate issue or to no more than two issues.

Not all the studies were cited. Those which raised issues which I thought needed discussion or were well representative of issues were used.

It is no surprise to me that the largest number of studies focus on working relations between teachers and educational assistants. ( I used the term teachers assistants in this search, because it is another of the terms that is widely used.) The language and structures in use, and continuing discussions, show that this aspect of the work is problematic. There is a wide variation among schools, and among teachers at the same school, regarding their assumptions about how the relationship should work. Educational assistants as well vary in *their* assumptions about the relationship. Bowman (1970) conducted a survey of training programs, the fundamental objective of which was to develop the team operation in the classroom and improve relations between paraprofessionals and professionals. O'Brien (1977) offers some directions for improved working relations and notes the effectiveness that is gained by good human relations. The content of these older studies shows that current issues are not new issues, and despite 30 years of development the issues remain current. Mueller (1995) offers some tips for teachers and paraeducators who work as a team. Morgan, Ashbaker, and Young (2001) examines the team relationship and discusses strategies for enhancing team effectiveness. The slow progress in addressing these issues may be the result of lack of preparation in pre service training. Practical experience in pre service training is often hit or miss, depending on whether there is a student with special needs and an educational

assistant where education students do their practicum. Perhaps course work in inclusive education could contain a section where education students and educational assistants take a portion of their training together. Inclusive education changes the nature of teaching from an individual activity to a team activity, and until the teaching profession fully makes this shift the teacher / educational assistant team will be unable to function to optimum effect.

The lone study in this initial overview which addresses related service areas for paraprofessionals (Matheny & Oslin, 1970) briefly reviews the use of paraprofessionals dating back to the 1930s, and examines the settings in which they were employed: teaching, social work, and counselling and psychotherapy. These are important historical roots in that an educational assistant inevitably encounters some aspect of all of these disciplines in the course of year to year assignments. There are also important historical roots in the wording used. The abstract states, “Social service programs have been able to employ housewives and indigenous workers.” There are at least two implicit messages here. The “housewives and indigenous workers” despite their lack of formal training, have something to contribute to the social service programs. It can be inferred that their contribution might be something the professionals lack, such as an understanding of the local culture, a more emotional connection to the population serviced, or simply the time to spend with the people involved. The second unstated message is that the “housewives and indigenous workers” are not highly valued, nor is the contribution they make to the process of which they are a part. These unstated messages, that professionals undervalue both the non-professional persons who work with them and the contribution they make, continue in current educational practice. This point will be examined in more detail when I review documents on current policy and directives.

The study also mentions the problems which arise if paraprofessionals are seen to threaten the status of the professional. This again is a current issue, as well as a historical one. Educational assistants, by virtue of their specialised training, experience, and role, and their day to day opportunities to spend extended lengths of time with individual students, can become more knowledgeable than the teacher about the individual student and about the special needs aspects of the work. Educational assistants in most cases do not have full credentials to teach, yet they spend considerable time on teaching related activities with students. There is a bind inherent in this role. The role exists because the need is there. In many cases students with special needs require one on one support and instruction for some parts of the day and for their individual programs; classroom dynamics often do not work well for them. When educational assistants are needed to make a significant contribution to a student's learning, that success can be seen as a threat to the teaching profession. If, on the other hand, there are problems with the educational assistant's contribution to the educational needs of a student, then those problems are seen as diluting the professional competence of the school and compromising the right of the student to quality educational opportunities. The mere presence of the educational assistants can be seen as a threat to the teaching profession. This perception of the presence of the educational assistant as a threat is not conducive to good teamwork. At best it weakens the team, and at worst it can sabotage the potential effectiveness of the relationship. This issue will be further explored with a review of historical documents from the Canadian Teachers Federation later on in this chapter.

More generally, the trend of demoting the educational assistant to a teacher assistant is international. A typical example of documents in circulation that communicate this relation of service to the teacher is *The Role of Paraprofessionals in*

*Utah Schools: The Selection, Preparation, and Utilisation of Paraprofessionals in Education* (1990). The document, like many others of its kind, addresses the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals in education and offers a very clear direction. I include it here because it makes explicit many of the assumptions which are a source of discomfort to educational assistants. The abstract, quoted in entirety, reads:

The philosophical basis for the use of paraprofessionals in education is that they provide educators more time to practice, and to reflect on, their professional responsibilities and opportunities. They augment, rather than replace, certified educators. The paraprofessional is at all times an assistant and responsible to a member of the professional staff. Professional assignments may not be delegated to a paraprofessional. The educator's primary responsibility is to the children; whereas, the primary responsibility of the paraprofessional is to the educator.

The assumptions expressed in this publication are prevalent in most of the public literature pertaining to educational assistants. Whether or not they are explicitly expressed, these assumptions are often held by current teachers and administrators, and often are open or implicit in policies regarding educational assistants. The elitism inherent in such assumptions about roles and responsibilities is not conducive to optimal team building. They are not conducive to educational assistants feeling good about their role in inclusive education!

A different direction is taken by Anderson and Jones (1972). The abstract of their study notes that, "Uncredentialed persons on school district payrolls are given few genuine opportunities to interact professionally with children, parents, and helping

agencies, thus creating a waste of resources and a form of discrimination.” This same approach is taken by Rueda and Monzo (2000). The abstract states “Paraprofessionals engaged almost entirely in low level activities and had access to only a narrow set of the practices in which teachers engaged. Most teachers did not acknowledge paraeducators’ access to student culture and community knowledge.” These researchers recognise the loss of contribution and the loss of human potential that occurs when one part of the educational team is excluded from many aspects of the process.

On the issue of career development and training, Pickett and Others (1993) show some evolution in thought. The abstract of their study begins “Paraprofessionals in education have become specialists, who are more accurately described as paraeducators. Paraeducators work alongside their professional colleagues in the delivery of instruction and related services.” Bowman and Wilton (1971) describe the concepts of career opportunities for educational paraprofessionals, along with the benefits for all involved in this process. This line of thinking would be well transposed to the present day. There is currently no provision for career upgrading for educational assistants in their collective agreement or elsewhere.

There was one study in this part of the survey which I initially found surprising. Hertog and Falk (1991) did a follow-up study of young adults with learning disabilities who graduated from a human services paraprofessional training program, and found that 76% of them were employed, mostly as paraprofessionals in education. On reflection, it makes perfect sense. Those who have had difficulty with learning and have overcome that difficulty might be in the best position to understand and to help others who are having similar challenges. I relate this to a truism in athletics, which is that the best players do not necessarily make the best coaches. The reason for this is the best players

are gifted, and do not have the experience of having to struggle to master difficult skills and complex plays. Lacking the experience of this struggle, “best player” coaches are not always well equipped to relate to the experiences of many athletes, who do have to struggle. Because it is primarily highly successful students who choose to become teachers, they tend to lack the personal experience of academic struggle, and are challenged to understand the experience of those who have great difficulty in school. This suggests that an emphasis on credentials might limit the involvement of individuals who have something less tangible to offer to inclusive education.

### **Language and Tensions with the Role of educational assistants**

Several important points emerge from this initial overview. The terms “teacher’s aide,” “aide,” “teacher’s assistant,” and “paraprofessional” are often treated as interchangeable, but they are not. Educational assistants who do have specialised training and experience are often treated in much the same way as individuals with minimal training. Mirroring the traditional treatment of students with disability and difference, educational assistants are often perceived and regulated according to low expectations about their capacity to fit in and to contribute. Inclusive education has evolved and needs have evolved with it; the language, structures and assumptions of educational practice have lagged behind.

A key problem which has been created is that the birth of the education assistant role has created an underclass in the school and classroom hierarchy (Giangreco, 2001, p. 56) and this dynamic cannot best serve the needs of inclusive education. In a system which values a high level of academic achievement, their required level of qualification is much lower. In a system which values initiative, responsibility, and “ownership” of

learning, their capacity to develop is explicitly and deeply constrained. In a system which has the stated values of inclusiveness and egalitarianism, educational assistants are explicitly limited in the degree to which they are able to participate in, contribute to, and be nurtured by the learning community. This problem is compounded by the nature of the work that educational assistants do. They work one on one, with small groups, or as a floater with the students who have, as discussed in Giangreco (2001) the most complex, most difficult, and most challenging issues in care, learning, and behaviour of all the students in a school. The relationship with these students is often more “gut level” and emotional than the relationships with those students who do not have special needs. In my observation, our schools tend to emphasise and value the intellect at the expense of other aspects of a child’s development. This emphasis on the intellect may have the effect of devaluing the work done by educational assistants. The greatest student needs are matched with the lowest level of formal qualifications and the least amount of political power within the educational hierarchy. Truly inclusive education requires the opposite. I suggest there is a need for the persons supporting students with disabilities to be developed to as high a level of qualification and specialisation as possible.

When I first began exploring the issues of the lesser required credentials for the educational assistants and the lower status which accompanies it, I reasoned one way to address these problems with the role of the educational assistant would be to upgrade the level of qualifications required for hiring in the field. My initial idea was that if the Human Services Course at Holland College, which is the basic qualification for hiring as an educational assistant, could be credited as the first two years of a degree, then over time the basic qualification could be upgraded to that of a practice based degree. This process would be analogous to the conversion of nursing training from non degree to a degree

program. This transition was successfully made by UPEI, and now all graduate nurses have a degree along with their practical training. The upgrading of the basic qualification for educational assistants to a practice based degree could not help but improve the quality of education for students with special needs. The upgrading of qualifications for educational assistants to a practice based degree also would also help to improve the status of educational assistants in the school community. Such a change would not, however, solve all the problems with the role. Giangreco (2001) notes:

One gets a sense reading much of the literature, that if we merely did a better job with role clarification, training, supervision, and compensation, the field's identified problems would be solved. While any actions that result in personnel being better trained and supervised undoubtedly would be beneficial, having a more qualified paraprofessional workforce ignores more central questions. (p. 54)

Are models of service provision that rely heavily on paraprofessionals to provide instruction to students with disabilities appropriate, ethical, conceptually sound, and effective? Does it make sense to have the least qualified employee responsible for students with the most complex challenges to learning? Is it acceptable for some students with disabilities to receive most of their education from a paraprofessional, regardless of training level, while students without disabilities receive the bulk of their education from certified teachers?

The “more central questions” that are asked omit other questions of equal

importance that are not apparent to researchers who are not in the role themselves. The questions I am posing with respect to the role of educational assistant build on those of Giangreco (2001). If models of service provision demote and demean educational assistants within the educational community, can they ever be considered, “appropriate, ethical, conceptually sound, and effective?” Why is it acceptable for the educational community to maintain the role of the educational assistant as subsidiary and custodial? In turning these questions around, and focussing on the treatment of the EA, I am hoping the educational community will look inward, not outward, and reflect on how it might better model inclusiveness.

A change to a higher level of qualification for educational assistants would not by itself solve the bind inherent in the way the role is now structured. It would in itself not be enough to overcome the professional exclusion imposed on the role of educational assistant. A change in thinking is required, not just a fine tuning of any aspect of the work. The educational community needs alternative dynamics for providing support to students with disabilities. How can we practice inclusive education, when the staff who work most closely with students with disabilities are themselves clearly and explicitly excluded from the educational community?

The educational assistant is in a double-bind. A double-bind is a “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” situation imposed on an individual or group by another individual or by the social world in which they function. A person or group is in a double-bind when the social power relations in which they operate serve to limit their options for a course of action, all of which are unfavourable, or are seen as unfavourable, in some way. For educational assistants, the nature of their work requires, on the one hand, a professional degree of commitment to, qualification for, and involvement in all

facets of education. On the other hand, the history of explicit and implicit control of the EA role has made such a professional commitment impossible.

These opposing forces create a tension which permeates the role. It is a tension between the requirement for the assistant to do as much as possible for the student or students with special needs, while at the same time conforming to the historical, structural, financial, and social limits which are imposed on the role. Superimposed on this tension are the assistant's own needs to find community, recognition, fulfilment, security, adequate financial resources, and personal growth in her career. These needs interact with the combination of forces in the workplace which either obstruct or facilitate the fulfilment of these needs. When I first attended an annual general meeting of the Education Assistants and youth Service Workers I was struck by the general tone of anger and frustration I heard expressed through the topics discussed. This tone, which I have observed at every meeting I have attended, foreshadows further issues with the structures of the workplace tending to obstruct the fulfilment of the assistants' needs.

There are also deeper systemic tensions involved in the work of inclusive education. The process of inclusive education is built on historical precedents and practices, and a series of laws, policies, structures, and assumptions which support and frame the current practice. These structures tend to be regarded and used by educators in what I call a "creationist" frame of reference. They have become "taken-for-granteds." The current ways in which we practice inclusive education tend to be seen as the best and only way to educate students with disabilities. The decades long debates around the issues of separate institutions, separate classrooms, specialised environments, the allocation of resources, the rights of children, and so on, are regarded as resolved and closed. Inclusive education is a political concept built around the idea, and the law, that

everyone is entitled to an education which suits their needs.

The current “taken-for-granted” is that including all children in the classroom, with only limited attention to their distinct and different needs is necessarily in their best interests, and in the interests of the school community as a whole. In practice, this has all too often meant simply physically “including” or placing all students in a classroom, as though that alone were our only responsibility, as though inclusion within the walls of the institution was sufficient? But what if the structure of the institution itself is inherently flawed and undemocratic? How can we be a society which embraces diversity, when we only offer standardised one-size-fits-all educational options? How can we claim that we respect individual needs and differences, when no kind of difference, be it cultural, class, intellectual, emotional, physical, or medical, is regarded as sufficient reason for refusing to submit to the standardised educational experience?

The concept of inclusive education has become so pervasive and so deeply entrenched that it is regarded as morally repugnant to suggest that there may be flaws in it, and that alternatives may have some merit. There are observations we as educators are implicitly not allowed to make and questions we are not allowed to ask. This issue – that some suggestions will not be tolerated – is well expressed in Bunch and Persaud (2003). A summary to the third chapter notes that the organizations surveyed were split between “believing in full inclusion”, or believing that “Some learners with disabilities could best have their needs met in specialized environments rather than in regular education settings” (p. 21) The authors respond to this information by saying “This situation signals a deep rift between parts of the national community regarding the educational best interests of Canadian students with disabilities . . . This is a disturbing finding” (p. 21). I disagree with this interpretation. I see no “deep rift” and I see no “disturbing finding.” This

finding simply shows a diversity of thought and approach which enriches the educational community and is the hallmark of democracy. What I do find disturbing is the inclusion advocacy which has assumed an evangelical tone, tolerates no diversity, and thus itself has become an oppressive force. It is not my intention here to debate the merits of either of these positions. My intention is rather to show that inclusion issues continue to have the potential to generate tensions which can become oppressive forces in the educational community.

Our educational systems have become in themselves a form of text, with layers of meanings which diverge from any original intention. The people operating in this system thus also become a form of text with multiple layers of meanings attached to everything they do. Every policy, every technique, every building and piece of furniture, every adaptation and every scrap of curriculum are in themselves and as a composite, a series of texts whose multiple meanings have been arrived at through their own histories and their own dynamics. As we interact with these texts we express them, or to say it another way, the layers of meaning contained in the texts are expressed through us. We modify them and we are modified by them. We add our own multiple layers of meaning as multiple layers of meaning are added to us. We function with an institutionalised consciousness. What this means for the assistants working with students with special needs is that every hour of every day, often outside their awareness, they carry a portion of the weight of these issues on their shoulders. What this means for the students with disabilities, who are the most vulnerable, most powerless, most voiceless members of our population, is that they are blown about like driftwood in these issues. The inclusion issues on which they float are like ocean currents in their power and pervasiveness, built up over time by forces which are geologic in their scope.

What this means to my study is best expressed as a metaphor with geology. I will be drawing upon my memories, which I liken to stones on the shore of my own and my colleagues' experiences. These stones, when cleaned and polished, will show the colour, texture, composition, and grain of their experiences and environments in ways that other forms of expression cannot, which is why I am choosing this form. The deeper systemic issues of institution-as-text and people-as-text; the whole context – not just the immediate moment – in which the experiences take place, can be seen as the history of the rock. Our understanding of the earth on which we stand comes from inquiring about the pressures, movements, and processes that have shaped the rock in our hand. That rock then becomes a window into the forces and factors which have created it. It becomes a chapter – maybe more – in the history of the world.

## **Chapter III: Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

### **Methodology Outline**

I took a narrative approach to accessing and representing the issues which are manifest in the experiences of educational assistants. This narrative is a fictionalised collage of the stories of educational assistants, a “research fiction” as Clough (2003) calls it. The research fiction is a separate chapter at the end of the thesis.

I also carried out a textual analysis of historical and current documents, to provide a context for the narrative and its expression of the nuances of current practice.

### **Theoretical Framework Outline**

In creating the research fictions and doing the textual analysis I draw on critical theory, deconstruction, cultural studies, and discourse analysis. The application of these theories to the context of my work is discussed in this section. I also tell my own story and discuss some ethical dilemmas relating to this study.

### **Why Research Fictions?**

The idea of research fictions will raise questions for some readers, as it initially did for me. I asked myself, “What can be achieved by expressing research not only in a narrative form, but in a fictional narrative form?” The answer which emerged is that research fictions address the difficulty of expressing the most complex and “fuzzy” issues in our schools, which might not otherwise be accessible. Polkinghorne (1988) tells us, “Narrative displays the significance that events have for one another” (p. 13). In other words, Polkinghorne is showing us that narrative puts events in context (p. 14).

At the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At the cultural level, narratives serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values.

Narrative gives meaning to events and expresses broader meanings for individual lives and groups which cannot otherwise be made visible. Perhaps more importantly, the cohesion of belief and transmission of values inherent in narrative means that its use may have a transformative effect for its readers, when the narrative touches their lives. I was at first reluctant to use a fictive form or strategy, yet I have come to recognize that this form as the best way of expressing the dynamics I want to readers to see. The Island's small size may make maintaining confidentiality difficult if actual stories are told.

The need for research fictions and personal narratives and their role is well articulated in the literature. Pat Sikes, Series Editor of *Doing Qualitative Research in Educational Settings*, in the preface to one book in the series, *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research* writes:

There is a need for rigorous research which does not ignore, but rather addresses, the complexity of various aspects of schools and schooling; for research which explores and takes account of *different objective experiences and subjective perspectives*, [emphasis added] and which acknowledges that qualitative information is essential. (Sikes, as cited in Clough, 2002, p.xi)

It is these subjective perspectives and their complexity that I intend to bring to my

readers. Sikes continues, quoting Denzin and Lincolns's (2000) "genereic definition" of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world . . . . qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world . . . . qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them . . . . that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives . . . . each practice makes the world visible in a different way.

(Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 3-4, as cited in Clough, 2002, xi-xii)

The "routine and problematic moments and meanings" (p.xii) are exactly what I strive to express through my use of narrative. The subjective experiences of educational assistants, made accessible through the use of fictionalized narrative, will reveal an aspect of the educational community that has not been seen previously. "Each practice makes the world visible in a different way" (p.xii). It is that quality of *visibility* that I seek.

The use of narrative is a shift not only in content and method, but also in language. The use of narrative bypasses the limitations – the filters – of conventional research language. The use of narrative also transcends the usual research emphasis on method. Clough (2002) argues that method does not free us from the influence of our subjective selves; rather it serves to conceal that influence (p. 84). I follow this line of reasoning, by explicitly and openly placing the influence of the subjective self in the centre of the work.

It is the influence of the subjective self that is illuminated in this study.

The tone and content of the research fictions I use is intensely subjective, in order to reflect and access the emotional range of experience working in schools in support of inclusive education, as well as those of broader life experiences which have something to contribute to inclusion practices. The intent of the narratives is to relate to wider life issues as well as to relate to scholarly discourse. Clough (2002) tells us:

Narrative is useful only to the extent that it opens up (to its audiences) a deeper view of life in familiar contexts: it can make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As a means of educational report, stories can provide a means by which those truths, which cannot otherwise be told, are uncovered. (p. 8)

I dare to hope that my use of this approach might contribute not just knowledge, but wisdom as well.

The research fictions are based on memories, previous research, and inferences from conversations and observations. Clough (2002) writes “The fictionalisation of educational experience offers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness – thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings” (p. 8). There are no “participants” as such in this study – there are rather the memories of educators who have in some way been a part of my experience. All details gleaned from my memories have been carefully altered to ensure that no identifying characteristics of student, staff member, or school have remained.

My intent is to show what life is like for front-line workers in inclusive education. In order to make these lives visible, my role has to be more of a story-teller and curator rather than researcher. The stories, the perspectives, the contradictions, the ambiguities, the incompleteness, the anger and the joy and whatever else is evoked, are those of educational assistants. Hopefully they will become the readers' as well.

The use of narrative in the manner discussed raises questions about whose words are heard. Lather (1991) quotes Mulkay presenting, “a form of analytical collaboration” which “allows more than one voice, and more than one interpretive stance, into the analytical text on an equal footing” (p. 92). Many of my colleagues have shared stories with me. They have not shared the mundane, but rather those stories which have strong emotional content. The stories which contain issues which trouble or inspire them are the ones that get talked about. I will be drawing on my memories of these issues in writing fictionalised narratives. It can be argued that the lack of overt analytical collaboration in this approach is a weakness. The stories are told by me and their original sources will be moved to the background. One might say the original sources were fictionalised out of existence. Not at all! Those stories I tell bring their voices to light, while the actual speakers are moved discretely and safely into the shadows. The issues, dynamics, emotions – the “rawness of real happenings” as Clough (2002) calls them – are expressed in a way that could not otherwise be accomplished. And collaboration has indeed taken place in the same informal way the stories have come to me. Conversations, mutual constructions of meaning, have taken place. We don’t tell our stories to a brick wall. We tell them to people who let us know they care by the feedback they give the speaker, and together the teller and the listener build the story.

I interpret the intent of using “analytical collaboration” is to diffuse the power of

the author, and thus improve the “democracy” of the findings (Lather, 1992, p.92).

Lather draws also on Patai, who “warns that situating the researcher’s experience at the centre of the inquiry perpetuates the very dominance our liberatory intentions hope to fight” (p. 92).

To these arguments I reply that I am not separate from the group being studied; rather I am a member of it. The group being studied is a group which is dominated, and as a member of that group I am seeking to draw attention to the effects of that domination. If there is an appropriation of voice in this work, and to some extent it is impossible to avoid doing so, it is not the sort that eclipses the researcher by the researched. There is always strategy at work when one speaks and claims insight, but strategy isn’t always associated with negative motive. In some cases, as in this instance of my empowered voice to speak the issues, there is no need to democratically diffuse my power as a speaker. There is, on the other hand, a need to democratically claim my power to speak.

I acknowledge that although this inquiry is an attempt to make other voices heard, ultimately my voice which will be the central one. Again, I do not see this as “perpetuating dominance” as long as my presence remains explicit and transparent, as one who self consciously crafts the narratives. This study is also unusual in that I am a member of the very group that I am studying. My status as writer/subject is paradoxical, involving the simultaneous power of the speaker and the vulnerability of the spoken about. Lather’s article has a lot to say to me here, as it is peppered with phrases raising various aspects of the issues of power inherent in research: “intrusive surveillance,” “invasive apparatus of power,” “pressured and coercive,” “technologies of normalisation,” “indignity of speaking for others,” “methodological intrusiveness.” My interpretation is that as researchers, we have to be gentle, sensitive, caring, open, and

concerned always with the welfare and dignity of our brothers and sisters in this life!

These are the values which I will strive to have embedded in the theory and method behind my research.

Where do I stand with respect to my subject of enquiry? Clearly, I have one foot on the inside, and one foot on the outside. I accept and make explicit my partiality in that I see educational assistants as a group that needs to be heard in the educational system, and I am advocating for that. On a theoretical level, as well as pragmatically, I find this to be a sound position. As I mentioned earlier, this soundness of position does not always translate into comfort in the position. Maclure (2003), writing on method in life-history interviews, sees the inside/outside question as a double bind:

I want to suggest that there is an *inevitable* ambivalence in the methodological discussions that revolve around, and aspire to, presence. The search for ontological security – that is, for presence – does not produce the comforts of certainty or authenticity, but produces *oscillations* instead – between scientific and personal authority; between mastery and surrender; between nostalgia for the authentic voice of the subject and the desire for certainty the leads researchers to override it. Attempts at collaboration, in which power, knowledge and truth would be ‘shared’ between the researcher and the researched, cannot really arrest these oscillations either. The problem is not one of ‘imbalances’ of power, or of the loudness of speakers’ voices, but of a *double bind*, to use another of Derrida’s phrases – a logical dilemma that cannot be solved because ‘one can only unbind one of its knots by pulling on the other to make it tighter’ (Derrida, 1998, p.36)

## Issues of Representation

The research fictions are my method or manner of accessing and expressing the issues in my inquiry. The aim is to capture – to represent – the subjective experiences and perceptions of educational assistants working with students with special needs in our schools. My focus will be on the dynamics of their interaction within and beyond the school hierarchy, and hopefully finding common threads and themes. Lather (1991) has something to offer me here, especially in raising the issue of *authenticity*: (p. 91)

Narrative realism, hence, is but one of many textual strategies with its assumption of the transparency of description which is, in essence, an uncertainty about what constitutes an adequate depiction of social reality. Nancy Zeller (1987), for example, argues that we actively select, transform and interpret “reality” in our inquiry, but we usually conceal our structuring and shaping behind masks of objectivity and fact. She goes on to argue that, as the filters through which experience is shaped and given meaning, we might find that *fictive forms or strategies could enlarge the appeal, understandability, and possibly even the authenticity of empirical work* [Italics added]. (p.91)

I see a close relationship among subjectivity, vulnerability, and authenticity. The use of fiction allows a fuller expression of subjectivity and vulnerability than would otherwise be possible. Subjectivity and vulnerability pass through the “filters” of fiction where other means would be less likely to allow their passage.

The subjectivity of the stories is part of the issue of representation. How can these fictionalised personal stories be depended upon to bring meaning to the reader about

inclusive education? How can subjectivity go beyond a self-absorption which means nothing beyond the immediate context of the speaker? To make a narrative “representative,” the story it tells has to move beyond the individual and bring the reader to the universal. By “universal” I do not mean a universal truth that is the same for all, but rather a more generalized resonance that speaks to multiple ears. The story has to convey diverse perspectives, explore the complexity of a situation, and do so with the intent of revealing issues that are relevant to all community members. The stories have to be exemplars of meanings which invite the reader to share in the experience, which evoke in the reader their own experience of the events portrayed.

### **Voice: What can the stories of educational assistants tell the inclusive community?**

These stories will be written as “research fictions” where the events portrayed are fictional events which happen to fictional characters in fictional situations. The issues expressed are part of the power dynamics experienced by educational assistants and are derived in part from my own experiences and observations as an educational assistant. Working with students with disabilities is a small part of the experience of most educators. Educational assistants, on the other hand, work closely and exclusively with students who have disabilities.

Educational assistants work every period of every term of every year with students who have a wide range of disabilities. At times they work exclusively with one student, getting to know that student intimately, forming a deep and rich relationship, acquiring specialised knowledge about the student, and consequently taking on significant responsibility for the education and welfare of that student which is well beyond that

which is formally mandated. At other times the assistant's time and attention is divided among several or many students with disabilities. This type of support is another rich source of inside information on the dynamics of inclusion. Educational assistants are the front line deliverers of inclusive education. In this role they quickly acquire specialized hands on experience and a rich store of knowledge and stories about individual cases, about patterns and dynamics, and about the process of inclusion as a whole. The inclusion support role of the educational assistants takes them from class to class, from teacher to teacher, and from school to school. Their close contact with students with disabilities in different school environments gives them a series of multiple perspectives which is unique. No other person in the educational system has anything approaching the richness of this point of view about inclusive education.

### **Focus and Stance**

The stance I took in preparing this study was that the telling of relevant lived experiences is meaningful, important, and tells us a great deal about the social processes we generate and participate in as we carry out our programs in schools. Narratives organise and relate complex personal experiences in a way which is otherwise not accessible. Some stories are unique; others show patterns or trends. They can show the need for some changes in the structures and the assumptions with(in) which we function.

In a completely different context in which I was involved, I participated in a process which was initiated for the purpose of hearing the voices of a group which had formerly not been heard. The group was maintenance trades persons in the Coast Guard, and the process was the trades persons rewriting their own job descriptions. These job descriptions had formerly been written by office workers, who had no real experience or

understanding of the work. They had no knowledge of the complex processes and dynamics involved in the inspection and planning, the shop work and fieldwork, and the interactions of tradespersons, to accomplish the construction and maintenance of marine navigation sites and equipment. The old descriptions had been imposed from the outside in and from the top down. The new descriptions, originating from the inside out, were vastly superior to the old ones, and resulted in significant changes and improvements to the way that organisation and the individuals within it functioned. I suggest that the process of hearing the stories of those who haven't been heard in an organisation will transfer well. What can be expected to transfer well from context to context is that there are knowledge and benefits to be gained from the insights contained in hearing new perspectives within organisations – education included.

### **The meaning of contradictions**

The observation that I bring to this study is that there are systemic limitations to the effectiveness of educational assistants, and these limitations in turn affect the quality of education for students with special needs. In my experience I have also seen the system work very effectively, and in order to show a balanced view I must elaborate on that experience and include the stories or parts of stories which show the system enhancing their effectiveness. The stories thus must include contradictory perspectives. This will lend strength to, rather than weaken their power. An issue is not negated by the experience of a contradictory perspective on it. Contradictory perspectives confirm that we are dealing with the complexity and “messiness” of human interaction. Clear cut one-sided perspectives would not be reflective of the totality of human experience. There may well be contradictions within a single story – and the issues will still be there, red

flagged for further scrutiny.

### **Limitations**

Almost all of my experiences are about the elementary level, so the stories and dynamics I relate may not have much to tell us about intermediate or high school levels. As stated previously, my experiences as an educational assistant suggest to me that there are systemic limitations built into the effectiveness of workers in this role. Narrative inquiry in the form of research fictions will seek to show lived experiences to illuminate this question. The stories told will provide perspectives and bring issues to light. They cannot, however, provide information as to the degree to which these issues affect the quality of education for students with disabilities. The stories may suggest possibilities for changing our system of inclusive education, but they can only be suggestions. They cannot assess the effectiveness of possible changes, and they cannot be quantified.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are critical ethical issues regarding any observation of people and the structures in which they work, including power, trust, community, privilege, vulnerability, and these issues are even more complicated when considering vulnerable populations: they precede and override research method. I choose to place these issues at this point because the earlier description of my intentions will make the discussion of the ethical issues more meaningful.

I have been informally and privately observing my work environment since I began working in education. A leap to making some sort of formal observations feels like an intrusion, and I acknowledge that my observations are always grounded in my

particular subject position. Anonymity of the individuals on whom research fictions are somewhat based is an issue, yet in itself it is not enough to ensure an ethical study. Names or no names, educators, students, and parents are still people whose lives and feelings are precious to them. Unobtrusiveness, whether the observation is overt or not, is also an issue the resolution of which is not in itself sufficient to ensure ethical conduct in this study. There is a power relation in making observations and a vulnerability inherent in being observed. Under most circumstances I am not comfortable with, or feel that it is outright inappropriate, to take that power. There is an implicit trust that grows among people who see each other over time that they are free to be themselves without anything they do in their normal activity and interaction being in any way used against them. They feel safe with each other. To make formal observations can be a betrayal of that trust. Even to ask permission, to seek “informed consent”, can be a betrayal of that relationship. In my own work I am of course not without my own vulnerability. I am learning as I go. I have to be unafraid to make mistakes, to move outside the level I know to another level I don’t know. Sometimes I have a bad day. I could not feel comfortable in my work, or be effective, if I felt scrutinised and judged, rather than receiving the respect and support I have experienced.

A personal experience adds colour and illustration to these issues. Some years ago I was interviewing a prospective roommate, or we were interviewing each other, to determine whether we would share my house in Halifax. Following the exchange of pragmatic details I told her that if we were to live under the same roof we would inevitably reveal to each other details about ourselves we would not necessarily choose to reveal to the world at large, and that the observations we would have of each other in this situation would thus be privileged observations. She agreed, and a respectful and

successful house sharing arrangement followed lasting for several years. This idea of privileged observations has stayed with me, giving me the awareness that many observations from the “inside” of social relations are often privileged observations. We would not be in a position to make those observations if we were not in a position of trust. Following from this, we must be careful that the use we make of the perceptions we have of others is sensitive, respectful, and not a violation of people or of their trust.

Another personal experience of the effect of observation also influences my thinking regarding the power that making formal observations can have. At one point in my working career, I was working under a highly abusive supervisor who was making life miserable for me and my colleagues. The management in the situation turned a blind eye to what was going on, or worse, they supported the abusive supervisor. I consulted the organisational directives regarding harassment. The references advised telling the perpetrator(s) of the effects of his actions and asking that those actions stop, which I did, and keeping notes of all incidents; in other words, making systematic observations, which I also did. Observation can be a profoundly political act, for in observing we choose what is important, what is seen and what is not seen, and we define the observed dynamics in our own terms. As the situation unfolded over many months, the supervisor and the negligent managers were shocked to discover that their actions or lack thereof were being carefully documented on a day to day basis. The observers, who had been defining the workplace dynamics in their own authoritarian and self serving terms, had now become the observed. They ordered me to stop, which I did not. In a less restrained society than ours, I would probably have been killed. There was no trust or privilege being violated by these observations! The situation eventually reached the point of investigation by outside authority (which I initiated.) My extensive notes detailing incidents, quotes,

dates, times, places, and supporting witnesses and documents resulted in one outright firing, two demotions, the forced geographic relocation of one manager, a reorganisation, and a written apology to me from the Assistant Deputy Minister of the department involved. There is tremendous power generated by observation. Generating and using that power is not to be taken lightly.

When I tell my composite fictionalised stories all these issues come into play. In telling my own stories I am free to reveal what I choose to reveal about my own experience, yet my own experience necessarily involves interaction with others. I have to be cognisant and careful that I do not reveal privileged perceptions, or make judgements about individuals or relationships in a way that could harm any person in any way. My freedom is thus tempered by the responsibilities to others inherent in the relationships we have shared. This tempering of freedom applies to each scrap of memory involved in this narrative enquiry. In my role as teller of stories, I carry responsibility for appropriate discretion not only with regard to my personal stories but also for any stories of my colleagues I am aware of which are the basis for research fictions.

In telling stories I have not approached individuals or schools to “Do Research.” The experiences have already happened; the lives continue to unfold based on what has gone before. There is nothing I have done to influence them or make them happen. Whether I have had conversations with my colleagues and write about their experiences or not, the stories are still there. In my absence, the stories will continue to be told over lunches, in parking lots, and anywhere there are informal gatherings where my colleagues have the need and the opportunity to talk about events and situations which teach, trouble, or inspire them. The stories will continue to be shared and heard just as I have shared and heard many already.

The movie “Kinsey” about Dr.Kinsey, the ground breaking sex researcher of the 1950s lends further illustration on the ethics of observation. In the movie, I was struck by the way many of the people interviewed were initially ambushed or caught off guard in being asked to talk about what was at that time literally the unspeakable. Many moved from that "guarded but caught by surprise" stance to showing an overriding desperation to be heard, to tell their stories. Again the underlying issues are power and vulnerability. There are many situations where there is a tacit or open agreement that one person will observe others, for example, the teacher/student relationship, doctor or other healer to patient or client, employer to employee, researcher to researched. In each case the observer has power over the observed, and the observation is a manifestation and a perpetuation of that power. In this study, I am attempting to minimise that power difference, yet it is unrealistic and naive to think the issue does not exist simply because I would prefer it not to be a factor. There is also a tacit (and sometimes formal) understanding in such power dynamics that the observations will not be used unfairly against the observed, although persons in positions of power often knowingly or unknowingly break that agreement.

Observation can be a form of hegemony, in that the person or group who is observed is in a subservient position, and the dynamics of observation serve to reinforce and perpetuate that subservience. Most observations of educational assistants have been made by teachers or other researchers who have higher status than the educational assistants. The observations that have been made are a manifestation and a perpetuation of the power and status relationship that the observer has over the observed. In this study, however, the stories of educational assistants are brought to light by one of their own, and thus they cease to be the observed in the educational hierarchy and become the

observers. The dynamic is completely different. This represents a profound political shift in power. Educational assistants speaking in the first person, acquiring a voice in the system, have the potential to disrupt the dynamics of subtle oppression that have existed since the creation of the role. I thus argue that it would be deeply unethical for me NOT to do this work.

There is more to it yet. The current zeitgeist is to let it all out. Reticence is regarded as pathological. The ultimate expression of this is to be found on the Dr. Phil show, where people share the wreckage of their lives with the charismatic Dr. Phil and about 100 million others at the same time. I am sceptical that this process is ethically acceptable. The people who come to Dr. Phil are desperate to be heard and desperate to turn over their problems to someone to be solved. My feeling is that Dr. Phil violates therapist/client confidentiality. Even though the people on the show agree to it, I see their desperation as overriding their judgement. They are too vulnerable to be in a position to give informed consent. The therapist, rather than using his position and judgement to protect them in their vulnerable state, uses that vulnerability for his own purposes in having them appear on his show. That vulnerability inherent in the need to be heard is the same vulnerability that Dr. Kinsey's interview subjects showed. It is the same vulnerability that any interviewer/ researcher has to be so very careful with! It is the same vulnerability I have to be careful with. Everyone is in their own way a member of a vulnerable population. I will have the responsibility to use my position and my judgement to protect anyone who has touched my life, whose vulnerability may need that protection.

This study is emergent in nature. It is not clear yet what will come out of the telling of the stories. What I do know at this point is that my own experience inevitably

involves my privileged experiences with others. The stories that colleagues have told me over the years also contain privileged perceptions. The stories, the narratives involved in this study thus will have to be treated with sensitivity and protection. The use of research fictions may enable me to provide a somewhat safe vehicle for expressing the issues while protecting individual vulnerability.

### **Theoretical “Placing” of this Study**

Why do I turn my attention to this aspect of education? This might be called an “inside-out” study. I am an educational assistant, thus it is from the “inside” that I experience the role of the educational assistant and the dynamics of people in this role interacting with the educational system. In the literature there are many studies *about* educational assistants; but I have seen none *by* educational assistants. There are some aspects of the educational assistant’s status and role in the educational system, and the effects of this status and role on the practice of inclusive education, which I see and experience as problematic. The goal of the study is to identify and bring to light the “taken-for-granteds” and implicit assumptions around which the role of the educational assistant has been built and how this affects – and limits – the way people in this role function in our schools. This illumination will hopefully initiate changes which might better serve the needs of inclusive education.

### **Writer’s Background**

In order to be as transparent as possible about the point of view I bring to this inquiry I begin by saying a little about myself. Education is a new career for me, a new direction following retirement from unrelated careers in the military and as a maintenance

worker for the Coast Guard and Environment Canada. I am privileged in my position as an educational assistant in a number of ways. I bring the life experience of my former careers to it. I am not wholly dependent on the income I earn from it. (If I were dependent, I could not afford to work as an educational assistant, I would have to find a “real” job, a full time job, somewhere else.) I have a degree, which many assistants do not. This combination of life capital allows me to see myself beyond the limitations of the role in which I work, and gives me the opportunity and resources to advance my education. It allows me to have a voice by virtue of conducting research. It may also be significant that I was able to step laterally into the field on the basis of my undergraduate degree, and I have done so late in life. I have bypassed the usual life circumstances and choices behind the decision to go into the human services field, which I suspect may serve to socialise its members to their status and role in education and society. In effect, the human services field may teach future educational assistants to position themselves in particular power relations enacted in schools. I have been able to bypass that socialization process, and consequently the set of expectations I bring to the field may be different from those held by many of my colleagues. It is as though I suddenly became a member of a racial minority group without having been brought up and educated as such. I don’t “know my place.” This dynamic will be expanded in more detail later. Let it suffice for the moment to say that this is part of the reason I find some aspects of the role of educational assistant problematic – troubling – and why I am addressing this in my study. I see also some taken-for-granted practices in the overall field of education which impact on the specific aspect of inclusive education in which I work. I have some sensitivity to these practices because of my unusual position as a mature individual who is in some measure nonetheless brand new to education, and far enough removed from his

own schooling that it has receded well into the background. Bear in mind that the normal process which produces a teacher is 12 years in school followed by 6 years in university- 18 years of deep immersion and socialisation in a system which has its own values, assumptions, and political stance.

### **Theoretical Frames: Critical Theory and other lenses**

The broad goal of this inquiry – that of enabling changes to better serve the needs of inclusive education – operates through multiple lenses. Critical theory, as expressed by Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) is the starting point. They provide a summary statement which packages a lot of theory in one paragraph:

We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness) that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterises contemporary society is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable; that oppression has many faces and that focusing on

only one at the expense of others (e.g., class oppression versus racism ) often elides the interconnections among them; and finally, that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (p.104-105)

I will be borrowing as well from a number of other theoretical stances. This is not contradictory or problematic. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) go on to say “ Any attempts to delineate critical theory as discrete schools of analysis will fail to capture the hybridity endemic to contemporary critical analysis” (p.105).

### **Deconstruction**

I had not initially seen a deconstructive approach as part of my study, but a passage from Maclure (2003) resonates strongly with the goals, needs, and ideas I bring to my inquiry. She writes:

Deconstruction is not just a game of words. It carries an ethical and a political charge, since, as Michael Shapiro (2001) puts it, deconstruction has the power to show how “every social order rests on a forgetting of the exclusion practices through which one set of meanings has been institutionalised and various other possibilities . . . have been marginalised” (p.321 ). A deconstructive educational research could be thought of, then, as a project of resistance to the institutionalised forgetting that takes place when matters attain the status of common sense, in educational policy, pedagogy, and research itself.

She continues:

Deconstruction, as Derrida has written many times, cannot be reduced to a technique or a set of theorems, to be mastered and then ‘applied’ to individual cases, since this, again, assumes hierarchical distinctions that deconstruction interferes with – practice/theory, principles/applications. Rather, each person has to find his or her own idiom. (p.179)

Maclure (2003) then quotes Derrida directly:

Deconstruction is not a method, nor is it a set of rules or tools. [ . . . ] So, if you want to ‘do deconstruction’ – ‘you know, the kind of thing Derrida does’ – then you have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation, with your own signature, to invent the impossible and to break with the application, in the technical, neutral sense of the word.

(Derrida, cited in Maclure, p. 180)

### **My Own Journey and its Intersection with this Study**

I claim my authority, not from experience and expertise in formal education, but from a lack of it. I have not been part of the social order of education long enough to become part of the “institutionalised forgetting”. No doubt, I have internalized other kinds of “institutionalized forgetting,” and I am likely to enact these without always naming them, but my focus here is on the practice of inclusive education. The intent of my study will in part be realised as “a project of resistance to the institutionalised forgetting that takes place” (Maclure, 2003, p. 179). And I am indeed working from “my own singular situation” ( p. 180). My childhood and youth involved frequent relocation

to different parts of Canada. I remember even as a very young child noticing the “taken-for-granteds” in each new place, initially aware of the local “institutionalised forgetting,” and over time becoming part of it. My study is also politically and ethically charged because it has implications for the perpetuation or disruption of power relationships and social hierarchies, and the welfare of disadvantaged individuals. It is not clear to me whether I am borrowing from Derrida and some of his interpreters, or whether they simply name for me some aspects of my study. What is clear is that I will use some of the approaches of deconstruction as part of my study. This approach is a partial blending point between critical theory and deconstruction. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) in their introduction, state, “Qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces, in our view, undeniably dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth” (p.87).

I often feel considerable anxiety about what I am trying to express, because being the bearer of “undeniably dangerous knowledge” is upsetting. It involves taking a stand, presuming to “overturn sovereign regimes of truth.” This knowledge is more accessible to me than it would be to outside researchers, because I am inside the perspective of the educational assistant, yet on the periphery of the culture of the educational system by virtue of being new to it. Expressing that knowledge is not easy. I do not speak from the safety of detachment and distance. There can be no pretence of objectivity here! For me to express a disruptive point of view means stepping outside the comfort, safety, and fellowship of the familiar and agreed upon, into the darkness and loneliness of that which is not known and not part of the accepted world view. It means breaking from the circle around the warm fire, leaving the tribe, and dealing with the possibility of not being able

to come back. This may or may not be a pragmatic reality, yet it is definitely a psychological truth. And I speak, not with any institutional status or authority, but from the bottom of the educational hierarchy. There are times when I feel I am not as effective at some aspects of what I do as I would like to be, so I cannot even claim the authority of being an exceptional contributor to the educational process. Adding a dark background to this anxiety is the nagging fear that what I feel so passionately might be wrong, in the sense of being just personal anguish, making my vision thereby a victim of my own skewed perceptions. Yet I claim authority based on these feelings. A position that admits to doubt gains credibility from the self questioning inherent in that admission. And a path that is difficult to follow merits attention because it may show us something beyond the well worn trails we habitually follow.

### **Workplace issues: The ethics of silence or dissent**

- It feels somehow improper, impolite, to bring up a disparate point of view about day to day practice. It feels like a betrayal of good working relationships with teachers and administrators I hold in high regard, to express negative perceptions - and thereby reveal I have them - about the institutional dynamics in which my colleagues and I function. It feels unprofessional. It feels "not nice." This sense of disloyalty associated with my critique of the institutional climate is compounded by the feelings of deep respect and affection I have for teachers and administrators with whom I have worked. It feels like a lack of integrity to pursue this line of thought. But I am rescued from my sense that it is somehow improper for me to speak my truths, by the words of Gloria Steinham (1993), "Underneath, there were doubts and tensions. And underneath is where we had been trained to keep them . . . I'd forgotten the seductive power of

niceness and unanimity" (p.113). These words remind me of those of Kincheloe and Maclaren (2003). "Certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterises contemporary society is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable" (p. 105). I *do not* accept the social status of the educational assistant as natural, necessary, or inevitable! At the same time, if I were to follow a "safer" line of inquiry, one which does not highlight the issues of power that I find so troublesome, then my passivity in this regard would serve to perpetuate the status quo. I feel a moral need to do what I can in a positive and responsible way to question the status quo, and thus my choice of question and method is highly value laden. The intent of critical theory is the disruption of inequitable power relationships. However uncomfortable I might be with the effect of what I have to say, critical theory remains my predominate theoretical basis, because it is my *intent* to use my work as a form of social criticism and a means to disrupt the status quo.

Interestingly, I found these powerful emotional issues echoed by Brookfield in "a phenomenograph of adult critical reflection" as summarised in his section on phenomenological analysis. (Brookfield, as cited in Patton 2002 p. 483) Brookfield found five themes of adult critical reflection:

- Impostership – the sense that participating in critical thought is an act of bad faith.
- Cultural suicide – the recognition that challenging conventional assumptions risks cutting people off from the cultures that have defined and sustained them *up to that point in their lives.*

- Lost innocence – the move from dualistic certainty toward dialectical and multiplistic modes of reasoning
- Roadrunning – the incrementally fluctuating flirtation with new modes of thought and being
- Community – the importance of a sustaining support group to those in critical process.

These themes are not obscure, except perhaps for “roadrunning.” I interpret roadrunning to mean a process of looking at my world and my practice in a new and disruptive way, then intermittently retreating back to the safe and familiar, and then venturing again, perhaps farther, into new uncomfortable interpretations of my life around me.

Viewed through this lens, my subjective experience of the questions I am raising in my thesis enquiry process is clearly that of a person in a state of critical reflection. It is not my intent to pursue this line of reasoning further, other than to say I find it validating to see my experience reflected in this work. Brookfield’s work names the process for me, and shows that I am not alone in my feelings. When the genie is let out of the bottle, being frightened is an appropriate and predictable response. I see this positively; the state of critical reflection shows a high degree of experiential involvement in my work, which is what I am aiming for. My interpretive focus is on social interaction and power relations as they are revealed by subjective experience, so at this fork in the path, I follow the signpost marked power relations, and see where it leads me.

It is noteworthy here that my own processes during this project – the intellectual, moral, and emotional doubts, the sense of incompleteness despite my best efforts, and the

uneasiness at my inability to make ironclad, “I’m-sure-beyond-a-shadow-of-doubt” statements, all mirror the overall processes of qualitative research. In qualitative research one often investigates that which is too fuzzy, too complex, too interwoven in the vagaries of life, to be definitively captured. One does the best one can to address the sources of doubt, to give credibility to the evidence and the arguments, to improve the level of understanding, and to communicate that understanding. I have tried to make a difference, despite the acknowledged inherent incompleteness of the process of inquiry.

### **Oppression**

I have chosen to quote a passage where Kincheloe (2002) uses the word “oppression.” How can I suggest that such a loaded concept could apply to any aspect of the dynamics of the PEI educational system? How can the concept of oppression be part of my theoretical orientation, when we practice inclusive education, and every effort is made to ensure that no child is excluded from the system? How can this apply when egalitarianism is inherent in the stated values of the system? Among the mandated beliefs of the PEI Eastern School District are the statements:

### **Mission Statement**

The Eastern School District is committed to excellence in education. In partnership with the community, we will provide a safe and caring learning environment in which all students have the opportunity to reach their potential and to face the future with confidence

### **Beliefs**

These beliefs are the expression of the Eastern School District's fundamental

values.

*We believe that high self-esteem and a respect for others are essential to successful teaching and learning.*

*We believe in the unique dignity and worth of every human being.*

*We believe in equitable access to learning opportunities.*

*We believe all adults have a responsibility to be advocates for children.*

*We believe that all individuals have power to positively influence their future.*

*We believe that all District staff should be exemplary professionals.* [Italics added]

(Eastern School District, 2005)

I have not quoted the mission statement in its entirety, but rather have selected those statements which are relevant to this discussion, in that each belief quoted emphasises some aspect of the egalitarianism intended by the school district.

This professional world does not look so egalitarian to the educational assistant, which is why the use of the word “oppression” is entirely appropriate and applicable in describing the theoretical basis for my work. Freire (2005) shows us the reasons:

One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is *prescription*. Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. Thus, the behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor (p.46) . . . Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of

oppression (p. 55) . . . Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects (p. 85).

In other words, oppression is a psychological process and condition. The damage it does is internal, subtle, and pervasive, in addition to or instead of that which is externally apparent. This, in a nutshell, is the reason for the passion I feel in doing this study. Freire continues with a discussion of the fear involved in the process of transforming the dynamics of oppression, which names for me another aspect of the anxiety I experience in doing this study:

The oppressed, having internalised the image of the oppressor and adapted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. But the struggle to be more fully human has already begun in the authentic struggle to transform the situation. Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanised and dehumanising totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they

oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanised because he dehumanises others, is unable to lead this struggle. ( p. 47)

Only educational assistants, who to this point in time have been silent in the organisational dynamics of the PEI education system, can lead the process of changing the system to one where the professed inclusive ideology includes them, in practice and in thought. It is ironic indeed that the shift to inclusive education, and the realisation of human rights issues in education, has also created a dynamic which limits the humanity of a segment of the school population. As a country and as an educational community we tend to think of oppression as a third world or “other world” issue. I hope we can make the abrupt perceptual shift needed to recognise that oppression is systemic in our own classrooms - and thus make the changes necessary to end it.

To revisit Kincheloe (2002), the last part of the statement I quoted was “Mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression” (p. 105). I am going in the opposite direction. I hope to interrupt a system of class oppression enacted in the many everyday practices and institutional structures found within schools.

## **Discourse**

Lather (1991) provides an additional basis for my study as she asks many questions about research, in particular the investigation of discourse. She writes, “Critical appropriations of post modernism focus on the regulatory functions of discourses that articulate and organise our everyday experiences of the world. Their

“object” of inquiry is the power-saturated discourses that monitor and normalise our sense of who we are and what is possible” (p. 89). This names for me a dynamic that bears further investigation. Discourse includes for me the tone, content, and presuppositions of a variety of written material - collective agreements, competition postings, policy statements, the minutes of meetings, and research literature. Part of my method will be to examine the discourse of historical and current documentation regarding the role of the educational assistant in the Island educational system and elsewhere to see how they shape what is possible.

Britzman (2003) tells us, “Discourses authorise what can and cannot be said; they produce relations of power and communities of assent and dissent, and thus discursive boundaries are always being redrawn around what constitutes the desirable and the undesirable and around what makes possible particular structures of intelligibility and unintelligibility” (p.252).

I will be looking at relations of power and limits on what can be said, in an attempt to deepen my understanding of why the world of the educational assistant is the way it is. Wink (2000) expresses it very simply, and names for me a number of the powerful yet unseen constraints which are a feature of being an educational assistant:

It turns out that *discourse* is not just the use of words. Rather, it is the use of loaded words that establish who is on what rung of the ladder . . . In discourse, the words carry subtle (and not so subtle) messages about power. It seeks to establish the hidden rules for who speaks and who listens; what knowledge is good and bad; whose words have more power and whose words are marginalised. (p.50)

Discourse is difficult to “see” because its effects are so subtle and so pervasive. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) offer a clear and succinct discussion of this effect:

From a critical perspective, linguistic descriptions are not simply about the world but serve to construct it. With these linguistic notions in mind, criticalists begin to study the way language in the form of discourses serves as a form of regulation and domination. Discursive practices are defined as a set of tacit rules that regulate what can and cannot be said; who can speak with the blessing of authority and who must listen; and whose social constructions are valid and whose are erroneous and unimportant . . . . discursive power validates particular research strategies, narrative formats, and modes of representation. (p.94)

### **Fabrication and textual authority**

The desire for “scientific authority” is not appropriate and cannot be realised when the subject is qualitative research dealing with complex interpersonal relations. “Scientific authority” is meaningful when it deals with those aspects of study which are technical in nature and can be made very precise and within sharp limits, such as chemistry or physics. When we attempt to smuggle this style of thinking out of its appropriate context into the wider arena of inquiries about the complexities of human interaction, it becomes an impostor and loses its authority. The best we ( by “we” I mean all involved in text, including the readers ) can do is to be as honest, transparent, and clear about the “location” and nature of our presence as we can be. We have to possess the courage to tacitly agree to tolerate some degree of uncertainty about our level of knowledge. The writer has to be open about uncertainty, and the reader has to accept this

limitation and draw whatever level of meaning is available in the exchange. The alternatives are practising the kind of collusion in self deception about certainty which marked the positivist position, or getting lost in the hall of mirrors of endless analysis.

MacLure (2003) suggests the need to use “alternative metaphors of method . . . metaphors of *fabrication* in other words. Rather than trying to escape from the double bind of mastery and surrender, we could acknowledge the productive dilemma that it creates for the researcher, inescapably caught up in the weave of the life story.” This resonates with my position. I will not be using life history, but I will be using research fictions based on the stories my colleagues have told me about their work and their experiences in the educational organisation – and the issues of “presence” are the same. Where I differ from MacLure on this point is that I don’t see mastery/surrender as a dilemma or double bind. I see mastery/surrender as a dualism, which limits and funnels our awareness of possibilities. I like MacLure’s suggestion of “acknowledging” the mastery/surrender “hot point”. ( I am avoiding using her term “productive dilemma” here.) I acknowledge this “hot point” not as so much as a “productive dilemma” but *as an issue, and an opportunity*. I see text as drawing its authenticity from the honesty of the location of its voice, and from the author’s taking responsibility for where he or she is standing. Text which clearly and transparently comes from its author has authenticity and power. Text which clearly and transparently comes from another voice has authenticity and power. Text which clearly and transparently is a synthesis has authenticity and power. Textual power is not a zero-sum situation. A researcher’s textual authenticity and power is not reduced by the sharing of it, by the relocating of it, or by the diluting of it. I am quite comfortable from a both a theoretical and a pragmatic stance, with claiming my authority and my power from whatever position best suits my

communicative needs. I just have to make sure that position is clear and explicit.

A caution I see regarding the “place” of the writer is associated with the desire for “invisible” writing. When power is gained by a writer’s attempts to be invisible, to describe, narrate, debate, or judge from the ubiquitous presence of a pair of all seeing, politically neutral, value free eyes, then authenticity suffers. Lather (1991, p. 91) notes “To use language so that it gives the appearance of clear, referential meaning is to conceal the artifice that produces the appearance of objectivity.” Maclure (2003) tells us, “Texts are often at their most persuasive when they don’t seem at all rhetorical, but rather pass themselves off as fact or realistic description” (p.81) She continues, “The hardest thing to see in any text is that which poses itself as natural and unquestionable.” An example from daily life illustrates. In a recent newspaper article about a school - an all black school - in North Preston, Nova Scotia, Mahoney (2005) writes, “North Preston, situated at the end of a remote side road about 15 kilometres northeast of Halifax, is a rundown community of about 3,500 where laundry hangs on clotheslines, men work on cars and children point at road kill. Unemployment is high” (Globe and Mail, October 15, 2005). At first glance this appears to be innocuous description, but it is actually heavy with rhetoric. The author did not say, “As I drove along, I saw clotheslines filled with laundry hanging up to dry, and groups of men working on cars” which would have drawn attention to what the author chose to see as important, to look at, to comment upon, and to make judgements about, or to give a clue about her assumptions and motives – or the fact that she has assumptions and motives in what he is saying. Instead, the first statement conceals the writer’s “place” and manipulates the readers into making the judgements the author intends, while at the same time leading the readers into thinking they have participated in an objective description. In his introduction to *Pedagogy of the*

*Oppressed* , Macedo (in Freire, 2005) quotes Goldberg's argument that "The Assumption of a View from Nowhere is the projection of local values as neutrally universal ones, the globalising of ethnocentric values, as Stam and Shohat put it." The author of this article has indeed assumed the "View from Nowhere." What values is she projecting as neutral and universal? What exactly does the author mean by the phrase "run down community"? Did she actually *see* children pointing at road kill, and if she did, what does this mean? I see this as an invitation to the readers to join in a negative judgement about the community, the people in it, and their way of life. The readers are given permission – they are urged – to make that judgement from a position of righteous moral superiority, which is evidenced by the knowledge that in *their* community, as opposed to in this "othered" community, clothes don't dry on clotheslines, because people have earned the money to own appliances to do that. In *their* community, men don't work on cars because they have better things to do, and besides they have money to pay other people – lesser people – to do that service for them, and furthermore, they own cars that are new enough – good enough – that they don't need to be worked on to keep them running, and they own these good cars – not like the beaters seen in the village – because they have worked hard, and worked effectively, in good jobs, and managed their money well, so the material advantages they enjoy are what they deserve, and are indicative of their rightful place in the social order, just as the poverty seen in this community is indicative of the rightful place of these people! So what this part of the article does, in a subtle and implicit way, is act as an oppressive force on the people about whom it is written – perhaps even without the full awareness of the author – and it incites the readers to join in that oppression. None of this is explicit. Nothing racist or classist is said, yet the text, which is the relationship between what the author assumed and

thought, what she wrote, the meaning taken, and the reaction to it, is a dynamic in which I refuse to participate!

Contrast the above with another passage also describing a community in a negative voice, yet written in the first person, where the author's involvement and judgements are open, personal and explicit:

I couldn't resist wandering around the streets of East Toledo and our old neighbourhood the night before. There were the same small houses, the same bars and churches in equal numbers, the same Polish and Hungarian social clubs. A few more black families had moved in, and Puerto Rican workers were bringing in a new layer of ethnicity, but what looked like the same tricycles were rusting in the front yards, the same wash was flapping on the lines, and the same big TV antenna dwarfed each roof, as though life here could only be bearable if lived elsewhere in the imagination.

Certainly, my teenage self had been totally consumed with escaping. If I had written any book then, it would have been titled *Getting Out* - and most of my friends felt the same. (Steinham, 1992, p.110)

I much prefer the greater transparency and authenticity – the directness and honesty – of an author having an explicit presence, and this is what I strive for. The “View from Nowhere” projection of ethnocentric values as global and neutral is also an issue I will be exploring in the document review section of this work.

MacLure continues the chapter with section entitled “Wrestling with identity.” It is about a researcher doing an ethnographic study on a group of erotic dancers/wrestlers

who ends up doing a performance with them as part of the project. In an effort to avoid “one-way reading” she writes multiple conflicting views about the same person (p.130). I find the idea of not being required to make one specific judgement, to find a “right answer” to be freeing, and I will use this technique at some point. The lesson here is that the ability to tolerate and use contradiction, paradox, and ambiguity adds power and validity to our inquiries. In educational research we are dealing with the complexities of human beings, their interactions, and their social structures. If we *don't* see and communicate paradox, ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty, and anomaly, we are probably missing something.

I leave the final words in this discussion of fabrication and authority to Clough (2002) in *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research*:

We are a long way from realising that research in the social sciences will find in its theatres of inquiry only what it puts there. ( And this is particularly true in my own field of educational difficulty, whose origins in the measurement of behaviour endure as stark functions of policy) For ‘educational practices’ are pre-eminently worlds of paid-up meanings – as it were – and attributions; in experience they issue from and are set about with meanings which are always ready-to-hand. And as researchers of educational practices, we ourselves give shape, weight, and identity to these meanings: we do not come innocent to a task or situation of events; rather, we wilfully situate those events not merely in the institutional meanings which our profession provides but also, and in the same moment, we constitute them as expressions of ourselves. Inevitably, the energies of our own psychic and social history fuel our insight, and

leave traces of those earlier meanings. But because the institutional drive requires a publicly accountable knowledge, we resort to method to clarify – in fact mostly obscure – our true involvement. (p. 83)

This is another high density passage, with a lot of theory packed into one paragraph. Clough tells us here that our inquiries are coloured by the practices (institutional meanings) we bring to them, as well as our own personal histories, and that method, rather than making our meaning more precise, conceals those influences. I see this as meaning that our practices and our inquiries are inevitably going to be, to some extent, snapshots of ourselves. The best we can do is to be as open and as insightful as possible in acknowledging that. He reasons – and I agree – that:

The essential point is that educational researchers should assemble, within their research craft, an honesty and integrity of language with which to express their moral positions (as well as the methodological justifications) of their inquiry. This must inevitably call for new ways of seeing. (Clough, 2002, p. 86)

### **New Ways of Seeing**

In terms of “new ways of seeing” I like to think of narrative inquiry, evocative narrative, or critical narrative – the various nuances on the theme of storied exploration of human interaction – as, to coin a phrase, “state of the art science.” This phrase is deliberately “bumpy” or incongruous, involving an apparent contradiction in terms, and my intent in using it is as a reminder that the divisions in the ways we see our worlds are limiting. In the preface I expressed a desire to move away from the concept of “research”

because of the connotations of the word. To me, and I think to many readers, this word subtly implies a power over and a separateness from the subject / object of the work. I suggest, again in terms of “new ways of seeing,” that we need a different *relationship* with the world about which we are inquiring. Freire (2005) shows us a different way we can approach the relationships involved in the quest to expand our knowledge and understanding. Although the work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is not new, (original copyright 1970), its implications for inquiry (I am avoiding using the R word here) are profound. The work is about pedagogy – how the relationships among people, social class, knowledge, history, action, the processes of learning and social change – all are interconnected. The same orientation applied to inquiry – again avoiding the R word – can lead us to whole new worlds. His words apply not only to the general process of inquiry, but also to the specific situation where a group without a voice very much needs to be heard:

The role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of *logos* (p.81).

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation . . . problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing . . . problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. . . . problem-posing education makes

them (students) critical thinkers (p.83).

Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. (p. 86)

If we substitute the word “inquiry” for “education” in the above quotes we see a process of inquiry using this approach as much more “alive,” much more tied in with the dynamics of life, than the concept of “research.” The questions are more meaningful, more value-laden; the answers not definitive or fixed, but part of a dynamic process. Freire (2005) continues with his concept of dialogue, which he discusses in a pedagogical sense, and which I see as applying equally well to the process of inquiry:

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namer as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built on silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. . . Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. (p.88)

Then he brings *love* into the discussion – no “scientific neutrality” here! (p. 89).

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and its people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the

foundation of the dialogue and the dialogue itself. . . . Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. (p.89)

Dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility. (p.90)

The circle is completed by including humility. Inquiry undertaken in this spirit is much more gentle in its approach. This is a spirit of inquiry based on love, humility, and entering into dialogue with others and with the world, about the problems posed by our place in the world. It is inquiry with a different *attitude*, and I interpret this as one “new way of seeing” that Clough (2002) posits is needed. This “problem-posing” form of inquiry is not neutral, but rather has a strong moral and emotional basis. It is only when we can conceive of inquiry in this way that we can see the implicit connotations of arrogance and power in the way in which the concept of “research” tends to be used. In the “research” model of inquiry, knowledge is “acquired”, “owned”, and “dominated” and it is used for the purposes of acquiring, owning, and dominating. I hope, I strive, that it be not so here.

## Chapter IV: Historical Roots and Current Practice

### A preview of issues

The aim of this chapter is to unearth some of the deeply embedded layers of thinking surrounding the ways in which the educational community perceives, defines, and treats educational assistants. In order to make it easier for the reader to follow this process, which at times sifts through strata which are thick and heavy, I provide a preview list of the key issues in the order in which they emerge.

1. Educational assistants were historically seen as a threat and as a problem to be dealt with. Consequently they were defined as a “problem population” and treated as such from the earliest days of their presence in schools.
2. The teaching profession is an “in-group” which has served to exclude educational assistants, who are an “out-group.”
3. Debate regarding educational assistants has been couched in terms which conceal its true nature – a power struggle.
4. Inclusion issues have become framed in teacher-centred discourse, which excludes consideration of alternate modes of thought.
5. Educational assistants have been defined at a low level of expectations, which emphasises compliance with their low status.
6. Current policy and practice reflects all of the above issues.
7. The power saturated discourse in current policy and practice does not reflect best leadership practices.
8. Leadership and policies fostering genuine collaboration and teamwork, and egalitarian attitudes and relationships, are more effective ways of working together and modeling the ideals of an inclusive school.

Some documents created in the early days of inclusion – and thus the early days of educational assistants – show some of the historical roots of current practice. Thirty two years ago, Enns, Dylon, and McDowell (1974) prepared a 72 page document for the Canadian Teachers Federation entitled, *Implications of the Employment of Auxiliary Personnel in Some Canadian Schools*. The first two sentences of the preface set the tone which is still in effect today:

For more than a decade teachers have been wrestling with the question of whether persons who are not professionally trained and certified in education *belong in schools* [italics added] and, if they do, what their functions should be and what relationship they should have to the organised teaching profession.

The purpose of this report is to outline some of the problems and questions that surround the employment of teacher aides and other auxiliary personnel, and to propose some solutions.

In other words, there was a strong sentiment that persons other than certified teachers shouldn't be in the schools. The “auxiliary personnel” were seen as a threat and as a problem to be dealt with, to which “some solutions” were required. This is key point, because it means that from the very genesis of the role, educational assistants have been framed as a problem population, and that framework continues to this day. *Who* were/are they a problem for? *Who* was/is in a position of power to neutralise that threat? *How* was/is that power manifested in neutralising that threat? *What* was/is done to neutralise that threat? These are not rhetorical questions, but rather points to consider when we think about how policy, practice, and research work together as an expression of

that framework, and what this means to the people who are current workers in this long-standing “problem population.”

In the introduction section of this document, Channon (1974) frames the debate within two larger societal trends: bureaucratisation and professionalism. Bureaucracy is the need to subdivide, specialise, and co-ordinate labour when objectives are too large or complex to be achieved by individuals or small groups. Professionalism is the process in which members of an occupation seek to increase the level of competence and status of the occupation by setting requirements and standards. She argues that these trends operate in a state of tension with one another, a tension which is reflected in the debate about employment of “auxiliary personnel” in school. Her description of the role of these forces is prophetic, as it applies to the current tensions just as it did 32 years ago:

Professionalism tends to place emphasis on the individual practitioner – his expertise, autonomy, commitment and responsibility. As well, professionalism fosters the development of an occupational “culture.” That is to say, the members of a particular occupation tend to form an “in-group” of people who share a particular world view, are bound together by common experiences of training and work, adhere to certain norms of behaviour and take a particular stance toward “outsiders” who lack these common elements. *It is possible that this particular aspect of professionalized occupations may be crucial in the decisions made regarding the roles of auxiliary personnel and their relationship to teachers.* [italics added]

To a certain extent bureaucratisation fosters professionalism in creating new occupations which may seek to organise and increase their own professional

status. On the other hand, in its move to increase specialisation, bureaucratisation may demand the removal of a prized set of functions from one occupation and its transfer to another, and probably lower status, occupation . . . . In dealing with sub-professional groups, the tendency is to bureaucratise, by seeking direct administrative control over the tasks and training of the sub-group. *This response, it should be noted, may well run counter to the wishes of the occupational sub-group as it too begins to search for professional status.* [italics added] (Enns, Dylon, & McDowell, 1974, p.3)

The problem with how this tension was playing out at that time, and how it has evolved and continued to this day, is that it was and it is a power struggle. This tension is often couched in terms of a debate about what works best and what is best for the students, which conceals its true nature – that of a power struggle. The professional group – the Canadian Teachers Federation – muddied the waters, creating a murkiness which has persisted to this day, by originating discourse which has imbedded their own interests in terms of the welfare and needs of the students. The *P.E.I.T.F. Handbook on the Use of Auxiliary Personnel* (1976) states (section II):

The Federation . . . recognises that the most important element in the school environment after the child is the teacher. The Federation believes, as well, that the teacher is often the most important person in a child's life outside his/her home. [Auxiliary personnel's] sole function is to make the profession more professional by reducing the number of non-professional tasks the teacher must perform, thereby *allowing the teacher more time to consider the children and their*

*needs*" [italics added- this statement contains the insinuation or even the assumption that no one else considers the children and their needs, or no one else is capable of this.]

The welfare and needs of the students is not only the stated *raison d'être* of the education system, it is also the ultimate motherhood issue. This means that any attempt at discussion regarding what anyone other than a teacher does for inclusive education, can be portrayed and seen as compromising the welfare and needs of the students. The interests, power, privilege, and elitism of the teaching profession are concealed from the discussion. They are not open to question, examination, or debate, camouflaged as they are behind that smokescreen. This discourse has, over time, created a dynamic which privileges the teaching profession over educational assistants in ways which are pervasive and counterproductive to the functioning, aims, and values of inclusive education. The structural dynamic in which the educational assistant works is the antithesis of an inclusive community.

I have shown that educational discourse disadvantages and disenfranchises educational assistants. This line of inquiry also shows that the teacher-framed discourse has had the effect of framing inclusion issues almost entirely within the context of the processes over which teachers preside. This means that suggestions of possible alternative programs, services, and interactions which are not classroom centred and teacher centred tend to be dismissed as anti-inclusionary – as unenlightened or morally repugnant.

There are other consequences to teacher and process-framed education. When a student experiences a lack of fit into classroom content, dynamics, and processes, the

discourse tends to define that difficulty as a disability. To say it another way, from ages 6 to 18 the life of virtually every person is centred around a classroom. It is required by law. For this age group the norm is almost 100% “bums on seats,” some more consistently and more effectively than others. Yet when we move beyond the age of legally mandated schooling, all the diversity that life has to offer comes into play, and people are moved by aptitude, interest, need, caste, and opportunity – even by pathology – into a thousand different activities. How many people move into this next phase of their lives scarred by feelings of being misfits and failures, feelings created because they did not fit and did not succeed in a classroom environment? We speak of modern inclusive education as having a heterogeneous population, but this is only because our thinking is framed entirely around the idea of the classroom. If we take our thinking outside the confines of a classroom, and look instead at the larger world, then we see the population of a classroom as stunningly homogeneous. Everyone is doing the same basic activities, with the same goals, all of which are created around the lives and values of a middle class academic elite, and everyone is in the same place at the same time. It is 100% eyes front and bums on seats, and there is no diversity at all! So those for whom the system works well, are privileged by this dynamic, and the 20% or so for whom it does not work, those diverse students we maintain we “include,” continue to be marginalised by an academic system which defines everyone, and measures success, in terms of itself!

The tendency of professionals to “debureaucratize” when looking up the ladder of the hierarchy, and to seek to increase bureaucratic power when looking down, is further counterproductive. This tendency works not only against the interests of those with the least amount of political power – educational assistants – but it also works against the

functioning of collaborative relationships. Ruedo and Monzo (2002) identified status and power differences as barriers to effective collaboration. Sergiovanni (1992) discusses at length how the use of bureaucratic power assumes supervisory rather than collaborative relationships, emphasising hierarchy, rules and regulations, mandates, and role expectations. This dynamic narrows the performance of the persons involved (p. 30).

The ideas of collaboration, teamwork, and professional communities involving ‘auxiliary personnel’ were not well considered at the time the new people were introduced into the schools. But why would they have been? At that time, teaching was very much a solo activity. Presupposing the second adult in the classroom belonged (was “naturally”) in a clearly subservient role, and presupposing also this to be the best or only way to construct these relationships, served to protect and maintain the dynamic of the solo teacher, and continues to do so to this day. The diversity of needs which are now routinely present in most classrooms has required a shift in method and of thinking from that of individual effort to that of a team approach. The vestiges of old style thinking have ensured that we are not quite there yet.

If the teaching profession is an “in-group” as Channon (1974) tells us – and in the tone of the language used it clearly is – then the educational assistants and others in the school are clearly an “out-group” who are formally excluded. Teachers operate with professional authority; educational assistants operate under the bureaucratic authority of the teachers. Is this an inclusive community? Of course it is not. The gap in status and power is as wide as it is pervasive. Does this dynamic foster the development of educational assistants to be the best professionals they can be, to make the best contribution they can? Does this dynamic best serve the interests of an inclusive community and the needs of the most challenging and vulnerable students? Of course it

does not. And as an educational community, we cannot have it both ways. We cannot have one group privileged over another on the basis of the privileged group's interests, while at the same time portraying that privilege as being in the best interests of the students and the community. It does not work. It's not working. I suggest that we can have one group operating with bureaucratic privilege over another, or we can have an inclusive education community, but we cannot have both.

Channon (1974) argues that society is moving towards the creation of paramedics, paradentists, paralawyers, and parateachers to "de-professionalize" various occupations, to ensure that services are provided without substantial cost increases. This argument contains the assumption that the "paras" are somehow less professional than the occupational parent groups they are associated with. I red flag this assumption and I disagree with it. The "paras" are not a watered down and cheaper version of the occupational groups they are associated with. I see them rather as specialists in some aspect of the occupation. A story illustrates:

A number of years ago in Halifax I witnessed a collision – with injuries – between a motor scooter and a car, and after ensuring the casualty was protected from further injury, I made the 911 call. The 911 operator assured me that due to our proximity to the hospital the ambulance would be there very quickly. Sure enough, the ambulance arrived within minutes of my call. I could see that the attendants had actually started assessing the injured person and the situation in the few seconds it took them to move to her side. Within 30 seconds they had further reassured her and made her more physically and emotionally comfortable. In less than another two minutes, and without frightening her, hurting her, or making her uncomfortable, they had thoroughly examined her, determined her visible and potential injuries, responded to her concerns, and called the necessary

information to the hospital emergency room. In another minute or so they had gently and capably placed her on a stretcher, protected her from further injury, loaded and secured the stretcher in the ambulance, and were on their way to the hospital. This man and his partner were not “paramedics.” They were not some kind of halfway watered down doctors. No, they were Emergency Medical Technicians. They were specialists in being first responders to accidents. They were totally focussed on the well being of their patient. They were very, very good at what they did. They were the people I would want to attend to me if I were injured. They were professionals in their own right.

The point of this story is that educational assistants do not see themselves as some kind of “almost” teachers. Educational assistants see themselves as specialists in working with and meeting the needs of the students who have challenges requiring extra support. To say it another way, the power of professionalism is not a zero-sum situation. It does not make doctors any less professional that their associates in the medical care field are also holders of professional status. It does not make teachers any less professional if their associates in education also hold professional status. Educational assistants are not taking any set of functions from teachers, because prior to the advent of inclusive education, the students that EAs provide support for were usually not in the classrooms.

Enns (1974) , in the second chapter of the document, begins by noting:

“The day of the teacher as an independent operator in the classroom is past. The day when he could close his classroom door and be the only arbitrator within the confines of his ‘eggcrate’ is gone” (p. 11).

Enns (1974) is investigating the issues of “auxiliary personnel” whose purpose is to augment various facets of the teacher’s work. There is a key difference between this

type of “auxiliary personnel” and the educational assistants in Prince Edward Island, who are the subject of this thesis. Educational assistants in Prince Edward Island have a specific and specialised reason for being in the schools – they are there to provide support for students with special educational needs. They are prepared for that role by a specialised two year community college course in human services, or by 4,000 hours of experience working with students with special educational needs. This training and/or experience qualifies educational assistants to be certified by the Prince Edward Island Department of Education. In the schools, they continue to develop and grow in that role through ongoing dedicated experience working with the variety of special needs that are now a part of every school.

I have argued that educational assistants need to see themselves as professionals in their right, and need to be seen in that way. This premise means that some of the arguments that Enman (1974) makes regarding the professional role of teachers apply equally to educational assistants as well. He states:

Releasing a teacher from clerical and other routine administrative duties and assigning them to aides promotes specialisation of behaviour for the teacher as well as the aide. *Task specialisation, however, tends to be restrictive, placing the individual in a more limited role and leading ultimately to mere performance according to a recipe* [italics added]. Such an approach would be anti-professional. But there is a more rewarding type of specialisation the teacher and the school system may pursue. Victor Thompson in Modern Organization calls it personal specialisation, characterised by a variety of interdependent tasks and functions, a high degree of challenge, a potential for self-identification and a deep

dependence and trust upon the individual by the organisation within which he works. (p.25)

I suggest that it is just that kind of “personal specialisation” that educational assistants need in order to function to optimum effect in the school system. I contend that in Prince Edward Island schools, there is confusion, in policy and practice, between the role of aide, and the role of educational assistant. The role of aide is a subordinate role in support of teachers. The role of the educational assistant is – and needs to be seen as – a more specialised role, that of providing support to students with special needs, and whose function is ideally that of a professional.

Dillon (1974), in his chapter on “The Preparation and Certification of Auxiliary Personnel” notes that there is no consensus about affiliation, certification, training, and duties of auxiliary personnel (p. 33) He continues, however, that teacher organisations across the country agree on four core professional teaching tasks: diagnosis, prescription, implementation, and evaluation, which belong solely to the certified professionals and cannot be *usurped* by auxiliary personnel. [I have summarised his argument and emphasised his use of the word *usurped*, to again show that the presence of auxiliary personnel was seen as a threat.] This line of reasoning has continued to this day.

In 1976 the P.E.I. Teachers’ Federation published a brief *Handbook on the Use of Auxiliary Personnel* which draws clear lines:

#### PEITF POLICY STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AUXILIARY PERSONNEL

1. That the function of auxiliary personnel is to assist the teacher and/or the school;

2. That teaching tasks such as planning, diagnosing, prescribing, instructing, and evaluating are the responsibility of the certified teacher;
3. That auxiliary personnel shall be responsible to the principal of the school to which they are assigned, and shall be under the direct supervision of a certified teacher or group of teachers;
4. That no teacher be required to use the services of auxiliary personnel; and,

*It should be kept in mind that an auxiliary personnel program should not detract from the professional or economic status of teachers [italics added].*

The collective agreement for teachers in P.E.I. which was written following the publication of the above pamphlet had the following section added:

#### SECTION 36- TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

##### 36:01 AUXILIARY PERSONNEL

The following shall govern the use of auxiliary personnel:

- (a) the function of auxiliary personnel is to assist the teacher and/or the school;
- (b) teaching tasks such as planning, diagnosing, prescribing, instructing and evaluating are the responsibility of the certified teacher but auxiliary personnel may assist the teacher in the performance of any of these tasks;
- (c) auxiliary personnel shall be responsible to the principal of the school to which they are assigned and shall be supervised by a certified teacher or group of teachers;

(d) auxiliary personnel shall be engaged as supplementary to and not replacements for the certified teacher. (*Memorandum of Agreement Between the Province of Prince Edward Island as Represented by the Minister of Education and The Prince Edward Island Teachers' Federation, 1977*, section 36:01)

Another document, this one from the Canadian Education Association, (1975) contains several statements which are also prophetic:

Teachers resented it when aides assumed duties that teachers considered to be professional. . . . It was thought that unionization of school aides would possibly lead to demarkation disputes and reduce the necessary flexibility in their use. Any increase in their employment was seen as dependent to some extent upon the availability of jobs for teachers and the willingness of teachers' organisations to accept differentiated staffing. Another board felt that teachers tended to be patronising in their attitude toward aides. (p. 8)

The section on “Special Education Aides” is particularly relevant and worth quoting in entirety, in that some, but not all of the tasks performed today by educational assistants are included in this description:

## SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

Also called

Orthopaedic Assistants,  
Teacher Aides (Special  
Education, Aides for the  
Trainable Mentally Retarded,  
Paraprofessional Assistants

Special education aides work with students who are physically handicapped or mentally retarded or both. Their duties may include assisting in the mobilisation of students within the classroom and school; organising local arrangements for transportation of pupils to and from school; assisting teachers in handling students during swimming classes and sport and outdoor education programs; helping students with feeding, dressing, toileting, and washing; assisting the special program teacher with reading and mathematics drill; teaching skills such as woodworking, cooking, and chambermaid duties; and assisting during crisis situations by withdrawing pupils from the class to work out their problems.

Empathy for children was described by several school boards as a necessary qualification for working as a special education aide. Other attributes listed as desirable were maturity, patience, flexibility, and good physical health. Courses taken at community colleges were also mentioned as an asset. When hiring orthopaedic assistants, one school board looks for a general knowledge of therapeutic activities for handicapped children. As qualifications for other special education aides, the same board lists experience working with children exhibiting emotional and/or behaviour problems, and the ability to work closely with a

teacher in implementing a consistent approach to classwork.

Among those employed as special education aides at the time of the CAE survey were housewives, ex-teachers, non-qualified teachers, graduates of child care courses, and former secretaries. The respondent for one school system reported that most of those engaged in teaching skills to the educable mentally retarded were retired people who were journeymen of various trades.

No serious problems had been encountered by the ten school boards in connection with the employment of special education aides. However, the respondent for the school board employing lay assistants to teach skills to the mentally retarded said that *teachers' federations were sensitive to the hiring of these people as they feared the loss of teaching positions; it was thought that in the future there might be some pressure to have them removed* [italics added].

(Canadian Education Association, 1975, p. 11)

It is noteworthy that one of the names given to this role is “paraprofessional assistant” and it is clear from the context that the role of providing support to students with special needs is seen as more demanding and of higher status than the “aide” positions. However, the systemic conflict with the teaching profession over status and roles is already clearly evident.

### **The Discourse of Current Policy**

The document in current use on Prince Edward Island regarding the employment of educational assistants and their relationships with staff and students is titled *Teachers and Support Staff Working Together- Standards and Guidelines* (2005). This document is

immediately striking in terms of the discursive frames that are used, beginning with the title. The educational assistants as a union voted to change their job title from “teacher’s assistant” to the new one “educational assistant.” They presented the new title as a proposal at collective bargaining. Against vigorous opposition, through arbitration they eventually won the right to that title. With the publication of this document, the Department of Education has effectively done an end run around the educational assistants’ attempt to gain some status, recognition and dignity. This has been done by attributing to them a new name/subject status: support staff. The term “support staff,” is a carefully crafted term that distances the educational assistants from their connection to education. It distances them from whatever agency they might have had or hoped to have in their work. It defines them in terms of activities other than their own, in much the same way the title, “teacher’s assistant” did previously. The new discourse places them much lower down on the continuum of status and agency than they were before. They have lost ground; they are worse off than they were before. The title, “teacher’s assistant” at least connected them to the teaching profession, if only in a secondary and subsidiary manner. “Support staff” distances them also from teaching, from students, from individuality, from relationships, from agency, from dignity, and ultimately from education. Support staff is a nebulous term that might include building and grounds maintenance people, a group even further down the hierarchical social ladder within schools. The term *others* educational assistants and makes them into a resource to be used, rather than people who have their own ideas, professional ideals, strengths, and personhood!

In terms of management through the expression and manifestation of power, the creation of this discourse is absolutely brilliant, and stunningly effective. In terms of

fostering an organisational climate which furthers the professed values of the department of education, most notably inclusion, it could not be much worse. The discourse speaks of collaboration, while at the same time creating a ubiquitous constellation of limitations for educational assistants. It is elitist, paternalistic, and authoritarian – not openly, not honestly, but deeply and manipulatively – and in terms of its effect on the human spirit, highly destructive.

On pages 4 and 5 of the document, there are fourteen “bullets,” points about the role, which begin with the phrase “support staff” . . . followed by: 1) refers to, 2) may, 3) must, 4) must, 5) must, 6) must, 7) must, 8) must, 9) have, 10) must, 11) act, 12) must, 13) have, 14) have. In other words, the preamble contains 14 *directives*, 14 *orders*, 14 *thou shalts*. The title “educational assistant” does not appear on these pages.

In its entirety, the first bullet reads, “Support staff refers to employees allocated to work in schools to assist administrators, teachers, and school counsellors to address special educational needs within the school.”

The wording of this discourse is almost like a hijacking. The educational assistants, working in schools to provide supportive relationships to the students who need them, have had their role hijacked from that of supporting students, to that of assisting teachers and other team members. The discourse puts them in a subservient role to every other team member. It weakens – further weakens – or takes completely takes away- their option of exercising judgement. The discourse takes away their place at the collaboration table. The first way of seeing the role, that of supporting the students, is a role with agency, the latter, a subservient role on a ubiquitous hierarchy, is a role without agency. Supporting students is a role where the educational assistant’s relationships to the students and other staff members are important; supporting other staff is a role in

which the educational assistant is simply a tool that someone else uses. The discourse is pervasive, and it is powerful in the way it frames the educational assistants as subjected to a regime of compliance. As such, it is similar to the many policy and curriculum documents which adopt the language of performance standards. The difference between these and the discourse of “auxiliary personnel,” however, lies partially in the distinct power relations which shape the subject status of employees versus students.

The issue of educational assistants (auxiliary personnel) as a threat to the teaching profession, and under pressure to be removed, is still very much with us. This discourse of subjection has partially resolved the issue, not by actually removing the EA from the classroom, because the support required by inclusive education makes their services essential, but rather by limiting their power to claim any authority. The threat has been eliminated instead by lowering and limiting the status of the educational assistants, by reinforcing a hierarchy in which they are either at the bottom rung of the ladder or not even on it, by disenfranchising them from having any real voice or status in the community. This is all done in the name of meeting the needs of the students. Like any effective lie, this has a grain of truth to it, but the larger truth is that this hierarchy is grounded in the power struggles of the teaching profession. Readers may react to “lie” as too strong a word, or one with connotations of dishonesty which make it outright inappropriate in this discussion. I use the word in the sense shown by Maclure (2003):

Texts work somewhat like lies. This is not to say that there is nothing but falsehood, or that no research can be trusted. But like lies, texts are artful, and they succeed when they *persuade* us that some state of affairs, proposition, or argument is as it appears to be. (p. 80)

The *Standards and Guidelines* document continues with two more pages without mention of the term “educational assistant,” yet the term “support staff” is used six more times. The phrases “under the direction of,” “under the supervision of,” and (teachers) “guiding the work of” are all used. The introduction ends with the sentences:

Guiding the work of support staff as inclusion facilitators in the classroom and in the school is a relatively new experience for Island administrators and teachers.

The purpose of this handbook is to assist all parties in supporting this “new” collaboration. (p. 8)

The word “collaboration” is used, but the discourse is hierarchical.

In the next section, titled Roles and Responsibilities of Support Staff, the term “support staff” appears fourteen times on pages 9-10; the term “educational assistant” appears twice. The five “bullets” which open the section echo the preamble, all begin with the term “support staff” followed by “must” in three of the five statements. Again, there is irony in the closing paragraphs:

The success of the support staff role depends greatly on the level of cooperation and collaboration that exists among all the educational partners.

School principals must ensure that all school staff have a clear understanding of where support staff services fit into their school plan. Support staff must have a clear understanding of their roles and how the school addresses the needs of all students.

Teachers are responsible for the overall direction, education and

management of programming, evaluating, reporting, and designing intervention for all students within the classroom. Therefore, any and all activities that support staff are assigned to carry out must be directed and monitored by a teacher or other teaching professional. (p. 10)

Again, the terms cooperation and collaboration are used, but the dynamic is hierarchical.

Sergiovanni (2000) takes a thorough look at the leadership climate in schools and its global effect on the people and their performance:

In successful schools, teachers work harder, are more satisfied with their jobs, and are committed to the school and its work. These motivating conditions are present when teachers and others:

- Find their work lives to be meaningful, purposeful, sensible, and significant, and when they view the work itself as worthwhile and important.
- Have reasonable control over their work activities and affairs and are able to exert reasonable influence over work events and circumstances.
- Experience personal responsibility for the work and are personally responsible for outcomes.

Teachers are more likely to experience meaningfulness, control, and personal responsibility when they are allowed to function as “origins” rather than as “pawns.” According to De Charms, quoted here by Sergiovanni, “An origin is a person who perceives his behaviour as determined by his own choosing. A pawn is a person who perceives his behaviour as determined by external forces beyond

his control.” (p.136)

And on the following page (137):

Responsive to unique situations, professionals take their cues from the problems they face and the students they serve. They draw on the wealth of knowledge and technology available to them as they create professional knowledge in response to student needs. (Sergiovanni, 2000, p.136-137)

Note that Sergiovanni wrote “*teachers and others.*” *Educational Assistants have the same needs as teachers for meaning, purpose, and control in order to find satisfaction and commitment, and to be part of a successful school.* The challenge for policies about working with educational assistants, and the schools and teachers which work with those policies, is to create working relationships which do not sabotage the meeting of those needs. How can this be done? How can educational communities meet the requirement to follow direction and standards while at the same time allowing everyone involved to collectively experience themselves as “origins” rather than “pawns?”

Sergiovanni (1992) in *Moral Leadership* shows the way. In a section entitled, “The sources of Authority for Leadership/Supervisory Policy and Practice,” he shows that the sources of authority that are used in the working relationship are the key. Teachers and administrators need to work with what he refers to as Professional Authority. The following is an adaptation and paraphrase from Sergiovanni (1992)

Professional authority has as its source informed craft knowledge and personal expertise. Teachers (and educational assistants) respond in light of common socialisation,

The assumptions behind this are:

Situations of practice are idiosyncratic, and no one best way exists. Scientific knowledge and professional knowledge are different, with professional knowledge created in use as teachers (and educational assistants) practice. The purpose of scientific knowledge is to inform, not prescribe, practice. Authority cannot be external but comes from the context itself and from within the teacher. (and the educational assistant) Authority from context comes from training and experience. Authority from within comes from socialisation and internalised values.

The leadership strategy is discussion and debate among teachers (and educational assistants) on professional practice and standards, and peer coaching and collegial support.

The consequences of using this source of authority is that teachers (and educational assistants) respond to professional norms; their practice becomes collective, they require little monitoring, and their performance is expansive.

Sergiovanni (1992) identifies Moral Authority as a further source – the highest source – of authority for teachers and administrators to use. The source of this authority is felt obligation and duties derived from widely shared community values, ideas, and ideals. Teachers (and educational assistants) respond to shared commitments and felt interdependence.

The assumptions when the use of this source of authority is primary are:

Schools are professional learning communities.

Communities are defined by their centres of shared values, beliefs, and commitments.

In communities, what is considered right and good is as important as what works and what is effective; people are motivated as much by emotion and beliefs as by self-interest; Collegiality is a professional virtue.

The leadership strategy when using this source of authority is to identify and make explicit values and beliefs to govern the school as a community; to promote collegiality, nurture staff development, and rely on informal norms to direct professional action.

The consequences of the use of moral authority as the source of authority is that Teachers (and educational assistants) respond to community values for moral reasons, their practice becomes collective, and their performance is expansive and sustained.

In responding to professional and moral authority the members of the team act and experience themselves as “origins” or agents and thus have the meaning and control they need in order to find commitment and satisfaction. The way people operate when the source of authority is bureaucratic authority is in stark contrast. Continuing from Sergiovanni,

In hierarchical authority, the sources of authority are hierarchy, rules and regulations, mandates, and role expectations. Teachers [and educational assistants] comply or face consequences.

The assumptions in use when bureaucratic authority is a primary source of authority are:

Teachers [and educational assistants] are subordinates in a hierarchically arranged system.

Supervisors are trustworthy, but subordinates are not. Goals and interests of teachers [and educational assistants] are not the same, and supervisors must be

watchful.

Hierarchy equals expertise, and so supervisors must know more than teachers [and educational assistants] do.

External accountability works best.

The leadership/supervisory strategies used with bureaucratic authority are:

Expect and Inspect.

Job descriptions, distinct goals and expectations

Direct classroom observations, checklist of skills.

Written feedback with improvement suggestions.

And the consequences are:

With proper monitoring, teachers [and educational assistants] respond as technicians, executing predetermined scripts, and their performance is narrowed.  
(Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 35-40)

It is clear from the tone and content of the document *Teachers and Support Staff Working Together* that it is built around the assumptions of bureaucratic authority, and it has all the limitations and disadvantages of bureaucratic authority. Under the General Knowledge and Skills section of the document (p. 12) there are three points which are particularly telling:

To help support students with special educational needs in an inclusive educational setting, all support staff must demonstrate the following:

- a positive regard for the distinction among roles and responsibilities of administrators, teachers, and support staff;

- an understanding that the nature of the support staff role is to be directed by educators and an acceptance that the classroom/subject teacher is responsible for the student in an educational setting;
- an ability to follow directions of teachers.

In other words, the educational assistant needs to know her place, like it, and keep it. As Sergiovanni has shown us, this is leadership which limits. This is confining leadership which inhibits the teams working with it and the individuals working under it, and limits the performance of the school. This is weakness based leadership, which assumes lack of trustworthiness, lack of commitment, and lack of competence, and builds those assumptions into a self fulfilling prophesy. This is leadership which limits the effectiveness of the teams operating in support of inclusive education. This is deficiency modelled leadership which impacts directly and pervasively upon the weakest, the most vulnerable, the least heard individuals in the school community – the students with special needs.

In my 40 odd years experience in the workforce, I have consistently seen that working relationships which exist in an excessively hierarchical environment are limiting and demeaning. Hierarchical working relationships serve to close down communication, shut down initiative and creativity, and replace commitment with compliance. When the power of individuals within a group is limited by the dynamics of the group, the overall power of the group to accomplish goals is diminished. Excessively hierarchical working relationships are dysfunctional relationships. When this happens in an educational environment – and it has happened – the ability to meet the needs of the students is compromised.

I turn to Michael Apple, whose perspective on how to view new policies has a lot to tell us about the unseen effects of policies:

We should be very cautious about accepting what may seem to be meritorious intentions at face value. Intentions are too often contradicted by how reforms may function in practice. . . . The framework I have employed to understand these tendencies is grounded in what in cultural theory is called an act of repositioning. It in essence says that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power. That is, every institution, policy, and practice – and especially those that now dominate education and the larger society – establish relations of power in which some voices are heard and some voices are not. (Apple, 2001, p. 196)

I have used strong words indeed to describe the effect of the current dynamics regarding the employment and status of educational assistants. Yet it is an understatement to say the educational community looks different from the bottom – or the margins – than it does from the middle or the top. The policy and practice of inclusive education on PEI does indeed “establish relations of power in which some voices are heard and some are not” (Apple, 2001, p.196). As part of my document search for this inquiry, I reviewed minutes of meetings of special education committees, of forums on inclusion on PEI, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland, and of meetings specifically about the role of educational assistants, and in not one of these documents was an educational assistant listed among the persons present. The voices of those whose full time work is support for special needs are not heard, because they are not at

the table. They are not included. Their possible contributions or interests are not considered. That piece of information alone is far more significant to this thesis than any content of the various minutes and reports. What this means is that the limiting aspects of our educational practices do not come to light, because the people who experience these limits and are most affected by them have no voice that is heard. I say it elsewhere in this thesis, and I say it again: How can we claim we practice inclusive education, when the people who work most closely with students with special needs are themselves excluded from the community?

### **Other Approaches to Working Relationships**

Other educators have different approaches to working with educational assistants. Palma (1994) contributes a succinct article whose title says it all: *Towards a Positive and Effective Teacher and Paraprofessional Relationship*. She states, “The work relationship between the teacher and the paraprofessional should be that of cooperation, congeniality, camaraderie, and professionalism.” Her summary statement packs a lot of ideas in one sentence:

A positive work relationship between teachers and paraprofessionals may be attained through the following: (a) value each other’s role in the teaching and learning process, (b) give credit where credit is due, (c) involve the paraprofessionals in program planning and decision making, (d) show the paraprofessionals not only the how but the why of lessons, (e) provide instructions by using we and us instead of you, and (f) provide both verbal and non-verbal feedback.

In Palma's writing, her emphasis on the relationship, and the warmth of the tone used speaks of an effort to move teachers and paraprofessionals closer together. This is in sharp contrast to the emphasis on status difference, which is so much a characteristic of the PEI document.

The emphasis on "supervision" and status difference is not unique to PEI. In one school of thought, that model is very much a standard. In the textbook *Making Inclusion Work*, the author's description of "paraprofessionals" shows a similar set of assumptions:

The ideal traits of a paraprofessional assigned to an inclusive classroom include the willingness to accept supervision, the ability to follow directions with precision and with consistency, and the discipline to document what she does throughout the day. The first characteristic is essential: there should be no confusion in the mind of the para who is the teacher and who is the assistant. The second is also very important: much of the value of a professional comes from doing exactly what the teacher wants done, the way the teacher wants it done, and with whom the teacher wants it done. (Bowe, 2005, p. 444)

In the chapter summary, Bowe (2005) continues this tone:

#### **Collaboration with Paraprofessionals**

- It is vital that schools establish clear policies governing the work of paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms. Administrators, teachers, and

“Para’s” themselves all need to know what is expected and what is forbidden.

- The key to supervising paraprofessionals is to give them explicit instructions and then to supervise them throughout the day. (p. 451)

This tone and content, which is echoed by that of the PEI document, quite take my breath away. In my many years on the workforce unrelated to education, I have experienced my share of situations with less than ideal leadership, but have not seen elsewhere a dynamic where one group of people is expected to have that degree of power and control over another, and where this is expected to work to best effect.

Anello (2005) succinctly and clearly names this style of leadership and its effects:

### **Authoritarian Leadership**

- The authoritarian leader gives orders.
- He expects immediate, exact, and unquestioned obedience to his authority.
- He avoids dialogue and allows no one to ask for explanations of his orders.
- The prototype of the authoritarian leader is to be found in military organisations, sometimes also in manager/employee relations.

Subordinates of an authoritarian leader

- They generally feel resentment, which may be either overtly or covertly expressed.
- When resentment is openly manifested, it may eventually lead to rebelliousness or revolt.
- When resentment is kept unexpressed, conformity and apparent submission may characterise the relationship. “Yes, master”

- However, behind this apparent submission there often exists a passive resistance which undermines the work to be done. Often mysterious problems arise.
- Initiative is virtually unknown
- Often no group unity, No development of potentialities.

(Anello, 2005, Models of leadership, powerpoint presentation)

I quoted verbatim the Anello presentation on authoritarian leadership, because it resonates so well with the description of the how educational assistants should relate to the educational community, as described by Bowe (2005) and by the PEI Department of Education (2005). The Anello presentation (2005) also includes a description of paternalistic leadership. Paternalistic leadership does not think of subordinates as having many capabilities, therefore it does not help subordinates to develop their capabilities. Paternalistic leadership derives satisfaction from the subordinates need for - dependence upon - the leadership. Paternalistic leadership fosters attitudes of dependency and helplessness that kill initiative and personal responsibility. This dynamic further resonates with the work of Bowe and the PEI Department of Education.

French (1998) takes a different direction in her study entitled *Working Together, Resource Teachers and Paraeducators*. Her results showed that the paraeducators served primarily in instructional roles and did so to the satisfaction of resource teachers working with them. The resource teachers also expressed in various ways that they were reluctant to provide supervision and *preferred to think of the paraeducators as peers*. Again we see an attitude that minimises rather than emphasises status differences.

### **Models of Service Delivery and their Implications for Relationships**

I question that a reluctance to provide supervision always comes from a lack of the ability to do so – after all, teachers are educated and capable professionals, well used to juggling a multitude of demands and carrying a heavy load of responsibility. Dealing with adults is a different dynamic from dealing with children, and may be a difficult adjustment for some, but there may be another, deeper reason why many teachers would be reluctant to supervise. I suggest the reluctance to supervise may come rather from a discomfort with the assumptions inherent in the leadership model which sees supervision as the primary relationship between teachers and educational assistants. The dynamics of supervision assume significant differences in status, ability, and commitment between the parties involved, as discussed in Sergiovanni's (1994) model above.

In my own experience, good teachers have an egalitarian outlook, as part of their inclusive educational practice, and that egalitarian outlook sees collaboration, not hierarchy, as appropriate and effective interpersonal relations, especially in education. Also in my own experience, good educational assistants share the view that collaboration and shared responsibility, not hierarchy, is the most effective strategy for the team to meet the needs of the classroom and of all students. In addition, this style of relations creates the kind of school climate which is most inclusive and beneficial for all.

This is a crucial point. Collaboration, not hierarchy, is the appropriate and effective relational style for inclusive education. Discourse which speaks of “supervising paraprofessionals” or words to that effect, frames the relationship in a dysfunctional way. I suggest the emphasis on “supervision” of educational assistants, an emphasis which is absent from other relationships in education, can be traced back to the original framing of educational assistants as a problem population and the responses to that

framework. Providing support for students with special needs, in an inclusive education environment, requires a level of commitment and capability which cannot be achieved through supervision, in the same way that the level of commitment and capability required of the teaching profession cannot be achieved through supervision. The response to the needs of the students and the community has to come from within, from moral authority. No amount of supervision – or micromanagement – can take the place of the need to respond from within.

When supervision – hierarchy – is the relational model for the role of the educational assistant, educational needs are thwarted. The child, the school, and the community, share a need for persons who are responding from within. The more closely the educational assistant is supervised – with the goal of ensuring that the education delivered to the students with special needs is of a professional standard – the less the educational assistant is able to or free to respond from within. The more closely the educational assistants are supervised, that is, assumed to know less than the teacher, not committed to the same goals, subject to external accountability, subject to expectations and inspections, working under detailed job descriptions, working with distinct goals and expectations, and working with a checklist of skills, (all aspects of the supervisory relationship from Sergiovanni (1994) as discussed earlier) the more they will follow a predetermined script, and the less they will be the kinds of persons the students and the community needs. The more the individual teacher, the school, or the department is committed to the dynamic of supervision, the less effective the teams involved will be.

The perceived need for supervision in relationships with educational assistants comes from three sources. As discussed, the genesis of the role brought with it relationships based on seeing the educational assistants as a problem population, leading

to an emphasis on status differences, the neutralising of the threat, and close scrutiny. As also discussed, the assumptions of bureaucratic authority see supervision as the preferred or necessary dynamic for these organisational relationships. The third, and current, source of this perception comes from the model of indirect service delivery. Direct services are those provided by qualified personnel ( i.e., certified teachers and other professionals) directly to the student. Indirect services are services delivered to a student by a non certified individual under the direct supervision of qualified personnel. (Giangreco, 2001) In this model, the teacher retains full and primary responsibility for the student with special needs and the educational assistant is responsible not to the student, but to the teacher. This model assumes that the quality of the service provided depends on the degree of supervision exercised by the professionals.

I suggest that this model is fundamentally flawed. The indirect service delivery model has the inherent assumption of a wide status difference between teachers and the educational assistants who work directly with the students, and also assumes a teacher centred learning process. These assumptions skew the working and community relationships as discussed above, in ways which impair the meeting of the needs of the students, the needs of the community, and the needs of the people doing the work. This is a poor substitute indeed for the flexible, egalitarian and collaborative relationships which are needed in an inclusive education environment.

There have been, there are, and there will be situations where educational assistants do not have the preparation or personal suitability to meet the demands of the situations in which they are placed. This needs to be addressed, by making sure that the right people are matched with the right situations, that requirements for hiring and educational criteria are appropriate and are updated as required, and that the rewards,

opportunities for growth, and status of the role of educational assistant are good enough to attract and keep talented, motivated, and creative people. The educational team members whose primary role is to provide support for students with learning difficulties need to be not paraprofessionals, but co-professionals, and they need to be seen as such and treated as such. Only a change of this magnitude will allow the educational community to move beyond the flaws and limitations of the indirect service delivery model. A retreat into an outdated and inappropriate organizational model is not the solution.

Giangreco, Edelman, and Broer (2001) conducted a survey with title which again says it all: *Respect, Appreciation, and Acknowledgement of Paraprofessionals Who Support Students with Disabilities*. In their literature search they found an emphasis on role clarification and supervision, and found only one short article, the one from Palma cited above, which addressed the issues of respect and appreciation. They noted a study which reported paraprofessional shortages and attrition attributable to a lack of respect, as manifested in low wages, limited opportunities for advancement, and lack of administrative support, and another which reported low job satisfaction among paraprofessionals. In the Giangreco et al. study, they found “The desire to receive respect, feel appreciated, and have their contributions acknowledged was a significant issue for many of the paraprofessionals that affected their reported job satisfaction” (p.488). Being given responsibility and wanting to be listened to were also important themes. In Giangreco’s discussion, the authors state that one of the collective challenges of the teaching profession is to communicate the value of *all the roles* [phrase emphasised in original, sentence is my paraphrase] played by paraprofessionals. The importance of this study is again in its tone and intent. Paraprofessionals are seen as valued colleagues

whose point of view and whose needs matter. In contrast, in PEI the overriding emphasis on status difference between teachers and educational assistants (“support personnel!”) projects a systemic lack of respect.

The closing paragraph of the Giangreco (2001) study summarises this aspect of the issue nicely:

Regardless of which direction taken by the field or individual schools, it is clear that paraprofessionals do important work in classrooms supporting students with and without disabilities. They deserve respect, appreciation, and acknowledgement intangible ways, such as appropriate role clarification, training, support, compensation, and opportunities for input in schools. It is in our collective best interest, particularly the interests of students, parents, and teachers, to ensure that paraprofessionals are not allowed to be, or become, the Rodney (“I don’t get no respect”) Dangerfields of public education. [my parenthesis added, from beginning of article.] (Giangreco, 2001, p.496)

It is important to note the wording, “Paraprofessionals do important work in classrooms *supporting students with and without disabilities.*” There is an underlying difference in assumptions here, that the educational assistants’ work is to support the students. In Prince Edward Island, the underlying assumption is that the role of educational assistants is to support the teachers, a dynamic which both follows and further reinforces the presupposition of a wide status difference between teachers and educational assistants.

French (1998) in the interviews conducted in her study, explores this issue in

greater depth. The themes which emerged from the interviews are no surprise: the strongest theme was that the educational assistants provided crucial additional assistance in meeting the educational needs of students in special education. Teachers perceived this role from two perspectives. Some saw the educational assistant as an assistant to the student, and others saw the educational assistant as an assistant to the teacher. Some did not see a wide difference between the teacher and the educational assistant. I find the exact wording of one of French's comments to carry special significance.

“Some teachers *failed to differentiate* [italics added] the roles of highly educated teacher/supervisors and less educated paraeducators.” The significance is that not perceiving a gap between the teachers and the educational assistants is framed as a failure, yet the observation was also made that, “Only one teacher clearly distinguished between the teacher’s role and that of the paraeducator” (p. 362). In French’s (1998) wording, I see continuing ambivalence regarding how educators feel about accepting educational assistants into their midst.

The majority of the teachers interviewed in this study take an egalitarian approach to their relations with the educational assistants:

Ideally I think to have a paraeducator be a teammate and not somebody to work for somebody else. Somebody whom you could sit down with and discuss the day’s activities and . . . discuss the different individual kids and their problems and what kinds of things we need to work together on as a team.

Another expressed a similar sentiment: “Kind of like being a team teacher with me . . . helping me out as much as possible.” One even minimised the importance

of teacher preparation when describing the paraeducator role:

Her job is to teach. That's how we use our paraeducators. Our paraeducators are teachers. They don't do any clerical work at all. We do all of that. So, a paraeducator would be like having another teacher in the room. Just because a paraeducator does not have a college degree and has not taken the dumb education courses that we have does not mean that he or she cannot teach.

Another said, "I think the role of the paraeducator should be almost like a second teacher, in many ways. I think he or she should have the confidence, the ability to work with the students, to understand lessons, to understand sequencing of skills, and that sort of thing." Still another said that the ideal paraeducator's role was to be a teacher when I'm not there, to take the role of the teacher. My expectation is that she have that skill and adapt and use the best judgement. She's teaching where I left off." (p. 363)

My intent in citing these views is not to debate the merits of who does what and who is responsible for what in the inclusive classroom and school. The importance of these findings is that they show alternative ways of thinking about how educational assistants can contribute to the needs of the students and the classroom processes, ways which are inclusive, flexible, and collaborative – and most of all, emergent. This contrasts sharply with the elitism, the rigidity, and the protectionism which are powerful forces – sometimes open, sometimes hidden – influencing current educational policy and practice in Prince Edward Island.

There is an underlying assumption in much of the literature on inclusive practice, that a student receiving care and instruction from an educational assistant is receiving

services of an inferior standard to what their classmates are getting. This assumption needs to be red flagged and queried. For the sake of argument, consider costs alone. To use round figures, let us say it costs 40 dollars an hour for a teacher to provide instruction to a class, and there are 20 students in the class. So the direct instructional cost for the class is two dollars an hour per student, and the teacher's time and attention are divided in 20 directions. Continuing to work with round figures, we peg the cost for an educational assistant at 20 dollars an hour. So a student with special needs who is receiving one on one instruction and support, inside and outside the class, is getting instruction which costs 20 dollars an hour. The figure climbs to 22 when we include this student in the class cost as well, and this is appropriate because in an inclusive environment, *the support is in addition to, not instead of the regular program*. But the educational assistant does not work in isolation. She receives ongoing support, and usually works with a program which is assembled and updated by a team. So the 22 dollars an hour direct cost is a conservative estimate. If the educational assistant is assigned to provide exclusive support for this one student, and her time is not piggybacked for other students, then the one student is receiving support and instruction at a direct cost in the order of ten times what is spent on every other student. Is this an inferior education?

Consider time. The classroom teacher's attention in the example above is divided 20 ways. The educational assistant's time is given 100% to the one student receiving the support. Is this an inferior education?

The assumption – or feeling – that time spent with an educational assistant is lower quality time than classroom time does an enormous disservice to both students and educational assistants, because it says in essence that one hundred percent of an educational assistant's attention is an inadequate substitute for five percent of a teacher's

attention. This line of thinking disenfranchises and devalues educational assistants and their contributions, and simultaneously demotes the students with whom they work. It disregards the value of the insights, the creativity, the relationship, the advocacy, and above all the caring that develops in this specialised situation. It disregards the personal commitment of the educational assistant, as well as her knowledge and experience acquired, in some cases, over many years of working exclusively with students with special needs. It treats the educational assistant as a non person. I suggest that a student who is receiving full time support delivered by an educational assistant, who is herself being supported by the school team, is getting the very best and most specialised of individualised programming that we can do for him or her within the confines of the school. The hidden assumption that time spent with an educational assistant is inferior quality time also places unrealistic and unworkable demands on classroom teachers. It is an unrealistic and unworkable premise to suggest the teacher retains primary responsibility for all students at all times. This is teacher centred thinking. This premise weakens the team. The responsibility is better *shared*. That's what teams do. When a student's needs are such that they are assigned the support of an educational assistant for all or part of the day, and they are not in the class for all or part of their day, this is not because of some inadequacy or failure to take responsibility on the part of the teacher. It is also not because of some failure of inclusion. It is because this support and this separation is what the student, and perhaps the class, needs at the time. It is in the best interests of the student. It is also in the best interests of the class, because the class needs their teacher to be there for them, not pulled to one side for one child whose needs are so great they override the needs of all others. That's what educational assistants are there for – to be the part of the educational team that directly works to meet the needs that

can't be met in normal classroom dynamics, to meet the needs of the neediest.

Giangreco (2003) in his paper *Working with Paraprofessionals*, prepared a chart about what he sees as appropriate support:

Sometimes it is difficult to know when providing paraprofessional support is appropriate and when it might cause problems. When in doubt, team members should ask themselves, *Would this situation be acceptable if the student didn't have a disability?* Consider the following examples:

- A paraprofessional provides the student's primary literacy instruction.
- The student is removed from class activities at the discretion of the paraprofessional rather than the teacher.
- The student spends 80 percent or more of his or her time with a paraprofessional.
- The student spends the majority of his or her social time (lunch, recess) with a paraprofessional rather than with classmates.
- The paraprofessional, rather than the teacher or special educator, makes the majority of day-to-day curricular and instructional decisions affecting the student.

These examples highlight a double standard: Most educators would consider these situations unacceptable for students without disabilities, yet these situations occur all too frequently for those with disabilities. (p. 52)

I disagree with the assumptions behind this chart. I agree that most educators would consider these situations unacceptable for a student without disabilities. However, the student without disabilities doesn't need to be in these situations, and in most cases the student with disabilities is in these situations because he does need this degree of support at this time. Also, "these situations" are not a hardship, but a benefit. That is why they are

provided. Giangreco's (2003) examples also assume – or insinuate – that the services provided by the educational assistant are inferior to classroom instruction, they are inadequate, or they are inappropriate. In the literacy instruction example, the student is getting a program specifically tailored to his needs and level, and delivered with one on one or small group instruction, with minimal distraction, in a non threatening and emotionally supportive environment. It is what he needs to find some comfort and success at this point in his development. It is what he is getting. It is a benefit. What is wrong with that? In the example of the removal from class activities at the discretion of the educational assistant rather than the teacher, this depends upon the situation. Ideally the teacher and the educational assistant are communicating closely, regularly, and working as a team. When the educational assistant removes the student at her own discretion, in my experience there are good reasons for this: signs of an impending outburst, eyes glazing over, bodily functions, not a good day, the wide variability of the functioning of some students with disabilities. Again, this is a benefit for the student. The educational assistant, by virtue of her personal commitment, and her own training and experience, is capable of exercising good judgement, and her proximity and intimate knowledge of the student makes her the team member who is sometimes in the best position to make this decision. Is it appropriate to take this decision making input away from the educational assistant, who has chosen a career dedicated to serving special needs, and instead give it unilaterally to a teacher, for whom it is only one aspect of her practice? The same reasoning applies to the other examples. The support is provided because the students need *this benefit*, and the educational assistant is there to give it to them.

I do agree – of course I agree – that separating students more than they need, and providing more support than they need, does them a disservice. Knowing how much they need at any given time is part of the balancing act educational assistants as individuals and

as part of a team do every day. This is part of the judgement that we as individuals and we as a team exercise every day.

The double standard that exists is not the situations that are provided for students with disabilities shown in the chart above. The double standard that exists is the skewed thinking that transforms hugely beneficial relationships for students with disabilities into situations that are portrayed as hardships, and suggests that such “hardships,” “these situations” can only be assuaged by correcting, further limiting, sabotaging, the relationships between the educational assistants, the teams they are so often implicitly and explicitly excluded from, and the students with learning difficulties they care so deeply care about.

The hidden assumption that time with an educational assistant is inferior quality time for students is deeply imbedded, ubiquitously expressed, and dead wrong! I suggest this assumption has roots in the historical framing of educational assistants as a problem population. On the level of organizational memory, it is almost like educational assistants are perceived as having committed some kind of original sin. This has resulted in a collective expulsion from the educational Garden of Eden, where the teacher was in sole command and managed all the needs alone, and life was perfect. Educators and researchers must recognise these assumptions and group memories when they see them in practice, in policy, and in research, and most of all in themselves. Until they do so, they will continue to be part of a discourse which limits and excludes a part of their team and a part of their community, and impacts negatively on the weakest, the neediest, and the most vulnerable students that pass through their hands.

## SARAH'S STORY

Sarah Zwicker is a young woman from a very small island just off the south coast of Nova Scotia. The spring that she graduates with her arts degree from St. Francis Xavier University, she makes a trip to PEI to look around and see what possibilities the place might have to offer. In Sarah's eyes, PEI is a whole new world which has been just out of reach all her life, and she has always wanted to see it. Sarah knows that she has outgrown the tiny island where she was brought up. She knows she can't live there again; she needs more possibilities and more challenges.

Sarah has grown up with two children with special needs in her life: her little brother Robert at home and her cousin Beth nearby on the mainland. She has considerable experience teaching and caring for both. This experience turns out to be important for her future.

Sarah is also working to distance herself from the pain of a broken heart. Her first and only love, Kent Wilson, who had been with her all through university, committed to taking a job out west and told her they were through. She was devastated, and the wound is still raw.

Sarah meets people, and in a quiet way, makes friends. She finds that she can work as an educational assistant and decides to stay on PEI. She gradually learns about the practice of inclusive education and the world of the educational assistant, as she begins to establish herself in the PEI school system. The issues she encounters in schools blend with her inner life as she works to understand the new world she has joined. Her story is told through letters sent home and diary entries. This allows us access to her

inner experiences as her life unfolds in PEI schools.

### **Reading the research fiction**

I have constructed Sarah's story for the purpose of showing insights into the working life of educational assistants on PEI. Of course, every person is different and every life is different. This fabrication is meant to show a composite of the social environment in which educational assistants work, the people who work in it, and the ways the social environment affects their lives and their work. This collage must inevitably be incomplete - one cannot take snapshots of everything and one cannot be everywhere - and it must inevitably, to some extent, be skewed - with my metaphorical camera, I cannot help but have chosen to snap some scenes and leave others.

A number of themes are expressed through this story. I point them out here to make it easier for the reader to see them as they emerge. For those who would prefer to read the story without a predetermined focus, I suggest they skip the following and proceed straight to the story.

Educational assistants:

1. Are subject to extensive rules, both written and unwritten, that regulate their subject position in the school environment.
2. Often have a sense of powerlessness in their work and their relation with a school.
3. Are often marginalized and isolated from the rest of the educational community.
4. Are vulnerable to forces beyond their control, because of the structuring of their employment contract.
5. Are deeply committed to the welfare of their students.

6. Experience frustration at the constraints and limitations they work under.  
Many feel they could contribute much more if given the opportunity.
7. Often feel that teachers and administrators do not respect them or value their presence or contribution.
8. Are better able to assist students with special needs when the school climate is one of collaboration, inclusion, and respect.

June 15

Dear Mom:

I met the most interesting woman at the beach on the weekend, and I think we will become friends. She was with a little girl with some kind of developmental delay, much like cousin Beth, and we struck up a conversation. Mary told me she works in the schools helping children with special needs, and works part time on her own caring for children like that. Mary is an educational assistant. My job search antennae were up; I asked her what the qualifications for the job are, thinking my brand new psychology degree might be just the ticket for this. She told me it's a two year college program, or four thousand hours experience teaching and caring for children with disabilities. And I thought; I've got that experience, and I could do that. So I told Mary about my years of experience caring for and teaching Robert. She explained to me that to work as an educational assistant I need to get certified by the Department of Education. She said they always seem to need people. Inclusive education on PEI is supported by the government, and schools all over the island have classrooms that include children with special needs.

I need to provide documentation of my experience with Beth and Robert. Can you get Dr. Stanton to write up a letter for me, certifying that I have that experience? The letter has to say that I have four thousand hours experience educating and caring for children with special needs. That will help me to get a good job here on PEI. If we add up all the time I worked with Robert and with Beth I think it's considerably more than that. I never thought that my work with Robert and Beth would lead to a job for me later in my life. This is an unexpected bonus, one more way that my dear little brother has been such a

blessing to us.

The prospect of this job is too good not to follow up on, so I have decided to extend my vacation and exploratory trip to PEI into a long term stay. I'm staying in a little cabin owned by an older couple who rent out to tourists. The cabin is too basic for tourist rentals, it wouldn't pass a license inspection, but it's fine for me, and it's cheap. I love my basic, simple, and earthy little cabin. Right now, it's everything I need, and I can afford to stay here long term.

And how are Robert, and Don, and Dad, and my dear Beth? I miss you all, and I miss my island home, especially now that you will be gearing up for fishing. But we have talked about the possibility that I might not be back except to visit, and I have decided I must move on to painting my life on a wider canvas than our island. So for the time being, here I stay. I'm on a bigger island, and yet, still an island.

I love writing letters. It's funny; most people don't write letters any more. They talk on the phone or do e-mail, but you and I have never been able to do that, because home on Granite Island, there has never been phone service. I think that has turned out to be a blessing. When I was going to university, in far away Antigonish, I at first envied my classmates who could call home. I couldn't do that, but not being able to call forced me to learn to cope on my own. Writing letters also helped me to clarify and deal with issues in a way that talking doesn't do anywhere near as well. It also created a record, which is so interesting sometimes when I look back on what I've said. Letter writing also adds a kind of perspective to life. When we talk, often it's too fast, there's no reflection in it. Also, the delay from writing a letter to getting back a reply always put my life in perspective. The issues were at least 2 weeks old, and

often behind me, when I read your reply. So I am grateful for what my rocky island upbringing has given me in so many ways.

love,

Sarah

July 20

Dear Mom:

Thanks for speaking with Dr. Stanton. The letter from him was perfect; I am now officially certified as an educational assistant on PEI. It's funny, my degree doesn't seem to matter at all for getting certified. It's the hands on experience, or the college program they want, and that's that. I find that surprising, because in university I learned to look below the surface of things, and I learned to communicate in that way, and I would think that would be necessary in schools. I don't yet have a job as such, but I am on the substitute list. They told me at the school board office that once the school year gets going I should get lots of calls. They told me also that often there are relief positions that come up, where they need a substitute to take someone's place for a portion of the school year. This has to happen after a certain date, or they have to offer it to someone who is already in the system. With a bit of luck I'll get one of those.

The other good news is, I do have a job for the rest of the summer, with a guy who takes tourists out deep sea fishing. I was down at a fishing village on the north shore one evening looking at the boats, and struck up a conversation with a guy whose boat I was admiring. When I told him about fishing with Dad, knowing my way around a boat, and having an operator's license, he invited me along on the trip for the next day. He let me take the wheel for a while, and after he had seen me handle the boat through the waves and wind and tide, and still stay on course, just the way Dad taught me, he offered me a job helping out. It turned out that the guy who worked with him had a chance for a high paying job up north, and had quit to take it. Fishing and tourism are a few

months work; Fort MacMurry is as long as you want it to be. Or maybe as long as you can stand it, from what I hear. So my timing in being there was perfect. I get to go out fishing after all, lucky me. I'm a helper for Jim's Deep Sea Fishing, and my boss, who I think will become my friend, is Jim.

On days we don't go out, I drive around the area and check out the roads to various schools, so I won't have any trouble finding them when I get calls to go to them this winter. I know you are worried about me driving the rusty little old car that Aunt Vera gave to me, especially in the winter. It's fine for now, and knowing where I am going will help. When I get steady work, I'll get a newer one as soon as I can. It's funny how much simpler life is back on our little island, and how good that is, and I only fully see that now that I am away from it. We have the path from the house to the wharf, and the wharf to the barn, and that's all we need. Here you need a car to get to things, and clothes to go out, and money to rent a place, and all of that. Sometimes I miss my little room upstairs, tinkering in the barn, and my overalls and rubber boots.

Most of the people I meet have been here all their lives, and take for granted that everyone knows where every place is - and I don't even know the landmarks to follow directions. Many also seem take for granted that everyone sees the world just about the same way they do. I just can't do that. It all takes some getting used to. Give my love to everyone.

Sarah

August 15

Dear Mom:

I have decided to stay for the winter with the older couple I have been renting the cabin from. Their name is MacLean, and I will refer to them as ma and pa MacLean because they feel like a second set of parents to me. I was telling them I had decided to stay on the island and I was looking for a place for the fall and winter. The cabin is fine for the summer, but it's pretty basic and has no heat. They offered to rent me a room in their home, because their children are grown and gone and they have lots of room. They would like someone who can help out a bit and contribute to the cost of heating the place. It's pretty ideal because it's a family type of situation and it's cheap. The pay I will be getting is good - twenty one dollars an hour - but Mary, my friend who told me about this work, says it is difficult, especially as a beginner, to get enough hours to make a decent living.

Twenty one dollars an hour sounds good, but the seventeen thousand a year it translates into as a part time job is a poverty line income. She also told me that most of the new EAs work part time somewhere else in order to have enough to live on. I hope I don't have to do that. It's hard to rush away from one job to another, and it makes it really hard if you need to stay late for any reason. I found that out with my jobs at university. She also told me that many new EAs are offered part time work doing tutoring for some of the students. Tutoring pays about half the rate that educational assistants get. I hope I don't have to do that either. She says that if a student needs the extra help, why should we work at half pay to provide that, simply because we are available as a result of our nominal job being only part time? She says that a lot of EAs just starting

out have to do this, to make ends meet. The tutoring work and its lower pay cheapens and weakens the work of supporting children with educational difficulties. She thinks it lowers the status of this work, and does a disservice to the children.

It's part of a class system, she says. The EAs don't have security and don't earn enough to live on because they only get part time work for the first four or five years. They get thrown these cookies, and they are in the position that they have to take them.

She sounded kind of resentful talking about this. I haven't even started out at this job, but I smell something fishy here. If I need more work - and more money - than I get at the job, I would rather work away from the school.

I didn't mean to go on about the job and the hours and the money thing. I guess it was more on my mind than I realised. It's kind of unsettling when a friend doing the kind of work I want to do is carrying that kind of frustration about her job. I just wrote to tell you about my living arrangements for the winter, to let you know I'm settled in OK. I miss everyone. All my love.

Sarah

September 28

Dear Mom:

Well, I have now worked as an educational assistant in a number of schools; I have seen what it is like, and I am getting a feel for it. I know I'm going to like it. I love being around the children, I like the atmosphere in most of the schools I have been in, and I get great satisfaction from being in a position to help those who need it the most.

I didn't get any calls at all for the first two weeks. I guess it's because not many people miss work at the beginning of the school year, and no one knows me yet. I was getting worried; the deep sea fishing job shut down labour day weekend and for a while I had nothing coming in. My first two days at school, Wednesday and Thursday, were at an intermediate school. I spent the morning helping a charming young man who uses a wheelchair. Mostly he worked on his own - very capably - in the classroom. It's a trick I'll have to learn; to come in and help when I'm needed - and not too soon. I learned how to do that with Robert. We all did. Robert can do lots of things, but at his own pace, and we had to learn to step back and let him do things himself. I have to do the same for other children now, and stay in the background when they don't need me. I worked the afternoons with a small group of students, helping them with their math assignments. We were in a room separate from the class, because the need for conversation would be disruptive to a class, and a lesson going on would have been disruptive to us. I didn't actually meet their teacher. The principal introduced me to the resource teacher, and it was she who showed me what needed to be done and introduced me to the children. Everyone was very nice. I thought the children had a good afternoon, and I went home tired

but feeling pretty good. The second day was like the first. I realised then that the group of children working outside the class did so most of the time. A program is put together for each child, mostly by the resource teacher, and then most of the face to face teaching of the children is done by the EAs. The students are working at a level so different from the other students, or just on different material, that most of the time it can't work for them to be in the classroom. Their work is just too different. The work in a small group outside seems to be working just fine for them. I guess it will mostly be that way for them for the rest of their time in school.

I worked at an elementary school the next day, and I noticed a big difference from middle school. Even though the student I worked with is functioning at a far lower level than the students I worked with at the middle school, she is much more a part of the class. I think it's because with students who have disabilities which affect their ability to learn, the gap often gets wider all the time as the years go by. At the elementary level it's easier, socially and academically, to find ways to include them. At the higher grades, it's often just not feasible academically. Socially, well, the children are busy moving on, the hormones are kicking in, and they want to be with their peers, with the children who are like them. Being accepted is more important to them than accepting. It's sad but it's true. So the students who are different are included, but often only peripherally.

Seeing this puts Robert's life in a different perspective. As I got older, sometimes I wondered if we were doing the wrong thing by keeping him as close to us as we did. You and Dad worked very hard to teach him as much as he could learn, and you involved me and Don in this. I realise now we are kind

of a special case. Robert couldn't be part of the larger community not only because of his disabilities, but also because of our circumstances living on a small island. For me, it was different. When I turned eight, you and Dad figured I needed to be more with other children, and I was old enough to handle the daily boat ride. Home schooling just wasn't the best thing for me any more. I can still feel that sense of wonder at the change it was starting school on the mainland in grade three, and suddenly being around all those people. And I still remember how I noticed that the people around me were so sure that the way they saw life and thought about it was the only way of seeing life. And I, just a child of eight, knew different, because I had lived different, and I went home every night to different. And I saw how I had been trapped in my own point of view, the same way the people on the mainland were trapped in theirs.

I was so surprised, so shocked, when I realised that not every little brother was like Robert. What I had taken to be a basic and universal fact of life, was just something peculiar to my own history and circumstances. From this jarring of my point of view I came to realise, even as a small child, that if this one point I assumed to be true turned out to be not so in different circumstances, then everything else I thought - and everything everyone else thought - was similarly open to question. Not necessarily wrong, or incomplete, but open to question. And I saw that again, in a fresh way, when I went away to university and encountered people from what I think of as a still bigger mainland. The other students were from all over Nova Scotia, some even from different parts of Canada or the United States. This awareness is another gift that starting life on our rocky little island has given me. Now, starting life on my own in a another new place, I still feel that sense of

difference, that sense of seeing that people can be so trapped in their own and their community's point of view. I think I feel it more now than I did as a child commuting to the mainland to go to school. I am able to articulate that feeling now, in a way that was not possible for me to do as a child. I saw - I felt - when I first spent time on the mainland, that the agreements about life that we as a group on our island unconsciously made, were not the same as the unconscious agreements made by the people on the mainland.

So that showed me that sometimes the agreement or consensus of a group can only be seen from outside the group. I wasn't aware that we had made agreements about life and were continually making new ones, until I saw other people who had made different agreements, based on different circumstances and different histories.

I guess that the more different a person's background is from that of a group he is encountering, the more there is to be learned, in both directions, from that encounter. Assuming, of course, that the people involved in the encounter are open to the possibility of seeing in new ways. So now I find my different circumstances and different history give me a freedom in what I am able to see in the situations I find myself in, a freedom that other people around me often do not seem to have. It is another reason I am so grateful for my upbringing on Granite Island. My goodness, how I do go on! As always, my love to you and all the family.

Sarah

November 1

Dear Mom:

Today I caught a wriggly little fish of unintended information. I was working at a school where I hadn't been before, and I noticed right away they have a nice overstuffed comfy couch and chairs in the resource area. I commented on this to the resource teacher, and she said she thought it was important to create an area for the students where they can feel relaxed and welcome. I realised later on, that the unintended message was that in the rest of the school they *don't* feel relaxed and welcome. The resource area also has its own kitchen. The idea is to provide a place for teaching and practising life skills, like food preparation and serving. What it translates into is that the educational assistants work in that area and take their breaks there, and don't go to the staff room. It seems pretty strange, that we are supposed to be doing inclusive education, but the people who work with students with special needs are themselves kind of segregated from the rest of the staff. I wonder if there is a message in this. It feels to me like there is. Maybe it means that inclusive education still has a way to go.

My love to all,

Sarah

## My Diary

December 8

Well, I've now worked at all three levels of schools, and I have a relief position beginning 2 weeks before Christmas and running until mid March. So that is sort of a job. It's funny; there was no interview for the job, just an application on paper and a phone call telling me I had won the job. I had a bad experience on my first day today. I don't think I'll tell mom about it, at least not right away. She will know, of course, she always does. It happened in the staff room at the school where I have the relief position. I came early to meet people and get oriented, and I was the first person in the staff room. A pleasant looking woman in her mid thirties came in, saw me, and introduced herself. Her name is Nicole. I did likewise, then she asked if I was a substitute teacher. I said no, I am an EA in for a couple of months, and her manner changed completely. "Another damned EA!" she snapped, half to me and half like I wasn't even in the room "The board should be hiring more teachers, to make a better teacher to student ratio, not wasting money bringing in more EAs!" I was kind of shocked, and said something about being there because the board advertised the need. I hope I didn't sound too defensive.

Luckily, more people came in, then a man introduced himself as the vice principal, David is his name, and asked me to come with him. That broke up that very awkward moment, and got me out of there. David was very nice. At this school, the VP does a lot of the day to day leadership stuff, because it's the principal's last year, and she wants to finish off like she started, by teaching a class. So the two of them have partially swapped jobs. David told me about the students I would be working with, then took me down the hall to meet their teacher. But his pleasantness didn't erase that initial unofficial greeting, where I was told in no uncertain terms that I wasn't welcome there. The rest of the day went fine. I hope my time here will be OK, but I'm pretty upset about my introduction to the school.

*Is that the way the other teachers think?*

I wondered about mentioning something to David, but I sure don't want to start off my new job here airing that kind of problem. Besides, I've learned in my short time in the schools that "being professional" often means not saying what you really think.

I'm uncomfortable about the way someone treated me, and I don't feel I can say anything about it, and that's not quite right, is it? I wonder if any of the other EAs are feeling

the same way? None of them has said anything. But then, how could they? It's not the sort of thing you can talk about in the staff room.

I am beginning to realise that as an EA, I'm kind of a separate class. We work fewer hours than teachers, and because of the fewer hours, we are paid significantly less. And because we are paid by the hour, for only the time we are needed to be there to support the students, we are not there for staff meetings and the other interactions that take place after the students leave. One of the teachers with a fifty percent position was complaining about not being in on the pulse of the school because she's only part time. I sympathised with her, and I agreed that's not a good situation. Later I realised that for EAs, it's like that for our whole career. We aren't there for the decisions, we aren't there for the consensus. Instead, we come to work in the morning and find out what the decisions were. We find out what the consensus is, and adapt to it. But it's not just that. Teachers are used to being in charge, to being responsible. And I or any other EA, as a second adult coming into a class, has to deal with that. It's in the classrooms, it's in the halls, it's in the buildings, this deeply engrained idea that the teachers are there to lead and we are

there to serve. There is an awful assumption, and it's one of those situations I am able to see because I am new and from outside, that EAs can't do anything without being told what and how.

Of course, with some kinds of students, I have little or no practical knowledge, and I need all the help I can get. I defer to and draw from the knowledge and experience of the teachers I work with. Some of them have been doing it for 25 years, and they have seen a lot. But with students who are like Beth, or like Robert, I have been working with them almost all my life, and I know what works and what doesn't, and what they need. They need lots of one on one time, and they need caring relationships, and the relationship is more important than any stuff they are working on. I don't need to be told what to do with a child like Beth or Robert. I just need to be part of the team.

## My Diary

December 9

Today I met the student I will mostly be working with. He wasn't here yesterday, and it's just as well I had a day to get oriented before I met him. Wow, major behaviour problems! I feel like I'm working with a baby psychopath. Nothing I have ever experienced or studied has prepared me for this! Dustin is so aggressive, and angry, and full of frantic high energy. He can be foul-mouthed and abusive to everyone around him. The VP told me part of my job is working with him outside the class and outside the building. I'm supposed to shadow him on the playground and keep him from hurting anyone. Now I see what he meant. My goodness, he bumped into - ran into at full speed - another boy on the playground. He was so excited, going so fast he couldn't change direction, and he thought it was all the other boy's fault. He was ready to kill him. I stepped between them and tried to calm him down, but he was beside himself. When I told him he had to come in off the playground, he swore at me, like I've never been sworn at before, and then tried to run away. I have seen tantrums before, but nothing like this. It was like he was possessed by the devil. Thank goodness the VP had told me what to expect and

how to handle it. Just like he told me to do, I was very firm and calm, at least on the outside. On the inside I was upset and anxious, but I didn't let it show. I walked him, sometimes half dragged him, inside to the time out room. When he saw that resistance and bluster weren't going to work, he switched to bargaining. "One more chance!" he wailed, "Gimme one more chance! I won't hit any more! I don't need to go in! Gimme one more chance!" Then, on arrival at the time out room, he switched to drama. "You're putting me in a sweat room. A sweat room, and I don't get to have any fun. I don't get to play. Everybody has fun but me!" he sobbed. Then, finally, despair. "I ALWAYS get put in this sweat room. I NEVER get to go outside. NOBODY likes me." He went through a couple of cycles of defiance ("You're not the boss of me!"), rage, thumping on the door, abuse, resistance, bargaining, and despair, before calming down enough to return to the class. I quickly learned that this sequence and variations was a consistent pattern. He is seven years old, but when he gets himself into one of these states - he is two.

I am grateful for the support from my VP about this. Without his leadership I wouldn't have known how to effectively handle this situation. David told me the more desperately

children need structure and boundaries, the more they fight against them. It's a good thing Dustin wasn't here yesterday! Anyway, I sure earned my money today. I had to take him to the time out room a few more times during the day. He has a pattern of becoming hostile and defiant, then so disruptive he has to be taken out of the class. His teacher said he has better days than today, but he also has worse days. It's pretty draining. It's hard to deal with stuff like that, and not get all stressed out. I hope it gets easier. I talked to David about it at the end of the day. He said children can be helped to come out of behaviour patterns like that, but it takes a long time. He also listened very well to the anxiety I expressed, and he was very supportive. I remember some of his exact words. "Don't take it personally. Whoever is there will be a target for his rage. It doesn't mean anything." and "Consistency is really important, and we all have to work as a team on this." I hope writing this down helps me to remember it, and to stay calm.

I think I'm going to enjoy working with Debbi, the teacher. In my substituting at various schools I have seen two distinctly different attitudes among teachers. Some teachers treat you like you are there for the teacher's benefit. Some treat you like you are there for the student. The teachers who

think you are at the school for their benefit expect to make all the decisions. They expect you to do nothing unless they ask for it. It's kind of a holiday from responsibility - and a waste of the EA's experience and judgement. Debbi isn't like that. Even though I'm new, and don't know very much about some parts of the work, she treats me as an equal partner. She knows I want to learn, and I will. Debbi includes me in the dynamics of the class. She is open to me, open to what I see and think and feel. She's like a good fishing skipper - like dad. A good skipper has the eyes and thoughts of everyone on the boat working with him, because he is open to them. A good skipper knows that everyone on the boat is there for the operation of the boat, and not just as extension of his own will. And a good skipper knows that different people, with diverse ideas and ways of doing things, can come together and do things so much better than any single individual ever could. A poor skipper thinks that to lead, he has to shut everyone else out. And he thinks he has to be in charge of everything, instead of trusting the judgement, the ways of doing things, and the work of the other people on the boat contributing to the overall operation. So a poor skipper has only his own eyes and his own judgement working for him, and spreads himself too thin, trying to do everyone's

thinking for them. It's limiting, it's unsafe, and it's no fun to work with.

Like working with a good skipper, by the end of the day Debbi and I were communicating just by exchanging looks. "Is he past calming down?" "Yes, I think so, I've seen this many times before" "OK, I'm taking him out. Hopefully I'll see you before too long." And all this without a word being said. That was the best part of my day. Between her and the VP, I feel like part of a team, not just an extension of someone else's work.

December 12

Dear Mom:

I should probably have mentioned a month ago, that I have moved out of my little cabin for the winter and in with my landlords, ma and pa MacLean. So I'm not freezing to death in an unheated cabin.

This probably won't get to you soon enough for you to write back and tell me what you need me to bring home with me. I am coming home for Christmas. I have steady work for the next 3 months, so I can afford the trip. I only found out about this a couple of days ago, or I would have written sooner. My last day of work is the Wednesday before Christmas. I plan to get ready that afternoon, then leave before dawn on Thursday. Weather permitting. I'll go to Aunt Vera's, and call you on the VHF. If you need anything, I can double back to Lunenburg and do the shopping. I'll call again when I'm back at Vera's. I hope Dad will be able to pick me up. Weather permitting. Remember my second year at university, when it blew a gale for the whole week around Christmas, and Dad couldn't even think of taking the boat out? Although it was disappointing , that Christmas was kind of special in its own way. I had Christmas dinner at Vera's, and you and Dad and the family had Christmas dinner on the island without me, and we all wished each other a Merry Christmas over the VHF. That was nice, but I do hope to get home. The radio just isn't the same as sitting across the table from you. Which I hope to be doing soon. Love to all

Sarah

## My Diary

December 15

I can't believe this! I've lost my full time job, almost before it started. I guess what happened is, the five hours a day I was working is more than many people in the union have, so somebody complained, and it has to be changed. The VP really wanted to keep me, so what's going to happen is that I will stay on, but for the mornings only. I will work 3 1/2 hours a day, mornings only, and someone else will work the rest of the time. I guess that's the way it has to be, and I guess I'm lucky that I get to keep any of the time at all. It's a good thing I didn't count my chickens and buy a newer car. I certainly thought about it. Anyway, I should be OK. The VP says I can still substitute in the afternoons, and that should get me a bit more time. Besides, Mom and Dad always taught me to live below my means, so I would be prepared to deal with a reduction in those means. I'll be all right. It will be good to talk to Mom and Dad about this.

## My Diary

December 16

Well, I am off home to Nova Scotia tomorrow. I'm so looking forward to it, to seeing Mom, and Dad, Robert and Don, Vera and Beth and the rest of the family. And real rocks. I get to be around the water here, but there's no real rocks. Just sandstone and lots of crumbly shale. There's no real sand either. I like my sand white, not reddish like it is here. The shore is nice here, but it doesn't smell the same. The air doesn't feel the same. It's just a gut feeling, but only my own shore will do. So the familiarity of a chunk of granite awash in salt water isn't quite good enough for me. It has to be MY chunk of granite and MY waves. Which makes me wonder. What hope is there for the poor kids, whose homes are on streets littered with trash and broken glass, discarded broken furniture, and rusty old bicycles? A person doesn't have to look very far to see that kind of environment around here. What hope is there for the children born into limiting, or even neglectful or abrasive relationships? Where will those children, as adults, take themselves, when that urge to re-create the familiar feel of home washes over them? What can our educational attempts to include them really do, when the have not kids look around

*them and see that most of their classmates have support, wealth, and possibilities that they will never be a part of?*

## My Diary

December 18

I feel so happy to be home in my room writing in my diary. I'm in my familiar surroundings and it makes me feel so safe. Mom and Dad understand my need to draw into myself and reflect. I don't have to perform for them, and this is so good. The best part of being home is spending time with Robert again. Being with Robert here is so different from being with the students in the schools. In the schools, we have such a strong agenda we try to bring to the children. It's our job. It's also a source of tension. We try to bring the children along, to help them to grow, and I think sometimes that translates into them not feeling accepted for who they are. They are under constant pressure to perform. There is no such tension here with Robert. We completely accept who he is, and he knows that. He is happy and relaxed, and a person who is open to that cannot help but be happy and relaxed too. I think our schools could learn from that.

## My Diary

December 31

As has become my habit, New Year's Eve is a time for reflection for me. I don't like the idea of seeing in the new year with a party. I much prefer to use this marker in time to take stock of life. I spent a quiet evening with ma and pa MacLean. They went to bed about ten, as they usually do. Now there's my kind of people! It's nice we found each other. Not surprising, though. Our movements are not random. I seek out a certain simplicity in my life, and when I bumped into them, it was only natural that the initial contact would lead to more.

This has been a year of big changes. I finished university and made the decision to not return to Granite Island. It was a good decision. If I had returned after university I would have been like a root bound plant in a pot which had grown too small for me. That which had originally nurtured me would have become a restriction, eventually stifling. I'm glad mom and dad see that, and they also see that my not being there is not an implied criticism of them. They're pretty special.

The other big change, maybe the biggest, is that I have found a place for myself in the working world on this bigger island. Working with special needs, although I didn't plan it

as a job, is pretty well built into me. I do it well, and it gives me great satisfaction. It looks like I will be able to survive and support myself doing this. Just as importantly, I feel I am making a worthwhile contribution by helping people who need it. One frustration I feel, and something that I need to work on, is that I often don't feel as much a part of the school community as I would like to be. It's not an ego issue- well maybe a little- but what is important is if I don't feel heard and accepted, what does this mean to the status of the children I work with? How can I advocate for them, when I am in a limited position myself?

The other big change, and the other thing I need to work on, is Kent. Most of the time I put on a brave face, and I fool everyone, including myself. If I take off the mask for a minute, I have to admit, his absence from my life is still an open wound. And much of the time, this new life I am making for myself is too fast and too complicated for me. Sometimes I am quietly terrified. Kent was my anchor. There, I've said it. When I wake up tomorrow morning, it will be a new year. There's still time for me to go to bed in the old year. Good night world. Happy new year world.

January 16

Dear Mom:

It was great being home for Christmas and seeing everyone. Dad was right about the weather. Leaving a day earlier than I had planned was the right thing to do. The weather was great all the way back, and there was a blizzard the next day. We have another blizzard today, and it's a storm day, no school today. I don't really need a break from the routine, I've only been back a couple of weeks - but I'll take it.

I was offered some tutoring time starting in the new year, but I remembered Mary's thoughts on that, which I do agree with, and I turned it down. Something better came up for me anyway. Ma and pa MacLean asked me if I would like to work for them when I am not in the school. It's pretty ideal. It doesn't matter when I start and when I stop; I just need to do the work. They can't afford to pay me as much as I get in the schools, but that's OK. The work is like being home on Granite Island. And I am so happy for all the hands on skills that I learned from Mom and Dad. I like working with pa MacLean. He moves carefully, never in a hurry, never excited, always open to the ideas of people working with him. He's like a good skipper. We are painting and fixing up his tourist cottages, one at a time. We set up a temporary heater in the cabin we are working on, so it won't be too cold to work and the paint will dry properly. Together we make decisions about colours, then he usually leaves me to repair and paint on my own. It's very pleasant work, dead quiet except for the hiss of the heater, following my own schedule instead of responding to the clock. It's a good contrast to the regulated pace and hectic demands of a classroom.

Pa MacLean was pretty impressed to find out I can do plumbing.

There's lots of that to be done, with new bathrooms going into 3 of the cottages.

Thank you, Dad, for those hours tinkering in the barn, fixing things and making things for our home and fishing operation. That was just as important as my school education, and something many children lack today. I'm really enjoying being in a school, and the kids are just adorable.

As always, love to all

Sarah

## My Diary

February 20

Since I started my job at Greenfield Elementary, there were days when I dreaded what behaviour I might have to deal with when I came into work. But then, if it were easy, we wouldn't be needed, would we? It has been an eventful eight weeks. Dustin got sent home from school a couple of times - once when he punched another boy in the nose and made him bleed, another time when he ran into the computer room, snatched up a keyboard, and smashed it across the edge of the table. He is so fast and so volatile; it's just not possible to prevent every bad thing from happening. And I always feel bad, not just for what happened, but for Dustin, too. He is so young to have that kind of weight on him. But there have been a couple of turning points. We (Debbi, David, and I) had an impromptu meeting in the hall one morning. We decided to make it a practice to bring him in early, ahead of the bell and the other students, because so often he got into trouble outside in the morning. David and I decided to change my working hours for me to be there to meet Dustin, to bring him in, and try to settle him down before school actually starts. So one morning he comes in, swinging his pack round him like a

club, all bluster and aggression and manic energy as usual. I try to get him settled, pack hung up, coat and boots off, indoor shoes on. And instead of taking him to the resource room, where we had usually been going for quiet time, for reading, talking, quiet music, and all the settling activities we do, I tried something different. I asked him if he wanted to go to the morning program. Greenfield Elementary has a morning program, for children whose parents need to drop them off early on their way to work. It's supervised indoor time before school where they can read, colour, finish homework, talk quietly, or eat the breakfast they have brought with them. Dustin said no, but not like it was a simple choice or preference, and not rudely, like he does when he's being oppositional. There was kind of a look in his eyes, a turning in of his body language, and I saw fear at the prospect of going downstairs to the program. His guard was down for a just a second, and I realised that he was terrified much of the time, and he covered it up with bluster. "It's all right" I said. "I'll come with you OK?" And he reluctantly shook his head yes, and held on to my hand for dear life. He stuck very close to me inside the room, but he was there. He accepted a piece of muffin offered by a girl beside him, and attacked it like it was his first food in a week.

(It wasn't) The rest of the day was great! He had his best day I had yet seen, and we sent a note home to mom saying what had happened and suggesting she send in some extra breakfast for him to have at the program the next day. And that has become our morning routine, not every day, but most days, and it gets him settled and ready to be in the class. The defiance and the rages still happen, but they are the exception, rather than every day like they used to be.

One morning, a couple of weeks after we started this routine, a boy across the table from Dustin at the morning program started making fun of another boy in Dustin's class who has a speech impediment. Just as I was about to intervene, Dustin said to him "Leave him alone, he's just learning, just like the rest of us!" and the boy across the table knew enough to leave it alone. So Dustin has found some peace here at school, and I feel pretty good about that.

## My Diary

March 20

Well, my relief job is done. Today was my last day. It's funny, I remember my first day, and how I was upset by that first encounter in the staff room. Every day in the halls and in the staff room I saw Nicole, the teacher who had been so nasty to me my first day here, and she was always polite and pleasant to me, like nothing ever happened. And I was the same. But I knew something did happen, so I smiled on the outside and I was wary on the inside. It's a pity, because at some point she will have a child with special needs in her class, and an educational assistant will be assigned to work with them. While she is working through whatever it is she has to, that EA and that student will suffer. If it continues to be really bad, the EA will find a way to get out of the situation. And the student will be still there.

Little Dustin came a long way. A couple of weeks ago, he had a collision on the playground, just like the one he had the first day I worked with him. All excited, running at top speed, and whump! head on into another boy doing the same thing. They both went flying, only this time, instead of charging in with fists churning, he picked himself up, said "I'm sorry" and

turned right back to his high speed chase game as though nothing had happened. The next day I asked him if he liked having me follow him around everywhere. I knew he hated it, and he told me so. Here's the deal, I said. You stay out of trouble, don't hit anybody, don't yell at anybody, and you can go out by yourself. I cleared it with David, of course, and then let him go out on his own. He was fine, and except for a couple of less than perfect days, has been since. I don't expect he will be without problems in the future, but he has turned a corner on his behaviour. I like to think I made a difference for him. But this happened only because I was working with people like David and Debbi, who respected me enough to give me the support, the time, and the space to give Dustin the kind of support he needed. They understand that working with a child like Dustin requires a lot of flexibility, and the person working with him needs the freedom to exercise that flexibility.

And here I am with no job again. I hope when I substitute for the rest of the year that I get enough calls to make ends meet. On days when I don't get called I can work all day for Mr. MacLean. I'm trying to convince myself that I will be OK. I really miss Kent tonight. Hadn't thought of him for quite a while. I'm feeling discouraged and vulnerable

and lonely, and I remember how comforting his support was to me. But it wasn't to be, and I feel so empty now. We loved each other for all the right reasons. I guess sometimes that's not enough. I think he wanted to be with someone he could want for the wrong reasons. I am grateful for what we had, and grateful for his honesty. But none of that does me any good tonight. Oh, I'm disgusting! Feeling sorry for myself, and wallowing in it. Tomorrow is another day, mom would say.

April 10

Dear Mom:

I guess I don't need to tell you I'm OK, because when you don't hear from me, it's because something is bothering me. So the envelope in your hand tells you before you open it that I'm pretty much past whatever wasn't going right, and the details are inside. I guess I don't need to say anything more. love, Sarah

Just kidding! Of course I'm bursting to tell you all my news. I was pretty down for a while after my job at Greenfield Elementary was over. I did get calls to substitute, but it's not certainly not the same as actually having a job. When you work in a school, you become part of a community and you can draw energy from that, as you put your own into it. I did a lot of work for pa MacLean. I guess ma and pa MacLean were my community for the month, and of course they still are. He is pleased that we got more units done than he had planned on. He will have more freshly renovated cottages, which rent at a higher price than the old ones, when the tourists start coming in another month or so. He already has some bookings for the summer, so it's looking good for him. I haven't moved back into the cabin yet. It's still pretty cold and damp out. There's still quite a bit of snow in the woods around the cabin where the sun doesn't get at it. I'll give it another month before I go back to my little Walden in the woods.

My great news is, I have almost a full time job until the end of the school year. I know I shouldn't be so dependent on external circumstances for my happiness. You and Dad always taught me to work on being happy with myself, then I can weather the difficult times better. But I need some sense of

security, and some sense of being needed, and some sense of belonging, and when I don't have work that gives me those things, it's hard. So getting a job is good.

David, the Vice Principal at Greenfield, asked me to come in and work with a new student. He called me because he knows me, knows I'm available, and he thinks I would be good with this student. This little girl started in September at another school, then went into the hospital after only six weeks. She has been there ever since, up until just a week or so ago. David told me that after a while people thought she wasn't going to make it back. The EA who had worked with her for those six weeks was then transferred to another school. That's the nature of our work. We get moved to where the needs are. This new student was moved to this school at the request of the parents, because they weren't happy with the care she had received at the other school.

I met this EA. She was here for a day to show me what she could about caring for the child. She said to me, right in front of the child, "In twelve years of doing this, she's the worst I've ever seen!" I was pretty shocked. Assuming a person can't understand what is being said, just because they can't communicate, is very wrong. Also, they may not understand the words, but they can understand the emotions behind them. That statement also revealed a lack of respect for students with disabilities, or at least this one, which is ...not too good. I usually ask myself when I meet a new person in the caregiving business, "Would I want this person to be taking care of Robert?" and in her case, definitely not. So I took what she had to say with a grain of salt, and filed away the information that not everyone in this caregiving role in the schools belongs there.

The good news for me is, it's late enough in the year so they can hire a relief person to fill the position. David said he thought of me right away. It sure pays to have people know you. So I'm hired for five hours a day until the end of the school year. I'm back at Greenfield. It's like a dream come true. That works out pretty well, because Pa MacLean doesn't need me to do much more this year, and I won't have the time anyway.

I don't feel the same rapport with Catherine, the grade one teacher I will be working with, as I do with Debbi, but I hope we will do OK together. Some of the other EAs have told me that sometimes you have to put so much energy into dealing with a teacher that you don't have much left for the student. I hope that doesn't happen. I don't think it will here at this school because the leadership sets the tone, and David's leadership sets a very co-operative style. It's the old good skipper or bad skipper story. I hope I'm not spoiled by working with Debbi. But I know I am. I've seen different approaches when working with other teachers when I was substituting, that aren't so great to work with. They aren't all like Debbi. She sure is a good skipper. Will I be lucky twice in one year?

I'm still driving Aunt Vera's old car, but between what I earn at the school and making something this summer, I should be able to upgrade this fall. Dad and Don must be getting the boat ready, as spring is in the air. I hope you and Robert are your usual joyful selves. I miss you and love you all.

Sarah

## My Diary

April 30

My new work situation is challenging me in a number of ways. The little girl I work with, Peggy is her name, is the most profoundly disabled person I have ever met. She has no speech and very little ability to move. Her arms and legs are like sticks. She has almost no muscle, and while she can move her arms and legs, there is obviously not much strength and little if any co-ordination. For my first first few days with her, I was filled with doubts- about whether I was up to the task of giving her what she needed, whether a child so disabled really belonged in the school, whether we could do anything for her. Yet at the same time, that first day we met, it had a kind of charged sense to it. I have had that feeling before, a kind of premonition, about people who have later become a friend, mentor, adversary, or lover. (Once all of the above in one person, but I won't dwell on that now.) So I paid attention, I was tuned in.

Even though she has very little control of her movements, Peggy has an expressive face, and she can move her head and her eyes, which she does a lot. There is a quickness and a sharpness to these movements that tell me that behind her

limitations, there is an engaged awareness of her surroundings. She is curious, too. When I move around a corner, just out of her sight, she cranes her neck in an attempt to see what I am doing. When I lift her to transfer her from chair to mat or chair to change table, she obviously likes that. She likes being handled, and she expresses that with her face, her eyes, her neck, and her body tension. She knows what she likes, she knows what she doesn't like. Her meaning is unmistakable. She can communicate. So I am finding, a bit to my surprise, that I am quickly building a relationship with her. But then, I love Robert, as my whole family does, and often people who meet him don't understand this. They don't understand that we love him, not because of what he can't do, and not in spite of what he can't do, but just for the person that he is.

Peggy doesn't like being in a classroom. Now that's an understatement. She's OK for a little while, then when she's had enough she screams, tenses her whole body, and flails her tiny little arms. Of course, I have to take her out when this happens. But David said I should work on getting her to be able to stay with the class more, so I don't take her out right away. I'll move her to another spot, still within the class, touch her head

to reassure her, or speak to her. I'm trying to stretch the time she can spend in the classroom. It's not just about her fear, either. She wants her own way. So sometimes, I find myself in the strangest situation - a power struggle with a completely helpless seven year old, and I have to be careful that the outcome is in my favour!

Her parents came in, on separate days, to see how she is doing in this new environment. She lit up like a campfire when each of them came into the room. And at first I had thought she couldn't communicate, and had limited awareness of her surroundings! When her mother came in, Peggy was in the resource room with me, in her chair with her back to the door, and when her mother silently stepped into the room and said hello, Peggy's eyes just snapped around to look. She couldn't get up and run over, like any other child would, but she did it with her eyes!

Of course, they weren't just checking on her and the environment, they were checking up on me. They are making sure that she is being well taken care of. I respect that. I told them about caring for Robert, and his helplessness, so they would know I understand their feelings about the needs of their daughter. I need to learn as much as I can about

caring for her, so it was great to have the opportunity for them to show me things and answer my questions. It came out in our conversations, that when Peggy started at the other school, her diapers were not changed often enough. They had pointed this out to the EA. Nothing changed, so dad sent her in one day with a mark on her diaper concealed under the fold. His suspicion was confirmed when she came home wearing the same diaper. He then took his observation to the principal, but still nothing changed, and she developed a terrible diaper rash. It's such a simple, basic part of care, and it wasn't done properly, and it made her miserable. They were pretty upset, of course, but before the situation came to a head, Peggy got sick again and went into the hospital. That's why when she came back to school, it was to Greenfield, rather than back where she started. I gather her parents asked the school board for the transfer, and to avoid any kind of problem, the board agreed. I think David knew all this, but didn't tell me. His silence was that aspect of professionalism I have already noticed in this business of education - that being professional sometimes means you don't say what you really think. So Peggy's parents had good reason to check me out pretty carefully. They were doing what I would do in their place. For my part, I am

grateful we never had to leave Robert in the care of anyone outside the family. I would have been concerned if we had needed to. Come to think of it, that time may come. Robert is big and heavy now, Don at some point might want to go off on his own the way I have, and dad won't be able to keep lifting Robert forever.

I talk to one of the parents, usually her father, a couple of times a week. We send a communication book back and forth daily, so we can let each other know how her night or day has gone and to bring up any concerns we have. That relationship is seems to be working well.

The relationship that isn't going well is the one I have with the grade one teacher, Catherine. Here I am again, avoiding talking about what is bothering me. Not going well is an understatement. She's driving me crazy! She expects to see every word I send in the communication book, and it's darned hard to get Peggy ready to go home, write a note, and double back to the class so she can see it. And what does it matter to her how many spoonfuls of lunch Peggy ate, or whether she had a bowel movement, or how her hand exercises went? It's like she's afraid I'll say something wrong that will somehow go badly for her. She wants to make all the decisions.

I start to take Peggy out, for any reason, and she wants to know why and tells me to wait. It's like I'm not capable of making an intelligent decision. Yesterday, Peggy's father called the school at break time. He knows he can get me then, while another EA is watching Peggy. Peggy had a bit of sniffles when she left the house, and her father just wanted to check she was OK. Pretty understandable with a child as delicate as Peggy. I told him Peggy was fine; her nose was a bit runny when she arrived, but she had cleared up as the morning went on. Catherine overheard the conversation, wanted to know what it was about, and told me in no uncertain terms that I'm supposed to refer parent inquiries to her. The way she said it made it clear that if I questioned her in any way it would be seen as confrontational. So I said OK - what else could I do? Then just today, I took Peggy out of the class for the resource room, and two minutes later Catherine came striding across the hall, asking - demanding - to know why I took Peggy out without checking with her.

"You were teaching a lesson, and she had a bowel movement." I told her. "When that happens, it needs to be dealt with as soon as possible."

"You should still check with me" she said. "In future,

please do so. Bring her back when you can."

And I thought of working with Debbi, and how we communicated so well, and how Catherine is closed to that. I was just seething as I finished cleaning Peggy up. I'm not used to being treated like that, not in any work situation I have experienced before. I have a university degree now, and I was never treated like that, not even as an employee in a fast food joint. I tried not to let it show, but I think Peggy is very intuitive, because she started to wail. She sensed something was wrong. I put her back in her chair, and she continued to wail. It was like she was expressing the emotions that I had to keep in check. Just as I was wondering whether I should bring her back to the class in the state she was in - not based on her needs, but because it was expected - Catherine came back in.

"I heard her crying. What's wrong?"

"I think maybe her lunch isn't sitting well with her." I lied. "Maybe I should try taking her for a little walk?"

"OK" she said. "She can't come back in like she is."

And that's the way it is. Catherine has to think what I do is her idea. So I put Peggy's coat on, and mine, and we wheeled outside and around the parking lot. She calmed down right away, or maybe I did. It was nice in the sun, and

Peggy was obviously enjoying the stroll. It was only twenty minutes until Peggy's pick up time, and I resolved not to go back to the classroom that day. She needed to be away from that tension more than she needed anything she might get from being in the class. Likewise me.

*I guess I didn't get lucky twice in one year.*

*This must be the kind of situation the other EAs were talking about that afternoon we all went out for a beer. They said sometimes you have to put so much energy into dealing with a teacher there's not much left for the student. It's awful! I'm going to talk to David about this. I know I should try to fix it with Catherine, but I don't see how I can do more than I have. Every time I try to bring up a point about some way we do things, I run into a brick wall. And the brick wall is, she's the teacher, and I'm just- JUST!- the EA. The problem with our working together isn't about any detail or procedure or way of doing something. It's about status, which she sees as non negotiable, and which I see as belittling and counterproductive. She's a control freak. It's about her thinking I'm not supposed to have a relationship with Peggy or her parents - that's her domain. So I don't know what I will do if David doesn't help me. Grit my teeth, I guess, and try to get*

through the rest of the year. Keep my eyes open for another relief position. I think I'll have a glass of wine before bed, and maybe I'll be able to get to sleep. The MacLeans are a comfort to be around, but I don't feel I can open up myself to them, like I need to do with someone. It's still nice knowing they are downstairs. I'm glad I'm not back in the cabin yet. Oh, damn. I miss Kent again tonight. I'll definitely need that glass of wine to sleep.

## My Diary

May 4

I got through the other night somehow. It took a second glass of wine before my mind stopped churning enough so I could sleep. David was away at a meeting the next afternoon, so I didn't get to see him. I left a note in his inbox asking to meet with him after Peggy leaves on Friday. Luckily, there were a couple of visitors for Peggy and me, and that kept us busy in the resource room for most of the morning. A travelling nurse from the health department came to check up on Peggy. Peggy recognised her instantly, and gave her one of those amazing smiles I love to see. She was very kind and professional. She told me Peggy is looking good. She said Peggy had more muscle and more movement before she went into the hospital with her last bout of infection, but almost six months of being confined to bed had taken a toll. She told me the more I work with her movement, the more possibility there is of improvement. I really liked the way she treated me as an equal. With her, I feel like a partner in the task of caring for Peggy. I think maybe nurses are often patronised and their contribution is unrecognised by doctors, so they know how bad that feels. She was making sure that our relationship isn't like

that. She gave me her card as she left, telling me to call her if I have any concerns, and committing to returning in two weeks.

The other visitor was a physiotherapist, whose job it is to instruct caregivers on the physiotherapy work they can do. Most of his work is home visits with spouses, parents, or adults caring for their parents. Sometimes he goes to schools to help out with cases like Peggy's. He showed me a series of exercises and gave me some pages of diagrams to go with them. He showed me what to look for in terms of tension and alignment, and told me how muscles need to be run through range of motion stretches. Basically, I need to run Peggy through the same movements I routinely do for myself, because she can't do them on her own. He treated me as an equal partner, just as the nurse had done. I enjoy that so much. I can really learn in such a situation. He also left me with a card, and told me to call if I notice any changes. I had expected Catherine would be across the hall every time she could grab a minute, but she stayed with the class the whole morning. I just realised now that maybe the reason she didn't come over is because she thought that being with the visitors meant I didn't need to be supervised!

The rest of the day was good. Peggy was in the class for a read aloud after lunch, and seemed happy and attentive. She started fussing after half an hour, the longest she has been in class yet. I think she was over stimulated and tired, rather than frightened or wanting her own way. I took her out to the resource room - with Catherine's permission, of course - put her on the mat, and practised the stretches the physiotherapist had shown me. He said it would be good to practice them right away to help me remember them and to relate my notes to their application. I put on soft music for this, and Peggy seemed to enjoy the whole process.

After Peggy was picked up by the van I went to see David. I hadn't realised just how upset I was by all of this until I actually stepped into his office. I was shaking all over, and really glad when he asked me to sit down. It's really scary when you bump up against the power of the system. I knew that's what I was doing. I told him way more than I planned to. It all came out. All the details, all the events, all the ways I was treated that I found so limiting, so frustrating, and so belittling. I told him how soul destroying it was to have my relationships with my student and her parents sabotaged. I told him how demeaning it was to be denied the use of my

knowledge, and the responsibility, the judgement, and initiative in my work that should be mine. All my bad feelings that I had been trying so hard to keep in check just spilled out of me. I hope I didn't sound too awful. Resentful, passive aggressive, uncooperative, even back stabbing. Maybe incoherent and emotional, too, because I was fighting back tears the whole time, and I wasn't entirely successful. David had closed the door, for which I was grateful, and he just listened, nodding, his eyes on mine, saying "I see" or "Yes" or just "Hmmm" after each gush of words and emotions, until I was finished.

"Well" he said, measuring his words carefully, "Catherine spoke to me on Wednesday about how the two of you are working together. She's upset too."

At that point I thought I was really sunk, I had stuck my neck out too far, and this was the end of me. But when he continued, his voice was kind, not reproachful.

"Technically, Catherine is right. According to policy, Catherine is doing what she is supposed to do. She is trying to handle your relationship according to the published guidelines. There are posters about these guidelines, but I didn't get them put up. I didn't like them. Maybe I should

have."

*And he held up a poster entitled Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers and Support Staff for me to see.*

*"I had no idea you were feeling like this. But I can see now that working this way is distressing to you, and I can see why. I can see it's not working. Not for you, not for Catherine, and especially not for Peggy. We are supposed to be here for Peggy, so we have to do what we can to make it work for her."*

*I wanted to interrupt, to tell him how hard I was trying to make it work for her, how hard I was trying to use my knowledge and experience to help Peggy. He held up his hand and motioned me to wait.*

*"Leave this with me." he said. "I'm working on a solution, but I need to make some calls first. It will be all right." Seeing the doubt in my posture and in my eyes, he said it again. "It will be all right. It will be. Enjoy your weekend. And thanks for coming in." Then he stood up, signalling the meeting was over. I think he would have let me linger, spent a bit more time with me, but we both knew he had things that needed to get done before the end of the work day. I thanked him and left.*

*I am trying to be at ease about this, to have faith that it*

will be OK, but it's hard. At least it's out in the open now. My livelihood and my fulfilment are at stake here, and it's outside my control. I think I'll take David's advice, and put it out of my mind and go to the beach tomorrow. Maybe Mary would like to come too. I'll call her, then have my wine and go to bed.

## My Diary

May 7

I had a great day at the beach with Mary, and I did a good job of putting my work out of my mind. I didn't talk about it with her, because I knew if I did, that would be all I thought about all day. No. That's not what the day was about! The day was about sunshine, and splashing our feet in the cold water, and painting our toenails in rainbow colours, and a nibble all day kind of picnic lunch, and it was great!

I was pretty keyed up this morning wondering what was going to happen, and I went in quite early hoping to see David. He was there and he was waiting for me. He invited me right into his office and motioned me to sit down. He was, as usual, warm and friendly.

“Thanks so much for coming in early. I was hoping you would. I’m not supposed to ask you to be here outside your assigned working hours, because I can’t pay you for that. So it’s great you’re here. Now, I’m sure you’re anxious to hear what’s going to happen with your work.

I have good news for you.

As you know, Peggy is having trouble adapting to being in a classroom. What class she is in isn’t too critical, because

the material we are working on with her is not on the curriculum anyway. We know she will be in Debbi's class next year, and it would help to give her extra time to make that transition. So what I have told Catherine, and what I'm telling you, is that we are moving Peggy to Debbi's class for the rest of this year, in preparation for her continuing on with Debbi next year. I know how well you and Debbi have worked together, so this should make the rest of the year go better for everyone. I had to clear it with Peggy's parents and with the board. Those were the calls I had to make. So starting this morning when she arrives, Peggy will be in Debbi's class; you'll take her to Debbi's class. OK?"

I think I must have just sat there with my mouth hanging open, because he asked me again, "OK?"

I sort of came to, and thanked him, still not fully understanding how well this had gone for me, left his office in a bit of a daze, and went to get ready to meet Peggy. The day went great. I took her to Debbi's class, and Debbi introduced Peggy to the class, and told them I would be working with them again, mostly with Peggy, for the rest of the year. It was nice to see them all again, and to see Dustin looking quite settled - or as settled as can be expected for a hyperactive seven year old

boy! Maybe I'll get a chance to work with him again before the year is done. I brought Peggy into the class for three short periods of time. It's a new group of people and I didn't want to overdo it for Peggy on her first day with them. She will be with them when possible for the rest of this year. A good start is important.

I phoned Mary to talk to her about this. She says I'm incredibly lucky. A lot of principals would probably have just let me go. After all, EAs are a dime a dozen. No principal wants be seen as siding with an EA in any kind of a conflict with a teacher. The teachers are long term staff members, and the EAs get moved around. They're expendable. So if something isn't going right, we are seen as the problem. And I'm just a relief employee, not even a member of the union yet. So I'm lucky that I not only still have a job, but a job at the same school. It probably helped me that David knows I'm good with Peggy, and if he doesn't have me, he doesn't know who he'd get. He knows the history.

David, with his amazing leadership, found a way to make it work. Catherine is a good teacher and a good person. He found a way to solve her problem, and my problem, and to take care of our student, without anybody losing in the deal. I

respected him before. I am in awe of him now, and I will always do whatever I can to help him out. I think Catherine felt she was in an impossible position, being technically responsible for a child whose needs she had no idea how to meet. She was also technically responsible for me, and I can do so much more than she can for a student like Peggy. I see myself as a professional in my own right, not just an extension of someone else's practice. That policy is just as unfair to her as it is to me, in the unworkable demands it placed on her. She probably had heard about the problems with Peggy's care at the other school, and that would certainly have added to her feeling of unease in this situation. She's not used to working with other people. Teaching is mostly flying solo, and I think it was too big a jump for her, along with all the other pressures of being a teacher.

What is behind this policy about how EAs and teachers work together? Where did the class system in it come from? It troubles me. It bothers me. It doesn't feel right. I can feel it when I walk into a school, that an agreement has been made about who I am in that situation. This agreement has been made prior to my arrival, without my knowledge or consent or involvement. I certainly felt it and lived it when I went

through that two week long toothache of trying to work with Catherine! Do I consent to that agreement, or become bound by it, or defined by it, when I take on the role of working with students with disabilities? Apparently so. Because that feeling, that experience of being “the other” is an undeniable part of being an educational assistant. And undeniable is the right word here. No matter how I twist and turn my experiences, trying to rationalise or repress them and what they mean to me as a person, they are there and they have happened. It’s so ironic, that the moral ideal of inclusive education is to stop seeing people with disabilities as “others”. Yet the educational community has created a whole new class of “others” with complex sets of rules governing their otherness and their limitations. I don’t like it and I don’t think it works well!

I see this as one of those situations where a group of people, in this case, the teaching profession, has over time made a series of implicit as well as explicit agreements about how their working lives will be with others. I don’t share the background and I don’t share the history. Through this difference in the road I took to get here, I am able to see that these agreements have been made, that that they are limited and insular in their application, and they are not universal

or axiomatic as they are seen to be by the participants in this professional culture. From my point of view as an outsider, policy on EAs and teachers working together looks like it was written by a poor skipper! How many other relationships have been limited or outright sabotaged by this policy, when it gets applied by people who don't have the experience to know any better? How many children like Peggy and others have had the meeting of their needs compromised by this policy? How many EAs work in a state of frustration by way they have been diminished by the way they are defined? How many EAs react by tuning out and just going through the motions, not really emotionally engaged any more? And, what bothers me most of all, how many EAs sooner or later buy into this way of thinking? How many come to see themselves as second class citizens in the educational community, then act accordingly, and make the class system into a self fulfilling prophecy? From what I have experienced and seen, it happens. Will that ever happen to me? And what would have happened to me if I didn't have a vice principal like David in my corner?

Oh my goodness I go on. Sometimes when I write, it's just a mundane account of events. Other times, things come out that I have been getting cumulatively more upset about. I

*guess this all needed to be said.*

*And the good news is: I get to work with Debbi for the rest of the year, and with any luck, next year too! I can't wait to go to work tomorrow! I can't wait to see Peggy, and to work with her needs, and not be worried about having to go along with all that other stuff. It's going to be great.*

*Oh damn. What's this empty feeling? This familiar empty feeling? There's this big empty space in me. I miss Kent again. I've learned to expect to miss him in the dark hours, when his comfort and support were so good. But now? I guess this shouldn't be a surprise. I miss sharing the good things with him too. Oh well, it wasn't meant to be. Good night world. I guess I'll have a glass of wine, and put myself to bed.*

May 14

Dear Mom:

I have now been to my first union meeting. I met and talked with quite a variety of people. EAs are a more diverse group than I first realised from my limited experience working in just a few schools. Many EAs are very articulate and professional. Others do not present themselves quite so well.

We were all given a copy of the code of ethics for EAs. I especially like that we have the formal ethical responsibility to act as advocates for children with disabilities. I like the idea of speaking on behalf of a child who is unable to do so for himself.

New members got sworn in with a Formal "Obligation of New Members" oath. I am not a new member yet, because I am still just a relief employee. I hope to become a "real" EA next year.

I didn't enjoy the main part of the meeting. It was kind of overwhelming being in one room with over two hundred and fifty people. That's a pretty big contrast to my home on Granite Island! Most of the people there had friends and former colleagues in the crowd, and there was a lot of chatting and catching up to do. This meant that the people at the meeting did a lot of the behaviours we work to change from the students in the schools. They didn't pay attention. They didn't get ready to start on time. They talked when the person addressing the meeting was trying to be heard. Large numbers of people wandered in late. It looked pretty unprofessional, and I wondered if this was happening because here was a group of people who were used to following the structures of a school and classroom, and were not doing well in the absence of those structures. Or maybe this is an inevitable response to the

way they are treated in the schools - disempowered and made to be so much less than professional. I thought what people talked about at the meeting was also unprofessional. Numerous times, different individuals stood up to speak about or ask a question on an issue that had clearly been resolved at a previous meeting, and the information had been made available to them. Other times, points were raised or questions asked - taking the time of two hundred and fifty people in the process - about the most routine and mundane matters, which should have been resolved by a phone call or a simple walk to the office at their school. It's all in our contract, readily available. I'm brand new, and I've read it. One person asked about getting reimbursement for the cost of taking a student in their car; another wanted to know about leave for family sickness. What a waste of my time - and that of two hundred and fifty other persons! I can best describe the tone of these questions and comments as a kind of whining. Another issue that was batted around was the number of assigned work hours for various people, and this sounded like a lot of bickering. The tone of this discussion was "what's in it for me?" and all this *stuff* was such a contrast to the positive tone of our code of ethics, read aloud earlier in the meeting. It made my head spin!

In my mind, the real issues didn't even make it to the table. To me, the real issues are how we work with the rest of the educational community, how we fit into the educational community and provide service to our students, and how we might change and improve that. So in my eyes, aside from the routine business which had to be done, the meeting was miles off course. I wonder what makes people act like that? Although being an EA is a good job in many ways, there are problems with it as well. There is a chronic lack of security in

the year to year assignments we get. All my colleagues have talked about that at one time or another. We are all feeling that right now, because assignment time is coming up soon. There is a lack of attachment to the educational community in our status as hourly wage employees, who are seen as "support staff", of limited value, in contrast to the teachers, who are seen as professionals. What it boils down to, is that educational assistants are not sufficiently nurtured by the structures of their workplace community. We all see that. We all experience it in some form or another in our day to day work. And it's hard to meet others' needs when your own needs aren't being met.

Educational Assistants as a group are kept in a state of shortage. There's never quite enough. Not quite enough security. Not quite enough money. Not quite enough status. Not quite enough voice. Not quite enough respect. Not quite enough autonomy. Not quite enough recognition. Not quite enough working hours. And so on. And the result of this chronic shortage is the fostering of a group of people who are less than they could be. It is a group who contribute less than they could contribute, if they were better supported. So the bickering over the unimportant is a reflection of the social conditions we work in.

Seeing what happened at that meeting made a light come on for me. In my travels to various schools, a number of teachers and administrators have said to me in casual conversation they find the EA union difficult to deal with. Now I understand why. The problem isn't the union, it's the whole culture. I think the union is crippled by the thinking behind the way educational assistants are an add-on, not fully included in the educational system. Not having a seat at the table, they are trapped in the position of begging crumbs

beneath the table. Of course people will quibble about details when the details of a contract are almost all they have. If their workplace community were to instead fulfil their needs for security, belonging, growth, and recognition, they would move mountains for that workplace and be happy to do so.

It's something of a tribute to the human spirit , that many EAs and the schools they work in are able to move beyond the limitations of the culture, and be creative in taking the support for their students to new heights. I've already seen that in my short time in the system, and I sure like it when that happens. Children in that kind of situation just blossom.

So Mom, here I am in the great wide world, seeing it in action and trying to figure out how it works. I think I'll leave fixing it until I have just a little more experience. In the meantime, I'll just work to the best of my ability at fixing my own little part of it. I'm learning a lot, enjoying my work and my student, and life is good. It has warmed up nicely, and I'll be moving back into my little cabin soon. I'll write again about summer plans. I just wanted to tell you now about my union meeting and all of that. My love to everyone.

Sarah

## My Diary

May 15

I am struck by the combination of messages coming at me and the other EAs. At the meeting the other day, the union leadership told us to be careful not to work at our jobs beyond the hours for which we are specifically paid. Couple this with the limitations imposed on us by Department of Education policy, and we are under pressure from both directions not to show initiative and to keep our place. How's that for a dysfunctional workplace? How's that for a culture of limitations? I think of the poster for the Easter Seals Campaign displayed in the front hall of the school. It shows a photo of the child ambassador for the year and the slogan underneath "See me, not my wheelchair". Then I think of another poster on display just down the hall: *The Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers and Support Staff*. And I want to scream out "See me, not my job title!"

## My Diary

May 18

I've had a great couple of weeks working with Debbi. And David. When I need help, they are always there, and when I need to be left to work on my own, they step back and leave me to it. Usually without much need for explicit communication. I'm alone with Peggy when that's what she needs, and in class when she can be and there's something happening that might be good for her. She's still not very good at being with the class, but we are working on it, a little at a time. Her classmates are curious, perceptive, and accepting of this strange new student who can't walk or talk, whose eyes are all over the room, who sometimes begins to wail for no apparent reason. They watch, taking it all in without judgement, when I have to wheel her away because her noise is becoming too disruptive to the work of the class.

She is beginning to open up to me a bit more. It's pretty subtle stuff, more eye contact, some smiles, and sometimes she raises her arms and flaps them when I speak to her. I talk to her constantly, telling her what I'm doing. She gets a running commentary on every detail of her physio and her exercises and what they are for. I don't know if she

understands any words, but I think she gets my tone and intent. We have a structure that is loose and comfortable. I know what we need to work on, and I have quickly learned we have to be very flexible depending on how she is feeling that day, what is happening with her class, and what her moment to moment needs are. We are falling into a rhythm in our work and time together. It is the gentle, yet powerful rhythm of waves on a beach on a windless day, when swells slowly rise, sweep upwards on the wet sand, and then slide back down, repeating, never quite the same, yet part of a larger pattern. It is like a giant respiration, the sea at rest breathing slowly in and out. It is not my rhythm, or the school's, or anyone else's. It is Peggy's rhythm. And it suits me. My rocky island childhood was a quiet childhood, very different from the pace I see all around me here. Peggy needs stimulation to be brought to her, because she cannot seek it out for herself. At the same time, she is very limited in the rate at which she is able to handle it and the amount of stimulation she is able to handle over any period of time. I think in the schools here, students and teachers get so used to a rate of stimulation engineered for maximum age appropriate input, that they have trouble remembering the need for pacing, for pauses, for just being.

Peggy, and students like her, remind us of that.

I must write to mom. But then, they must be really busy at home. I guess there's no rush; I'll write after I move back into the cabin. I wonder what Kent is doing. I haven't seen him for over a year now. I would so like to tell him about the direction my life is taking. I know where these thoughts are leading. Time for my glass of wine, and to put myself to bed. I will miss sleeping with the comfort of knowing the MacLeans are downstairs, but I will also enjoy being closer to the earth, back in the cabin. I like feeling the changes in the air, like I could on Granite Island. It's a problem we have with houses. The more effectively our dwellings shelter us from the environment, the more they isolate us from it as well. Having the winter shelter and the summer shelter is a good compromise. Goodnight world.

June 20

Dear Mom:

Things are going pretty well with me. I have been hired on for next year to work again at Greenfield Elementary with the same student I had this spring. Yes, hired on! I have a letter from the school board confirming my position, so I definitely have a job to go to in the fall. I'm on probation because I'm a new employee, but the other EAs tell me it shouldn't be a problem. I will be working five hours a day, which is really good for a new employee. The hours of work assigned are based on seniority in the union. The senior members get assignments with five to six hours work a day. Normally a new employee would only get three and a half hours a day. I have this job because my vice principal, who will be my principal next year, pushed for it. There is a clause in the collective agreement which allows for a "delicate relationship" between an EA and a student to take priority over other factors - like seniority - in the assignment process. That must be what was done. The idea of the policy is to keep an EA with a student if it is in the best interests of the student to maintain that relationship. I'm pretty pleased, not only to have a job, but to be able to continue to work with Peggy. She's pretty special. Also, not all principals are like David. I went out to lunch with the other EAs one day we were still at work and the students were done for the year. We didn't talk much about our assignments for next year, because one of us is transferred to another school and she is unhappy about this. It's not a good situation to be excited about good news, when not everyone's news is good. We all like the working atmosphere here at Greenfield Elementary. All EAs have seen that at some schools, the administration is not as supportive of EAs as we have it here. At

some schools there is a climate of tension. So I'm glad to have avoided that as well.

I only found out about my assignment yesterday. It's pretty strange, with all the planning that goes into a school year, that the EAs only find out about their jobs at the last minute. I think that's a pretty shabby way to treat people. That withholding of vital information keeps us off balance, in a one down situation. I talked about that in my last letter too. I feel we are treated like children. The assignment is our livelihood, and the next year of their lives, after all.

I have moved back into my little rented cabin. It took me a whole day of scrubbing to get it fit to be in. A fine red dust had found its way in everywhere, and the mice had a field day there this winter. It's all fresh and clean now. I had to fix a leaky joint in the plumbing, which showed up when I turned the water back on. It must have had some water left in it over the winter, and it froze. The fridge and pantry are stocked, and I'm back in summertime mode. I phoned Jim, my boss from last summer, and he wants me back for the deep sea fishing business as soon as school is out. I'm looking forward to that. Maybe if things slow down a bit towards the end of the summer I can come home for a visit. That would be nice.

My student is an absolute darling. She can't do much for herself, but that doesn't seem to matter. Sometimes a teacher will send a student who has trouble reading to do it with her. It's because that's so non threatening for them; how can anyone feel performance anxiety with someone who is so vulnerable? So she gets read to (with me being a safety net to provide prompts for the reader) and gets some company, the student gets to practice reading

and sees a new perspective on life, and everybody wins. I think she affects adults the same way. Her vulnerability frees us from our need to be powerful and competitive. I see it all the time, that people are happier after spending some time with her. Adults seek out her company. They find a reason to drop in for a few minutes while we are working in the resource room. At first people came out of a desire to be inclusive, perhaps a sense of duty, and this has changed over time into people talking to her and visiting her because they like it. It feels good. I know I'm happier after spending time with her. What a blessing! Robert of course has that quality too. I hope I get the chance to spend a few days him and with all of you.

love

Sarah

## My Diary

June 30

The school year- my first year working in a school- is over. There was a staff picnic at David's cottage to celebrate the end of the year. It was nice to get together with everyone, away from the responsibilities of day to day work in the schools. Everyone on the staff was more relaxed than I have ever seen them, and they probably thought the same about me. But it wasn't all perfect. The EA who has been transferred to another school cried when someone asked her about it. All the EAs know that it is just luck that they get to stay where they want. Even the most senior has no real security about staying on at the same school. Every spring we wait for the assignments to be given out, not knowing where our job will be next year, and it creates a painful level of anxiety. We were uncomfortable for her, and we were uncomfortable for ourselves. And the other thing that wasn't perfect was more subtle. One teacher was excited about getting a higher level of license and more pay, and another was talking about her application for an administration position. EAs don't get higher levels of licenses or pay increases. EAs don't move on to leadership positions. Some of the teachers were talking about the class they will be

teaching next year. Some were joking about spending their summer cheques. EAs don't get summer cheques. We get laid off, and our income stops or is reduced by half - after a two week waiting period - when we go on employment insurance. We are all happy for the teachers. We know, because we see the school from the inside, just how hard teachers work, how many things they do, how many problems they face and solve in the course of a day, and how much energy they put out in doing their job. We know what a huge contribution they make. We know just how much they deserve every good thing that comes their way. We also see that there is a culture to being a teacher. We see it every day, in the staff room, in classrooms, at meetings, and in posted notices about workshops and other opportunities. The teachers' culture is a culture of possibilities, a culture of personal growth, a culture of leadership and hard work, a culture of shared problems and solutions, and yes, a culture of privilege. EAs are not part of that culture. EAs are excluded from that culture. The culture of the EAs is different - it is a culture of limitations. This creates a difference - a class distinction - between the teachers and the EAs. Everyone was very nice at the picnic, just as they are everywhere else. With very rare exceptions that's the way they always are. But the

only two people on the staff that I feel really relate to me as an equal human being in my own right are David and Debbi. They see me as a person first. They tell me how they feel, and they are interested in how I feel, beyond small talk. With the rest there is that cultural distance. They see me and address me as an EA first and last, and I find it is beginning to affect the way I feel about myself and my work. So I didn't stay late.

I'll be visiting Peggy during the summer. I set it up with her parents that I will come to their home once a week to work with her. She made some gains in strength and control of her arms in the ten weeks she was in school. More importantly, she has come out of herself. I think it's important to build on those gains and not lose them over the summer. So I will come to her home and spend one morning a week with her, working on her exercises and physiotherapy, reading to her, and interacting with her in any other way she is receptive to. I've got the time, she needs the help, and I'm just doing it. Besides, life is pretty good to me, and it's nice to have a chance to give a little something back. I like that I'm not spread thin the way a classroom teacher is. I only have the one who needs so much, and I'm focussed on doing what I can for her.

## My Diary

July 7

I can't believe what happened to me today! I've lost the summer job I was so looking forward to! Every day since school ended, I have been out on the boat with Jim, my friend, boat captain, and summer employer. It was fun, it felt good, we work so well together. This afternoon we came back in, dropped the passengers off, and got the boat cleaned up and ready for the next day, as usual. Then we sat down and had a beer together. We talked a bit, I told him more about what I do during the winter and how I got there because of my experience with my little brother and my cousin. He told me about his wife being sick, for a long time now, and about having no one he can talk to. He told me he had been thinking about me all winter. Then he looked at me, very intently, and all my alarm bells went off. It wasn't a look of lust. That I could have handled, just by very clearly letting him know I'm not interested. But the way he looked at me was with googly eyes. And one thing I learned in university, is when a man looks at you like that, with googly eyes, you can either look back at him the same way, or you can run as fast as you can in the opposite direction, but you are never in the

same place again. I should have seen it coming, but my guard was down, and it was down because I'm not thinking such thoughts at all. He misread my guard being down as an openness to possibilities, rather than my just not thinking about them. Well, I wasn't going to look back at him the same way. He belongs to somebody else, and that somebody else needs him. There is so much pain in this life, I'm not going to add to it by doing something stupid. So I told him I'm sorry, but we can't work together any more, and I just got up and left. No, I'm lying to myself here. I didn't leave because it was the right thing to do. I left because I wanted to stay, and I am afraid. Kent had looked at me like that, and I had returned the look. And eventually got my heart broken.

Oh, fish guts! I have lost the summer job I love doing, and the income from it. I guess I will have to apply for employment insurance. I was hoping to avoid that. I find the idea humiliating, so I was glad I had another job to go to at the end of the school year. Not so any more. Oh my.

Surprise, surprise; I miss Kent tonight. I'm also missing the boat trips with Jim. Yes, I admit it. I'm missing Jim. I'm missing having a job. I am up to my knees in feeling sorry for myself. Time for a glass of wine, and to put myself to bed.

## My Diary

July 9

I almost always write at the end of the day, but today I'm writing mid afternoon. I don't have the same structure I'm used to.

I spent the morning with Peggy. I wasn't sure she would know me after almost two weeks, but I need not have worried. She grinned, and even let out a little chuckle when I touched her cheek. We had a great morning. I went through her physio routine. Her father does it with her when he can, which isn't always. I can tell he has been able to keep it up lately because she has stayed pretty loose. She would have tightened right up if it hadn't been done. I read to her, did her hand and arm exercises, worked with button pushing (the electric variety, not the emotional kind, for the benefit of anyone who might eventually happen to read this) and the morning was done. I finished with a visit with her dad, who gave me a glass of milk and a sandwich which I had while he fed Peggy her lunch. Then I drove back out to Stanhope and my little cabin, reflecting how good the morning was, and feeling a sense of privilege that I actually get paid for doing what I love so much. I can't imagine any other job giving that kind of

fulfilment.

Pa MacLean, bless him, my dear landlord and member of my second family, knew something was wrong the first morning I didn't go out on the boat. He saw my car still parked by the cabin when it should have been gone, and dropped by to see if I was OK. He was so gentle and concerned, and careful not to be intrusive. I gave him an edited version of my job loss. I was a little hung over, which helped to keep me from being too emotional. Feeling bad in your head and your gut sometimes feels good. He knows I need to keep busy, and told me he needs some work done on the house, if I want to take it on. I said yes. He told me that the downstairs bathroom is too cold. It has the same radiators as the rest of the rooms. So it's getting the same heat, but it's losing it too fast. He wants me to see if I make the room warmer. I'll get at it in a day or two. Right now, I think I'll give Mary a call, and see if she wants to head for the beach.

July 10

Dear mom:

This is just a short note to bring you up to date. My summer job working with the deep sea fishing operation didn't pan out after all, so I should have no trouble finding the time to come over. I will be doing some work for my landlord, pa MacLean, as well as visiting my student regularly, so time will not be too heavy on my hands. I am enjoying the summer here, and I look forward to seeing you all. If you need me to bring anything home let me know and I will pick it up.

love

Sarah

## My Diary

July 12

Today I tackled Pa MacLean's problem with the cold bathroom. When I looked at the bathroom window, I could see right away that it was the source of the problem. About thirty years ago, the house had been covered with aluminum siding over the original cedar shingles. The problem with the cold bathroom, was that instead of removing the large window original to the bathroom and putting in one of a more suitable size, the contractor had simply installed the new siding right over the old window, leaving the top half of it uncovered to act as the "new, correctly sized" bathroom window. This meant that the part of the wall under the exposed top half of the window, an area of almost a square metre, had only the aluminum exterior and the drywall interior between the inside of the room and the outside winter air. Of course it made the bathroom cold.

My solution to the problem was to remove the aluminum storm window and slide fibreglass insulation batts through the gap under the window into the area under the top half of the window. It wasn't easy or straightforward. The accumulated layers of paint over the storm window frame and the

aluminum fascia to which it was fastened made it difficult to see where the seams are and how it had been put together. The screw heads were all filled over with flint-hard accumulated paint. It was quite a struggle to get it apart without destroying it, place the insulation, and reinstall the storm window.

The aluminum siding on Mr. MacLean's house is very much like the policies that I am so uncomfortable with concerning my work. A house with siding installed on it always raises the question, "What problem is this covering up?" A policy, like siding, can also raise the question, "What problem is this covering up?" A policy, like siding, is a solidification of the thinking and the assumptions in vogue at the time it is installed. A policy, like siding, is applied as a solution to a perceived problem at a specific time. A policy, like siding, is seen to be a long term solution when it is installed, and it is only with the passage of time that this application emerges as limited and dated, and in turn creating its own problems. A policy, like siding, sometimes covers over problems, which will then emerge and need to be dealt with at a later time. A policy, like siding, gets layered over as the years go by, making it very difficult to see how and why it was originally put together. A policy, like siding, will have the details of its

construction obscured by time, making it difficult to disassemble and change in any way. Finally, a policy, like siding, covers over the underlying structure supporting it, concealing the nature, limitations, and problems of that structure. So the next time someone frustrates me in my work with students with special needs by defining me in a way that limits me, I will just think of them as an old strip of aluminum, and smile to myself!

I have already had a couple of visits with Peggy. I think continuing these visits over the summer will help her a lot. She won't regress over the summer because we will continue our work. We have already become more comfortable with each other because of this additional time in her own home. I am also getting to know her parents a little better. Knowing them will help me to help her. Doing these visits is so beneficial, and so unlike the policy on what EAs can do, or what the union would sanction. Aluminum siding covers so much!

Oh how I do go on! All I had intended to write was that I fixed the window for ma and pa MacLean and they invited me for a lovely dinner after. It's funny; I would never think of addressing them by first name. There is always that touch of formality, yet they are like a second family to me. I enjoyed

*doing the dishes with ma MacLean as much as I enjoyed the meal. Her daughter is grown and far away, and she has such warmth to give. Here I am - lucky me, taking it all in! I just went to pour myself a glass of wine before bed, but the bottle is empty. No matter, my mind feels very clear tonight and I think I will sleep well.*

## My Diary

August 30

I had a good visit at home. Robert, my dear little brother, is all grown up. I couldn't think of lifting him now. He is almost as big as Don now. Dad and Don usually lift him together. Mom says they will be getting a sling lift soon. The county will pay for it, which is a good thing, because it is a lot of money. Mom says the county is paying because we take care of Robert and the county doesn't have to, so it saves them money. Dad brought a social worker over and she checked everything out. She helped mom fill out some forms and the lift has been ordered. Dad says he could do the installing if they let him, and I know he could. He built and installed his own trap hauler and the winch for the boat slip, so this would be easy for him. But the worker said the safety regulations require the company supplying the lift to have their guys do the installation. It works like a car jack, and it will put Robert's weight on the ceiling beams when he needs to be lifted - not on Dad's back. Then mom won't need Dad when Robert needs to be lifted. That will be good!

Dad said I should come back here early so I won't feel all rushed when it's time to start work. He was so right. How does

he know these things? He has worked all his life on the coast and on our little island, yet he always seems to know what to do about parts of life he has never lived. I was telling one of the other EAs about dad one day, and she said if he had learned to read, he would have been really something. I was kind of annoyed. Dad IS really something.

14 September

Dear Mom:

I think of home, and guess that the lift for Robert must be installed now. I hope it makes your life easier, and give you some peace of mind as well, to have that done.

I am really enjoying having an actual job. It feels better, more settled, more secure, than just working on a relief position. And it sure beats substituting, and not knowing whether the phone will ring or not. The teacher and the principal I work with are great, and you already know how I feel about my student. She's settling nicely into the school routine, just like the rest of the students. I meet the van she comes in; she greets me with a grin, and I bring her into the special needs room and get her ready for the day. Sometimes we stop at the gym on the way if there's no class in it. I tow her around in her wheelchair by her hand, helping her to grasp one of my fingers. She has a limited ability to grasp and it's something we are working on. Like it was and is with Robert, we find something to build on and go from there. I get to work with her all day, and I'm so glad about that. Usually the time with a student like Peggy is divided up among two or more EAs. In the spring I had asked my principal if I could work with her the whole day, and he agreed. He said we might change it later on in the year depending on how things go and what the other needs are.

Her classmates are sweet to her. It is heart warming to see how they accept her and are concerned for her. Children that age don't usually see much outside themselves, but for her, they do. Her presence is helping them to grow. I think it helps a lot that they know her from the short time she was with

them last year. Maybe it helps her too, because she's not as fearful as she was last year. Sometimes she engages for a few minutes with some of the students, and it's only two weeks into the year. When I can, I slip quietly into the background when this is happening and let it take its course, other times I have to direct it a bit. Debbi is really good at creating these opportunities and at seizing the moments when they happen. Our teamwork is growing to a new level. She leads the group dynamics with the kids so well. I am good with one on one and small groups, and we complement each other. I see good things happening, and it's great to be around it.

I'll be staying in my little cabin until about the end of October. Right now, it's just at its absolute best. The air is cool and dry, the sun is not too hot, and there's very little traffic, so it's quiet. It's even more quiet than Granite Island, because back home, there's almost always the sound of breaking waves.

I'm working a bit for ma and pa MacLean. It's the best time of year to paint because it's good and dry; we're painting his cottages one at a time as they become empty. Pa MacLean doesn't close them up all at once. He closes them one at a time as the tourists leave, and he always leaves a couple open until halloween for the tourists who like to travel late in the season. Pa MacLean has that same sense of connection to the earth that Dad has. You can see the change of the seasons in their eyes.

It was great spending some time at home. I miss everyone already.

love

Sarah

## My Diary

September 21

I invited Mary and a friend of hers over for dinner last night. It was fun to have company in my cabin. Three people really fill it up, but it was cosy. We were talking about work, which I hadn't really wanted to do, but when people have something on their minds, it can't help but come up when they feel safe. That something was our not being as much a part in the school community as we would like, and maybe finding a way to improve this. I suggested maybe we should find a way to attend staff meetings. Michael, Mary's friend, said, "Let me tell you a story about going to staff meetings."

"It was my first year, my first assignment working as an EA after I finished my course in Ontario and moved here. We used to go to the staff meetings at my first school, all of us EAs, even though we weren't paid for them. It always bothered me a bit, you know, the teachers are paid a salary and what they get allows for the extra time for things like meetings. So what it amounts to is that if we do anything extra our time is worth nothing - we are worth nothing - while we are doing something extra. But we went anyway so we would be more a

part of what was going on.

Not long into the year, it was October or November, the staff were talking about some of the kids who tend to go wandering, there was a number of them that year. They needed to be specially watched on the playground by the teachers on duty. If they weren't watched and prompted, they wouldn't come back in after the recess. Then the class would be all back in and they'd be missed and someone would have to go looking for them. I didn't know who most of them were, I was new to this work and I was new to the school. I said maybe we should have their pictures up in the staff room so we would all know, like the allergy pictures. There are six hundred kids to worry about, and there will always be new staff and substitutes. I thought that might help. Then this one teacher jumped right in, and said that was really stupid, we couldn't do that, we would get sued. She went on and on, putting me down, saying what a dumb idea it was and how if I knew anything at all I would never say something like that. I was younger than everybody, and I had no experience, and I don't have a degree, just my course. And she didn't stop, even when I said I could see how it was wrong and apologised for saying it. I was on probation, as every new EA is the first year, and I was

terrified that I would lose my job and my chance to do this. Everyone else, even the principal, just kind of froze. I felt so bad, so afraid and powerless, I just got up and left. I don't see what else I could have done. And you know, that was the last time any of the EAs ever went to a staff meeting. The subject of us going to staff meetings has never been mentioned again by anyone. There is a silent agreement among all the staff that it just doesn't get talked about."

Mary and I just listened to the whole story from beginning to end. We both said we were sorry that had happened and that he had that unpleasant memory. Then I asked him if he had made any attempt to resolve what had happened. He told me he hadn't, yet he had never forgotten what had happened to him that day. It was not just the behaviour of this one teacher, but the silence of the rest of the staff that bothered him. He said he knows when you have a problem you're supposed to talk about it and resolve it, but he didn't have the trust or confidence in his relationship with the school to do that. He said he just kept quiet for the rest of the year, and in the spring he requested a transfer for the following year.

"So that's the story of EAs going to staff meetings at that

school." he finished.

I told him that I had also had a couple of bad experiences, but aside from those my work environment had been positive. Not perfect, but generally positive. Mary said much the same. I thought to myself, that maybe the problem is, that when interpersonal relationships go wrong, we (EAs) are in an especially vulnerable position. I didn't say anything, and I changed the subject, because I didn't want the evening to become a bitch session. "Tomorrow is the equinox," I said, "Let's celebrate by dancing on the beach." So we hopped into Mary's car and drove two minutes to the beach. It was beautiful. The glow of the setting sun was reflected on the strip of wet sand left by the receding tide, the sea was calm, and the air was warm. It should have been special, magical. Instead it fell flat. We just couldn't get in the mood. We didn't even take off our shoes. We just silently watched for a few minutes. It was the end of the last day of the year which was longer than the night to follow. Then wordlessly, lost in our thoughts, we returned to the car.

## My Diary

September 22

Last night's conversations about work needs a closer look. I think it would be a good idea to get together with a group of EAs and talk about some of the things that bother us. It might help us to tell our stories, it might help us to feel better, and it might lead to change for the better. So I gave Mary a call about this. She thinks it's a great idea. She knows lots of EAs and knows a place where we can meet. We'll do it Friday evening. I can hardly wait!

## My Diary

September 25

Mary's brother has a huge rec room in his basement, and it was just the right size for the dozen of us that came to last night's get together. We agreed at the beginning that what was said in the group would stay with the group. We wanted it to be a safe place to talk. It was an eye-opener for me to hear the stories told by other EAs. I feel much less alone than I did with the issues that I have encountered at work. The get together was almost like a support group for EAs. One girl told the story of working with a student with physical disabilities and medical stuff to deal with. That one really got my attention because it was so close to home. This is Meagan's story:

I've been doing this for ten years now. Mostly it's been good. Last year was a pretty good year. The student I was assigned to had physical disabilities and needed a lot of care. She had so many needs that she spent most of her time with me. It worked out I was her primary care giver and teacher at the school. Her home room teacher just didn't have the time to do any of that. He had twenty three other students to worry about,

and most of her program was outside the class. Little Tamara was an absolute angel. I loved working with her. We had the usual communication book we sent back and forth from the home to the school. I would write in it what we were doing, how Tamara's day had gone, if we had any problems, and so on. Her mother would send the same kind of information from home. I talked to her on the phone often. We had a really good relationship, and I thought we worked great as a team.

It must be so hard having a child like Tamara. We only have the children in school for six hours a day, five days a week, and the parents have them the rest of the time. With a child with so many needs it's a lot to worry about. So I made use of the position I was in and tried to do what I could to make it easier for Tamara's parents. I worked with her after school sometimes too, because her parents found it very difficult to find a baby sitter who could give her the care she needed. They couldn't afford to pay me as much as I could earn in other situations, but this wasn't about money. It was about helping a child and parents who needed it. Sometimes I just donated my time. What I learned at her home helped me to help her at school.

Then, just near the end of the school year, something

weird happened. The principal called me in and said some parents were really demanding and kind of thought they "owned" the EA, and for this reason I was not supposed to talk to the parents any more than necessary, to let the classroom teacher do it. He also told me we were going to work more as a team, which meant I would be spending less time with Tamara in future. I was kind of in shock about it when I left the office. At first I thought it might make sense, maybe there were problems and this was a necessary fix. And then I thought that some parents are a problem for the classroom teachers too, but they deal with it and if they need help they go to administration. And what does a classroom teacher know about a child like Tamara? The EAs learn all the stuff they need to know about the children they work with, and then these children are with the EAs mostly. We are there for the students like Tamara, that's our job. And one reason it worked so well that year was I had a good relationship with the parents. And the biggest shock of all was that the principal's leadership had originally helped to foster the excellent relationship I had with the parents. I don't think he knew I worked with Tamara outside the school. It's so ironic that outside the school I was respected and appreciated by the

parents for the contribution I made to Tamara and to them; inside the school I didn't have the authority to talk to them.

It was much the same at the school I was assigned to the next year. There were several high needs students there that year, and at the beginning of the year we EAs were told as a group by the principal not to talk to the parents, other than to refer them to the teacher. So the parents would arrive to pick up their children, and they would meet us because the children were with us and we were handing them over to the parents. Of course they would want to talk to us, to ask us how the day had gone and how their child was doing, and we weren't supposed to tell them anything. We were supposed to refer them to the classroom teachers, who didn't really know, couldn't really know, and didn't have time. It was pretty frustrating. I feel like I'm supposed to be a non person in my job. I mean, what does it mean when you're not supposed to communicate with people, to tell them what you think? What does it mean to the kids with special needs, that they spend most of their time with people who are supposed to be invisible? And what does it mean to the parents of these very vulnerable children, that their children spend their days with someone who isn't trusted to talk to them? What does it mean to teachers, that they are expected

to stay on top of situations so far outside the usual classroom dynamics? Aren't they in an impossible situation too?

*There was a real change in the way I feel after this happened. I don't talk about it, but it's there on the back burner. I used to be here for the joy of helping the children. Now I'm in the schools because it's a job. I'm not about to give anything extra any more. The reasons for wanting to give have been taken away. The relationships, the making a difference, being part of a team, being part of a community, they're all taken away. I'm looking around. If I can get work somewhere else, I'm moving on.*

There was a long pause when she finished, just silence, at first no reaction from the others. Then a few quiet comments were made. "Yes, I've seen something similar." "I've been there." "It feels awful to be treated like that, doesn't it?"

"I know what that feels like," I said. Her story was so much like what I had experienced when working with Catherine. But I didn't have time to dwell on that. Another woman began to speak.

"For those who don't know me, I'm Connie. I had a turning point too. The year before last, I worked with a couple

of students in a grade four class. One morning, before the first bell, I was in the class as the students were coming in and getting settled. The teacher had gone to the office to make a phone call about a student. The bell rang and he wasn't back yet. I knew the national anthem would be coming over the address system, so I went to the front of the class and got the students to stand up to be ready for it. Then the teacher arrived back from the office. I thought he would come to the front of the class and take over. Instead he called the class from the back of the room and told them to turn around and face him. He got the students to turn their backs to me, like I was less than nothing."

She paused, and someone interjected a comment.

"He must have been an awful guy to work with."

"No", she said. "The worst of it was, he was generally sensitive and caring. He didn't mean to belittle me. He was just acting in what he felt was a completely appropriate manner, maintaining his authority in the classroom. If he were a nasty or arrogant person, I would not have felt so bad about this. But he's not like that, he's nice. I enjoyed working with him. That's what gets to me. He was just following the natural order of things, and the natural order of things is

that EAs don't count, we don't matter."

She paused again, her posture showing she had more to say.

"When I was a kid, I was in Air Cadets. I left when I was seventeen or eighteen. By that age, I came to see the cadets, especially the parades, as a bunch of nonsense. All that saluting and stamping and posturing began to look pretty silly to me, and I didn't want to be part of that any more. But I see it differently now. Parades are a show, they are a ritual which expresses the social hierarchy of the military. On a parade, each person on the hierarchy reports to someone higher, and salutes. The salute is then returned as the person higher up the ladder takes over, and each person's authority and place on the hierarchy is acknowledged. From the lowest rank and file, to the parade commander, each person has his place and his authority - no matter how small - acknowledged and recognised.

That incident in class that day was also a ritual, and what it expressed is that EAs don't HAVE a place on the hierarchy. We're not included."

She lowered her eyes and looked down, signalling she was done. The group was completely quiet, everyone just listening,

*the speaker's words acknowledged by the silence.*

*A younger woman, only a few years older than me, rose halfway out of her seat. When she saw she had our attention, she sat back down and continued talking from her chair.*

*"Hi, I'm Lindsay. I'm in my fourth year being an EA. I really enjoyed my job until this year. I love working with kids with high needs, I love being around a whole class, and I like working with teachers. The student I work with this year is a sweetie, they all are. I worked with her a bit at the beginning of the year. She doesn't learn much in class, mostly it's at a level or done in a way that doesn't work for her. But when her teacher realized that this little girl is quiet all the time, and stays in her seat, she wouldn't let me take her out any more. The teacher sends me out to do photocopying, bind booklets, mark homework, that kind of stuff, most of the time, and the little girl I'm supposed to be supporting just sits there, not getting much of anything without any help. I think the teacher is deliberately keeping me away. When I told her I think I should be there more for the girl and take her out more, she said that's not very inclusive, and it's her decision, and then sent me to do some laminating. The child can*

learn, I know she can, but not like that, sitting without any help. So my student is just about abandoned, but I'm not allowed to talk to the parents, so I can't let them know their daughter is getting almost no support. When the child learns next to nothing this year, her parents will think that's all she can do. After all, she's in school, in an inclusive classroom. I wish there was something I could do! I guess I'll ask for a transfer. That will solve the problem for me, but not for this poor child."

We all sat there in shocked silence, nodding our heads in understanding. I couldn't help looking at her very closely, wondering if I would be like her in a few years time.

Another woman (we were all women there, except Michael,) an older person, stood up and began to speak.

"Hi, I'm Lauren. Last year I was posted to a new school. There was a student there, not one I was assigned to, who has a syndrome I have a lot of experience with. I went to see his teacher, when I had the time, to see if I could be of any help. She brushed me off, didn't want to hear me. She told me it's her job to deal with whatever difficulty her students have, and she can do it just fine. So the four years full time experience I have

working with that syndrome was just blown off. I was just blown off. I could have given her so much - I could have been such a benefit to the student - with just a few suggestions based on my direct experience of what works and what doesn't work, and I wasn't heard. But that's just one incident, one example. I've brought up three children, on my own. I've dealt with all the problems that children run into as they go through school. I dealt with homework problems, sports injuries, and life threatening illness. My kids have turned out just fine. What gets me is that with all the experience I have, all the responsibilities I have carried out, all the decisions I have had to make, as soon as I walk in the doors of a school, I am suddenly seen as incapable of having a meaningful opinion about a child's education, or doing anything without being told. I will be old enough to take an early retirement soon, and I'm going, because I want my self respect back!"

Once again the speaker's words were acknowledged by silence. The silence continued, and Mary stood up and said it was getting late, and we had done enough for one night, and we would do it again. A very subdued and thoughtful group quietly got up from their seats, walked out the door, and drove off into the night.

October 15

Dear Mom:

You must have heard on the news that the tail end of Hurricane Maria passed over PEI, and that some parts of the island were damaged. The MacLeans escaped unscathed, my cabin leaked a bit, but that was all. It wasn't forecast to be as bad as it was, but Pa MacLean knew - like Dad, he just knew - and he invited me to spend the night in the house with them. I was glad to be in the house. It was a wild night.

My student was away one day this week and the teacher asked me to work with another student who had been absent for a couple of days. She asked me to bring him up to speed on the work he had missed. I'm so used to baby steps that I was amazed how fast and how well he caught on to the new material. It was an interesting change of pace for me.

My student has settled right in. We always make sure she is with the class for group reading. The other students just love reading to her, especially the weaker ones, because it's non threatening to do it for her. Outside the class, we do a program of exercises and stimulation activities given to me by the occupational therapist who visited. She seems to enjoy this work and is making noticeable progress.

I have settled right in, too. I enjoy collaborating with the rest of the staff. Everyone contributes ideas, resources, and support. There were times last year that I felt isolated, but I don't feel that way now. Work is good.

I finally bought a new car. Well, new to me. It's five years old and a big jump up from Aunt Vera's old car. I feel a lot safer in the newer car. The old one went to the scrap heap, too rusty to fix. I think getting the newer car marks

a big change in the way I feel. Before I didn't feel secure enough to spend that much money. Now I feel I can make that commitment.

It's late, and I must be off to bed. All my love.

Sarah

## My Diary

November 8

Peggy is changing a lot. She is stronger and has better control and less tension than she did. I called the physiotherapist and told him about the changes, but he said he couldn't get the time from his other commitments to come and show me how to change Peggy's program. He told me to keep on doing the same exercises in the same way. I told this to Debbi and she made some phone calls after school that day. The physiotherapist was at the school by the end of the week, and spent almost two hours with Peggy and me. He was evaluating Peggy's progress, making notes, and instructing me. It was great. He left me a detailed instruction sheet to follow, and told me it had been set up that he would come every three weeks for the rest of the school year. Good for Debbi! She knows some people in the system and she knows how to advocate. So Peggy will have the benefit of this specialised knowledge being brought to her program, and it will help to improve her quality of life.

A student like Peggy needs a crossover between medicine and education. The better the people in these two disciplines communicate and co-operate, the better these students will do.

*I am enjoying my role which puts me at this meeting point, and gives me the opportunity to help her in new ways.*

*I am back in my room with my landlords, dear Ma and Pa MacLean. Last year it was new and a little bit tentative. This year it feels like coming home, and it feels great. They are very much my second family.*

*Tired me. I'm writing like a Yoda. Sleep now.*

## My Diary

December 12

Peggy's father dropped a bombshell on me today. They are moving to Toronto! He just told me at the end of the day as he was picking up Peggy. He requested a transfer with his job, and he got it. He hasn't told anyone else, and asked me to pass the news on to Debbi and David. He'll be in to see them later. Debbie and David were both busy as I was leaving, so I didn't get to tell them. It will have to wait until tomorrow.

I am devastated! Peggy has been doing so well; she has been blossoming. I will miss her so much. Her father said they want to be in a major centre where they will have more ready access to specialised medical facilities for Peggy. Of course I am happy for her, but this will take some getting used to. I love her, and now I have to let her go. And what will become of my job?

Will I get laid off? I wish I could talk to someone about this, but I can't until David and Debbi know. I guess I'll have a big glass of wine and try to sleep.

## My Diary

December 31

It's stock taking time again. I think I'm over Kent. I don't remember when I stopped missing him, I just realised with a bit of a shock one day this fall that I hadn't thought of him for a while. Then I missed missing him. There was a comfortable sort of routine in that familiar ache. But I seem to have moved on. My heart seems to have finally caught up to the rest of my life. And maybe that leaves room for Jim. Pa MacLean pointed out the obituary of Jim's wife to me in the paper, about a week into November. "Look" he said, "your old boss's wife has passed away. I thought you might want to know." If he had guessed in any way what had happened - or what might have happened - he didn't let on. He has never asked about anything beyond what I felt was OK to tell him. He has never probed. I love him for that. I agonised about whether to go to the visiting hours or the funeral, and decided against both. I figured so many people would come, and if I wasn't there it wouldn't be noticed, and if I was there it would be noticed. So I didn't go, and I sent Jim a card. I think he knows how I feel, and I hope it was OK. How could I go to comfort him in person, when I knew I couldn't meet his eye?

*I'll give him a call this spring. Maybe he's expecting me to. Maybe it will surprise him. Maybe he thinks he will never see me again. I hope it will be all right, and I hope it will not be too soon. Or too late. Really, he's been alone a long time. Maybe I'll give him a call mid winter. Just to talk. This is the first time I have allowed myself to think about him since I sent him the card. I wonder where his thoughts are?*

*This is my second New Year's Eve staying with Ma and Pa MacLean, and my second New Year's Eve since I started working as an EA. This has been another year of change. It was such a shock when Peggy's parents told me, just before the Christmas break, that they were moving to Toronto. They are taking Peggy there because they can get more specialised medical help for her at a major centre. At first I thought it was because we were letting her and them down, but it was the opposite. Peggy has made such gains in the time she has been at the school that her parents and her doctors see possibilities for her that used to be out of the question. There is a good chance, with continued intensive work, that she may gain enough use of her arms to do things for herself with them. Her legs are meatier and stronger too. Who would have thought that eight months ago, when she came here with arms and legs*

as thin as sticks?

Before I worked with Peggy, I had thought I possessed a good understanding of disabilities. After all, I grew up with a disabled brother and cousin. But I had always just accepted that as just the way it was, even after the surprise of learning that not all little brothers were like Robert. It's different outside your own family. The experience of knowing Peggy has shown me a bigger picture. Peggy's needs for care and help came about simply through a roll of the cosmic dice. It is only through chance that one child has disabilities and another does not. So Peggy's needs belong not just to her, or to her parents; they belong to the community. I think that our community is doing a pretty good job of working to meet those needs. Being part of that community is what gets me to work every day. I am constantly thrilled to be part of that. It's funny, working with Peggy as an educational assistant, I have no real responsibility. It's supposed to be the teacher who is responsible, and my role is supposed to be to help the teacher. But this just doesn't work with the reality of high needs students. A student like Peggy needs individual attention, and a class needs their teacher. So I have been the person who is there with Peggy, in literally a hands on, one-on-one position. I felt a

sense of responsibility to her, not for her. That is why I felt concerned for her happiness. That is why I wanted her time in school to bring her the best quality of life we could give her. That is why I noticed her changes and saw possibilities for her, and I felt it was my responsibility to do whatever I could do to help her work towards those possibilities. Who else in the whole medical and educational systems had the quantity and quality of time with her, to see the subtle signs of her development? Who else had the quantity and quality of time to know what she needed next? For children without disabilities, development is like fireworks. It's vivid, it's spectacular, you can't miss it. For a child like Peggy, development is like a peat fire, smouldering unseen below ground for long periods of time, smouldering under the limitations imposed by her illnesses, then emerging to the surface at unexpected times and places. It was great that David assigned me to be with her the whole day. He told me that normally the care of a child like Peggy is supposed to be divided up among more than one EA, but he had a feeling that assigning just me to be with her was the best way to do it. I think he was so right! If the time with Peggy had been divided up, it would have diffused both the responsibility and the opportunity to help her. The time I had

with Peggy gave me both the responsibility to her and the means to fulfil it.

The time I had with Peggy was a wonderful privilege. I had five hours a day, five hours dedicated to providing help to someone who very much needed it. The gift of this quality time - a time when we were both fresh, at our best, free from distractions, and surrounded by the best quality of support possible, is a gift most adults rarely get - even with their own children. I know this. I cared for Robert, and worked to teach him. And all the needs of running a home and earning a living competed for my time and energy. So I am grateful for what the gift and the privilege of working with Peggy brought to both of us.

The quality time we were able to share came from many sources. The basic educational structure that allows for intensive support of a child like Peggy, and the social values behind that, were the starting points. I think also that our work went well because we were in a small school. A small school allows for closer, more informal relationships than are possible in a large one. Even the level of stimulation, the sheer numbers of people and situations to deal with, are far more comfortable in a smaller school. It feels that way for me. It

must feel that way even more for a child like Peggy, who is limited in the overall amount of stimulation she is able to handle, as well as the rate at which it comes at her.

I think the biggest source of the quality of care we were able to provide for Peggy came from David's leadership. The informality and sense of shared responsibility he fosters creates a community of caring. There is so much knowledge, experience, compassion, and insight among the school staff and visiting professionals, and it all comes together for students like Peggy and others whose needs are not so profound. That could not happen nearly as well if the person working most closely with the student has been put in a peripheral role. David knows a school can't have it both ways. You can't have a collaborative culture in a hierarchical system, so he chooses collaboration. Which is just great, because if you read the policies, the rhetoric is teamwork, but the reality is hierarchy. I've sure seen the opposite of David's style when I worked with Catherine. I also saw it at some of the schools where I substituted. At some schools, they tell you, "We work as a team." And what they mean is, someone besides you makes all the decisions, and you do what you are told! It's that old class system, which rears its ugly head from time to time. David

told me when we had our celebratory tea in the staff room, after the students had gone home for Christmas, that I had done very well with Peggy. Of course, I thanked him. And I also told him that when I do well, it is because I work in an environment that allows me to do all that I can do, that brings it out in me. The gifts that I have to give can only come out in an environment that welcomes them. We need more principals like David. We need more principals like David creating the policies we work with.

Peggy taught me a lot about life. She gave me joy, she gave it to all of us in the school in sharing her delight in whatever it was she was able to do. That was wonderful, for the whole school, but it wasn't the most important part of what she came to mean to me and to everyone around her. It was her spirit that mattered. She showed us all that it is OK to be vulnerable, and it is OK not to be able to do things. She showed us that the quality of life is what matters, not power or ability. Her simple pleasure in just being, and her unbridled joy at the smallest of doings, was a lesson I will never forget. It makes me think there is something wrong with the language we use. When a child has intelligence and special abilities and things come easy to them, we say they are gifted. I think a better term

would be “privileged” to apply to those for whom the world unrolls like a luxury carpet in front of them. Peggy is gifted. She is gifted in ways that are not obvious to the majority of us, who are obsessed with ability, achievement, and power. She showed us there is so much more to being human than being powerful. She is gifted in ways that taught all of us around her.

Peggy reminded me of the Buddhist precept, that we are called human beings, not human doings, and that it is the being that matters, not only the doing. She also reminded me of my grandmother. In her terminal illness grandma never complained about what she couldn’t do. Her privileges of energy, mobility, independence, and talent evaporated a little at a time and were replaced by the gifts of acceptance, vulnerability, and simplicity. Like Peggy, she was always positively focussed on what she had, not what she didn’t have. When she couldn’t walk around the island anymore, she enjoyed being wheeled along the paths. When she couldn’t sit in the wheelchair anymore, she took pleasure in sitting in the little flower garden by the house. When she couldn’t sit in the garden anymore, she watched the colours of the earth and the sea and the sky while lying on the couch looking through the

screen door. And when she couldn't move to the couch anymore, she couldn't drink in the beauty of her world from there, she sipped on what she could see from her bed. It was as if her experience was a source of light, which at first was broad and diffuse. As it got smaller and smaller, it got brighter and brighter, until she became just a point of light too intense to look at - and then she was gone. At the same time, she led us all, her children and grandchildren, through the experience of her dying, her transition from being with us to not being with us. Peggy is like that. She is always a bright light. She led us in being with her.

There was something magical in working with Peggy. She brought something magical to me, to her class, to the school. I think she made me appreciate my own life better. I think she also helped me to see how our lives are all connected together. I can't put my finger on just when it happened, but looking back, I realise that I was so focussed on helping her with her learning that I didn't even notice how she was teaching me. I am so happy to have been a part of her life and her learning, but what also matters is that she was such an important part of my life and my learning. I think that applies to the rest of the school, too. I loved the things we

worked on together, but it was her spirit that really mattered. The rest was just on the surface. The rest was just her personal curriculum in the school.

She was included in the school in so many ways. She was more than just there among the rest of us. We heard what she had to say. What we were able to teach her was not as important as what she were able to teach us.

It will be hard going back to school this week with Peggy not there. David said I will be transferred to another school, because the school was given the hours I worked for her needs, and now she's gone to another province. So I'll be moving. Of course I'm scared that my new situation won't be a good one. I know there are teachers and there are schools that don't treat EAs well, but I will just have to hope for the best. I guess that's the nature of the business. We are sent to where the needs are, and it will be another school, another staff, another teacher, and another student. At least I get to keep my five hours a day, because there is a clause in the contract saying no lay offs during the school year. Mary pointed that out to me when I told her I was worried about losing my job because Peggy has moved away. That's the good news. I guess the bad news is, I will be back to working three and a half hours a day next

year. Oh well, that's eight months away, and a lot can change in that time. I wonder about going back to university and getting an education degree. But I can't afford tuition and books and another two years without income, and I already have student loans to pay off. It's just not possible. Besides, that's not really what I want. What I want is to work with special needs. I just want working with special needs to be better. I need some kind of security. I need to know that the quality of my work environment won't be dependent on just luck. I need every teacher to think like Debbi, and every principal to operate like David. I need to be included.

Good night world. Oh, it's past midnight. Happy new year, world.

**Postscript: Discussion and Suggestions**

The problems, issues, and tensions raised in this thesis are complex and ongoing, and do not lend themselves to simple resolutions. Therefore there are no conclusions, nor can there be. I like to think instead in terms of possibilities. What are the insights gained in this project and what possibilities are suggested by those insights?

The emergent overarching theme, which encompasses a composite of issues and tensions, is that power and status differences between educational assistants and teachers are counter productive to the practice and the culture of inclusive education. This leads me to recommend that the educational community address the hierarchical power relations which structure the subject position of educational assistants in schools, and explore ways of reframing the relationship in terms of a collaborative culture.

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