

Monday Commentary – May 7, 2007
- Zuhy Sayeed, President of CACL

My husband Raffath and I were parents of one son when our second son, Rashaad, was born to us in 1982. I was a trained educator, with a keen interest and career choice in early childhood education. My husband Raffath is a physician, so our strong views on the importance of education were quite natural. Rashaad had numerous special needs and the world of education for Rashaad we encountered as parents, was quite a revelation for us both.

We took it for granted that Rashaad would go to school at the same school as our oldest son did - our neighbourhood school, just down the street. But it wasn't as simple as that.

Our small city had a segregated school for students with disabilities. It had been there a long time. As a consequence, local educators believed that we should simply send our little fellow there.

However, that was not an option for us. Ever!

We knew without a doubt that our son would be doomed to a life of mediocrity if we allowed that to happen. We knew that children learned from other children and that we wanted our son surrounded by his natural peers, the children in our neighbourhood that he played with on our street. He needed to be engaged with many children- not just those with special needs during his school years. For us, segregation in a special school was just not something that was in our thinking.

By the time Rashaad was 13 months old, we were receiving in-home support from Early Intervention Program. We were faithful parents - making and attending appointments, driving to the children's 'rehab' centre in Saskatoon- some 3 hours east with a fussy child in the back seat of the car. We did all that was required. It was over funding discussions for the Early Intervention Program that we discovered the Association for Community Living (ACL). It was Early Intervention's parent organization. Since we live in Lloydminster, a border city in both Alberta and Saskatchewan, we could not choose where we received service; we had to get service in the province where we lived. At that time funding for Early Intervention was available in Saskatchewan and not in Alberta....

It was with the support of ACL that we gradually put pressure on the School Division to close the segregated school. In time they agreed to do that. However we were equally appalled when the decision was made to construct a new elementary school that would serve ALL the students at the segregated school- yes- even the 15 yr olds. It was to have a 'fishbowl' windowed centre for the students with disabilities. This was not the same vision of inclusion Raffath and I had. We were not alone.

The families in our ACL group were furious. Some even moved away rather than have their 15/ 16 yr olds in an elementary school.

To make a long story short, Rashaad did not attend that new school. Instead, he became the first child in our city to receive funding from the education system to attend the neighbourhood daycare that was both age appropriate and had him spend the day with peers. When he was five he moved on to the Kindergarten in the neighbourhood elementary school, the same one his older brother attended. As it happened he was the first child in regular school with a teacher aide and indeed the first child with a disability to be in regular school in our city.

Next came the struggles for an ‘appropriate’ program” for Rashaad. We found that the school interpreted what was in his best interests differently from us. In all, it took 7 years for us to get to where we wanted to be - from the time Rashaad was 2yrs old until he was 9. It was not easy at all as educators at that time were very reluctant to do anything differently than they knew how. Plus, as the road was ‘bumpy’ and many were afraid to speak to us in school and were just not willing to think outside the box at first.

We also had to struggle over jurisdictional matters. Remember; we live in a Border city. The school division is chartered to Saskatchewan, the daycare we chose was in Saskatchewan and we are Alberta residents.

I share these details with you for two reasons. First, I want you to know --that if you are having ‘issues’ with your local school or school authorities you are not alone. Many parents continue to have this challenge. Those of us who have children Rashaad’s age (early twenties now) have been through these struggles and have lived to tell the tale. It has a story of many discussions, many crisis situations, a great deal of heartache, battles fought, some wins and some loses. Indeed, the days seemed long and the pain of wasting precious time in the lives of our young children was very tough to bear.

However, things have changed for the better. “Inclusive Education” is much better understood and supported these days. We have many more examples of schools and school districts and divisions that follow this approach.

There are over 25 years of experiences now that are documented and that have made a great difference in the lives of thousands of Canadian children. We have acknowledged that classrooms and communities are filled with diversity, learners who learn many different ways and bring unique gifts and capacities to both schools and community.

We now have a body of conclusive and amazing research on the positive impact of Inclusive Education for children with a disability. We also know that inclusion has benefits for the child’s peers, the teachers, the school and ultimately the community. We also know that school culture is improved by the philosophy and practices that go with inclusive education. The strategies that have been developed over the years for our children have proved to be very powerful for all children as well.

If I were to offer advice from my experience in my family, I would say what we have accomplished for our son was tied directly to the strength, knowledge and expertise that we gained from being members of the Association for Community Living, at the local,

provincial and national level. Working with other parents and families, with the volunteers, the staff and the experts who work with us, made all the difference for our family

With our shared vision and the support we have received my son was included during his full school life – in elementary school, in middle school and high school; with post-secondary training at college; and now in a job where he is working and making his way forward.

Yet what we have accomplished is not enough!

We still hear about children who experience exclusion and segregation in Canada's education system. Our children continue to suffer from narrow thinking by school staff, officials and governments in many places. Regressive practices and archaic ideas continue to be used in our schools. It is both unnecessary and shameful that this is happening in this day and age. There are few excuses left for a school to choose to segregate children because they have distinct learning needs.

Sometimes the issue of funding and funding mechanisms is used as an excuse. We also know that much of the difficulty is due to the lack of training for teachers and school leaders that we know still exists. It is also a result of narrow thinking and the lack of opportunity to learn the knowledge available from research. It may also be tied to the focus to raise standards and see that children do better on tests. In some cases children with learning challenges are seen as an obstacle in this effort.

But let's be honest. It could also just be discrimination. Kids with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities are not reliably accorded their equality rights in our schools.

What do we need to do to make a difference?

We need to bring critical knowledge and expert resources to change the system. We need to develop and use political and legal pressure at every level. And as families we need to work together through parent groups and collectively through many of our local Associations for Community Living. Many of them have developed the know-how to work with the education system. Through the ACL or through other families we have the information and the strategies to move forward. Parents do not need to struggle alone for inclusive education. We should stand together so no one is forced to choose anything but full inclusion in their school of choice. There is no reason to be forcefully duped into believing that it is a resource issue or that "special services" will be somehow superior in a segregated or special school setting.

Segregation out of the neighbourhood school is simply not acceptable. It is not only archaic and wrong- it is simply dangerous for the child's future. Social inclusion is vital for kids with disabilities and they need the relationships they develop in school with their peers. To ignore the research that we need to embrace the diversity that exists in our

communities and see it fulfilled in our schools is to deny the very make up of communities- and worse the very human-ness of our children.

Canada is well known as a leader in inclusive education and as a leader in inclusive thinking, human rights and doing what is fair and just for our children with different abilities. However, we need to do better, not only for our own sake but to set a worthy model for other countries.

Many developing countries are in the midst of setting policies and implementing the “Education For All” mandate. They are looking to countries like Canada for vision, knowledge and examples on how to move ahead. Inclusion for children with disabilities needs to be an essential component of these efforts.

On March 30, 2007, Canada was one of more than 80 countries that signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in New York. Section 24 of the Convention presents a strong and clear basis for inclusive education in our country. Our national and provincial government must now be challenged to fulfill the promise and see that inclusion is available in every community and jurisdiction in the country. We must create the awareness and understanding of what is fair, right and just for our children.

Ultimately the legal process and the courts are available to assist us in our struggle for equality and inclusion for our children. Policy changes are the preferred way to move ahead. However on occasion we may have no choice but to use the courts and human rights agencies to advance our cause. However that can be an expensive option, especially with the court challenges program eliminated.

Families working together can bring the vision of diversity and inclusion to all the places in which we live- in Canada and throughout the world. For over 50 years, it has been families and communities who have been at the root of any progress. No benevolent government will create this change on their own. It has been us- together and strong. It is families who reach into every corner of society and community- hockey rinks, bowling alleys, Boy Scouts and Girl Guide troops, arts and cultural opportunities in any community... and on and on. We, as families sometimes don't give ourselves credit for the huge points of influence that we touch - every single day. It is the inclusive lives that we build for our children that will touch and impact the lives of many others in our communities. We have to nurture our communities to be inclusive just as we nurture our children to be full, participating members of our families, our schools and our communities.

CACL, in our almost 50 years of work and through the research of The Roeher Institute has come to some very clear conclusions as to how we have to develop inclusive schools across the country. We work with our Provincial and Territorial Associations, who in turn work with their local members, families and allies to nurture teachers and educational leaders in our schools.

Thus, at the National level, CACL works with national organizations. For example we have partnered on initiatives with the Canadian Teacher's Federation, the Canadian Home and School Association, The Council of Ministers of Education and the Canadian Education Association. We have also worked in close collaboration with our Provincial and Territorial Associations as Education is a provincial responsibility. CACL brings together families and educators, decision makers in Education and Faculties of Education on a regional basis.

CACL gathers information and shares it amongst families and educators.

This website is yet another example of the numerous forms of sharing and discussion.

CACL and its Provincial and Territorial associations hold summer institutes for families and educators. We hold conferences and workshops in every Province and Territory, each time bringing new partners to the table to create change and to share research and practices in Inclusive Education.

More and more we have realized that it is not merely about changing or influencing a classroom, or indeed a school. We have discovered, in Canada and around the world, that we must begin to change school cultures and pedagogy to really create inclusive classrooms and thus nurture the growth of our children.

Inclusion starts when it is modeled at home in the family. It continues in early childhood life, continues for many years in schools and then in post secondary places of learning and work. Our children will have the opportunity to take their place in our communities when they have the assurance of their rightful place in our schools.

Let's move forward by working together for inclusive schools in every community in Canada.

Zuhy Sayeed
May 7, 2007