

**PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHER ASSISTANTS
WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH DIVERSE LEARNING NEEDS**

JOANNE WASYKOWSKI

B.A.. University of Manitoba. 1982

B.Ed.. Brandon University. 1990

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Dedication

The work, the knowledge, and the understanding from which this thesis arose are largely due to my friend. She has shared many similar agonies in her work, yet still remains focused upon the real goal: the academic, social, and emotional success of students, our community of children. A peephole into a teacher assistant's working reality helped me realize many teacher assistants likely share her concerns and insecurities. She, like so many exemplar teacher assistants, desires, above all, to help at-risk students blossom with promise. I am deeply grateful for this knowledge; it has delivered me into better place.

I must also thank my family, my husband John, my two sons John and Ben, and my daughter Chari. John, without your constant support to do whatever I needed throughout our marriage, I would not have made it to this point. To my children, you are the reasons why I need to work towards creating a better world.

A word of gratitude to my mom: you encouraged me to dream and reach for my dreams; you infused me with strength, compassion, endurance, and empathy for those who hurt; you are the origin of my inheritance and my legacy. A final thank you to my dad: your expectations for quality, integrity, and honesty are everlasting foundations for my own strength of character.

Abstract

Implementing the educational model of inclusion for students with diverse learning needs into mainstream classrooms requires skilled teamwork among parents, classroom teachers, special education teachers, and teacher assistants. Teacher assistants, a fundamental part of the school system, are essential participants in the individualized programming for students with diverse learning needs. These individuals, the front line workers, are significant adults in students' lives; they can positively transform attitudes, skills, and learning for students with diverse learning needs. Subtle messages of devaluation and hierarchical divisions can make teacher assistants cognizant of "their place" in the school. Additionally, a perceived lack of educational and behavior management strategies can exacerbate feelings of insecurity and, or, incompetence. It is essential that teacher assistants receive the necessary training, professional development, and opportunities for collegiality to become effective educational partners. An "empowering" environment for teacher assistants respects the needs of adult learners and employs mentoring qualities for on-the-job training. Finally, an empowering environment provides a safe learning climate through transformational practice. The metamorphosis into increased learning and appropriate risk-taking evident in teacher assistants can enhance the lives of students with diverse learning needs. In this study, six teacher assistants from a rural southern Alberta school district were interviewed to identify and explore factors in an "empowering" work environment that may positively contribute to individuals becoming effective, committed teacher assistants.

Preface

Creed

Harm no one

See. Hear, Create,

At-Promise. Fully Alive

An ear to the Heart

An eye to the Soul

Courage, love

Strength, Forgiveness

Harmony, Balance

Breathe. Laugh, Love,

Create. Heal

On Hallowed Ground

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The scholarly challenge and integrity with which I embraced this work must be credited to the climate built into and expected from students in the Masters Program at The University of Lethbridge. Most distinctly though, I would like to recognize with deep appreciation and gratitude, my supervisor, Dr. Leah C. Fowler. Her high expectations for quality work, authenticity, and voice truly embodies the belief that through making another individual “aware of what one can be and what one should become, one makes these potentialities come true.” (Frankl, 1959, p. 134) Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the guidance and assistance of Dr. Michael Pollard and Dr. Robin Bright as my committee members in the culmination of this endeavor.

Finally, I would be sorrowfully remiss if I failed to acknowledge the many teacher assistants with whom I have had the privilege of working, and in particular, the six who allowed me into their inner worlds. I gaze in respectful awe at the degree of at-promise love, commitment, and integrity with which they interact and learn with students with diverse learning needs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title.....	i
Signature	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
Preface.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Table of Contents	vii
Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION	
The Way it Was...The Way it Is	
Coming to the Question of Teacher Assistants in Southern Alberta.....	1
I Believe.....	7
Background	8
Purpose and Focus	10
Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	
Those Who Have Been Before: Guides and Maps.....	17
Theoretical Threads.....	19
Critical Pedagogy	20
Moral Leadership and Community	25
Adult Learning	34
Mentoring Relationships	38
Performance-Based Instruction Strategies	43
Summary	45

Chapter 3	METHODOLOGY	
	Provisions, Itinerary, Pathways	47
	Researcher in Context.....	48
	Role of Researcher.....	50
	Data and Collected Works: Pathways.....	51
	Interview Subjects: Sojourners.....	57
Chapter 4	DATA ANALYSIS	
	Pathways, Scenic Routes, Trails.....	61
	Interviews: Pathways.....	61
	Transcribing the Data: Exploring With Words.....	63
	Coding the Data: Map Reading--Legends	64
	Sojourners: The Stories.....	66
	Lily	66
	Molly	74
	Alexis	80
	Crystal	87
	Judy	94
	Patty	101
Chapter 5	DISCUSSION	
	Treasures, Images, Reflections	
	The Paradigm Shift.....	109
	Treasures: The Front-Line Workers.....	110

Mirror Images: Reflected Roles	
Consulting Teacher, Teacher Assistant, and Students.....	113
Inside-Out	
Making Visible the Shared Purpose in At-Promise Students.....	118
Soul Searching	
Possibilities in Schools.....	120
Students At-Risk, Students At-Promise.....	124
Empathic Connection.....	126
Promising Changes.....	128
Post-Script.....	130
References.....	131
Appendices.....	137
Appendix A: Letter of Consent	137
Appendix B: Interview Question Blueprint.....	138

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Way It Was... The Way It Is

Coming to the question of perspectives of teacher assistants in Southern Alberta.

Special Education is a calling, for both teachers and teacher assistants; if you are not prepared to listen with your heart, your soul, and commit yourself to walking the talk—it is not for you. I have always felt this was my lifelong career—I was meant to be a special education lifer—no parole—constant learning, change, growing, and development would keep the job from becoming stagnant.

Special Education and the role of the teacher assistant have changed significantly over the past nine years. Currently the practice is that of integration and inclusion, providing educational programming in the least restrictive environment, preferably in the student's community school. Previously, the norm was to segregate students with diverse learning needs from the rest of the school. They were isolated into classrooms or programs of similar students experiencing differing degrees of uniqueness and educational needs. Whether the philosophy was effective or not was largely determined by the special education teacher's vision of where these students would fit into the community. Many special education teachers were quite content to maintain this segregation--it worked well with their needs. I have always maintained that students with diverse learning needs require more opportunities for interactions within the communities of school and home. To lead successful lives, they must attain a certain measure of competence and contribution within their chosen communities. Satisfaction in life, living a good life, comes from feeling valued, accepted, and useful to the environment in which one resides.

Students with diverse learning needs, like all human beings manifest many different, but similar profiles. There is a whole spectrum of diverse needs ranging from severe physical and cognitive deficits through to mild or moderate physical or cognitive disabilities. Likewise, teacher assistants come with a variety of different needs, backgrounds, and educational experiences. The work of the teacher assistant is to help students learn well with these disabilities; shared differences and similarities can help the development of relationships which is tantamount to successful learning and teamwork with, and also between, the teacher, teacher assistant, and student.

Before introducing the question of my research on teacher assistants, I want to locate myself as a researcher. I was the only daughter in a family of six children. My father worked in construction, building homes, and recreational cottages in a vacation area; this was a family business and my brothers provided his workforce. I was expected and encouraged to cook meals, bake cookies, cakes, and other desserts, vacuum and clean the house, and wash and iron clothes; work of lesser value when compared to that of supporting a business which brought economic stability to the household. Through hindsight and with the knowledge that I now have as a mother, I realize and appreciate the importance of performing such care-taking-nurturing tasks as cooking and baking, laundry, and house-keeping for the family; these loving tasks are the glue that holds the fabric of family and home together; they maintain a sense of unity, care, and love to and for each individual in the family. However, these tasks are often overlooked as mundane, unskilled, and under-valued as compared to work outside of the home and this is how I perceived my value as a child. I always perceived myself as the "other" child in the family; I felt that I was not as useful or valuable to the economy of the family as my brothers. Customers to the business and acquaintances to the family were always

surprised to discover that there was a daughter. Consequently, I learned to accept the “otherness” of myself in my family and to live in silence and perceived invisibility.

In addition, my family immigrated to Canada from the United States to a small tourism area; we were outsiders to the families that had lived in the area for generations. Furthermore, Americans were valued only for their temporary stay and the tourism dollars they left behind; they were undesirable as permanent residents. There was a perception in our family that we were not entirely welcome in the community; subtle forms of exclusion from parties, celebrations, and community life delivered this message. When I was old enough to attend school, I did not know any other children; I was lost, isolated, shy, and frightened; I did not know how to approach other children to play; I did not know how to ask other adults for help. I felt silenced and invisible to both the family and the culture in which I resided.

Consequently, I identify with and recognize the marginalization, the loneliness, and alienation that many students with diverse needs seem to feel; I identify with the silenced voices and invisibility of teacher assistants in the educational system; I did not feel valued, heard, or seen in my familial home nor in the community in which I lived.

Lastly, and probably most important, I am a mother of children with diverse learning needs. My oldest son had great difficulties in school understanding and interpreting the non-verbal messages delivered by teachers; his inappropriate behaviors were met with punishment and isolation rather than explanation and re-teaching. He was expelled in grade eleven after many agonized years spent in classroom situations with teachers who neither seemed to be able to see his at-promise characteristics nor had the desire to appreciate what he was having difficulty perceiving; “otherness” based on his inability to “read the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1995). Conversely, my daughter

experienced the isolation from the maturity of perception, knowledge, and understanding that gifted and talented children often experience; “otherness” based on her unique differences in intelligence, creativity, and emotional characteristics. I have watched their unattended needs as they progressed through school; I have agonized over their silenced voices; and I regret that their at-promise potentialities were not perceived nor appreciated in their educational histories.

I began my job, nine years ago at a junior high, in a tiny, narrow 12 by 15-foot classroom on the basement floor near the exit. Not seen and not heard? I never interpreted it that way, but there were colleagues ensconced along with me who did. We had one small window in the classroom to connect us with the outside world; it was cozy and warm. unconditional acceptance was evident.

My job was to teach the “EMH” students (in 1992 this stood for educable mentally handicapped); I had a total of three students who were somewhat isolated from the rest of the school. I had a choice, a vision: this small, isolated setting was not going to be the scope of my world nor would it be the scope of the students’ world.

From the start of my work assignment, I looked for methods to achieve greater integration within the school for both my students and myself. I had some very successful practices that made my students the envy of their regular stream peers. We ran the canteen every Wednesday, selling nachos and cheese, submarines, and candies; we baked cinnamon buns-- the scent permeated the school enticing buyers before the buns were finished baking; my room was open and available for a place to “hang out” before and after school began, and over noon hours.

Initially, three students accessed student services to different degrees, but this swelled quickly to first 7, then 20, 30, 60, and in the last year, 100 students. I hesitate

to take credit for what was a group effort, but my program seemed to achieve a sense of security, stability, love, acceptance, and opportunity to grow in positive esteem and self-control for troubled youth. We had a remarkable group; three teacher assistants and I were dedicated to the identification of the needs of these students, to their burgeoning responsibility and the recognition of their self-worth. I had an effective and committed team of teacher assistants who not only felt valued, respected, and heard, but were also treated as equally important to the success of the program as was I.

We were not intrusive with our interventions nor were we blatantly visible with modifications applied to create individual success. We made learning valuable and appropriate for each student, particularly within the world in which they dwelt. We taught them how to go back into their minds to picture themselves in the classroom when they performed experiments in science so that they could arrive at answers rather than leave the assignments incomplete. We helped them interpret what the questions on tests were actually asking. We taught them how to organize information and write essays. We taught them how to rely on each other for support mechanisms in learning; cooperative learning strategies. We helped them understand they were capable, effective, and valuable human beings. This foundation work created a sense of power within our students because it gave them strategies to use rather than relying on "luck," guessing, and alternating between passive and aggressive behaviors.

These students were a delight and they taught me many things about learning and relationships. They taught me the power of reasonable expectations--challenges just out of reach are those that can be attained. I learned that at-risk students become more confident and competent through academic support systems that build on relationships and provide equality of learning; or conversely, they can be dragged down through continuous and

overwhelming expectations in an oppressive authoritarian teaching classroom. They taught me that an adult role model that not only believes in their abilities, but also encourages them when their energies flag could make significant differences in the manner in which they approach their responsibilities. I learned to ask questions and observe behaviors and body language as indices to gain knowledge about learning styles, learning and emotional difficulties, and the impact of these on the individual. Finally though, they would not have taught me anything if I had not been an avid student.

The learning that I gleaned from students with mild or moderate learning difficulties was extremely valuable for approaching students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders. Anger and negative behaviors are preferred styles of interaction by students experiencing severe difficulties in academic subjects. These students usually experience difficulty managing social interactions, developing social skills, developing competency in reading, writing, and mathematical computation, and even understanding core subject content. Thus, they are unable to succeed at the same rate as their peers. Consequently, they prefer to identify themselves as behavioral problems rather than as learning problems; in their minds, they are terrified that someone will think they are "stupid." They are not stupid! I have explained learning difficulties to so many wounded children that I feel like I am chanting an exhortation:

"To the At-Promise Student: You are a capable learner. You are smart enough to learn this."

In my experience, when other students were learning to read [or whatever the difficulty might be] the student with diverse learning needs was having difficulty with his anger [speech, hearing, social skills, fine motor skills, attention, family etc.] and so, a lot of the learning that was occurring with peers was missed.

Then when the student with diverse learning needs was developmentally ready to learn, the teacher and classmates had already moved on to a new concept.

At this point, the student with diverse learning needs becomes so afraid to show that she is behind, she goes one of two ways. She **withdraws** from everyone and gives others the message that she does not care; to those outside of her, it looks like she is sending a message that she is “lazy.” If she chooses the **angry** option, then it is not long before teachers and peers withdraw from her resulting in further isolation because they do not know how to help her. They are afraid of what her anger might do them.

Therefore, it is not that students with diverse learning needs cannot learn; they just seem to miss the opportunities to learn at the same time as many of their peers. They can make a choice to learn or they can continue on a limited path walking blindfolded, perhaps tripping on all kinds of barriers that will continually get in the way of their dreams. If they choose to become open and let learning be their chosen path, then teacher assistants can walk beside them as best they can to support and encourage the education of students with diverse learning needs.

I Believe

My own beliefs that underlie this project are as follows:

1. People are basically good. They want to learn, they want to become the best they can be.
2. People are people regardless of culture, race, or gender. However, perception colors everything: word, thought, and deed.
3. Relationships—honesty, trust, respect, and an ability to listen are of utmost importance for teaching.
4. We all need to have control over our lives; we need a personal space, a “turf”

where we can feel that we have ultimate control over decision making.

5. Teamwork is essential in the education of children—parents, teachers, teacher assistants, and administration.

6. Everyone needs to know her strengths and when she is achieving success—celebrate! Opportunity to empower students comes from teaching them to become more aware of useful strategies to nurture and obsolete strategies to shed.

7. Power relationships based on intimidation and fear will not result in truly changed and internalized locus of control in students or adults.

8. Love of reading, learning, and curiosity—passion—are important in teaching and in living. What we love, spills out and becomes contagious to those with whom we work and learn.

9. Children manipulate for survival—our job as educators is to determine why they need to manipulate us and fill their “holes.” Manipulation is a positive attribute and is survivalist in purpose.

The learning focus should always be on the student—it is all about the student—that way, I always learn too!

Background

Education, particularly special education, in Alberta has changed significantly since 1993. Special Education teachers have amassed increased responsibilities to students, principals, teachers, parents, and Alberta Learning. One shift was a move towards inclusive practice to insure equitable education for students with diverse learning needs: a significant increase has resulted in the number of teacher assistants hired within the school district where I am employed. Whereas I have witnessed an increased work force in the numbers of teacher assistants employed to assist the learning of these students. I

have not seen a move towards protecting teacher assistants in their roles from dangerous work assignments nor in providing them professional development opportunities that would better prepare them for the work-related challenges in their roles. In addition, I am unaware of the development of standardized guidelines to protect students from teacher assistants demonstrating difficulty with their work assignments; the Code of Conduct in the Alberta Teachers' Association expects teacher assistants to adhere to teacher ethics, but nothing specific addresses teacher assistants as members in the educational process. Teachers undergo rigorous observation and course work on the topic or conduct in schools, whereas teacher assistants do not often have the benefit of such experiences; theirs is predominantly "on-the-job" training.

The diversified demands of my work as a consulting teacher, sometimes parallel and sometimes conflicting with the needs of teachers, students, teacher assistants, administration, and parents, pull me in multiple directions. I straddle the worlds of individual needs, group needs, and the communities of home and school. Tugged in all directions at once, I am searching for a small way to begin merging the factions. The working context of my career—the interdependency and interrelationships that are inherent elements in my role as consulting teacher—guides me in a search to establish a more integrated position to understand my role to enable the optimal growth of students with diverse learning needs and of all students. I am searching for mechanisms to connect with at-risk/at-promise students and a variety of adults involved with education. I am investigating the means to empower through knowledge of themselves and the social world in which they live, students, teachers, teacher assistants, and parents. Studying the perspectives of a group of teacher assistants will allow me to meet my goals as a consulting teacher and better understand ways to establish my integrated position

among those with whom I work.

Purpose and Focus

For this study, I am choosing to focus on six teacher assistants in public schools in Southern Alberta. These individuals are in a position to alter the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and skills of students with diverse learning needs more than anyone else in the educational team equation. Working one-to-one and in small groups with these students, teacher assistants are often the adults to whom the student entrusts delicate, personal information. Thus, teacher assistants become the educational and emotional advocates for these students, wielding significant power to positively assist these children in their quest for belonging, value, knowledge, self-esteem, and self-control; the reverse may also be true, thus destroying potential and denying the student an opportunity to blossom with promise.

As a consulting teacher, I am concerned about the lack of regular inservice opportunities for professional development for teacher assistants in working with students with diverse learning needs. The ad hoc nature of the teacher assistant role often precludes adequate preparation or job-shadowing opportunities prior to the onset of their work assignment. On one hand, teacher assistants are in a dangerous position of exploitation; on the other hand, they are in a dangerous position to exploit.

Teacher assistants work in small groups or singly with students who exhibit learning and/or behavioral difficulties; this is very skilled work requiring flexibility, consistency, teamwork, patience, care, creativity, and reflection. They must be able to respond to nuances in body language, learning, behavioral, and motivational factors in the students with whom they work. They must also translate this knowledge to teachers through observations based on their work with these students. In addition, they must apply this

same set of skills to the adults with whom they work, reflecting both student and teacher to teacher and student; a complex process requiring great skill, if performed effectively.

The responsibilities of my work preclude my availability to supervise frequently or direct the work teacher assistants do with students. Consequently, if the teacher assistant is unaware of different strategies or unwilling to approach the consulting teacher to determine what strategies will be most effective within his or her particular assignment, students can very quickly lose whatever confidence and appropriate risk-taking attitudes for learning that they might have had. Conversely, though, if the teacher assistant is desirous of and comprehends the significance of the work, then he or she frequently discusses the needs of the students with whom she or he works with not only the classroom teacher, but also the consulting teacher, and other teacher assistants to maximize the strategies she applies in her assignment.

While the guidelines for professional practices and development of teacher assistants is not the immediate matter of my own work, it is a concern that warrants inspection at some level; teacher assistants should have similar privileges, guidelines, and support for professional development that teachers have because they should be considered crucial, effective, and committed educational partners. In my research I am most concerned about the teacher assistant role: people who can make a very positive transformation in the attitudes, skills, learning, and sense of belonging for children with diverse learning needs. I am concerned about how teacher assistants can be viewed as equitable partners in the education of students with diverse learning needs.

The numbers of students accessing some form of educational support outnumber the resources of the individual consulting teacher. The reality of the situation is that teacher assistants rather than consulting teachers, have become the front-line workers in the

delivery of education to students with diverse learning needs. As one person in the role of consulting teacher, I cannot deliver effective programming for the high numbers of students currently identified with diverse learning needs in my school, without the help of teacher assistants. There are not enough human resources available without teacher assistants to give these children the time, programming, and assistance they require and deserve in order to be successful students, and ultimately successful members of their communities.

To be successful, inclusive education of students with diverse learning needs into their community schools and mainstream classrooms ideally requires educational support in the form of at least one teacher assistant in almost every classroom. Educational support then for an elementary school, for example (kindergarten to grade 6 with two classes in each grade), would require at least 14 teacher assistants to insure that students with mild and moderate learning disabilities are adequately served. When students with severe emotional/behavioral disabilities are included in these classrooms, the number of teacher assistants in the classroom increases by the number of children with severe needs.

Who is responsible for insuring teacher assistant competence, professionalism, ethical standards, and commitment at the school level?

One of my mandates as the consulting teacher is to provide, with the least amount of intrusion as possible, efficient and effective educational programs for students with diverse learning needs. To meet this requirement, it is essential that I work to develop the teacher assistant's knowledge, skills, and attributes as fully as possible. A teacher assistant straddles a very difficult working world. The individual must be able to "read" the needs of the classroom teacher for instruction, behavior management, and curricular objectives; "read" the student to perceive areas that may build resilience or cause

frustration, resistance, or difficulty; interpret and apply the modifications and accommodations that may be necessary for a student with diverse learning needs to be successful; develop educational foundations of skills, strategies, and knowledge that can enhance the success of the students with whom they work; and throughout this whole sphere of expectations, have the interpersonal skills to work in a team that provides education for students with diverse learning needs.

Four issues concomitant to the development of effective and committed teacher assistants must be recognized: lack of continuity of employment, lack of financial incentive, effect of high teacher assistant turnover rate on students, and the building of a satisfied, effective, and committed teacher assistant workforce.

The first issue, dialectical in nature, concerns the lack of continuity of employment for teacher assistants. There is continual fear or concern for unemployment and transfer in teacher assistants: they are not necessarily guaranteed a continuous placement at one school year after year. Their contract is determined by the numbers of mild and moderate students as well as students with severe learning needs identified in the school and across the district. Over the course of a year, should a student with severe needs leave the school or jurisdiction to attend a different school, the teacher assistant may end up unemployed or transferred. Additionally, a teacher assistant could be hired for one year or partial year but may not have the security of knowing that there is a placement awaiting him for the next academic year. On the other side of the working relationship, a teacher assistant only needs to provide the school district with a two-week notification should the work prove unsuitable. This lack of continuity for teacher assistants can make education difficult for students, consulting teachers, parents, and the remainder of the school staff. Consulting teachers and classroom teachers can frequently be training or orienting new staff; at

this pace, one rarely gets to the stage of efficiency and effectiveness with the student services team or an effective knowledge return for the students.

Secondly, there seems to be a lack of financial incentive for teacher assistants.

Teacher assistant turnover is a major concern, particularly when effective people cannot afford to stay in this career, which can be unfortunate for individuals who wish to be teacher assistants. They come to this new career full of enthusiasm and desire to excel. When they discover how inadequate the pay is, they feel de-valued; they are asked to fulfill an important role, yet they are not recognized as important educational partners, evident in the meager pay they receive for the highly skilled and intensive work they do. This is not to say specifically that the pay is inadequate but the hours of work as a teacher assistant are equivalent to a part-time job. The difficulty of the issue of pay lies in the fact that school is open from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., prime time hours for a full-time, 40-hour workweek. The problem is not so much the salary per se, but the part-time nature of the work. If they must leave this work to meet financial commitments, they feel guilt, confusion, and longing regret at the loss of a position that added joy, personal self-worth, and challenge to their lives. Additionally, my own rural school district, as an example, is located quite close to a larger urban center where they are able to pay their teacher assistants a slightly higher rate of income. Furthermore, some of our teacher assistants reside in the urban center and would find the decreased travel costs quite attractive. Occasionally, my rural school district loses effective and committed teacher assistants primarily because of the decreased travel expenses in conjunction with increased income. It is hard to compete with this reality.

Thirdly, what does the effect of high teacher assistant turnover rate do to the students? Based on my observations as a consulting teacher over the past nine years, it

delays the learning for the child. Since the student with diverse learning needs can ill-afford any extra delays or barriers to learning, the addition of new staff can be a significant concern. When a new staff member begins working with a child, depending upon the past experiences of this child, it may take one or two months for trust, rapport, and a working relationship to be established. Within this time span, learning continues to occur within the classroom, and the child is expected to meet learning objectives established by the teacher. In addition to the pressures to meet the curricular objectives of the classroom teacher, the teacher assistant must not only meet the emotional and academic needs of the student, but also deal with his or her own needs for competence, autonomy, and belonging when placed in a new learning situation.

High teacher assistant turnover rate can increase the length of time for the entrenchment of inappropriate behaviors and ineffective learning strategies in the student with diverse learning needs. Too much time can be lost, to the detriment of these students, when there are ineffective and inefficient training practices combined with a lack of ongoing professional development for teacher assistants. This situation increases the length of time that the student manifests attitudes, perceptions, and self-defeating learning mechanisms that hinder a sense of belonging, success, and participation in the community of both school and home. When schools experience a high turnover rate of teacher assistants, it interferes with the climate of the school as an effective learning environment for students and other educational participants.

Lastly and most importantly, the consulting teacher has difficulty attempting to build a satisfied, effective, and committed workforce when one can neither guarantee job security for the teacher assistant nor quality professional development for individuals who would like to excel in their work. I am very interested in developing a team which

views its work not only within the walls of the school, but also in the framework of the communities in which these team members reside.

I cannot solve the problem of salary for teacher assistants; the education infrastructure limits how and where funds will be directed. What generative, constructive action then, can schools and consulting teachers take to connect, empower, and validate the worth of these essential individuals? How can schools weave teacher assistants into the intricate fabric that is the lives of its children, its programs, and its communities?

Teacher assistants can be interviewed to determine what they require in order to do their work well. There may be simple interventions that can be investigated and interwoven into the fabric of the educational community that could inspire excellent performance. A covenant (Sergiovanni, 1990, pp. 54-71) that integrates the qualities that most human beings require in order to feel valued: shared values and expectations, self-direction and competence, innovation and appropriate risk-taking, empowerment and belonging, respect and dignity, and professional development and reflective practice perhaps, can motivate them to remain in this valuable career despite meager pay.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Those Who Have Been Before: Guides and Maps

“Once you have discovered what is happening, you can’t pretend not to know. you can’t abdicate responsibility” (James, 1989, p. 401).

I realize that through my journey, my research into teacher assistants and their perspectives of their work in schools, I am venturing into uncharted territory rife with razor sharp abutments, snaking turns, and precipitous cliffs; the prospect is strangely exhilarating, freeing, and yet, dangerous. Proposing change that recognizes and incorporates the role of teacher assistants as equitable partners in the educational process of students with diverse learning needs is counterhegemonic, political action.

There is a hidden curriculum for teacher assistants which denies them the opportunity to achieve an equal partnership in the education of students with diverse learning needs; this is similar to that for students with diverse learning needs when they are unable to understand and work within the organizational structure of the classroom culture to share in decision-making about their learning and lives. This implied and hidden curriculum is evident through the lack of opportunity for ongoing professional training equivalent to that of certificated teachers, and in the lack of standardized ethics, guidelines, and training requirements required by Alberta Learning or the Alberta Teachers’ Association. A dissonance is embedded in the development and implementation of Individual Program Plans (IPPs) for students with diverse learning needs when teacher assistants are required to implement the strategies involved in the program plan, yet they are inconsistently recognized when their observations and on-the-spot interventions are effective and appropriate. In my opinion, teacher assistants are

an oppressed and silenced culture within the current educational system; they serve the purpose of enhancing education for students with diverse learning needs, yet they are not recognized by educational decision-makers as the powerful and important force for educational support and social transformation that they truly embody. The hidden hegemonic forces that exist simply by the denial of teacher assistants' equality in governmental guidelines and literature regarding education is evident in inadequate salaries, a lack of standardized guidelines, and an absence of encouragement to develop an educational association. They are silenced through the implementation and evaluation of the individual program plan when their observations and interventions are de-valued. Ultimately, the silencing of their voices indicates the denial of recognition and refutation that they are powerful forces in the education of students with diverse learning needs.

As a consulting teacher I envision the possibilities inherent in the inspiration and commitment of dedicated teacher assistants to reconnect isolated and alienated students with diverse learning needs. I recognize also, the inherent dangers that exist when children with diverse learning needs work with teacher assistants who neither understand the educational process nor are aware of their own social biases that perpetuate the dominant culture and thus, oppress and silence these marginalized students. The lack of professional development and the absence of standardized guidelines for ethics, conduct, and practice in Alberta, equivalent to that of certificated personnel, is dangerous for both students and staff. Teacher assistants can not be effective educational partners if they do not receive regular and ongoing professional development that provides them with essential knowledge, strategies, and philosophical foundations to work in a competent and dedicated fashion with children with diverse learning needs.

Theoretical Threads

I draw upon five fields of research literature to support my research into teacher assistants, their perceptions of their roles in education, and the direction that must be taken to bring a more equitable and democratic environment that can positively impact upon the education of students with diverse learning needs. The first of these, critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Greene, 1986, 1988; Giroux, 1988; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Hinchey, 1998) provides a pathway for social change and transformation by giving voice to and building audibility for individuals who have been silenced. Secondly, Sergiovanni's (1987, 1990, 1992) moral leadership and moral community literature enables the transpositioning or interweaving of critical pedagogy constructs into the heart of educational institutions that can develop schools of excellence. Thirdly, adult learning literature (Houle, 1984; Wlodkowski, 1986; Knowles, 1990), a necessary prerequisite to understanding the needs of the adults whom schools hire as teacher assistants, is essential to determine what is required with respect to adult learning needs that gives dignity, value, and voice to the development of teacher assistants; a means to contradict silences and redundant information that can limit their growth as human beings. Fourthly, it is important to investigate the concepts of mentoring relationships (Carruthers, 1993; Baird, 1993) that can guide on-the-job training for teacher assistants. Many of these individuals become staff members without the benefit of background knowledge of how schools function; they need opportunities to acquire this knowledge on a continuum of needs, as well as, in an environment that builds a learning community of excellence. Finally, since mentoring practices do not cover all aspects of the skills needed for the work of teacher assistants, performance-based instruction literature (Areglado, Bradley, & Lane, 1996, Brethower & Smalley, 1998) will provide strategies to

determine on-going, on-site professional development for teacher assistants.

Critical pedagogy.

Critical theory is political. Pursuing the goal of genuine democracy means that education must become a means of enabling people to make changes in their social reality. They need to understand how power works and how they might go about challenging the current structure, taking more power into their own hands. (Hinchey, 1998, pp. 142-143)

My research pilgrimage, the twisting, turning road, began with my journey into critical theory and critical pedagogy through the writing of Hinchey. The realm of critical pedagogy as the means for re-connecting marginalized students, families, and community members back into the social and educational community has opened the door to possibilities. I had been practicing critical pedagogy for years without knowing the theory behind my actions and this introduction propelled me into a desire to begin the alteration of the current perspective of teacher assistants in education into a more democratic, fulfilling, transformational "movement" that can have the power to change education for students with diverse learning needs.

Critical pedagogy is a difficult concept to define. I have been perusing literature, building my knowledge base slowly for ten months; merely a novice, I am slowly constructing my understanding. As I struggled through literature that initially denied my entry, occasional flashes of enlightenment encouraged me to continue. As Giroux (1988) states, I have become a subject in the act of learning; the mediation between myself and the larger social context has helped me locate myself in the social-history of the culture within which I reside. As the door opens wider to possibilities, so does my critical consciousness, and I, who have been one of the "others" for the greater part of my life, see a means to alleviate isolation and oppression experienced in schools, at least in the schools where I have been employed, by raising the consciousness of the silenced.

powerless, oppressed individuals who cannot read the world (Hinchey, 1998, p. 123). Critical pedagogy firstly is about oppression and breaking down the barriers that deny minorities or subordinated individuals power, and secondly, about re-creating a more equitable democracy that creates a measure of audibility to previously silenced individuals and cultures. I can neither reverse my course, nor turn a blind eye; I have seen too much, I have heard too much, and I can no longer ignore what *needs* to be changed.

I work in education with oppressed and marginalized students and parents; a culture that is often both denied the basic needs of belonging and acceptance and perceived as having little value to others in society. This particular culture presents behavior patterns that are alternately pacifist and rebellious with intervals of violence and aggression in an attempt to resist the denial, the violation, the silencing of their voices (Freire & Macedo, 1995, pp. 220-221). They do not know how to make sense and personal use of the mechanisms that define their roles, their "places" in society. They feel powerless to take control over the course of their lives and the lives of those they love. It is a degenerating cycle that holds many students with diverse learning needs captive in the maelstrom of their worlds.

Children with diverse learning needs often do not understand how they give their individual power away to those who dominate, those who would and do make decisions based on their power and self-focused interests. Children with diverse learning needs feel pushed, pulled, and torn asunder with their inability to achieve acceptance, belonging, and value in the larger society. They begin school as "others" and they often continue to live in their communities, on the outskirts, as "others." They are often illiterate with both their actual reading deficits and their lack of cultural knowledge in language, skills, and behaviors, the cultural capital, which enables the dominant culture to reproduce itself.

They are unaware of the hidden cues and expectations in support and maintenance of the dominant culture that teachers promote in their classrooms. Furthermore, the teachers themselves, are often unaware of the meanings of their hidden expectations: "...messages and values that are conveyed to students silently through the selection of specific forms of knowledge, the use of specific classroom relations, and the defining characteristics of the school organizational structure" (Giroux, 1988, pp. 4-5). The hidden curriculum, that which conveys the implicit expectations, beliefs, and values of the dominant culture, adds to the alienation and disempowerment of those who cannot seem to *get it right*; those who cannot gain admittance to the secret world of language, knowledge, and behaviors of the dominant culture—those who are often children with diverse learning needs.

For many years, I had unwittingly called the knowledge that enables students to thrive in a school *classroom survival skills*. This knowledge is the same construct that Freire and Macedo (1995) speak of when defining the substance of literacy not only as "reading the word," but also, "reading the world." These students need to find and reclaim

the critical tools to understand their world, ... [the tools] denied by not giving them access to education, to literacy, so they can read the word as well as the world.... the ability to think critically and the option to act on their own world as subjects of history and not as objects. (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 213)

Students with diverse learning needs are isolated and alienated for demonstrating behaviors and attitudes that enable them to survive in a position of silence and subordination, but they do not understand these as counterhegemonic and dangerous practice to the reproduction of the dominant culture. Repeatedly, they are ostracized and punished for presenting behaviors and attitudes for which they do not have alternate replacements. Overt instruction, frequently absent, for what is acceptable action and attitudes would enable them inclusion in their educational community and cultural

community. These students are not only isolated by their inability to “read the word” and “read the world,” (Friere & Macedo, 1995) but they also exist in rage, pain, and silence because of this illiteracy.

Those of us involved with education need to embark upon a reclamation of children with diverse learning needs. The goal is to de-mystify the nature of their difficulties and to ease their minds, ensure them that they are capable of learning, contributing, and being lovable. It is important to recognize that altering the beliefs and values systems of students with diverse learning needs initially might be snail-slow and subtle. Once it becomes apparent to the student, though, kinetic energy principles “kick-in” thereby increasing the rate of change, similar to a snowball gathering not only speed, but also increased girth as it rolls faster and faster downhill. However, the more teachers and adults try to push the rate of change, the greater is the possibility that the student will dig in her heels and refuse the invitation to participate in her journey, perhaps because the fear of change and the unknown is too great. When children with diverse learning needs can “see” how the beliefs and values of the dominant culture are supported and maintained, when consciousness increases, then they might be in a better position of power; a position to change; a position to reclaim what belongs to them.

It is crucial, therefore, that educators address the question of how aspects of the social world are experienced, mediated, and produced by students. Failure to do so will not only prevent teachers from tapping into the drives, emotions, and interests that give students their own unique voice, but will also make it equally difficult to provide the momentum for learning itself. (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 324)

My goal for students with diverse learning needs is to imbue them with knowledge of themselves; knowledge is power and power becomes knowledge when promoting change. The more these children know of themselves and their location in society, the greater can be their power to make decisions and choices that can enhance their quality

of life. This knowledge of self also includes an awareness of learning strengths and difficulties; an understanding and awareness of why these children act in opposition to normed school practices; an awareness of how and why teachers reward certain behaviors and punish others; and finally, developing and internalizing behaviors and attitudes that help them gain acceptance by teachers, peers, and the community at large.

I perceive teacher assistants as marginalized workers in the education of students with diverse learning needs. They are frequently excluded from decision-making discussions about the students with whom they work; they do not have as much access to professional development opportunities as certified teachers; they are not recognized as professionals or equal partners in the education of students with diverse learning needs; and they are not obligated to the same code of ethics and conduct as teachers. They are denied their voice and worth in the decision-making and education of students with diverse learning.

I work in a rural school district and it is often from the rural community that we draw our teacher assistants. Since these individuals both live and work within the community, it makes efficacious sense to inspire these individuals to effect social change, to reconnect the marginalized students with diverse learning needs, to inspire a notion of responsibility that goes beyond their immediate families to reclaim the sense of community necessary to raise healthy, connected children. It is through the efforts of caring, effective, and committed teacher assistants who envision their roles as essential in the educational and social success of alienated children that I see an opportunity for social transformation. Popular movements for social change, that which I hope to inspire and build in the teacher assistants with whom I work, should be based on free and open discussion to incorporate a wide range of possibilities for social agency and an

opportunity to participate in the creation or building of a learning community that recognizes individual strengths, resiliencies, and experiences.

Many positive changes have taken place in the last thirty years as the result of popular movements ... If this struggle becomes a mass movement of the oppressed and exploited ... the impulse to contribute to it may intensify, growing both from moral pressure and the desire for self-fulfillment in a decent and humane society. (Chomsky, 1995, p. 127)

Teacher assistants provide a highly skilled and delicate task of mediation between the world of the student with diverse learning needs and the larger context of the educational and social world. However, their needs for professional development, work-competency, and long-term employment are not considered as equally important to the educational system as teachers; they are silenced by omission and negation of value. Who better to help address the silenced voices of children, but those who are silenced themselves?

We cannot negate the fact of power. But we can undertake a resistance, a reaching out towards becoming *persons* among other persons. ... To engage with our students as persons is to affirm our own incompleteness, our consciousness of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be tapped, possibilities still to be opened and pursued. At once, it is to rediscover the value of care, to reach back to experiences of caring and being cared for... We have to find out how to open such spheres, such spaces, where a better state of things can be imagined; because it is only through the projection of a better social order that we can perceive the gaps in what exists and try to transform and repair. (Greene, 1986, p. 29)

A soft muted muttering of voices can develop into a harmonic chorus of the silenced and oppressed reclaiming what has been denied them; the opportunity to act "as knower, learner, and teacher, ... [reaching] beyond ... cultural boundaries" (Leistyna, Woodrun, & Sherblom, 1996, p. 5) to fill the empty spaces with joyful voices of reclaimed and alienated children with diverse learning needs.

Moral leadership and community.

Underpinning my research pilgrimage is the fundamental belief that

transformative intellectuals united with a common purpose and vision can create social and educational change to a greater good. Since teaching and learning are connected and recognized as a struggle over meaning and power relations, action should be grounded in “forms of moral and ethical discourse ... [and is exhibited in], a preferential concern for the suffering and struggles of the disadvantaged and oppressed” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 303). Whereas these theorists seem to be primarily addressing the possibility of transformative intellectuals as teachers only, I would argue that this definition needs to be expanded to include teacher assistants who, by virtue of their role, are educators. They are equally as important as teachers in the educational programming for students with diverse learning needs; as part of their job description they are asked to modify, accommodate, and implement curricular materials and concepts under the direction of the classroom and/or consulting teacher. As such, they should be recognized as integral members of the educational community in the education of students with diverse learning needs.

As educators, and as members of this global community of society, we must acknowledge the unequal sharing of power and authority that not only exists in our communities, but in our schools as well. To re-connect our isolated and alienated children, the “others,” it is crucial that educators recognize the role that students must play in their education; to encourage their participation “as critical agents, [to] question how knowledge is produced and distributed, utilize dialogue, and make knowledge meaningful, critical, and ultimately emancipatory” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 303). In order to enhance literacy for “reading the world,” educators must recognize and address how the social world is experienced, mediated, and produced by their students; they must develop an understanding of the drives, emotions, and interests that motivate students to learn, speak, and imagine in order to give audibility to their voices.

Our conception of self and world, therefore, can only become critical when we appreciate the historicity of its formation. We are never independent of the social and historical forces that surround us—we are all caught at a particular point in the web of reality. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993, p. 175)

Gaining voice, gaining knowledge, gaining power in *reading the world* can give all students, and particularly students with diverse learning needs, power and control over their learning, and ultimately over their lives; “teaching and learning is linked to the more political goal of educating students to take risks and to struggle within ongoing relations of power in order to alter the oppressive conditions in which life is lived” (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 314). Gaining voice, gaining knowledge, and gaining power in their voice, strategies, and abilities for the education of students with diverse learning needs can help teacher assistants enhance the learning of success of these students.

I am proposing a new perspective toward teacher assistants. They are central to the educational programming for students with diverse learning needs and should be viewed as equitable partners in the education of students with diverse learning needs; teacher assistants are frequently the front-line workers in the current educational model of inclusion. Consequently, they connect with far more children on an hourly or daily basis than does the consulting teacher. If inspired with an opportunity to reconnect alienated and isolated children, often the same children identified as students with diverse learning needs, many teacher assistants might respond with increased motivation and commitment to make the education and reconnection of these children a political act of transformation. Their actions of caring and being cared for through attitudes of equity and worth can transform the current educational system into a responsive more democratic community based on “spirit, drive, commitment, and a sense of moral responsiveness” (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 8); qualities necessary for transformational schools.

The transformation of teacher assistants into change agents requires careful work through moral leadership; they must be persuaded that their participation is vital to the creation of both an extraordinary school of excellence and a moral community for learning. The transformational leader of a moral community is one who has developed her vision through communion with individuals, “from listening to other people, listening to their complaints, their sufferings, their dreams, their longings. Much of the vision will begin to be built in conversations with others, bringing their insights and suggestions into a fuller synthesis” (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988, p. 205). Leadership as seen through the role as “keeper of the vision,” builder of moral communities, builder of covenants merges facets of critical pedagogy that speaks to the elimination of oppression and denial of a voice. the becoming of a subject in history rather than an object. The endowment to teacher assistants of the power to employ their strengths and sense of purpose into the fabric of the organization’s vision to create communities of excellence, communities of inclusion and value occurs when moral leadership is instituted. The teacher assistant is propelled into the role and action of subject in history, subject in charge rather than object of action, object of subordination.

When I began this research I had a vague concept of what I meant with my vision to create an empowering climate for teacher assistants that could promote, value, and develop their human and humane potential to increase the positive educational outcomes of children with diverse learning needs. The following excerpt from Sergiovanni (1990), defines three active components of moral leadership that can inspire and thus, near the promise of excellence in students and adults within a school.

- Empowerment is practiced when authority and obligation are shared in a way that authorizes and legitimizes action, (reciprocity in the relationship), thus increasing responsibility and accountability.

- Enablement is practiced when means and opportunities are provided and obstacles are removed permitting empowered persons to make things happen, to be successful...
- Enhancement leads to enhancement. Followers' roles are enhanced when empowerment and enablement are practices and the leader's role is transformed from manager of workers to leader of leaders. Role enhancement for both results in increased commitment and extraordinary performance. (p. 96)

I have always believed that an effective leader inspires and stimulates excellence in her followers when power is returned or awarded to the individuals who need to make on-the-spot decisions. It took me time, trust, and patience to feel comfortable practicing this belief with teacher assistants as there is a definite difference in the degree of education and training one receives as a teacher as compared to a teacher assistant. The development of trust begins to arise when one can accept that all human beings have value and worth despite their different life and educational experiences; in truth, knowledge sets us free to explore the possibilities in the relationships in a humane and liberating manner.

[Individuals] must find space within which the experience of their daily lives can be articulated in its multiplicity. In practice, this always implies a struggle—a struggle over assigned meaning, a struggle over discourse as the expression of both form and content, a struggle over interpretation of experience, and a struggle over self. But it is this very struggle that forms the basis of a pedagogy that liberates knowledge and practice. It is a struggle that makes possible new knowledge that expands beyond the individual experience and hence redefines our identities and the real possibilities we see in the daily conditions of our lives. The struggle is itself a condition basic to the realization of a process of pedagogy: it is a struggle that can never be won—or pedagogy stops. It is the struggle through which new knowledge, identities, and possibilities are introduced that may lead to the alteration simultaneously of circumstances and selves. (Lewis & Simon, 1986, p. 267)

Crucial to a leader's development of trust in her followers *to do what is right because it is the right thing to do* (Sergiovanni, 1990) arises with the acceptance that each individual develops a unique literacy *to read the world* (Freire & Macedo, 1995) based on his life experiences of gender, race, colour, socio-economic status, etcetera, and that

also within this unique literacy is a communal experience and reciprocal need as human beings to be heard and valued. Literacy not only means that individuals can *read the word*, but also that individuals are able *read the world* (Freire & Macedo, 1995); knowing how to interpret, to their advantage, the hidden curriculum of social relations, the subtle application and protection of power by the dominant culture helps individuals regain power over the decisions that they must make in their lives.

Individual life experiences are valid and colour the perceptions of value one places upon the various norms of a community, culture, and society. Despite the uniqueness of individual experiences with power and oppression, we as members of our particular cultural units have accepted norms and values we consider significant to our lives and work. In an organization, once the basic needs of physical safety and security are met, employees need to feel a sense of belonging, competence, challenge, and self-fulfillment. These values seem to be illustrated best through job satisfaction and opportunity to develop basic competence, availability of stimulus and challenge, feedback to enable growth, support for new ideas, and concepts, plus a variety of collegial relationships built around ideas, values, beliefs, and commitments. Intrinsic motivation derives from the value one gleans from the work itself and arises from:

feelings of competence and achievement, excitement and challenge, meaning and significance, enjoyment and moral contentment that one receives from successfully engaging in the work... When intrinsically motivated, teachers [and teacher assistants]...are pulled by an inner desire to be effective.... Involvement with work is internal or moral or both. (Sergiovanni, 1990, p.126)

In my years of work as a consulting teacher, I have come to realize that the power to effect change derives forthrightly from the type of administrator or leader one works beside both at the school level and also within the district level. I have been fortunate to observe and internalize some powerful mechanisms whereby individuals have been

empowered to build communities of care, communities of learning, communities of excellence through empowerment, enablement, and enhancement. I have not only felt the internal power from being the recipient of this value-added leadership, but have also witnessed the power of enacting value-added leadership with some effective, committed, and caring teacher assistants. It is through these experiences that I have evolved my knowledge, vision, purposing, and quest to build a moral community of teacher assistants capable of instituting a powerful social change of reclamation of marginalized students, students with diverse learning needs.

When a leader articulates a vision of values that is shared by the followers, a sense of common purpose arises that can propel the learning community into an organization of excellence.

Value-added leaders expect adherence to common values but promote wide discretion in how these values are to be implemented. Discretion is promoted by practicing empowerment and enablement.... *Everyone is free to do the things that make sense to them providing the decisions they make embody the values that comprise the school's covenant.* (Sergiovanni, 1990, pp. 134-135)

Empowerment as a construct of value-added leadership recognizes the accomplishments of the school, the achievements of its goals, and the vision as the avenue whereby greater commitment to shared values, purpose, and moral communities will evolve (Sergiovanni, 1990, pp. 104-105); it is not appropriate nor effective for the leader to have power over her followers—power is given to the followers.

Components of critical pedagogy resound in the concept of value-added leadership as “a powerful model of practice that seeks first to secure a satisfactory level of performance and commitment from teachers and students [and teacher assistants] and then to achieve extraordinary performance” (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 32). It is through the transformation of teacher assistants as agents of social change to create moral

educational communities that the re-connection of students with diverse learning needs can occur; the sense of alienation and isolation that these children experience as the “others” can be diminished.

Since the wages earned by teacher assistants do not reflect their true worth, one possibility for engaging a committed team of excellence could be achieved through performance investment where participants give more to their chosen work because of the intrinsic value earned from the deep satisfaction of one’s work (Sergiovanni, 1990, pp. 18-19). This can result in the “building [of] a covenant of shared values, one that bonds people in a common cause...” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 15) which derives from the unified moral order of the institution and is based on shared values and expectations, vision and purposing, whereby the participants take part in shaping the school to “reflect the hopes and dreams, needs and interests, the values and beliefs of everyone that has a stake in the school” (Sergiovanni, 1990, pp. 56-58). The purposing or vision is what can inspire the drive and commitment of teachers, students, and in the case of this thesis, teacher assistants to achieve extraordinary performance. It is through the conceptual framework of community culture and moral order that I hope to inspire commitment and excellence within the teacher assistants. It is this quest for doing things right and doing them for the right reasons, moral leadership, that may strike the resounding chord for intrinsic motivation that can intensify “moral pressure and the desire for self-fulfillment in a decent and humane society” (Chomsky, 1995, p. 27) through the commitment of teacher assistants in my school.

Moral leadership evolves from agreements of purpose and vision established in the school—the leader is responsible for communicating and building hopes and dreams, ideas, values, beliefs—shared purpose that is inspirational, moral, and sacred—a

litany of sacred responsibilities that students must be prepared to undertake *and* a set of sacred responsibilities for those in the schools who have to get them ready” (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 82).

Moral leadership is an expression of the obligation of democracy—it is the right thing to do for the right reasons. “If we simply accept the world as it is, as being fixed, shrugging off its imperfections as inevitable, we *contribute* to the perpetuation of the way things are” (Hinchey, 1998, p. 140). There are far too many lost, sad, and alienated children living in this world to allow things to continue as they are. Freedom and self-sufficiency are connected to shared values and norms within a democracy, but this connection demands the worth and dignity in and for each individual enforced through the extension of equality and voice towards all members of the community. Many teacher assistants in my district reside in the community in which they work. As members both of the educational and the social communities, they might be able to deepen the connections and sense of value that these lost, sad, and alienated children of both school and community feel. When they see these children on the street or at playgrounds out of school, simple words and greetings could make these children feel special, noticed, and worthwhile. As teacher assistants in the educational community, they can make a connection that unites the out-of-school to the in-school community, thereby deepening the sense of interest, value, and worth exhibited to the child. As members of the community, we are all interdependent in the purposing, shared values, rights, and common responsibilities of the school (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 143). If we treat this expectation and obligation as sacred, there can be voice to all, a loosening on the reins of oppression by the dominant culture, and opportunity through the heart and soul investment of teacher assistants, for children with diverse learning needs to develop to

their fullest potential.

The creation of moral communities can be achieved through usage and nurturing of the skills and attributes of committed, effective, and moral teacher assistants combined with the reality of experience, intuition, emotion, and sacred authority⁶ as legitimate and valued forms of knowledge in the learning community of schools. “In contexts of this kind, open contexts where persons attend to one another with interest, regard, and care, there is a place for the appearance of freedom, the achievement of freedom by people in search of themselves” (Greene, 1988, p. xi). Teacher assistants who are actively committed and involved in the building of the moral community in a school should be an integral part for reconnecting alienated students with diverse learning needs back into the educational and social community—the building of a more equitable democracy of educational programming for which I am currently searching.

Our very survival depends on the degree to which the principles of communality, human struggle, and social justice aimed at improving the privileges of all groups eventually prevail. Public schools need to be organized around a vision that celebrates not what is but what could be, a vision that looks beyond the immediate to the future, and a vision that links struggle to a new set of human possibilities. (Giroux, 1988, p. 10)

Adult learning.

By his love [for another human being, man] is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true. (Frankl, 1959, p. 134)

Since the teacher assistant job does not avail itself to sufficient opportunity for discussion, planning, and implementation, or for close direction and guidance, an effective teacher assistant needs to be a self-directed learner. The individual must be able

to determine her needs; envision the attainable goals; find materials and resources to implement them; choose and appropriate learning skills and strategies; and finally, evaluate and reflect upon the outcome. The teacher assistant therefore, must be a reflective educator, constantly assessing and re-assessing why the student is or is not grasping what is being worked on, why the student is or is not an active learner, or what actions were successful and which were not. As the teacher assistant grows in experience, he becomes a source of knowledge, a mentor or coach for determining future learning for both himself and others, ever watchful that he does not create unhealthy dependencies of learned helplessness within students and/or colleagues. The teacher assistant in combination of these qualities must be truly interested in the student as an individual in need of a mentor, an advocate, and a teacher.

Adult learners enter new learning situations with preconceived notions about the use of new knowledge; they are self-directed learners and what they perceive as required for competency depends upon their own identified gaps of knowledge. The effects of their own educational experience remain uppermost in their minds; their life experiences influence both the appropriation of content and process (Houle, 1984, Wlodkowski, 1986, Knowles, 1990). The epistemological roots of these individuals can have both a negative and positive influence on students with diverse learning needs, particularly if the teacher assistant has social-historical experiences of silence, oppression, and subordination. The goal of an effective leader, a builder of moral communities, needs to raise the critical consciousness through assisting the teacher assistant to perceive life through the eyes of those who are oppressed, alienated, and silenced to connect with understanding, voice, and with voice, give power over decision-making to those it affects. It should not be so

* sacred authority as defined by Sergiovanni is based on religious beliefs, professional, community and

difficult an accomplishment, as my understanding of the role of teacher assistants through their eyes is that they experience this same sense of de-valuation and silencing that students with diverse learning needs experience.

Adult learners generally want to learn that which is essential to perform life tasks and fulfill their daily needs. The focus must be on problem-centered experiences, personal projects, and current needs; they resent their time wasted on non-essential material (Wlodkowski, 1986, Knowles, 1990). A moral community of educational excellence can evolve when teacher assistants recognize that students with diverse learning needs are illiterate with knowledge and skills needed for classroom survival and feel an overpowering commitment to address this illiteracy and silencing. I have seen teacher assistants become quite concerned that parents have not instilled these values in their children—conscientization or consciousness-raising (Hinchey, 1998), by the teacher assistant ensues. It is at this juncture, that the inspiration of teacher assistants can occur to work towards the purpose and vision of a learning community of excellence and social change.

Adult learners require a relationship of reciprocity with an instructor/mentor/coach: they want respect for having knowledge and being capable of learning; they deserve dignity; and they want useable and applicable knowledge for their job (Wlodkowski, 1986). The role of the consulting teacher is to recognize, accept, and build upon the teacher assistants' needs as adult learners and encourage them to gain new perspectives of education and social-history that will enhance the educational programming of students with diverse learning needs. To facilitate this, the consulting teacher must be aware of her own assumptions and safeguard against the imposition of her own experiences on

personal norms, shared purpose, and democratic ideals.

another—recognition of the learner's need to know, right to direct her own learning, role of the learner's experience in the situation, learner's readiness to learn, context of the learning, and the intrinsic motivation of the individual (Knowles, 1990). Additionally, the consulting teacher needs to help the teacher assistants examine their own value clarification, mediation, and dogmatism as factors that can impact both on their own learning and their mediation of learning with students with diverse learning needs.

The androgogical model, (Knowles, 1990, pp. 57-63), identifies six epistemological constructs that drive the adult as a self-directed, motivated learner. The adult must first decide the learning is essential in order to span the gap between what is already known to what needs to be known for work competence: the learner needs to see the personal benefits in order to invest the energy needed to learn new material. Secondly, responsibility for the individual's right to self-direction must be considered: the teacher assistant must be respected as capable and desirous of self-direction. Thirdly, the role of the learner's experience must be acknowledged in terms of the background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests, goals, habits, and biases from life experience. Fourthly, the timing of the learning must coincide with a developmental task—there should be an immediate applicable reason for the acquisition of new learning. Fifthly, the orientation to learning, which in terms of special education relates to the transference of the new learning material, is best learned within the context of the application—"the teachable moment." Lastly, the most potent motivators for learning are recognized as internal: job satisfaction, self-esteem, and quality of life; adults want to keep growing and developing, curiosity is an innate characteristic of human beings.

I am interested in factors of intrinsic motivation that can inspire commitment and dedication in teacher assistants as self-directed learners striving towards extraordinary

performance. Areglado, Bradley, and Lane (1996) identify an internal incentive or motivation—naïve curiosity, self-esteem, a challenge to power, and satisfaction of accomplishment inherent with adult self-directed learners. The higher order needs of esteem, competence, autonomy, and self-actualization develop when work factors such as challenge, responsibility, opportunities for and recognition of one's accomplishments, and opportunity to demonstrate competence and building of trust are present, which are in effect, prerequisites of an excellent learning community (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 52).

Accounting for the requirements of adult learners as identified in the adrogical model supports my quest to create a more equitable, democratic environment based on principles of critical pedagogy and moral leadership initiatives. A bonding between the participants raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspirations to higher moral levels thereby transforming both sectors, when the building of a learning community occurs through moral partnership by both leader and followers under consideration of the particular learning needs of the adults. This shared covenant interacts with the higher needs of the leader and the led, lending purpose, meaning, significance, and moral value to the process of education (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 52).

Mentoring relationships.

Organizations in the business world have been using mentor/mentee relationships as an avenue for job training for many years to "ensure that the culture of the organisation is perpetuated" (Carruthers, 1993, p. 14).

The concept of mentor/mentee relationships seems to provide the respect, dignity, and appropriate guidance for the knowledge, skills, and attributes to build a covenant of shared values and purposing that I am in search of for teacher assistants. Baird (1993) dualistically defines typical mentoring behaviors as

a caring listener, a critical friend, a concerned advisor. As a caring listener ...you hear more than they say—you are attuned to the subtle, personal communications that provide information necessary to inform your response and strengthen the value of the relationship to them. Important affective aspects of the role involve respect, sensitivity, perceptiveness, care, concern, encouragement, and enthusiasm. A primary objective of the mentor is to emancipate, not just to advise.

Curiously enough, pieces of this definition resound with both principles of critical pedagogy through the quest to emancipate the mentee, and moral leadership and communities through the building and valuing of relationships;

the responsibilities of a mentor may be considered as assessing, advising and guiding mentees in order to foster and maintain personal challenge.... an endeavour that involves thoughts, feelings and emotions, where the pursuit of productive personal challenge occurs congenially through a process of collaborative reflection. (Baird, 1993, p. 56)

Qualities desired in mentors are: "role model, guide, willing to be a mentor, support, experienced, adviser, trusted counselor, leader, friend, listener, knowledgeable, shares resources, observes confidentiality, interested, shows mutual respect, shows affection, accessible, [and] networker" (Carruthers, 1993, p. 20); these qualities can be identified as threads of critical pedagogy, moral leadership and community theories, and adult learning theory practice that can be interwoven into a educational fabric for social change and transformation to re-connect students with diverse learning needs.

Firstly, in the role as mentor, the consulting teacher must have expertise not only about learning but the characteristics manifested in the wide diversity of learning, emotional, behavioral, and physical disabilities children with diverse learning needs for whom we must develop educational programming. There is a significant difference between the scope and depth of training that a consulting teacher receives as compared to that of a teacher assistant. In fact, in our jurisdiction, due to the difficulties of finding qualified and trained teacher assistants in rural areas, we often hire individuals who enter

the school as parent volunteers in their children's classes. Through expertise, the consulting teacher needs to be accessible and open to questions and new avenues of learning or doing things whereby the learner/teacher assistant may lead and learn. Since the consulting teacher has more education and knowledge of the educational process and programming, she must be the educational leader and strive towards the creation of effective teacher assistants who can recognize and accept the vision and purposing of educational programming for students with diverse learning needs, as part of their values and dreams for a more equitable society. However, because the role of the teacher assistant in inclusive education is that of front-line worker, the consulting teacher must accept, encourage, and incorporate the observations and suggestions that the teacher assistant proffers in respect to the student with diverse learning needs, particularly if the inclusive model is to be successful.

Secondly, the consulting teacher must be a guide or researcher in order to illuminate the possible "whys" of behaviors and learning needs, develop hypotheses of why the observed behaviors occur and then look for support to either refute or confirm. In this case, the consulting teacher is constantly learning, refining, and redefining knowledge which in turn, becomes a rich training ground for a mentor/mentee relationship. When the consulting teacher is a researcher, she readily recognizes the need to experience the outcomes from actions, reflect upon these, and plan the next avenue of action based on the information gleaned from reflection and discussion. A researcher attitude towards learning, making mistakes, and reflecting on difficulties provides a sense of reciprocity between the mentor and mentee. Processes of observation, action, reflection, hypothesis, and direction for changing learning and emotional/behavioral concerns might be best developed through the mentor/mentee/coach relationship. In order for the reciprocity

of the mentor/mentee relationship to exist, a safe and supportive climate is essential to promote risk-taking attitudes. The needs of students with diverse learning needs are so unique and experiential that skilled workers are most effective when they apply strategies of a researcher.

Thirdly, the mentor/consulting teacher must not only be a trusted counselor but also be accessible to support, hear, and respect perceptions to understand the difficulty that teacher assistants experience in their roles. Crucial to the recognition of difficulty within the specifics of individual teacher assistant assignments is an understanding of how adults perform when faced with challenging work situations, needs of adult learners, and tenets of intrinsic motivation that can alter and affect the work performance. As with all human beings, it is perceptions that determine actions, behaviors, thoughts, and conversations. Perceptions are part of the factors in an empowering environment; they are constantly mutating through the interactions that we have. One must be aware of the different perspectives and experiences that individuals bring with them in their lives and their work.

Finally, the consulting teacher as a mentor must have empathy, be an adviser, a trusted counselor; he must have a realistic understanding of the teacher assistant's needs and expectations with the specifics involved for the learning (in this case, the role of teacher assistant). Within the role of empathy is the acknowledgment of the requirements of adult learners and the role of perception in the evolution of learning and development; how the teacher assistant mediates the context of the educational community and the outside social community. This awareness will enable the consulting teacher to validate and honor the knowledge of the teacher assistant, to "...individually experience and understand problems, challenges, techniques, and strategies" (Freschi, 1999, p. 45),

that may assist the development of extraordinary performance by teacher assistants. Value and respect can grow from this reciprocity; there can be an increase in the critical consciousness of the team by experiencing and recognizing the similarity of roles to create a greater trust and understanding of the intricate nature of the role of teacher assistant in educational programming for students with diverse learning needs. With increased value and respect, teacher assistants will develop professional pride and commitment in their careers. With the development of increased pride and commitment a change in the perception that the teacher assistant job is not just a job, but a worthwhile, significant lifestyle—a calling can evolve. This paradigm shift can then inspire the intrinsic motivation necessary to create schools and moral communities of excellence.

My observations and discussions with teacher assistants over the years enlightened my perspective of teacher assistants. Many perceive that a job well done depends on the student's success with tests, interpersonal relationships, responsibility, and acceptance into the community. While part of this is true, it is not a reflection of their incompetence when difficulties with the student arise; they must have respect for the child's right to make mistakes and learn from them. However, it is difficult for teacher assistants to remember that the child's behaviors do not reflect their inadequacy; the child has a choice to behave one way or another, the child has a right or option to voice his needs. Stepping into the teacher assistant's role enables the consulting teacher to recognize the needs of teacher assistants as adult learners, receive valuable observations and insight into the individual peculiarities of the student and teacher assistant, to gain credibility through "walking the talk." This knowledge can provide valuable insight into the job peculiarities and environmental qualities that can assist the training and professional development of the teacher assistant, which can in turn, draw out the potential in "students-at-

promise.”

The application of desired mentor qualities by the consulting teacher for mentoring teacher assistants can create a moral community of excellence and enthusiasm for meaningful differences and success in the lives of students with diverse learning needs. It is important that teacher assistants receive the message that working with students with diverse learning needs is indeed, “a labor of love,” and that powerful and positive social change can happen for alienated and disconnected children through relationship building. When the message fits the action, teacher assistants can feel that their roles in the educational partnership of students with diverse learning needs are much more valuable. A skilled mentor must employ effective communication, using words and descriptions understandable to the learner (Wlodkowski, 1986). When the teacher assistant reaches the stage where she “loves her work”, as the consulting teacher, the mentor does, schools will stand at the threshold for making significant, validating connections to all students, but particularly those with diverse learning needs.

Structuring mentoring in terms of the cognitive and affective components of shared adventure [between mentor/mentee] will foster personal challenge through a process of collaborative reflection leading to enhanced metacognition. Such a process is not simply acquisition of topic- or task-related knowledge and skills. It empowers the professional to work individually and with others towards more perceptive and effective practice. In so doing, it improves the quality of education for all. (Baird, 1993, p. 58)

Performance Based Instruction Strategies.

Freschi (1999) ascertains that for maximum benefit or the most success and learning for the child to occur, the teacher’s responsibility is to provide training for the teacher assistant. I wrestled with this dilemma, myself, resenting the precious time it takes to effectively train teacher assistants in my all-too-busy work. However, too much time can be lost to the detriment of the student with diverse learning needs when there are

ineffective and inefficient training practices for teacher assistants. It is difficult to find “release time” for teacher assistants when they are needed in the classrooms with the students and teachers. Creative means to honor professional growth for teacher assistants through training initiatives, educational partnerships, and value in the community of education must be found. As stated earlier, one of my mandates as consulting teacher is to provide efficient and effective programming to students with diverse learning needs with the least amount of intrusion as possible. To meet this requirement, it is essential that I develop the teacher assistant’s knowledge, attributes, and skills to competency.

Performance-based instruction, which has three components, can respect both the needs of teacher assistants as adult learners, and apply qualities of the mentor/mentee relationship. Guided observation allows teacher assistants to see for themselves the “why, what, and how” necessary to the job, essential for motivation of adult learners. Guided practice or orientation to the work, requires teacher assistants to link the already known from prior knowledge to job knowledge; application in reality to insure the transference of the skills as an innovation or adaptation. Finally, demonstration of mastery, which also can be seen as facets of intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1990, Sergiovanni, 1990), “...is meant to achieve high standards of workplace performance, identified as objectively as possible...[and] develops competence, self-respect, and confidence” (Brethower and Smalley, 1998, p. 92), aspects of both critical pedagogy and the building of moral communities.

Principles of performance-based instruction, which appear to be interwoven with constructs of the androgical model of adult learning (Knowles, 1990, pp. 57-63), acknowledges the action and application of what is already known from prior knowledge to acquired job knowledge; the outcome is assimilated knowledge relevant to the

performance requirements of the job. Prior knowledge is respected and the learner's previous work and learning experiences are recognized; a necessary requirement for motivated adult learners. Adult learners must see for themselves what is effective; guided observation honors self-directed learners and the personal recognition when there is a knowledge gap which then provides the avenue to recognize teacher assistants as intelligent, capable beings. In conjunction, guided practice keeps the designer/instructor/trainer honest, always prepared to support the rationale and illustrate specifics of how the strategy or philosophy works; aspects of effective mentoring qualities. These precepts maintain relevance to the situation for the adult learner, keeping him motivated and self-directed to achieve mastery. another important facet of adult learners. All these qualities of generative adult learning must be principles in any professional development work conducted with teacher assistants.

Summary

The Iowa Guide for Paraeducators (1998) emphasizes the importance of valuing and developing teacher assistants. Teacher assistants have an important and complex role essential to success of the students and school; they must be respected and valued members of the educational team; they must be provided orientation and ongoing training; they should be encouraged to have a professional identity; and teachers, administrators, and other leaders at the state and regional level should enable teacher assistants to be effective in their work. In addition, they value the job of teacher assistant as a life-long career.

We are not quite at this level of consistency in Alberta, yet, there are promising initiatives happening. As recently as spring of 1999, the Alberta Teachers' Association recommended that Alberta "urge school jurisdictions to develop enforceable standards

of conduct for non-certificated staff and volunteers” (Teacher and Teacher Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities, 2000, p. 12). However, encouragement and provision of adequate funding for on-the-job training and professional development of teacher assistants is still not forthcoming; a hidden message of subordination remains in the culture of education that denies teacher assistants value and voice.

Interweaving the theories of critical pedagogy and moral leadership, adult learning literature, mentoring relationships, and performance-based instruction strategies suggests the creation of a rich tapestry, unique in texture, form, and colour that not only lends strength to the fabric of a transformational school, but also recognizes the threads that comprise the fabric, the individual citizens who populate the social community outside of the school. The interweaving of these fields of literature can assist, through the inspiration and commitment of effective, dedicated teacher assistants, the creation of a positive and powerful environment for social change, social transformation, and ultimately, the reclamation of isolated, alienated students with diverse learning needs.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Provisions, Itinerary, Pathways

In my work, as Clandinin (1986) discovered, I experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the general working reality of teacher assistants. I had been privy to many discussions about money, training, and expectations for and with teacher assistants. I have grown over the years, to respect the roles and understand the positive impact that teacher assistants can play in the successful educational inclusion of students with diverse learning needs. I empathized with their concerns and, it is this search for knowledge, insight, and understanding that has led me to the threshold of this qualitative research. Since this research explores and identifies factors in an empowering environment that may assist the development of effective and committed teacher assistants, a qualitative approach involving narrative interviewing to focus on and uncover the detailed, specific, and unique factors in the roles and needs of teacher assistants is most appropriate.

What is an empowering educational environment that can assist the development of effective and committed teacher assistants? Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi (1992) believe it is one of collaboration: insiders and outsiders interrelate on a flat, horizontal plane of learning. Existing alienating practices must be replaced with teacher¹ and school-based approaches to create a climate of teacher empowerment and emancipation.

¹ Much of the literature focuses on the needs and lives of teachers. I have observed parallels between the feelings, experiences, and observations of teacher and teacher assistant in their work with students. When the literature discusses teachers, please insert teacher assistant into the passage: the practice and context is much the same. According to one teacher assistant, "even though not titled as a teacher [a teacher assistant] is actually a teacher".

One of the goals of qualitative research seeks to understand perceptions, experience, and knowledge in the context of the individual or group. Perceptions are reality: the interpretation of them affects much of what we do, think, and say (Palys, 1997, p. 17). “Researching teachers’ lives is an enterprise fraught with danger but the alternative is, I think, more dangerous: to continue in substantial ignorance of those people who, in spite of the many historical shifts and cycles, remain central to the achievement in the educational endeavour” (Goodson, 1992, pp. 12-13).

Researcher in Context

“The rule to follow...: one begins by seeking to *articulate the context*” (Jackson, 1992, p. 73).

The roles of consulting teacher and teacher assistant are mirror images, squeezed, elongated, distorted by responsibilities, education, training, and status in the educational process. I am a significant member of the educational team, the other half of the student services team that provides programming for students with diverse learning needs. The researcher/consulting teacher must spend time with the subjects/teacher assistants, collaborating; developing an understanding for and within their context. “If we want to understand what the teacher [teacher assistant] does and why, we must therefore also understand the teaching community, the work culture of which that teacher [teacher assistant] is a part” (Hargreaves, 1992, p. 217). The research process is one of shared participation, values, and purpose (Clandinin, 1986, p. 27). It is only through a relationship of closeness: researcher as objective and researcher as researched can a window be opened from which we can view the world of teacher assistants. Consequently, an inductive approach is appropriate when asking teacher assistants what they consider important for effective learning and working conditions; they will know

more what they require rather than an outsider looking in.

Narratives form a framework within which our discourse on human thoughts and possibility evolve, and they provide the structure and functional backbone for very specific explanations of this or that educational practice.... Narrative discourse is essential to our efforts to understand teaching and learning. (McEwan and Egan, 1995, p xiii)

Narrative inquiry also can provide an avenue for inspection and introspection, reflection and transformation of teacher assistant work. By listening to the needs and lives of teacher assistants, we can discover key ingredients of the people they are to understand how the work environment can be manipulated to create excellent performance; individuals invest much of who they are into their work roles bringing with them their experience and background (Goodson, 1992, p. 116). As with teachers, the sounds of teacher assistants' voices can be heard through the act of studying their lives and needs. Heightened audibility can bring increased respect, recognition, and value for their roles in the education of students with special needs. Their voices can bring new insights into education that could impact positively on students with diverse learning needs (Ball and Goodson, 1985, Clandinin 1986, Clandinin and Connelly 1991, Goodson, 1992). Hargreaves (1992, p. 220) identifies the change requisite to altering beliefs, values, and attitudes: characteristics of teacher relationships and patterns of interaction. Once teacher assistants claim their voices, once their contributions in education are valued, and heard, changes in the workplace can occur. A change in the form of the school culture, of the school climate for teacher assistants can enable a change in current education practices.

As outsiders and researchers, we need to understand how teachers [assistants] evolve, develop and change their practical knowledge in the way that they perceive their experience of it. ...bring [ing] with them a regard for and interest in the teacher [assistant] as a unique *person*, and the teacher [assistant] as a *learner* who possesses a special type of knowledge. (Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi, 1992, p. 57)

It will not do to stand outside the window looking into the teacher assistant

world. Narrative method involves participant-observation, shared work in a practical setting. The process is joint living out of two person's narratives, those of researcher and practitioner, so that both participants are continuing to tell their stories but the stories are now being lived out in a collaborative setting. (Clandinin and Connelly, 1991, p. 265)

Role of Researcher

Clandinin (1986, p. 20) identifies the relationship between researcher and researched as intertwined. There is a dialectical relationship that characterizes the interdependence and interrelationship of researcher and subject. Researcher/teacher and subject/teacher assistant are involved in a process of reciprocity and response. I am both researcher and subject in this study.

There are two separate, but conjoined avenues for investigating the phenomenon of researcher/subject. The first of these commonly held research views is the researcher as neutral observer through in-depth interviews. The second stance of researcher is a subjective role (Clandinin, 1986, 12-13). I subscribe to the view that all researchers are subjects; in this study I recognize my role as subjective researcher and as such, will reflect this unique position in my writing and through field notes.

Researcher as neutral observer. occurred by the process of in-depth interviews with six teacher assistants. The researcher is separated from the role of participant through a standardized open-ended question interview format. This should mitigate against the possibility of bias from my position as consulting teacher to assume certain themes, concerns, experiences.

The second issue of researcher as subject originates with and consequently, embraced the knowledge that I care deeply about the confidence, self-worth, validation, and competence of teacher assistants in the educational process.

As teachers *and* researchers we can bring our own craft knowledge to bear, to attempt to understand from the inside how reflection contributes to the action teachers take in their classroom work. Such participative research, however, can only take place in the context of well-developed collaborative, relationships between teachers and researchers, relationships built on mutual respect, trust and complementary interests. (Louden, 1992, p. 178)

As stated previously, the roles of consulting teacher and teacher assistant are mirror images, we share similar values and purposes in the educational process; separation and objectivity are impossible; I share many of the experiences in the working lives of teacher assistants. I want teacher assistants to be viewed as individuals and valued in more than the role of assisting an educational program; their actions have meaning and their meanings have power. (Clandinin, 1986, p. 13). They have power to reach across and outside of the educational community to re-connect our isolated, alienated children; reclaiming the notion that it takes a village to raise a child.

It promises to extend a new tolerance not only to other people's children but to other people as well. For as we share the care of a child with her parents we engage in a mimetic and empathic relation with them as well as the child, gaining access to their hope as well as to their habits of nurture. It is not enough to know other people's children. We must know, share a world with, the other people who love that child, wildly or tentatively, desperately, ambivalently, or tenderly. (Grumet. 1988, p. 179)

Data/Collected Works: Pathways

"You ask for detail by requesting particulars. Life is lived in details..." (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 78).

During an online course in the spring 2000 session at the University of Lethbridge, I designed a small study on the working reality of teacher assistants entitled, "The slide of the fulcrum: Can a shift off-center build an empowering climate for optimal teacher assistant development?" The participants were teacher assistants employed at the school in which I work. I wanted to know how consulting teachers could maximize the learning and development of effective teacher assistants. My goal was to discern what teacher

assistants wanted in their working lives in order to become happy and effective long-term employees.

The outcomes from the study merely resulted in more questions. How does one understand the view from within the teacher assistant's role, without the closeness of perspective? What is it like to work in a school, a classroom, with small groups, and one-to-one with students with diverse learning needs—daily, intensely? What are the work experiences of teacher assistants? What knowledge, skills, and attitudes are involved in this role? “The ways in which teachers [teacher assistants] achieve, maintain, and develop their identity, their sense of self, in and through a career, are of vital significance in understanding the actions and commitments of teachers in their work” (Ball and Goodson, 1985, p. 18). Perspective and perception in this instance is everything: it is the world, the working context of the teacher assistant. “We need in short to know more about teachers’ [and teacher assistants’] lives” (Goodson, 1992, p. 111), and it is these questions this larger research explores.

In this investigation there are four elements of data collection: in-depth interviews with six teacher assistants, correspondence and informal conversations with one teacher assistant, my field notes, and analysis of the data through the lenses of critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Greene, 1986, 1988; Giroux, 1988; Freire & Macedo, 1995; Hinchey, 1998), moral community and leadership (Sergiovanni, 1987, 1990, 1992), and adult learning theory (Houle, 1984; Wlodkowski, 1986; Knowles, 1990), with attention to both mentoring (Carruthers, 1993; Baird, 1993), and performance-based instruction (Areglado, Bradley, & Lane, 1996; Brethower & Smalley, 1998).

A number of basic questions may be worded quite precisely in a predetermined fashion, while permitting the interviewer more flexibility in probing and considerable freedom in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or even to undertake whole new areas of inquiry that

were not originally included in the interview instrument. (Patton, 1987, p. 114)

I interviewed six teacher assistants using a combination of standardized open-ended questions, informal-conversational, and interview guide formats (Patton, 1987, pp.108-114). Appropriately for this research, I chose to use a standardized open-ended format to provide not only a direction and focus for the interview, but also to safeguard against the researcher's neophyte skills as an interviewer. The interview questions were sent one week prior to the interview, with intent for thoughtful, rather than spontaneous responses. "The major way in which the qualitative methodologist seeks to understand the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of people is through in depth, intensive interviewing..." (Patton, 1980, p. 29). This design allowed the interviewees opportunity to describe the complexities of their work, supplying their "own words, thoughts, and insights in answering the questions" (Patton, 1987, p. 114), while at the same time increasing the comparability of subject responses between different programs and individual experiences (Patton, 1980, p. 206), yet enables greater ease during data analysis.

The standardized open-ended format is appropriate for four reasons. Firstly, this researcher is a novice with interview techniques and the standardized open-ended format provided focus and useful data collection from the interviews, yet allowed the interviewer to build some interview skills as the research progressed. Secondly, each subject had opportunity to respond to questions in the same sequence delivered with the same choice of words. Thirdly, a standardized open-ended format simplified the coding and data analysis to the benefit of the researcher's time commitment. Finally, the use of a standardized open-ended interview format protected the respondents' interpretation of the questions with respect to their work views, knowledge, and experiences, to thereby

allow them to answer with their own words, thoughts, and experiences.

The combination of both informal conversational with interview guide data collection techniques increased my opportunity as the interviewer, to be “responsive to individual differences and situational changes” (Patton, 1986, p. 110). With the inclusion of subjects from both elementary and secondary schools, the informal conversational interview technique allowed the interviewer to “generate rapid insights, to formulate [new] questions quickly and smoothly, and to guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation by the structure of the questions” (Patton, 1986, p.111), as determined in the standardized open-ended questions; there are likely to be both situational variations and similarities between the two levels of schools. “A guide keeps the interaction focused, but allows individual perspectives and experiences to emerge” (Patton, 1986, p. 111). Furthermore, the interview guide allowed the interviewer to “build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style” (Patton, 1986, p. 111) within the confines of the standardized open-ended interview format to increase the richness and access to in-depth data. “Depth means getting [a] thoughtful answer [s] based on considerable evidence as well as getting full consideration of a topic from diverse points of view” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 76).

The combined interview design using standardized open-ended questions with informal conversational and interview guide data collection acknowledged my participation as both neutral observer and subject in the research; I have preconceived notions about what I think a teacher assistant requires and experiences, yet I am not a skilled interviewer. “The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people

without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories” (Patton, 1980, p. 28); I can retain my status as researcher and observer through the more objective stance of a guided interview format. However, the depth and richness of the data can be increased simply through my role of consulting teacher, similar to that of participant observer (Bogdan, 1972, pp. 3-4) employing informal conversational and interview guide data collection techniques.

I have an intimate knowledge of the working realities involved in the education of students with diverse learning needs. This role, despite the difference in formal education and work responsibility is quite similar to that of teacher assistant. We both work to insure that students with diverse learning needs acquire the skills, knowledge, and attributes necessary to survive and thrive in the educational community and the lived-in-community outside school. “The observer participates in the everyday life of the people and situation he wishes to understand. He speaks with them, jokes with them, sympathizes with them, and shares their concerns and accomplishments” (Bogdan, 1972, p. 3).

The personal nature of the data derives from the fact that it is open-ended (and therefore does not willy-nilly categorize people), the evaluator [interviewer] has established close contact with the program and therefore has made it more personal, and the procedures of observation and in-depth interviewing, particularly the latter, communicate respect to the respondents by making *their ideas and opinions stated in their own terms* the important data source for the evaluation. ...the program picture unfolds in a way which takes into account idiosyncracies, uniqueness, and complex dynamics. (Patton, 1980, pp. 83-84)

My role as a consulting teacher mirrors the role of the teacher assistant in the education of students with diverse learning needs, and as such opens the door for closeness to the details, themes, concerns, and perspectives of teacher assistants. Yet, sometimes, closeness can be a handicap too, blinding one to the perspectives of those removed from the phenomenon under study. Consequently, it is necessary to find the

means to stand back during the data collection process whenever possible to insure the usefulness and credibility for purposes of understanding the variations and similarities that might exist in the role of teacher assistant.

Secondly, I include pieces of informal conversations and correspondence with a teacher assistant whom I have known for nine years. As discussed earlier, the roles of consulting teacher and teacher assistant are mirrored images. We have shared many similar agonies watching alienated students with diverse learning needs either withdraw or strike back, sometimes both, through violent anti-social behaviors at themselves or at a society they perceive as threatening. We have shared many epiphanies and celebrations of victory watching alienated students gain control over their learning and personal lives. We shared the same working environment for four years, striving as a team to build an educational program that enabled students with diverse learning needs to read both the world and the word. The culminating data from our shared lives may illuminate intimate details of critical incidents and specific learning needs in the life of a teacher assistant. These stories are not the main text, but rather the experience of the participant, recalled and reconstructed through the telling, the writing, and emotional and moral judgments (Clandinin, 1986, pp. 28-29), to illustrate and augment data obtained within the separate interviews. "Critical incidents in teachers' [teacher assistants'] lives and specifically in their work [may] crucially affect perception and practice" (Goodson, 1992, p. 118). For this data collection technique, collaboration with this teacher assistant will relieve ethical concerns of exploitation. Measor and Sikes (1992, p. 211), identify the importance of reciprocity in the interactions between observer and observed. It is essential to view individuals in research with dignity, privacy, honor, and voice; there is a moral obligation to uphold this promise.

Thirdly, I kept field notes in a journal to detail the process of my role as researcher/subject; pre- and post-interview logs, recorded interactions, discussions, observations, and reflections assisted analysis of the data and provided me greater understanding of my assumptions regarding the needs and perspectives of teacher assistants (Patton, 1980; Patton, 1987; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Finally, the data is analyzed through the lenses of critical pedagogy, moral leadership and community, and adult learning research literature of which both mentoring relationships and performance-based instruction are part.

Interview Subjects: Sojourners:

“The power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth” (Patton, 1987, pp. 51-52).

Despite proximity to a large urban center, my school district remains rural. We have a difficult time getting teacher assistants with diplomas or certificates from the rehabilitation field or teacher assistant programs. Many teacher assistants initially begin as volunteer parents in their children’s classrooms. Other teacher assistants have experience working with disabled adults in group-homes and occasionally, some have personal experience from raising a disabled child.

The audio-taped, in-depth interviews, lasting a maximum of one hour, have been conducted with six teacher assistants employed in a rural school district in Southern Alberta. Of the six teacher assistants I invited to participate in this research, three are from an elementary school and three from a secondary school. “Purposeful sampling is used as a strategy when one wants to learn something and come to understand something about certain select cases” (Patton, 1980, p. 100).

Of the six teacher assistants to be interviewed, I made an attempt to increase the

utility of the data through both maximum variation and convenience sampling. Interview subjects have been chosen and invited to participate with attention to diversity in age, years of experience as a teacher assistant, and variety in the work assignment relative to students' learning and behavioral needs, grade level, and, or school.

Of the interview subjects chosen from the elementary school, one of these is a mature individual, 41 to 50, plus years of age. Alexis has worked as a teacher assistant for 2.5 years. Choice of this subject was made primarily because of her life experience knowledge, previous experience in another rural school district, and her relatively new status as an employee with my school district. Her work assignment requires that she move between three different grade levels (4, 5, and 6), work with a variety of diverse learning needs (emotional, behavioral, learning disabled), and develop successful working relationships with four different classroom teachers and two consulting teachers each day. In addition, she has a comfortable relationship with this researcher: a consideration that might relieve the anxiety inherent to the interview process, thereby yielding greater personal information and details regarding this individual's perspective as a teacher assistant.

The second subject, invited to participate in this research at the elementary school fits within the 31 to 40 years of age range. Judy has worked as a teacher assistant for more than 5 years. Selection of this individual was based on her experience in the current elementary school coupled with experience in both an out-of-school program and another rural school within this district. In addition, her present work assignment finds her working with a severe emotional/behavioral disorder student in the morning, and roving as a mild/moderate teacher assistant between grades 2, 3, and 5 in the afternoon. She must develop working relationships with three different teachers, students of various

academic levels and diverse learning needs, and one consulting teacher each day. In addition, she shares a trusting relationship with this researcher which can break down the barriers that may prevent access to an understanding of the concepts, themes, and experiences involved in working as a teacher assistant in a rural school district.

The third subject invited to participate in this research within the elementary school, has been employed for one year, and fits the range of 20 to 30 years of age. Molly's selection was based on her youth, new experience as a teacher assistant, and the diversity of her work assignments. When she initially came to our school, she was hired to work one-to-one with a severely behavioral and emotional disordered student, outside of the classroom. When the child moved in May, she substituted in a variety of classrooms when teacher assistants were sick and spent the rest of her time until the end of June, working in grades 1 and 3 as a mild/moderate teacher assistant. This year, she began work in a grade 1 program with a severely behavioral emotional disordered student, moved to grade 4 to work with the student who had left the previous year (she returned to our school), worked in a grade 5 classroom for a few weeks when the student became independent enough to function without assistance, then began working one-to-one in December with a child diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). With her new experience as a teacher assistant and her youth, she should have a very unique perspective of teacher assistant work.

Of the subjects that have been selected from the secondary school, all three, Lily, Crystal, and Patty, fall into the range of 41 to 50+ years of age. Two of the subjects have been employed in the rural district for more than fifteen years; both have worked in all three levels of school (elementary, junior high, and secondary). The third individual from the secondary sample has been working for ten years as a teacher assistant.

Despite the sampling by convenience (employment in the same rural community as the researcher), “the confidence in common patterns that cut across different programs” (Patton, 1980, p. 105) has been increased “by attempting to increase the diversity or variation in the sample...” (Patton, 1980, p. 102) through diversity in age, experience, and work assignment within the limited number of subjects that will be interviewed.

Permission was requested and granted from the Assistant Superintendent of the district to survey the participants. In addition, each teacher assistant received a letter of consent to participate in the study through interview. The interview subjects had opportunity to confirm and amend the recorded transcripts from the six interviews in order to maintain accuracy and authenticity, to further explain ambiguities, and thereby, lend a reflective note to the process--“the speaker is seen as a subject creating her own history, rather than as an object of research” (Casey, 1992, p. 189). The interview tapes and transcripts remain in the possession of this researcher with any identifying information deleted and pseudonyms applied.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Pathways, Scenic Routes, Trails

It is a sensitive process whereby one meets with individuals to inspect, illuminate, and discuss their work; it is a delicate task that requires an ambiance of value and trust, that incorporates aspects of careful listening, respect, integrity, and patience. For many people, baring their souls, sharing their deep thoughts, dreams and values is dangerous dialogue; the interviewer must approach the exchange with an attitude of extreme privilege and honor for she has been allowed entry into the inner workings of an other's mind, emotions, spirit. Finally, it is crucial that one know something about the details of the work or the topic in order to uncover the layers of knowledge, attitude, and experience within the participants.

Interviews: Pathways

The standardized open-ended question interview format provided an essential and effective framework to manage my novice experience firstly, as an interviewer collecting data and secondly, as researcher in handling both the coding of data and the analysis of such; the standardized questions maintained focus with question wording and the sequence of question delivery. Additionally, the union of the informal-conversational and interview guide format permitted the opportunity to explore and identify, through the individual interpretation of the questions, the respondents' situational variations and similarities with respect to their work. My knowledge and understanding of the scope and parameters involved within the work of teacher assistants further enhanced this latter benefit. I have previously acknowledged the role of consulting teacher and teacher assistant as mirror images; it is this exactitude that has defined my role as both

participant-observer and teacher-researcher in the education of students with diverse learning needs. Furthermore, availing the interview questions to the participants one week prior to the interview seemed to enable thoughtful and insightful responses to the questions; many of them recorded thoughts, situations, concerns, and examples on their questionnaires before the interview and read their responses aloud, as a lead-in to the identification, definition, or delineation for the interpretation of each question. This was an interesting and unintended outcome that allowed me to probe in depth into the foundations of their views, knowledge, and experiences.

A maximum of one hour was the intended length of the audio-taped interviews. However, once the subjects began discussing information so close to their hearts, detailing the intimacy of their work-lives, they frequently extended the interviews from 1 hour to 1.5 or 1.75 hours. An opportunity to be questioned regarding their perspectives seemed to create a natural conversational, dialogue flow, an unlocking of silence and silences that had denied an opportunity to reflect, appreciate, and re-define their role in the education of students with diverse learning needs. The participants were grateful for the opportunity to discuss their views and many, felt this was a useful process that enabled them to review their philosophy, take charge of the direction their lives are unfolding, and appreciate the opportunities they have been afforded through this work.

Molly, Crystal, Judy, and Alexis chose to interview after school in my classroom at the elementary school where I work; a very open, sunny, room with many windows that display a panoramic playground and a wide-open field for soccer and other running activities--recess heaven for children. It is important that the atmosphere in my classroom be warm, welcoming, accepting, safe, and caring; alienated children, parents, teacher assistants, and other adults should feel like they have just walked into the safety and

security of their homes when they walk through my door. Lily preferred the confines of her home; and Patty chose to converse in my home—one of the locations of many of our conversations, the source from which this research began.

Transcribing the Data: Exploring with Words

“Sitting down to make sense out of the pages of interviews and whole files of field notes can be overwhelming. Just dealing with all those pieces of paper can seem like an impossible task.” (Patton, 1987, p. 146)

Transcribing the interviews was an intense labor of love, a desire to understand, and to view the world of work through the perspectives of teacher assistants; 1.5 hours of taped interview became the equivalent of 15 to 20 hours of listening to encode oral words into written communications. Conversations and discussions are interesting forms of information exchanges; people use frequent forms of word-finding and thought-collecting strategies. In the interests of creating a smooth conversational flow, the taped interviews resulted in full transcripts purged of the word-finding and thought-collecting speech mechanisms; pseudonyms were applied to cities, provinces, and other sundry identifiable characteristics to protect the identities of the participants. I provided copies of the transcripts to the participants to read for errors, additions, and other concerns that might deny them voice, authenticity, and perspective from the process.

Initially, I thought it would be possible to listen to the recorded interviews and input the data directly into a word processor, thereby removing a step in the data management process. However, this proved to involve too many conflicting cognitive processes and increased the frustration and length of time that the transcribing consumed; I turned to the tried and tested method of handwriting into journals. Before I began to determine how the data would be handled, I was serendipitously afforded a second reading of the contents

through the simultaneous action of reading of passages while keying the interview data into the word processor of my computer.

By the time I had interviewed my third participant and transcribed the recorded data, I began noticing a link from the recorded interviews to the interweaving of the five fields of theory that I had included in my literature review; interesting bits of information and thoughts sparked divergent thinking, epiphanies, and illumination that validated the choices of literature with which I had flooded my mind. In addition, it was about this time in the course of my evolution as an interviewer, that I began to develop an awareness that I must be careful not to "allow [my] initial interpretations to bias additional data collection. ...[and to] become particularly sensitive to looking for alternative explanations and contrary patterns that would invalidate initial insights." (Patton, 1987, p. 144)

Conveniently though, at the time of this burgeoning awareness, I had finished interviewing the three elementary teacher assistants and was beginning the interview process of the secondary teacher assistants. It was a natural transition to open my mind to the possibilities of variation in data collection and interpretation based simply on the reality of different levels of, and expectations for learning between an elementary and secondary school.

Coding The Data: Map-Reading--Legends

"Reading, reading and once more reading through the data forces the researcher to become familiar with those data in intimate ways." (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.114)

Once the original transcripts were encoded, I made three copies: a master-copy was left unmarred by pen or highlighter; a personal copy was given to the individual participants; and the third copy became my working framework for analyzing, interpreting, and conceptualizing the data. It was on this copy that I first carefully read

the contents penciling notes in the margins, underlining key phrases, and simultaneously writing field notes that represented my insights, questions, or connections to theory.

The analytic process demands a heightened awareness of the data, a focused attention to those data, and an openness to the subtle, tacit undercurrents of social life. Identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together is the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis and one that can integrate the entire endeavor. Through questioning the data and reflecting on the conceptual framework, the researcher engages the ideas and the data in significant intellectual work. (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, pp. 115-116)

As I worked my way through the data with solidified intent to understand, I began to recognize word usage, phrases, and thoughts that illuminated the manner in which the participants viewed their lives, roles, and experiences in working as teacher assistants in the education of students with diverse learning needs. The journey of determining how to code the reams of rich data began with recognizing the emergence of themes, concepts, values, experiences, and ideas. (Bogdan, 1972, pp. 60-62; Patton, 1987, pp. 144-155; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, pp. 226-254)

I thoroughly and carefully read all of the transcripts first using pencil markings to indicate areas of interest. The second reading was united with color-coded highlighters to underline passages that were relative to certain categories. As this process developed, it was interesting to note that some passages were blended with all five highlighter colors. At that point, I felt it would be of greater benefit to describe the participants individually through beliefs, values, experiences, and views—their stories as subjects in their history, and then analyze the data for theoretical connections and situational variations and similarities within and between the subjects.

I became greatly concerned that I would not be equal to the challenge of presenting the interview subjects with the respect, honor, and integrity due to their persons. I was

terrified that I might disfigure or misrepresent their persona. Curiously, once stated aloud, once labeled and identified, I was able to vanquish this fear or reluctance to embark upon the next leg of my pilgrimage. Labeling my difficulty created a solution; the honor is in the intent. The intent is to honor and pay deep attention to the teacher assistant stories in a rewardable labor of love and service on behalf of the students with diverse learning needs who have benefited from their work. Sacrifices of time, love, energy, and resources from these teacher assistants have enabled many of them to re-connect to the world, develop a burgeoning literacy, self-worth, and at-promise possibilities. This work is a covenant for authenticity; I have entered a sacred trust to retell through their words, to make clear perspectives of teacher assistants working with students with diverse learning needs.

Sojourners: The Stories

The challenge is to craft from the interviews, the individual stories of teacher assistants with an eye cast, and an ear tuned, to the integrity of character that is so much a part of their life-essence: their voices, values, and dreams must be clearly ascertained within the narratives.

Lily.

“I love working with kids, I love the flexibility of the hours, liked being home with my kids Easter, Christmas, summer, evenings—it’s been great!”

I interviewed Lily at her home one evening near the beginning of March. The family dog greeted me at the door, “swearing and complaining” about the disruption of his evening at home. Lily’s home is very warm and inviting; it epitomizes the genuine warmth and caring that is a genuine part of her personality. Her living room held a large fireplace, the focal point of the room; a sofa and love-seat are carefully arranged to support and enhance conversations while enjoying the pleasantness of a warm fire

when the weather is inclement. The room contained a variety of small collector figurines on an end table; family pictures on the walls, and candles arranged on the hearth. In front of Lily's large windows were many healthy, large green plants that would lead one to assume, life, sun, and brightness are important components in this household; important components in Lily's life. The existence of the much-loved family pet eased the interview as he frequently came to remind us of his presence throughout our directed conversation.

Lily has been a teacher assistant for seventeen years. She began as a volunteer in a local elementary school. When her son went off to begin school, she decided that she "just did not want to go back at graduation"; she wanted to stay involved and connected to his world. Thus, began a lifetime of working with students, loving kids, loving learning, and loving school—and a dream to be there "pushing her walker through the hall."

Lily's strength as a teacher assistant seems to flow outward from her beliefs and values in the solidity of family. She entered this work as a means to stay connected to her children's lives once they started school, and she was fortuitous enough to work with only one student for twelve years in this profession bonding her opportunity to follow one child through school much like a parent.

For 12 years Lily was a crucial member of a support team essential to guiding success for a student with a sensory impairment where she enjoyed a very close professional relationship with specialists, teachers, and parents of this student. She maintains that his impairment was actually his asset.

Doug [is] a kid who was extremely gifted. This was not a child with any kind of difficulties academically; he had a sensory impairment and a learning disability, so he couldn't read very well. If he had only had a learning disability, he would have been one of the kids at Smoker's Bench; the kids egging houses and scratching cars and getting into trouble. I think he was so fortunate with the services he was provided. If he had just had the horrendous learning disability, do you know how he would have suffered?

Despite the move to working with a larger number of students with diverse learning needs throughout the day Lily, in line with her strong sense of family, works to create a sense of belonging in the students with whom she works.

You need to be warm and caring. You need to have a good sense of humor, a gentle spirit.

Warm, caring, and open, someone who is fun [is] useful to build relationship, to build relationships with kids. You can't be cold and aloof and uncaring and expect much progress. If you show that you are open and you are not all closed-up and to yourself, then [the students] will open-up to you. It's sort of a two-way street--openness, show a bit of yourself and often they'll do the same; at least that's what I've found. I've found [is that] if you're a sour old grump, you're not going to get far.

A bit of gentleness, just a bit of tender caring. You know what kids are like these days; so many of them come from wretched, wretched homes. In fact, case in point, science 24. Yesterday Crystal was saying that kids had to list 15 vegetables they had eaten in the last two days, over the week-end. Some of them didn't list anything that they had eaten. One kid did come up with a pork chop and Crystal wasn't sure which vegetable group that belonged to. Kids don't eat meals today with family; they really don't!

Nobody really cares whether they're fed or watered, whether they have good clothes, no clothes. So I think, gentle and tender, just caring about their needs.

Lily understands the significance of caring first for the basic physical and emotional needs of students with diverse learning needs before they can be open to academic learning. She exhibits a willingness to care and an interest in caring for these children. However, this caring also includes respecting the dignity of students to experience the consequences from a lack of diligence or responsibility to their learning. She respects these children enough to have expectations that they can and will complete their work.

There can be too much [caring]. Last semester there was one young man [who] I was caring more about whether he graduated than he was. I finally had a conversation with him about the beginning of June and said, "I'm investing more and more of my time in this than you are. There's something wrong with this picture. You're 18 you know, and if this is important to you, you're also going to have to start caring."

I think he was a little appalled [with me] because he didn't think I would say anything like that. But I said, "You know, I care about you, but I'm to the point where I'm caring more than you are and there's something wrong here."

I saw a huge change when the diploma exam marks came out about a week [later] and he failed the course I was concerned about. So, now he's back in that same

class with me and is somewhat changed. I think he's taking a little responsibility for himself now.

Sometimes it's easy for me to do everything in my power to help them pass. You know, make up their review-sheets, you do the extra two miles and then they don't bother to take it home or they go and get drunk the night before an exam instead of studying. You kind of get to the end of your rope.

When it becomes important to you [student], let me know, and I'll help you all I can. We did have that conversation and it is making a difference.

Lily offers a good measure of reality coupled with caring, forgiveness, and an expectation for excellence; a recipe that most students with diverse learning needs cannot resist. However, if these students are denied their opportunities for learning, Lily's motherly-protectiveness rises; she finds a way to intervene and provide particular strategies or supports necessary to assist literacy in reading the world.

We're seeing that right now [potential for great destruction]. I lost it last week. It was Thursday and in high school, you're not sure who's going to drop [subjects in the first two weeks of class]. So after about three weeks we kind of know who [students with diverse learning needs] is there and you can get your assistants [into the classes] where you need them. I had dropped into a classroom where there was a full-time and a half-time assistant [working]. They had 13 targeted kids in that room—no one neither of the assistants had taken notes. Now this is a social studies class. What do you do if the teacher is doing notes? You ought to be taking them! Nobody was providing for any of the kids and I lost it!

These people [teacher assistants] know better. So, I hauled out the IPP's [individual program plans] and said, "Excuse me, but it says here: Little Stinky gets full copied notes. What am I missing here?"

So there is a great potential to just bugger-off and not do the job. That is one of my frustrations in this job right now; seeing how it should be done, doing it how it should be done, and seeing that others are making like a monkey and doing a whole lot of nothing.

[Kids first], isn't that why we're there?

Lily was incensed by the denial for the students of their voice, power, and opportunities for learning when her fellow teacher assistants did not fulfill their obligations to the students. Is this a conscious action by her fellow teacher assistants to keep the oppressed down? Does this attitude exist with the teaching staff in their interactions with teacher assistants?

There are barriers to Lily attaining her best work performance, and despite her adept skills at reading the world, she can still experience frustration. One particular difficulty is when

a classroom teacher feels extremely threatened having another adult in the classroom and is unwilling to share responsibility when working with the children. Maybe they think we're sitting there judging their teaching or being judgmental somehow, criticizing what they're doing. I think that's personality with some people who are insecure. People who are secure with themselves and [with] what they are doing, are not nearly as intimidated having someone in the classroom as a teacher who is insecure and doesn't have a wonderful self-concept.

When teachers need to maintain their role as sole authority and director of the classroom, not only teacher assistants, but also students may lose out on opportunities for learning. When the teacher assistant is not allowed to see the marks earned by the students with whom she works, she may not have opportunity realistically, to assess the efficacy of the learning strategies she uses. Silencing in this case, empowers a distinct minority, the teacher, while disempowering and alienating visible majority, the teacher assistant and students with diverse learning needs.

[To work with many different personalities] you adjust accordingly for every teacher you work with. It becomes a really neat tap-dance that you do. I worked with a teacher who will not let the assistants find out what marks the kids are getting on exams and assignments: it's the marks-book and it's hers and nobody will ever look in it. So that becomes a trick, because you're working with students but you have no idea what their marks are until report cards come out. But you just do what you can and you do what you're allowed to do. Some teachers are uncomfortable in letting you get right in there and seeing how kids are doing and helping them accordingly; some don't want you moving around while they're lecturing—so you sit back and make sure your kids are at least awake; some are very comfortable having you circulate, perhaps not while they're lecturing, but when the work has been assigned.

Lily seems to be super-sensitized to reading the world; she is quite aware of and supportive of the clear difference between a classroom teacher and teacher assistant. She does not seem to be resisting the demarcation of the roles of the teacher and the teacher

assistant, but rather the denial of opportunity for at-risk students and adults.

I'm not as competent as the classroom teacher is in any of the subject areas. I may have been through a number of classes and know the material fairly well, but I don't want to ever be viewed as someone who is equal, as far as the knowledge or the ability to impart, to the classroom teacher. I don't think I am, but I can certainly assist the kids once they've been given an assignment. I don't think I'm on par; one of us has five years of university in a particular subject area and it's not me.

Lily's strengths as a teacher assistant originate from her foundation beliefs and values in solidity of family and relationships. A corollary of this in respect to a moral community of learning excellence, lies in her work ethic and abject dismay at her co-workers disregard for strategies and interventions that would assist the learning of students with diverse learning needs. She is very cognizant of what makes an effective leader and that the consulting teacher is responsible for determining the work climate and attitudes of the teacher assistant team.

I've worked with an exceptional consulting teacher for a very long time, who after she has been at student services meetings, would always come back and say, these are the areas we discussed; these are the areas that might change; here is something really exciting; there's a conference coming up we'll send you to that.

You need a consulting teacher who understands the directives from Alberta Learning for special education for these children and how to implement them. When he has to look into a book every time there's a question, because he doesn't know, you're in deep trouble.

You need strong interpersonal skills; you cannot be a person who would be best working in a little office punching numbers—can't be! You need to be able to talk to people; you need to listen; you need to be willing to take advice and suggestions from people; you need to love kids.

I think you need to have a clear knowledge of what your job is; if you don't, you're already handicapped.

A consulting teacher [needs a] clear sense of direction and knows what he's doing. A strong program is strong because of the consulting teacher and a good staff under her.

Lily has high expectations for work performance for herself and her fellow teacher assistants.

We have an assistant who has a highly inflated view of her own importance. She has insinuated herself into the good books with the staff by volunteering and doing 15 other things; she's running concessions for sport events.

I love Chris [consulting teacher] to bits, but she is accustomed to having assistants such as Crystal, Patty, Tammy, and myself. If she were in a coma, [we] would be doing what we're supposed to be doing. The last year and a half, she's had two and sometimes three, depending on which way the wind blows, assistants who just about need someone checking up on them full-time; they're just buggering around, doing squat!

It's just very, very frustrating for a number of reasons. [For one] I guess my sense of fairness [is compromised], which sounds pathetic, because whatever everybody else is doing should not matter. But the fact that I'm doing what I'm supposed to, should be the only thing that matters. But unfortunately, I'm human and I resent seeing someone else getting away with doing very little. Seemingly, there are no checks or balances applied. It also frustrates me, as I said, when there was a teacher assistant and a half in a classroom, and nobody bothered to provide notes to children who are so needy.

I have to question myself: am I annoyed because they're getting away with something or not working as hard as I am? Part of it is that, and that's not good. And, it is not good for the kids at all! I get really indignant. Add to that a lot of the teaching staff—if they think we're stupid and don't know what goes on, they're wrong.

I feel that our position [as teacher assistants, professionals] sometimes becomes somewhat of a mockery, and I resent that because I feel that I work darn hard.

Lily's needs as an adult learner were readily fulfilled during the time she worked with Doug, with appropriate resources and expertise personnel, respect, and responsibility; she had a terrific arrangement with a professional disabilities organization.

I was left on my own and I'm not complaining about that at all. It worked really well for me and worked well for him. I was given a lot of responsibility and I quite enjoyed it. I telephone-conferenced [with the organization] really often.

The professional organization that supported Lily with her work with Doug entered into a mentoring relationship with her; the consultative team and other support personnel would have shared their knowledge and strategies, liberally with her, since she was solely responsible for managing his learning assistance. However, when she joined the remainder of the student services team two years ago, Lily has experienced a confusing dichotomy: a consulting teacher who continues to engage in mentoring activities and another who not only "doesn't have a heart for children, but is not willing to listen and [provide] direction [like] I've been accustomed to at least since last year."

It was almost an adjustment for me to be expected to be part of a team. I do like having the meetings, talking about the kids, sharing; you know, I'm having a real problem with little George and someone else will say, well did you know that his mom died last week and that's why he's acting like a little jerk? So, sharing ideas and strategies is really useful and helpful. It's been interesting, a whole new learning experience for me.

Lily applies the same skills of reading the world to both students and teachers. She exhibits a willingness and openness of approach with teachers that signifies a real desire to improve her skills. This is the same form of relationship that she builds with students; respect, values, and dignity.

You find out pretty quickly what a teacher wants. Because I'm a fairly open person, I find people respond quite well to me. I kind of get the information that I need. Teachers will tell me, but if I just sat there and didn't say anything except, what do you want, and then clammed-up, I don't know how much feedback I'd get from some people.

I'll say to every teacher I've ever worked with, if you notice anything that I'm doing that makes you uncomfortable or you'd like me to change or you think I could be better, please let me know.

I'll certainly be open to any suggestions they think I need to do.

Lily's advice to teachers about teacher assistants derives from her beliefs and values in the family structure and relationships.

Try to view teacher assistants as a partner, someone who has the best interests of the child in mind, someone who's not there to judge their teaching or to criticize or to interfere, but to help facilitate the kids' learning.

[View us with] a wealth of experience and a wealth of knowledge, because of years of service—it's worth something, listen to what we have to say.

Interns are in charge of their classroom and it is their responsibility to do the teaching, but we can provide them with a lot of help and a lot of assistance.

We know the children, we know their learning difficulties, we know their needs—listen to us, it'll work.

I'm thinking about my job; thinking about the things I really appreciate about it thinking about the things that frustrate me about it and why they make me frustrated and I appreciate [it] again. Ninety-five percent of my day is spent as it should be, but that five percent is a killer. It's a killer! [Lily, 2001]

Molly.

“I really enjoy the job. I just like the kids. [I like] the challenge [and] the moment when they know they catch onto something.”

Molly and I sat down to interview in my classroom on a Monday afternoon in February. Earlier in the day, during lunch-time in my classroom where Molly and a few other teacher assistants often sit with children and eat their lunches. Judy, another teacher assistant, had walked into my room and opined about the questions for the interviews. Molly, who had been given her questions and interview consent-form a week before worriedly chimed in, “there are questions?” We all laughed, including Molly when she realized that she had not even opened the envelope I had given her. One of the reasons I had invited Molly to interview was her comfortable relationship with me, her trust in discussing our work roles and our lives outside of school; however, it is precisely this same trust that could be an area of concern.

Molly was my first interview and we were both ill-at-ease with the process. We sat at one of the larger hexagonal tables in my classroom looking outside to slightly falling snow and a panoramic view of children relishing the daily freedom that ends each school day; some cavorting with their friends, others dawdling to delay their arrival home—all budding explorers discovering the infinities and limits of their immediate worlds.

Molly is developing critical consciousness through her desire and focus on doing what is right for students. She wants to connect with alienated children that exist on the cultural fringe. She is fascinated and drawn into hypotheses of children’s behaviors, motivation for learning, and interpretations of their environments. “It’s interesting to see how different things are for some kid. It’s interesting to see how they perceive [things]. They just think so differently sometimes [and] how they react to things--it’s

enlightening.” She is intrigued by their thoughts, the questions they ask, and the answers they provide to questions asked. This is an individual who enjoys being in a school.

Threads of moral community are apparent through Molly’s desire to do what is right because it is the right thing to do:

I’m at my best [when I] know that everybody is there for the good of the kid, regardless of whether everybody agrees on what is going on or not; everybody is there to do what is best for the student and [I work best] as long as everybody is cooperative and willing to do whatever needs to be done.

Molly has an attitude of tolerance, respect, and dignity for students with diverse learning needs.

Frank got right up tight because he moved—Mrs. Foss had moved his desk. He freaked out and gave her a dirty look. Mrs. Foss told Frank, you can go up to the gym last. He just wasn’t going to have it. I stayed back and told him that he needed to calm down; he couldn’t go to gym until he was calm. Then he got angrier, of course, and cried and screamed, and was demanding, saying, I’m going in! He freaked out in the hallway, and I just let him cry. I said, well, if you want to act like a grade one student having a fit, go right ahead. When you’re ready to act like a grade two student, then maybe you can go back in to the gym. He didn’t like that, and retorted, why don’t you act like a baby! So, I told him he couldn’t go into the gym until he calmed down and even then, he would have to go and ask Mrs. Foss if he could get back in. Eventually he calmed himself down and went back in. He was fine. You can’t do much more than take care of him that way.

Molly withstood his emotional barrage stoically, with respect, in order that Frank might acquire self-control, cultural literacy for handling his emotions and needs in a safe, humane manner rather than continuing his violent, aggressive, and disrespectful behaviors that would, in the long run, maintain and deepen his isolation and disempowerment. She respected his human-ness to know that he must experience the pain, frustration, and consequences of his actions so that he can take responsibility for his decisions. She stayed with him during his isolation and remained there to guide him through to the other side of the pain where he might learn and grow in his knowledge of more appropriate

behaviors that could enable control over his life; she cared enough to expect him to learn a different, more humane way of interacting with others. Molly insured that Frank was not left alone and isolated both in the immediate instance and unfolding circumstances of the incident, but also through facilitating his acquisition of alternate behaviors that could help him take control over his life choices and enable him to develop respect and value in others. It is through the breaking down of barriers (emotionally dysfunctional behavior) and consistent expectations for humane and ethical interactions from which communities of excellence for learning and behavior will emerge.

Could it be that Molly is merely reflecting the manner in which she would like to be treated as a teacher assistant? Is she modeling freedom of choice for decision-making and responsibility for actions taken?

Molly not only wants to feel useful and valued in her work, but also access opportunity where she can gain experience and knowledge. In addition, she needs to earn a decent wage to support herself and consequently, works another job after school; she is currently pursuing a third job as a relief worker in group-homes for teens in custody.

Molly seems to crave experience and variety. She has experienced many different assignments within her first year working as a teacher assistant: "I've been all over, everywhere but grade 6." The behavioral and learning needs exhibited by these students range from severe emotional and behavioral disabled students in grades 2, 3, and 4, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), and severe emotional behavioral concerns concomitant with significant learning disabilities. Molly is seeking to acquire knowledge and skills. She is also eager to develop understanding of others' perspectives:

I really enjoyed [the different assignments]; it's not the same, ordinary, not mundane. It's not the same thing everyday. It's like you move from one experience and you learn skills and then you go to the next experience. It was a tougher experience because you had to learn more skills and learn how to forget maybe,

what you learned before, or maybe, use what you learned before, or change at any spur of the moment.

As an adult learner, Molly wants opportunity to “discuss problems [and ask] what should I do about this or what do you think is going on with that?” She wants to develop a repertoire of strategies, skills, and knowledge that will help her develop expertise.

I know there are instances where I could have done things better or discussed it with you [researcher/consulting teacher], like you could have done this or this would have worked. Just to have somebody to say, hey, what if you tried this? [To] have the opportunity to discuss why you thought [this]. I’ve never dealt with children who do off-the-wall things. What am I going to do better next time, or what am I going to do if I get into this situation if it got out-of-hand this time, how am I going to stop that next time?

Molly would like to work to her best performance whenever and wherever possible; communication is a large component for establishing job expectations and the direction of Molly’s learning. She can become quite anxious in new situations and prefers to ask questions because she does not know what people are expecting. The desire for improvement resides within Molly’s strength to rise to excellence in her work; she needs to feel valuable which is equivalent in the classroom, to being useful. In a classroom where there are children with diverse learning needs requiring assistance, it can be quite difficult to feel useful when the teacher controls everything.

In Beverly’s room, you’re just sitting there because she’s done all the photocopying for the entire year already and it’s September. There is nothing to do because she’s the teacher and she marks everything. You know you don’t need to check any words in books or anything because she’ll do all of that in this unimaginable, organized fashion. There’s just nothing to be done, so you just sit there; you don’t want to move; if you start talking to the kids...it’s a weird atmosphere in there.

I knew for math, the kids weren’t picking up on it, but the minute you try to help, you kind of feel like, geez, I shouldn’t be doing this because she’s going to get uptight with me. Maybe I’m making her feel like she’s not doing her job because they [students] don’t get it.

Molly is denied the very substance of her work; she could be facilitating the learning needs of the students with diverse learning needs, but the teacher silences her

value through maintaining the power in the classroom as held primarily through her authority as the teacher. Molly could do so much for these students—simply working through the individual sub-tasks involved in math, reading, writing, and thinking can fuse the learning connections for students with diverse learning needs. As an adult learner, Molly is denied respect for her knowledge, experience, and observations. She is de-valued through the teacher's refusal to include her as a valuable learning facilitator and consequently, Molly will likely be unable to rise to her potential as a teacher assistant in this classroom. She will not have opportunity to develop her skills as an observer and innovator for learning. What is perhaps even sadder, is that the students who could benefit from the individual attention, explanations, and interactions with Molly are denied their at-promise possibilities—"you feel more useful when you're doing something with the student."

In contrast, a teacher who acknowledges the role of a teacher assistant as an equally valuable member of the educational team opens up possibilities for all learners, all people—children and adults—in the classroom.

In Anne's room there's always something to do. At anytime, any of those kids can come to any of the teacher assistants in the room and say, I need help with this or can you fix this for me. Once that task is done, they know they have something else to do; there is always something to go on [to]. If they have to leave the room, that's fine. She'll say, these people are going to go back with this teacher assistant.

Molly equates this quality with freedom. Anne seems to be quite comfortable sharing the learning and relationships that are fundamental to and within the classroom. She is able to respectfully communicate the differences in the roles of teacher and teacher assistant, yet is very aware of the importance of relationships by all people in her classroom with her students.

Molly is open to receive whatever guidance and direction she can obtain that

would help her develop her potential not only as a teacher assistant, but also as a caring human being. One must constantly respect, nurture, and engender positive moral growth in Molly as she seems highly impressionable and willing to learn from those with greater work and life experience--wonderful assets. Institution of strong moral and ethical guidance are crucial when facilitating the development of an idealistic, enthusiastic, eager individual. Here, as with students with diverse learning needs, the potential for great good rides on the same axis as the potential for great harm; one can support the positive development of an individual interested in re-connecting with alienated children and youth, or one can quickly destroy the potential in such a person, thereby, creating another disempowered, isolated, and de-valued human being. The role of the consulting teacher as a moral leader genuinely interested in excellence in herself and her team is crucial here. Value and relationships are key factors for Molly. For her, trust, availability, and reciprocity would seem to be components of value and relationship:

being able to go and talk with consulting teachers, just at anytime. I can discuss problems or issues, or have questions or being able to talk to other teacher assistants who have worked with the student. You guys [consulting teachers] are very open to advice: it's much easier to be able to come and say [things or discuss stuff]. I still have my own opinion, but at any kind of cross-road, I [can] come and say, what do you think, or I see this...

Molly feels quite comfortable asking teachers, teacher assistants, or the consulting teachers for resources, strategies, or different viewpoints:

between the two of us we can come up with something that will work, two heads are better than one. The biggest thing for me is just being able to talk with the people and have access to information. [Initial job-shadowing with] the person who has been there before, [the opportunity to] have somebody there to watch what goes on and to find what works and what doesn't work, and how they say what works and what doesn't work [words, cadence, phrases], how reactions occur and what kinds of things set people off. Just to see an array of behaviors and situations [interactions between students and adults] and what happened in certain incidents and what kind of role each person plays so that you know you're not doing the wrong thing, you know exactly what goes on in the run-of-the-mill so that you don't miss anything so that you're meeting people's expectations.

Molly's advice to teachers about teacher assistants would seem to arise from her desire to have the same qualities of respect, care, dignity, and human-ness that she provides for the students with whom she works.

Know what your boundaries are and what you should be doing. We're not here to take your job or to diminish what you're doing. Let's just all do what's good for all the kids. [For some teachers] it's almost like you're afraid to let us do anything because you are the teacher, really it's not that I want to teach kids. I don't want to do all the things you want to do, but I want to know what [the students] should be doing. Communication is the end-all. If I can't talk to anybody [students or teachers] because I'm going to get my head snapped-off or you're not going to agree, or you're going to cause a problem and disagree, that's all going to cause tension. After that, it will probably only get worse because then that person will probably always be on guard.

It's enlightening, it still is every day there is something you learn or you see about a different kid. One minute everything is going good and the next thing, you're like in another warped world. [Molly, 2001]

Alexis.

"I enjoy seeing the joy in their faces and the excitement when they finally accomplish something that they think they can't do."

It was a sunny Tuesday in February when Alexis and I sat down to interview in my classroom. Outside the windows one could see children with apple-rosy-cheeks, puffs of breath exploding in clouds of conversation and joy, embracing the end of the school day. The tone at the beginning and throughout the interview was that of trust and collegiality.

Alexis' intuitive grasp of critical pedagogy is eminent throughout her conversation in values that extol learning and accomplishments. She had difficulty in school and frequently felt that she was not capable of learning and thus, feels compelled to re-address her own loss through insuring possibilities for students with diverse learning needs.

I think I enjoy working with the kids because I was a struggling student. I was

the one who sat and nobody would help me. I was that little girl that sat in front of the class and said, “Teacher, I don’t understand this.” And she said, “Well, that’s too bad!”

Alexis translates her experience into strengths, into openings for learning for students with diverse learning needs; opportunities for learning through an “ability to talk to students, not at them. You have to show the caring and compassion and interest with them [to] help them get their goals and make them feel successful.” Alexis feels a great sense of fulfillment when she is able to engender success in the students with whom she works.

I like to think that maybe I can make a difference. If I can make Craig feel better just knowing he is good in math, he might struggle with the language arts part, but we can work on it, he won’t be excelling in it, but he can pass. I’m hoping that Craig, when he sees this next report [that] we can get a lot more out of him with this [support]—that he’s going to be able to look at it, (I wish he would have kept the one he did last week, instead of throwing it away. I would like to have let him read the first one and said, OK, now read the second one. Which do you think is better?), so that he can see the comparison of what he did do [and] what he was capable of doing; so that he gains that confidence in himself. I think what they [students] need to do is see the small accomplishments.

Alexis works very hard to unearth independence, recognition of ability, and perseverance in the students with whom she works; she frequently provides opportunity and decision-making to students with diverse learning needs. Alexis seems to sense the utmost importance of learning to read the word for these students, and assumes this as her personal mission.

There are a lot of kids especially in Price’s class [to whom I] really need to slow down and explain [their work] to them, because I’m not capable of taking out half of the class to re-explain it to them and go one-on-one with them. I wish that I could have more time working with the kids that I know need help.

There is a sense of time lost for Alexis—valuable time that would provide her opportunity to support literacy both in reading the world (honest effort, accomplishment, and responsibility) and reading the word (academic literacy and achievement).

[Some] teachers are disorganized and a lot of it's 15 minutes of just organizing the class: getting them to where they should be, a lot of times, it's sharing, things like that. But, I don't think that when I walk into that classroom, (like into Mr. Byam's classroom—I go in there for spelling [and] those kids have their spelling in arm and they're waiting at the door to go), I think what they need to do is know that I'm coming for math. If those [students] are the ones I'm working with, have them ready so that when I come into the classroom, we're not wasting 15 minutes. Because...boy, that 15 minutes can make a great big difference.

Alexis becomes very frustrated when her ability and opportunity to facilitate literacy in students with diverse learning needs is denied. She strives to develop a community of learning excellence through her commitment to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

I've been told, don't waste your time with Penny. She's not coded, so don't waste your time—there are others who are coded that need you.
Well, I see this little girl that's struggling with division. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to turn my back and say, "You're not coded!"²
Well, I've been told—wasting my time! So what I've done is told her, at lunch time, it's my time, he [teacher] can't say anything [about] what I do with my recesses or lunch time. If you [Penny] want to come down and get help, then I will give you help.
She needed help. So that was that!

Alexis is quite aware of a division of power for students and adults, a hierarchy in the school. Is this story a subtle reminder that only a few students will survive to rise to the top of the class? Is Penny not receiving sufficient recognition or support from her teacher because she does not demonstrate the behaviors for success that this teacher values? Where will she learn them, particularly if her family does not have the knowledge or skills to transmit this literacy?

Paul doesn't have a spelling book. I have to run off his spelling units because the teacher doesn't think to get the spelling units done.
There's another one in Price's class—he lost his spelling book, so instead of getting him another spelling book, I'm running his off. Two days went by and I wasn't in for spelling. He came up to me and said, "Mrs. Bright, I don't have a spelling unit."

² The implication is that since the student was not coded as mild/moderate learning disability according to Alberta Learning standards, she does not qualify for extra assistance, and therefore, success or failure is a result of a lack of diligence to learning on her part.

Well the teacher didn't take it upon himself to make up a spelling unit for that child. So two days of spelling has been gone and I'm trying to make up time.

Is this silencing intentional or does it arise from a de-valuation of those who are different from what a teacher believes valued in society? Perhaps the student misplaces his work, forgot it at home, or does not understand the work and is afraid to ask for help. In a short while, this behavior might be perceived by the teacher as a lack of interest, diligence, and, or motivation to learn. The student then experiences greater denial of voice and presence through the teacher's focus on students who present with greater motivation, organization, and interest in the processes of learning. It could become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the teacher views the student as incapable and not worth the effort of invested time. The student, feeling this subtle message of de-valuation, turns either inward and sabotages further success with greater withdrawal and powerlessness or outward and commits actions harmful to the safe learning environment of his peers.

Alexis has experienced this same silencing when she joined our staff after school in late September.

I believe you took me down to Mrs. Humphrey's room. I'm not sure if she was even in the classroom. When I walked into her classroom, she wasn't there. When she walked in, she walked right by me and did not say hello; did not say welcome—just looked at me like, why are you here? The other aide in the classroom walked right by me [and] did not introduce herself. I was left standing there, thinking, hmmm! Am I here or am I not?

And there were a few situations that were the same; that when I walked into the classroom, they [teachers and teacher assistants] looked at me and did not come over to introduce themselves or say welcome to the school.

You know, sometimes you have to just jump in with both feet, I guess, but it takes the wind out of your sails when you come and nobody acknowledges that you're there or even that we want you here.

[Comfort, value, and welcome could have been more satisfactorily proffered to Alexis through] a buddy system. If one of the other aides has been there for awhile could take you under their wing and say, "This is where this is; and that's where that is." Just the little things, things that I know are routine, probably for everybody and everybody [else] knows the routine except for the new person. You don't realize there is a meeting here or that you need to be looking on this board for this information and that board for that information; so that you are on top of things.

Is there a tentativity with the teacher assistant staff when a new person joins the team? Do they feel threatened with the arrival of a new individual? Are they concerned about their placement in the hierarchy of the school; is there a hegemonic microcosm?

Alexis' desire to share in the development of a learning community of excellence is clearly heard through her committed interest in team-work with parents, teacher, principal, and supervisor. Essential to this teamwork is "consistency, because I don't think that it's fair for me to be expecting [a certain quality or quantity of work from] kids when I'm working with them outside the classroom and for the teacher to have completely different expectations of them." Alexis frequently feels that there is insufficient time to assist students in ways that will result in significant gains.

Billy and Paul don't have enough [support] time because I'm only working [in there] in the afternoons. If there are things that have to be done that they're behind in [from] the mornings, then give me time in the afternoon—don't make them sit in meaningless things in the classroom.

When I'm working with six kids in Price's class and trying to make sure that they all understand how to divide and we only have 35 minutes in which to do it, maybe sometimes even 20 minutes, it's really hard to give each one the one-on-one so that I know that they're understanding what they're trying to do. Sometimes you just need more time.

This frustration with a lack of time and a lack of direction or vision of identified goals for the students, causes a great dilemma for Alexis.

The teacher has to decide what [is] more important—getting the spelling and math done like he's told me—one minute he's telling me we don't want them to have any homework, so then that means I have to use my afternoons to do the homework. We can't be wasting our time in social and science—it's not going to be an important thing. We have to use our time wisely.

[Great irritation and frustration results from a] lack of guidance from the teacher, not knowing plans, lack of support, lack of resources in some areas, lack of control on the teacher's part.

Imagine how this feels to an individual like Alexis who views learning as a sacred process, academic accomplishments as an ultimate honor, and consistency coupled

with responsibility as an integral right and component of education.

I see their success as my ability to bring out the best in them. My job is to figure out how [the student] can learn it [and if this is not successful it is] a failure on my part to get across to them what needed to be learned. I figure if this way wasn't working, it was up to me to find another way to make it easy for them to attain that [success].

Alexis views her role in the educational process with the students as a member of a team.

You have two people to play the game and we're playing a game where I can't do anything by myself and they sometimes can't do things by themselves; we have to be able to do it together. I get anxious when I walk into a situation and I see that nothing is getting accomplished. because I guess, I know there is so much that has to be done.

Alexis is continually searching for opportunity to acquire knowledge that can help her develop greater knowledge and skill in her work as a teacher assistant.

Co-workers who are willing to share experiences as well as ideas, materials, and viewpoints [are valuable]. [I] learn more by seeing and actually getting into it and by feeling my way around; observing and watching how the others are dealing with things. I watch how you [researcher] are dealing with the students in here. I ask: How did you deal with this situation before? What works? What doesn't work? What works for the ones that you're working with? I'm having trouble with this, what concept do you think...?

I want to be able to come to you and say, "I have this problem." Then [for] you to say, "Yeah, I remember seeing that...now let me think about it and I will come up with what it is." Then once I know that that's there, like the stuff that I'm carrying now. [I can get it when I need it]. But, if you would hand all that stuff to [me], it's too overwhelming!

Alexis seems to appreciate freedom to innovate strategies and techniques that she acquires from observing others work with students with diverse learning needs.

I have learned different little tricks by watching how some of the teachers, how some of the good teachers get across to the kids. Then I take that with me and say, OK, well this didn't work, but maybe this one will work. [I] try it and see if this picture looks different, we'll get something different out of it. I'm still learning. You always have to be open to things.

A mentoring relationship can facilitate a great part of learning from others; reciprocity, communication, direction, and guidance between mentor and mentee is

valued. Alexis is an experienced woman in both living life and through raising a family. She prefers whole group meetings held as a student-services team every two weeks where an opportunity to share accomplishments and celebrations is provided. She recognizes her need to have a room where she's "free to talk [or] get advice from somebody else on a situation;" a safe place and opportunity for sharing "experiences and [offering guidance] because there are a lot of things that we come up against that I've never had to deal with before and I sometimes don't know what to do." Lastly, communication is essential to successful mentoring relationships.

I think when you're communicating with people, like when I'm talking to you [researcher] or when I'm talking with Andrea [another consulting teacher] she'll say, "Oh, I have this, try this..." If you don't have the communication, you're not going to find out what's available out there. Basic communication is the opener.

On-the-job training for Alexis emerges from both her requirements as an adult learner and as a partner in a mentoring relationship with not just the consulting teacher or classroom teacher, but also fellow teacher assistants. This individual so highly values purpose, meaning, and accomplishment that she readily seeks out ways to improve her skills as a teacher assistant. Alexis finds great value in her teacher assistant co-workers when they "share some of [their] experiences [to discover] what we should and shouldn't be doing." She actively seeks new information, support for her interventions, and shares both her failures and successes in a search for promising practice.

Alexis' advice to teachers about teacher assistants parallels her interaction style with students with diverse learning needs.

Respect us as co-workers and somewhat equals. Respect us. Some teachers think because we don't have the education and the paper that we are a little lower than what they are. Yes, you have that paper, but if you didn't have an aide in the class, how much work would you get done with all your students if we weren't there to help you? How frustrated would you go home at nighttime? How much work would actually get accomplished in your classroom?
Sometimes teachers look at us as a lower, not just a lower level, but a lower

occupation. I know I'm on a different level than what teachers are. I know that there is a group of teachers and there's a group of teacher assistants; there will always be more or less, a two-tier system.

[I want to be seen as] somebody who is there to benefit the students; somebody there to help those who you [teacher] don't have time to be working with. I realize that when you are standing up there in front of 25, 30 kids and you've got some who are having problems, you can't get around to helping everybody. That's what we're there for, so that [you] can be helping those, who if they're the ones who are going further ahead, keep them going further ahead while we help those who are struggling. If it's vice versa, if you want us to help those ones who are going ahead and reading ahead while you help those who are struggling, so be it. If that's how you want it to be, we're there to benefit the class. There are things that we are capable of doing.

Give us the chance and see what we can do.

So I helped her draw a straight line and I showed her how to measure and the look in her eyes—like she thought she'd finally learned how to do something. It was so exciting and all I did was teach her how to draw a line. When I see those kids learning things—it's exciting to see the joy in their eyes and the surprise in their eyes when they finally figure out that they're able to do something. [Alexis, 2001]

Crystal.

"I think you have to love kids and you have to love learning and you have to be relational.

You can't come in and do the book thing."

I had not met Crystal before the interview and was concerned about establishing trust and rapport as quickly as possible. As it turned out, my concerns were unfounded. We introduced ourselves in my school foyer. As we walked down the hallway to my classroom, she apologized about being late; I replied, that I was delighted she had come. Somehow or other, we were quite comfortable with each other right from the beginning—a natural conversational style evolved as I began the dialogue by offering Crystal a synopsis of what I was researching. As the sun warmed and melted the snow outside my classroom, time evolved into words.

Crystal has been a teacher assistant upwards of ten years. She was educated as a

teacher when one could certificate with a two-year program. When she married and moved away from her home province, provincial guidelines accepted her certificate, but would not credit her two years of experience; she was required to return to university for a third year of learning. Crystal did not feel comfortable leaving the security of her new home:

I was twenty years old and I knew no one and it would have meant leaving the one person in the province I knew. So, I had children and did tutoring through school for some handicapped kids and just kind of dabbled in teacher assistant [work], did some volunteer work. I got hired as a librarian and from then on, I've been pretty much steadily employed as a teacher assistant.

Perhaps because Crystal views the world of education through the lenses of a teacher, since this was initially the foundation of her practice, she values freedom to do what she senses necessary to engender success in the students with whom she works. In a previous junior high setting, she had opportunity to develop her skills and knowledge as a teacher assistant.

I was in a rather unique setting. We ran a pullout program, but the kids did the academic subjects in our classroom and then option classes, they were integrated. It wasn't a true "pullout" because they were integrated, but they had a safe (it was more of a homeroom) situation. We were able to adapt curriculum to their level and I think it was an ideal situation for those kids because it was pre-vocational. The teacher I worked with was amazing. [He] gave me lots of responsibility and lots of rein to do things. We also did job skills.

We had kids who did their math, reading, science, and social—grade 7 to 9 in one room. They kind of shifted in and out, as their option schedule demanded.

We had a kitchen in the back where we ran a catering business and we had a shop behind it, where we ran carpentry and furniture refinishing. The students learned about cash flow, working to dead line and quality of workmanship. [Those are] the things they learned in our classroom. Then they would go out and do the things like cooking. They mixed and they loved it. They took some responsibility too.

They had a safe retreat to go to and they did. It was a great situation. That was one of the things I hated to leave there.

[He] was a great teacher. He knew how to handle the kids and that helps as an assistant, a lot—to have somebody competent, knowledgeable, and willing to give you freedom to do—this is your area, you do it; when you need help, let me know; if you don't, carry on. It was so good, I really felt like I had my niche.

Crystal had opportunity to develop her expertise and skills as a teacher assistant in this program. She was valued as an adult at-promise and awarded responsibility, guidance, and support to not only facilitate her development, but also to reproduce this in the students who accessed the learning community.

Crystal has experienced silenced powerlessness as a teacher assistant.

I worked with two teachers last semester. One of whom I could go in and if there were tests sitting on her desk and the key was there and she was teaching, I would mark her multiple choice questions. (You know, you'd have to be kind of not too intelligent to not be able to do that). It's a pretty easy job. I could do that and know with confidence that if she left them on her desk, I was free to do that. If there were tests to be marked, I could enter them into her mark-book, open it up, and look at it. The next class, I would go into, I worked with a teacher [of which] I have never seen her mark-book. I have never handled a test; that makes it hard to do my job. It's just how she functions.

I have to go from one room to the next and not do any of the things that I could do there. That's a little frustrating, but it also did make it more difficult to work with those kids because I [didn't] have as clear a grasp of where they [students] were. I was a little more tentative in there about what I could and could not do because there just wasn't the freedom to kind of resolve it.

Denial of voice occurs for this teacher assistant through preventing her opportunity for developing effective learning strategies and interventions for the students. How can a teacher assistant determine if the strategies she uses with students with diverse learning needs are useful or successful if she does not have opportunity to view the marks they receive on the assignments and tests for which she provides assistance?

Crystal values learning but understands that "you have to be able to connect with some of those kids [to show that] you are human." She recognizes that often there are barriers to learning for students; barriers based on the cold, hard reality of their lives.

You look at some of these kids, and you think, my goodness, there are so many other things going on in their lives—what do co-sine and sine really matter? [Crystal worked with a student once who suffered a stroke during surgery]. We developed a very close relationship because she was obviously very emotionally uprooted [and] didn't have a lot of home support. Lots of times we did lots of other discussing aside from the math that we were supposed to be doing. We had fun; we went out to stores and worked on stuff and that was good. [We] did some reading

together, but more developed a relationship and [I] just kind of supported her through [it]. She ended up moving away at the end of that; it was a one semester job. She had a rough time. We talked about her laying there and her body not doing what it wanted. She said, "Why do I want to get drunk again?" [The town she lived in] was a big drinking town. "Because you know, I didn't like that and really, that's what I'm experiencing here, too [partial paralysis from the stroke]. So a lot of that, kind of mom-stuff, because her mom was not around. I saw her a few years later, just bumped into her at a big youth conference—it was neat to see her.

Breaking down barriers and offering relationship, support, and voice to students with diverse learning needs can sometimes encourage these children to change a self-destructive course of action into a self-constructive mission.

Crystal values the creation of a learning community of excellence evident in her commitment, desire for recognition and:

input into decisions [so] you don't feel like a pawn [and to] feel included as part of the working team. It's an atmosphere, like I'm part of the team, give me something valuable to do, something that matters; working with kids directly and trusting me with something that is not step-by-step-by-step and saying, "This is exactly what you do and don't dare ever deviate from it." I guess it's just valuing your judgment and saying, "This is what I want done, here is the child—see what you can do," rather than, for the first 10 minutes this is what you will do, for the next 5 minutes, you will do this, and it doesn't really matter if it's working or not.

How can an individual work to her best performance if she is not allowed trust, freedom, creativity, and innovation? Much of this atmosphere derives from the philosophy, attitude, and action of the consulting teacher towards the teacher assistants, individually and collectively.

A consulting teacher should be in charge, but able to delegate. It's kind of a shady thing, you don't have to be in tight control, but you do have to create, give direction to a program and if I'm not given direction, that's really hard to have any sort of focus.

I need some leadership so I have focus. I need a listening ear, an ear that listens but responds with some constructive things. I need to be able to sit down and discuss kids.

In a high school situation where you may have six different aides working with some kid because of whatever class he's in, we need to be able to sit down and corroborate and say: What have you tried? What have you done? What isn't working? Have you seen...? You know to establish patterns. I might see a kid for

an hour a day and not always at the same time. If I'm not getting a good picture, I don't know if I can work effectively [then] with that kid.

Delegating work by the consulting teacher and the classroom teachers allows respect and opportunity for skill and knowledge development in others. It is a process that respects the other person enough to hear that he too, might like to become better, more skilled at what he does. Crystal states this quite succinctly.

Part of the affirmation [in a job well-done] is letting you do something valuable, part of that is being given responsibility. You do it with your own kids, you know, I give you this responsibility and you grow through it and feel better about yourself then. I think you just feel better about what you do, you do it better; you're happier at doing it and so, you will have to do a better job. [If] they are willing to invest in what I'm doing, they care about a good job getting done here. So then I also will care about getting a good job done here. If someone cares about you, it becomes more important.

You'll bust your butt for the job!

It would appear that the qualities Crystal identifies as essential in an effective leader are also the same qualities essential and effective for assisting students with diverse learning needs. Crystal speaks of the need to connect and be relational with students; one cannot do this if one does not listen, provide direction and focus, delegate responsibility and respect for at-risk students; those who often feel powerless in their educational and home communities. An effective leader can facilitate the same at-risk growth and development in teacher assistants through the same components essential to working with students. Furthermore, belief in the ability of individuals to rise to their best potential might develop through adequate support and the application of respect concomitant high expectations for work performance.

Passion for learning is an integral part of Crystal's character. As an adult learner she needs to

feel a part of the team, to have some successes, first of all—you know, you have a day where you go home—yes! The light has gone on! The affirmation of being given real work, real responsibility, collaboration, collegiality—all of those

things [are components of the support package that can affect Crystal's work performance].

Crystal's best work performance depends on:

accurate student information that's communicated regularly. Things change. You [consulting teacher] can write an IPP (individual program plan) in September and a situation comes up in a student's life or a medical condition or whatever. If it's not communicated to me, I can't deal [effectively with him], I cannot give help to him if I can't do what I need to be doing.

This reflects back to the patterns of interaction and team-work philosophy of the consulting teacher and classroom teachers. This reflects back on the vision held by the consulting teacher and classroom teacher for students with diverse learning needs; how they view and value the work of teacher assistants in dealing with students with diverse learning needs. Crystal is motivated to be the best teacher assistant she can be, but occasionally is thwarted by a lack of communication. Difficulties with communication seem interwoven into the total complexity of education of students with diverse learning needs; frequently creating misunderstanding, misperceptions, de-valuation, and denial of voice and worthwhile substance to teacher assistants.

Mentoring relationships are fertile grounds for delegating and assigning real work, and real responsibility (values held by Crystal), through reciprocal sharing, discussing, and creating new methods of working successfully with students with diverse learning needs. The mentee benefits from the experience, knowledge, and guidance of the mentor while the mentor has opportunity to transmit her skills, and feel valued from another individual taking those strategies, ideas, and beliefs and adopting, adapting, or innovating them to another level of intervention. In her work, Crystal seeks "unity [of] philosophy, encouragement in the direction [I'm] going and suggestions for another direction to take if that doesn't work; kind of get me on the road and then set me free." The role of

consulting teacher as a mentor could provide the avenue whereby Crystal can be heard, valued, and given real work.

An effective process for establishing on-the-job training can be achieved through

team meetings. I cannot know a kid from one hour in the day. We need to meet, discuss, and talk about strategies. We face a lot of things [syndromes] and we're not trained specifically for them and we will never be trained for everything. So when they [syndromes and disabilities] come up, we need to address them. If I'm dealing with a child with a particular disability or a particular syndrome, then I think that I have to have made available to me some sort of resources and not just reading. Frankly, there's a ton of stuff to be read and it just piles up on my desk because I don't have the time and personal resources [to read it]. People to talk to, or a workshop [would be best].

It might be a helpful and positive gesture of value to include teacher assistants in the same professional development opportunities as teachers attend, particularly in the area of disabilities and syndromes. As Crystal further states, "the teaching staff is no more educated in those areas than teacher assistants are. I don't think that we're going in [to professional development] on any different level [of knowledge]." In an ideal world, teacher and teacher assistant would attend the workshops together so that greater unity in the educational programming could occur. If both cannot attend the workshop perhaps it should be the teacher assistant who goes before the classroom teacher; frequently the teacher assistant works at a greater level of interaction with the student with diverse learning needs than does the classroom teacher. In actuality though, what usually happens with workshops on syndromes and disabilities is that the consulting teacher attends them and then functions in the role of "train the trainer" to guide and develop strategies that can be used for educational programming. Again, this process, "train the trainer," evolves into a mentoring relationship that should strengthen and create greater teamwork, communication, and program unity. Ultimately with these qualities in place, learning communities of excellence could develop.

Crystal's advice to teachers about teacher assistants is very practical.

If a teacher has a capable assistant, it's a use-them-or-lose-them situation. Because if someone is capable and she's not being used in the classroom, she's going to look somewhere else [to be useful]. I think the teacher has to be able to judge and that's tough to do. Maybe in an elementary school where you see the assistants perhaps all day, it's easier, but in the high school where you're [teachers] seeing them for one period, that might be a problem, but to judge what their strengths are and to use those strengths and that [can be attained] only through building a relationship yourself, discovering, exploration.

Assistants are there for the kids. That's our primary focus.

I love my job. I love working with kids. I have worked with kids outside of school as a volunteer and I have raised kids. I have loved most moments of this...I have found working in schools just very fulfilling and challenging and stretching, and that's been a really good thing. ...This has made me think back and it has made me realize how lucky I've been to be able to do this.

I have basically been able to be around when my kids are around, but that's not the primary reason for doing [this] and if I was doing this for financial reasons, I'd be somewhere else. I just like working with kids; it's fun to see a kid learn. [Crystal, 2001]

Judy.

You help the kid academically, you're helping them emotionally because most of the time [the] emotional difficulties or behavior problems stems from [a] lack of confidence, insecurity, lack of self-esteem. You help them academically, their confidence builds and they're helped all around. That's the biggest thing I [have] learned.

The day we interviewed was an off-colored day both in the world outside and in Judy's work-world. Out of doors, it was greyish with threats of snow, cold, but not brutally cold. Inside Judy's world it was also greyish coupled with feelings of inadequacy and lack of control. We conversed in my classroom on a Thursday in February at the end of a frustrating day for Judy. The student she assists with learning had developed a possessive attitude about sharing her time and *allowing* her to work with other students whom required her help. The student had chosen to behave with anger, aggression, and

non-compliance; he ended up working in the principal's office, in isolation from peers and class for the day. Judy had been questioning her expectations, responses, and the effect of all of this on the child with which she works so closely. In addition, she was also feeling *under the weather* from a cold and pulled back muscles. When I suggested she pull my padded chair out from behind my desk and put her feet up on another chair to ease her sore back, she was not sure that I really meant what I said and responded, "You don't need it?"

Judy has spent a great deal of her time and energy resisting authority, power, and organization politics. She identifies a necessary component of working in a school as

[having] an understanding of how the school system works, because when you come into the education field, you're completely at a lost as to how it functions. And every school is different—an understanding of the goals and objectives is really [important].

When I first started as a teacher assistant, I had no clue as to what a teacher assistant did or how the school functioned; how the hierarchy was, anything like that. You knew the principal but you didn't understand the politics. It's really important to know that there is red tape, unspoken rules, and codes of conduct that you have no clue [about]. It's like I was groping in the dark. If I mess up, then I know I did and I've got to go this direction—it would be nice to know [the rules and codes] before you [messed up]. It's like with kids: we write down, we tell them what the rules are before they [mess up]; you don't set them in a classroom and as they break the rules, you tell them. You tell them [the rules] before [the behavior happens].

Judy has struggled with finding her own location in her family, church, and social circle. She recognizes the significance of understanding location and history as a crucial stepping stone for change, understanding can be perception-altering.

School was terrible for me, not a pleasant time. I really desire to make it fun for kids. They can learn their multiplication tables or whatever, but you know, if you can make it fun, that's what's going to stick; or you develop a relationship and impact the kid so that he learns or has a revelation. If they understand something about themselves, they can grow through that.

I grew up with very little structure and very little direction in a family of eight kids and the tail end of it. I felt like school was drudgery for me. It was just like a jail sentence. I used to sit and stare out the window.

I see so many kids being in a complete fog. I can identify with this. You turn off the light switch and you put yourself in a classroom. You do this until 3:30, and then

you are out of there!

Judy is aware of the power in labeling and recognizing her biases and beliefs so that she can free herself to listen to the voices of others. She identifies with the needs, feelings, and powerlessness of students with diverse learning needs.

You learn from the kids. I think I've learned more about who I am with how I relate to kids, when I help kids. If I were interviewing someone for a teacher assistant job, I would try to get a handle on how in-touch with themselves personally [they are] or where they are at personally with their own growth. If they are in tune with their understanding of where they are, they will have a better understanding of where others are. They'll understand the coping mechanisms and things that people use to keep them from losing control. If you understand the method a child is using when he's trying to defer learning, if you understand what the motivation is for his action, you can find alternative ways to get around that. You find out what the need is, you recognize the coping mechanism, you know that comes out of a need. Once you identify what the need is, you can find other ways [that] may be more beneficial to his learning.

I'm telling the truth there—I've been there.

Judy views herself as a facilitator for both cultural and written literacy; she is motivated to empower and provide opportunity for decision-making and choices for children with diverse learning needs; she craves this for herself. Subtle messages of devaluation and silencing for Judy, as a teacher assistant, seems to evolve from a lack of direct communication which originates from a failure to develop relationships with teachers.

I worked with one teacher last year that I had not a hot clue whether I was functioning well or badly. It was awful; I had to read body language, facial expressions, everything. As much as I tried to communicate and develop a relationship (because once you have a relationship there's a beginning to communicate issues), I couldn't get it. So you function in that but it's certainly not comfortable. You're always playing these stupid games, reading games. You're trying to read the teacher—they're really not direct communicators.

Your anxiety about your performance is increased and so you're not dealing with the kid as well as you could because somebody is watching you and you're already afraid of what that person thinks of you.

A lot of emotion and valuable time is consumed by trying to figure out what the teacher wants you to do. You'll spend time doing something [you are directed to do] when instinctively you know it's not the best thing for the child. But you feel that is what's expected. So when there's that lack of communication, the time is just

wasted.

Why are teachers reluctant to communicate their expectations clearly and directly to other adults? Why do so many teachers expect a teacher assistant to, perhaps, by osmosis or telepathy, envision the support required of them for learning in the classroom, without some direct communication to them of the expectations? Is this an unconscious act towards maintaining authority and reproduction of the hegemony that exists in the classroom, mirroring the hegemony in the external community?

Judy acknowledges her own participation in this subtle messaging herself.

When new teacher assistants come on [join the staff], there's a real sense of personal boundaries or something. There's a whole group of us and we kind of get everything worked out, you know where you belong and everything. Somebody new comes in and there's a little bit of (at least this is my personal thing), like I put up a little wall—I'm not sure where you're [new person] going to fit in.

There's certain boundaries; you create your little group and someone new comes and you resent it a little bit, like she's on your turf or something.

But as part of the school, though, we need to recognize [that] new people coming on have some real needs.

Is there a microcosm or hegemonic force that exists in the teacher assistant world acting to control and determine what values, behaviors, and attitudes are prized in teacher assistants?

Judy takes issue with the lack of importance placed upon the role of teacher assistants demonstrated through the financial remuneration for their work.

If I were paid as though this was a profession (and I'm not saying I want the same wage as a teacher or anything like that), like this was my sole job and I didn't have to work a second job to support myself, I would be more than willing to put time and effort into wherever it was needed [in the school]. But this is a bit of a problem issue for me. If I'm getting paid what I'm getting paid when people are holding flags out on the highway (getting paid twice what I am)—what does that say about how what we're doing is valued?

Teacher assistants are into one-on-one relationship with kids; maybe small group relation-building. We know that relationship is ultimately what's going to change a kid. You're changing lives, impacting lives. The difference we can make for one kid—you have only one conversation with a kid—it could be a life-changing thing. But the money value placed on that—it's just ridiculous!

You look at any teacher assistant in this school, they're either married and this is a second income or just kind of a side income or it's a single person who is having to hold down another job. The only reason they're [single people] staying here largely, is because they love their work.

I would love to go designing full-time, but I couldn't give this up. This is where I get all my intrinsic rewards!

Judy's sense of belonging, community, and value originates through her personal need for recognition, respect, and voice. A learning community of excellence begins with a vision; a leader who listens and understands issues and needs.

The key thing, I would think is a vision. You [researcher] have that vision and I've never had a vision defined for me in that sense. But you [have] obviously come and presented that vision. It's no different for us as teacher assistants as it is for what you want to do for the kids. It's no different for what you offer us personally, as it is for what you want us to offer the kids. I don't think anybody has committed their heart as you have. Your personal interest in us as teacher assistants. What you were doing was, you were teaching us, at least me personally, (I shouldn't speak for other people, but I know other people have felt the same way), is that you've helped us understand ourselves and in understanding ourselves, we were better equipped to help others.

There is a drawing here, something has transpired here. When you sit in Wednesday meetings: there's energy and there's obviously key people that you've invested into their lives. You're taking that as your excitement about growth, you're taking that and that is affecting our work. If we're stagnant in our personal lives we're going to be like that in a classroom. We're not going to be excited about what we do if we aren't excited about our lives.

[A leader who shows] interest in the personal growth of teacher assistants—not just their growth as teacher assistants but as people. The better we work out our own issues or problems, the better [we can] help kids. It's a big one.

You tried to understand us personally; that for me was a growing edge. That's what really helps—that has triggered a lot of changes in me in terms of understanding the way I operate and stuff. That's all passed on to the kids. The better I understand myself, the better I will be able to understand the kids.

I need to feel like I'm respected for what I do; I need to feel safe; I need to feel that there's a place, a safe place; to feel as though my time is valuable and it's respected; knowing that what you're doing is making a difference.

Because she seems to highly value communication and understanding of others, Judy identifies the same qualities she wants given to her as essential for working with students with diverse learning needs.

I think a teacher assistant needs to have the ability to communicate clearly and

concisely with both students and co-workers. I think we need to have good teaching strategies and I know that's not our job, but we do teach, a lot. We take kids out, we need to understand different strategies and how to communicate processes. Probably a base-line for a teacher assistant [would be] an understanding of the mental, emotional, and physical development of these kids. Unless you understand where they're at in their age progression, their emotions, and their physical things, we don't understand what their needs are.

She relates how a particular teacher develops a community of learning excellence in her grade 3 classroom.

When you're a teacher assistant, you can sit back (not sit back, it sounds like we don't do anything), sometimes you're in awe of how a teacher can handle a classroom.

There's something I've picked up from being in Anne's classroom at the beginning of this year that has stuck with me; it has stayed with me, for sure!

She has a way of everything...there's a firmness about her, but there's a love for the kids and the respect that you sense in that room, an ambiance; it sets an entire, and I've noticed that in her class every year, there's a respect that the kids have for each other and a concern. She sets that standard in everything she does, because that's what she holds personally. That goes back to that, "what we don't have in ourselves, we can't give to others."

Anne sets an atmosphere in her class. She relates to the teacher assistants constantly during the class, and in that relating, there's an appreciation she gives off. She's in a relationship with us while she's teaching and I don't know how-in-heaven's-way she does it! But in that, the kids are learning, the kids are being modeled how to relate to other people. There are other adults in the classroom and they're observing how we're relating to each other. They're having fun in the classroom and joking, and they're serious sometimes; it's about family. It's such a learning environment in there, even for us teacher assistants.

It would be nice for teachers to come in and see what happens there. I would use that as a model to how teachers should access teacher assistants; to how to make people feel good about themselves.

Kids aren't just learning from Anne; they're learning from us and how we're relating.

I believe it's Anne's personality; it's how she relates to other adults in the environment. Often the perception in some classrooms, the kids just really pick up the fact, *you're just a teacher assistant*. You will get comments like that, or I don't have to listen to you, you're just a teacher assistant. The ambiance is set with the teacher, [and the kids] will pick up on it—kids are so intuitive that way. They'll know if there's a hierarchy and they'll know how to treat people according to their status. If the teacher believes you're on the equal with them, the kids will pick up on that. They'll respect you just as much as they respect the teacher.

You're respected as an equal adult [in Anne's class]. You know when you have a good relationship with a teacher, there's an openness to say, this is what I'm struggling with. Even if it's five minutes, you can come into that environment and there's a connectedness and the kids will pick up that and it contributes to the

way the kids will feel.

A mentoring relationship, where reciprocity is an essential component, could be an effective avenue to both respect and facilitate Judy's development as both adult learner and teacher assistant. Reciprocity from teacher assistant to student in the form of mentoring has enabled Judy to recognize "I think I've learned more about who I am with how I relate to kids. Who you are as an individual and how you take that and impart that to kids and teach kids about themselves." Reciprocity between the consulting teacher and teacher assistant, and between teacher assistants seems to evolve from individual instruction or group meetings:

whether we talk about anything or whether the time is really productive, everybody is together and we're a team. It's morale-building. I've found that has been critical ever since I've started. If we have issues we can sit and work [that out] in a big group. We get excited about ideas and stuff like that and we get into the middle of it; that's really reassuring because the biggest difficulty of [being] a teacher assistant is feeling like what you're doing is being watched by other staff and maybe not being approved. So when I come down here and say, this is what I'm doing and you say, yep, that's [great], that clears my conscience, [or] this is what I need to do, OK? Often, I'll come to you and you'll have resources or you have techniques—getting the strategies and stuff like that.

[Reciprocity between the classroom teacher and teacher assistant builds over time]. The longer you work in this setting, the more you feel like the teachers have confidence in you and the more freedom they give you. Over the last five years, I think I've gained a fair bit of credibility. I can go down the hall, (I wasn't like this when I started), but I can feel confident about what I'm doing for the most part. I can go into a classroom, like Jean's for example, and I can start doing stuff. I can feel OK—there's a confidence [from] experience.

[I like] knowing that I'm making a difference and I think it's often the teachers that communicate that to me.

Judy's advice to teachers about teacher assistants is a derivative of and a continuation of her search for personal voice and decision-making power: "communicate with us. Take the time to talk to us."

I applied for a job with the school board because of working with kids—I've enjoyed that. I thought, this is temporary until I find something more permanent in that

area [working with kids] and I stayed in it because I love working in a school setting. I started for a certain reason and I've stayed in it for another reason. My initial reason for choosing this [career] is not so much the opportunity to help kids academically, but to help them personally through relationships, develop their trust and stuff like that. But as I work in this, I've learned most of the time, when you help the kids academically, you are helping them emotionally. [Judy, 2001]

Patty.

I think you have to be able to joke with the kids. They have to see you not as an authority figure. You have to be able to develop rapport with these kids; once you have rapport going, they will do a lot more for you; they will do more for themselves. I think kids will feel safe with you. They won't feel threatened when you build rapport—they will take chances and try things.

Patty and I interviewed at my home on a Friday evening sitting at the wooden dining table where, over the last two years we have shared countless Friday evenings, learning, celebrating, agonizing, and growing in our shared passion: our deep wonderings and ramblings that commingle in a desire to connect and infuse, with hope, the children and adults we meet who are encountering pain, isolation, sorrow, and alienation in their lives. Rarely have I felt or experienced the mirroring of these same desires in another educator, let alone, had opportunity to explore this phenomenon at a leisurely pace. Quite by accident, the opportunity for this investigation evolved through my work relationship with Patty.

Patty has been experiencing some real difficulties this year with both her family and work-life. This manifests itself as despair, insecurity, and feelings of worthlessness; many times over the past 2 years, I have reminded Patty of the power that her positive, caring, and consistent expectations and interventions creates through connecting with students with diverse learning needs. However, bombarded by individuals that do not seem to understand the messages and agonies of these isolated students, Patty's sense of worthlessness increases and the full measure of her caring and loving spirit is denied.

When we met to interview, Patty was deep in the morass of insecurity and de-valuation, weary from battling others who refuse to acknowledge the needs, sufferings, and at-promise-possibilities of students with diverse learning needs.

Patty has been a long-term freedom-fighter against silencing and disempowerment of students with diverse learning needs. She began working 19 years ago in the education system as a speech assistant with the health unit. She has a wide range of experience and knowledge

when I think about it, I really have seen a lot of kids, worked with a lot of kids, worked with a lot of teachers, seen a lot of different teaching styles and schools. I think over the years, [I have] developed skills because often I know where these kids are at and what they need sort of [by] instinct. [I know] when to back off and when to let them [students] try something on their own.

Patty has witnessed a greatly altered education system for delivery of individual programming for students with diverse learning needs; from quite segregated to highly integrated; working only three hours a day to five and a half hours a day; not knowing at the end of June whether there will be another placement to knowing with some security and continuity that there will be work the next year; not knowing which school might have an opening to knowing, with some confidence, where she will be placed the following academic year; working at a school where there were only two or three teacher assistants to teams upwards of 10 people and closer to 25, depending upon the number of students requiring support in each school.

Perhaps because of her past experiences, Patty takes time to read the environment in which she works before she begins to offer suggestions and interact to her best performance with students with diverse learning needs. She uses her skills and abilities as an astute reader of the world to create a better world for the students with whom she works.

I come in, in my quiet way and I sit in the back [of the classroom] and I just listen; I see what the kids are doing. I'm not the type to come in right away and say [to the teacher], "What are we doing today? What do you want me to do? How should I do it? When should I do it?"

Because I'm new, I said [to the teacher], "We have three students who are reading at grade 4 level or lower. I think those three definitely need to come out when you're doing short-story reading." That's who I stuck to, just those three and he agreed.

Then Lily came in one day, and I told her what I had been doing and she [inquired] about other kids. I know they're really struggling with their reading because I've come back in and they'll say, 'Mrs. Martins, what does this mean? I don't understand this story.'

Well, I have a problem with that because it's a real judgment call; I could take out half the class and do I want that or do we want them to try?

So I went and I talked to [the teacher] and we had a little discussion. I said, I've just been taking the three low ones out, but if I take those other kids out, I could have up to ten kids. He agreed; he thought of it and said, let's play-it-by-ear. Maybe I'll do different groups, maybe groups can read to each other so they can stay in the classroom.

In the midst of and through the power of reading the world, Patty found the means to empower students to read the world and belong to the greater community of their classroom. She opened dialogue with the classroom teacher to identify the problem and then worked in conjunction with the teacher who ultimately makes the educational decisions in his classroom, to create solutions that could be acceptable to many.

Patty has experienced silencing and disempowerment, personally in the classroom.

[It's frustrating and irritating when you are not] allowed to do your job in the classroom. I don't think [teachers] really know what we do. I think Beverly, [a teacher] thinks we're just going around and giving them [the students] answers. I don't think Beverly really knows what my role is in there. If a student puts up his hand, she answers his question; she will help them just like we help them. I know last semester I had to tell her often [that], we will tell them what page [the answer is] on; we will tell them what paragraph it's in; I shared how we [worked with] Jason [a student]. You need to educate them.

I've one very weak student, I've now realized I need to sit right beside him; read the questions to him; have him discuss the answers; and help him word it so he can write it down.

Beverly will tell the class, "Now I want you to do this on your own. You're not to ask Mrs. Martins for any help." One day, I'm going to ask this woman, "Well, [then], why am I here?"

The same patterns of interactions that develop a good relationship between

consulting teacher and teacher assistants or classroom teachers and teacher assistants are the very same patterns of interaction that develop successful working relationships with students with diverse learning needs.

You really have to like kids and know where they're coming from. You have to be flexible and you have to have a sense of humor—no power-trip; you're there to help these kids. When I think power-trip, it's: do as I say, and you do it now or else... We are in the middle of teacher assistants with different philosophies and ideas. There is no team work going on; their goal isn't even helping kids, their goal is: I'm the policeman in the classroom. That's all they want to do.

There's this one teacher assistant and our little buddy, Matt.³ I was upstairs when the teacher assistant came in. She was beet-red and spittin' mad, "oooooh! I don't know what I'm going to do with him!" She was so mad at him; she had picked his binder up and thrown it out the door into the hall and screamed at him to, get out. The teacher beside [that class] came out to see what was happening. The teacher assistant screamed, like an idiot at this kid, according to her, because he was making fun of Wayne; he was making noises.

Well this boy who we're trying so hard to get some work out of, you know, I think of it now—if someone treated me like that, I'd say, screw you too! And you know, he never said a word back; he just stayed quiet.

They [two teacher assistants] think he's copying, he's making fun of Wayne. Matt has told me many times, I used to make these noises before he even came.

But again, Matt came in [to math] and that's the first thing he did. Wayne walked by and Matt went, AHHMMM! I just walked up to him [Matt], I'd heard about the incidents and said, "You know what Matt, I'm going to ask you something. Will you stop making those noises? Stop imitating Wayne?"

He said, "Well, I'm not. I just make the noises."

I said, "But you know what? He picks up the noises that are happening around him. So just stop making the noises. You'll help this kid out too. That's all I'm asking of you Matt, for this class, stop making the noises."

I asked him in a nice voice; I didn't scream at him, and he stopped.

No wonder these kids say, well why should I do anything? Some of these kids, I look at them, they must be so thick-skinned. I would just be in tears.

I think of Matt being screeched at out in the hallway. How did he feel? Oh, I would just run!"

Patty has the ability to recognize those-who-have-been-silenced and works

unflaggingly with her efforts to give them voice, even if it is only to her ears that the silence is broken.

³ Matt has undergone some real difficulties at home, school, and in life, generally. He vacillates between being noisy and defiant to broken-spirited and withdrawn. Treated with care, kindness, and a belief in him that he is able—expectations to be the best, Matt gratefully, yet cautiously blooms, two steps upwards, one step downwards.

The administration of a school sets the tone for the manner in which teacher assistants are valued; the consulting teacher and classroom teachers extend this in their close work and supervision with teacher assistants; teacher assistants extend this in their work with students with diverse learning needs. Since all human beings interact within the organization of a school, this spiral works from the bottom up as well. At the previous school where Patty worked, she felt

administration treated us as part of the staff, just as important as the teacher, a part of the team. Now, I'm feeling that a point is not made [to invite us to staff meetings at her new placement]. If they have staff meetings on professional development days, which has happened, then we are [invited]. We had one the last time, and then I felt part of the staff because I was involved; we do group activities and you are treated as part of the staff.

I honestly feel that [value] comes right from the top, how administration feels, treats their support staff.

We [should] get the same notes and messages as everyone else; if the teachers get certain messages that the teacher assistants don't, we feel like we're not part of the staff.

I'll go back [to my previous school]. Once you feel a part of the school, you volunteer more; you do other things and they're happy to have you. We did the meals for the parents and you volunteered for things because when you feel part of the staff, you want to do that.

But right now, where I am, I'm struggling with that. I'm just sort of coming in and doing my job.

Is maintenance of a hegemony and denial of voice deliberately intended to keep teacher assistants in their role?

The consulting teacher's philosophy or vision towards the value of teacher assistants parallels her philosophy or vision towards students with diverse learning needs and is affected by the value administration places upon the special education program. This vision is communicated by the consulting teacher's thoughts, words, and deeds to, and with the teacher assistants. Because teacher assistants are sensitized to nuances and hidden messages in their world, they are very aware of how they are treated or mistreated. Consciously or unconsciously, perhaps at both levels, they recognize their value or

lack of value through the vision of educational programming for students with diverse learning needs held by the administration, consulting teacher, and classroom teachers. They accept, develop, or adapt this system or attitude of value and interaction into the learning community and then bestow this interpretation upon the students with whom they work.

A team leader [consulting teacher] knows his stuff, he's there when I need him, I can count on him. A [good] leader is qualified. In today's world, looking at the school, you need to be able to work with a team of many teacher assistants. You have to be a good listener; you have to be there for support.

He needs to have rapport with his teacher assistants. I think the rapport [helps] you feel comfortable with your consulting teacher. It's like the kids, you feel safe with him, you would be willing to share problems and not feel stupid.

You might have a consulting teacher that you admire because of her knowledge and because she's so good with the kids. You want to work like that—you work so well together because your focus is the same.

Now put yourself [into a situation with a consulting teacher where she says] I will tell you what to do and when to do it, and where to go. [You wished] you were brave enough to tell her to stick it [like the kids do] or else you walked away and you were always angry and you were always upset.

I worked with a consulting teacher who power-tripped. It made me feel insecure; it made me feel I didn't want to spend any time with her. [I did not do my best work] as much as I did before when I knew there was a consulting teacher who thought the same way. I did my job because of the kids, but it would [have] been easy to sluff-off and not do my job because I didn't care.

When you don't respect your consulting teacher, you have no one to go to. He may have good ideas, but after awhile, you don't even want to listen to anything...it goes back to rapport.

[However], if you have the support of a good consulting teacher, that really helps you with your classroom teacher. You have to remember, we work with some classroom teachers who will do nothing for these kids. Often we're in a position, if you don't have a good consulting teacher, you [teacher assistant] make the calls, and if you have no experience, you can make [serious mistakes]. Even myself, as an experienced person, I often question, is this the right call? I would love to be able to say to my consulting teacher, this is what we're doing, any suggestions?

A consulting teacher is a person I could go to when I was having a problem; very approachable, knowledgeable too.

Everyone should have the same philosophy; everyone is different, but everyone needs to be caring for those kids.

As an adult learner, Patty has demonstrated a continual desire to work towards her best potential, increasing her knowledge, skills, and strategies. This is apparent in her

application of flexibility and expertise in reading her world; a process that must be continuously honed and perfected.

You work with so many different kinds of kids, different teachers, and different classrooms. One teacher will expect you to do one thing, the next teacher will not allow you to do that. You have to be able to change every time you come into a different classroom—adjust to wherever you are, quickly, quietly.

I do think some knowledge of the curriculum helps, especially at the higher levels; knowledge that's expected at a grade level or just being familiar with the subject.

I think over the years, I have learned to work with the kids and say, listen, let's see if we can figure this out; how can we figure this out; where can we go to find this information; let's just read it and let's look at your notes. You develop these skills by just working with them [the students] a bit, knowing who needs the stories read, when to back off, when to let them try something on their own.

[In addition], knowing how to talk to teachers is [important]. They don't want you coming up to them—I don't tell them—I share my concerns [and] I ask if there's another way to do this?

I need to be encouraged to go to workshops—it doesn't matter how long you've been on the job, you can keep on learning. There should be workshops available for us [teacher assistants] to attend that relate to our jobs, even if it's not what you are doing; you [might] want to expand to another area. Just because I don't work with a Down's Syndrome student, why shouldn't I be allowed [to attend a workshop on it]? I think we should be encouraged [to go to many workshops] if we want to keep working.

Respecting Patty's experience, life-long development as a teacher assistant and love of learning could be addressed through mentoring relationships with the consulting teacher, classroom teachers, and fellow teacher assistants. For Patty, sharing the same philosophy is

really important. You can have a different way of working but your philosophy is there to help kids, to help these kids the best you can. You want these kids to succeed.

A lot of this is sharing ideas; this is what I do with Jerry in science, and it's working really well for me; do you have other strategies; what doesn't work; let's do some brainstorming. I think you can learn so much by just discussing. Like maybe, someone has a better idea how a student can get notes down.

I feel competent when I know my stuff, [when] I know what the teacher expects.

[We keep those things in place through] communication with the teachers you work with in the classroom; I think a lot of it is communication.

I've always wanted to do the best.

Patty identifies her learning needs relative to what will be helpful to and improve

the efficacy of her support for students with diverse learning needs. She views herself as providing a service, a service she loves to perform—a service of empowerment for students who are desperately in need of understanding the hidden messages of the world around them; that they do have value, ability, and opportunity to make choices about their quality of life, and perhaps, to meet their dreams.

Patty's advice to teachers about teacher assistants is based on understanding the significance of her role in supporting the learning of students with diverse learning needs.

I think teachers have to know what a teacher assistant's role in the classroom is. Teachers have to realize that when we sit beside a student, we're not doing his work for him; some teachers think that's what we're doing. They need to know what we're doing for these kids, how we help them with work.

If I was a teacher and I had a teacher assistant in my class, I'd want to know what she was doing when she pulls kids out; I'd like to know what she does. I think I'd give a little more direction to teacher assistants—a lot of teachers don't know what I do.

[Teachers] need to be aware that there are kids who work at a different level. My biggest beef over the years has been not giving kids enough time—kids who can do it.

I don't like it when the teacher expects that we will teach [the kids]. First of all, it's their job, it's not my job. That's why I find it very important to stay in the classroom when they're teaching because I need to know what they're teaching. Be careful of expectations because I'm not an English teacher and I shouldn't have to teach English to these kids.

In a perfect world I would love to have the teacher say, let's look at the kids; let's discuss every two weeks where they're at—meet ahead of time to know what's happening; work as a team

I would like teachers to talk about kids: how is it going; do we change anything; do we have to adapt, change our plans.

In an ideal world, you have a good consulting teacher. You sit down, the consulting teacher, the teacher, and the teacher assistant and you look at your kids. If this teacher does not know these kids, a consulting teacher can say, these are our students: Sean is a terrific auditory learner. He's very slow writing. Maybe this is an area where you...

Communication, team-work. [Patty, 2001]

Chapter 5

Discussion

Treasures, Images, Reflections

The paradigm shift.

Being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself....self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence. (Frankl, 1959, p. 133)

I began this research journey in search of conditions that could empower and create an effective, long-term teacher assistant work force as an avenue to build a learning community of excellence. I near the end of this research, with the realization that power lies within each individual (consulting teacher, classroom teacher, administrator, or teacher assistant); it is a moral attitude, a condition of character, an acceptance of a role as servant-leader whereby learning communities of excellence can be created. The quest begins within the individual, who through unique experiences or a paradigm shift identifies a need to alter the progression of his life from inward-individual-independent living to outward-synergistic-interdependent thriving. I had to reach a point in my pedagogy and practice whereby I recognized that there are many people who care about children just as deeply as I do. Just because they might have a different way of dealing with the students does not mean that they do not care as much; why not build on this desire to do what is right because it is the right thing to do, so that more people can unite to build a better community? I realized that I could not do enough for students with diverse learning needs on my own, not if revolutionary changes in the way they are perceived are to occur. This community, this world that we currently live in is neither a caring nor safe place for many children; they are angry, they are violent. They are

reacting in dangerous course with each other and themselves; I cannot stand to see people in such pain—it is unbearable.

Who are these students towards which this research, thought, work, and reflection is directed? These students are often illiterate with both their actual reading deficits and their lack of cultural knowledge in language, skills, and behaviors; the cultural capital which enables the dominant culture to reproduce itself. They are unaware of the hidden cues and expectations in support and maintenance of the dominant culture that teachers reproduce in their classrooms. They are often denied the basic needs of belonging, acceptance, and perceived with little value to others in society. These students do not understand how they give their individual power away to those who dominate: they feel pushed, pulled, and torn asunder with their inability to achieve acceptance, belonging, and value in the larger society. They exist in school as the “others” and they often continue to live in their communities, on the outskirts, as “others.” But, we have opportunities and possibilities near at hand; these children can be seen as at-promise rather than at-risk. They can become our future problem-solvers, citizens, and caretakers. These are children at-promise; we do not know who or what they might become if they are provided with safe and multiple opportunities to experience value, validation, and respect—practice for quality living in their communities—by building on their strengths and creating new pathways to greater skills and strengths for both cultural and written literacy.

Treasures: The Front-Line Workers

“The most important ingredient we put into any relationship is not what we say or what we do, but what we are.” (Covey, 1989, p. 187)

Teacher assistants are fundamental participants in the educational programming for students with diverse learning needs. They are the front-line workers who often bear

much of the weight for the implementation of the individual program plan (IPP) when they work individually or in small groups with students with diverse learning needs. Teacher assistants have power to positively transform attitudes, skills, and learning for these students; they have opportunities to break down barriers that deny, silence, and sabotage academic, social, and emotional growth in students with diverse learning needs. Conversely though, if not provided adequate and appropriate guidance, direction, and value the destruction of at-risk students through alienation, and increased isolation can cause great harm to the very students for whom the teacher assistant was hired to assist.

An effective and committed teacher assistant is an individual who has an uncanny ability to read the world both within which she resides and wherein resides the other partners in the educational team: student with diverse learning needs, the parents of the student, the classroom teachers, and consulting teacher. It is a difficult position of existence for the teacher assistant; he must be able to traverse the crisscrossing crevasses between the needs of the classroom teacher to deliver the mandated curriculum; the needs of the student, for whom emotional concerns and learning difficulties are of major concern; and the expectations and directions of the consulting teacher whose role it is to provide effective and efficient educational programming for the student with diverse learning needs. The teacher assistant must find a way to weave the needs and expectations of the various stakeholders into the fabric of the learning community where she works without losing her individuality in the process.

An effective teacher assistant recognizes that he is participating in an educational program focused on the student with diverse learning needs and that the needs of the student and not his, are the primary goal in the learning process. An ability by the

teacher assistant to view the world through the lenses of the student can create acceptance, tolerance, and understanding of the student's socio-historic location. This does not mean that the student becomes excused from recognizing and accepting responsibility for her behavior, learning, and actions, but rather that she is accepted for who she currently is and viewed with at-promise potential—the goal being to treat the student as she could and should become, so that she might rise to fulfill the prophecy. To initiate this development, the teacher assistant must become an advocate for the student employing skills for listening, observation, hypothesizing, testing, and proving or refuting the possible strategies or interventions that might help the student gain a stronger grasp on his decision-making and academic success.

The effective teacher assistant is interested in and truly cares about what is right for the child, and within this, is comfortable applying problem-solving discussions and other forms of communication necessary to create the openness that can optimally place everyone on the team in providing effective educational programming for students with diverse learning needs; he has observations and questions about the students and seeks solutions through evidence, communications, and interactions to address the dissonance.

An effective teacher assistant is willing to incorporate new ideas and concepts gained from discussions about the student with fellow teacher assistants and the classroom and consulting teachers to maximize the at-promise potential of the student with diverse learning needs. This teacher assistant prizes confidentiality and respects the student's right to dignity and experience; both success and failure are benchmarks to indicate progress in the development of responsibility, decision-making, and both cultural and written literacy.

Effective teacher assistants know how to motivate reluctant learners; most of

them recognize that the key is through relationship and rapport building. They are comfortable investing care, gentleness, trust, and faith in at-risk students knowing that often, the basic needs of human beings, dignity, respect, value, and belonging will reap the benefit of greater interest and responsibility in the ownership of learning for these students.

The effective teacher assistant often observes behaviors, interaction patterns, and faulty learning mechanisms that the teacher is unaware of because his attention focuses on the learning that develops within and from the teaching. Effective teacher assistants are aware of how a student's face carries her fears and how a kind word can ease an insecurity; how a student's face carries the joy of mastery-learning and how one slight twist of a word or change of a thought can carry so much power for knowledge. They are first on the scene to receive a student's fragile and sometimes secret information; often the child will tell many things about her inner world to a trusted teacher assistant. They find ways to help students with low self-esteem and powerlessness feel very special and loved; they can effectively apply tenets of tough-love, but are also very willing to forgive and recognize that errors are part of growing. Ultimately, effective teacher assistants are willing to go the extra mile to improve the lives of the students with whom they work, and by virtue of this, the communities within which they live in.

Mirror Images: Reflected Roles

Consulting teacher, teacher assistants, and students.

"Each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible." (Frankl, 1959, p. 131)

Each of the teacher assistants that was interviewed seemed to recognize the key to

efficacy when working with a student with diverse learning needs was achieved through the building of relationship and rapport; an empathic ability to step into the shoes of the student to determine what might be causing reluctance, fear, insecurity, or emotional instability that might deny or sabotage academic or social success. The student is authentically valued as the number one priority for their involvement in the educational programming and they care deeply for the success and acceptance of the students within their classroom community by both teacher and peers. They work to facilitate learning in the students with whom they work; to create connections to the educational and the community environments in which the students exist. They define their role as that of support for students and teachers—mediators in the tasks of learning and teaching. They have felt the scourge of silencing in one form or another through subtle messages of devaluation from teachers, fellow teacher assistants, or administration; denial or denigration of useful suggestions, contributions, decision-making, and observations on behalf of the students with whom they work; refusal by the teacher to allow their working with students either one-to-one or in small groups; and lack of direction or purpose manifested in confusion over roles, educational outcomes, communication, and philosophy by the consulting teacher or classroom teacher.

Each interviewed teacher assistant identified similar aspects and requirements of adult learners. They do not like their time wasted on extraneous information or material; they want information that is useable and applicable to their work assignment; they also recognize that workshops not necessarily related to their immediate work assignment are important for maintaining an excitement about learning. These individuals crave respect for knowing, capacity to learn, and contributions to the organization within which they work. They need opportunity to be heard and respected with at-promise potential; to be

the best that they can aspire to become, both as teacher assistants and also as human beings. As adult learners, they arrive equipped with a variety of learning experiences, which might influence negatively or positively, on their perceptions of individuals, families, education, and community. Within their working community they need to develop a relationship of trust and caring with their colleagues, facilitators or supervisors: teacher assistants, consulting teacher, classroom teachers, and administration. They seem to respect the facilitator or supervisor that can “walk the talk;” those who share experiences and knowledge in a manner of reciprocity, respect, and trust; those who share the same value and have useful knowledge about students with diverse learning needs. Most importantly, they conceive the role of the consulting teacher as the team-leader for the educational programming of students with diverse learning needs; the keeper-of-the-vision, the guide or director crucial for a successful program.

According to the interviewed teacher assistants, it is important that the consulting teacher know how to build relationships, communicate concisely and honestly, and inspire the involvement and participation, through excellent work performance, in the creation of a common purpose, a vision of what a learning community of excellence can be for students and other individuals.

The philosophy of the consulting teacher towards the role of special education for students with diverse learning needs is reflected in the manner in which she values the work of teacher assistants. His philosophy, actions, knowledge, and perceptions are mirrored in the philosophy, actions, knowledge, and perceptions of the teacher assistant. When the consulting teacher perceives and lives the at-promise concept of both the students and teacher assistants through the integrity of thought, word, and deed, the teacher assistants reflect this climate onto the lives of students with diverse learning

needs. The positive safe and caring climate and actions of teacher assistants can become effective determiners in building learning communities of excellence. The successful creation of an at-promise program as envisioned by the consulting teacher can translate into successful educational programming for students with diverse learning needs; all team-members work towards the same purpose of education—at-promise growth in all participants, students, teacher assistants, teachers, consulting teachers, and administrators.

A teacher assistant must have opportunity to feel safe and valued enough to discuss observations of students' behaviors, strengths, and weaknesses with both the classroom teacher and the consulting teacher. This ambiance of trust and reciprocity, components of adult learning, mentoring relationships, and moral leadership is the framework for building a learning community of excellence. This learning community of excellence can be established by the consulting teacher in his work with classroom teachers, teacher assistants, parents, students, and administration. The greater the opportunity for open communication, discussion, and problem-solving dialogue among the educational partners, the greater then, is the opportunity to develop a common purpose, a vision of excellence in educational programming for students with diverse learning needs.

In order to maximize the potential for at-promise development, the consulting teacher must become a mentor/advocate for the teacher assistant, similar to the relationship between the teacher assistant and the student with diverse learning needs. The consulting teacher must be prepared to be available and approachable, knowledgeable and resourceful, and aware of the importance of skills for listening to understand. She must be willing to share her knowledge of learning modalities, strategies, skills, and interventions through a mentoring relationship or in one-to-one direction or guidance with the teacher assistants; skills for behavioral observations and program implementation,

hypothesizing, testing, proving and refuting possible interventions and strategies to facilitate at-promise growth in students with diverse learning needs should be transferred to teacher assistants. Within the quality of listening to understand should be a desire to create win/win situations for individuals, willingness to accept advice and suggestions from teacher assistants, and delegating of important work and shared responsibility with those involved in the program delivery, particularly, teacher assistants.

The consulting teacher must be truly interested and care about the professional growth of teacher assistants. Active promotion of training activities and opportunities for self-fulfilling work are essential threads to weaving effective, committed, and long-term teacher assistants into the fabric of a school. The consulting teacher needs to accept his role in providing on-the-job training while also respecting the particular needs and values of the adults, the teacher assistants, for whom he is responsible for supervising and evaluating; ultimately, if the program is to be successful, it becomes the consulting teacher's responsibility to train, supervise, and constructively evaluate the performance of teacher assistants. If the consulting teacher is responsible for supervising and evaluating the teacher assistants, the obvious corollary of this is that training should be forthcoming for the areas of identified needs in the teacher assistants. Without training, supervision and evaluation are incomplete; I find this an ethical dilemma. Supervision and evaluation of teacher assistants without opportunity to effectively address or re-dress areas of concern and improve areas of strength denies effective and efficient educational programming for students with diverse learning needs; and also denies and silences teacher assistants in their quest to be valued, validated, and respected as equal partners in the education of students with diverse learning needs.

Just as the teacher assistant needs to respect the right to dignity and experience

for the student with diverse learning needs, so too, must the consulting teacher respect the teacher assistant's right to dignity and experience; both successes and failures in their interventions and strategies with developing promising practice should be viewed with patience, reflection, proactive, and preventative perspectives.

An effective leader, the consulting teacher, through relationship building, caring, integrity, moral leadership, and expectations for excellence in performance, can facilitate the growth of effective, committed, and long-term teacher assistant teams. This can be achieved through the practice of reciprocity, open communication, and an inherent desire to not only listen but also listen to understand the motivation, values, and needs in the individuals who are the teacher assistants, the front-line workers in educational programming for students with diverse learning needs.

Arrival at a common point of at-promise growth for students, teacher assistants, classroom teachers, and consulting teachers can be achieved through sharing of purpose and vision, valuing each person as a human in development of being humane; individuals eager to become the best we can.

Inside Out

Making visible the shared purpose in at-promise-students.

Making and keeping promises to ourselves precedes making and keeping promises to others.... it is futile to put personality ahead of character, to try to improve relationships with others before improving ourselves.... It's an upward spiral of growth that leads to progressively higher forms of responsible independence and effective interdependence. (Covey, 1989, p. 43)

The location to begin the process of shared purpose or vision of at-promise-students is from the inside out; to communicate the pedagogy we hold towards the education of students with diverse learning needs to the others who are required to implement this educational programming. I can only control myself; it is my responsibility first to

have the integrity to respect my voice, value, and worth before, I can extend that outward to others. I cannot expect to force my beliefs, values, and responsibilities onto another human being through intimidation, fear, or coercion; if control is occurring, it will be through some form of intimidation or oppression resulting from the oppressed one's inability to have freedom of choice or personal control originating in fear from possible financial insecurity, rejection, incompetence, unworthiness, or a myriad of other fears. Commitment to excellence cannot freely evolve when one is fearful or oppressed. To inspire the commitment and efficacy required by those who work with students with diverse learning needs, one must firstly, maintain and constantly strive to live integrity of purpose, vision, or goal. This purpose, vision, or goal is one of at-promise; students with diverse learning needs, despite their dysfunctional behaviors, actions, or difficulties for learning, are as equally at-promise for learning as their peers. An educator must also maintain and constantly strive to live integrity of purpose, vision, or belief that those involved in the education of students with diverse learning needs, teacher assistants, are there because they feel they can make a difference. Teacher assistants can reclaim a lost, hurting child and teach her that she has great value in this world; they are in this work with honorable intentions.

The paradigm shift from at-risk to at-promise presents possibilities for viewing these students with diverse learning needs through the lenses of resiliency rather than through a "damage-model" which can and often does, pre-determine and limit the strategies, interventions, and successful growth for students with diverse learning needs. If one views these students as at-promise, the goal becomes one of continual search: adaptation, innovation, reflection, and alteration of the strategies and interventions that can be applied to identified strengths to offset or circumnavigate the learning and emotional

difficulties experienced by students with diverse learning needs.

A paradigm shift in the perspective of students with diverse learning needs from at-risk to at-promise, can also be paralleled towards teacher assistants and their role as equal partners, the front-line workers in the educational programming for students with diverse learning needs. Teacher assistants mirror and implement the vision, purpose, and philosophy held by the teachers and consulting teachers towards students with diverse learning needs. If they are recognized as essential and equal team members sharing the responsibility for the education of these students, it must be accepted that they will require the same opportunities for growth, development, collegiality, and learning that teachers need for improved practices; it is crucial to provide professional development and learning opportunities in an ongoing basis so they can near their at-promise potential. The teacher assistant can become at-promise when she is provided opportunity to experience, learn, adapt, innovate, reflect upon, and alter strategies and interventions to assist the at-promise growth in the students with whom she works. It is the teacher assistant's observations, suggestions, discussions, and problem-solving communications from the attempts, successes, and failures in working with students with diverse learning needs that can increase the efficacy of the teachers' or consulting teacher's knowledge of learning theory and curriculum. The marriage of the practical knowledge from the teacher assistant's implementation of the educational programming and the teachers' and consulting teacher's learning theory in a strong commitment to teamwork can work effectively to help create learning communities of excellence.

Soul Searching

Possibilities in schools.

Research is a journey, an epiphany, an awakening of self and voice--a

pilgrimage. What seemed at one time to be an endless tunnel of darkness heightened by smothering air has become light infused, effervescent. Ponderous weights have been cast aside, clear fresh air surrounds, and my vision is limitless. I have been reborn, transformed, reclaimed.

I would like to share this sense of journey, my personal victory with those I see struggling five steps or more behind me, other consulting teachers who are encountering increased work and emotional demands from the numbers of teacher assistants working in their schools. I wish my writing to resonate with a sense of hope, a sense of journey, a sense of love and communion to inspire a belief, a recognition, a commitment to accept the weight required for and inherent to the struggle for social change in return for a more equitable social and educational order for today's children. The many questions based on observations and experience that have bubbled within me during ten years of teaching are oozing forth, demanding my attention. Claiming my voice, which heretofore remained silent, has unleashed personal power; I hear voices that are silent and silenced, clamoring for release and recognition. It is to these silent voices that I wish to lend audibility.

The platform from which this thesis begins lies in the formation of a relationship with a close friend. She was not a friend when *we* initially shared the same workplace. Once she was a member of a team, once she was *my* teacher assistant; now she is a respected and trusted friend. The undaunting, fascinating spirit of this woman parallels my career and offers the beginning from which my research questions originate.

I have learned a great deal from my relationships with teacher assistants over the years that I have worked in this job and have relayed this fact to certain teacher assistants to find them looking at me in dismay. When working in special education, the reciprocity that should exist in the relationship between consulting and/or classroom teacher and

teacher assistant is fundamental to successful teamwork; teacher assistants have become crucial members in the educational programming for students with diverse learning needs, and as such, should be recognized, valued, and honored for their educational contributions.

Characteristics of my silenced voice resound in the context of teacher assistants and the students with diverse learning needs with whom they work. Since much of their working context mirrors my own, I began to wonder what conditions would enable them to reach the potential that they envision for themselves. What factors are necessary to develop an empowering environment to create effective and committed teacher assistants? This thesis, a partial answer, also underlies a hope to provide a service to my colleagues, whom, I am sure, have been asking a similar question. In addition, I hope to inspire a paradigm shift that will afford teacher assistants the recognition and professional development necessary for excellent performance that could occur when they are viewed as more equitable members in the educational programming of students with diverse learning needs.

Over my ten years of teaching, I have worked with teacher assistants in every teaching assignment I have held; some were highly effective and committed professionals, while others were ineffective and detached employees. Informal conversations and relationships, reflective teaching, observing, living, and listening to the stories of colleagues, teacher assistants, parents, and students has resulted in many questions about the education of students with diverse learning needs and the teacher assistants who are required to work with them. What variables determined the success or failure of the working-learning relationship? What attitudes and beliefs did I hold that either dovetailed nicely with or abraded corrosively to destroy potential for teacher

assistants? Was the potential for an effective committed teacher assistant actually there or did I assume it was? If the potential was there, how did I fail to bring it to fruition? How can teacher assistants be inspired to embrace their work as a life-calling as many teachers do and commit themselves to extraordinary performance that can create a learning community of excellence?

As a consulting teacher, I recognize the importance of developing a deep and abiding love and respect for humane learning and life; to enable individuals to have control and satisfaction in their lives; to open the possibility to achieve greater choice and satisfaction in life. The greater the satisfaction and fulfillment an individual attains, the greater the likelihood that there will be a return of "good" to society. Such an individual will likely participate in altruistic behaviors when her life is respected, heard, valued, and full. Through the emergence of respect, value, and voice, arises a congruent recognition and responsibility to improve the conditions of the world in which we live.

The opportunity for teacher assistants to return "good" to society can emerge from their professional fulfillment through both allegiance to a learning organization that strives for extraordinary performance, and an organization that meets their needs as individuals wanting to reach maximum potential who wish to give something positive and lasting in return. An organization such as this, a school, can become the impetus for social change that can reconnect children with diverse learning needs to significant, caring, and positive role models as found in effective and committed teacher assistants.

Schools are the obvious venue where social change can begin. Education is a major socialization process in which children from diverse backgrounds merge en masse, to learn the mechanisms of the system in which they live. It is important that educators give children the means for improving their quality of life in their communities: to become

independent, happy and positively contributing members within their communities. The requisite academic skills, obviously, are those that help one use the tools of the culture: literacy in reading, writing, and mathematics, and critical thinking skills. The invisible tools, cultural literacy and knowledge, are those that can instill a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and achievement: historical knowledge and social perspectives, competence, respect, dignity, value—audible voice. Thus, will children develop into critical thinkers and life-long learners; active citizens in a democratic society.

Many of the children that I encounter are increasingly making their pain audible. They are the children who are alienated and disengaged from relationships with caring and significant adults. They are more importantly, students with diverse learning needs.

Students At-Risk, Students At-Promise

Who are these children? What are their needs? What do they look like? Where are they? These children are everywhere. They stand beside, inside, and around us. They are wonderful, beautiful, striving, hurting children who want only to belong, to be heard, to learn like everyone else.

Students with diverse learning needs often feel powerless to make any differences upon their environment; they are silenced and voiceless. They often feel worthless and unconsciously sabotage their own success. They do not know how to communicate their needs, and regularly feel their needs are unimportant. They display and experience regular and extreme frustration, anger, and sorrow over their failures, and they feel and experience a horrible sense of inadequacy. Despite feelings of inadequacy, they have unrealistic expectations; they want marks that are above average, but do not know how to achieve this. Yet, perhaps this is not such an inconsistency; it would serve the useful purpose, constant proof of unworthiness, support of a de-valued feeling that permeates

their very existence. Hazards abound with school and social failure for these children; increased risk of anti-social behaviors, isolation, and further disconnection, which may result in personal suicide or societal suicide.

Students with diverse learning needs require an understanding, an awareness of hegemonic forces that have conspired in their oppression. They frequently come from disempowering environments that are isolated and devalued in the face of the dominant group. The path for release from this labyrinth remains invisible to their eyes; they cannot find a way to escape from their confining, claustrophobic world. In school, by the very nature of their learning difficulties or home environments, they become isolated from their peers. Many of them want nothing more than to belong. They want to be like the "others." Nevertheless, there is a fundamental problem—these children are the 'others'. They have spent their lives in one shape, existing as the 'other', a minority in a world that moves too quickly or disregards their needs. These children need their place of value, of voice, and of contribution in their communities.

A successful school, like a successful business, is a cohesive community of shared values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies. The community celebrates its saga by telling stories of heroes and heroines who embody the core values of the community. Human bonds are forged to release a powerful synergy of shared responsibility. All members are involved as the adversarial mentality is supplanted by a spirit of cooperation and mutual commitment. (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Bockern, 1992. pp. 40-41)

Alienated and disengaged children, children with diverse learning needs require multiple opportunities to personally experience and construct an understanding of how society functions. Since they do not understand the invisible rules, many of these children meet with punishing corrections that serve only to isolate them further from significant adults and their peers. This punishment drives a wider wedge between what they are and what they could be. They need to understand where the rules, values, and beliefs of the

larger world derive. They ache to have their needs for belonging, love, and worth met. They need to practice how to live in the world where they reside and so, with practice, develop internalized understanding. The greater the familiarity and awareness that children with diverse learning needs have of the etymology of the rules, beliefs, and values of the culture in which they live, the greater can be their transformation. Just as a river will find a new outlet when obstructed, these children with diverse learning needs can understand the reason and imposition of rules, beliefs, and values, if they understand the etymology of them; then as a social order, we might slowly change the course of society. By refusing to blindly accept traditions and truths because "that's the way it has always been", if we, as social members no longer mindlessly encourage the "others" to accept this belief, we have an opportunity to instigate change.

One opportunity for social change can lie in the empowerment and development of effective and committed teacher assistants. They have the potential to be an army for a peaceful social revolution; a reclamation of voice for those who have been silenced and oppressed. The desire, the passion that drives me to create this army could through example, result in the empowerment of the children who stand voiceless, powerless, and alienated.

Empathic connection.

He was a marginal youth; ill-kept, raggedy, unwashed. He lived in the world of the others. His impoverished background was more than economic alone. Cruelly ostracized, he lived in loneliness. Invisibility swirled around him; he was small and thin, a waif.

I remember him well: I too looked at his clothes, smelled his odor, tried to keep my distance. I must not have kept my distance as well as I thought.

A conversation boomeranged back to me via another marginal student. They find each other: loneliness magnetizes loneliness with strongly powered attractive forces. When you exist as an-other, you seek "others" to help you belong to something, someone, somewhere. You crave acceptance and love.

This young man identified me as the best teacher in the junior high. Why would he do that? I did not remember spending any amount of time with him. I was aware of the loneliness carefully shrouded behind porcupine quills in junior high students, and so, I tried to greet those who lived in the barrens of loneliness. Maybe I spoke ten times to

him throughout his three years at school. Perhaps I smiled at him in the halls as we passed, bustling about our business. Perhaps when I spoke to him, I smiled and asked him how he was, or, was it a good morning? Maybe, I even asked him if he had a good weekend and stopped to listen to his answer.

Currently, four years later, he has withdrawn from traditional high school and is experiencing greater alienation. After countless lates, unexplained absences, and general academic neglect, he has been suspended; expulsion is on the horizon.

I see him on the streets from time to time. I try to reconnect, to draw a sense of value and worth from somewhere deep within him. I ask him how his life is going; does he have plans for after grade 12; does he have plans to find a job?

Still, he wanders aimlessly, alone, finding some vandalism when the whim grabs him, hoping various drugs will provide a temporary release from his agony, looking for a place to belong, someone to care, someone to expect the best that he can give...hope lies waiting, resilience is deep within, an opportunity to see and experience the world differently could create so much.

I do not remember having spent much time with him.

He was a lonely boy. I had done so little for him, yet he remembered it as so much.

Somehow, we connected across a cold, barren, expanse of isolation and silence, and yet, I did not hear the pain in his voice. Perceptions are our own personal reality, and it does not matter that in my mind I did very little to alleviate his anguish. In his mind, I offered a great deal compared to others in his educational experience. The intervention of adults investing care, honesty, and respect to both children who are alienated and disengaged as well as those who present with diverse learning needs has the potential to begin a social revolution whereby those who have been silent, silenced, and oppressed can be reunited with their rightful sense of self, dignity to be heard, and the opportunity to make choices for themselves, a chance for possibilities never before envisioned...Lest the door closes on their dreams, remember there are deep reserves within these children where resiliency lies waiting for those who will take the time to make connections of value, validation, and respect in the school, on the streets, and in the community. If a smile, a gentle touch, or a supportive word can fill them with worth, what then can a work force of teacher assistants committed to the reclamation of these children create?

Promising Changes

“Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.” (Frankl, 1959, p. 98)

At the time of writing, I am pleased to note that my school district has developed a teacher assistant handbook that will be given to each teacher assistant in the district. Committee members who joined together to create this guide include two administrators, one classroom teacher, two teacher assistants, two consulting teachers, and an assistant superintendent. The handbook provides information that will be helpful for newly hired teacher assistants in orienting themselves to a school system and will also serve as an ongoing resource for long-term teacher assistants; a source designed to respect and value the work teacher assistants perform in supporting educational programming of students with diverse learning needs. In addition, there are orientation workshops planned for two or three times during the academic year for new teacher assistants to attend. Furthermore, all teacher assistants will be expected to and are provided paid time to attend three workshops a year as an avenue for their ongoing professional development.

I have been involved in the development of this handbook and in some of the workshop planning. I am very excited about the possibilities that lie ahead for teacher assistants and ultimately, the students with whom they work.

The final part of the search for an empowering climate that will weave effective, committed, and long-term teacher assistants into the fabric of our schools is the value and worth teacher assistants are given by the individual school sites: administrators, classroom teachers, and consulting teachers.

My district stands before an open gateway of new and promising perspectives of teacher assistants in the education of students with diverse learning needs. I am

honored to be a part of this opportunity.

Post Script

As a result of the work that has gone into this research, I am reminded of the fragility of the self-esteem, self-concept, and self-image we each hold as human beings. Through my roles as a consulting teacher and also as a mother of children with diverse learning needs, I am acutely aware of this fact in students since they are in a sense, just beginning to enter the at-promise-potentialities of their lives. My interviews with teacher assistants have furthered my understanding that within the inner core of each of us human beings resides the psyche of a child with diverse learning needs despite differences in age, life experience, and life- and work-roles. It is my hope that this work can be a reminder to tread gently, lovingly, humanely in our relationships not only with students with diverse learning needs, but also with our educational colleagues: teacher assistants, teachers, consulting teachers, and our administration.

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Appendix A
Letter of Invitation and Consent to Participate

Dear Teacher Assistant:

As a graduate student at The University of Lethbridge, I am conducting research on the perspectives of teacher assistants and their needs as part of the educational process to provide an inside view of the difficulties and needs that teacher assistants experience. I am hoping the results of these interviews will open dialogue to generate professional guidelines for practice, orientation and professional development for teacher assistants.

As part of the research, you are being asked to participate as one of six interviewees. Since your participation is entirely voluntary, at any time, you may decide to withdraw, without prejudice.

Your taped responses will be treated with the utmost respect and confidentiality. They will not be given to any other party. The focus of the research is to identify your perspectives of the themes, concerns, and issues as felt by teacher assistants; you are not asked to reveal confidential details. When powerful and illuminating quotes, details, or issues are used to illustrate a theme, concern, or issue, identifying characteristics will be removed or eliminated to preserve your identity.

I would very much appreciate your participation in these interviews. If you choose to do so, please indicate your willingness by signing this letter in the space provided below. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at jmwasy@home.com or telephone me at 345-2151. Also, feel free to contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Leah Fowler at the University of Lethbridge (329-2457, email: leah.fowler@uleth.ca), or Dr. Keith Roscoe, Chair of Human Subjects Research Committee, The University of Lethbridge (329-2446, email: keith.roscoe@uleth.ca), if you wish additional information.

Please sign below and return to me.

Sincerely,

Joanne Wasykowski

I have read the above information and agree to be interviewed.

Name

Signature

Date

Appendix B
Interview Question Blueprint
Perspectives of Teacher Assistants

1. Why have you chosen to become a Teacher Assistant?
2. How long have you been a Teacher Assistant?
3. What personality strengths do you see necessary for success in this work?
4. What knowledge, skills, and attributes are necessary to work as a Teacher Assistant?
5. What do you need to feel part of the entire school?
6. What do you require in order to feel part of the Student Services Team?
7. What skills and attributes held by the Consulting Teacher are necessary for your best work performance?
8. What supports do you require to for your best performance?
9. What makes you feel appreciated with your work?
10. What conditions can prevent your best performance?
11. What can cause irritation or frustration in your work?
12. What can make you feel anxious in your work?
13. How would you like the situation to be handled when you make a mistake or misjudgment in your work?
14. What conditions or supports must be in place for you feel competent in your work?
15. What supports do you require as an adult learner?
16. What would you view as adequate on-the-job training?
17. Are there any other questions I should have asked?
18. If you could give any advice to teachers about teacher assistants, what would you say?
19. Are there any comments you would like to add?

Please indicate into which age category you fit.

___ 20-30

___ 31-40

___ 41-50+