



Commentary

Reflections on a Career Devoted to the Integration of Handicapped Children

Karen Hulme

ABSTRACT

In this interview, retired educator Karen Hulme recounts how her interest in working with disabled children began at age six, a passion that led her to become a camp counsellor in her late teens at the School for Crippled Children. Next, she discusses her 42-year career at the Mackay Centre School, and some of the early initiatives that were in place to not only help integrate handicapped children into regular schools, but also introduce regular kids into the Mackay Centre—a process called “reverse integration.” She talks about the “Circle of Friends,” a school program that promotes social interactions, facilitates awareness, and breaks down barriers between students with and without disabilities. Lastly, she discusses the importance of educators in leadership positions to “... know *who* these kids are, what their needs are, and what their parents’ needs are ...”

Karen, you’ve been a highly respected educator in inclusive education for many years. Can you tell us about what attracted you to this area and why?

This is rather interesting. When I was six years old I had my tonsils out at the Montreal General [Hospital]. And every day I’d pass the school for crippled children...it was called just the School for Crippled Children. It was underneath the Shriner’s [Hospital], built into the side of the mountain. Every time I went up to the hospital they’d be dragging the kids out and putting them on the buses. And they’d take them from the wheelchair and throw them over their shoulders.

I would look at these kids being thrown over the shoulders of these bus drivers, and I would get so *upset* because it seemed so unfair that people would have to be carried that way—with their bottom in the face of the bus driver.

So, I decided when I was six years old that I was going to work with handicapped children. I don't know why. When I was 13 I phoned up the school...the school for crippled children...and asked them if I could go to the camp as a counsellor. They said I was too young. I called every year. Finally, at the age of 16, they let me go and I was there for several years, working. Then, I went to McGill, with the full intention of going to work at the School for Crippled Children up on Cedar, but I didn't end up there because they had just built a new school—they joined with the Mackay School for the Deaf and Dumb. They put the two schools together and it became the Mackay Centre for Deaf and Crippled Children. And I started there the year that it was built, in 1967, and I was there for 42 years. And I never looked at anything else. My parents didn't particularly like this idea at all. They wanted me to be a doctor but there was no swaying [me] anywhere along: I was always going to work with handicapped kids.

Many of your years as an educator were spent at Mackay Centre, which has played a unique role in the Montreal community. Tell us about the mission of Mackay Centre.

Mackay Centre was originally built as a school in 1965. It was donated by Domtar, and a wonderful man who was the president at the time. As time went on, more and more physiotherapists, occupational therapists, audiologists, and so on, started coming to the building to service the children. Eventually, it became a rehabilitation centre with a school, instead of a school with a rehabilitation centre. It had outpatients...all the kids in the school...and the outpatients [were] the biggest part of the building. It's now still a school and still a rehabilitation centre, but there is a question as to whether it's going to be a school or a rehabilitation centre—the government is working on that right now.

Can you tell us how children from outside the school became a part of that school?

Initially Mackay serviced all the Maritime provinces, Quebec, and part of Ontario. We had a huge residence of about 400 kids. Then it became just for the Island of Montreal... The children who came to Mackay needed rehabilitation and their parents couldn't be taking them three and four times a week—maybe to two different kinds of services—it became overwhelming. So they sent their children to live—or live *and*

attend the school—where they could get the rehabilitation services. They usually stayed three or four years, and then they went back out into the regular system.

In 1974, there were a few children who left Mackay and were integrated into regular schools. Through the parents I noticed it really wasn't working. The schools weren't ready for them, there were no architectural barriers removed...it just was not working. So I went to the then Protestant School Board and asked them if I could have a job integrating kids in the regular schools—not knowing *anything* about it. But it seemed as though somebody needed to be out there helping these kids being integrated. The school board gave me the job. So I thought, well, what about all the kids in the school? They're not going to have regular kids around them. Why don't we bring regular kids to Mackay? So at the same time that we started integrating them out—and we integrated them out as groups, we didn't just integrate individual kids—we started bringing regular kids to Mackay. It became a very popular program. We tried to have [an] equal number of handicapped children and regular children in the same classroom, and we tried to match them up. We had a whole system of how we would evaluate the kids, and who we would choose.

We had no trouble at all because the kids really wanted to be there. Many kids who want[ed] to nurture other kids, who want[ed] to take care of them, also want[ed] to push a wheelchair. That was a very popular activity when they first started. After they'd been there a few months, they didn't do that any more. It was *fabulous* when it first started. I would go to the school and say to the principal, "Would you like to take a handicapped child in your school?" and if the principal said, "Well, what can I do? That sounds wonderful," I would get all excited and would integrate a child into that school, even if it wasn't in their area—at least we were *doing something*. If the area where the child came from didn't want the child, or said we couldn't make the architectural changes, or whatever, we would go to another school. Keith School in LaSalle *wanted our kids* so, we moved a whole class of about eight really, really disabled children there for three months. I went down there every day and helped them integrate them. We took them away to science camp and did all kinds of activities with them. After three months, there was no way these kids wanted to come back, and there was no way that we could take them back because the parents would have been so upset. So, we left them. That group of kids stayed there for quite a few years.

And then we started integrating individual children into individual schools, and that was a huge problem because the architectural changes—the boards didn't have the money to do it and the teachers weren't trained. There were certain schools, like Riverdale, that did a fabulous job, and then there were other schools that just didn't

have anybody in the school who was trained for special education, and these kids had a lot of special needs. They also needed *some* rehab, and the school boards weren't, at that time, providing rehab. Mackay Centre was not going to travel out to the schools very often, maybe once a year to do an evaluation. So, it became a real problem.

What do you think the children who came from the school system to Mackay Centre learned from that experience?

Incredible amount of stuff. I remember one child coming for two days, and she [said], "I really want to come to Mackay Centre but are all these children going to die while I'm here?" And so I had to explain to her what cerebral palsy was, spina bifida—she was very, very bright—and so that she wouldn't think that anybody was going to...everything was going to be fine, and she was going to have a wonderful time. She stayed for three years and she was really a fabulous reverse-integrated kid. We really enjoyed having her because she was a real ambassador: when she left Mackay she went out into other schools and talked about them all the time and had her best friend come over and visit her school, and they played wheelchair basketball. The regular kid learned how to use a wheelchair, and still does, and she plays it professionally. And, she's not handicapped. But her best friend comes along with her and they play wheelchair basketball.

That's a success story. Can you share another success story that you experienced in your tenure there?

Well, that really is the biggest one because they're friends, they're real friends. Lots of kids went out and really did very well academically, but lots of them went out and didn't make friends. And for me, that was the most important thing—was that they made friends. At assemblies, if they didn't make friends, often they were unhappy, and we knew they were unhappy and we talked to them about it and sometimes we even got them help. But, I found that children who were physically disabled wanted to have friends who were also physically handicapped because they understood each other's needs. Not the regular kids who are running away from them all the time, or have other friends and want to be cool, and so on, and it wasn't cool to hang around with a child in a wheelchair—and it was, the friendship aspect was, a huge issue. For me it was. You know, if we couldn't get the kid in the school we'd find a way: we built ramps in the middle of the night to get kids into schools. And we could do all those things if we had to, but if they didn't have a friend, you know, they were just going down the hall just all by themselves in their electric wheelchair, eating by themselves, nobody ate with

Reflections on a Career Devoted to the Integration of Handicapped Children

them, and they were so lonely. They wondered why no one befriended them and what was wrong with them: everyone seemed to have friends and they didn't. This worrying took up a lot of their time. They wanted to be part of the group and they didn't know how to do it.

And so there weren't a great number of success stories, but the best ones were the kids who went out into schools where there were reverse-integrated kids who had already been to Mackay, and who understood the situation and knew how to act with a person who is handicapped. There was nobody in the schools who *knew* that when you talked to a person in a wheelchair you get down at their level, and you have eye contact with them. You don't talk down to them, like this [demonstrating], you sit in the chair beside them. Things like this, they didn't know, and they were uncomfortable, and they didn't know if this person was sick or why were they in a wheelchair. Because they were never given the opportunity—the person in the wheelchair—to talk about it, and the teachers didn't have time to run programs to have these kids make friends. And often they had an aid who sat beside them, and who helped them either with writing—they didn't have computers when we first started to do their writing and help them with their academics—so their friend was the aid, not the other children, not the peer group.

You've suggested some challenges that you faced in your experiences at the Centre, can you talk about any other challenges?

The biggest challenges are, at the board level, transportation. Having the proper kinds of buses: the kids are transported properly and tied in properly, and the bus drivers understand what to do if something goes wrong in the bus—that's a big issue. And another one is toileting, that's a huge issue. The people who are taking these kids to the bathroom—are often not trained—and there have been issues around that. Because those are two things that these kids *need*, that other kids don't need. But it would be nice if they could travel on the same bus with the regular kids, but they can't.

Can you tell us about the program called "Circle of Friends," developed by Evelyn Lustaus and her colleagues, which you implemented.

Oh, I really love this program. It started off where you went into a classroom where there was a handicapped child, and I would teach a program using consecutive circles, and talk about different kinds of friends: the friends who we're closest to, the friends we're not close to...then I would talk about the child in the wheelchair whose

friends were the grandmother, the parents, the caretaker, the doctors, the physio, the audiologist—whoever it was. And then we would talk about *how can we change that circle?* If I come back in a week, *what can we do to change that circle?* So, we'd take all the words that had to do with friendship, and all the words that had to do with loneliness, and we'd talk about this and set up a program for this child—the whole class would do it.

And then—if I could work with the principal—we would set up some program where, either the most popular kids in the school, or some other kids who have needs and the popular kids, would have special roles in the school as prefects or even...we did a lot of recycling of juice containers...and they were every assembly, these kids (including the kids in the wheelchairs) were all talked about at the assembly about what a wonderful job they were doing, and so everybody knew them and everybody knew that they were doing something special in the school. This was *really* important, this "Circle of Friends," and we would also go out at night sometimes. We would go to a movie, all of us together, the group that we had decided in the school that was going to support this handicapped person. And it took up a great amount of time and a great amount of writing, and a lot of the teachers didn't want to get involved... the kind of writing where, "Let's today talk about one of the issues around friendship. We're all going to write about it." And the teachers had a curriculum they had to finish, and they didn't necessarily want to finish *my* curriculum. And some of them were terrific.

I remember at Lindsay Place we used to have a barbecue every two weeks, after school. We'd have a barbecue out in the backyard, on the field. And these kids... anybody who wanted to come, could come, and we would...the special needs kids were all there...all the special needs kids in the school. And it was *really* successful and the school was *really* behind it, and really wanted us to do it. And, Keith School, they were great on that one. They really helped me a lot. I did it in many, many schools, but I'll tell you it's lucky I wasn't married and didn't have a family because my whole life was the "Circle of Friends"—probably for 10 years. It really took...but what joy I had! I mean it wasn't a job, it was what I wanted to be doing, I wanted to make a difference for these kids who were going up to regular school.

What advice would you have for educators in leadership positions about inclusive education?

I think they've got to know the individuals. They've got to know *who* these kids are, what their needs are, and what their parents' needs are—they really have to

understand it and try and make it work. If it doesn't work it's a huge catastrophe. The school, everybody knows about it, and it's terrible for the child. But if it works, it's wonderful! It really is wonderful, and if the child is really included in everything, and everybody makes sure the child is included—we went horseback riding every year with the reverse-integrated kids and the regular kids. *Everybody* went horseback riding. *Everybody* has to do it. You know, I don't care if you're in a wheelchair: we're all going horseback riding! I think it's really important that the principal wants it to happen.

The schools that worked best were the schools that took groups of kids in from Mackay, and maybe had a separate class, and then fed them out into different things when they could do it, and made them very visible in the school and made sure that they ate in the cafeteria, and that other students in the school were involved with these kids—somehow, whatever way they decided to do it. But one child going into a school, unless the school was very excited to have this child, often was very lonely and really didn't do well.

There was a child that went to John Rennie [High School] and it was very difficult to understand his speech. He had cerebral palsy, and his parents were here as ambassadors from some country, and were just wonderful parents. They wanted him in a regular school. He crawled around the floor when he had to, to get to different places, and *he* taught the other people how to treat him. *He* taught the other children how to treat him, and he did it through humour and he had everybody on his side. He had the kind of personality and that makes a big difference—that makes a big difference for the teachers. You know, they have to learn to work with what they've got. If they don't *know* these kids that they have, they don't know what to do with them.



Karen Hulme graduated from McGill University with a B. Ed. in Teaching, a M. Ed. in Special Education, and a M. Ed. in Reading. For 42 years she worked at Mackay Centre, a school for children with physical disabilities, where she taught, administered a reverse integration program, and carried out the program of integration of physical handicapped children for the English Montreal School Board. Karen also taught in the Faculty of Child Care Counselling at College Marie Victorin as well as in Nigeria for the Canadian Teachers Federation. In addition, through the Katavik School Board she helped identify children who are deaf and/or physically handicapped and helped set up their programs in Northern Quebec. She is currently president of the board of CARE, an organization providing a recreational and educational program for adults with severe physical disabilities.