

INCLUDING CARSTEN

by Ana Mettler

Community is one of the key words of the Open School concept: to openly invite and integrate children of all ethnic backgrounds, gender, origin, experience, to include and involve their mothers and fathers, grandparents, neighbors, artists, businesspeople, foreigners; to consider all as equals in their contributions to the educational process, as givers and takers, as teachers and learners, as partakers of a shared human consciousness.

And yet, at all the fiestas, celebrations and assemblies my oldest son would remain a stranger to the school community that my other children and I had been a part of for so many years. His handsome appearance, not giving away immediately his enrollment in a program for the severely and multiply handicapped, invited friendly inquiries about which school he attended and what grade he was in, since he obviously was not an Open School student. These were unanswerable questions for him both for lack of verbal skills and for the fact that most special education programs do not have grades. Therefore, as long as nobody in “our” community would have a more intense opportunity to know my son, the usual getting-to-know-you rituals would be but futile and frustrating experiences.

Carsten would remain an outsider. Carsten did not attend my childrens’ school because he was handicapped. The school district believed that he was best served in a special class together with about 12 other children with significant disabilities.

I pondered this evaluation, I observed, I did not agree. Much good happened in this special classroom, there is no question about that. But I knew we had to go beyond the concept of involuntary isolation.

The happiest and most fulfilling moments for him and the rest of the family, the most honest life-situations occurred when he could be a true equal to us and with us: sitting in the back of the car singing crazy and catchy commercials with his brother and sister, riding the bike with us around the lake at full speed, surpassing me at jogging, sweeping the kitchen floor meticulously clean, while all others, too, were involved in cleaning the house, making coffee in the morning and sharing his first

cup with me, working in the garden, digging relentlessly and creating space for new planting. During these times the “handicap” was not only momentarily forgotten but truly overcome.

If we as a family could do this, if we could manage to integrate Carsten into our “normal” lives, with all the follies and crazinesses, I could not help thinking that an Open School, a “community” school had to be able to do it, too.

First, the school had to be able to embrace this idea. As I proposed to include my son and all other handicapped siblings of Open School students that I thought might be out there, my fears and inhibitions came up: How could I possibly expect anyone else to carry this burden, in a world where everyone seems overwhelmed? Was this not my responsibility and mine alone?

Should I not be realistic about Carsten’s limitations and the severity of his diagnosis? Should I not listen to the advice and recommendation of those trained in the field of special education?

Beyond these doubts, my belief in and commitment to the maxims of community remained unshaken: that we all are takers and givers, that mutual happiness and fulfillment, growth and challenge to grow are more likely to be achieved by inclusion rather than exclusion; that segregation will never be a tool for overcoming but will always be a hindrance for meaningful human development.

I could see how much an Open School lent itself to the idea and realization of inclusion: its emphasis on individualized, self-paced learning, gathering in interest groups, emphasis on hands-on learning, its open structure overall, the inter-age concept, the community service idea, the absence of any need for “grading”, the belief in life-long learning, the belief in genuine learning rather than mere memorizing for tests.

Even though I would ask the community to carry more than the usual, I knew that they would be given something back in return by Carsten, something that was unique and invaluable. To include a handicapped human being into the realm of your daily life is a challenge and a chance for profound growth in many ways. It is an opportunity to learn and practice what true human compassion is, compassion that is fully accepting, that is empathic and has nothing to do with mere pity.

It addresses what Zorba the Greek once yelled out: “Man needs some craziness in life!” What he calls “craziness” or what some might call “difference” forces us to open up our view of the world, to become

aware that our thinking and feeling are to an immense degree fettered by ethnic, rational, materialistic, practical categories deeply ingrained in us through upbringing and background. It changes our perceptions and perspectives, our points of view, our understanding and interpretations of reality. It allows a hitherto unthought of and unexperienced way of life to happen and to be savored. It teaches us to embrace dichotomies, to strive for the highest goals and expectations and yet to be able to let go of them completely. We then become able to help a person overcome his or her handicap and yet to fully accept that very same handicap as a genuine part of that other person.

It is these qualities that are needed for “successful” inclusion and at the same time they are what inclusion will bring forth: compassion and an open mind. And as in all important life issues it will always remain an achievement of the moment, neither life nor inclusion are static, never finished, but always in flux, in process. My beliefs and convictions have carried me further than my doubts.

At this point, Carsten has attended the Open School for two years. He has had vocational training in the school cafeteria. He has shelved books in the library and taken poetry and yoga classes. He has gone on trips and bicycle tours. He and some peers have put together a puppet show for the preschool. He did woodworking, had piano lessons and participated in music improvisation classes.

And above all, every day that he comes to school he is showered by the warmest welcome by each member of the school community who crosses his path.

Carsten’s Poem:

Good good tree.

Applegrass. Sunny day.
Talk happy. Boat paddle.

I laugh and laugh.