

First Grade
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In October 1948, one month before Truman beat Dewey, and more than 25 years before federal law (I.D.E.A.) guaranteed an education to people with disabilities, I became the first child with a severe disability in Sioux City, Iowa to be mainstreamed. Born with cerebral palsy, I could walk leaning on others and could talk so that only Mom, Dad, and a few others could understand me.

In those days, such children in Sioux City either attended special classes or received home instruction; but the school social worker, Mrs. Bowers, promised to help find a normal class for me to attend. My father was the counselor and director of a Sioux City social agency and had helped some of her clients, so she was glad to help me in return.

I was almost six and was very interested in starting school. I could read a little and remember nagging Mom to teach me more. Miss Bowers spoke to several first grade teachers in neighborhood schools, until she met Miss Erskine who was interested in having me in her class. Miss Erskine had just the right kind of class for me: her class was slower than the other three first grade classes at that school. This class would take two school years to complete first grade work, and I would be the smartest child in the class, sometimes an important compensating benefit for a child with a disability.

I started school in October and must have known that I had to sell myself. On Halloween I gave everyone in the class a card and had Mom put a stick of gum in each one. When anyone asked me about my walking I said, "I can't walk well, but I can tell time." I would then show them Grandfather's big pocket watch and explain how to read it. They soon forgot about my walking.

When I began school, I attended only two hours a day so I would have time to get used to the routine, and the other children could get accustomed to the unusual child in their midst. I got tired at first, but gradually my stamina grew, and within six weeks I was able to attend all day. Mom stayed with me in class all the time at first just to translate my speech for Miss Erskine, but Mom's attendance became less necessary as Miss Erskine began to understand me, and as I began to do well academically after a month or so Mom no longer needed to come with me. All through school, though, Mom took the initiative in getting to know each of my teachers and encouraging them to call at the onset of any problem. I never felt awkward about this as it just seemed to be another dimension of my special circumstance.

My success in first grade gave my parents enormous joy. They saw it both as a signal of my eventual independence and as evidence that they would not need to educate me at home. For me, this first year was the onset of a completely mainstreamed education.

Because so few pupils with disabilities were mainstreamed then, there was almost no opportunity for me to meet them. In grade school I rarely came across other disabled pupils and often wondered if there were others. I met a few at several summer "camps for the handicapped", but most of them had educational or mental handicaps leaving us with little in common. I always left those camps after a few days because I could not stand being treated as a "disabled child".

Once, when I visited my grandparents for two weeks, I attended a special class for children with orthopedic disabilities in their community. Much time was wasted in naps and arts and crafts with little actual learning. I spent the entire two weeks worrying that I would fall behind in my class at home. I had a similar experience when I spent two weeks at a

rehabilitation center during my junior year of high school. My teachers at home had written out detailed daily homework assignments. For the first few days of rehabilitation program I would stay up until 11 p.m. each evening to finish my homework, then the staff started giving me tranquilizers. They viewed my industriousness as a neurotic symptom.

Throughout high school and college, I was the only student with a disability in attendance. I grew up being the only different one wherever I went; that helped prepare me for a life of employment. That is, throughout much of my career, I have been the only person with a disability in my work unit.

Because none of my teachers had taught a child with a disability before and because I attended school before teachers' colleges developed special education curricula, I had the advantage of being judged on my merits rather than on arbitrary standards or on the performance of pupils with disabilities who preceded me. I was lucky to have been placed in a mainstream class, where I was forced to work up to my potential.

My long-term ambitions were still greater than those that many of my teachers had for me. Perhaps that had something to do with my perception of my disability. People told me I was disabled, that my speech was slurred, and my walk clumsy and slow. Yet when I spoke I heard the words in my head as I said them, so they sounded clear to me. My walk seemed slow to me but it did not seem clumsy as I always looked straight ahead and could not see my legs twisting. With my strong self-confidence I could not understand how my disability might block success.

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