NAVIGATING THROUGH EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN LEARNING ASSISTANCE SERVICES: A PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF A LEARNING ASSISTANCE TEACHER IN AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SYSTEM IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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The purpose of the following study is to document some of my experiences as a learning assistance teacher in two distinctly different communities within the Catholic Independent Schools of the Vancouver Archdiocese or CISVA. In documenting my experiences which took place over the course of five years, I hope to raise awareness of the structural issues that impacted my work with various students identified as requiring learning assistance services. By identifying, describing, studying, and reflecting on these factors, it may be possible to offer recommendations that may expand how learning assistance services are provided within the CISVA.

Teaching elementary school children in the beginning of the twenty-first century in a pluralistic and diverse context as Canada is a complex endeavor. It is complicated by a wide range of stakeholders, who have a variety of expectations, values, and priorities when it comes to educating children. These differences in values and expectations can affect how educational resources and funds are prioritized. The process by which resources and funds are prioritized is affected by social arrangements, policies, structures, and thus can be highly political and idiosyncratic. How scarce resources are allocated both within schools and across schools in the CISVA highly impacts teachers and students at the local school level in terms of the kinds of services and programs that can be offered. What may not be easily detected are the wider implications differences in service delivery may have on our larger society in terms of social justice issues such as the social reproduction of cultural capital and the continuance of socioeconomic differences.

Within the complexity of education in British Columbia there is much rhetoric, misconception, and misunderstanding on both sides in regard to the public versus private
education discourse. Many public school educators are concerned about the increased number of children requiring special education funds and resources, as well as the complexity involved in integrating them into the regular classroom. There may be a perception that "private" independent schools exacerbate the situation in the public schools. Some may feel that public dollars are going to "rich" students in private schools. There may also be the perception that some private schools screen out those with special needs and learning differences. What may not be widely known is that as complex special education issues are in the public education system, the situation in the independent schools in British Columbia is even more intricate and convoluted. The complexity of special education delivery in the CISVA arises as it is overseen by three levels of governing bodies — the provincial Ministry of Education, the district board office, and the local parish education committee or PEC of the school.

Schools in the independent school system are impacted by the local community upon which enrolment and funds are dependent on. Thus, independent schools are directly affected by the trend towards fiscal tightening and the commodification of education. The provincial government oversees independent schools through the Independent Schools Branch of the Ministry of Education. As an independent school system, Catholic schools in the Vancouver Archdiocese do face many issues that have real consequences in the lives of some of our most vulnerable children, who are those with learning disabilities and special needs.

Learning assistance teachers working in an independent school context in British Columbia face a hodgepodge of policies, which may be confusing or even conflicting in some cases. Modernists describe school organizations as rational, unbiased, logical
systems that strive towards achieving efficiency and effectiveness. They perceive the world as an objective reality. Thus, using a positivist approach, they seek laws that govern behaviour, efficiency, and performance in organizations. These laws are then applied to all organizations regardless of contextual differences. From this body of research has emerged an emphasis on social structure; that is, the pursuit of efficiency and control through division of labour and the establishment of vertical and lateral coordination such as hierarchical power structures, policies, and procedures (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006).

Critical theorists and postmodernists note that “scientific” and positivistic methods are limited and limiting. These recent writings have raised the awareness that not all of what we do in education can be explained, rationalized, or predicted by the theories and ideas put forward by positivistic methods. Anti-positivists take into consideration the subjective nature of life in organizations. They have brought to light how policies, regulations, and practices derived from theories using supposedly non-biased, rational scientific methods in fact can have unaccountable or unpredictable outcomes or consequences on the quality of people’s lives. Such awareness has helped to broaden our understanding of the nature of research and how it can affect policies and practices that are upheld in our schools. This study examines how some of those organizational structures impact learning assistance teachers and special education students, as seen from the perspective of a learning assistance teacher.

Clandinin and Connolly (1994) advocate a narrative approach to research in education. They believe that such approaches give a more detailed contextual picture of what goes on in schools and education. Perhaps by having a greater understanding of
how our educational practices affect students, educators, and the general public, it may be possible to address inequities in practices, funding, and policies in our schools.

While there is much written about students receiving special education services, as well as special education policies, there is less written about the actual real-life experiences of learning assistance teachers as they try to navigate through complex contexts. Such actual accounts or stories are important because they can provide a rich context and insight into how and why certain educational decisions are made. Such stories have the potential to raise awareness of conditions or situations which may have unintentionally risen from social structures intended to be unbiased, efficient, and progressive.

Researchers in the field of teacher education note the growing awareness of the importance of personal narratives or teacher stories (Clandinin and Connolly 1994, Miller 2005, Kridel 1998). They believe the important role personal narratives play in the ongoing professional development of teachers. Such writings may be a creative problem solving tool in trying to solve educational issues.

Writing narratives can be a powerful tool in articulating one's lived experiences, beliefs, and assumptions. By writing narratives, teachers may become more aware of their own tendencies, biases, or blind-spots and thus address them. Those who advocate the use of personal narratives believe that a collective power can come about from the naming and the sharing of teaching experiences with other educators (Ashton and Denton 2006 p.4).

Personal accounts reveal an aspect of what Winograd (2003) describes as a teachers' "emotional work." Among the range of emotions tied to the work of teaching, teachers
may feel a variety of dysfunctional emotions such as feeling overwhelmed, confused, or ineffective. Winograd (2003 p. 1641) reflects how a self-accusatory stance “…diverts teachers’ attention from structural problems in their working conditions and, instead, focuses attention on the inadequacies of teachers as individuals. In such contexts, it is important for teachers to try to make sense of their actions.” When teachers’ emotional work is revealed and articulated in personal accounts, it is important to look beyond those emotions to the social arrangements and organizations that may have inadvertently led to unintended consequences. In other words, while learning assistance teachers may feel discouraged and may blame themselves, or be blamed by parents or others, it is important to reflect beyond emotions. It is important to look at broader social and political factors that may have contributed to the problem. For example, a lack of political will in a community may lead to inadequate funding which in turn may restrict the kinds of therapies and services needed. Thus, information from such personal accounts may then help to form better procedures, guidelines, and policies in the delivery of learning assistance services. Improved policies may serve to ensure a more equitable distribution of scarce special education funds.

From 1997 to 2004 I entailed new experiences and had the privilege of being a learning assistance teacher in two distinct schools within the CISVA. One school was located in a lower socio-economic area of a lower mainland city, while the other school was located in an upper middle socio-economic area of the same city. The school demographics and cultures were very different. Working as a learning assistance teacher in each of these situations entailed new experiences and raised a variety of emotions.
These experiences raised for me fundamental questions as to the nature of learning assistance services and its delivery within the CISVA.

What follows below is an autobiographical, self study of my experiences documented in case studies of two school contexts. The study has two main purposes. One goal is to document my experiences of a learning assistance teacher working in an independent school setting and to reflect on how the social structure affected my work as a learning assistance teacher. By providing specific details of each unique situation, I hope to raise awareness of some of the complexities and consequences of trying to provide learning assistance services within an independent school context in British Columbia.

The second goal is to reflect on my experiences and to ascertain how the differences in the two school situations affected the educational experiences of the children from my perspective as their learning assistance teacher. I will reflect on some of these experiences in light of the research and theories in the fields of personal narratives, educational sociology, educational leadership, and critical theory. By reflecting on the broader educational landscape it may be possible to put my experiences into context and identify relationships and aspects of the formal social structure that affected me as a learning assistance teacher, as well as how they impacted some of my students.

Winograd (2003) states that it is through such processes that teachers are able to better comprehend the relationship between the social structures and their emotional work. With a better understanding, it may be possible to utilize emotions such as anger to bring about change through activism. As St. Augustine states “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage
to see that they do not remain the way they are” (quoted in Mulligan 2005 p. 47). In other words, many feel that it is important to recognize and to name injustices. By raising awareness, it enables people to act collectively to bring about more positive transformative changes in society (Wetherell and Nodding 1991; Winograd 2003; and Clandinin and Connelly 1999).

Once policies and practices are better elucidated, it may be possible to offer a number of recommendations for changing some of the structures surrounding the delivery of special education services within the CISVA. Documenting some of the issues associated with special education services may lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and improve the educational experiences of students requiring learning assistance services. It is also the hope that this study will increase the awareness as to what the professional knowledge landscape and experiences of a learning assistance teacher within the independent school system is like. It is hoped that this study will foster understanding between educators not only within the CISVA and the other Catholic school systems within British Columbia, but within the broader public and independent school systems as well, so that we may work towards supporting all our students.

Methods

This study documents my personal experiences as a learning assistance teacher in a low socioeconomic neighborhood on the one hand, and a high socioeconomic neighborhood on the other within a lower mainland city. An autobiographical narrative will be utilized. A self-study or autobiography lies within the qualitative methodology identified as narrative inquiry. Recently, qualitative methods and narrative inquiry, in
general, have increased in the field of education. A growing number of educator/researchers have noted how the complex, multilayered, contextual, socially-constructed nature of teaching cannot be effectively captured by the more traditional, authoritarian, scientific research methods.

Kridel (1998) affirms the importance of personal narratives and the power of stories especially in the postmodern age. This is also noted by Ashton and Denton (2006 p. 4) when they state that “in the subtle shadings of embodied experience, we are freed from the western dualisms of matter/spirit, body/mind, heart/intellect, into new vistas of intuitive and personal knowing.”

Jalongo and Isenberg (1995) identify narratives as being essential in any authentic study of teaching. They state that narrative inquiry is imperative for teachers to gain insight into their own personal professional knowledge and development. This sentiment is also reflected in Clandinin and Connelly (1998 & 2000) when they note the important role narratives play in bridging the practical to the theoretical in education.

Clandinin and Connelly (1990 p.2) discuss how humans are “storytelling organisms.” They view narrative as both a phenomenon (stories) and a method (inquiry). In other words, “narratives name the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study” (Clandinin and Connelly 1990 p.2).

Self-study/Autobiography

Phillion (2005), Bullough (1998), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Close (2005) view the goal of autobiographies as an exploration to reveal more about ourselves, as well the context in which we make practical decisions. Thus, it may unearth our implicit beliefs about students, the nature of learning, and about our identity and roles as teachers.
It may also reveal the socio-economic and political contexts in which we work. Many feel that it is important to have personal narratives connect with the larger picture of society.

Various researchers have commented on possible pitfalls to be aware of in self-studies and autobiographies. These include issues of selectivity and omissions, and the "illusion of realism" (Pinar and Pautz 1998). In other words, autobiographies are limited in that they provide one perspective. Such studies are affected by the perception, point of view, and bias of the writer. The writer may not be aware of other aspects of an issue. Also, there may be the potential for falsehood and/or exaggeration.

Narratives, including autobiographies and self-studies, have criteria other than objectivity, reliability, validity, and generalizability which are important in quantitative research. Clandinin and Connelly (1990 p. 7) reminds us that "it is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research." Various researchers offer many criteria such as that narratives should have thick descriptions, or that they should not be guilty of selectivity.

Jalongo and Isenberg (1993) state that good narratives should have four main characteristics. First of all, the story should ring true or seem plausible. It should invite reflection and discourse. It should be able to withstand being scrutinized beneath the surface and be open to reinterpretations or allow for the possibility of discovering new meanings upon repeated readings. Finally, the stories should be powerful enough to elicit emotions.

In the experiential snapshots which follow, I will describe the context of the situation and the choices that were available to me at that time. I will then articulate my
reflections on my experiences and emotional work in light of the educational research readings I have studied since beginning my graduate work.

**Narrative Inquiry and Social Justice**

Narratives and autobiographies can give voice to the marginalized. They have the potential for expanding our knowledge and exploring possibilities. Authors such as Phillion (2005 p. 9) and Close (2005 p. 668) comment that stories help to foster understanding and empathy. By realizing the commonalities with others, it encourages "boundary crossing." By naming differences, stories have the potential to extend our borders (Bullough 1998).

Pinar and Pautz (1998 p. 68-69) state that autobiographies can create "political spaces" that can serve to destabilize illusory notions of the "normal." Such political spaces can act to destabilize the neo-liberal agenda that acts towards the commodification and bureaucratization of society. Thus, the stories of individual lives give us new perspectives from which to examine our practices and to change them where needed.

By documenting my experiences as a learning assistance teacher, it is hoped to be able to see past the "emotional work" to better elucidate the flow of power and resources, the structures, policies, as well as the practices that led to differences in the delivery of specialized services between the two different socioeconomic schools. The ensuing recommendations are hoped to act towards filling in the gaps between our more and less affluent schools.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The following self-study and autobiography includes "snapshots" composed of memories and recollections of situations in my work as a learning assistance teacher in
two schools in the Catholic school system in a large urban center in the Lower Mainland. These “snapshots” describe people, places, emotions, beliefs, personal practical knowledge, and settings at a particular time. Following these descriptions, will be a discussion of how those experiences affected my personal practical knowledge.

Following the discussions regarding the snapshots, I will offer a reflection in light of theories in educational administration, educational sociology, politics, and critical theory. Thus, the self-study and autobiography will be an exploration of how my own personal practical knowledge has shifted or changed due to my experiences as a learning assistance teacher.

To avoid the potential pitfalls of narrative inquiry such as issues surrounding omissions and selectivity, I have elicited the help of several people to act as critics in the initial stages of my study. They served as critics in informal discussions regarding specific interpretations of policies and practices in regards to the CISVA and the delivery of learning assistance services. These people include other learning assistance teachers, educators, board personnel, regular education teachers, as well as educators outside of the Vancouver Archdiocese. These informal discussions took place during meetings, phone calls, and e-mails.

Clandinin and Connolly (2000) suggest inviting readers to critique the stories to avoid some of the pitfalls of narratives. Thus, I have asked three people to act as critics. Each of them will read the self-study independently. One is a former colleague who still teaches at one of the schools mentioned in the study. He knows the students and the school community and can alert me to inconsistencies or gaps I may have missed. He did not know me when I was a learning assistance teacher at the school, so he will have a
different perspective in relation to the story recounted in the study. Another critic is a fellow former learning assistance teacher from another Catholic school district. She is knowledgeable of the provincial special education policies and she brings a perspective from someone in a different Catholic school context. A third critic is a non-educator who has no background in special education. He may be instrumental in clarifying some taken-for-granted assumptions and tacit understandings that need to be elucidated. Inviting others to read the stories may reduce some of the pitfalls of narrative writing in the accounts provided.

The three critics will work independently of each other. Each critic will read each of the two snapshots and the analysis. They will critique them for accuracy and clarity. They will also check for coherency and flow to ensure that there is sufficient details given so that the snapshots will make sense as a narrative account.

This self-study may promote discussion among other educators as to the complex and demanding nature of teaching special education in an independent school system in British Columbia, and perhaps encourage collaborative work towards ensuring equitable services and resources for students who may require them.

The Institutional and Organizational Context of CISVA

_Hierarchy coupled with parochialism._ Unlike many independent schools in BC, the Catholic schools in the province belong to districts with district offices. The Catholic Independent Schools of the Vancouver Archdiocese (CISVA) is a complex organization comprising 39 elementary schools and six secondary schools spanning from Chilliwack to Powell River. The school system is structured hierarchically. There exists the Board of Directors including the Archbishop, the vicar general of education, and elected
members from various Parish Education Committees. The district office through the superintendent and three assistant superintendents oversee the schools on behalf of the Archbishop and the Board of Directors. The superintendents make reports to the Board of Directors at monthly meetings which are closed to the outside except for two observers-one principal and one teacher representative elected from the Vancouver Catholic School Teachers’ Association (VCSTA). The teachers and principals have no voting power at these meetings. The superintendents meet with the principals’ association once a month. The superintendents also meet with the executive members of the VCSTA once a month. In addition to these meetings, the superintendents work with the principals on a number of other sub-committees ranging from those looking into professional development to those looking into various policy issues.

The hierarchy is coupled with a parochial structure, and the latter receives more emphasis. While the Vancouver Archdiocese has a district office, their role is more of an advisory one. Most decisions are made at the local level by the local parish education committee (PEC), which is comprised of elected parents and/or parishioners, most of whom do not have a background in education. Each school is formally run by the PEC, headed by the parish priest. The six PEC members are elected from within the parish and/or appointed by the pastor. Most of the PEC members are not professional educators. In extreme situations, the Board of Directors can disband a PEC. They have the power to hire principals and teachers, set budgets, and thus, have the potential to influence the flow of resources such as how much money goes into various curricular areas.

Catholic school district hierarchy is linked with a parochial model. The Vancouver Archdiocese is known to be one of the most parochial systems in all of Canada. In other
words, the local parishes have quite a bit of autonomy. The superintendent’s job is seen as mostly an advisory one to the parishes. Each parish has its own mini school board or PEC. They hire the principal and teachers. Issues of personnel are often deferred to the local PEC level. It differs significantly from other Catholic school systems in British Columbia. For example, in the Victoria Catholic school system, principals are hired by the district and are accountable to the superintendent. The teachers there are unionized and have a greater voice in terms of the allocation of funds for resources. Being less hierarchical, teachers are involved on many major decision making committees at the district level. School councils exist but do not have as much political weight as they do in Vancouver.

In Vancouver, the local PECs can set budgets and spend money as they see fit. Thus, it may be possible for some PECs to approve budgets where the athletic expenses are comparable or higher than the library’s budget. There are some restrictions in terms of how much tuition they can charge. The Board of Directors sets a permissible range for tuition. If PECs want to charge a higher tuition rate they must apply to the Board of Directors for permission. Also, the schools are levied a certain amount to pay for district personnel and services.

Metaphor of Family. The CISVA is part of a larger Catholic institution which functions in a symbolic system rife with myths, rituals, icons, canon law, doctrines, and stories. According to Church doctrine, there is a fundamental belief in the dignity of the human person. The aim of education for Catholics may be found in the original Latin word educare, which means to lead out. In view of this fundamental belief about the nature of human beings, the Church states in official documents that the essential goal of
Catholic education is the development of the whole person so that each person can work towards the benefit of the larger community.

Catholic teachings also emphasize the communal nature of human existence. From the stories of covenantal relationships found in the Bible and other texts, the idea of community is strong and is seen as fundamental to the life of a Catholic school. By looking at commonly used metaphors within the CISVA, it is possible to see the kinds of relationships that are formally encouraged. Metaphors not only make explicit the implicit, they have “...power to shape reality and structure the thoughts of people...” (Kendall and Kendall 1993, p.149).

The metaphor of a family is common in the Catholic Church. Kendall and Kendall (1993) note that according to the family metaphor, there is a priority or goal of promoting cohesion within the group. Cultural images and languages are used to gain compliance; words and images such as “obedience” and “sacrifice.” The metaphor of a family is expressed explicitly in school practices such as the importance given to relationship-building activities such as holding staff retreats, parties, and dinners. While there is emphasis on the whole group, there are tensions in how different members of the community meet their needs. The formal leader is seen as a head of a family who strives to balance the various needs within a family.

In a hierarchical parochial system such as the CISVA, the head of the family is considered to be the Archbishop followed by the pastors. This is reinforced in rituals such as the Mass, and in structures such as the deaneries which make up the major decision making bodies of the Archdiocese. These groups include few lay people.
Within a hierarchical system, power is exerted as power over. There exist few formal opportunities for some members of the school community to express their voice. Teachers are not included in any major decision making groups other than those initiated by consultants having to do with some aspects of the curriculum. For instance, there was a group of learning assistance teachers representing different areas of the district. They met with the consultant for special education to discuss any Ministry of Education changes to the special education policies. They used to act as coordinators to bring suggestions for professional development, but this is no longer the case.

Special education policies can vary significantly between schools. It is inevitable that within such an inconsistent or erratic context, there lies the possibility of unintended consequences for students and teachers such as discrepancies in the quality of services being provided due to differences between a community’s political will and/or ability to access resources, funds, and qualified personnel.

Partial public funding. While most provinces provide 100% funding to their Catholic schools, British Columbia does not. The Ministry of Education provides 50 per cent of operational costs such as the purchase of textbooks, and other items as specified in section 12 of the Independent Schools Act. It does not include costs such as the construction costs of schools. The 50 per cent is based on the location of the specific schools. For example, CISVA schools located in Coquitlam are funded 50 per cent of what the public schools in Coquitlam receive from the Ministry of Education. Thus, the government grants to CISVA schools can vary depending where it is located. For instance, the Catholic schools in Coquitlam receive $200 less per student than Catholic schools in Vancouver.
The PEC is required to raise any other funds needed to run the school. Part of the task of the PEC is to organize a variety of fundraising activities throughout the year. The ability of the PEC to generate extra funds through fundraising varies greatly from school to school. Thus, a school in a higher socio-economic area generally has the means and resources to generate more funds. Specifically, they may have more resources to plan, organize, and publicize their events. For example, they may have direct contact to locally known celebrities who may be able to draw a larger crowd. In some of the schools, where the parents are immigrants, they may not be familiar with events such as dinner dance auctions or walkathons. Also, these parents may feel they do not have the language skills in English to publicize their events. Being new to an area may also mean that they know fewer people to invite to the events. For example, an affluent school in the CISVA raised about $80,000 at their dinner dance auction in the fall of 2007. At a school in a less affluent area of the Lower Mainland, where many of the parents are recent immigrants, they had to cancel their dinner dance auction because they sold about 25% of the number of tickets they needed just to break even. All of these contribute to differences in school financial funds and budgets within the CISVA.

Setting #1: St. Christopher School (a pseudonym)

St. Christopher School is located in a lower socio-economic urban setting. It is located in an area where the neighboring public schools receive hot meals and additional district resources to promote literacy. At the time I taught at the school, about eighty percent of the 230 were from one of two East Asian communities. There are a few students from a nearby European national parish that has no school, as well as some students from Goan backgrounds. (Goa is a former Portuguese colony located in India). Most of the
students are children of immigrant parents. Although born in Canada, there are a number of students whose first language is not English. At the time I arrived at the school, the parish was transitioning from a parish comprising a mix of ethnic groups, to one that would be servicing one particular East Asian community. The church shifted from having one local diocesan priest to having two from the one particular East Asian background. At first, there were many recent immigrants who lived outside the parish boundaries who attended the church. The priests initially strongly encouraged the congregation to enroll their children in the school. The shift in demographics brought tensions not only among parishioners but between them and the neighborhood. For example, the extra congestion and noise level from the church were of concern to some of the homeowners. Cultural differences in terms of what is considered acceptable noise levels in the evening are an example of some of the tensions experienced. A public relations consultant was brought in to hold community meetings to discuss such issues. As part of the solution, signs in different languages were posted to remind some of the parishioners about respecting the local neighbors.

Historically, before the teachers' pay scale was standardized throughout the CISVA, this school had the lowest pay. In the past, it had a reputation as being one of the most rundown and least desirable schools to work in. The principal at the time I was at St. Christopher had been working hard to improve the physical appearance of the school. In terms of the physical layout of the school, the interior has been well kept. The play areas are quite small. The play area designated for Intermediate students also acts as the staff parking lot. The small play area at the rear of the school is designated for primary students.
At the time I worked there, there were few teaching resources. If teachers wanted materials for their classroom they often spent their own money or went without. The school excelled in sports often winning many trophies in basketball and volleyball. Practices would take place before and after school as well as during morning and lunch recess. Some teachers felt that the extra curricular coaching duties which could also include weekend work, affected the quality of their classroom teaching.

Academically, there were some students who performed well. However, there were some weaknesses in language arts and the newer math that emphasized problem solving. Much of the weakness was attributed to the students being ESL (English as a second language) learners. There was no other support for those designated as ESL students other than learning assistance services.

On the surface, the school had a very relaxed school climate. Students were encouraged to feel at home, thus students and parents could be seen inside the office and staffroom “hanging-out.” Common managerial features such as walking along the stairwell in single file along the right hand side did not exist. At recess, children could be seen running in and out of the washroom. During the course of the day, extended members of the students’ families such as grandparents could be seen socializing on benches or chairs in the hallway. The parents were often grateful to the teachers and often brought them “treats.” They rarely voiced concerns to the administrator.

The school structure for the staff was quite hierarchical. Staff meetings were usually comprised of the principal reading memos from the central office. Little input was sought from the teachers in regards to resources, professional development, or setting school goals. Although professional development opportunities were offered through the
district office, regular classroom teachers were often not permitted to attend due to the cost of obtaining substitute teachers. There was a strong expectation that the staff act as a family and teachers were treated as children within the family. For instance, teachers were not permitted to leave the school property during lunch and it was expected that they eat their lunch together in the staffroom.

St. Ignatius School (a pseudonym)

St. Ignatius School is one of the top five most affluent schools in the CISVA. It is located in a mid to high socio-economic area. Many of the parents are professionals, some who are known as “community leaders” in the larger urban context. It is not uncommon to see nannies escorting students to and from school. Many of these parents had extremely high standards for the academic achievements of their children. This school has a reputation among the teachers for having some very demanding parents who exercise their influence on the principal to get their way. Although the majority of the families are affluent, about 15 per cent of the school population is bussed in from a less affluent neighborhood and they comprised a visible minority.

The school has a very high turnover rate for teachers. Most of the teachers when I arrived were young and inexperienced. There was a smaller group of core teachers who referred to themselves as the “old-timers.” Overall, there was a high expectation of professionalism among the staff when it concerned the students and their learning.

The physical setting of the school is quite unique within the CISVA. It has one of the best teacher resource rooms in the CISVA. There is a vast resource of teacher reference materials, curriculum guides, and teaching materials. The playground is large by CISVA standards, but is small compared to other public schools in the area.
The facilities and resources available for learning assistance and music were quite different. Both classrooms were located across the street from the rest of the school. The learning assistance room was located in a portion of the basement of the priest’s rectory. The music room was located in the old school. Unlike most of the CISVA schools, this one was previously run by an order of nuns. During their time, they saw themselves as progressive and valued their own practical knowledge over that of any best practices advocated by the district office. It was also one of the only schools to advocate a “relaxed” uniform code. The “old-timers” prided themselves as being “different” from other CISVA schools. Their relatively young and inexperienced principal of two years was a young woman who was determined to have the school re-join the CISVA family of schools in terms of standardizing some extracurricular activities and events.

Snapshot #1

Half way through my ninth year of teaching as an elementary school teacher, I was offered a position as a vice-principal and learning assistance teacher in a larger urban school district than the one I was in at the time. Always looking for an adventure, I felt I was ready for a change and a challenge. That summer my 54 boxes of educational materials and I landed on the steps of St. Christopher’s. What I did not realize then was how much my view of education and teaching would be stretched, challenged, revised, and expanded.

I found my work as a learning assistance teacher quite different than teaching in a regular classroom. While a teacher in a classroom setting may have a sense of a flow and ebb between the start and ending of a school year, such a sense does not necessarily take place for many learning assistance teachers. Learning Assistance Teachers often work
with students on an individual education plan that requires adaptations or modifications in the curriculum. An adaptation is when a student is expected to learn the same material as the rest of the class but may need different or additional services and/or resources, such as a scribe to write notes or extra time on assignments. Modifications are when students’ goals are different than those in the classroom. For example, a student with a modified language arts program may be reading materials two or more grade levels below that of their peers. Learning assistance teachers often act as an advocate for the student with other educators regarding their students’ program. They often act as intermediaries, meeting with classroom teachers and administrators, explaining the students’ educational needs and helping to meet those needs. As a learning assistance teacher I worked with students for shorter blocks of time over the course of a week. However, depending on the student, I might teach the student for several years, thus seeing a student develop over time.

When I first became a learning assistance teacher, I felt quite overwhelmed. All of a sudden I was expected to be the resident “expert” on everything from Down’s syndrome to dyslexia. I was also required to know the different policies and agencies that worked with the some of the students. My frustration grew since much of the information is not explicitly written in an accessible way. I worked to establish links between the special education consultant for the district, as well as other learning assistance teachers in the CISVA. I called various agencies and outreach teams to access services and information. Much of what I really needed to know in my new position came from my contacts and fellow learning assistance teachers.
My understanding of students as learners also changed. As a classroom teacher, I knew from experience that not all students learn in the same way or at the same rate. Entering the teaching profession in British Columbia during the beginning of the Primary Program in the late 1980's, I was familiar with the professional knowledge landscape that espoused “child-centered” learning and the different modes of learning (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic). Then there were concepts of multiple intelligences and the push towards integrating these into the way we taught children. Thus, as a classroom teacher I tried to provide a variety of multisensory activities along with the more traditional paper and pencil tasks. Despite trying these various methods, every year, I knew that some children became fluent readers while usually two or three struggled to learn the sounds of the letters of the alphabet. While I was aware of learning differences such as dyslexia, I always liked to believe, that for the majority of them they would eventually one day soon catch up to their peers.

As a learning assistance teacher I came to realize through experience and some of the research literature on early reading that some learning delays displayed in the first grade actually increase as a child progresses through school. Much of the evidence from research described how these students require a somewhat alternative way to teach beginning reading which differed greatly from the whole language approach advocated in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The Orton-Gillingham method is one form of therapy which is typically recommended for students with dyslexia. Such alternative methods are often costly and labour intensive. For example, one session of one-to-one Orton-Gillingham tutoring can cost $40. Being one learning assistance teacher with a case load of over thirty students, such one-to-one teaching was out of the question. The realization
that despite trying my professional best, I was not able to meet the needs of all my students bothered me and led me to feelings of inadequacy and anger.

I thought about the way schools were organized. I questioned the necessity of structuring the school into grades and how "grade-level" standards seemed to be engraved in stone as far as many classroom teachers were concerned. Some teachers with such an attitude seemed reluctant to adapt or modify learning objectives for struggling students. For example, some students required an adapted program, which meant that the students were expected to learn the same content as their peers, however, students on an adapted program were able to view and represent their knowledge in other ways. In such cases, a student may have a text read out-loud and give oral presentations rather than handing in a written report. Despite special education policies described by the province, some teachers were unwilling to adapt or to modify the curriculum they were teaching. Some common responses were that students had to learn how to read and to write in the "real world." Other teachers were sympathetic and expressed that in an ideal world, they would like to offer adapted and/or modified lessons, but given the extracurricular expectations at the school as well as the large class sizes, they that the only way they could cope was to have whole class activities where every student was expected to complete the workbooks ordered for their grades. They stated that they did not have enough time to organize and set up separate lessons that may be required for students with learning differences. With experience I came to realize what a political being a learning assistance teacher was.

The issue of funding in special education was a sore spot with me. The case of John, (a pseudonym), is one example of the kinds of complexity I had to deal with in order to
try to secure resources to meet student needs. John was first recommended for learning assistance services when he was in the third term of kindergarten because his classroom teacher was concerned that he was displaying language difficulties. At the beginning of the year, she wondered if his difficulties may have been due to English being his second language. However by the third term it was clear to her, as well as to the other specialist teachers who taught him, that John did experience difficulty with his expressive language.

John was a quiet, gentle student who was very polite. His parents were hard working immigrants who had come from an economically depressed area in Asia. They worked hard in blue collar jobs to support their two children, putting them in an independent school. During parent-teacher conferences, they conveyed how they had high hopes for both of their children. The father explained how he had always wanted to work for an airline and expressed hope that one day his eldest, John, would become a pilot. Despite long hours of work, the parents tried to support their children's learning at home.

By the time John was in the first grade it was evident that he was struggling academically and socially because of his difficulties with language. Teachers and students had a hard time understanding what he was trying to say. He experienced difficulty trying to understand lessons. Having tried a variety of approaches he only made small advances in learning how to read.

Reviewing Ministry of Education policies, I knew that learning disabilities involving language usually were not eligible for special education grants from the provincial government. Costs needed to service students with learning disabilities are covered by
funds given to districts as part of a general block funding. How the block funding is portioned out is at the discretion of the school districts. Thus, services for students with learning disabilities fall under what is called non-categorical services. Falling in this classification, students with learning disabilities are not able to access provincial resources such as speech-recognition software through the Special Education Technology branch. Only students who qualify for categorical services have access to such resources. Categorical services are those which are made available to students who are eligible for special education grants. In the end, even though I knew there were specialized therapies and technologies that would benefit John, he would not be able to access them. Yet knowing the kinds of issues he would be facing in the intermediate grades, such as the government tests, I also felt that an assessment by a speech and language therapist and a psycho-educational assessment were warranted. Findings from such an assessment would entitle him to an adapted and/or modified program. This is because such assessments are legal and binding documents. Recommendations made in the assessments would be followed through by the school.

Both the psycho-educational assessment and the speech-language tests were available to children in the public school system. However, these services were not available to students attending schools in the CISVA. Speech-language therapists were paid by funds obtained by an agreement between the districts and the Ministry of Health. In the agreement, health dollars were given to public districts to pay for speech-language services to school age children. The agreement does not extend to independent schools.

In a public school setting psycho-educational assessments are usually conducted by trained district personnel such as a certified psychologist. The districts pay for the
positions from the block funding given by the province to each of the public school districts. The calculations for the funding is quite complex and takes into account many factors including the number of students registered in a district. Since much of the block funding is quite a bit smaller due to the small student population in independent schools, many independent schools cannot afford the personnel to conduct psycho-educational assessments. In the end, even though parents of students in independent schools pay provincial taxes, they often end up having to pay for services and resources which are often available to children attending public schools. In such a context it is possible for one child in Ontario attending a Catholic school to receive district resources such as speech language therapy, while a child attending a Catholic school in Vancouver does not. As a learning assistance teacher, the situation with John and my other students with learning differences raised a myriad of questions for me at that time. The issues included funding, politics, and the larger social consequences of learning disabilities such as dyslexia and other language based learning differences. In striking contrast to John who did not qualify for government services and funds, the opposite was the case with another student, Jason (a pseudonym). Jason had transferred from the public school system the same year I started at the school. He had Down syndrome with a host of other medical complications. Jason had a variety of services available to him because he fell within a classification recognized for special education grants by the province. At that time, the Ministry of Education provided 50% of the special education grants given to public schools to independent schools.

With Jason’s classification, I was able to secure the services of other provincial outreach teams. Thus, when planning for Jason’s educational needs there were times
when up to eleven people met for several hours. Jason flourished at the school. While there, he learned to walk more consistently. He was doted on by a number of students who liked to walk with him. He learned simple routines and basic communication skills. Due to Jason’s condition, I realized that he would have his basic needs met.

While I was pleased with Jason’s progress, I felt badly that more could not be done for John and the others who were under funded because the classification of learning disabilities were not eligible for special education grants by the provincial government. The Ministry of Education in British Columbia does not directly fund most learning disabilities, especially if there is a language difficulty involved. Services and resources needed by students with learning disabilities are considered to be non-categorical services. These are to be covered by part of what is called block funding. There is no apparent mechanism or policy in place that requires independent schools to account for how the block funding is spent. So for example, if the government gives the schools $300 per student in block funding, there is no policy in place to determine if schools in fact have used those funds for non-categorical services or if those funds have been used for other purposes. The government states that it is up to individual school districts to determine how to divide those funds. Public school districts employ school or district personnel who are capable of conducting psychoeducational assessments, as well as speech and language therapists; however, not all the independent school districts hire such personnel. Even if schools wanted to use those portions of the block funding for non-categorical services, it may not be enough to cover the cost of personnel qualified to test and work with students needing specialized services such as speech and language
therapy. The Ministry of Education does not monitor or regulate how or if the block funding for special education is used in the independent school districts.

In the end, I knew that if John was to undergo a psychoeducational assessment, the funds would have to come from his family. Thus, I met with them to discuss the matter. Meeting with John’s parents, I reviewed with them the need for further testing so that the school could better design an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The tests could range from $1000 to $5000. They stated that they did not have those kinds of funds available at the time. In the meantime, I approached the principal to see if the school or church might be able to help the family financially. I had heard from my colleagues in other schools that they have applied to various church service groups for funds. The principal stated that he was not in favor of this particular kind of financial support, because it may set a precedent for other families to come forward and ask for funds. He felt that if the school made it too easy for families to obtain funds for psycho-educational testing, it may encourage other families to claim that they cannot afford testing when in fact they may be able to re-pay the school over the course of a fixed time period. It may also encourage other non-Catholic families to enroll their children in the school if word got out that the school paid for psycho-educational testing and other services. This may be attractive to some families since the wait list in the public school systems is long and may take up to two years. The underlying assumption is that there may be people who may abuse such services.

Determined to secure funds, I contacted our board office and asked if there was a “common pot” whereby funds may be gathered from affluent schools which might go towards funding special cases from schools in lower-socioeconomic neighborhoods, such
as the student I was working with. The answer was no, because not all the schools and parishes were in favour of taking funds away from the local school setting. It seemed like an unfortunate situation. It appeared ironic in a sense that in the secular school system, there was a greater sense of social justice where more funds were made available for less affluent schools for hot meals, readiness, ESL classes, etc. Finally out of frustration, I paid the $1500 needed for the assessment myself. Knowing the principal’s stance and not wanting to create tension, I did not tell him I paid for it. I arranged the testing and paid the psychologist directly.

When thinking about how isolated each school was in the Catholic school system, I wondered about the social consequences of not helping schools in lower socio-economic areas. Having been on several different district committees, I knew that some schools struggled to obtain up-to-date textbooks, while other schools in more affluent areas were able to offer not only the basics, but extra fieldtrips and other unique learning opportunities. I thought about how the inadequate funding and resources negatively impacted Catholic school students in lower socio-economic areas. They received fewer services than other students in their own neighborhoods who attended the local public schools. If Catholic school students, especially those with learning differences, were affected negatively by inadequate and inequitable resources and funding, the structures of the provincial government and the CISVA were acting in a way that maintained economic and social inequalities between schools in different communities. Thus, schools in affluent communities had the potential to provide more resources to students who already enjoyed further privileges as contrasted to students from non-affluent communities.
Through the years of being a learning assistance teacher in the context of the CISVA, I found that increasingly I started to get involved more and more at the district level. I took any opportunity that came about to try to convince the wider Catholic community to look at the inequalities and to try to come up with alternative ways to assist students with special needs. Thus over the years, I became involved with the Archdiocesan Synod which looked at how to update current practices in the Catholic Church in Vancouver. This was a unique opportunity since it was the first formal attempt in over twenty years to have lay-people involved in making decisions in the diocese. I also became one of the regional coordinators for learning assistance teachers. The group of coordinators was eager to reach out to other learning assistance teachers and provided new ways to provide input into the kinds of in service education they wanted. We established and coordinated network meetings where we shared our experiences and expertise. We also encouraged the sharing of resources, especially between the have and have not schools. Thus, teachers from less affluent schools had access to books and other resources for which we otherwise would not have access to. At that time, I believed that things were far from perfect but was encouraged by the positive steps we had made. Through such committee work, I felt a bit more encouraged.

Reflections on snapshot #1. Reflecting back on my experiences at St. Christopher’s, two major issues come to mind. One has to do with the transition from my becoming a classroom teacher to a learning assistance teacher. It was a convoluted, complex, and at times frustrating process as I tried to obtain structural and procedural knowledge about which agency to approach under what circumstances. It was confusing why resources were available to some students with special needs and not others with learning
disabilities who may not. Also adding to the confusion was the incongruity between the stated recommended guidelines and policies and the lived realities of trying to implement them. The second issue deals with how my perception of students deepened and how I came to wonder more about the process of schooling.

The transition from the classroom to becoming a learning assistance teacher was complex and at times confusing. For example, at that time children diagnosed with Asperger’s Disorder were not eligible for special education grants, but those diagnosed with High Functioning Autism were. Many specialists regarded the two as pretty much similar to each other. Thus, if a school submitted a grant for a student with Asperger’s Disorder, the application would probably be denied. However, if a grant was submitted for a student with High Functioning Autism, it would most likely be accepted.

A major source of frustration for me was the incongruity between stated recommendations and expectations on the one hand and the lived reality of the job on the other. The documentation required initially prevented me from working with my students at the beginning of the year. Each IEP could take hours to complete. It would include large amounts of time assessing and testing each student. In some schools, learning assistance teachers do not have a set schedule to work with students until October. In the end, I decided that I did not want students to suffer because of the paperwork. I made a choice to work with students during school hours and did all of the paperwork and documentations in the evenings and weekends.

Another form of incongruity between stated expectations and the lived reality had to do with resources such as time. The special education policies of the Ministry of Education and the CISVA recommends that classroom teachers and learning assistance
teachers should work together to meet the needs of their students. In reality, this was often hard to accomplish. One of the difficulties in working collaboratively with the classroom teachers had to do with the lack of time designated for those purposes. St. Christopher’s had a very full schedule of curricular and extra-curricular activities. Both students and teachers were often involved in extra-curricular activities before school, during school, after-school, and on weekends. Besides the sports activities, St. Christopher’s had special events almost every month, such as the Christmas Play, the Speech Arts Festival, the Fine Arts Festival, Walkathon, and the annual school picnic, which took away from the instructional time.

My relationships with colleagues, parents, and administrators changed. The work of a learning assistance teacher is far more collaborative in nature than that of a regular classroom teacher. It involves working together with other educators, health care providers, administrators, as well as parents. What I came to understand is that not all the people involved have the same needs, wants, and priorities.

Many teachers wanted to work collaboratively and to adapt and modify lessons as needed, but felt constrained by time. It did not seem to make sense why teachers were kept from doing their primary goal of teaching the curriculum, unless it was not a priority for those in administration. I wondered how these factors acted to support and maintain certain kinds of social structures that exist in the larger society, and what kinds of repercussions there may be for students and the general population.

As a learning assistance teacher, I found that my relationship with students changed. I found that while I did not see them as often as a classroom teacher does, I did teach many of the students for several years. I watched the children grow from small
primary students to those in the intermediate grades. I came to appreciate their unique gifts and talents as they grew in spite of difficulties they may have experienced academically in the classroom. My relationship changed as they expressed their views on how they experienced life in the regular classroom. I saw how their image of themselves as learners affected themselves. I worried how sometimes we as teachers can lose sight of the whole child. I also worried about the effects of categorizing our children as “learning disabled.”

I began to wonder how schools, in general, can meet the needs of students who experience academic difficulties. I thought about the way schools were organized. I questioned the necessity of structuring the school into grades and how “grade-level” standards seemed to be engraved in stone as far as some classroom teachers were concerned. As I started to think about such issues, I wondered why we as educators emphasized the academics to the point of marginalizing students who had learning differences, possibly affecting their sense of self-worth. While practices of tracking in high schools have met with opposition in other jurisdictions, I wondered if there might not be alternatives within the CISVA for those who were not academically inclined. Speaking with those at the district level, clearly the costs of running a trades program at the high school level was prohibitive. I wondered if some creative pathways or partnerships with local community colleges could not be explored.

Snapshot #2

I came to St. Ignatius School after spending one year as a consultant for the CISVA schools. While I appreciated and valued the time I spent getting to know many more of the principals, teachers, and school communities, I was quite eager to settle down and
once more belong to a specific school community. Once more I found myself in the position as learning assistance teacher and vice-principal. However, St. Ignatius was in many ways the very opposite of St. Christopher’s. St. Ignatius School is in an affluent part of a large urban centre. Unlike at St. Christopher’s School, the parents at St. Ignatius School were professionals. In addition to these students, about 10-15 per cent of the students were of a visible minority who were bussed in from a different neighborhood. The rest of the students were mostly from a Western European-Canadian cultural background with a few recent immigrants from an affluent area of East Asia.

At St. Christopher’s, I often purchased my own resources since funds were tight and the needs were many. Arriving at St. Ignatius School, I discovered that the school was well-stocked with the latest in children’s literature as well as other resources for students. The resource room for teachers was the largest of any school I had seen in the district, and in fact was larger than the district resource lending library. After having spent years spending my own money on resources, it was a pleasant change to have easy access to a vast range of teacher resources. There was over 15 feet of shelving extending from the floor to close to the ceiling, filled with the latest teaching resources written by exemplary educators. There were the latest books written by the up and coming educators, as well as many of the well-known “classics.” There were excellent resources for teaching reading, spelling, social studies, and science. In addition to books, there were cupboards and boxes full of science kits, art materials, and many other things most schools could not afford. I felt like a child in a candy store. I would often choose one or two books at the end of the day, make myself a cup of tea and head over to the learning assistance room across the street--the room I jokingly referred to my colleagues as “The Dungeon.”
The learning assistance room was located in the basement of the priest’s house. Along with his golf clubs, bikes, and other items, there is a washer and dryer. (I had been warned by the previous learning assistance teacher to avoid trying to teach on Mondays when the housekeeper did the laundry.) The room was dark and had two bare light bulbs. I felt a certain disconnect between the lavishly supplied teacher work room and my “dungeon.” The reason I was given for the location of the learning assistance room seemed plausible. A new school addition was going to be built, thus until then, the basement was the only available space for the learning assistance room.

The prospect of having a brand new room seemed appealing, but I had a nagging feeling that the current state of things in the learning assistance room was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of people’s attitudes towards learning assistance services. Thus, I approached someone familiar with the building committee and asked exactly when the new addition was going to be built. She sighed and stated that when she initially went to the school to inquire about her daughter enrolling at the school for kindergarten, the previous principal had told her that it should be completed in a couple of years. We both broke out laughing, because her daughter was just starting the ninth grade at the local public high school.

Not looking forward to spending a long time in the “Dungeon,” I once asked the teachers and the principal if anyone thought of placing a small portable on what seemed to me a very large playground. (It was at least six times the size of St. Christopher’s playground). They stated that they did not want to sacrifice the playground for a learning assistance room. I was a little concerned about the message the school was communicating to those students who were already struggling and did not particularly
find school a positive experience. I was not impressed that they would have to leave the main school to enter a dark dingy basement to receive learning assistance services. I tried to appreciate the teachers’ perspective however I was getting a stronger feeling that learning assistance services were not seen as a priority at the school.

This feeling of a lack of appreciation for learning assistance services was intensified in the case of trying to obtain a much needed piece of equipment for Jacob (a pseudonym). Jacob had a number of learning challenges including higher functioning autism and an auditory processing disorder. His speech therapist and audiologist had recommended a $1,000 FM system which would amplify the teacher’s voice so that it would help Jacob process sounds better. The principal asked if I could bring forward a motion at the Parish Education Committee for the school to purchase a piece of equipment needed for a student with special needs. All through our conversation she seemed nervous. Although I thought it was a little unusual since most principals directly deal with the budget without discussing every item at the PEC meeting, I agreed to go and plead my case.

At the meeting, prior to presentation and discussion of my request, there was a drawn out discussion about how to use a particularly large sum of money not related to special education. I was encouraged by the fact that the PEC seemed to have excess money to spend. I presented the recommendations of a speech language therapist report that stated a student needed a particular piece of equipment. One member stated that it is the responsibility of the parents to pay for the equipment. She gave the example of glasses. She stated that it is not the school’s responsibility to buy glasses for every student who needs them. I stated that the parents were in a difficult position and did not have enough
funds because of the nature of the disability. The parents were already paying quite a bit for occupational and other forms of therapies. I also stated that several other parents in the class have offered to fund raise for the equipment. The member stated that it was setting a dangerous precedent. I informed her that according to the Ministry we had an obligation to provide for the educational needs of all our students. In the end the PEC refused to purchase the equipment. Throughout the discussion, the principal did not say a word. I left the meeting angry that they had a large amount of money to spend, but not for an FM system that would help a student. I also felt betrayed by my principal who did not back me up.

When the parents of the child were told that the PEC would not purchase the equipment they were shocked. They could not understand the decision, and were very upset. Following that, I reminded the principal that we had the financial means and a moral, if not legal obligation to help that student. Once again in frustration over a financial matter, I presented her with a personal cheque for the amount of the equipment. Unlike the previous time when I had given funds without others knowing, this time I decided to make a statement, therefore I presented a cheque to the principal. I wanted the principal and the PEC to reflect on what I perceived as their lack of generosity and sense of moral obligation. When the PEC found out that I had given a cheque to pay for the FM system, they changed their previous decision and eventually paid for the equipment themselves.

The preceding incident was one of many I had with not only the parents at that school, but the teachers and the principal. I felt uncomfortable working in an environment which did not place a strong value on considering the needs of the most
vulnerable of our student population. I especially felt uncomfortable with the "hoarding" of funds and lack of commitment to social justice issues. By March of my first year, I knew this school culture was one that did not mesh with what I wanted to accomplish as an educator. I submitted my resignation and returned to St. Christopher's the following year.

Reflections about snapshot #2. Reflecting on these experiences, I was struck by how some of those with available financial resources felt no moral obligation to help those in need, especially given the religious aspect of Catholic schools that emphasizes helping others. I wondered if we needed to educate the PECs on Catholic social justice teachings. I was also struck by the number of students whose parents had their child undergo psycho-educational testing. In many cases, the parents wanted to err on the side of caution and had testing done to ensure that they were maximizing their child's learning potential. While I could not fault the parents for wanting the best for their child, I could not get out of my mind all the children I had known at St. Christopher's who needed such testing to procure funding, but whose parents could not afford to pay for the tests. I felt frustrated that there was not a district mechanism in place for ensuring that those children who really needed specialized services would be able to obtain them. I approached various people at different levels of the CISVA. The general feeling was that the local parishes would not want to give more money over to the diocese. Some stated that there were parishes that were barely surviving. I believed that if there was a genuine political will to deal with such issues, there could be ways in which large successful parishes and schools could assist those who had difficulty arranging fund raising events, or ways to distribute existing funds more equitably. Also, I wondered if the district should take a
more hands-on approach to schools struggling to provide learning assistance services. For example, the district could include recommendations and policies requiring schools to report and/or provide funds for all students requiring specialized services. In other words, I did not see why some schools would help parents to pay for required specialized services, and others would not.

I was also frustrated with the Ministry of Education which at that time funded some special education services for independent school children at only 50% of the rate at which public school children were funded, and did not fund other services, such as speech-language therapy, at all. I wondered why parents who paid tax dollars to the city and province were having their children’s needs unmet simply because the children attended a “religious school.”

After five years, in two different schools, trying to work in the best interest of the students needing learning assistance services, I had felt like I had hit a brick wall, and that I was uncomfortable with the knowledge that I could have helped a student, but was unable to do so due to inadequate resources and funding. I felt that the issues were so complex and intertwined that it was next to impossible for one or a few well-intentioned learning assistance teachers to deal with.

What was struck me the most about my experiences at St. Ignatius was the low regard some people at the local level had for learning assistance services. In my view, it flew in the very face of what we profess to do in Catholic education, which is upholding and helping the most vulnerable in our community. In other words, I could not explain why such attitudes could exist in the context of a Catholic school.
Making Sense of the Snapshots

The transition from the regular classroom to becoming a learning assistance teacher involved a change in what Clandinin and Connelly (1999) refer to as a "professional knowledge landscape." They use this metaphorical image of a "professional knowledge landscape" to describe the professional knowledge of teachers. Teachers who work in special education have a slightly different landscape of professional knowledge from those in "regular education." The difference lies not only in a more specialized pedagogical knowledge, but also in the different forms of relationships special education teachers have with students receiving services. Unlike in a regular classroom, a learning assistance teacher may work with a student for shorter blocks of time over the course of a week. However, depending on the student, a learning assistance teacher may teach the student for several years, thus seeing a student develop over time. While a teacher in a classroom setting may have a sense of a flow and ebb between the start and ending of a school year, such a sense does not necessarily take place for many learning assistance teachers.

Clandinin and Connelly (1999) also describe the concept of a "teacher's personal practical knowledge." This particular practical knowledge has to do more with knowing the ins and outs of the organizational cultures of the school and district, as well as a more personal adaptation or integration of the larger professional knowledge landscape. In the case of learning assistance teachers, this personal practical knowledge is essential in navigating through the various policies and structures to ensure that their students receive adequate funds, resources, and time. Much of the personal practical knowledge is learned by experience and by networking with other learning assistance teachers and special
education educators since much of what one needs to learn cannot be gleaned from specific policies.

One aspect of my personal knowledge that changed was my understanding of students. As I watched eager and energetic young primary students grow to become older intermediate students, it was difficult at times to see their enthusiasm and attitude towards schooling change. In some cases, their experiences led them to question their own abilities and talents. While I appreciated their own uniqueness, I worried about their school experiences and in general how schools themselves were structured, and how these were impacting my students’ sense of self-esteem. The issues regarding grade level expectations and standards are reflected in the writings of those such as Elmore (2004, p.278) who points out that there has been “no empirical research into the reliability or validity of what constitutes appropriate grade level performance by which states can legitimately base retention or deny graduation.” Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001, p.525) note that at various times, there have been students who do not meet the current educational and social definitions of “success.” They believe that such labeling may be a result of a “‘mismatch’ between the structure of the schools and the social, cultural, or economic backgrounds of the students identified as problems…” Reflecting on such research, I gained a growing understanding of the complexity between what we as educators were trying to achieve in schools and the actual lived realities of the students I worked with. It concerned me if and how the structures of schools affected the students’ sense of self-esteem.

*Institutionalism and Loose Coupling.* The dilemma and tensions I felt between espoused policy and recommended guidelines for special education on the one hand and
what was actually happening may be better understood through educational and organizational theories. For instance, the theories of neo-institutionalism may shed light on why there seemed to be a mismatch between stated goals and what actually happens in an organization. Marion (2002 p. 279) states that “…organizations are defined by tensions between their stated, formal goals, and their irrational constituents…such tensions forces organizations to compromise who and what they are…According to institutionalists, it is more important for organizations to appear effective than to be effective.” Such theories help to explain why despite stated formal goals of excellence in academics; St. Christopher’s School spent so much of their time and resources on non-academic endeavors.

Schools do not exist in a vacuum. There are many internal and external social pressures exerted on educational institutions and schools. For example, CISVA needs students in order to survive as an organization. The schools need to attract students in order to receive funding which is distributed on a per pupil basis. Thus, administrators may not have the same priority as teachers. Some principals are influenced by the need to attract parents to the school, and to prevent parents exercising the exit option as described by Chubb and Moe (1988, p.1067).

Weick’s (1976) theory of loose coupling helps to better understand how this happens. Weick (1976) expands the understanding of organizations beyond that of rational tightly coupled or tightly linked parts that work rationally following policies and formal procedures. He notes that some organizations are only loosely coupled or linked. Weick (1976, p. 3-4) describes how there are generally two mechanisms that can hold organizations together. He describes the technical core-couplings which are those that
are “task induced.” Other ties are formed through formal authorities or offices. However, he notes that organizations are only loosely coupled or loosely tied in education. Thus for example, the local schools in the CISVA are loosely coupled to the central district office. Weick (1976) notes that there are advantages and disadvantages to loosely coupled organizations. For instance, he notes that smaller units may be more sensitive to changes in local environment and thus adapt accordingly. On the other hand Weick (1976) also describes possible pitfalls. One possible pitfall is how there is little pressure for one part of an organization to discontinue ineffective practices. In a loosely coupled organization, it is also possible for newer and more productive practices to and ideas to diffuse. Also, it is harder for isolated parts of the organization to obtain assistance from other sections.

It is also possible for sections of organizations to isolate themselves from the larger organization by decoupling themselves when the situation is to their advantage. Zucker (1987, p. 445) notes that while decoupling strategies may increase the survival of an organization, they also reduce their efficiency. In fact, Dornbusch, Glasgow, and Lin (1996, p. 411) state that “the most critical task performed by schools, instruction, is only loosely coupled with the school’s administrative processes...[and that] schools often fail to meet expected curricular goals...Schools have developed ways to prevent close inspection of their technical core.” As a result, extra-curricular activities and special events give the impression to parents that the CISVA schools are more efficient than public schools because they are able to conduct such special events. As Ball (1997, p. 332) notes “what is important here are appearances...Public performances like Ofsted
inspections, local league table position, and artistic events in the school, dance, drama
and music, all need to be carefully stage-managed to give the right impression.”

Teachers in these schools sometimes feel their professional values are being
compromised. They know that some of the students, especially those of new immigrants
and English language learners face an uphill battle in terms of their language
development. Some teachers often feel that the larger class sizes and the time taken for
extra-curricular activities are at odds with their main job of teaching in the classroom.
This sense of displacement of values makes sense when one considers Bidwell’s (2001,
p. 102) observation that “…the technical work of instruction is essentially decoupled
from an administrative apparatus that deals with legitimacy and resource providing
exchanges with external actors…” away from the core curriculum are not in the best
interest of students. Gleeson and Husbands (2003, p. 499) state that there needs to be
“…‘greater authenticity’ in the way education practice might drive, rather than being
driven by the policy and performance agenda.” They state that “what is required is a
better balance between evaluation as performance audit and evaluation for quality
development which involves government acknowledging its limitations by investing
more trust in the teaching profession” (p. 507).

The concept of loose coupling also can help to explain the idiosyncratic nature of
funding students with special needs and learning differences. In a hierarchical, loosely
coupled institution such as the CISVA, there may not be opportunities or mechanisms in
place for decision makers to be aware of the resources needed by students and teachers.
Thus, those in a position to increase funding may not be aware of the idiosyncratic ways
that special education is being delivered at the local level.
Weick (1976) also notes that in a loosely coupled institution there may be little incentive to change to address difficult issues. In a loosely coupled institution, local problems could be attributed to local decision makers. This enables the larger institution to isolate problems to the smaller unit and protect the other schools. It makes it possible for the institution to distance themselves from difficult issues. In extreme cases, it allows the possibility for those in authority to defer problems to the local level which may not be in a position to solve the problem. Thus, those affected by local problems are left on their own. For teachers, it could place them in a position of having to confront social injustices within schools without the protection of a union. During informal conversations, some teachers have expressed frustration that they cannot talk to their administrators for fear of repercussions. Such examples bring to light the consequences of the use of power at the micropolitical level, and how that interacts and interplays within the larger institution to which it is loosely coupled.

*Power, privilege, and marginalization.* The issues regarding the access of resources whether it be funds, time, or textbooks raises the issues in regard to the flow of power in schools. Bacharach and Baratz (1962 and 1972) have distinguished different faces of power. These have been expanded on by Brunner (2002) and Lukes (1974). They state that in the first face of power, power is expressed overtly. In other words, power is expressed as “power-over” or by dominance, control, and authority (Brunner 2002 p. 606). This may take the form of direct conflict. This form of power can be seen by how the Ministry of Education has the legitimate authority to control special education funds as well as the power to make special education policies.
The second face of power is more subtle. It expresses itself more covertly. It can be expressed as built in bias and existing organizational values, as well as through non-decisions such as self-censorship (Reed 2000 p. 40-41). An example of the second face of power in the context of the schools in the CISVA may include values expressed in the use of words and images such as “sacrifice” and “vocation.” Within such an organizational culture, teachers may self-censor themselves to not “complain” about their workload.

Reed (2000 p. 80) discusses the work of Lukes (1974) expanded Bacharach and Baratz’s (1962) work to identify a third face of power. He states that the mobilization of bias can be so complete that “the real interests of the disempowered never surface as coherent, expressed grievances, sometimes not even in their consciousness; let alone in the decision-making arena” (Reed 2000 p. 80). An example of the third face of power may be seen in how the parents of my students did not directly appeal to the CISVA or to the Ministry of Education to change the funding structures for children with learning differences.

Reflecting on the loosely coupled nature of education and how that looseness gets played out in terms of power relationship it led me to look at who controls the resources and what some of those consequences might be. The case of trying to obtain a piece of equipment for Jacob is revealing especially under the lens of critical theory. Marion (2002 p. 272) states that morality is at the heart of critical theory. He states that “critical theorists argue that social organizations serve an elite class at the expense of a subjugated class, and that woman, ethnic minorities, and other such groups are systematically excluded from full and satisfying participation in society.” Critical theorists shed light on
injustices with the hopes of opening the way towards more democratic and egalitarian forms of participation by those marginalized. Pajak and Green (2003, p. 396) state that “a critical perspective...can lead to reforms that equalize educational inputs and outcomes for poor and minority students.”

In the case of St. Ignatius, clearly the PEC had money to pay for the equipment, however, they initially chose not to. Using the theories of Bacharach and Baratz (1962), Brunner (2002), Lukes (1974) and Reed (2000), it may be possible to see this situation as an instance of the first face of power, which is the overt control over funds. The action of the PEC could be seen as an attempt to maintain their position of privilege in a competitive educational setting. Actions taken by some schools to maintain their privilege go against the stated institutional culture as expressed through the philosophy of education and the mission statements of the CISVA and their schools. My offer to pay for the piece of equipment could be viewed as an attempt to challenge their control over resources and the learning assistance program.

Another issue which the CISVA needs to be cautious of is described by Casella (2003, p. 129) who observes a trend towards residential isolation and school segregation that comes out of choice and the commodification of education. Casella (2003, p. 130) states that “…retreat from public spaces and integration...has caused greater segregation of individuals based on social class, race, age, and lifestyle.” As an Independent school, the CISVA needs to be aware of these trends and its relationships to our schools and the wider community. The trends noticed by Casella (2003) can also be seen in the CISVA. The retreat from public spaces to those more segregated can be seen in some of the national parishes and schools. For example, there are some schools that are known to be
mainly of one ethnicity. In those communities, families socialize mainly with each other and do not mix with the wider society. As a result, it is not uncommon to find non-English speaking second and third generation Canadians arriving in kindergarten.

On the other hand, there are others who already have "economic, cultural, and social capitals...[who are] engaging in a range of exclusive and exclusionary practices..." (Reay 2004, p. 79). For instance, those with economic means may raise tuition and school fees to the point that those with fewer economic resources would not be able to attend some schools. Those with economic means may also provide additional incentives to attract a more desirable staff, such as through additional pay. The social capital or networks and connections also can act to maintain differences in schools. For instance, parents with a limited knowledge of English may continue to socialize with those from a similar language and cultural base. This can act to further isolate groups from the larger society, and may prevent some from accessing services that may be available to them.

On the other hand, in a school which has few English language learners may not see a need for a district level department to oversee services for students requiring English as a Second Language services. The cultural capital, or the knowledge, language usage, and experiences one has had through the course of peoples' lives may enable them to succeed more so than someone from a less experienced background. As seen in the example with fundraising activities, those with higher social and cultural capital are able to raise more funds for their schools. Such examples raise the question as to how much the CISVA is contributing to the forces of the commodification of education in British Columbia as well as to the forces of segregation. Both of these are in direct conflict with social justice
values of an open democratic society that have fair and equitable schools available for all children.

It is crucial that educational leaders be grounded in principles of social justice, of not just distributive or retributive justice, but a form of a recognitive justice that “…includes a positive regard for social difference and the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards its achievement” (Gale 2000, p. 267). Those involved in education require what Starratt (2006) describes as a ‘special ethic of care’ that includes an ethic of critique and justice. Gaskell (2001, p. 34) states that “a politics of difference provides a progressive way to reframe the debate about differences and choice in public schooling, but it requires continuing debate about the limits and possibilities of difference, about what is equitable and about what encourages discussion.” What follows below are offered as possible steps to take to counter larger societal trends that can act to undermine fair and equitable distribution of resources.

Social justice and liberation theology. Organizations such as the CISVA may be products of a specific cultural context, but they do not have to be tied to those contexts and social forces, especially if they go against the grain of what we ultimately want to accomplish as educators. There are some recent trends which independent schools and especially those of the CISVA need to be wary of. What is occurring is a situation described by Walsh (2006, p. 97) who notes that the “…discourse of egalitarianism and personal development has been marginalized in the educational reforms of the last twenty years.” He (p. 106) cautions that “…excessive ‘superficial’ control can lead to pathologies in organizations that in turn lead to organizational dysfunctionality.”
Considering Catholic theology, canon law, morals, and ethics there are attitudes and practices occurring within the CISVA that are not aligned with the goals of Catholic education. As the Canadian Trustees of Catholic Schools (2003) state, we should not merely be “technicians of survival.” In other words, Catholics have an obligation towards the promotion of social justice, and not only in the maintenance of traditional practices. Marion (2002 p. 207) warns how an organization can be so lodged in tradition that the past traditions become “…the selection criteria that determine present structure…Internal selectors may have little or nothing in common with external conditions; they may for example resist change when change is desperately needed.” He (2002 p. 229) further adds that organizational conventions serve to preserve social class structures.

In documents such as Centesimus Annus and in the works of liberation theologists, Christians are encouraged to work towards bringing justice to those who are marginalized and oppressed. According to liberation theology and other social justice teachings of the Church, Catholics should demonstrate a “preferential option for the poor.” In other words, Christians are called to help those marginalized in our society to work towards their self-actualization. Marion (2002 p. 225) comments that “educators are in the front lines of social battles over racism, sexism, and other manifestations of prejudice in our society.” We should be working towards social justice, equity and equality of social opportunities.

Recommendations for Reform in the CISVA

The following are some recommendations that strive to work towards the broader vision of social justice in Catholic education.
Expand Special Needs Services at the District Level

Due to the specialized and technical nature of special education, it may make sense to expand special education services. Currently, there is no formal department of special education within the CISVA. There is one director of special education and one consultant who assists the director as part of her overall duties as a general consultant. The Archdiocese could look at the possibility of expanding special education services at the district level, especially for those schools with communities in financial constraints. According to many researchers such as Marion (2002 p. 175) and Weick (1976) those in charge of administrative duties do not always understand and/or do not have the time to deal effectively with the technical core of the organization. Especially in a hierarchical structure, administrators may have limited understanding about the knowledge that teachers have learned from their experiences. Under these circumstances, Marion (2002 p. 185) notes that administrators may fall into what Bordieu (1977) calls a "simplification error" whereby "...an individual fails to appreciate or perceive the complexities inherent in a given function." In other words, it is possible for people who are in a position to allocate funds to not understand the complexity of special education issues and override recommendations made by those who understand the educational needs of students with special needs. For example, at St. Ignatius, although the PEC had the authority to allocate funds, they initially chose not to pay for a piece of needed equipment even though they did have the funds to cover the cost. There are some who feel that there should be little difference in terms of resources between schools in lower socioeconomic areas and those in higher socioeconomic areas. On the other hand, there are parents in affluent areas who feel that they have worked hard for their money, and their children
deserve to gain from the parents’ efforts. These parents may be reluctant to place their funds into a common pool of funds to share with less affluent schools. The Archdiocese could expand its annual fundraising campaign, Project Advance, to gather and to distribute special education funds in a more equitable way across the Archdiocese.

The Archdiocese could use Project Advance funds to pay for a consultant who is qualified to perform psychoeducational tests, as well as a speech language therapist. The consultants could work with the students from less affluent schools. There may also be a sliding scale for other families as well. Such a sliding scale of costs already exists in the Catholic Charities department, whereby clients pay for services according to their financial ability. In such a system, those who can afford services pay the full amount, while those who cannot afford to pay the total pay only a portion of the cost.

Structures such as services and policies are only part of the picture. Attitudes and biases within the Archdiocese also need to be addressed. The current Archdiocesan Synod may provide the means for organizational learning.

The Synod and the Synod Proclamations

The Synod is a process that began over eight years ago. The purpose was to set new directions for the Archdiocese by inviting input from three levels of the Catholic community, including the lay people. Five major themes were selected for review including Catholic education. Early in the process, five preliminary commissions were established to report back findings and recommendations. Each of the commissions consisted of a mix of clergy and lay people of various theological backgrounds, from conservative Catholics to liberal Catholics.
After the commissions submitted their working papers, the documents were made available to all Catholics for discussion. Parishes were encouraged to discuss the findings and recommendations with parishioners. Each parish sent one to two representatives to the general synod assembly. It involved over 300 people in a series of meetings. Participants worked in smaller groups discussing the recommendations which would be voted on later. Participants also had the opportunity to address the larger group. It was the first time in over three decades that lay people had an opportunity for direct communication with higher Church officials. There was much anticipation and hope for some positive changes to the Archdiocese.

Having been involved with the preliminary commissions and the general synod, I was struck by the diversity of views held by Catholics. I was also struck by how much we all learned by hearing those various voices. While there were at times raging disagreements on some issues, many people had a better understanding of the factors and reasons people had for their stances. I thought how the synod process was a helpful mechanism for helping people be more aware of various issues. Thus, the synod process may be helpful in teaching people about social justice issues such as the unequal distribution of funds.

Ryan (1989) and Reay (2004, p. 84) state that “there needs to be far reaching changes across society and not just within the educational system.” As a start, the pastors and others responsible for the religious education at the adult level can play a part in making the social justice teachings of the Church known more widely throughout the Archdiocese. Pastors of affluent schools in particular have the potential to emphasize
social justice to principals and PEC members when discussing the distribution of financial resources to other schools within the CISVA.

As part of the synod process, new committees and initiatives have been announced. There may be new opportunities for the Archdiocese and the CISVA to raise awareness of inequalities in our system and to coordinate efforts to improve such situations. In one of their recommendation, the Synod states that there should be an archdiocesan plan to help Catholic schools meet financial challenges, including the possibility of creating a Catholic Foundation to help raise and distribute funds. This idea could be expanded to include forging links between have and have-not schools. For example, the office may be able to establish a means by which expertise in fundraising events from one school could be shared with another. Or it may be able to compile lists of parents who are qualified psychologists and speech and language therapists who could be permitted to complete their mandatory parent participation hours in other schools. Thus, the synod may prove to be a helpful mechanism in teaching people about social justice issues such as the unequal distribution of funds.

The Forum

The Forum is a fairly new group brought together by the Board of Directors. Previously, the superintendents and board members made policies and other educational decisions with little input from PECs or teachers. For example, teachers had never negotiated their own contracts until about six years ago. In an attempt by the board to open the lines of communication, the Forum was established.

The Forum is made up of elected members of each of the stakeholders in the CISVA. They include representatives from the teachers, principals, and the PECs. The
Board of Directors asks the Forum to look at particular issues about which they would like input from the stakeholder groups. The Forum is made up of elected members of each of the stakeholders in the CISVA. They include representatives from the teachers, principals, and the PECs. The Board of Directors asks the Forum to look at particular issues about which they would like input from the stakeholder groups. The work of the Forum is restricted by the Board of Directors, and its recommendations are not binding. Some teachers feel that the Forum mandate limits true exchange of concerns and ideas because the agenda can only be drawn up by the Board of Directors.

The present format of the Forum could be expanded to let teachers and other stakeholders bring issues up for discussion. Many teachers would like to see issues related to working conditions such as class size and extra-curricular duties to be included. On the surface, such issues may not appear to be directly linked to special needs services but they are. For example, extra-curricular duties can be so extensive in some of the CISVA schools to the point that teachers feel that they have little time to work with learning assistance teachers and other colleagues to work on IEP’s or to develop appropriate lessons and units of study.

Class composition may also affect the quality of services. For example, ten years ago there may have been one or two students with special needs in any one school. Recently, teachers are reporting having two or more students with special needs in one class with some class sizes reaching 27-30 students in the primary grades with the result that class composition also affects the quality of services.

At a fundamental level, there needs to be a paradigm shift from a hierarchical parochial system to a more democratic, community oriented one that encourages
discussion, and recognizes the professional input of teachers in the decision making process.

**New Forms of Accountability and Transparency**

There needs to be a mechanism in place to hold the district, PECs, and principals accountable for the proper allocation and use of funds for special needs students. Maxcy (1991 p.91) states that “too many bureaucrats have escaped the scrutiny of evaluation entirely.” He further adds that “...the policy maker cannot pass on the responsibility for bad policy to the practitioners: teachers and students are not to be held accountable for the bad policies of administrators (Maxcy 1991 p. 85). Rufo-Lignos and Richards (2003, p.778) give a cautionary note that when there is greater local autonomy, there need to be more effective forms of accountability mechanisms. The case studies mentioned above indicate where some of the problems arose and how those entrusted to maintain the integrity of system can divert or avoid the problem. For instance, the district is responsible for developing and implementing policies and guidelines and it does on a number of important matters. Yet when the issues regarding fair distribution of funds or issues regarding special education come up, these are often referred back to the local level, citing that the CISVA is a parochial system. While honoring local decisions, the CISVA also needs to be careful not to forget its responsibility with respect to equitable funding for special education. Maxcy (1991 p. 87) notes that “…policies also mediate between our values and acts. Policy then becomes the act of expressing or actualizing values.” Thus, the CISVA needs to ensure that local PEC policies and the wider district policies reflect the social justice teachings of the greater Church.
The CISVA and especially the Board of Directors should consider different forms of accountability that are more transparent so that discrepancies can be better detected and addressed. For example, the Board of Directors’ meetings could become open to any interested stakeholder. Currently, the CISVA has no formal mechanism in place where teachers and students can give voice to their experiences within the district policy making bodies other than at the local level. Thus, if learning assistance teachers have professional differences of opinions with either the principal, PEC, or parish priest, there is little recourse under the current parochial model of the CISVA. Thus, a more formal appeal procedure could be developed where teachers and/or parents can appeal decisions made by local administrators and/or PEC members who may have little expertise such as in the area of special education.

Internal CISVA and Ministry Evaluation teams may benefit from including practicing teachers on school evaluation committees. Currently, teachers are not included on evaluation teams. It may also be prudent to have the director of special education on the team as well, or at least a qualified special education teacher. Such trained personnel may be able to better assess learning assistance and special needs services. A practicing teacher may give attention to the classroom issues such as class composition and access to resources, and its effects on learning.

**Teacher Mentorship**

Expand the newly developed teacher mentorship program to include mentoring teachers new to special education and learning assistance. Currently, many new teachers have not had the training or experiences in their practicum for working with students with special needs. The new teachers may not be aware of CISVA policies and protocols.
While the matter is presented in a workshop for new teachers in August of every year, much of the actual issues are too varied and specific to the students’ needs to be covered effectively. Practicing teachers may be able to mentor new teachers on how to work with special education assistants and other health care professionals. They could provide support in ways to adapt and/or modify lessons on a practical level.

Some regular education teachers are slotted into the job of a learning assistance teacher for various reasons. In some cases, principals place weak teachers in learning assistance because they feel that the teachers would cause “less damage.” In other cases, some teachers with young families may choose to work part-time, and principals may place such teachers in learning assistance positions so that they do not have to create split-classes. In such cases, existing regular education teachers may not be qualified under Ministry of Education guidelines to work as learning assistance teachers. Due to the shortage of such teachers, many private and public districts are forced to fill those positions with unqualified teachers. A mentorship program for these teachers may also be of benefit to schools.

**District Screening of Special Education Providers**

The CISVA could establish a hiring policy for Special Education that emphasizes the importance of hiring qualified teachers and special education assistants whenever possible. The CISVA could also help schools by making available, a list of qualified psychologists, and other service providers, who may serve as special education resources persons for schools and parents.

*Lobby the provincial government*
In the past the Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA) has helped the independent schools obtain funding for services which are provided to public schools but not to the independent schools. Specifically, FISA should lobby the provincial government for funds to cover speech language therapists and school psychologists in independent schools. By providing funds for such services, the government would make it possible for all children in the province to have access to speech language and counseling services. With additional funds, it would be prudent for the government to develop accountability processes to ensure that targeted funds are in fact reaching the students who need those services.

Transforming Inequalities and Promoting Democracy

In this study, I utilized a personal narrative approach to describe two complex contexts in which I served as a learning assistance teacher. I described how my "professional knowledge landscape" and my "personal practical knowledge" developed and changed from a regular classroom teacher to that of someone working with special needs students. I reflected on how that affected my relationship to colleagues, parents, administrators and students. I wondered about how schools were organized into grades with grade level standards and how these were internalized and utilized to determine "at-risk" and "learning disabled" students. In this sense, it is the educational institution that creates these labels and classification.

Reflecting on concepts from educational researchers such as critical theorists, another other key issue came to light in the two snapshots, which is the complex nature of trying to obtain funds and resources for students with special needs and learning differences. Although I knew previously that not all decisions in the field of education
seem logical from a teacher’s perspective, I came to realize that effective and productive instruction was not always the primary goal of an educational organization in every circumstance. This led me to wonder why this was so and what might be the effects of such circumstances.

My attempts to understand the structures and processes involved in institutional settings and school organizations led me to look at the loosely coupled nature of education and how that looseness gets played out in terms of power relationships. It led me to look at who controls the resources and what some of those consequences might be. As Foucault (1977) mentions, power acts in capillary and proximal ways, or from the bottom-up. Seeing how power can exist even in apparently lower levels of a hierarchical organization, I offered possible recommendations that may lead towards a further understanding of social justice issues as well as a more equitable distribution of resources and funds.

Educational theorists note that change in loosely coupled organizations is difficult. Marion (2002 p. 324) notes that complexity theorists have found that change is more effective when it is implemented systemically and slowly. He states that “enduring relationships must be forged and other subsystems must make collateral changes; that is growth and maturity is a network dynamic…” Thus, I tried to frame some of the recommendations in a way that extends throughout the hierarchy and allows for the possibility of organizational learning and networking. Through such shared learning and communication, new realities may be shaped by a common vocabulary and shared perceptions.
In conclusion, the delivery of special education services is messy and complex given the existing organizational structures, policies, and procedures, as well as the organizational cultures of the local schools. In need of transformation, it will require the work of all stakeholders to promote a culture of collaboration and shared sense of care and social justice. As Levin (1998, p.74) states there is a dual commitment “...to make education an important part of democracy and to make democracy an important part of education.” In working as a community, exercising the “preferential option for the poor,” the potential exists for the CISVA to transcend the segregating effects of a consumeristic ideology to become that which it strives to be, an instrument to bring a positive, transformative change in society.

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