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## **An Education and negotiation of differences: the “schooling” experiences of English-speaking Canadian children growing up with polio during the 1940s and 1950s**

### **Abstract:**

In this paper we present oral narratives focusing on schooling experiences of Canadians who lived with polio as children between 1940 and 1959. We argue that disabled students with polio received an education about the differences ascribed to them by individuals in authority (teachers, principals), by other young people, and through the dominant negative discourses of polio and normalizing, ableist practices of schooling. Using narrative accounts from participants' interviews, we analyze their school experiences of difference: inaccessible physical and temporal spaces, bullying at school, exclusion from classes, and negotiating youth culture related to shoes, clothes and friendships. However, participants were not passive and they discussed how along with families, they negotiated and occasionally defied normalizing processes. This research gives voice to a generation of disabled English-speaking Canadians, whose stories about school have not been heard before.

**Keywords:** Disability, polio, children, school, bullying, exclusion.

### **Points of Interest:**

- We describe the public fear of polio and negative views of disability in the 1940s and 1950s, in English-speaking Canada.
- Adult participants, who survived polio as children, discuss their experiences at school.
- Such experiences include exclusion and being bullied for wearing shoes and clothes that concealed leg braces, but also marked children as different and exclusion from regular classroom activities.

- We describe the many ways children and families advocated for children's participation in school activities.

## **Introduction**

Disability history scholarship seeks to uncover concealed histories - the voices and experiences of disabled people (Reaume 2000, 2012; Clarke 2006; Strong-Boag 2007; Gleason 2012; Longmore and Umansky, 2001). Canadians who contracted polio prior to 1955 comprise one of the largest groups of disability pioneers and their social histories (i.e. schooling) have only been minimally uncovered in a few Canadian polio-related texts (Aitken et al., 2004; Ruddy 1995). American (Wilson 2007; Finger 2006; Shell 2005; Wilson 2004) and international polio (Gould 1995) survivors' stories are more evident in the disability studies literature than Canadian polio stories. Our paper is aligned with Altenbaugh's (2006) notion that disability historiography and the history of education should include the voices and experiences of young people with disabilities and Gleason's (2012) work examining the educational experiences of Canadian young people with disabilities.

In this paper, we present oral narratives focusing on schooling experiences of Canadian children who lived with polio between 1940 and 1959. Our overarching orientation to this study encompasses a constructionist/social model view of disability (Oliver 2004; Thomson 2002). We argue that school structures, policies, practices and cultural or dominant ways of parenting and being children during this time, (re)produced the child of difference (Davis and Watson 2001). We use the term difference to describe the historical understanding of disabled children's capabilities as "deficient." We also use the term difference, from a disability studies lens (Garland Thomson 1997; Titchkosky 2003), to signify diversity, celebrating the meaning of

difference/disability as a positive attribute or characteristic of an embodied self. Therefore, the phrase “education of difference” describes the process of learning about disability in both regards: difference as deficiency, and difference as strength.

An oral history approach captures the everyday experiences of people who lived with polio prior to 1955, contributing to disability culture (Hirsch 2004) nationally and internationally. This paper is based on research from a larger oral life history project developed and implemented by academic and community disability activists (Yoshida 2008) which centered on capturing the everyday activist narratives of 38 English-Canadians, from across the country, who contracted polio prior to 1955. Thirty of these narratives talked about school life in urban and/or rural settings in Southern and Northern Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Pseudonyms are used for participants accounts presented in the paper<sup>1</sup>.

Using both social model and disability studies perspectives; we focus on individuals’ agency and structure in their lives. In this way, we facilitate active and engaged participants to guard against the “othering” of disabled people. Two challenges arose early on as we tried to place individual experiences at the center of our analysis. The first issue was convincing participants that their stories were important and should be shared. We spent time explaining that there is little social/public history available about the experiences of disabled people and how participants’ involvement is significant in addressing this situation. A second challenge was that many participants spoke about teasing, taunting, and physical bullying. Yet they downplayed these experiences as a part growing up. The language – teasing and taunting – locates their

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experiences historically; however, we have chosen to frame these experiences as what is today recognized as bullying.

People with polio who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s came to know about their differences in these decades within a specific historical context. In order to contextualize and better understand their stories and experiences, we situate these in the specific historical context of disability (especially polio) and education that contributed directly to participants' very particular education of differences. To establish that context we begin by examining the discourses of polio between approximately 1940 and 1959. To further set the context, we also look at schooling in Canada for disabled children in the same period.

### **Discourses of Polio**

Prevailing polio discourses we examined between 1930 and 1950 were fear, normalization, charity and scrutiny. These discourses, which we identified through popular media sources<sup>2</sup>, contributed in different measure to our participants' education of differences.

Polio survivors had to contend with the public fear of polio - a fear of the disease and its survivors, which was ever present (Wilson 1998). The public fear of polio re-victimized the young people who contracted it. Popular media reports, combined with confusion about how the disease was transmitted, turned survivors of polio into dangerous carriers of the disease. News articles focused on the prevalence of new cases and deaths, discussing school, theatre, public pool and church closures, quarantines and isolation processes, lists of symptoms, and experimental antidotes. Stories about quarantines instilled in the public a fear of the contagion (The Evening Telegram, September 13, 1937).

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<sup>2</sup> The Evening Telegram, The Globe, The Calgary Herald, The Winnipeg Tribune

Heightened fear especially accompanied the return to school in September. On numerous occasions, school boards in different parts of Canada closed schools during the first weeks of September as a way of dealing with polio epidemics. The years 1937 and 1953 saw record numbers of polio cases (Rutty, 1995). During these epidemic years, school boards in Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta closed schools for several weeks in September (Rutty 1995). School closures helped to construct young people with polio as threats to other children in schools.

Disability and polio were also framed in society as deficiency and, therefore, various social mechanisms, e.g. charity organizations, became dedicated to the bodily normalization of disabled children with the goal of producing non-disabled people – or at the very least, less-disabled people. The knowing of differences involves discursive, ableist practices in school and outside of school, which help define difference and, therefore, help to create the disabled child.

Surgery to address the after-effects of polio was one particularly notable source of normalization in the 1940s and 1950s. Ableist assumptions and practices were embedded in the practice of surgery, which contributed to young people's education of their differences. Charitable organizations devoted to Canadian children with polio, such as the Ontario Society for Crippled Children Centre (OSCCC) and the Crippled Children Foundation Fund (CCFF), published full-page advertisements in newspapers appealing for public support – mostly financial – for corrective surgeries for disabled children.

Charitable organizations enlisted the help of parents and the public to make sure that all young people with disabilities who were eligible engaged in normalizing discourses. Parents were expected to seek out medical intervention necessary to correct, normalize, or “mend” their child's body. Charitable organizations appealed to the larger society to watch out for any child in

need of surgery or care. The OSCCC asked the public to be vigilant for “crippled” children in need of medical attention, placing parents and children under direct scrutiny. An OSCCC advertisement published in a Toronto newspaper and addressed to the public reads in part: “Do you know of any little child, or older child, or adolescent in your locality, who is crippled, and who is not receiving proper surgical or medical attention either through the carelessness and neglect of his parents or guardian, or because his parents or guardian cannot afford to pay for such attention?” (The Globe, May 27, 1932). This encouraged members of the public to report children who had fallen beyond the OSCCC’s reach. The organization turned vigilance into a high stakes game. “By crippled children is meant any child not more than 18 years of age who has physical defect which, if not corrected, would militate against his normal, social relationships, and his ability to become self-supporting, and would lower his value as a citizen” (The Globe, May 27, 1932). This statement by the OSCCC offers further insight into how individuals came to know differences and how advertisements enforced otherness. Priestly (2001) has noted that this heightened concern and intervention can accentuate difference. What is also evident from the OSCCC advertisement is the immediate scrutiny of children in this particular historical context, but more than that – the watching and knowing of differences at all times.

Outside of schools in the 1940s and 1950s, disabled young people – especially young people affected by polio – were confronted with several different discourses. These discourses of polio and disability contributed to the education children with disabilities in Canada received about their differences.

## **Schooling children for an education of difference**

Schools reinforced discourses about polio, disability, and normalization that circulated in the 1940s and 1950s. Schooling added something of its own to those discourses as well. In Canada in the 1940s (especially after 1945) and the 1950s, the goal of extending educational opportunity to all children emerged as a national educational preoccupation (Stevenson 1970.) One of the ways that school reform extended educational opportunity was by expanding special education services for Canadian children with disabilities (Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1959). In one way, the new impetus towards educational opportunity in the 1940s and 1950s supported what was then a fledgling idea of integrating young people with disabilities into mainstream schools. But, as other evidence – and participants’ experiences in particular – reveal, the school environment of these two decades also did a great deal to further educate – to school – physically disabled pupils about their differences.

The school environment in the 1940s and 1950s could easily make disabled children feel isolated, intimidated, and excluded. These feelings that the school environment engendered could all contribute to a sense of difference amongst children with disabilities. Students with embodied differences that marked them as unlike their peers had the least status in schools in the 1940s and 1950s. These students were often the most vulnerable as well (Gleason 2001). Canadian schools in the 1940s and 1950s were, generally speaking, strict and pedagogically traditionalist, and could often be physically and verbally intimidating as well – for all boys and girls, including disabled children (Sutherland 1986; Axelrod 2005, 2010). Peers could also make schools intimidating places for young people. Probably no child with a disability was immune to teasing

in this environment and many participants in our study talked about being teased, bullied physically or excluded for their differences.

In the 1940s and 1950s, normalization was an important purpose of special education programs for disabled children in schools, and by extension a goal of educational policy more generally. This goal of normalization at school further educated young people about their differences. Normalization sometimes took the form of physical, occupational, or other therapy. Although Canadian schools were usually separate from hospitals, special education programs for physically disabled children within those schools nevertheless integrated therapy directly into the daily program, a practice dating back to the 1920s in some places (Donohue 1985; Ellis 2011).

School authorities often had to modify the academic program for disabled children to make room for therapy. Some subjects were dropped entirely from school curricula. A modified educational program for disabled young people, one that sometimes also emphasized vocational options school authorities believed physically disabled youngsters were best suited to, helped to further underline disabled children's difference from the rest of the school population (Ellis 2011).

Although special education was often held up as the most modern form of education for disabled children, these programs were far from universally available in the 1940s and 1950s in Canada, and were usually limited to urban areas (Dominion Bureau of Statistics 1959). Schools built purposefully with disabled children in mind, such as Toronto's Sunny View (opened in 1953), did not come into existence until the very end of our period (Donohue 1985). Without consistent approaches for educating disabled children, many schools in the 1940s and 1950s

developed their own informal accommodations. These approaches sometimes helped and sometimes hindered.

Another central feature of the school context in the 1940s and 1950s, the notion that a child had to fit in socially with a group of school peers in order to be well-adjusted, also contributed in multiple ways to educating physically disabled children about their differences. School and child psychologists laid a great deal of emphasis in the 1940s and 1950s on the importance of fitting in, or adjustment as it was also called. Participants in our study often reported that fitting in with peers was a challenge. Psychologists expected that adjustment would be challenging, if not impossible, for any child who lacked a certain appearance (white), a certain set of means (at least middle-class), and a certain body type (not deformed or unusual). Schools and adults who worked in them were often eagerly engaged in identifying and regulating, maladjusted disabled youngsters who were physically different (Gleason 1999, 2001).

Canadian schools in the 1940s and 1950s promoted expanded educational opportunity and extended real opportunities to children with physical disabilities. Yet at the same time, public schooling, as an experience, for the most part accentuated differences instead of welcoming them.

### **Analysis: Education and negotiation of difference**

Canadian students with polio received an education about the differences ascribed to them by individuals in authority (teachers, principals), by other young people, and through the dominant negative discourses of polio and the normalizing, ableist practices of schooling. In this section, we use narrative accounts from participants' interviews to present and analyze their schooling experiences. These school experiences are set in the educational and discursive

contexts that surrounded polio in the 1940s and 1950s. We discuss negotiating physical space and temporal constraints, playground interactions, academic experiences, and youth culture.

### *Getting around the school*

Our interviews tell us that the large spaces within urban and some rural schools applied a normative temporal expectation upon all students concerning their movements in and between school spaces. When disabled students failed to meet the normative expectations of time and space in schools, they were marked as different. Helen discusses the issues she faced as a young girl and having to negotiate stairs within a specific timeframe:

It was so exhausting. ... It was one of these square, two-story, brick rural prairie schools. The staircase ... went up forever (laughs)... I know I didn't go out for recess because it was too much all the way down and all the way up.

Helen's experiences illustrate the normative physical and temporal aspects of schools and how an array of negative consequences resulted from participants' exclusion from activities – even the simplest activity, recess. Like Helen, many participants who walked with crutches, canes, or braces on their legs negotiated stairs and the large spaces in schools on a daily basis on their own like other students. A few participants, who were wheelchair users, were 'accommodated' in school with the help of fellow students. Sandra recalls her feelings about being different when she was carried up school stairs in grade school:

So kids were assigned to pull me up and down flights of stairs. ... I hated being the center of attention. You know, the boys would come [to carry Sandra] and would make all of us late for class, and then I was allowed to leave class a little early to get down the stairs.

Sandra's story illustrates that accommodations did not always translate into inclusion, and could further mark a child as different.

Participants' inclusion and exclusion varied based on the willingness of individual teachers and principals to accommodate their needs and on the nature of the accommodation, which differed for participants in our study. Melvin's teacher provided him with a stool so he could elevate his leg during class. She also arranged a part-time job for him and a friend shoveling snow. A custodian built a small ramp for another of the participants so he could avoid some school stairs. Participants spoke of these informal accommodations positively.

### *In the classroom*

Participants' frequent stories about physical education illustrate the degree of inaccessibility and exclusion within schools, which was based upon a belief in the construction of the healthy individual and the view that disabled people (individuals with polio included) were unhealthy. Participants' inclusion in physical education classes was limited at best. What was consistent in most of the participants' accounts was that "accommodations" were based on ableist school practices. Many were excluded from any participation and were enrolled in other alternative classes, such as typing. Others were "included" informally and made to change into their gym clothes, but had to sit and watch their peers play and exercise. Rita describes the process as not "making sense." She says,

...even though I couldn't do gym, I would have to sit by the side of the gym wearing a gym outfit, which didn't make sense...And then change after...

Penny participated more in physical education than Rita, but considered the experience equally unpleasant,

They pushed ... physical education there...Well you know basketball. You have to throw the ball. ... I'd say to the gym teacher, I said, "I'm sorry. I can't do. I had polio," and I said..., "I have no strength in the shoulders and arms."... It didn't matter. I had to do it. I got horrible marks. And the same in the swimming. But crawl is not my strong point.

Yeah, so I said “Can’t I do the breast stroke, or the side stroke?” No. So I would always get failures for those. I thought that was so unfair.

Penny’s experience exemplifies how she attempted to negotiate accommodations. The simplest request, to be graded on breaststroke instead of crawl, was rejected. In addition to physical education class, participants also spoke about how their education was affected by medical interventions. Lorraine spoke about starting Grade 10 in November due to surgery and about how her small northern Ontario school accommodated her needs:

Yeah, I got exceptionally good marks... I was EXTREMELY fortunate there were only three teachers in the whole high school like for the four grades. The principal had to teach too... They [the teachers] all took an interest in me, and taught me.

Lorraine’s interest in school and the closeness of the teachers to the students made it possible for her to catch up academically. For others, the effects of polio made it difficult to concentrate in school. Ann talked about her struggles:

...but I think the polio did have a lot to do with ... - cause I’ve read some books –it affected your brainstem,... and your ability to concentrate and comprehend and ... hold onto information.

Rita, a First Nations woman, describes how she succeeded in high school—and rebelled against it too:

Well my teachers never really expected much of me, but I excelled academically anyway due to the fact I was a nonphysical person..., I retreated into the intellect and the ... mental part of me to keep myself occupied; like reading, writing, 'rithmetic...I did pretty good, although there was the time I did rebel when I was 16. I went to two schools in the same year in grade ten, and passed grade ten in both schools. I would get bored with one school and I would go to another one. I would go to (home school) for two or three days a week, and then (other school), you know ... my parents never knew. I wasn’t caught [until] Grade 11.

Once Rita was found out she had to decide upon one school and chose to go back to her home school. Earlier in her education, teachers in Rita’s elementary school wanted to enroll her into a

special education class because, as she states, “it was equated disability equals ... unintelligent.” However, her mother advocated on her behalf, and she continued her education in a general classroom.

### *Life on the schoolyard*

Some participants told stories of playing with neighborhood children and one or two close friends. Few stories were told about being included in schoolyard play. However, in school and specifically on the schoolyard, many participants spoke about experiences of teasing, taunting, and less frequently, physical bullying.

Some participants tried to participate in schoolyard games and sports but were either always chosen last, excluded by peers, or reprimanded by teachers. Marlene remembers “playing” baseball when she was eight years old:

I do remember being the last one to be chosen for things cause I wasn't physically capable of doing lots of things... Of course can't run, and only had one good arm, so couldn't pitch. ... I would be stuck out in the field somewhere.

Growing up in the late 1930s and 40s, Michael still has vivid memories of being excluded from playing baseball and also humiliated in front of other children by a teacher:

I remember vividly Mr. Johnson ... I tried out for a baseball team. Of course I hit the ball, and I was running as fast as I could, and then Mr. Johnson said (yelling) “get out of there. You're too slow. Get out of here.” I always remember it. I would never try a sport again. Ever... I was about six or seven... Teachers are supposed to inspire.

Being forced to skip recess was a regular occurrence for many participants because of the physical and temporal constraints of schools. Their exclusion from schoolyard play further marked participants as different from their peers.

In walking to and from school, participants mentioned that sometimes they were teased and called names (e.g. “gimpy,” “hoppy,” “cripple,” “one leg,” etc.) or would have their walking imitated by others. Kathleen:

Sometimes on the way home from school some kids would make fun of me. I would sit down, take off the braces – can’t walk anywhere without them, right? Take off the braces and start flinging them to hit them... Now you think the kids are going to stand close enough for me to hit them?

The process of walking to and from school was stigmatizing because it accentuated differences in the way one walked. Walking to school, which parents encouraged and was intended to normalize disabled children, seemed, in many cases, to further accentuate their differences.

Physical bullying, or what participants called “taunting,” “teasing,” and “being picked on,” shows how participants’ peers accentuated or rejected—sometimes violently—participants' differences. Male participants described more events of physical bullying than female participants. One female participant, Ruth, who used a long leg brace and crutches at the time, described an incident where a girl would run by and hit her (Ruth). Ruth told one of her older brothers who spoke to the other girl’s brother. The incidents stopped for awhile but then started up again. The bullying finally ended when the girl’s grandfather saw her hit Ruth. Except for Ruth, no participant mentioned reporting bullying to any older person.

Earl, Herman, and Melvin all recounted being physically bullied and beaten up during school. Melvin, a black Canadian, grew up in Atlantic Canada and first attended a predominantly black school until his family sent him to live with another black family so he could attend a school he could walk to. He was one of only a few black students. In Melvin's situation, the bullying was not solely polio-motivated. Race was certainly a factor:

I remember I used to have this long leg brace on... I remember this one kid all the time he used to come running around me, and then he used to spit on me, eh? ...I was mad... But I couldn't catch him because he was faster than me. ...That went on maybe three, four weeks like that. Every time in the schoolyard. ...this other guy there, he stopped him one time. He grabbed a hold of him ... until I could get over there, get to him. I put him down on the ground and I was just beating him, hitting him, and hitting him. The other fellow had to pull me off because I was so angry with him...

Other participants' encounters with bullying occurred all through elementary and secondary school. Earl experienced multiple episodes of being beaten up in junior and senior high school when he lived in western Canada. Earl took up martial arts, and he later challenged his bully to a fight after school:

I always had to walk home, so I had crutches... I would always get beat up. Then all of a sudden the crutches went away. Then I took up the sport of judo... This was at about... ten, eleven, twelve years old. About three years later..., the bully who was always beating me up all the time, we had a major fight on the school grounds and ... my judo came into play... That was the first time that I felt ... like my self-esteem probably went just super high at that point. I got all the confidence that I needed to basically carry me on into high school, adulthood – the WHOLE works, it was because of that. I got picked on so much...

For Earl, asserting himself physically (challenging others to a fight) reproduced the hegemonic heteronormative masculinity that was required at that time (Wilson 2004). However, other participants, such as Michael, decided not to confront their bullies:

The best thing to do when you see a bully comes is get out of there as quickly as you could. I didn't ever want to start a fight with anybody. Cause I would... lose... If you went to the teacher, the teacher would just ignore them. Teachers did nothing about bullies years ago.

Michael goes on to say how he had few friends growing up and reflected on his reclusive life today as a result of his childhood experiences. Herman was physically bullied on the schoolyard. He quotes one bully saying, "We don't want no polio kid at all." This incident resulted in a broken leg. Herman told us:

So when I tried to kick the ball a guy came up behind me, and kicked me in my leg and broke my leg, and so I laid there until my dad could come after school and pick me up.

Herman went on to say that it was four hours before his father arrived and took him to the hospital. He did not receive any assistance from teachers, staff or other children.

### *Trying to fit in*

Youth culture in the 1940s to the 1960s was organized around apparel, friendships and social occasions. Both male and female participants when talking about high school also specifically discussed clothing and shoes. Their stories about both illustrate the intersection of social class and disability. For some, these stories sparked the most emotional response because of the exclusion participants felt from peer groups. The majority of participants discussed shoes in particular. Shoes encapsulated the potential for normality, inclusion and acceptance – they represented normality for participants and signaled normality to others. When one failed to wear the “right” shoes, participants were visually marked as different and described feeling different. For participants who discussed shoes, there was a resounding dislike of Oxfords;<sup>3</sup> described by many participants as too cumbersome and completely unfeminine. Marlene:

None of the other girls had to wear them. They were the most ugliest things in the world. And I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be like everybody else, and I wanted to be one of the girls. There were lots of things that I would do so that I would be accepted; fit in. Things like I would join things. I would work extra hard at things.

All participants who spoke about shoes agreed with this description, but more importantly, this statement exemplifies how strongly some participants wanted a normalized school life experience. The ability to pass as someone without a disability – or to conceal one’s marker of difference was important.

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<sup>3</sup> Oxfords were hard soled uppers, often brown and known for their sturdiness.

Shoes and clothes also represented the socio-economic status of participants and at times, (re)produced their understanding of their difference. Earl's account demonstrates how wearing the "wrong" kind of shoes, mismatched size shoes, and "poor" clothing all helped (re)produce him as different from other children.

It was hard to make friends because they considered me a little different because of my, you know, my limp and all that kind of stuff. We couldn't afford shoes that were built up. I couldn't afford shoes that were different sizes. So when I was little, you know, I'd have like a size six on this side, and a size four on this side. But what we'd do is we'd buy two size six shoes and we'd stuff it with toilet paper so that ... you could wear them. But we just didn't have any money. My clothes and everything were ... Well they came from a ... from a poor type of family. And so I was picked on.

Earl's account shows quite clearly how an individual's (or family's) socio-economic status reflected on their inclusion in school. Ian was also excluded from participating, until he got the "right" kind of shoes – in this case, PF Fliers:

But I remember ... arguing with my mom 'I need these shoes. I need these shoes.' The kids always used to joke around and everything else. Tease you. One day I got a pair of running shoes. At that time they called them PF Fliers. You know, they were ... supposedly the elite shoe. They were the PF Flier, but they were a knockoff. I put these things on and the kids ... – I started ... moving quite well with these shoes on. The kids were quite amazed. They'd joke and tease you, but they knew you couldn't catch them. But when I put these sneakers on I remember chasing kids away.

These new shoes translated into social capital for Ian and allowed him to participate with his peers without being teased – it did not matter that the shoes were knockoffs.

Besides shoes, participants also discussed other forms of social capital. Participants actively sought out involvement in school councils and organizing committees that partially involved them in school activities, especially in organizing events. Helen, who was on student council at her school, organized bowling but never participated. Others took part by joining

decorating committees and singing and playing piano. Marlene talks about how she was involved in planning dances and how she also participated:

I can remember, you know, going out to dances and having parties and getting involved. I got involved with things like... being on the decorating committee. We had the Red Cross club – I think in junior high; grade eight and grade nine. In grade nine I, and a bunch of other kids from all across Alberta, went to a Red Cross conference in Banff.

However, not all participants had pleasant experiences in social extracurriculars. For the majority, the social pressures to participate (re)produced their differences by highlighting their separation from “normative” social involvement in after school activities. Sharon talks about how her social circle was very limited in high school, and that even her brother ignored her.

I was quite a loner. Because of my disability not too many of the cool kids, the normal kids, wanted to be seen... with me. Even my brother who was in my classroom, he was one year older than me – didn't talk to me.

Sharon explains further how she did not attend her high school prom and how difficult it was to establish relationships with “guys” in her grade.

Well I didn't know any guys, or I didn't ... I think my wheelchair made me ... sometimes self-conscious and, you know, no one ever asked me so I never ... went. ... That a lot of times there were a lot of things I didn't do because of my wheelchair and I would get upset. I didn't go to that many dances, or ... Actually didn't go to any dances, at school and stuff like that.

As the most prominent marker of her difference, the wheelchair represented to others her “inability” to dance. She argues:

I think too because ... kids didn't ... thought you were in a wheelchair, what can you do? Unless you tell them “I can do this.” I do remember one year out at camp they had... we had a dance out at Camp Horizon. And I ... we could dance, because I danced with my sister. Growing up with my sisters and stuff like that. We did that.

The exclusion from social events such as proms and dances at school (re)produced, for participants, a negative understanding of their differences. However, not all participants had

unpleasant experiences concerning social activities. Edward talks about how he used his wheelchair to make friends:

If you went really fast in my wheelchair and turn really sharp, you could leave black marks on the floor. Skid marks. So they would ... – with a little encouragement of course. They could see how big a skid marks they could leave on the floor. (laughing) I remember there was a hill outside the school. The high school students would smoke at the bottom of the hill. I remember going down the hill in my wheelchair with somebody riding on behind me ... on the foot pegs. You'd be steering and there'd be two of you going down this hill on the sidewalk as fast as you could go. Virtually out of control.

Edward's experience demonstrates the positive association he makes with his disability (and mobility device as an extension) with his friends. He uses his wheelchair not just for getting around but as a way of having fun, taking risks and including others. Edward's use of his wheelchair demonstrates participation, negotiation, and defiance of normalizing behaviour for wheelchair users.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that schooling practices in the 1940s and 50s delineated participants as different and in turn educated them about their differences. This education took place when polio was largely feared, and when polio survivors were under severe scrutiny to normalize their disabled bodies. At the same time, new discourses of educational opportunities were being implemented that expected children with disabilities to participate in schooling just like every other child. When disabled children were unsuccessful in participating, accommodations were either informal or nonexistent, which often lead to the further exclusion and isolation of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities were (re)produced as different by various ableist school structures and processes, creating inaccessible spaces for disabled children. Participants' social locations of gender, race, class, and geographical settings, also shaped their experiences.

Yet participants' accounts undeniably reflect agency within and outside of school. This agency became an important part of their education, which they carried forward in their lives.

While this project promotes the voices of disabled children during this time period, future studies should focus on the diversity of children in other social locations such as race, sexual orientation, and social class. In doing so, we allow for multiple, fluid, and nuanced understandings of disabled identities, which would move towards a more complex politics of disability. The experience of disabled children and the creation and education of difference, should also be examined in spaces other than school, such as organized sports, girls and boys centered clubs and other activities. In addition, these studies should also emphasize how identification is produced, sustained and emergent within multiple settings and the meaning and importance to the individual at various points in time.

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