

**“I couldn’t understand how they could walk without crutches, sticks, callipers, so somebody had to wind them up in the morning, somewhere there had to be this key that turns. That is how I looked on it.”**

(Watson, 2002, p.517)

## HOW DO STUDENTS VIEW THEIR DISABILITY AND WHAT PART DOES THIS PLAY IN DEVELOPING THEIR SENSE OF SELF?

Jane’s account of her life as a child living with other children with physical disabilities did not show a loss in her idea of her “self”; instead she was fascinated by how others could do things that she physically could not. As she grew older her physical differences had become an acceptable but unremarkable part of herself.

**Identity**



Life story books are a way that students can work with a trusted person to talk freely about their lives to construct a book using words, photos, and documents that provide a positive enhancing account of their lives.

(Cheston, 1994)

**“I just don’t see myself as disabled.  
I’m in a wheelchair, big deal.  
The chair’s my legs, I save a hell  
of a lot of money on shoe leather,  
I just don’t see myself as disabled.”**

(Watson, 2002, p.517)

Jane did not define herself by her disability. Many students with a disability do not do so either. In one study deaf students as a group wanted to distance themselves from the word disability, seeing disability as an “illness” or impairment. For others, issues relating to gender, age, class and sexuality were more significant in their lives than disability. Others say, it is their **disabling experiences** not their **disability** that defines their life experiences, and they reject negative disabling identities imposed on them by others.



**“In real class you feel you’re normal, and you know, it’s one of those standards where if you’re in normal class, everyone thinks you’re normal, but if people see you walking toward the special ed section they say, “Ooh he’s got a problem he’s in special ed.” Nah. I mean I really don’t like going to special ed, but I’m only in there for study hall so I don’t mind, but it’s just one of those things. I prefer general, but I do need extra help so I’m stuck in special ed.”**

(Lovitt, Plavins & Cushing, 1999, p. 297)

Schools are pivotal in terms of students developing their sense of identity. They can support the development of a positive identity or they can be risky and isolating places for students with disabilities. Students with an intellectual disability may struggle on a daily basis to meet the academic and social demands in their environment. In one study, positive support at school was described by students as coming from their friends and school staff. This helped them gain independence and make key decisions on a day to day basis.

(Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001)

Research shows that students with disabilities are confronted daily with ways of speaking about disability that influence their experiences and sense of identity, and that negative portrayals are common.

(Linton, 1998; Priestly, 1999; Shakespeare & Watson, 1998)



What are your students’ support systems?

Are they reliable and consistent?

Do they know when they need to access support systems?



Some things in our schools are visible to all students as markers of difference. Have you thought about?

- Timetabling
- Lunchtime experiences
- Pull out programmes
- Planning for trips
- The language and messages used in the school about disability
- Physical access to playgrounds and buildings
- How mobility support is offered to the student.

**Gill:** “Patrick, come over here and tell these people why you’re in the unit”

**Patrick:** Looks down and mutters under his breath

**Gill:** “Come on Patrick, tell them”

**Patrick:** “A’ve, A’ve, A’ve got Tourettes miss”

**Gill:** “And what does that mean Patrick? ”

**Patrick:** “It means I diiae behaved miss”.

(Davis & Watson, 2001, p. 673)

Patrick understands his disability in terms that have been described to him. He sees himself as someone with a behaviour problem, and he doesn’t seem to have had much support in terms of challenging this idea.

