



# Living Otherwise: Students with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities as Agents in Educational Contexts

*Duncan P. Mercieca*

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...One of the classroom assistants, Irene, decided to tell Ruth a story around the giving of invitations for her birthday party while she was feeding her. Mummy Sylvia was going to give a big party to celebrate Ruth's birthday and a number of guests were to be invited, amongst them the classroom staff. At this point, Irene started asking Ruth whether she wanted to invite Duncan. Ruth signed no. Irene repeated verbally Ruth's sign. No, then, shall we invite Jasmine? No again. Shall we invite Irene? No also. Shall we invite Ritienne? Again a negative answer. Shall we invite Joanne? Yes. Irene said: you only want Joanne at your party? And Ruth put her hand in front of her chest and laughed, moving her right leg in the air, an action which she normally does when enjoying herself. The teaching staff were suddenly involved and very interested in this play and asked Irene to go through the story with Ruth all over again. They suggested that this time Irene should change the sequence of their names recounted to Ruth. And so she did. But once more Ruth only invited Joanne for her birthday party. The whole process was repeated several times, still with Joanne being the only person chosen from the school staff. The teaching staff now was participating and commenting on Ruth's responses. They tried to reason with Ruth in vain and persuade her in various ways to change her mind. Their arguments were similar to the following: You say no to Jasmine, but she is the one who escorts you home everyday - now is that fair? And Duncan, who loves you so much and spends so much time with you - don't you want to invite him to your party? The staff members became concerned at Ruth's refusals and not a little offended. There were moments when Joanne was trying to excuse herself and explain why she thought that Ruth would choose her. She tried to convince the others that Ruth was only joking, that in reality she does want to invite all of them... (p.140) This book addresses the question of agency that children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) have in educational contexts. When children have such severe impairment, the idea of their agency often does not cross the mind of adults around them. However this book draws upon the work of Jacques Derrida, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze in relation to nine stories on engaging with children with PMLD, showing to readers the profound influence that children have upon the lives and actions of the persons around them.

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