

Embracing difference

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For parents of children with intellectual disabilities, finding a school that sees the value and life their child brings is essential.

As their daughter Miriam prepared to finish primary school last year, Mary and Bill McCarthy prepared to face the daunting task of finding a secondary school that would be as welcoming as her current one.

Miriam, 12, is a loved and valued student at St Margaret Mary's Primary School in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Spotswood. Although she was born with Down's syndrome and verbal dyspraxia – meaning she finds it hard to articulate what she wants to say – she has found a welcoming and positive atmosphere at the school.

Mary remembers trying to find a primary school that would suit her daughter. While some schools talked about difficulties Miriam might have had in fitting in, the principal of St Margaret Mary's

spoke instead about how pleased they would be to have her.

'I said she had Down's syndrome. He said, "Oh we've got a little kid with Down's syndrome here, and she is a challenge but boy she's a delight and boy she's brought so much to this school and taught our children so much".'

For the McCarthys, such an enthusiastic response was refreshing. Indeed, in the search for a secondary school for Miriam, Mary has been reminded of just how good St Margaret Mary's has been with her.

'What I'd like to communicate is that this school has embraced Miriam with her disability, and has integrated her and supported her', she says.

'This little school that's tucked away in the burbs, a very small school who never made an issue about it, who've just seen what the commitment is to support these kids,

no dramas, and have been really pleased to have these kids as a part of their class.'

Having gone all the way through school since prep with the same children, Miriam sees herself as part of the group. Aside from the activities she undertakes with her aide Anne, Miriam does everything else the other children do, from going on the school camp to competing in the school sports day.

Miriam always participates in the hundred-metre race, and though she is still running while the other children have finished, 'They all just stand on the sidelines and clap her', Mary says. 'And she thinks it's great because she's got all these crowds clapping her.'

The school community shows support and encouragement in artistic pursuits as well. Miriam performed alongside the other students in the school concert two years ago.



Pictured: Miriam with some of her classmates at St Margaret Mary's Primary School



'As we were walking out, all the other parents were patting us and saying "She was absolutely awesome"', Mary says. 'She was in there doing it and having a great time doing it and all her peers were supporting her.'

Mary believes the parents of students who share classes with intellectually disabled children should not view the situation as negative for their child.

'I've had people saying that, "If Miriam goes into this classroom, my child is not going to get everything from the teacher because the teacher is going to be so busy looking after your kid with the disability".'

Mary says growing up alongside a child with a disability is a valuable life lesson, and doesn't detract from children's learning at all.

'The children who are growing up with Miriam, when they get out into the community they'll know a little bit about Down's syndrome, which won't be how bad it is and all that sort of stuff. They'll know kids with Down's syndrome are able and capable of doing all these things, because they grew up before they were prejudiced.'

Chris O'Connell, the principal of St Margaret Mary's Primary School, agrees. He says the children have learned from Miriam an understanding that everyone is different.

'They've learned an appreciation, a deep appreciation of disability', he says. 'They do not view Miriam as a lesser person. She falls over and she cries like they do, she eats like they

do, she laughs like they do. They realise, "She's just like us, but she just learns a bit differently". That's the greatest thing that she's offered. The children have walked away with a respect and appreciation that she has the same status and integrity and dignity as everybody else has. It just so happens that she has a disability.'

Mr O'Connell says that schools who may be reluctant to take on children with disabilities should know they will always offer the school more than they will take. Mary agrees that other schools should see the benefits of welcoming intellectually disabled children and realise that it can be done.

This year, Miriam will commence year seven at Bayside Secondary College. Mr O'Connell says that St Margaret Mary's will certainly miss Miriam when she goes.

'She has her own individuality', he says. 'We'll miss her not being about. What she has offered, only Miriam could have brought that to the school.'