

## CHRISTIAN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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### Introduction

As an administrator of a school for disabled students, I have observed a number of reactions fellow administrators when sharing the nature of our school with them. Reactions include surprise, delight, curiosity, confusion, interest, and non-interest. The comments are just as varied. Comments such as, "We really need to do something for these kids. Where do we begin?" "There really is a need for that but we are just not set up to meet the needs of disabled students," and "That's interesting, but we don't have any students with special needs at our school," demonstrate an individual's attitude and awareness of the needs represented by Christian young people.

According to data from the U. S. Department of Education (1992), approximately 10% of all school-aged students are receiving some form of special education services. Applying this prevalence rate to the estimated 140,000 students enrolled in schools of the American Association of Christian Schools (AACCS), there exist potentially 14,000 disabled students that require some form of special education. In a study performed by J. Sutton, Everett, & C. Sutton (1993) found that only 6% of the schools in the AACCS have special education programs. Who then is providing for the needs of these 14,000 young people? The obvious conclusion is that the needs of many Christian young people, who may desire a Christian education, are not being met through Christian schools.

Is this to say that the Christian school does not have compassion for Christian young people with disabilities? I don't think so. It is a personally held opinion that many in leadership positions of Christian schools do not understand why it is necessary to provide for the needs of disabled young people.

### Christian Education vs. Christian Special Education

The purpose of Christian education is the directing of Christian individuals toward God's goal for man: godliness in character and action

(Bell, et al., 1978). This can only be achieved by using Biblical principles as the foundation for accomplishing God's objective. School administrators across the country serve in leadership positions in order to see this objective accomplished in the lives of young people. As indicated earlier, however, the opportunity to receive a Christian education is not as readily available to young people with special needs. Is the purpose and primary goal of Christian education different for these young people than it is for young people without special needs? No, it is not. In fact, the purpose and primary goal of Christian education and Christian special education are one and the same.

While it is recognized that the parents maintain the primary responsibility for the education of their children, it is also recognized that if the body of Christ accepts the responsibility to assist in the education of its *members*, then distinctions between disabled and nondisabled cannot be made.

I Corinthians 12:22-27 best reflects the responsibility of the body of Christ to its members thus providing an appropriate philosophical basis for Christian education not only to include special education but to be Christian special education. The passage reads:

*Nay, much more those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, upon those we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: But God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to the part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.*

This passage indicates that the members of the body which are perceived to be more feeble, are necessary. Those members which are thought to be less honorable, upon these we should bestow more abundant honor. The

word "honour" means deference or reverence. It is the Christians' responsibility to respectfully submit themselves to the "less honourable" members of the body, or those that are given less deference, by bestowing upon them more abundant honor and comeliness. Practically speaking, this honor could come in the form of time and financial assistance; both of which more is necessary when dealing with disabled children. The reason for doing so is explained in that God hath tempered the body together having given more abundant honour to the part which lacked. How? Through the other members of the body. Why? That there should be no division in the body but that the members should have the same care or degree of concern one for another.

If our concern is for Christian young people to receive a Christian education, then the opportunity to receive that education should not be extended to our "comely parts," but must be extended to all parts of the body. Deuink (1992) states, "No student should have his faith undermined in the process of receiving a quality academic education" (p. 2). Christian schools, therefore, should respectfully submit to meeting the needs of the "parts which lacked." This physical illustration of a spiritual fact would provide the world with a clear illustration as to how the body of Christ responds to the needs of its own members.

### **Christ: Our Example**

Godliness in character and action should not just be a goal we set for the students we teach. It should be demonstrated in our own teaching and in the way we minister to the needs of young people. The Lord taught large crowds (Mt. 13:34, 14:19, 15:10), small groups (Mt. 9:37, 11:1, Jn. 9:2), and individuals. He took time to address the needs of sick and disabled individuals (Mt. 9:27, 14:21, Mk. 2:1, Lk. 6:6). He used appropriate methods for each situation. When dealing with the disabled, however, three elements should be noted in His teaching: (1) one-on-one instruction; (2) methods tailored to meet the individual's need; and (3) alternative assessment.

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The information included in the section, *Christ: Our Example*, is adapted from *Framework for Teaching in Strategies for Struggling Learners* by Joe P. Sutton and Connie J. Sutton (1997), pp. 33-40, *Exceptional Diagnostics*. Used by permission.

Pure one-on-one instruction was the method the Lord used most frequently when dealing with the sick and/or disabled. A minimum of thirteen instances in which Jesus dealt with the sick or disabled is recorded in the gospels.

With the exception of the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19), Christ dealt with each situation on an individual basis. Students with disabilities will need one-on-one instruction if they are to succeed academically. Young people with reading and math comprehension problems, processing problems, or conceptual thinking problems will need concepts explained or demonstrated in a variety of ways in order to understand the concepts being taught. Taking the time to do this in a group situation is difficult to achieve successfully.

One-on-one instruction, however, is not sufficient enough to allow a student with disabilities to perform up to his God-given potential. The methods of instruction and the ways in which progress is evaluated must also be considered.

The Lord used appropriate teaching methods to make certain His audience understood the principles He taught. He used methods specific to each situation. Knowing a child's strengths and weaknesses will help to determine the methods used in teaching the child successfully. Students with poor visual motor skills, auditory and/or visual processing skills, and processing speed problems will not be able to process the same amount of information in the same amount of time as the child without these challenges. To help the student compensate for these areas of weakness it would be appropriate for a teacher to: (1) provide prepared outlines so the student's focus can be on the material being presented rather than getting words down on paper; (2) allow the student to tape lectures so important details that may have been missed during the first presentation of the information can be identified and reviewed; and (3) allow the student additional time to complete assignments and tests.

Some would question whether or not this practice is fair to the other students. Fairness is not providing everyone with the same. Fairness is providing individuals with what they need. Children with suspected or documented disabilities need certain modifications made to their education program to achieve their potential and demonstrate their true abilities. Was it fair that Christ gave more individual

time, used extra materials, and gave the man born blind specific instructions as to what he should do to receive sight and salvation (John 9:1-7)? Obviously it was, because that was what the Lord knew he needed to see and believe. Was it fair that He did not do the same for all the others? Yes. The others did not have the same needs. Therefore, the same time, materials, and instructions were unnecessary.

In order for disabled students to demonstrate their true knowledge of a subject, it is often necessary to adjust assignments and use alternative assessment methods. A student who processes information at a significantly slower rate than his peers will not complete the same number of test items within a designated time period. However, the student can demonstrate his knowledge by correctly completing fewer problems of the same nature (i.e., capitalize all proper nouns in 5 sentences instead of 10; solve 10 long division problems instead of 20). Likewise, a young person with a reading disability may fail a history test because he is required to read the test. In such a situation, the child's reading ability is being tested, not his knowledge of history. Having someone read the test questions to him and allowing him to fill in the answers or give the answers orally will provide a truer indication of his knowledge.

### **Personal Responsibility**

Does providing these modifications mean that a disabled student is not to be held to the same degree of accountability as his nondisabled peers? Not at all. To the extent to which he is capable of performing what is required of him, a disabled child's degree of personal accountability is not to be modified. The disabled individual is to be held accountable for and rewarded for how he uses the abilities God has given him.

### **Conclusion**

More time, more money, and more energy is needed to provide for the educational needs of disabled students. Should the body of Christ participate in this responsibility? In respect to the uncomely parts referred to in I Corinthians 12, Matthew Henry states, "instead of despising them, or reproaching them for their infirmities, they [the other members of the body] should endeavor to cover and conceal them [the infirmities] and put the best face upon them [the uncomely members] they can" (p. 570). This is not to imply that the disabled are despised or reproached by the Christian

community. Nor does it imply that deformities or disabilities should be hidden. The implication is, we should do whatever is necessary to cause these parts/members to become as much as a natural part of the body as are our comely parts. What clearer demonstration of godliness in character and action can be given by the Christian school as it applies this truth to itself?

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