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Learners With Disabilities— Christian Educa- tion's Blind Spot

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James A. Tucker

Christian schools that do not provide for the needs of students with disabilities are ignoring one of the main thrusts of the gospel: “to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised”

(Luke 4:18, KJV). Three reasons are often given for not

meeting such needs: (1) cost; (2) detraction from the needs of other students; and (3) lack of teachers trained for such special tasks.

Cost

To say that the cost of providing Christian education is acceptable for “normal” students but is prohibitive for children with disabilities is discrimination that borders on sacrilege. Such discrimination is illegal in the secular world! We cannot treat the issue any less seriously. In cases where the church-school community does not have the resources, it can take advantage of programs available to help disabled children.

For instance, the school can form a partnership with public-school services for students with disabilities. Such interaction need not compromise our standards or goals.

Often the issue is not cost but creative planning. Rebecca, a third grader with Downs Syndrome, was enrolled in a school that was “inclusive.” There was no question that she would be accepted, but her hyperactivity was the problem. She would not stay in one place and insisted on carrying her desk around the room. To hire a teacher’s aide to oversee Rebecca would have been costly, so the teacher came up with a creative solution: provide Rebecca a rocking chair. Rocking took care of her excessive energy, and she stayed steady academically.

Values

Everyone has intelligence and mental abilities that represent gifts from God. How well we are endowed intellectually is not the issue. How we *develop* our talents is what is important. Therefore the IQ test that measures intelligence using a linear one-dimensional concept, distributing people from highest to lowest is not consistent with Christian philosophy. A multi-dimensional view of intelligence is a more useful educational tool. It is in keeping with a Christian worldview, and can provide for the instructional needs of all students, including those with disabilities. As a result, providing for students with disabilities need not distract from the achievement of normal students.

Experience both in North America and Europe shows that where provision is made, all students, including those with disabilities, receive a better education in a regular classroom. However, this achievement depends upon the presence of two factors: (1) teachers trained to meet the special needs of *every* student, including those with

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disabilities; (2) an adequate support system to assist teachers in meeting those special needs.

Training

In order to help teachers meet the needs of students with disabilities, they need the following: (1) training in teaching models and learning strategies, including skills in classroom management and instructional methods required to fulfill the full range of student needs, including disabilities; (2) training in setting up and conducting child-study teams, necessary to provide the community support essential for meeting special needs. (The next issue of the JOURNAL will deal with issues related to program development and training.)

Conclusion

To deny educational services to the poor, the disabled, the linguistically different, or those with “behavior problems” is inconsistent with our Christian calling. There is no legitimate reason for a school established on biblical principles to avoid its responsibility to all students, including those with disabilities.

Christian schools, above all others, should be known for their support of *all* students, including those with disabilities. This issue is intended as a start in accomplishing this goal.—James A. Tucker.

Dr. James A. Tucker, Coordinator for this issue, is Professor of Educational Psychology at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan and Director of the University Center for Assessment and Learning.

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