
Opening the Church School Doors to the Learning Disabled

From his first few months, it was evident that something was wrong. The signs came in many forms, but his failure to perform activities within the general maturation scheme for infants convinced me of his impairment. At age four he was diagnosed by a psychologist at Children's Hospital National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., as mildly retarded. When he entered school he was classified as learning disabled.

Unlike his intellectually gifted older brother, this child was not going to be an achiever; my husband and I knew that. Yet we hoped that he would be able to receive an Adventist education during his early years. When I inquired about the possibility of his attending one of the church schools in our area, the principal off-handedly stated that his school did not deal with such cases. "We recommend that they go to public school," he said. "They do a better job."

And indeed the public schools do a better job, in many instances, as far as the child's physical and intellectual needs are concerned. But haven't Adventists always contended that

church schools are designed for the whole child? That principal and others like him have allowed the visible physical limitations of learning-disabled children to obscure the fact that these youngsters, like all others, have spiri-

tual needs, needs that the Adventist church school was designed to meet.

Seventh-day Adventist church schools serve students effectively. As a former church school teacher, I know of the teachers' competence and dedi-

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education, the carefully prepared curriculum materials. However, the system has always been slanted toward the average and above-average child. Class size, teacher training, curriculum, and acceptance policy all reflect this way of thinking.

Virtually Ignored

Until recently the educational practices of the world's second-largest parochial school system virtually ignored an important part of the church's constituency—the handicapped. But Adventist education, like other parts of the church's work, must adapt to accommodate the needs of its people. Church schools must change in ways that will help them meet the very real challenges of the learning disabled.

Of course, severely handicapped and disabled children may not be able to function in a church school, but here the denomination can study what other groups are accomplishing, and do what it can with existing facilities.

Handicapped children are being educated in hospitals.¹ My son attended school at the Hearing and Speech Center at Children's Hospital from age four-and-a-half to fourteen years. There the children have access to therapists, physicians, testing, and counseling, in addition to a fully individualized education program.

Adventists could develop a program like the one described above. The de-

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nomination runs alcohol rehabilitation programs in some of our hospitals to meet a perceived human need. From a similar motivation, hospitals could operate schools for the handicapped and learning impaired as part of the church's ministry to its constituents as well as others who need the service. Such a program has great missionary potential.

A Joint Venture

A number of church schools are located near Adventist hospitals, thus providing an excellent opportunity for the two institutions to cooperate in developing a program of educational service to handicapped children. Church school faculty might even make the first move to discuss the matter with hospital administrators and plan for a joint venture in education. The results would prove beneficial to all concerned: for the students, an education suited to their abilities, provided in a Christian setting; for the teachers, the

satisfaction of being able to deliver a sorely needed service; and for the hospital, the chance to demonstrate its broad commitment to the goal of making people whole.

Most parents who want to send their learning-disabled children to church school do not seek to have them transformed into superachievers. They do want to have these children accepted as human beings and taught some degree of mastery over their own lives. They would like to see their children use their abilities to the maximum and learn to fill their place in God's world. Since much of a student's achievement is attributable to the quality of the learning environment,² church schools, with their consistently high-quality learning environment, have a head start in providing an education for the learning disabled, as well as for their other students.

Only a Small Inconvenience

Admittedly, an influx of handicapped children could pose a major problem for the already overworked church school teacher; neither our schools nor our teachers are prepared to deal with the learning disabled on a large scale.

However, one learning-disabled child in a classroom creates only a small inconvenience. The teacher and pupils are called upon to make only minor adjustments. When I had a blind student in my class, I found that working with him necessitated no more than

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a little extra planning and anticipating his needs. Understanding, acceptance, and willingness to shed preconceived notions about the handicapped are the major requirements for working effectively with them.

Lazy and Unmotivated?

Some teachers make a special category of their own into which they fit the learning handicapped: they classify them as lazy and unmotivated. Such students' real problem, however, is inadequacy—not inadequacy to meet any and all learning tasks, but to meet them on the teacher's terms and to keep up with the other students, who have no functional disabilities. Teachers who take the time—and effort—to see slow youngsters for what they are and adapt a program to fit their learning style are often surprised and delighted to be rewarded with students who can and do perform satisfactorily.

Individualized Strategies Needed

Individualized teaching strategies are needed to work with the learning-disabled child. The teacher must plan with the child in mind. It does a disservice to the child if the teacher tries to "carry" him along with the rest of the class. Inevitably, such a strategy will only serve to frustrate both teacher and student.

To help ensure success, the teacher should secure the help of the child's parents, bringing them into both the planning and the instructional processes. If they work together as a team to develop instructional objectives that fit the child's capabilities, then the parents can be asked to help carry out the objectives, daily reinforcing at home what is taught in school. Parents of learning-disabled children are usually eager to become involved in their children's education.

How to Involve Parents

Parents of learning-disabled children can be asked to contribute a speci-

fied amount of time at school each week. In my son's early years at the Hearing and Speech Center, I noticed that the teachers depended greatly on parents' contributions in every way, particularly in classroom assistance. Parents can help with drill work for a learning-disabled child; they can read to the child. Parent volunteers can work with children with speech disabilities, tape recording words, sentences, and stories and replaying them for listening and imitation. My son, whose speech was severely impaired, loved to pretend he was a reporter and conduct interviews. Using a tape recorder, we were able to help him realize the need to speak more clearly in order to be understood.

Imaginative play can be used to help disabled children achieve social and emotional development. Through play that provides for interaction with non-disabled children, they can develop self-awareness and body image.³ Games that involve dressing up, finding hidden items, giving or accepting items, showing concern, or lending a helping hand are useful classroom activities that teach learning-disabled children about themselves, others, and the world around them.

Fun is an effective motivator for learning-disabled children, but they "tend to react negatively to the arduous."⁴ All new activities for these children should be based upon previous knowledge. The teacher should not suddenly throw at them a major challenge for which they are unprepared. The teacher may think that he or she is thereby challenging them to greater performance. However, such a challenge often elicits the opposite response.

Using Other Children as Tutors

As educators are well aware, children can be their own best teachers. In the classroom the learning disabled can learn from the other children if a positive atmosphere exists. Small groups

where the disabled can interact with able children offer both groups the opportunity to practice effective verbal and behavioral communication. The brighter children can assist the learning disabled by tutoring them in some of the subjects with which they experience difficulty, while at the same time learning positive attitudes toward people with such problems.

As for the learning disabled, they will benefit greatly from the interaction within the regular classroom. In their extensive study, Margaret Wang and Edward Baker found that "mainstreamed disabled students consistently outperformed nonmainstreamed students with comparable special education classifications."⁵ This should mean that learning-disabled children in an Adventist setting could make significant gains, given the church's holistic educational philosophy and the special sense of mission that characterizes Adventist teachers.

Offer a Welcoming Hand

Church school principals ought to be willing to do a little risk-taking and admit children with mild learning disabilities into Adventist schools, providing them with the opportunity to experience education in a system designed to restore in humans the image of their Maker.

Parents who consciously decide to forgo the benefits of the tuition-free specialized schools with their modern support systems, and send a learning-disabled child to church school, do so out of a conviction that the church school provides a more desirable environment for the child and that a Christian teacher is a preferred influence for that child. Parents with this kind of dedication both to their child and to the concept of Christian education should be rewarded with a welcoming hand at the church school door. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Heather Murdoch, "Helping the Deaf-Blind Child in Class," *British Journal of Special Education* 13 (June 1986), p. 75.

² Margaret C. Wang, Maynard C. Reynolds, and Herbert J. Walberg, "Rethinking Special Education," *Educational Leadership*, 44 (September 1986), p. 26.

³ Murdoch, p. 76.

⁴ American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, *Physical Activities for the Mentally Retarded* (Reston, Va.: 1968), p. 4.

⁵ Margaret Wang and Edward T. Baker, "Mainstreaming Programs: Design Features and Effects," *Journal of Special Education*, 19:4 (Winter 1985-1986), p. 503.