

**F**or centuries, civilized societies of people calling themselves Christians tended to ignore those of their number who had disabilities. This occurred in spite of the clear words of Jesus, who said: “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13, RSV). “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40, KJV). How is it that so many Christians have overlooked those directives?

Until at least the 19th century, little concern was expressed for persons who were blind, deaf, or had other physical limitations. The very word *handicap* is a demeaning derivation of an English term used to describe those—often blind or crippled—who, taking hat in hand, begged for a living; they became known as the *handicapped*. Not until the mid-20th century did some of the world’s major social systems address the needs of individuals with disabilities. At first, the assistance was little more than increased handouts. But gradually, such inhumane attitudes began to change, as well as our use of language.

In the United States, the first comprehensive national law assuring the rights of persons with disabilities—Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act—was not enacted until 1973. By that act,

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# Toward a Christian Understanding of Students With Disabilities

BY JAMES A. TUCKER

Congress decreed that such persons have a constitutional right to equal opportunities as citizens and that reasonable accommodations must be made to assure those rights.

Two years later, in 1975, with the passage of Public Law 94-142, the U.S. Congress established an entitlement for the education of students with disabilities. Fifteen years later, in 1990, Congress reaffirmed this resolve and changed the name of the legislation to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Other nations have also been struggling to become sensitive to the needs of persons with disabilities. Some countries, most notably those of Northern Europe, have made giant strides. Norway and Sweden have moved rapidly to provide comprehensive services and necessary accommodations for persons with disabilities.

The language remains a part of the challenge. From Denmark comes the word that translates into English as “normalization,” which means to provide an environment for persons with disabilities that is as close to normal as possible. The more recent term, which originated in North America, is *inclusion*. However, in some other countries, demeaning terms such as *defective* are still used to describe people with disabilities.

### The Educational Problem

While the world dealt with the ethics and economics of providing services for persons with disabilities, educators struggled with ways to provide for their educational needs. The solution most widely adopted and implemented was called *special education*. H. L. Mencken is alleged to have said that “For every problem, there is a solution which is simple, neat, . . . and wrong.” In many respects, this has been the case with special education.

Ironically, as public education agen-

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cies reject traditional special-education programs in favor of a more inclusive, normalized educational environment for all students, Christian educators are calling for the establishment of traditional special-education programs.<sup>1</sup>

The history of special education is spangled with the best of intentions but pockmarked with dismal results.<sup>2</sup> We have not considered carefully the basis for some of our traditional practices. Consequently, without intending to, we have contributed to the problem that we sought to alleviate. In fact, special education itself has become an insidious form of discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

Christian educators should pay close

attention to the reasons why traditional special education has failed to achieve its hoped-for goals. They must be aware of the subtle and dehumanizing effects of such programs, beginning with the definition of terms.

### Defining Special Education

Most current discussions about the educating of children with disabilities define special education in terms of P.L. 94-142. However, the language and intent of the law contrast sharply with its actual implementation. The

definition of special education has not changed in the 18-year history of this legislation.

*The term “Special Education” means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents or guardians, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability . . . .<sup>4</sup>*

It appears that the term never was intended to imply a place, a program, or a system of service delivery—the most common interpretations. In state and federal law, special education is consistently defined as “specially designed instruction.” So why has it evolved into something so different from what was initially intended? What can we learn from this as we seek to provide Christian education to students with disabilities?

Through the years, we have often allowed sociopolitical realities to define special education by default. Special education has become a sociological phenomenon rather than an instructional intervention.<sup>5</sup> If the concept was defined originally in law as a *type of instruction*, then why have educators been so reticent to address it as such?

Each person needs an education that is special—one designed to meet his or her specific needs. But unfortunately, we have limited individualized instruction to those who are disabled, and then defined *disability* in a way that meets the needs of society, rather than those for whom the laws were written.

## What Is a Disability?

The world classifies various conditions as disabilities—depending on what is considered “normal.” The norm usually is defined culturally rather than on the basis of need.

Labeling things as “normal” or “abnormal” is a human invention designed to establish conventional thinking and behavior. Indeed, we cannot imagine that something normal could exist outside our ordering of the world to meet our standards.

But if nothing can be defined as normal, then there are no disabilities. *That can't be right!* It would make our invented definitions meaningless. Perhaps the solution, then, is to change our conventions, our idea of what is normal and what is not.

In the United States, we go to great lengths to assert that we value diversity—in ideas, in language, in physical characteristics, in religion, and in many other arenas. But we also allow ourselves to be seduced by the idea of comparative diversity, which says, “My ideas are better than yours.” This kind of thinking leads to the normative paradigm that has long held the educational profession tightly in its grip. It is also the fundamental reason that Christian schools choose to educate only students who are traditionally considered “normal.”

Students with disabilities are regarded as abnormal because they score outside the norms on standardized tests. By definition, some students must pass and some must fail any standardized test. Because we use mathematics—an exact science—to support the sorting process, we become convinced that the procedure is somehow based on immutable truth. This is not so. A different set of assumptions would produce a different grouping.

## Definition of Disability

Unfortunately, we tend to substitute labels for the

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needs of people. This causes us to focus on imprecise generalities instead of the specific needs of the individual. We ascribe the qualifier *disabled* to those who cannot perform according to our predefined standards. We establish a category, lower our expectations about what they can achieve, and treat them with a patronizing attitude.

For example, let's look at the skill of communication. The disability, if we must use that term, is an inability to communicate effectively. It is *not* being deaf, learning disabled, or emotionally

disturbed. A deaf person who can communicate effectively by signing does not have a disability; he or she simply needs to use hand signals instead of sounds. A person who learns differently from others still learns; he or she simply needs to find a method that makes sense.

People compensate for differences in communication styles in varying ways. Thus, a diagnosed condition or categorical label is not a disability, per se; whether a person can achieve a desired result determines whether a disability exists. By this definition, someone who is considered normal in all the standard ways and yet is unable to communicate effectively *does* have a disability.

Educators must keep these four truths in mind:

- Every person is unique.
- Every person has needs.
- Every person is “normal” in many areas.
- Every person is “disabled” in many ways.

The issue for education, then, is not to diagnose eligibility in terms of categorical labels, but to *determine the degree to which a person can function effectively.*

Some educators have suggested that the only real difference between special education and regular classes is the student/teacher ratio, but there

is nothing inherently special about reducing class size, even to a one-to-one relationship. Routine instruction provided at a lower student/teacher ratio is not “special,” only more intensive. All students occasionally need a low student/teacher ratio—such as during drivers-education classes, music lessons, detention, and after-school academic assistance. A student who cannot keep up with the learning pace of the rest of the class is not necessarily disabled, but may simply require a different approach. And a student who requires tutoring does not need a special program if the necessary

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tutoring can use the same methods as for regular students. He or she simply needs instruction at a slower pace.

### **The Categorical Assumption**

The biggest problem in trying to define students' educational needs is the categories used to group people with disabilities. These classifications have provided a convenient way to select those who are eligible for a given service. It is easier to relate to a generalized abstraction than to focus on a specific reality. Therefore, when we accept as fact the theories on which those categories are based, we also adopt a prescribed structure within which to build a service-delivery system.

There is a strong tendency to "set in concrete" the theoretical structures that we create. Bureaucracy is the mechanism that society has developed to carry out this function. This does not mean that all aspects of bureaucracies are evil, but they do tend to suffer from what someone has called "hardening of the categories," in which the structure becomes more important than the people it serves.

Hargis<sup>6</sup> illustrates this through the story of Procrustes, who, according to Greek mythology, provided free lodging and food for weary travelers. Everything possible was done for the comfort of the guests. But the guest had to fulfill one criterion: He had to fit the bed. If a person was too short, Procrustes stretched him on a rack; if too tall, he cut off his feet and legs. Everyone who fit the bed had nothing but praise for the beneficent Procrustes and encouraged others to enjoy his gracious hospitality. But many people died in that house, and no one heard of their experiences. For them, the free hospitality was not appropriate.

Categories intended to *include* also *exclude*. It is a great temptation to force the individual to fit the category, rather than making the category more flexible. We have built special education on the assumption that we can precisely define the disabling conditions of students and then prescribe the specific services needed for those conditions. We now know that assumption is false.

## *The biggest problem in trying to define students' educational needs is the categories used to group people with disabilities.*

Let me demonstrate how this assumption has seductively led us down the wrong road. All special-education categories can be classified as fact or theory. With that in mind, consider the major categories that we use:

*Blind/visually-impaired, deaf/hearing-impaired, and physically disabled.* These physical disabilities are perhaps the most evident of all the categories. Even mild forms have a clear physical basis for diagnosis that requires little theoretical interpretation.

*Emotionally disturbed.* Clearly, this category is a theory. It is based on several hypothetical sub-conditions that are also theoretical. The definition is ambiguous and subject to broad interpretation. A student may be defined as emotionally disturbed by the evaluation team of one school system but not by another.

*Learning disabled (LD).* Vast amounts of literature over the past 30 years have argued whether this category exists, with little agreement. LD is a theory used to explain certain observed behaviors, which, in turn, correlate with poor achievement.<sup>7</sup> Neurologically based learning disorders certainly exist, but they occur in very small and readily detectable forms.<sup>8</sup>

*Mentally retarded (MR).* This concept has always been only a theory. Because severely "retarded" persons have more physical abnormalities than "normal" individuals, we may think that the category is a fact. In reality, the

physical symptom is the fact; the category is the theory.

When theories are given labels and labels are given credence, the following progression occurs: First, there was the theory of Mental Retardation. Then there were MR people who needed special treatment. Insufficient money was available, so the theory was changed to restrict the definition and reduce the number of people eligible for treatment. But there were still needs, so additional labels were invented, with the same results. Then came LD, with the same sequence of events. Then dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. Each time, treatment of the symptoms became more important than addressing their causes. More recently, we have seen the meteoric rise of a category called Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. The needs are certainly real, but rather than addressing them directly, society creates more labels.

All such labels define people in terms of behavior. Although certain types of behavior certainly correlate to school failure, they may have a variety of causes, including normal development and poor instruction. For example, boys are naturally more active than girls, so we may be tempted to define that extra burst of energy as ADHD and then prove its existence by regarding such behaviors as deviant. This then justifies a new category of support. It also allows educators to rationalize that the student is abnormal. He or she does not fit the routine or curriculum of a school setting that was established for "normal" students.

### **Appropriate Education**

We no longer need a separate educational designation for students with disabilities. The needs of such students define themselves. Here again, the words of law are helpful. What is guaranteed in American public schools is a "free and appropriate education." But how shall we describe it? How about "instructional accommodation for students with disabilities"? In such instruction, the actual techniques are impairment-specific and require the teachers to obtain special training techniques.

With the more severe physical handicaps, it is relatively easy to define "appropriate education." For example, students with orthopedic disabilities need braces and wheelchairs; students who are blind or visually impaired need training in Braille, orientation, and mobility; and students who are deaf or hearing-impaired need hearing aids and training in non-verbal methods of communication.

However, when the disability is a so-called emotional, mental, or learning disorder, the needs are more difficult to determine. A vast misappropriation of the special-education programs has occurred in these areas. Many if not most of the students being served under these classifications could more accurately be described as curriculum casualties. Their symptoms often result from poor instruction, not organic dysfunction.<sup>9</sup>

Just because a student seems to fit the eligibility requirements of a certain special-education category and has an approved Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) does not guarantee that he or she will receive an appropriate education. The parties involved often are unaware of what will work for these students. Educational research and practice are replete with examples of practices that produce positive effects, but for the most part are not being used in public schools, let alone in Christian schools.

The only types of disabilities shown by Sutton, Sutton, and Everett<sup>10</sup> as receiving services in the Christian schools are those in the theoretical group. The students with "factual" or physical disabilities do not receive any assistance. For Christian schools, categorizing students has provided a convenient excuse for unloading them onto the public-school system. Anyone who has a disability is eligible for services at public expense.

Public education is rapidly moving toward a dramatically reformed concept of education for students with disabilities, a program that concerns itself with the needs of *all* students, including those with disabilities or special needs.<sup>11</sup> Christian schools should address the

subject of special education in this context.

### Funding

Why do Christian schools discriminate against students with disabilities or special needs?<sup>12</sup> Lack of sufficient funding is often given as the reason. But how can any administrator or teacher in a Christian school rationalize that there are not funds to provide an appropriate education for a certain group of students?

Data verifying widespread exclusion gathered by Sutton, et al.<sup>13</sup> graphically reveal that the Christian schools of America are failing to live up to a basic tenet of their faith: "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Matthew 25:45, KJV). There is no legitimate excuse for a school established on biblical principles to avoid its responsibility to *all* students, including those with disabilities.

It is time for Christian schools to find ways to educate *all* of God's children, not just those who show sufficient promise according to some standardized criteria. The public schools are learning that appropriate education for all students costs no more than education that discriminates against various populations by isolating them. It is long past time that parochial schools embraced the Christian principles involved in serving all students. Not because it is a trend, but because it is the right thing to do. ☞

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