

# TRAINING CHRISTIAN SPECIAL EDUCATORS

BY JAMES A. TUCKER



**T**he topic of teaching and learning for students with disabilities—or special education, as it has come to be known in recent years—is an emotional one. Parents want services that they feel they aren't getting. Teachers believe that they are required to provide services for which they are not trained or which are beyond the limits of human ability. Administrators are concerned about the costs as well as the liabilities required to expand educational services to students with disabilities.

In spite of the turmoil, however, public schools have, after years of struggle, resolved most of the issues. And, ironically, they have done so before most Christian schools have even addressed the subject of providing an appropriate education for students with disabilities.

For the past 20 years, I have been training teachers, school administrators, parents, and other support personnel to meet the needs of students with disabilities. My interest was partly inspired by personal experience with my own children and grandchildren, whose challenges have ranged from speech impairment to severe physical disabilities. But gradually, my focus has become more professional. As Christian educators, it is not only our responsibility to serve all students, but also our commission.<sup>1</sup> My enthusiasm grows out of the fact that we now know how to provide appropriate instructional support for virtually *all* students, including those with disabilities.

This article will be organized around two main themes, and will present three levels of recommended action. After each theme is described, levels of action are specified. The article also includes recommended

action steps and a list of resource materials. The recommendations are based on the author's experience and represent strategies that have proved successful.

### How Do We Get There From Here?

Serving students with disabilities in Adventist schools is a Christian imperative. However, it requires a different kind of teacher training and a different and more comprehensive kind of community support from the church than is currently in place. In order for SDA schools to provide for the special-education needs of students, pre-service and in-service training must address the following themes:

1. *Effective Instruction:* Training in teaching models and learning strategies that provides classroom management skills and methods to meet the full range of students' instructional needs, including pupils with disabilities.

2. *Collaboration:* Training in establishing and conducting instructional support teams (also called child-study teams), in order to provide the community support essential to meet the needs of every student.

For convenience, this article addresses these themes separately. However, such an approach is in reality a false dichotomy. The issues are inextricably linked and must be addressed as an integrated whole. In fact, effective training in both themes must evolve simultaneously on these levels:

1. *Pre-service training* for teachers.

2. *In-service* for teachers and other school personnel who need further skill development.

3. *Community-based training* for parents, as well as other church and community members.

Whether a local school or school system can meet the unique needs of all its students depends largely on the quality of the training at all of these levels. The interaction of the themes and levels of training is shown in Figure 1.

Among the many variables that affect student achievement, classroom instruction stands out as the most important. In the public sector, we have

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known since at least 1982 that the value of any "special education" program depended on the quality of instruction provided.<sup>2</sup> Since then, strong emphasis has been placed on the quality of instruction for all students, including those with disabilities. The current term for this is *inclusion*.

It is a critical mistake, however, to assume that inclusion means simply putting students with disabilities into regular classrooms without the supplemental support required to meet their unique needs.<sup>3</sup> The popular term used to describe such a practice is "dumping." The ideal, which is no longer an impossible dream, is for every school to

be an "effective school"—one where every student is successful, including those with disabilities. But that ideal can become a reality only when an effective training program brings together a collage of appropriate skills.

The literature on effective schools has consistently reported that certain characteristics are shared by effective schools. In summarizing this research, Arthur Steller reports that although there are variations in the school effectiveness research, five factors seem to be consistent across studies. They are:

1. Strong instructional leadership by the principal,
2. Clear instructional focus,
3. High expectations and standards,
4. Safe and orderly climate,
5. Frequent monitoring of student achievement.

Apparently, these factors interact with one another to produce a good school. All must coexist for significant positive results to occur.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, virtually all of the listed characteristics directly involve instruction. They occur only when there is careful planning and an effective training model.

A number of effective instructional models exist. Each of them appeals to different individuals or groups. A few years ago, Thomas Gilhool, former secretary of education in Pennsylvania and one of America's foremost advocates for the appropriate education of students with disabilities, identified six "powerful pedagogies."<sup>5</sup> We also have the work of Roger and David Johnson,

Figure 1

#### Concepts That Should Be Addressed by Training at Various Levels

	Effective Instruction	Collaboration
<b>Pre-service Training</b>	teaching models learning strategies	team teaching peer coaching
<b>In-service Training</b>	teaching models learning strategies study groups	team teaching peer coaching child-study teams
<b>Community-Based Training</b>	study groups parent volunteers	child-study teams community-based learning advocacy

Robert Marzano, Bruce Joyce, and others who have demonstrated that virtually all students can be successful in school.

### Training and Support

The SDA education system needs to provide philosophical support and practical training for teachers, so that they may upgrade their skills in order to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities.

Such an agenda could be supported by several specific actions:

1. Create incentives throughout SDA school systems for local school personnel to explore powerful pedagogies and to adopt one or more that work.

2. Provide incentive grants that last for at least five years to help local school administrators establish an effective instructional program.

3. Require each local school to establish a method for monitoring how well the five factors of effective instruction are being implemented.

### Collaboration

Effective instruction is not something that teachers can do alone, or even with the support of administrators. To be truly effective, instruction must involve the entire community—be it a geographical community or a spiritual fellowship. A popular adage holds that it takes an entire village to educate a child. In practical terms, this means that our children's education is not what is described in our curriculum manuals but the student's worldview as taught by his or her community. If we want to educate children to be different, we have to provide them with a community support system that exemplifies that difference. Are we prepared to do that?

It is therefore necessary for SDA educational leadership to provide, through existing training structures (union and local conference offices of education, as well as college teacher-education departments), training in cooperative interaction. This will enable every level of church organization to obtain information and support and to provide for effective instruction.

The training provided must enable

local church-school communities to function as grassroots planners, using current information. Specific activities that have proved effective in such community settings include the following:

1. Each local church that operates a school should establish a community council—not the school board—that provides for “round-table” type of communication about student needs. Such a council should include no more than *one* person from each of the major “stake-holder” groups in the church community, such as parents, church administrators, school administrators, school instructors, and Community Services persons. This council is to recommend items to the school/church board that will enhance instruction for all students.

2. Local church-school constituencies should send teams to visit school settings where all students are successful, including those with disabilities.

3. Local or regional study groups should be established to address specific topics that are crucial to providing effective instruction for all students, including those with disabilities.

### Pre-service Training

In both our undergraduate- and graduate-level training programs, we must focus on methods and strategies for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This does not mean, however, that we should emphasize such students specifically. The primary problem with that approach, which was initially embraced by public educators, was its focus on learner characteristics rather than on adjusting the entire instructional program.

Over the past 30 years, a separate strand of teacher training and certification has focused on the needs of students with disabilities. However, in recent years, this duality has proved impractical and ineffective.<sup>6</sup> The market for separately trained and certified special-education teachers is beginning to shrink and probably will disappear. Taking its place is an education that meets the needs of *all* students. Current innovations in teacher training include special education as a *part* of the regu-

lar-education program.<sup>7</sup>

Those of us in the teacher-education business must adjust our training to prepare teachers for a marketplace that increasingly demands effective instruction. In fact, some are suggesting that the university is not the best place to train teachers.<sup>8</sup> They believe that teachers learn to teach best by teaching, not simply by learning theory and content, and that traditional teacher-training programs lack sufficient hands-on experience.

Our teacher-education certification and recertification programs must integrate adequate experiences into the training schedule so that every teaching candidate is exposed to the challenge of addressing the unique needs of each student. This should include the training of school psychologists, counselors, speech therapists, and other specialists who work within the regular education programs. When we train teachers and specialists in this way, they can work effectively as a team.

### In-service Training

Most teachers and principals have not received adequate pre-service training to enable them to provide instructional support for students with disabilities. However, we cannot wait for higher education to improve its pre-service training programs. Although this is a good long-term strategy, we need to address the *existing* needs of our students, as well as their parents and teachers. We must immediately begin to offer comprehensive in-service training for teachers, parents, and other community support personnel. One approach that has proved effective is the instructional support model developed in Connecticut and Pennsylvania over the past 10 years.<sup>9</sup>

### Instructional Support

This idea is more of a concept than a model in the formal sense. It is flexible in implementation, but very specific in its content and in the method of application. There are, and should be, as many different ways to use instructional support as there are implementation sites of the concept. But for the con-

cept to work, the training must include the following elements:

1. **Content.** There are five areas of highly specific, skill-oriented training:

a. *Collaborative consultation* is the method by which persons work together to meet the student's needs. Methods drawn from the extensive body of literature on the structure, methods, and application of working together as professionals have proved effective when applied in the classroom.<sup>10</sup>

b. *Instructional assessment* (also called curriculum-based assessment) should be used to ensure that instruction matches the unique learning rates and styles of individual students.<sup>11</sup>

c. *Behavior-management* (also called discipline or classroom management) strategies should utilize effective interaction patterns rather than behavior modification.<sup>12</sup>

d. *Instructional strategies and curriculum adaptations* must take into consideration learning rates and learning styles of each student. (See the references on effective instruction at the end of the article.)

e. *Inclusion* must be viewed as an instructional-support concept rather than a fad or simplistic placement option.

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## 2. Method

a. *Hands-on training* in classrooms must use guided practice.

b. *Different kinds of training* are needed for principals and teachers. The bulk of this training should be provided by teachers and principals from the perspective of their own experience.

c. *Intensive training for one full year*, with follow-up for at least three years—probably for five to 10 years—is the ideal. Given the high level of turnover in staff at many schools, there is a need for ongoing, intensive training. Fur-

thermore, teachers need the opportunity to practice and polish their skills. New learning does not become automatic until the skill has been extensively practiced.

d. *Trainers must be experienced in the skills involved* and must provide most of the training through guided practice in classrooms—not in didactic workshops (although some such training is also needed). It is not adequate for trainers to just read a book to “bone up” on the method and then provide training.

Much of so-called teacher in-service training yields little—if any—appreciable change in participants' skill levels. Given the diminishing levels of funding available for such activities, we must make sure that whatever training does occur is as effective as possible.

## How Church Organizations Can Help

Each division could establish a clearinghouse of information and sources for training and instructional support that can be shared with each union conference. In turn, each union conference, in conjunction with an affiliate college or university, can establish an Academy of Teaching and Learning (ATL) to provide up-to-date training and support to the local conference departments of education—either directly to the teachers or by training leaders at the conference level.

Specific actions that can be taken include the following:

1. Instructional-support training can be provided by the ATL to local conference representatives, school personnel, and community volunteers in order to develop expertise in the essential content and method areas.

2. Establish an interactive exchange network via electronic mail and traditional mail as a means of sharing

a. instructional strategies that work and the location of schools where interested persons can observe these strategies in operation.

b. the location of schools where all students are successful, including those with disabilities.

3. Instructional-support teams (child-study teams) should be established at conference and local organization lev-



*Child Study Teams involve professionals from the community in helping students with special needs.*

els to seek solutions to particularly difficult cases.

### Conclusion

Given the number of traditional workshops and seminars, we educators seem determined to perpetuate the myth that in-service training consists of holding a meeting, showing overheads featuring lots of data, charts, and entertaining quotes, and pointing with a stick to emphasize our various positions on endless subjects. Such sessions do teach us about new rules and regulations and how to fill out forms, and they are effective for making announcements and inspiring us with new ideas. However, they don't help teachers to learn new skills.

Learning to *do* something differently can only be accomplished by modeling what is to be done, followed by an opportunity for guided practice. In educational contexts, this means that training must take place where learning occurs: in classrooms, on the trail, in the home, in the church, on the job, in the garden. Effective learning strategies must be demonstrated and then practiced, with immediate feedback from the trainer.

Because effective training costs more than traditional approaches, some people will say that we cannot afford it. In reality, although it is more expensive in the short run, over time the most effective strategies will pay off in more effective teaching and learning.

Since one of the primary goals of our schools is to provide effective instruction for all students, including those with disabilities, we must assure our constituencies that we have the best teaching staffs. And, knowing what works—both in classroom instruction level and in-service training—how can we settle for less? ☞

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