



Why Adventist Education Should Be Special

A Polemic With Some Practical Suggestions

Seventh-day Adventist education is not ordinary education. When Ellen White described education as “the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers,”¹ she laid the basis for the essential wholism of Adventist education. At the level of the individual, Adventist education is special because it insists that education is incomplete if it is merely academic or vocational, or indeed, only spiritual. True education must encompass the entire individual. It must develop the whole person.

Yet, at a systemic level, Adventist education would be seriously lacking if we stopped at developing the whole person for it is possible to educate a se-

lect few in a wholistic manner and feel satisfied that we have met the test. One of the best things about Adventist education is that it has historically been egalitarian. It has avoided elitism. Churches and schools have provided a way for those who have modest means to receive an Adventist education.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul² described the church as a body with different parts serving different functions, but all making up Christ’s body. I would suggest that wholism in Adventist education must not only involve the whole person; it must also involve the whole Body of Christ. That Body includes the rich and the poor; it also includes those with disabilities as well as those without.

In order to find out how we are doing in special education, I conducted

two informal surveys, one in 2008 and a follow-up in 2014. I asked my student assistant to contact all the union conferences in the United States in order to find out whether they employed special-education teachers, and if not, how they dealt with special-needs children within Adventist schools.³ Of the 911 schools for which we received information (2008), only 26 had a designated special-education teacher. In the fall of 2014, of the 659 schools for which we received a report, 41 had access to special-education services provided by a church employee.⁴ Some conferences provided special-educational services by assigning one trained educator to serve many schools. In other cases,

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schools made do with the expertise or additional training provided by their regular teachers. But in the overwhelming majority of cases, special-education services were simply not provided, and the schools depended on local public resources to meet their needs.

There is a real problem in the provision of special-education services in Adventist schools in the United States. Based on our initial (2008) inquiry, less than two percent of Adventist elementary schools in the U.S., and less than three percent of all our schools (inclusive of junior high and high schools), provided direct special services to our

children.⁵ The more recent survey yielded more optimistic numbers. Still, only six percent of schools reported access to Adventist special-education services in 2014. If one assumes that Adventist schools in the U.S. are better endowed in this area than elsewhere, especially in developing societies, hard questions must be raised regarding how well we provide for students with special needs worldwide.

Putting the facts so starkly, however, is not intended to indict our system. Underneath this bleak reality are the many ways in which these schools show that they are aware of the needs of their

students with special needs, and are employing various strategies to meet those needs. So the responses we received provide hints for solving this problem. A few suggestions are listed below. Some of these better fit the U.S. educational environment, but most can be adapted to a variety of systems around the world.

1. Make Use of the Public System.

U.S. law requires that facilities be made available in the public education system for all children with disabilities, including those enrolled in parochial and private schools.⁶ Since public



school districts are generally better staffed with school psychologists and special-education teachers than our conferences, we can benefit from using these facilities. Many Adventist school systems report that they have addressed the need in this way. However, there is a reason why we as a church chose to develop our own system, even though our students have a right to free public education. If Christian education is truly to be wholistic, it is far from ideal to subdivide our educational offerings into parts—the part that can be delivered by the state and the part that we are able to deliver ourselves. If we are committed to Christian education, then we must do it wholistically. That means although the use of the public system may be a helpful stopgap, it is only that. Ideally, Adventist education must be available to all of the church's children, regardless of ability or economic status. In order to do so, we must have Christian personnel in our schools who are trained to provide special education.

2. Use Our Trained Personnel.

My informal 2008 survey suggested that only six percent of our U.S. schools have access to trained personnel functioning as such. This suggests a serious problem of unmet need. There is a reason for this. Hiring specialized personnel is seen as a luxury that our mostly small schools cannot afford due to limited resources. In multigrade schools, many of which lack a full-time principal, each person has heavy responsibilities, and it is unrealistic to expect one to be a specialist. It is not surprising, then, that the lack of special-education personnel is most evident at the elementary level, since in the North American Division, most of the schools are small, with only one or two teachers.

The Adventist educational system in the United States is fortunate to have a number of teachers with substantial training in special education who func-

tion as regular teachers in classrooms. These teachers can be sought out and used as consultants in the schools in which they serve. Our survey found some schools in which this is already being done. It may serve to enhance their profile and effectiveness if these teachers are provided with incentives that recognize their specialized skills and responsibilities. Such incentives might include financial enhancements, flexibility in scheduling, or subsidies to facilitate further professional development.

3. Provide “Circuit Riders.”

Some conferences reported appointing special-education teachers to serve a collection of schools within a geographical area. This is another way our limited trained personnel can be used in areas with many small schools. The number of circuit riders needed could be calculated using a formula based on the number of students enrolled in Adventist schools within a particular area. Such teachers might work from an office in one of those schools or at the conference office. They could receive travel reimbursement to allow for movement among the schools within the assigned “district” and a mandate to serve all the special-needs students within that particular area. They could also provide in-service training to classroom teachers on how best to meet the needs of these special students. One danger of this approach is the likelihood of such

teachers being over-extended, which would reduce their effectiveness.

4. Embrace Inclusion as a Working Policy.

A popular special-education text defines Inclusion as “the process of bringing all, or nearly all, children with exceptionalities into the general classroom for their education, with special educational support.”⁷ If we value our students as being of equal worth, we must consider including all of them, with and without disabilities, in every aspect of the learning experience. A serious commitment to educating all students equally will require us to consider whether this can best be done by placing students with special needs in the same settings as other students. Although it is not the purpose of this article to make a case for Inclusion as a policy directive, several lines of research⁸ suggest that it may be a worthwhile approach. Indeed, it seems like a good match for our church school system, where specialized personnel are in short supply. However, this approach does not eliminate the need for specialized personnel. Because it is a statutory requirement in American public schools (though the term is not used explicitly in the law), most teachers in the U.S. system are already oriented to this practice. Church schools in other countries should seriously consider this approach. Yet, any adoption of Inclusion should be

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done only after careful consideration of the research, rather than as a hastily chosen option of convenience. Implementing this approach would require a comprehensive change in orientation and training among all the teachers in any school that adopts it.

5. Focus on and Expand Training.

Whether your school decides to use the conventional approach or the Inclusion approach to special education, both beginning and in-service teachers will need more training than they generally receive in the area of teaching children with special needs. Currently, certification requirements for most U.S. states demand only cursory theoretical training about exceptional children. Yet, if Adventist teachers must continue to function in an environment with few specialist resources, they will require more extensive training. Unfortunately, recent trends in our Adventist colleges and universities in North America are not encouraging, with only one school offering an undergraduate degree in special education, and no teacher-education program requiring more than a minimum exposure to special needs or Inclusion education. A possible course of action might be to require that all teachers who have not taken such courses be provided with in-service training and subsidies for coursework relating to the education of students with disabilities.

6. Change Our Orientation.

Probably the greatest need is for every educator in the Adventist system, from the classroom teacher to the superintendent, to re-evaluate the way we think about special education. Is it a luxury that we can leave to the vagaries of budgets, an extra that we can lop off when times get difficult? Or is it an essential element that is central to what we do because we value all our students equally, whether their abilities allow them easily to be taught, or whether they require special attention or special accommodations in order to succeed? Are some of our children more deserving of a complete Adventist education

experience than others? If, as I believe, the answer is “No,” then every educator must do whatever it takes to ensure that no special-needs child is left without an appropriate Adventist education.

In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats⁹ in the last judgment, the basis for judgment is how well we as His followers have met the needs of the least among us. If Adventist education is going to be truly Christian, we cannot ignore the increasing number of students who come to us with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities. We must take them and provide as adequately for their educational needs as we do for the rest of our students. We cannot turn them away or merely turn them over to the public system or a Christian school operated by another denomination. Doing so could send the message that Adventist education is not for them, too.

There is no evidence that children from Adventist homes are any more or less vulnerable to the whole range of issues associated with physical, intellectual, or learning disabilities. Consequently, there is no less of a demand for these needs to be met in Adventist schools than in other schools. Moreover, many Adventist schools serve constituencies that go beyond the narrow confines of the children from Adventist homes. The mandate of Jesus to love our neighbor as ourselves¹⁰ obligates us to care for all the students that might enroll in Adventist schools. This article, then, is in some ways a polemic. It is a call to re-examine our commitment to Adventist education as a means for *all* children who attend Adventist schools to achieve the harmonious development of *all* their powers. It is a plea for Adventist education to pay much more attention than we have previously to those students who are the “least of these.” ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 13.
2. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.
3. I wish to acknowledge student assistants Keri Wilson, who gathered the initial information, and Zhu Min, who helped with the more recent inquiry.
4. Because this was an informal inquiry, a more careful and detailed evaluation needs to be made.
5. According to our inquiries of 756 elementary and 35 junior high programs, 14 had special-education teachers. Of 120 secondary schools, 12 had special-education teachers.
6. The specific provision is found in TITLE I/ B/612/a/10 of the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, which can be accessed at this source: <http://idea.ed.gov/>.
7. Samuel Kirk, James Gallagher, Mary Ruth Coleman, and Nick Anastasiow, *Educating Exceptional Children* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2012), 13th ed., p. 41. See also “What Is Inclusion,” *Florida State University Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy* (2002): http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu/resourcefiles/resource_file_18.pdf. Accessed September 2, 2015.
8. Various studies suggest that Inclusion approaches may be superior to conventional special education (Kenneth A. Kavale and Gene V. Glass, “The Efficacy of Special Education Interventions and Practices: A Compendium of Meta-Analysis Findings,” *Focus on Exceptional Children* 15:4 [1982]:1-14; Conrad Carlberg and Kenneth Kavale, “The Efficacy of Special Versus Regular Class Placement for Exceptional Children: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Special Education* 14:3 [1980]:295-309), as well as being cost effective (James Q. Affleck, et al., “Integrated Classroom Versus Resource Model: Academic Viability and Effectiveness,” *Exceptional Children* 54:6 [1988]: 339-348).
9. Matthew 25:31-40.
10. Mark 12:31.