

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the Classical and Christian Classroom

by Leslie Collins, Trinity Christian School

The movement of classical and Christian education has been propelled largely by high achieving students and parents. I believe that we are at a crossroads. More and more families with members who have disabilities are asking for these students to be included in the classical classroom. The first reaction of a classical school is often "What about our standards?" or, "Won't this mean dumbing down? Are we now egalitarians?" Douglas Wilson charged the attendees at the 2009 conference with the idea that our schools should not be judged by the academic awards our students achieve as much as whether those students love the standards and the subjects themselves. Can't a student with a disability love the standard of classical education, even while they are never able to achieve it?

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' *On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other* (emphasis mine). If one part suffers, every

part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Corinthians 12:21-26).

Here we see God's purpose in each part of the Body of Christ.

The child's parents are the primary educators and must bear the weight of the child's educational needs with the help of the school. Most inclusion requires

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Are not covenant children with disabilities part of that Body? If the Lord has a purpose in combining the members of the Body, why are we keeping them out of our schools? Most of us began our schools because we considered the Lord's call to families to train up their children "when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7). We considered this as a good reason to bypass our own fear of failure. That same obedience to His call should motivate us to overlook that fear now.

Defining Inclusion

Inclusion is a misunderstood term. It is not mainstreaming or dumping. It is not dumbing down or compromising. And, it is not sugarcoating a significant problem. Instead, it is the inclusion of individual educational needs into a general classroom environment and curriculum.

Inclusion is a biblical model whereby we make several assumptions.

additional adult support. This can be provided through grants or personal funding. This person should be hired and trained by the school and accountable to both the school and the parents.

All children are capable of learning and need to be guided through a curriculum that is based on their abilities and needs, including the need for a biblical worldview.

These needs can be interwoven into the general curriculum of the student's peers without compromise to either, with strategic and skillful planning and implementation.

Children should be with their same-aged peers as much as possible because this is the Body of Christ that God has put them in. Both the students with disabilities and the students without have much to learn from each other. These lessons will be life shaping and will have an impact of the work of the church for that generation.

Strategies and Principles of Skillful Planning and Implementation

There are several factors that must be included in

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an inclusion-based model.

The challenged student's program must begin with the essentials: individualized reading, writing, and math instruction based on his/her ability with objective criteria for success.

Paralleled instruction of these activities must be attempted so that they are following the typical class schedule wherever possible. Often parallel instruction can occur in the same classroom but it is also appropriate to find another location.

The student's individual goals are woven into the typical classroom routine. For example, when the class is working on math facts, the student with a disability can work on math facts at their own level and the amount can be adjusted to fit in the time given to the class, or they can practice writing their numbers legibly in the time allotted.

Peer-to-peer instruction is an optimal way of teaching those who are potential teachers and leaders how to care for those who struggle. *The Seven Laws of Teaching* by John Milton Gregory reminds us that when children talk, they learn more than when they listen. This must be done, however, without compromise to either student.

Curriculum Modifications

Students with disabilities will need modifications in order to succeed in the general classroom environment. Modifications must move toward increasing levels of independence and normalcy. The following considerations should be made.

Respect the student's age and ability. Try to match the font and appearance of the modification as much as possible so that the student is

not unnecessarily embarrassed.

Match the skills taught as much as possible so that the student is learning about the subject, not just matching letters and coloring pictures. The student may only be able to learn 10% of what the typical student learns on their modified worksheet; this is enough.

As an example of modification, during *classroom instruction*, the class begins with singing and chanting and then moves to learning about James Madison. The class worksheet reflects a paragraph of information about James Madison, his reasons for limited government power, and the conflict around the Louisiana Purchase.

For *modified instruction*, the student joins the class in singing and chanting and then moves to learning about James Madison from a modified paper. It explains that James Madison was the fourth president and one of the founding fathers of our nation, that he did not want the government to have too much power, that he was known as the "Father of the Constitution," and that he helped our country to buy land called the "Louisiana Purchase." The paper directs the student to copy the new words, match their meaning, re-tell the information, and fill in the blanks to rephrase the information so that what is learned is truly learned and remembered.

Require the student's best work and redefine "best" regularly. Don't just look for ways to keep the child busy during the class; look for ways to teach the skills and keep looking. Inclusion is not about throwing the kid into the class and giving him work that is loosely based on the topic so that he is busy during class time. It is about considering

what the class is doing and how they can attempt that same skill at their own pace and level.

Suggested Modifications

Latin: get keys of teacher lessons and have the student highlight answers and read along with the class—the correct answers on the page provide immediate reinforcement of teacher instructions.

History/Science: use a large "post-it" on the worksheet to write answers as the teacher says them; the child then copies from the "post-it." This assists with auditory discrimination. If the child's handwriting is illegible, consider using small labels for the child to place where needed on the worksheet.

Bible: use a dry-erase marker on the student's desk to copy key words mentioned by the teacher. The student can copy these as able onto their paper. Or, insert a plain piece of notebook paper on top of the worksheet as an added note page.

Music: using a recorder, cover up all the holes on the recorder with Silly-Putty to create the note desired and teach the student to blow properly and at the right times only. This eliminates problems with dexterity and perception but allows for independent participation.

Art: prevent potential mistakes by using paper and tape to block out areas on art work so that coloring, painting, and erasing can't get out of control. This also limits the task to small areas and allows gradual success and progression on the project.

Physical Education: adjust the amount and intensity of the physical requirements of the student. For games and fast-paced activities, provide peer support for

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being part of the game, guiding the student in how to think with peer-shadowing. For competitions, plan ahead to balance the levels of the teams to compensate for a slower child so that constant losing due to the slower student is not a source of conflict within the class.

These suggestions are by no means exhaustive, nor are they appropriate for every situation. They were used in a fifth grade classical classroom for a student with Down syndrome and autism.

Demand an increasing level of performance and skill. Finding ways to include students in the task at hand is good, but these activities must constantly be improved upon so that the student is growing stronger and more independent, more like his peers. We should never be content to find something that works and stick to it all year. The Reformation cry, *semper reformanda* (always reforming), applies to the special educator, too.

Example 1: The task of writing a spelling word can be modified by having the student write the first letter of the words, which can be improved to writing the first three letters of the words and eventually writing entire words.

Example 2: The task of class reading can be modified so that the student who may not be able to read at the same level as her classmates can read chapter titles, a list of character's names, locations, or a paraphrased summary of the story written at her reading level.

Example 3: The task of identifying a list of Latin words and phrases on a written test can be modified so that the student provides the answers orally, which can be improved to matching the correct answer from a list, which can be improved to writing the

first letter of the English word.

Example 4: The task of alphabetizing a list of vocabulary words can be modified so that the student arranges the words on business cards, placing them next to the letters of the alphabet written on his desk using a dry-erase marker. The student is matching the first letter of the word to the letter of the alphabet written on his desk. This can be improved to arranging the words without the written letters on the desk, and eventually to having the student arrange the words in order without a written guide.

These examples are just the beginning of ways that curriculum can be modified to meet individual educational needs of students with disabilities in the classical classroom.

Biblical Inclusion

King David provides perhaps the best example for us as we prepare an educational feast for our students each day. Mephibosheth, the disabled son of David's best friend, was asked to join him at the king's table daily. Culturally and socially, this was awkward and unheard of. Wheelchairs were not available, much less accessible ramps. Imagine the added work to all of the king's servants. And the very idea that someone who is "lame" is dining with the king!

But David invited him anyway: "Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table, and he was crippled in both feet" (2 Samuel 9:13). It wasn't that David didn't understand the importance of proper decorum at the king's table. He loved that standard. And so did Mephibosheth. And that's why he was there.

Inclusion isn't about asking

schools to lower standards or change their curriculum. It's about making exceptions to those standards for the sake of the body at large. Exceptions do not nullify the standard; they uphold it. Families of students with disabilities aren't asking for your school to change for them, they just want a place at the table.