
A RATIONALE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

THOMAS J. LONG

MERYLANN J. SCHUTTLOFFEL

The Catholic University of America

Debates about inclusive education for students with special needs challenge Catholic educators to develop a rationale consistent with Catholic theology and Church teaching. Guided by the rationale, arguments are made for the role Catholic schools, seminaries, and Catholic higher education should contribute to realize an inclusive Church. Contemplative practice offers a process for engaging Catholic identity with school practitioner decision making for implementing inclusion. This article posits that the rationale for Catholic special education reflects an authentic understanding of Catholic identity within Catholic learning communities.

During the past 100 years, American Catholic bishops have clarified and strengthened the Church's position on social justice issues through their many published works, specifically addressing disability issues (National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB], 1998; United States Catholic Conference [USCC], 1978). Following the broader political trends toward equity in secular society, individuals with special needs and their families seek full participation in Catholic educational institutions and programs. Arguably, some practical barriers may exist for a comprehensive implementation of inclusion; however, this article presents a rationale for augmenting educational opportunity for students with special needs within Catholic educational institutions and parish programs in order to be truly Catholic and Catholic. First, we will present a brief understanding of Church teaching with a focus on papal documents and statements by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB]. These teachings shape the foundation of the rationale for Catholic special education. Second, we will present contemplative practice as a decision-making model for engaging this rationale for special education within Catholic schools. Next follows a discussion of the crucial role that pastors play and the implied challenges for seminary education. Finally, we propose important contributions for

Catholic higher education in leadership preparation and research.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

John Paul II (2000) stated in his homily for the Jubilee of the Disabled that “the Church is committed to making herself more and more a welcoming home [for the disabled]” and this welcoming “needs not only care, but first of all love which becomes recognition, respect and integration” (§4). The Church’s recent pronouncements on the rights of people with disabilities follow the broader trends toward equity and civil rights espoused by the Church, and the Church’s consistent teachings on social justice for all (John XXIII, 1961, 1963; Leo XIII, 1891).

In 1978, the bishops of the United States stated their firm commitment “to working for a deeper understanding of both the pain and the potential of our neighbors who are blind, deaf, mentally retarded, emotionally impaired, who have special learning problems, or who suffer from single or multiple physical disabilities” (USCC, p. 1). This statement focused largely on access to the religious life of the Catholic community, the acceptance of persons with physical, intellectual, and emotional differences, and the defense of the right to life. It concluded, however, with an exhortation to coordinate educational services within the dioceses in order to “supplement the provision of direct educational aids” (p. 8). The bishops were forward thinking in laying the groundwork for the integration “of students with disabilities into programs for the able-bodied” (p. 8). Religious education personnel were encouraged to adapt “their curricula to the needs of disabled learners” (p. 8). The bishops further recommended that Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers be prepared in “how best to integrate disabled students into programs of regular education” (p. 8). The 1978 pastoral statement was reaffirmed by the NCCB in 1998.

In June 2005, the full body of U.S. Catholic bishops published the document, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium*. Among its many pronouncements, the bishops applauded “the increasing number of our [Catholic] school administrators and teachers who have taken steps to welcome these children [with disabilities] and others with special needs into our Catholic schools” (USCCB, 2005, p. 7).

Statements made by the U.S. bishops regarding persons with disabilities are in keeping with the multiple pronouncements of the Vatican. The Holy See’s document for the International Year of Disabled Persons (John Paul II, 1981) affirmed that people with disabilities are “fully human subject[s],” endowed with “a unique dignity” as human beings (p. 6). This document, while weighted toward those who were mentally impaired, stated that the

focus of the family must be to facilitate the future participation of those with disabilities in the life of society. This life must include personal as well as moral development. When the Vatican Conference on the Family and Integration of the Disabled met in December 1999, it was clear, from those assembled, that the education of people with disabilities, specifically those with mental impairments, was to be fostered in all aspects of what it means to be human, including personal and sexual relationships.

John Paul II (1999) told this conference that every person had basic rights that are “inalienable, inviolable and indivisible” and that those with disabilities should “be welcomed by society and, according to their abilities, integrated into it as full members” (§4). He was pointed in saying that every human being was worthy of respect because of his or her “dignity as a person,” and that both civil society and the Church had an obligation to foster the integration of people with disabilities into the life of the community, even as each person with a disability was to “take charge of his own life” (§4).

The conference ended by indicating that the responsibility for educating children, including those who are disabled, resides with the family. The primacy of the family is in keeping with the consistent teaching of the Church, “The first and primary educators of children are their parents” (Vatican II Council, 1966, §3). But “Families clearly need adequate support from the community” (John Paul II, 1999, §5).

While parents are those primarily responsible for the education of their children, schools are no less responsible to assist parents in this task. Parents, in a complex society, cannot succeed in achieving satisfying educational results on their own. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB, 2005) indicated that it was the responsibility of the whole Catholic community to continue to strive toward the goal of making Catholic elementary and secondary schools available, accessible, and affordable to all Catholic parents and their children, including those who are poor and middle class, and to look for ways to include and better serve young people who have special educational needs. The bishops specifically identified this task as the responsibility of “bishops, priests, deacons, [and] religious” (p. 1) as well as that of the laity.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE AND CATHOLIC SPECIAL EDUCATION

Current research states that effective institutions have a focused vision and a clear mission (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Catholic educators benefit from a clear mission that includes two co-existing goals (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). First is an emphasis on teaching and learning the body of academic, psychosocial, and physical knowledge determined requisite for future suc-

cess as a citizen. The second goal stands individually and also permeates the first goal; that is, Catholic education transmits the faith to the next generation. Catholic educators carry out this mission by integrating a coherent educational experience that teaches life knowledge and how the Catholic faith engages life (Bryk et al., 1993; Convey, 1992). The result provides the most cognitively effective and holistically satisfying Catholic educational experience. As with other Catholic families, parents of children with special needs want this integrated faith learning experience for their children.

A COMMON MORAL DILEMMA

Catholic educators are familiar with the moral dilemma the inclusion of students with special needs presents. The dilemma may be characterized as a tension between the social justice value to include all students and the social justice value to provide adequately for these students' learning requirements. When confronted with a moral dilemma, Catholic educational leaders often choose contemplative practice as a vehicle to assist the decision-making process (Schuttloffel, 1999). Contemplative practice challenges Catholic educators to examine their decisions through the lens of Catholic teaching and tradition. Here the principle of contemplative practice raises questions about the authenticity of a Catholic educational experience that does not embrace all members of the faith community. The typical parish population includes children and adults with special needs. A contemplative educator asks the question, "Why aren't children with special needs enrolled in our school?" Or perhaps asks, "Where are Catholic children with special needs receiving their education?" Or he or she might ask, "What message is sent to our faith community, especially to persons with special needs, when the Catholic educational experience excludes their participation?"

Bishops' statements (NCCB, 1972, 1998; USCC, 1978) provide an impetus for Catholic schools to serve children with special needs, but as the following section describes, Catholic schools must instead consider how best to accommodate these children in the mainstream life of the school, what resources are needed, and how best to obtain these resources.

A TYPICAL SCENARIO

Here is an example of contemplative practice in a typical school scenario. Parents who are parishioners approach a Catholic school principal to enroll their school age child in kindergarten. The child has Down Syndrome. Typically a child with Down Syndrome would not meet the developmental goals set for kindergartners. The principal considers what it means to be a Catholic school. During this process, the principal reflects on the foundation-

al principles that undergird Catholic education. The principal's character, influenced by personal beliefs about the role of teachers and students within the faith community and shaped by Church teaching and tradition, guides the decision-making process. Then the principal focuses on the messages each decision would send. What message would students, teachers, and parents receive if this child were turned away? What message would each decision send to the prospective student's family and the student about his or her value as a human being? What does each decision convey about what it means to be a student in this school? The principal will carefully reflect on these and other questions as he or she tries to determine the most appropriate decision. Finally, at a technical level of reflection, the principal must determine how to meet the educational needs of the child with Down Syndrome, within the school's resource constraints. "What does this child need in order to be included in this school?" "What resources are currently available to this child and to the school?" "How might this child be included in the life of this school, given the current level of resources?" By crafting an operational plan, the principal begins to make concrete his or her Catholic educational orientation. The principal's challenge is to implement the rationale for Catholic special education in practice. The child's needs are weighed against available resources, not in the sense that available resources should determine whether or not the child is admitted to the school, but as a challenge for making best use of available resources and for finding the resources the child needs.

The decision to move parish or Catholic school educational programs to an inclusion model is not without controversy. There are questions about quality of services, the financial burden of services, and the preparation of teachers and support personnel. In spite of these barriers, a Catholic educational orientation grounded in Church teaching provides a rationale for the inclusion of the majority of students with special needs who choose to apply to Catholic schools.

SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS SERVED IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

During the past 30 years the Catholic Church in America, and Catholic schools specifically, have increasingly responded to those with special needs (Weaver & Landers, 2002). By the year 2000, Catholic schools were serving students with special needs in all disability categories (USCCB, 2002). Today nearly 200,000 students enrolled in Catholic schools, approximately 7% of all students enrolled, "have been diagnosed by a qualified, licensed, trained professional as having a disability" (USCCB, 2002, p. 4). Of these children, less than 1% "receive services funded by IDEA" (p. 4). Of the cost

of special education and related services for Catholic school students with disabilities, 34% is covered by Catholic schools without charging parents for the additional costs; only 13% is funded by federal funds, while state or local government funds account for another 34-37%.

THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS AND THE EDUCATION OF THE CLERGY

“For most Catholics, the community of believers is embodied in the local parish” (NCCB, 1998, p. 5). It is through the parish that Catholics, including those with disabilities, participate in the life of the Church. It is the parish community that should make certain that persons with disabilities are welcomed and integrated. Indeed, the Code of Canon Law (Canon Law Society of America, 1983) locates the spiritual welfare of the baptized as the province of their pastor. For the most part, the clergy leave it to lay principals and teaching staff to integrate children with disabilities. These lay school teachers and principals, however, need the support of the parish and diocesan staff to serve children with disabilities in Catholic schools, and people with disabilities need a better educated clergy to be more fully integrated into the life of the parish.

Dunn, a Catholic with a background in theology and liturgy, made the following stirring comment after becoming disabled by a stroke resulting in hemiparesis:

I recall my struggle with my Church after I became disabled. I gave years of non-ordained ministry to a parish where people opened their lives and hearts to me. But the clergy, the institutional patriarchy, was something different. I felt a sense of personal devaluation from being ignored, avoided and patronized that left a wound which pains me anew every time I enter the church building – now that I can get in. (1997, p. 1)

Catholic seminaries equip hundreds of future clergy each year, but there is little instruction in the curriculum of these seminaries about the human experience of disability (Anderson & Blair, 2003; USCC, 1995). At the same time, the clergy is being increasingly called upon to work with persons with disabilities. Catholic seminaries have had a history of not admitting candidates who gave evidence of a disability, so few seminarians encountered persons with disabilities during their period of formation (USCC, 1978). The majority of seminaries (more than 80%) have never examined whether their curriculum included instruction that might increase either theological or practical knowledge about people with disabilities (Anderson, 2003). The Anderson survey also found that “less than 15% of respondents (16 out of

121 [seminaries]) rate their curriculum as effective in preparing ministry students to include and minister to people who have disabilities,” while 83% of respondents stated that “there is a need for greater academic attention to the human experience of disability in graduate theological education” (p. 1). In order to better serve persons with disabilities in parish life, a transforming theology of disability is needed, as is a clergy and teaching staff better educated in what it means to have a disability.

A theology of disability exists (Block, 2002). Cooper (1992), professor of philosophical theology at the Louisville, Kentucky, Presbyterian Theological Seminary, suggested that “by thinking of God as disabled-metaphorically...we can deepen our understanding of the nature of God’s creative and redemptive love” (p. 173). Cooper further identified three theological issues that are especially troubling for Christians with disabilities: (a) “the meaning and function of perfection language in the biblical faith” (p. 173); (b) the question of how God could allow the suffering that often accompanied the lives of people with disabilities and their loved ones; and (c) “the theological issue of hope and salvation” (p. 174).

In addressing the 1999 Conference on the Family and the Integration of Disabled Children and Adolescents, John Paul II said that, “the value of life transcends that of efficiency” (§4). This statement should ring strongly in Catholic schools and parishes in which every child deserves whatever is needed for them to learn, and every person deserves whatever is needed in order to be integrated into the life of the parish, each in accord with his or her ability. This is the definition of fairness.

THE CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION PREPARATION PROGRAMS FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATORS AND CLERGY

If a better educated clergy, school staff, and laity is needed for better integration of young people and adults with disabilities into the life of the Catholic school and parish, then Catholic higher education institutions, including Catholic seminaries, have the challenge of facilitating this education. This challenge extends beyond programs for educating special education teachers for Catholic schools. Catholic higher education institutions must rethink what is done across the curriculum, attempting to discern how to infuse disability education into all aspects of the educational program, especially in seminaries and other schools of theology. It is also up to these institutions to develop ways to disseminate instruction not just on the content of disability education, but also on the affective awareness of the human experience of disability. Nor is it sufficient simply to invite the clergy and school staff to attend courses, lectures, and conferences on disabilities on Catholic campus-

es; these institutions must reach out and contact those who have not shown an inclination to expand their awareness of disabilities even as they encounter those with disabilities in their parishes. Catholic schools of education, seminaries, and schools of theology do not need to add coursework to their already full curriculums, but they do need to find ways to interweave understanding about human disability into any course taught. Such interweaving must include not only content goals, but also affective goals for learners, since it is these goals that can best permeate the curriculum and, though they may take longer to take root, will last longer in the awareness of disciples.

THE NEED FOR DISABILITY RESEARCH IN CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS

Much of the research about disabilities has come from the social sciences, but there is a singular lack of research that emanates from theological inquiry. In Catholic ethical geography, the position of persons with disabilities has, over the centuries, had a negative connotation, despite the more recent pronouncements of the Holy See. The bias of the centuries must be examined and corrected. Disability is not a punishment for sinning. It is time for Catholic universities to foster theological as well as educational understanding of the human experience of disability through increased research. We have an opportunity to collaborate across disciplines to examine what we teach in our colleges, universities, and seminaries, what is taught in our schools, and what is understood by our clergy about disabilities. We have an opportunity to examine the theological and historical perception of disabilities over the millennia of the Church's existence. And we have the opportunity to examine the responses we make to children with disabilities enrolled in Catholic schools from not only an educational perspective, but also from a theological one.

SUMMARY

The Church teaches a positive anthropology that each person is a reflection of the divine, and as such, each is bound together in a community of faith that must respect and care for one another. It is the obligation of all members of the Christian community to develop a deeper understanding of those with disabilities and to work to integrate them into society. This obligation includes integrating students with special needs into Catholic schools and parish education programs. Parents have the primary responsibility not only for the education of their children, but also for their integration into the larger society. But this responsibility is shared by Catholic schools and by the

whole Catholic community. Contemplative practice engages decision making that honors the authentic Catholic identity of Catholic educational institutions. In the declaration, *Gravissimum Educationis*, the school is seen as a community and not just as a sociological concept, but also as a theological one “as a genuine and proper instrument of the church” (Vatican II Council, 1966, §6). In order to facilitate the integration of those with disabilities, the clergy, teachers, and lay leaders have a responsibility to become educated about the rights and needs of those with disabilities and an obligation to honor those rights in all aspects of Christian life. Catholic institutions of higher education have a responsibility to teach disability education, infusing it across the curriculum; this is especially true when it comes to the education of the clergy who should be exposed to an affective awareness as well as the content of the human experience of disability. Catholic institutions of higher education should also increase their knowledge about human disability through research, not only in the secular fields of inquiry, but also as theological inquiry. This research will be best fostered through collaborative endeavors between theologians, educators, and others in the social and physical sciences.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. C. (2003, Winter). Survey of seminary education. *The Religious and Spirituality Division Quarterly*, 1-2.
- Anderson, R. C., & Blair, W. D. (2003). *Survey of theological education and people with disabilities*. Birmingham, AL: The Center for Religion and Disability.
- Bennis, W., & Nanus, B. (1985). *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge*. New York: Perennial Library.
- Block, J. W. (2002). *Copious hosting: A theology of access for people with disabilities*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Bryk, A. S., Lee, V., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Canon Law Society of America. (1983). *Code of canon law* (Latin-English ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Convey, J. J. (1992). *Catholic schools make a difference: Twenty-five years of research*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- Cooper, B. (1992). The disabled God. *Theology Today*, 49(2), 173-182.
- Dunn, L. (1997, Winter). The disabled God. *Wings: Newsletter for United Methodists with Disabilities and Those Who Care About Them*, 1.
- John Paul II. (1981, March 23). Document for the international year of disabled persons. *L'Osservatore Romano*, p. 6.
- John Paul II. (1999, December 4). *Address of the Holy Father to the congress on integration of disabled children*. Retrieved December 12, 2005, from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1999/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_04121999_cong-pc-family_en.html
- John Paul II. (2000, December 3). *Homily for the jubilee of the disabled*. Retrieved December 12, 2005, from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20001203_jubildisabled_en.html
- John XXIII. (1961). *Mater et magistra*. New York: The America Press.
- John XXIII. (1963). *Pacem in terris*. New York: The America Press.

- Leo XIII. (1891). *Rerum novarum*. In M. Walsh & B. Davies (Eds.), *Proclaiming justice and peace* (pp. 15-40). Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1972). *To teach as Jesus did: A pastoral message on Catholic education*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops. (1998). *Welcome and justice for persons with disabilities: A framework of access and inclusion*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
- Schuttloffel, M. J. (1999). *Character and the contemplative principal*. Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.
- United States Catholic Conference. (1978). *Pastoral statement of U.S. Catholic bishops on people with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Catholic Conference. (1995). *Guidelines for the celebration of the sacraments with persons with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2002). *Catholic school children with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2005). *Renewing our commitment to Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the third millennium*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Vatican II Council. (1966). *Gravissimum educationis*. In W. M. Abbott (Ed.), *The documents of Vatican II* (pp. 637-651). New York: The America Press.
- Weaver, H. R., & Landers, M. F. (2002). Serving students with special needs in Catholic schools. In T. C. Hunt, E. A. Joseph, & R. J. Nuzzi (Eds.), *Catholic schools still make a difference: Ten years of research 1991-2000* (pp. 117-130). Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association.

Thomas J. Long is an associate professor and coordinator of the Special Education Program at The Catholic University of America. Merylan "Mimi" J. Schuttloffel is an associate professor, coordinator of the Educational Administration and Policy Studies Program, and director of the Catholic Leadership Programs at The Catholic University of America. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Thomas Long, Department of Education, The Catholic University of America, 620 Michigan Avenue, Washington, DC 20064.