



The handicapped child and education integration

Should the handicapped child be in a special school? Will he be happier there? The blind with the blind, the deaf with the deaf, and the retarded with other retarded children? Should he be carefully sheltered from the outside world, protected from all hurt and risk, never allowed to make decisions, loved and cared for at all times, and as a consequence remain dependent all his life? Is it 'too hard' on "normal" children to have a handicapped child among them, with perhaps disruptive behavior and "strange" habits? Lots of questions, to which there are no tailor-made ready answers.

In the past, a handicapped child was often seen as a shame, someone who had to be hid from society. Fortunately, that attitude has changed greatly over the past fifty years, and many people have worked with much love and enthusiasm to help the handicapped child and his family.

Although in the past it was common practice for professionals to advise parents of profoundly retarded children to "put them in an institution," today they realize more and more that the best place for retarded children is in a normal home setting where parents receive help from professionals when needed in raising their child, where the child feels secure and loved, and where, in a Christian home, he daily receives the "nurturing in the Lord" which parents are obliged to give.

The above statements will receive little argument from anyone. But, when the child reaches school age, what then? The trend, especially in Europe, has been to build all kinds of special schools. The child is tested and then sent to the school that will best fit his needs, even if that school is sometimes far from his own home and community. Undoubtedly, this has been done with the best of intentions.

However, today's trend, especially in North America, is to slowly phase out segregated schools for the retarded and to place all but the most severely handicapped children in the normal school system. The process is called *education integration* and deserves a good, hard look.

We all believe that children learn a great deal from their peers. If you then place a mentally handicapped child in a setting where all or most of his daily contacts are with children who are also handicapped, you deprive him of valuable learning opportunities. The child is already handicapped; to deprive him of these opportunities only handicaps him further. Children with mental retardation need the modelling provided by normal peer interaction.

The following example may the most clearly illustrate what is meant by education integration:

A small class of nine mentally handicapped children had one dedicated teacher and two teacher's aides. Some integration with the other students in the school occurred through physical education programs, but very little else. This teacher managed to convince the rest of his colleagues of the value of integration, and seven teachers volunteered to take his nine children for parts of the school day. Today they all start the day in an age-appropriate homeroom class and have their year-end pictures taken with this class. They take recess and eat lunch in their homeroom with their age-appropriate friends. Twenty-six students from a nearby high school assist and tutor these children when necessary.

Is this not what Reformed schools should be doing? Indeed, the road to Reformed education has been rough and there are still many problems. But if public schools, often also on limited budgets, are doing it, shouldn't the Reformed schools be trying even harder? After all, is it not true that people are unfamiliar with, and therefore fearful of, persons with mental retardation? It is probably

true that if all children had the opportunity to get to know handicapped children in school settings, community attitudes would change. A handicapped person would feel much more "at home" in a congregation in which he has grown up as very much a part of the Reformed school, knowing and known by his peers.

This will not be easy for any school to implement, it will not be easy for parents to send their child out into the "normal" world, it will not be easy for the child himself, and yet we strongly believe it is the right direction to take. God has placed a handicapped child in a home for His own purpose, but He has also placed that covenant child of His in a certain congregation for His own purpose. When the young children of a congregation put into practice at school that *"love is patient and kind"* (1 Corinthians 13:4), life at that school will flourish — for the handicapped and non-handicapped alike.

Dedicated teachers and aides will be needed; older students will have to get involved; it will be hard work! But it is possible. In our own congregation and local Reformed school, a beginning has been made. Our severely handicapped daughter receives special help and is also integrated into the kindergarten class. She loves it there, and we are convinced that she is loved by the teachers and her classmates. It took a little while for the students to get used to her, but now she is completely accepted the way she is. The girls in the higher grades take turns staying with her at recess time, so that the teachers have a break. With love and hard work it can be done!

Questions will remain. What happens when the child gets older and bigger? Where will he fit in then? But answers and solutions must be found.

For the purpose of this article I have focused on retarded children. But I believe that the foregoing applies to all children with handicaps — mental, emotional, or physical — including the gifted child, who, in a way, is also handicapped. They are covenant children; they belong in Reformed covenantal schools. The time has come to do our utmost to see that they are there.

R Kuik

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