

IS ADVENTIST EDUCATION FOR EVERYONE?

BY CHRISTIAN DUPONT

Angela Banks* never wanted to leave church school. She liked the spiritual atmosphere and the positive social environment. But she couldn't stay. Angela was mildly retarded. Twenty-five years ago, when she was school-age, Adventist institutions simply couldn't provide the special education she required. Angela went on to graduate from the local public school system, where she received the specialized curriculum she needed. For the past 12 years she has worked as a food service aide at a hospital. Angela is happy, but she still speaks wistfully of how much she missed having a Christian education.

Things haven't changed a great deal since then. Unfortunately, other families like Angela's still can't turn to their church schools for help.

The link between stories like Angela's and my life began about seven years ago when I became a Seventh-day Adventist and began my career as a direct care worker for the mentally impaired. Even though the events occurred independently, I naturally link them together in my mind.

Through my various experiences at a state institution for the retarded, as a job coach for the autistic, to my duties as a live-in companion to a young man with autism, I have often imagined the benefits of applying what I've learned about Adventist educational philosophy to a special-education curriculum. Using the opportunity afforded by my senior honors research project at Andrews University, I surveyed Seventh-day Adventists in the Lake Union

Conference about the possibility of developing Adventist special-education programs for the mentally retarded.¹

They're Out There!

One of the first things I wanted to learn from my study was how many children from Adventist families needed special-education services. No direct statistics were available, but based on national averages,² there are probably 180 mentally retarded children between the ages of 3 and 21 years (about 1 percent of the population for this age group) in the Lake Union Conference, which has about 65,000 members in four Midwestern states.³ Typically, approximately half of these mentally retarded children would require special-education classes, and another 14 percent would need a special school.

Of the 151 respondents to my questionnaire, 14 indicated that they had a mentally impaired person in their family—a rate of more than 9 percent. This figure may encompass all types of mental impairments, not just retardation, and may include extended families and persons of any age. Despite the size of this group, only a few of our schools are prepared to teach the learning disabled, and virtually none can accommodate the mentally retarded.

Keeping Up With Public Education

Since the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142), parents have had the right to demand that the local public school provide an individualized education program for their men-

*Not her real name.

tally/physically impaired or learning-disabled child. Unfortunately, as we've already noted, Adventist parents may have to do just that—demand from the public schools what they can't get from their church school.

A major cause of their dilemma, it seems, is an underlying conflict in our approach. The Lake Union Conference Department of Education Code Book provides an example. Section 4046 3 of the code reads: "Seventh-day Adventist schools have not been established for the purpose of offering special education, and are therefore unable to accept pupils who have serious scholastic or behavioral problems, or who are mentally handicapped."

Interestingly, this statement was written in 1975 amidst the climate of growing awareness toward and service to the handicapped in the public sector. It was apparently intended to clarify what Adventist schools could and could not do. The conflict does not lie between this statement and the practice of our schools. Instead, there is tension between it and broader expressions of our educational philosophy.

Just two paragraphs above the one already quoted, the union code affirms that "Seventh-day Adventist schools are open to all young people of the Seventh-day Adventist church who come for the purpose of doing earnest, faithful work, and who have a desire to develop a Christian character." Might this statement, coupled with 4046 3, imply that children with mental impairments are unwilling and unspiritual?

An even more categorical declaration of the all-inclusiveness of Adventist educational philosophy may be found in 4058 1: "Christian schools have been established to serve the entire church, and we are urgently counseled in the Spirit of Prophecy not to rest until every Seventh-day Adventist child is enrolled in one of our schools."⁴

Since mentally retarded and other handicapped children will always be found in our ranks, the only way our schools can achieve this goal is to develop special-education curricula for exceptional children. When looked at from that angle, it becomes a matter of principle—a matter of committing ourselves to meet the goals of our educational philosophy and the needs of our young people.

Attitude Adjustment

Through my research I set out to gauge how members of the Lake Union Conference related special education to their own educational philosophy and whether they would

support the development of such programs in our schools. To measure these variables, I constructed an attitude scale and administered it to a representative population.

In order to develop meaningful items for the scale, I analyzed the history of our present denominational school system to determine the basic obstacles encountered in its development. I postulated that similar obstacles would face the development of special-education services.

Five areas emerged as potential problems: the perception of the immediacy of Christ's return, the relationship of special education to our mission, the church's commission to spread the gospel, the need to offer a distinct improvement over secular education, and the financial practicality. For example, the questionnaire included the following statements: "Even though the Lord is returning soon, the Adventist Church should invest time into special education for the mentally retarded" and "Retarded children could benefit more from an Adventist school teacher than a non-Adventist one."

Respondents were asked to indicate their response, ranging from "strongly agree" through "strongly disagree." Based on the results of a pilot study, 18 items were determined to effectively discriminate between positive and negative attitudes.

A total score was obtained for each

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respondent by combining the scores from the 18 individual items. A total of 140 of the questionnaires were returned from the 300 mailed to conference administrators, pastors, teachers and lay members in the Lake Union.

According to their total scores, three-fourths of the 140 respondents showed a mildly to strongly favorable attitude toward offering special education for the mentally retarded in Adventist schools. Lay members expressed a more positive attitude than did the denominational em-

ployees. Older participants in the survey showed more positive attitudes than younger ones. Also, respondents from the Lake Region Conference demonstrated a more favorable attitude than respondents from the Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin conferences.

Male and female respondents scored almost identically, but interestingly, the same range of scores was found among participants who had only met a mentally retarded person and those who had one in their own family. While the survey instrument did distinguish attitude groups, it could not provide an explanation of what factors contributed to the differences.

The graph summarizes the responses of the 140 participants in each of the five areas of potential obstacles. While more than 85 percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed a little that Adventist special education would help spread the gospel, only 48 percent agreed that it would be affordable. Attitudes were also mixed regarding whether our schools have enough time to devote to special education for the retarded and whether they can offer a distinctly better program than the public schools.

Jump in!

While an ocean of potential difficulties lies open before us if we really

are committed to bringing special education to the Adventist school system, I think we need to dive in head-first.

Some respondents to my survey commented that a program for the mentally retarded should be developed at one of our larger centers, which would have a greater concentration of children with special needs. This might prove a good solution, since many Adventist families willingly relocate to be closer to their children's schools. Furthermore, I think if we put our efforts into developing one super program it will serve as a model for others. As the proverb says: build a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door. Here are a few more ideas to bait your interest:

Networking: In my involvement with the Autism Society of America I've seen miracles happen when several parents with similar needs and frustrations team up together. Administrators could tap into this energy resource by identifying Adventist families with mentally impaired children and stimulating the formation of an Association of Adventist Parents of Exceptional Children with local chapters.

Communication could be facilitated

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through newsletters and information lines. Carol Schoun, parent of a learning-disabled child and director of parent services for her local Learning Disabilities Association (formerly ACLD), stressed to me the importance of Adventist parents becoming more open and involved.

Teacher Training: Many teachers feel they are not trained to offer special education. In some cases they aren't trained because our colleges don't offer enough courses in that area. The vicious circle needs to be broken. Colleges need to increase their offerings in special education and make such

classes a requirement for teacher training.

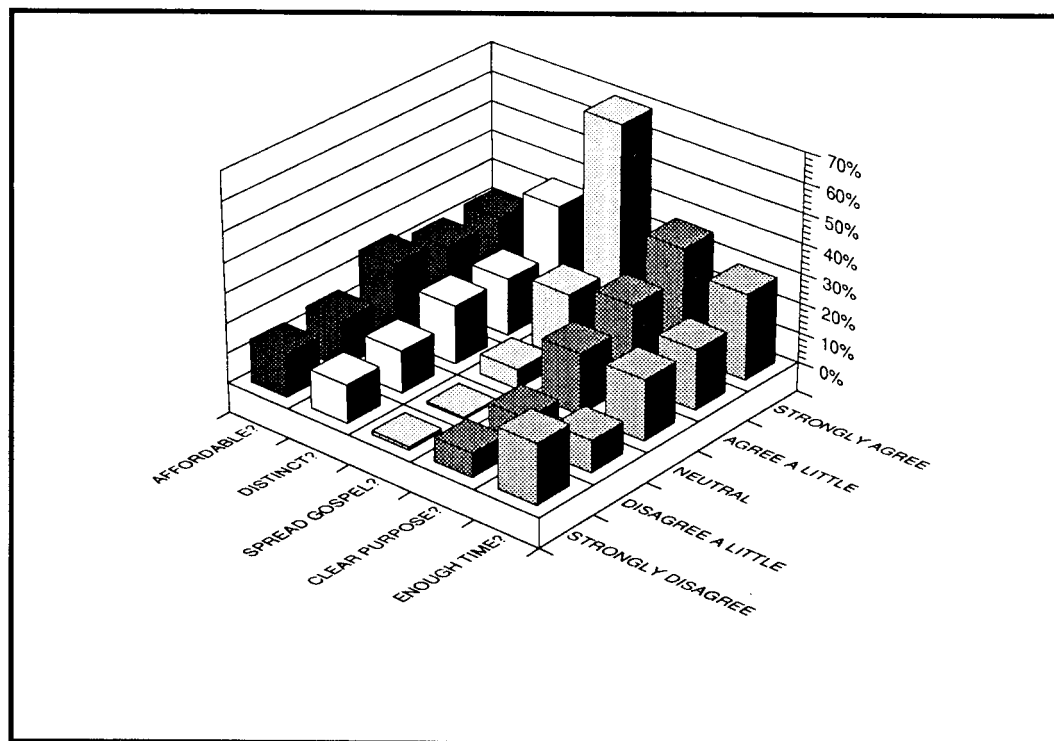
For teachers in the field, in-service or workshop training can be contracted through local agencies. At the very least teachers must be trained to recognize different types of handicaps so they can assist parents in seeking professional help for their children.

Cooperation with Public Schools: In sparsely populated areas a viable alternative to having our own special-education classes would be a joint arrangement with the public school system whereby a retarded student would take academic subjects from the public schools and nonacademic subjects and extracurricular activities at the church school. This should not cause undue entanglement with government, since the student and not the church school is receiving services.⁵

Church Activities: Adventists already assist the handicapped through the Christian Record Braille Foundation, which provides braille and audio recordings of Sabbath school lessons and other religious material, and sponsors summer camps for the visually impaired. Perhaps churches could offer Sabbath school classes to the

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Attitudes Toward the Possibility of Adventist Special Education



ENOUGH TIME?

Does our church have enough time to devote to special education?
(4 of 18 items from survey)

CLEAR PURPOSE?

Would Adventist special education fulfil a unique purpose in our mission?
(3 of 18 items from survey)

SPREAD GOSPEL?

Would Adventist special education help spread the gospel message?
(2 of 18 items from survey)

DISTINCT?

Could Adventist special education be both distinct and yet reputable?
(3 of 18 items from survey)

AFFORDABLE?

Could our church financially support special education programs?
(6 of 18 items from survey)

A 5-point, 18 item Likert-type scale was administered to 300 administrators, pastors, teachers and lay members in the Lake Union Conference in March, 1989. The data graphed above combines the 140 usable responses from all four categories and summarizes the respondents' attitudes in each of five areas.

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mentally retarded in their community. Members—including students—could present afternoon programs at institutions or foster homes for the retarded in much the same way as they do for nursing homes.

Because of the linkage of our church and school boards, church-sponsored activities should increase interest in special education in the schools.

Printed Resources: Guidelines for Working With Exceptional Students in Seventh-day Adventists Schools was developed by the North American Division Office of Education in 1982. While it could be updated, the manual contains a helpful discussion of approaches for educating various categories of exceptional children in Adventist settings. It also describes programs conducted in the Colorado and Southeastern California Conferences.

Another good resource is *Pastoral Care of the Handicapped*, edited by Roy E. Hartbauer.⁶ Both pastors and lay members could benefit from its presentation of theological motivations for becoming involved with the handicapped.

A Bargain at Twice the Price

Christian education requires a sacrifice, but it would still be a bargain at twice the price. Why draw the line to exclude the children like Angela who want to be a part of it? Our church has much that is unique and precious to offer the world. Adventist education really should be for everyone! □

Christian Dupont holds a B.A. degree in Theology from Andrews University. He has just enrolled in a Master of Arts program in theology at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana. Since 1982 he has been employed full-time in assisting the mentally handicapped.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Copies of the complete research project may be obtained from Mrs. Rebecca Twomley, Circulation Services, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1400, or by calling 616/471-3549. Please send \$6.70 with your request.

² United States Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1988*

Teachers must be trained to recognize different types of handicaps so they can assist parents in seeking professional help for their children.

(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1988), pp. 15, 121, 135.

³ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Office of Archives and Statistics, *125th Annual Statistical Report* (Washington, D.C.: 1987), p. 16.

⁴ The North American Division Education Code, K-12 (March 1977) includes the following under 020: "The Seventh-day Adventist Church desires to save its youth and prepare them for the service of the gospel by providing for all its children a general education within the framework of the science of salvation." (Italics in original).

⁵ See Ronald J. Wylie, "The Handicapped Child and Private Education: A Legal Overview," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 43:5 (Summer 1981), pp. 9ff.

⁶ Published by Andrews University Press, Berrien Springs, Michigan, in 1983.

TOMMY

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and badly-in-need-of-repair clothes.

I tried to satisfy his physical needs as best I could, but I knew that I was merely scratching the surface. I couldn't even touch Tommy's real problems. I couldn't remove the sting of the angry, bitter words his foster mother flung at him as he left for school. I couldn't reach the hurt wonderment that formed in his young mind as he saw how easily younger classmates mastered facts that he'd struggled with for weeks.

And there were times, though I hate to admit it, when I was the cause of those tears. Moments when Tommy wrapped his arms around my waist

I faced a task that would demand the ultimate in physical, mental, emotional, and most of all spiritual stamina.

and I was too "busy" to return his affection. Moments when his childish pranks evoked a hasty and overly severe reprimand. Moments when I despaired over his "slowness" and let my irritation show. Many times I would look at the tears I had caused and cry myself. It was too late to retrieve my hasty word or thoughtless action—the best I could do was give him a hug—which he never failed to return. Many times I wished I had his remarkable ability to forgive.

Forgiveness was just one of the lessons Tommy taught me. I spent an entire school year teaching him the fundamentals of reading, writing, and mathematics—yet they seem trivial compared to the lessons he taught me.

Tommy taught me the lesson of determination, even in the face of insurmountable obstacles. He taught me the lesson of cheerfulness, even when tired or discouraged. He taught me the lesson of faith, even when the object of that faith has proved unworthy. And most important, Tommy taught me the lesson of love. Love for the physically unlovely—love in the face of indifference and even rejection. Love "in spite of" instead of love "because of."

Oh, Tommy, I owe you so much. As I witnessed your unswerving love and trust in me, as undeserving as I was, my faith and love for my heavenly Father was strengthened. As I endeavored day by day to meet your varied needs I learned to lean heavily on the arms of the Master Teacher.

But the hardest lesson of all came on the last day of school. I didn't want to leave Tommy in the cruel little world in which he lived. I wanted to erase the pain in his life or at least stay at his side and help him face the obstacles. But I couldn't. I had to let go. I had to leave Tommy in God's care.

As I drove off that last day I could see Tommy in the rear-view mirror, standing on the curb waving, surrounded by the depressing conditions of the tenement in which he lived. I cried and I prayed, committing not only Tommy's life, but also my own, to God. I prayed for strength to go on and meet the challenges He had for me. And I prayed for love, to embrace the future "Tommys" I would face; and then courage—to turn away, leaving them in God's care. □

**Not his real name.*

Arlinda J. Cotton teaches grades K-4 at Capital City Adventist School in Saint Paul, Minnesota.