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# Promoting Justice in the Classroom: Looking Beyond the Label to See the Individual

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## ABSTRACT

Christian educators are faced with the task of promoting and encouraging justice from the viewpoint of Christ as they encounter the broad strokes of diversity within their classrooms and schools. Following Christ means that the Christian educator must look beyond the labels that have been applied by the religious and secular to see each student as made in the image of God. This article presents a paradigm that recognizes the worth of each individual within the context of the student's background knowledge, language abilities, academic achievement, and behavior (BLAB) instead of the singularly focused labels that marginalize students.

## Introduction

Christian educators have a vital role in promoting justice; for each educator is preparing her students daily with the skills and dispositions that will be required to administer and support justice in the future. The challenge, however, emerges in how one defines *justice*. The recent controversies concerning police shootings of black men in the United States illustrates the challenge. Protesters would argue that justice is their goal; however, justice for one side would result in freedom for the police officer, whereas the other side would argue that justice would only occur if the police officer were charged in the shooting. In essence, each side has marginalized the perspective of the other protesters; both actions raise the question of injustice with one focusing on a systemic issue (the shooting of black men by the police) while the other focuses on an individual issue (the police officer who shot the black man). How does the Christian educator present the perspective of Christ within an environment of injustice, whether that injustice is systemic or individualized?

Wolterstorff (2002) stated that post-enlightenment Western liberal society defines justice within the context of the proper execution of contracts and protection from assault. At face value, this traditional definition does not include any consideration of the marginalized with its legal emphasis. The use of the term *social justice* in the initial writing by Rawls (1971) expanded

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the concept of justice to describe the interactions between the major social institutions (political, social, economic) and the members of society. Those major social institutions also identify the status of individuals born into or admitted to that society and define individual rights and duties. The concept of fairness for each society member is emphasized in Rawls' secular theory. In the preceding paragraph, those who supported the police exemplified the concept that justice means the protection of the citizens from assault and battery. The citizens who were protested the actions felt that the shooting was unjust; as an institution, the police were perceived as shooting black men more frequently than white men, resulting in a perception that black men were marginalized and not valued members of society.

How should a Christian educator respond to questions of injustice? Especially if that injustice is occurring in society, religious practices, schooling, or classrooms? Does the Christian's relationship with Christ create a changed paradigm of justice that includes the marginalized with full rights, responsibilities, privileges, and supports to become successful? Or does that relationship with Christ support the traditional view of justice in the post-enlightenment view of western society?

Building on the descriptions of justice found in the writings of the Old Testament prophets (especially Amos 5:1–24), Wolterstorff (2002) stated:

What this has to mean is that a rule of thumb for determining whether there is justice in a society is whether justice is being rendered to such people (*widows, orphans, aliens, poor*); what justice requires is that such marginalized people as these have standing in the community and a fair share in its goods. (p. 280)

The journey for the Christian educator begins with how the educator looks at each student in the classroom. The many labels that can be attached to a student (or the parents) can be overwhelming; one label can become so prominent in the teacher's judgment that other qualities of the child of the child are overlooked – this is the process of marginalization that leads to injustice, both in the classroom and in society. This paper is organized in three sections. The first section will examine the role that labels play in marginalizing an individual or group. The second section will examine how Christ responded to marginalized peoples. The third section will describe how educators can avoid the trap of labeling students because the labels lead to marginalization and, ultimately, to injustice.

## **The process of marginalization**

Marginalization begins with a label, a comparison between the norm and the individual. Labels dominate the language of comparison; whether that comparison refers to objects, commercial products, characteristics, beliefs, or people. Labels have a naming function that allows individuals to differentiate or associate related concepts, products, or people with similar attributes.

The association or differentiation does not have an inherent moral quality by virtue of the word itself; instead, the positive or negative connotation arises within the thoughts and intent of the labeler. An adjectival quality is present in a label for it conveys specific characteristics assumed to be present in the named group. Labels are applied to describe sports allegiances, regional and national identities, religious and political affiliations, socio-economic status, gender, educational attainment, professions, racial identity, cultural identity, intelligence, and disabilities; the list continues infinitely recognizing the enormity of differences.

The example from Jesus in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) exemplifies marginalization by labeling. The term *sinner* was used derisively and condescendingly by the Pharisee who praised God that he was not a “sinner like everyone else”. However, the same word *sinner* was used by the tax collector to describe himself with honesty and integrity (Luke 9:13). This exemplifies the dual nature of labels. The label *sinner* was used by the Pharisee to mark the difference between him and other people (i.e., the sinners). The tax collector used the label *sinner* to identify himself, not in comparison to the Pharisee, but in recognition of his life and how he had lived it. Marginalization by the Pharisee communicated that the tax collector had no value in God’s eyes or in the eyes of society.

Marginalization can occur in society, schools, and classrooms when teachers and students are confronted with the myriad of labels describing the diversity of students and teachers. The language of diversity is omnipresent within each individual’s description: alien, second language learner, culturally diverse, gay, lesbian, poor, illegal alien, non-English speaking, male, female, moral, immoral, religious, secular, non-religious, learning disabled, talented and gifted, conduct disordered, and athletic, for example.

Inherent in the concept of labeling people or ideas is the recognition that the people or ideas are deviating from the norm, the norm that is being defined by the person applying the label (Rist, 2007; Tomlinson, 2004). Norm, in this context, can be used to describe the mainstream population. It could also be used to describe the tenets of a small group within a larger population. Traditionally, the concept of the norm in the United States has referred to the mainstream white middle class population. This group may or may not have included women. Non-mainstream groups became the outsiders whose role or place in society was minimalized or excluded. Historically, these marginalized groups have included women, the poor, minorities, foreigners, African Americans, Asians; any group or individual whose lifestyle, culture, or belief system did not coincide with that of the mainstream group. Marginalization is systemic, affecting education, socio-economic status, privilege, housing, and profession.

Within any group setting, marginalization can occur when a minority (one person or several persons) challenges the prevailing beliefs held by the

mainstream group or its leaders. Marginalization in this context results in a dismissal of the minority's concept without a discussion, denial of the validity of the question raised, or in no response at all. Group marginalization can be associated with multiple factors including race, gender, culture, socio-economic status, and educational status. Rejection of the minority can be limited to one issue; it can become epidemic with any idea from the minority ignored on the basis of the source of the idea.

Marginalization is multi-dimensional. As evidenced in the writings of the prophets and the apostles, and in the teachings of Jesus, the widows, orphans, aliens, and poor have historically been oppressed, eliminated from the mainstream of society, and despised (Acts 3:1–5; Luke 5:17–26; Amos 5:1–24). A religious dimension of marginalization occurred when the Pharisees and teachers of the law continually objected to the willingness of Jesus to have fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, and sinful women who were thought to be unwelcome in society, both politically and religiously (Luke 5:27–32; Luke 6:6–11). The Roman conquerors enjoyed position and privilege, but also encountered marginalization with respect to Jewish society. The Romans marginalized Jewish citizens, even the Pharisees and leaders of the Jews (Matthew 8:5–13; Matthew 27:27–40). Living in a patriarchal society limited the opportunities and freedom of the women (John 5:1–42). Different ethnicities and cultures encountered rejection from the mainstream; among these groups were the Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians, Romans, and Canaanites. People who had physical infirmities, were demon-possessed, or had mental illness were cast aside unless they had friends who cared for them (Acts 3:1–5; John 5:1–7; Luke 5:17–26). Each label became the means to identify the marginalized; a label that described how the individual differed from the supposedly normal person (as determined by the one applying the label).

Marginalization within a Christian congregation, Christian school, or among Christian teachers, surfaces when politically and religiously-charged terms, such as illegal immigrant, godless public schools, Christian private schools, gay, lesbian, straight, liberal, conservative, feminist, humanist, or non-English speaking are used to define a person. Within the terms are included multiple attributes which are identifiers associated with the group and with every individual that is a member of that group. More importantly, the terms are used as a line of demarcation identifying behaviors that separate the individual (or individuals) from the norm as determined by the person applying the label. In some cases, the line of demarcation is used to state whether a person is a “true Christian” or a “false Christian”. The demarcation diminishes the worth of the individual denying the individual's privilege to be called a child of God, that the individual was made in the image of God, and that the individual has the essence of God within.

The concept of marginalization as primarily occurring in one dimension of a person's life is often incorrect. While the labels often focus on the most

obvious characteristic, marginalization occurs across multiple dimensions for our students whose lives and family backgrounds are framed by one or more of the following labels: second language learner, illegal alien, poor, parents are farmworkers, broken home, homeless, learning disabled, one-parent family, non-traditional family, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight. It is often the most obvious (or most repulsive to Christian identity) that is applied as the single descriptive for a student, parent, or colleague.

### **How did Jesus respond to the marginalized—societally?**

The beginning of Jesus' ministry was marked by His proclamation in the Nazareth synagogue that He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come ... The scripture that you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day! (Luke 4:18–22 New International Version)

Four marginalized groups were the focus of the message: the poor, the captive, the oppressed, and the blind. In the first century Palestine, none of these would have been among the favored in society, but instead relied upon the mercy of others for their daily lives (Acts 3:1–5; John 5:1–7; Luke 5:17–26). The message of Christ was good news for these marginalized groups: God had intervened in the world to provide freedom and His favor.

The depiction of Jesus' response to the poor, crippled, lame, and blind during His ministry in Luke's gospel demonstrated a ministry that sought the marginalized over the non-marginalized. Eternal life was possible for a rich young ruler, but only if he could sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor (Luke 18). The young, rebellious son (now destitute) was welcomed back by his father in Luke 15; much to the chagrin of the elder brother who had remained at home. A beggar named Lazarus had lain at a rich man's gate for years, virtually unseen by the rich man in Luke 16. After death, Lazarus was at Abraham's side receiving his blessing while the rich man lived in torment.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees in Luke 11 challenging them to rethink their worldview that focused on appearances, rather than internal convictions. The rebuke identified significant weaknesses in the Pharisees' practices of love and justice and challenged them to give to the poor. Similarities are present between this passage and the prophecy of Amos (Amos 5:1–27). Amos rebuked the nation of Israel as a result of the widespread corruption and injustices occurring in its court system. Not only did Amos confront the Israelites concerning injustice, but also stated that God had rejected their religious feasts. God's expectations for the Pharisees were the same expectations as He had had for the Israelites.

Jesus challenged the typical *quid pro quo* of society which emphasized inviting friends to banquets in anticipation of a return visit to your friend's banquet. Jesus reversed that tradition arguing that your invitees should include the poor, crippled, lame, and blind since those guests had nothing to offer you in return because they had little of value; whether that little was expressed in money, property, possessions, or status (Luke 14).

Society in first-century Palestine was multi-national, representing ethnic and racial groups not only from within Palestine, but from throughout the Roman Empire. Paul, himself, was a citizen of two states; the Jewish state in which he excelled as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:4-6) and the Roman state (Acts 22:22-29). The Jewish and Roman states were the dominant cultures in first-century Palestine; other cultures were minorities who were not viewed favorably.

Relationships between the Jewish people and the Samaritan people in the first century were non-existent. The Jewish perspective was a condescending attitude, even though both groups claimed a common descendent in Abraham and an expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Avoidance of one another by both cultures was the practice, but Jesus challenged that practice in His lifestyle and in His teaching.

Jesus transcended the cultural boundaries of gender and ethnicity when He taught the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). The thrice-marginalized woman (gender, culturally, morally) initially resisted Jesus' conversation because of the traditional separation between Jews and Samaritans; however, Jesus persisted as He taught her about life and living water. Prophetically, Jesus later told her that she had had five husbands and that the man she is now living with was not her husband. The return of His disciples reinforced the tradition that conversations with Samaritan women were to be avoided rather than encouraged.

Contrasting the actions of the religious with a Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus pointedly told a parable to a teacher of the law who wanted his neighbor identified so that he could limit his benevolence to certain individuals expecting Jesus' response to favor the Jewish people. Instead of focusing on the recipient of the benevolence, Jesus focused on the initiator of the benevolence. The two religious leaders (a priest, a Levite) did not help a man who had been attacked, but a Samaritan became a neighbor to the man.

The relationships that Jesus developed with aliens and foreigners in His ministry were an extension of the concern that had been shown by God in the Pentateuch. Building on the concept that the Israelites themselves had been slaves and aliens in Egypt, it was against the Law of Moses to oppress or mistreat a foreigner. Slaves and aliens living in the households of the Israelites were also to observe the Sabbath providing the slave and alien with a time of refreshment (Deut. 5:12, Exodus 23:9-21).

In a culture in which the fate of society's marginalized citizens was bleak, the message of Christ, from the beginning to the end of His ministry on earth,

was that the time of God's favor had come for the marginalized. He challenged cultural barriers based on socio-economic conditions, disability, gender, cultural heritage, nationality, and social status. He recognized the worth of the individual as a child who had been made in the image of God. External appearances or status were not the focus of Jesus' decisions, but instead it was that each person was valued in the Kingdom of God.

### **How did Jesus respond to the marginalized—religiously?**

Jesus' ministry brought Him into a running conflict with the Pharisees and teachers of the law who felt that they had established the norms for godly living based on teaching, tradition, and the law. Those who did not follow the precepts of the Pharisees were labeled *sinners* and marginalized from society. Among those sinners were tax collectors and violators of the Sabbath laws.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law objected when Jesus ate with Levi and other tax collectors because they were sinners (Luke 5:27–32). Table fellowship recognized the worth of the individuals sharing the meal that ran contrary to the message of separatism emphasized by the Pharisees. This man Jesus, who said He was from God, was sharing a meal with the tax collectors. It was anathema to Pharisees.

On another occasion (Luke 6:6–11), Jesus healed a man with a deformed hand on the Sabbath. Focusing on obedience to the law rather than mercy, the Pharisees and teachers of the law objected to this breaking of the Sabbath law. The disabled were marginalized and neglected by society, but Jesus demonstrated mercy. A *sinful* woman anointed Jesus' feet that raised the condemnation of Simon the Pharisee because she was a sinner with a reputation for an immoral lifestyle (Luke 7:36–50). Simon's religious message was that Jesus should have avoided her, but Jesus chose to do otherwise. As tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus to hear His teaching, the Pharisees and teachers of the law complained that Jesus was associating with sinners and having table fellowship with them (Luke 15:1–2).

Pharisaical practice emphasized the keeping of the Sabbath law. Condemnation by the Pharisees and teachers of the law occurred when Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Consequently, they rebuked Jesus when He healed the woman who had been crippled for 18 years, the man who had a shriveled hand, and the man who had been born blind. Jesus confronted their focus on external practice of keeping the Sabbath by raising questions about the true intent of God's law. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus demonstrated the fullness of His proclamation in Luke 4 that He had been sent by God to the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame; to set the captives free.

Though marginalized by the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus reached out to the sexually immoral, the tax collector, the sinner, and the disabled. These religious leaders received harsh words of condemnation from



Jesus in Luke 11 as He confronted them concerning their treatment of the poor, practice of justice, and distortion of the love of God. Wolterstorff's (2002) concept that justice involved the full participation of the marginalized in society is supported in the ministry of Jesus as He welcomed them into fellowship with him and challenged the religious leaders concerning their practice of exclusion.

### **How did Jesus respond to the marginalized—the children?**

Birmingham (2009) identified the minimization of public school teaching with the attitude that working with adults yielded greater prestige and rewards than working with children. A similar attitude could be found in Jesus' disciples who favored the idea that Jesus speak to the adults rather than interact with the children.

The disciples rebuked parents and others when they brought children to Jesus to be touched by him. Jesus chose to rebuke the disciples emphasizing that children should be allowed to come to him unhindered (Matt. 19, Mark 10, Luke 18). The Kingdom of God belonged to the children and to those who came to the Kingdom with the attitude of a child.

In the midst of an argument among the disciples about who would be the greatest, Jesus taught that anyone who wanted to be first must be the very last and the servant of all (Mark 9:35). In the next sentence He spoke concerning children after taking a little child in His arms, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me, but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

Throughout His ministry, Jesus healed children who had been brought to Him. While the first century society, as evidenced in His disciples, sought to marginalize children, Jesus gave them worth and importance choosing the heart and faith of children as the model for how people were to enter the kingdom of God. Rather than minimalizing their worth, He elevated their worth.

### **How did Jesus respond to the marginalized?**

Marginalized groups were the focus of Jesus' ministry. The gospels record multiple instances in which Jesus challenged the *status quo* of both the religious and the secular pointing His followers to a new way of thinking. People living on the fringes were to be welcomed into the mainstream as Jesus welcomed the sinners, women, immigrants, the disabled, the poor, and children into His circle of fellowship. Exclusion and avoidance were not the norm in His teaching. Embodying the words of Isaiah the prophet, Jesus' ministry had opened the way to life for the marginalized. Justice for the marginalized was emphasized in both the Old and New Testaments.

As disciples, Christian teachers seek to follow Jesus listening to His teaching and following His example. These vignettes from the Gospels have provided a

glimpse into His relationships with those who were the ignored, marginalized, or outcasts of first century Palestine. The Christian teacher interacts daily with students who could be identified with any number of labels; labels that could provide additional services, labels that could honor, or labels that could diminish a student's worth and value in society or in God's eyes. The application of Jesus' teachings and life to the classroom is exemplified in the paradigm entitled *BLAB* that begins with a dispositional change. The acronym *BLAB* describes a four-dimensional perspective of differentiation that emphasizes the consideration of the student's *background knowledge* (B), *language abilities* (L), *academic achievement* (A), and *behavior* (B).

### **Overcoming marginalization through dispositional change**

The supreme demonstration of Christ's mission to the marginalized is described in Philippians 2:5–11 as Paul challenged the Christians in Philippi to have the same mindset (or worldview) as Christ did. Although Christ could have been the master, He chose to become the servant and died so that the marginalized would have life. The admonition to have the mind of Christ was vividly portrayed by Sheldon (1899) as he immortalized a fictional middle to upper class congregation whose members actively sought to have the mind of Christ. Rather than being comfortable in the *status quo* with the marginalized people of the town being invisible, members of the congregation became Christ's disciples in reaching out to the marginalized.

While the fictional congregation, as the people sought the mind of Christ, reached out to the marginalized, Emerson and Smith (2001) described how black and white evangelical congregations are divided by their faith. The emphasis within white evangelicalism on the individual, free will, and personal relationships prevented the white evangelicals from seeing the marginalization of black people through the social, economic, and political institutions. White evangelicals often chose not to see the injustices perpetrated upon the black people believing that each individual was responsible for his success or lack of success. Societal barriers that limited the possibilities of success were not seen. Reinforcing the limitations were beliefs of the white evangelicals that focused on justice defined as being a society where contracts were enforced and citizens did not live in fear (Wolterstorff, 2002).

Similar processes have impacted other individuals whose behavior, attitude, disposition, or likenesses have differed from the norms of the church, the norms of society, or the norms of the group. Differences based on language, culture, appearance, ability, disability, gender, sexuality, religion, education, or socioeconomic status result in contradictory messages from society: invisibility or hyper visibility. Invisibility is preferred because it allows the person to be ignored or marginalized. Hypervisibility requires a response from society, the church, or the individual Christian. Building on Emerson

and Smith's (2001) work concerning the perceptions of white evangelical Christians, the individual who is different is responsible for his own success or failure.

Into such a milieu walks the Christian educator, who has made the commitment to follow Christ, but whose religious heritage may emphasize the individual and self determination; that each individual is in control and determines whether he will be successful or not with few external factors to prevent that success. Unfortunately, or fortunately, the classroom of the Christian educator is not a utopian dream for it represents the diversity of the world with all of its benefits and barriers. As Wolterstorff (2002) wrote, "But then to begin with the injustice on one's doorstep, or in the classroom. The voices and faces of victims may well be present right there in the classroom, in the person of some of the students" (p. 283).

The mission of the educator is to create a community of *shalom* that emphasizes positive relationships with God, oneself, others, society, and the world (Wolterstorff, 2002). A *shalom* community requires affirmation that each person is created in the image of God and should be treated with honor and respect (Lee, 2010). The concept of *shalom* presented by Wolterstorff and Lee resonates with the teaching and example of Jesus. Writing about the role of Jesus in bringing Jews and Gentile together, Paul described it as the destruction of the wall of hostility that had arisen between the two groups (Eph. 2:11-22).

Cooling (2010) envisioned Christian educators as transformational, cross-cultural agents who seek to contextualize Christ's message for modern situations. The experiences of Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 1-12) illustrated how Christians could love the culture while being counter-cultural at the same time. Daniel chose to transform the culture around him through his incarnational ministry that emphasized obedience to God. The integration of faith and learning has an incarnational aspect as the Christian educator bears witness as she lives as a member of the body of Christ in the academic world (Badley, 1994). The initial impetus of Badley's writing was the post-secondary academic world, but the implications of incarnational living are present throughout the educational environment.

Pudlas (2008) posited that some Christian educators might not want special education students in their classrooms. His argument was that people fear what they do not know and that through teaching his education students about disabilities and disabled students, the students would know and understand the need to have special education students in the classroom.

(Inclusion is) an ideology resulting in a pedagogy in which all students, regardless of any condition which presents barriers to their learning, are to be educated to the fullest extent possible in the regular classroom, and where the teacher of that classroom bears the primary responsibility for the learning of all students therein. (Pudlas, 2008, n.p.)

Christian educators can adapt Pudlas' definition of inclusion to include those students who are different, who have been marginalized, due to their culture, language, socio-economic status, gender, race, sexuality preference, lifestyle, immigration status, disability, or other uniqueness. Christ came to bring life to the marginalized (John 1:1–18; John 10:10). The image of Christian educators and churches “reaching out to those ignored or pushed away by society” was developed by Anderson (2003, p. 23) as he wrote about the connection between Christ's ministry and work of reconciliation by Christian educators. Christ's strongest words of rebuke were not for the marginalized, but for the mainstream, the religious leaders, for the leaders focused on the external, while neglecting the internal dispositions of love, justice, and mercy.

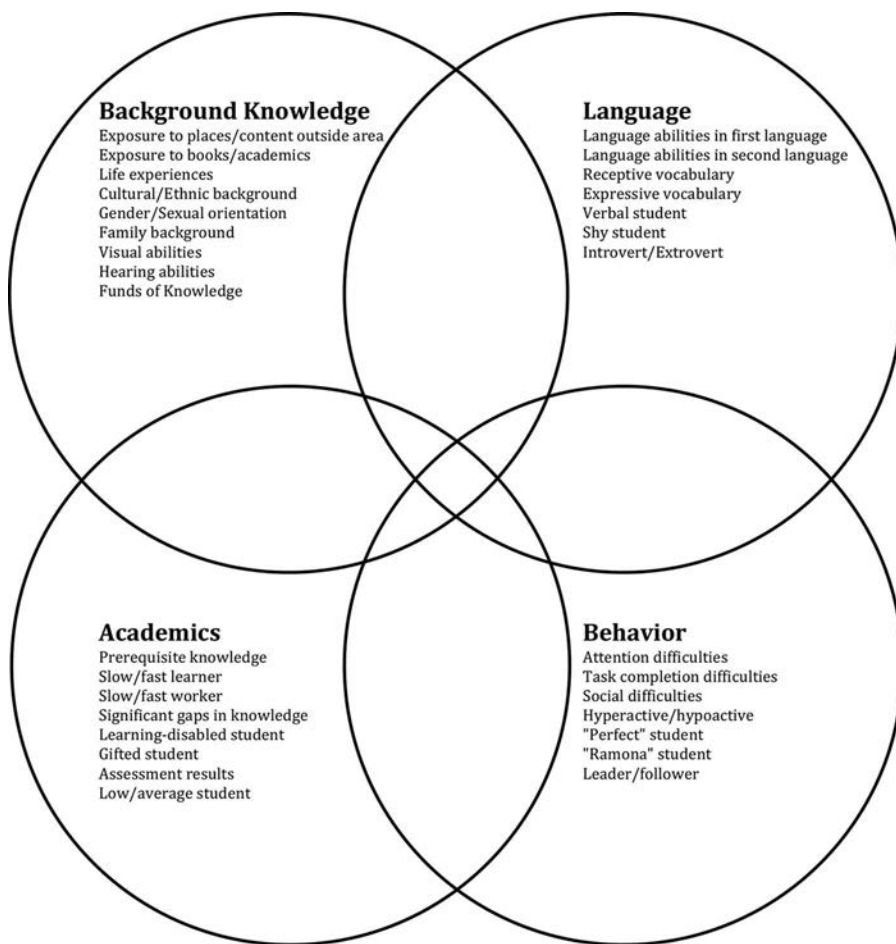
The people alienated from society and the religious were the people that Christ sought in His ministry as He brought the life of God to a lost world. Christian educators face a challenging dichotomy as they serve as Christ's ministers in the world: follow Christ and recognize injustice with the intent of breaking down the barriers that have marginalized many or perpetuate the labeling and stereotyping that occurs daily with the oppression that results. For the Christian educator, those decisions begin in the classroom as the educator encounters students with a multiplicity of labels, stereotypes, and life experiences. As Christ saw beyond the label to see the individual, so Christian educators must look beyond the label to see the individual student who has been made in the image of God.

### **Overcoming marginalization through the BLAB paradigm**

The paradigm *BLAB* emphasizes the holistic view of each student recognizing how each student has been shaped by the multiple interactions that she has had with school, teachers, the academic content, peers, society, and family. Rather than focusing on one label or dimension to formulate an all-inclusive image of the student, the paradigm is dynamic requiring the teacher to engage in a continual discovery process learning and building relationships with the student and his family. The acronym *BLAB* represents four domains that affect each student's progress in the classroom: *background knowledge*, *language*, *academic abilities*, and *behavior*. A visual representation of *BLAB* can be found in [Figure 1](#).

### **The role of background knowledge**

The majority of Jesus' interactions with people are reflected in the characteristics of this domain for it requires the Christian educator to look beyond the social or cultural label to see the value of each student and what that student brings to the classroom. Describing the knowledge that Hispanic students bring to the class because of their familial histories, occupations, and experiences, the initial work of González, Moll, and Amanti (2005)



**Figure 1.** The BLAB paradigm.

brought the term *funds of knowledge* into the classroom vernacular. Rather than seeing the students from a deficit perspective, the term emphasizes the strengths that have been developed through life experiences. Beegle (2007) noted that children from poverty will have different sets of coping skills from children of other socio-economic classes. Each group of children has positive skills that enable them to be successful in their respective environments. Christian educators should provide a quality-learning environment for their student that reframes teacher expectations from domination by the missing skills or knowledge of each student to recognition of the positive contributions that each child can make to the classroom (Kilburg, 2012).

Initial conversations concerning a child's background and family often focus on the socio-economic status of the child's family, the cultural or religious heritage, racial heritage, gender, or sexual orientation. Christian educators face the temptation of allowing those elements of a child's background to dominate their perspective of the child much like society, both secular and

religious, did in the time of Christ. These initial discussions can lead to a label, which is used to define the worth of the individual and her place in society, and in the classroom. The result of the label is marginalization with preconceived ideas determining the strengths and weaknesses that the child could possess. Injustice occurs as the child is no longer seen as an individual made in the image of God, but as someone who is defined by the label.

The transformational perspective, which was seen in Christ's ministry, is that each child's is valued not because of the label that she wears, but because of who she is. The status, orientation, and heritage characteristics in the preceding paragraph provide the child with important knowledge and experiences that can shape classroom discussions and learning. The characteristics are not seen from a deficit perspective due to their differentiation from the norm; rather that differentiation from the norm enables each child to contribute knowledge, experience, and learning to the classroom. It is through the diversity of the classroom that true learning occurs as students explore and examine the wealth of knowledge that is in the world.

Investigating the wealth of knowledge that each child brings to the classroom involves building relationships with each student, observing and interacting with her as she completes her tasks, plays, or interacts with her peers. From a teacher's perspective, this is *kidwatching*, a process initially developed by Goodman (1978) to describe how teachers should examine the literacy development of students. The Christian educator seeks to view each child through the eyes of Christ developing strong insights into who each child is. Insights are created as the educator considers a child's exposure to the world outside of the classroom or her immediate family, her exposure to books, life experiences, visual abilities, and hearing abilities as well as the cultural, familial, racial, and gender perspectives that she brings to the classroom. Each insight, or perspective, is not viewed in isolation for it is only through the integration and consideration of all perspectives is the child known. The isolation of, or labeling, singular perspectives will result in an unbalanced perspective (or stereotype) which was not seen as Christ interacted with the people.

## **The role of language**

Language, especially academic language, is essential for student success. Language concerns have often focused on the second language learner; however, language concerns can emerge for any student as the student is expected to utilize expressive vocabulary to share her thoughts in writing or verbally and receptive vocabulary to understand what she has read or heard. Several research studies (Heath, 1982; Hart & Risley, 1995; Lareau, 1989, 2003) have raised concerns concerning the academic vocabulary possessed by students from low socioeconomic homes. The studies have noted the influence of limited grammatical structures, adult-child interactions, and educational

experiences on language development. This phenomenon is not limited to children from poverty as it could occur across any social strata in relationship to the family and home experiences of the child.

An important indicator for students learning English as a second language will be the strength of their academic language in their first language. Cummins (1979, 2000) distinguished between the language that is used in conversations (basic interpersonal communication skills [BICS]) and the language that is required for academic success (cognitive academic language proficiency [CALP]). Proficiency in the first language is a direct influence upon proficiency in the second language.

Assumptions concerning the language abilities of each child can be costly as the Christian educator formulates her perspective based upon a report, label, or assessment. Academic language capabilities will vary across content areas as its development is linked to the quality of experiences, interactions, and associations that each child has had. The abilities to use receptive and expressive vocabulary in content areas will be impacted by the role that literacy (i.e., writing, speaking, listening, reading) has played in each content area. Limited experiences will result in limited vocabulary and content literacy.

In understanding the language needs of each child, consideration should be given to the child's language abilities in both her first and second languages, the conversations that the child has with her peers (BICS), the conversations that the child has concerning academic subjects (CALP), verbosity, or shyness. Learning a language (especially a second language) is a process that is developmental and continuous. A child's inability to express content in a second language does not mean that she does not understand the content in her first language. For the second language learner, the marginalization occurs when Christian educators formulate that assumption and respond from a deficit perspective rather than a strengths perspective.

## **The role of academics**

The stress on data-driven decision-making that is prevalent in education emphasizes student achievement (or academics) as represented in a single or multiple assessments. The data are aggregated and disaggregated within the context of schools and classes without consideration of the other three domains of BLAB. This is a failing of the current environment for it neglects the roles that background knowledge, language, and behavior play in the process of learning.

The BLAB domain *academics* examines each child's learning with the context of the other domains. Through the process of *kidwatching* (Goodman, 1978), the Christian educator observes, discusses, and interacts with the students as they progress through a task, problem, or assignment. Observations are made concerning slow workers and fast workers with those observations leading to

hypotheses concerning the motivation or aptitude of the student. A concern for the student who works through a set of tasks quickly is the conceptual understanding that the student possesses concerning the content. For the slow worker, hypotheses are made concerning the reasons for the slowness (i.e., distractibility, carefulness, perfectionism). Since the BLAB paradigm is dynamic, observations are made continually that include conversations with the student in both the academic area under evaluation and other academic areas.

The special education label *learning disabled* holds a particular challenge for the Christian educator as she considers the academic abilities of her students. The label itself builds on a deficit perspective—i.e., the student does not perform as well as her peers (or the average students) in a particular subject. The label is based upon a comparison. Adding to the challenge for the Christian educator is that minority groups, particularly second language learners and African Americans, have been over identified or misidentified as learning disabled based upon the quality of the assessments that were given (Gulberston, 2009; Kea, Campbell-Whatley, & Bratton, 2003). Although the assessments and identification of learning disabled were intended to provide assistance, the implementation of the process has led to the marginalization of these minority students. This handicapping condition is subject with specific reference to reading, writing, or mathematics. Identification in one content area does not limit a child's abilities in other academic areas. Neither does identification mean that a student cannot learn in the given subject; alternative modalities, strategies, and processes can lead to success for the learning disabled student (Tomlinson, 2004).

### **The role of behavior**

Compared to the other three domains of BLAB, behavior is probably the most noticed by the classroom teacher, especially negative behaviors. In reality, though, there is a continuum of behaviors from the student who seeks to be the perfect student to the student who means well, but makes mistakes due to misunderstandings to the student whose behaviors are described with terms such as ADHD, conduct disorder, and emotional disturbance. Recognizing the message behind the behavior demands that the Christian educator examine the environments and settings in which the behavior occurs to determine if the behavior results from attention seeking, avoidance of a task, stress, or other reasons. It is within this examination that consideration of the student's family background, societal status, or current situation would involve a conversation with the student and possibly others who are close to the student. The conversation should seek to determine if there are external factors that are influencing the student's behavior.

The labels ADHD, conduct disorder, and emotional disturbance are designed to provide the student with additional assistance in order for the



student to be successful in school. Christian educators should be aware of the power of the labels as each label brings preconceived ideas about how a specific student will act in the classroom. The focus on the preconceived ideas denies the rights of the student as an individual to be different, to be someone who is unique and made in the image of God. This would be similar to how the poor, sinners, women, and foreigners were treated in the time of Christ, but whom Christ treated as unique and special.

Within the continuum of behaviors in a classroom would be a set of behaviors that could be described as *social difficulties*. This term describes how the students interact with one another in the classroom; interactions that could be varied depending upon the task, group, or performance expectation. These difficulties could include the inability to work with other students or specific students, dominating conversations, having few friends, verbal outbursts, refusing to participate in cooperative groups, or choosing to always work alone. Students with social difficulties could be identified with a special education term. The misbehaviors could also reflect the current environment or living situation being experienced by the student or her preferences for working alone or with a group.

Through the BLAB paradigm, the focus is on the student, not the negative behavior or the label that has been attached to the student. Behaviors are seen as communicative instruments of the student as she interacts with the classroom environment, academic content, or the world outside the classroom. Additional assistance is possible through the special education label, but the Christian educator must reject the negative inclination that allows the label to define the student.

## Conclusion

Marginalization is the first step on the pathway to injustice. It often begins with a label—a label that could have been self-initiated by a group or individual before being overtaken in derision to define how an individual is different from the mainstream or the norm as defined by the oppressor. Labels have been used to define people throughout history to recognize gender, cultural heritage, racial identity, religion, nationality, or other differences.

Christ came to people who had been marginalized and labeled in first century Palestine—the poor, women, children, sinners, the sexually immoral, the oppressed, and the prisoner. He offered them life, a life based upon their relationship to Him and God. His message was not a new message from God for the prophet Amos (Amos 5) had confronted the nation of Israel concerning the injustice that was tolerated and practiced on a daily basis.

Christian educators, like Christ, are challenged by living in a society and worshipping in congregations that have been overtaken by labels with the intent being the marginalization of groups and individuals. The application

of the label, whether intentionally or unintentionally, denies the person has been made in the image of God and has value, both to God and to society. Labels such as illegal alien, sexually immoral, immigrant, African American, godless public school, poor, and second language learner have been used by Christians to deny the value of people who have been made in the image of God. Within the school setting, the Christian educator encounters additional labels such as learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, gay, lesbian, and ADHD to include with the seven labels in the previous sentence. Unfortunately, these are not the only labels used to marginalize people and groups.

The Christian educator fights injustice beginning in her own classroom and her own congregation. Within her classroom, she emulates Christ by seeing the whole child recognizing the worth of the child's culture, heritage, language, family, and life experiences. These perspectives are viewed positively, knowing that in some situations there will be differences between her personal norms and the norms of the child's family. Special education labels are not used to define the worth of a child, but instead are used as parts of a puzzle that the teacher completes to develop a successful learning environment for the child. Her eyes are open to the injustices that are occurring in the world and she seeks to lead other Christians to find solutions for the injustices.

The Christian educator should use the BLAB paradigm to develop a holistic perspective that emulates the way of Christ concerning each child. The Christian educator considers the background knowledge, language abilities, academic strengths and weaknesses, and behavior as she plans lessons that are designed for student success. Her interactions and relationships with each student expand her knowledge and understanding of each child beyond any labels that the child might wear. This is the beginning place of her fight against injustice as she shapes the minds of future leaders in society and in the church.

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