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## Inclusion and the Ethic of Care: Our Responsibility as Christian Special Educators

### Abstract

This essay explores one teacher's motivation to advocate for more inclusive practices for students with IEPs as a Christian response to applying the ethic of care in public school settings. Additionally, it charges teacher education programs at Christian universities to prepare teacher candidates to apply the ethic of care to their work with students with special needs in response to their faith. Special educators, who listen, show up, and advocate can make a profound difference for their students.

## **Inclusion and the Ethic of Care: Our Responsibility as Christian Special Educators**

Alicia Watkin, George Fox University

### **Abstract**

This essay explores one teacher's motivation to advocate for more inclusive practices for students with IEPs as a Christian response to applying the ethic of care in public school settings. Additionally, it charges teacher education programs at Christian universities to prepare teacher candidates to apply the ethic of care to their work with students with special needs in response to their faith. Special educators, who listen, show up, and advocate can make a profound difference for their students.

### **Introduction**

I remember being a student teacher, sitting with my teacher education advisor and making the decision to add a credential in special education to my program coursework. "It's only three additional classes and one more student teaching experience. You might as well get it now, while you're still in school," I remember her convincing me. I can say with complete confidence that was the best decision I made. My credential in special education is the reason I was hired in a district that had too many elementary teachers. It is the reason I received a pink slip only once and then promptly had it taken back when they checked my credentials to find out they included special education. Yes, special education has benefited me. However, beyond these somewhat surface advantages, my teaching experience in special education has allowed me to gain a depth of understanding in my personal calling as a Christian educator.

My teaching career began with being hired as a Resource Specialist in a large district. I was assigned to an elementary school then quickly reassigned to another school, due to shifting numbers in caseloads. I ended up at a middle school in which I was expected to "push in" to support the students on my caseload. Though a somewhat dated term, "push in" refers to supporting students in their

general education classes in order to provide more inclusive delivery of service for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). In a classroom, the special education teacher works with students to provide specific scaffolds in supporting students to access the curriculum. One example is helping students to work on an assignment in a small group rather than independently. They are in the classroom to focus specifically on those students who require additional supports. This was my first experience with inclusive education and one I am grateful for, as it has brought such depth of purpose to my career as an educator.

Entering those general education classrooms, with the eagerness of a first-year teacher, I quickly became frustrated with the barriers I encountered as I worked to support the students on my caseload. I was surprised to find that one teacher did not want me in his class at all. This was difficult to understand because I felt we were both there to help students learn and I was left wondering why a classroom teacher with an overflowing roster would not want another teacher to support student learning. As we worked together during the school year, he became more welcoming of my support. I learned that he had enormous pressure put upon him by the district to cover specific curriculum in a specific time frame. It became clear that the system was not structured to accommodate these well-meaning mandates of inclusion, which left teachers and any other stakeholders frustrated with unrealistic expectations.

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) is not a new practice. Federal policies have been established for more than forty years to set the parameters for supporting students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) included the

consideration of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This means a student with disabilities should receive educational support in the environment that is least exclusive from the general population of students (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). Additionally, with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which specified almost all students attain grade level proficiency, inclusion of students with disabilities has grown. This growth is in response to meeting not only student learning needs, but now meeting federal education achievement goals (Friend, 2008). Inclusion may look differently, depending on the student being supported. Some students may be fully included, meaning they have an IEP but are taught and supported in the general education classroom with no exclusion. Some students may be included a certain percentage of the school day because the IEP team has agreed they require some support outside of the general population, perhaps in a setting where curriculum can be modified more extensively. The degree of inclusion for students varies according to their learning needs and what the IEP team has agreed upon.

Though federal mandates have been in place for students with disabilities, there are disconnects in how these policies are applied in public school classroom structures. The prevailing approach in public education is knowledge-centered, with goals focused on meeting learning standards and grade level proficiency for all learners (Ellis, 2004). There is great pressure put upon classroom teachers to increase test scores and to have students with disabilities included in that expectation can seem overwhelming.

Despite this, the more experience I had in working with students and teachers, the more I understood the benefits of including students with disabilities. Eileen Winter (2006) explains that inclusion is more than the simple location of classes. It is about being able to fully participate in the “life of the school” (DfES, 2004, p. 12). I began to realize that placing students in separate classes, away from their peers, was not an accurate representation of life. Surely, some students need individualized instruction in a separate setting, so I am not claiming full inclusion for all, but inclusion as it is appropriate for each student to be a part of the school community.

When I consider the purpose of education, I sense deeply that school must be a place where teachers help students prepare for life through experience and relationship with others. I believe teachers cannot claim to have imparted a quality education to a student if the student has not been given experience in working with peers and being part of a community.

I remember being on the blacktop one morning before school as students were playing handball and I watched a group of students including a boy who had Down Syndrome. As I watched them, I never heard a student tease the boy or act as if they did not want him there. In fact, they cheered loudest when he got a point or made a good hit. For me, this illustrates Romans 12:5, when Paul writes, “...in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (New International Version). The students I observed that day were living in community. There was no pity for the boy with Down Syndrome, just full acceptance and evidence of support for each other.

### **The Greatest Commandment and the Ethic of Care**

Recently I moved out of the K-12 classroom into higher education at a Christian university. It has caused me to reflect deeply upon the role of Christian educators in public schools, specifically in special education.

Mark 12: 30-31 tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all we have and to love our neighbor as we would love ourselves. This scripture is an obvious call that if we profess to love God we will love our neighbor, the two “cannot be divorced” (Brower, 2012, p. 318). If I love God, I must love my neighbor. As special educators, neighbors include students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. Additionally, Noddings (2012) acknowledges that life is lived in relation with others and that this forms us as individuals. Building relationships with my students and their parents is how I love God and bring his kingdom to Earth. There is a great opportunity for reconciliation in the relationships teachers have with parents and students, especially those who have had negative experiences in special education. In my view, the IEP process is set up for

relationship, so I take full advantage to make that relationship meaningful.

In speaking of the ethic of care, Nel Noddings (2012) writes that it is “others- oriented” (p.777). There is a denial of self. It is apparent that the ethic of care aligns with God’s commandment. God-followers must care for others. Noddings (2012) explains that teachers have asked how they are to create a caring climate in the classroom when there are so many other pressing needs. Her response is that creating a climate of care is “underneath all we do as teachers” (p.777). I would add to Noddings’ idea that, as a Christian, my motivation to care for my students is in response to my love for God. God is what is *underneath* all the other duties of teaching.

It follows that if I am to truly care for my students with God’s love, then I must be working to bring them into community with others. Looking at the life of Jesus, he consistently loved the marginalized and those that did not quite *fit*, such as children (Matt. 19:14), people who are blind (John 9:1-6), Samaritans (John 4:1-26), and tax collectors (Luke 19:1-10). Within special education, the term “SPED” itself expresses exceptionality and labels students. This common label is simply an abbreviation of the term special education. The label serves practical purposes, certainly, but works against the very mandates of inclusion that are promoted through it. Jesus modeled an inclusive love and care for people, and as a Christ-follower, I am called to do the same.

### **Teacher Education for Special Educators**

In teacher education, I have found it easy to focus on pedagogy and promoting academic rigor, but what about the relationship of a teacher with his or her students? Nouwen (2003) writes that, “perhaps we have paid too much attention to the content of teaching without realizing the teaching relationship is the most important factor in the ministry of teaching” (p.11). In my credential coursework in special education, the role of the parent was repeatedly used in negative, combative examples to show the importance of communication and following laws, which certainly must be addressed in order to prepare teachers of special education. However, this taught me to view the parents of my students in a negative way. It took me longer than I

would like to admit to understand that the parent can be an incredible support and partner in teaching students with disabilities. I was frustrated that my teacher preparation did not teach me about the impact of good relationships with parents.

I argue that teacher education programs at Christian universities need to spend time addressing the importance of relationships with colleagues, beyond collaboration, which is still centered in curriculum. There is interdependence in our humanity and that is significant in the lives of educators. From the beginning, Anderson (2012) explains that God designed humanity to need others in his creation of Adam and Eve; he did not want Adam to be alone. Throughout scripture, followers of Jesus are referred to as the body of Christ, showing that “our dependence on one another is part of God’s design” (p.149). This is a difficult concept in education where the classroom can be quite lonely and even become personal “turf” for some. I use the term “turf” meaning ownership and a sense that some teachers believe the space within their walls belongs to them and any other adult entering is treated as an “outsider”. This mentality promotes the opposite of loving one’s neighbor and living in relationship. Knowing this, special educators have work to do in order to build bridges with colleagues and help gain trust so that the practice of inclusion of students with disabilities is welcomed into general classroom settings.

Special education requires a collaborative mentality, centrally expressed in the IEP. It is meant to be a team effort and decision. So often personal agendas get in the way of what is best for the student. But if teachers are working from a motivation of love, then they must be working to reconcile these issues. To reconcile these issues, teacher education programs should give more attention to preparing student teachers for building relationships.

### **Now What?**

As I consider my role helping to prepare future teachers and my deep belief that advocating for inclusive practices is a responsibility of Christian special educators, I have landed on three essential action steps that future special educators must put into practice: listen, show up, and advocate. I believe putting these actions into place helps build

relationships amongst everyone involved and leads to more positive experiences for all.

### **Listen**

In special education, there can be a myriad of voices to be heard in supporting a single student. Every student has an IEP team, which includes those adults supporting the student in working toward their specified goals. For some students, I have had IEP teams consist of fifteen people. While there are many voices grabbing at our attention as special educators, I believe the student, parents, and classroom teacher must take priority in these conversations. They are the *neighbors* who must be loved and cared for and listening is an outward expression of care. Listening sounds like a simple act, but it requires time and intentional effort. As most educators would agree, time is something teachers get very little of in meeting the demands of teaching. However, through listening, teachers can build trust and relationships are strengthened. Through strong relationships, teachers can work together in a more positive way to help students reach their goals.

One year, I worked with a parent who demanded more time than what I would have expected according to their child's IEP. While I acknowledge that boundaries must be set with parents, which I had to in this case, I did schedule time to meet with her because I felt she wanted me to hear her concerns. The more I listened, the more I learned of her story with her son and his learning disability. I learned that her previous special education experiences had been negative and that she felt the last school told her what was best for her son and never listened to her. I learned that she was desperately grasping to find a reason her son had a learning disability and wanted to discover the remedy, as I can understand most parents would. My experience with this parent, though frustrating at times, allowed me to build a relationship with her and she grew to trust me. This trust allowed us to have difficult conversations. While we did not always agree, there was shared respect and she knew I was listening. I could not meet all of her demands, and they were not all the best supports for her son, but listening is how I cared for her. The time spent building trust and communicating care are never wasted (Noddings, 2012).

### **Show up**

Additionally, special education teachers need to know that they must show up for their students. This is especially important in the public school system, which, historically, can tend to be more structured with the goal of having all students achieve the same learning goals with little consideration of the whole person (Freytag, 2008), though it should be noted that some public school districts are taking steps to change this. Special educators must do the hard work of showing up to support students, even in a misaligned system. The rigid structure of public school requires special educators to be attentive to the students with whom they work. For example, I worked with a student who had emotional and behavioral challenges and he had a difficult time self-regulating his feelings. One morning, as students packed up to get ready for the bell to ring, I noticed he was still in the corner of the class where I had a reading area set up. His head was down and covered in his hands, clearly showing something had upset him, even though there had been no outburst or incident reported to me. I watched him as the bell rang and students left. My own schedule required me to teach a computer elective class in another part of the building, but I knew this student needed time before moving on to his next class. I felt the pressure of time and quickly went across the hall and asked if the English learner support teacher could start my elective class while I helped the student. She agreed and I returned to find the boy crying. When he did not want to talk, I simply sat there on the floor with him. After several minutes, he wiped his face and lifted his head. I asked if there was anything he needed, he said no and that he was going to go to class.

I learned that day, that I cannot always be a problem-solver for my students, but I can sit with them in their struggles and frustrations. I can show up. Showing up for this student meant I had to make him a priority over an inflexible bell schedule. The rigid requirements of my schedule had to take second place in order to care for this student (Noddings, 2012) and show him the love that God has called me to in teaching. This is important for teacher candidates to be aware of, especially when they feel the pressure to prove themselves as new teachers.

Special educators also need to show up for their colleagues. To promote inclusive practices, relationships with general education teachers must be built if students are to be accepted into the classroom community. One powerful approach to inclusion is co-teaching. Co-teaching is two credentialed teachers, usually a general education teacher and a special educator, teaching a diverse group of learners in the same classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995). Respect is also a critical component in showing up for colleagues (Friend, 2008). Consideration of schedules and planning time are examples of opportunities to respect another teacher's time. While passing in the hallway unplanned conversations may occur, but intentionality should be given to scheduling specific times to meet about student needs. To be an effective teacher, Friend (2008) explains that educators must invest in their relationship with each other, and in turn, student results are more positive.

### **Advocate**

In responding to loving and caring for students, special education teachers must also be advocates. As a new teacher, in a district focused on inclusion, I expected everyone I worked with would be supportive of inclusive practices for the students I supported. When I experienced otherwise, I was unsure of what to do. In one instance, I had a classroom teacher who gave me the assigned packet of reading and questions and directed me to work with "my" students, referring to those students with IEPs, in the library. With another student, I was told by a lead special education teacher that I could not ask for assistive technology for a student to take home because the district would not allow it, even though I knew IDEA supported this. I had not been taught how to advocate for my students within the system of the school district. Though my students were my priority, I was an employee of the district, so I felt torn. The program for my special education credential taught me the law of special education, as well as best practices and how to teach diverse learners. However, it had not prepared me to stand up as a voice for my students and parents. Freytag (2008) explains that many teacher education programs lack preparation in this area. She states that teacher education programs must help special educators "develop their voice in a system that too often fails to listen from the bottom up" (p. 139). I

did not have a voice then, but over the years I have learned how to advocate for students. I have learned to pay attention to that feeling when I know the system is not supporting students the way it should. Preparing future teachers for this reality must be addressed or a great disservice is done in preparing teachers to serve and care for students.

### **Conclusion**

Loving God and loving neighbor is the greatest commandment. In educating future teachers at Christian universities, the motivation should be a different from that of secular programs. Teaching an ethic of care is integral to teacher education programs and in preparing genuine educators who consider the whole person. At a Christian university, however, the motivation to care is in love for God. In special education, teachers are specifically called to care for students who have been labeled and often marginalized, as well as their parents and caregivers. It cannot be forgotten that teacher peers are neighbors as well. As I have taught and supervised student teachers, I intentionally bring attention to students who have IEPs. I want to help teachers notice their neighbors and care for them as they teach.

When I think back to sitting with my advisor and our discussion for me to pursue special education, I wish there had been more meaningful discussion aside from it being an easy time to add the credential. Though my current role in higher education has not yet required me to act as an advisor, when I think of myself in that chair talking with a teacher candidate, I will answer differently.

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