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Consider the positive impact a peer-tutoring relationship could have on students, in which the mentor serves, testifies, and ministers daily to a student with disabilities.

The Doctrine of Inclusion: Reaching Students with Disabilities

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I remember the first time I walked into a class for students with special needs when I was a teacher at the Logan Seminary in Cache Valley, Utah. I was asked to assist Sister Wendy Parker with her second-hour class. She did not have all of her students with disabilities paired up with their traditional peer tutors, so I needed to help maintain order as she continued to organize the class. As I saw many students within that looked and sounded different than traditional students, I realized I had no idea what to do in this classroom! After a moment, I snuck in the back. In less than a minute, a student sitting in a desk a few feet in front of me turned, looked directly at me, and stood up. Standing about three inches taller than me, he was as solid as a Mack truck, and it seemed that I was in his lane. As he stepped closer, he tilted his head back slightly and stuck out his chin to size me up a bit, and I noticed his hand clenched in a fist. I was about ready to bolt for the door, or at least duck if he threw a punch, when he smiled a toothy grin, grunted, and held out his fist. Relief washed over me when I realized he wanted to give me a fist bump! I sheepishly stuck out my fist, and our knuckles touched. He laughed, reached up, put his arm on my shoulder, and, turning to a classmate, gave

a louder grunt to get his attention while pointing at me. The other student came over, and he too gave me a fist bump and asked me if I was new in the class. After that moment, I never felt uncomfortable in Sister Parker's class again. I had been included.

Wouldn't it be marvelous if that sense of being included were felt by every single student who entered our classes, disabled or not? In Utah alone there are close to 11,000 students with disabilities engaged in seminary programs.¹ If they were all located in the same relative area, it would take roughly 13 buildings with 78 full-time teachers teaching 390 full-sized classes to educate them all. The implication for institute programs and Church universities is also stark. Census information indicates that in the United States, 22 percent of adults (eighteen years and older) report having one or more sensory, mental, or physical disability, and an additional 46 percent experience a diagnosable mental disorder during their lifetime.² This means that at any given time in an institute or university class, there may be as many as 66 percent of the students who have a disability of one form or another. Students with disabilities are substantial threads in the classroom fabric of seminaries and institutes. As the number of students with disabilities who are included in traditional classrooms (mainstreaming) continues to hold steady at these high levels,³ religious educators will likewise continue to encounter a heightened demand for successful inclusion of all the students in their classes. A healthier comprehension of the perceptions and aptitudes of religious educators regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities can help us advance towards a better understanding of how to teach every student now and in the future.

Doctrinal Foundations

The Savior taught the doctrine of inclusion and set the perfect example of teaching and ministering to those with disabilities.⁴ When his disciples came wondering about the cause of disability, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" He taught, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."⁵ In Matthew 11:28–30, he invited, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Later the Apostle Paul eloquently taught the Corinthian Saints about inclusion:

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.⁶

More recently, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement."⁷ Elder Marion D. Hanks of the Seventy, commenting on the weight of this statement, taught, "God expects that His . . . children [with disabilities] will be given an opportunity for that enlargement, and that His disciples will accept the great responsibility to be concerned that they are."⁸ These teachings and statements highlight the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regarding individuals with disabilities and stand as pillars for the entire program of Church education. I have a witness of the truthfulness of these principles even when it comes to severe physical and mental disabilities, and I am not alone. Many have shared similar expressions with me and have felt, as I do, a desire to contribute in that effort to enlarge the minds and spirits of all God's children.

Where We Have Been

In order to see the path clearly ahead of us, it is important to understand where we have been. Seminaries and Institutes (S&I) began addressing the issue of providing for the needs of those with disabilities of secondary-age level and above in the 1970s as the United States government implemented the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 in public education.⁹ These efforts were modest at first and improved over time. The special education S&I program was conceived as a stand-alone entity that sought to address the specific issues regarding the gospel education of students with disabilities, in isolation from traditional S&I programs. Those disabilities being addressed ranged from chronic health problems, language and speech disorders, vision loss and blindness, and hearing loss and deafness, to mental illness, impaired mobility, intellectual disabilities, and autism. Interestingly, those

who administered and staffed this program were treated similarly to how students with disabilities were treated at the time: They were separate from and rarely included in the work of the traditional S&I program. They had a separate administration, scheduled and held their own meetings, and in fact did not even have offices in the same building as the rest of S&I. Consequently, many felt that all this contributed to a certain “step-sister quality”¹⁰ about the program and how it fit in the larger Church Educational System family of seminaries, institutes, primary and secondary schools, and universities. Although many areas of special education in S&I moved forward, this feeling remained for many years.

By the late 1970s, the special education seminaries were using a program developed by the Church headquarters for helping young American Indian students attain a greater educational opportunity called the Indian Placement Program (IPP). The IPP provided teachers with a foundational resource on which to base curriculum for the special education program of S&I, but no formal curriculum was established. The special education staff worked tirelessly and eventually received permission to write and illustrate the basic canon of scripture in a condensed format known as “scripture readers.” These scripture readers then became the foundation of the curriculum for the special education program. Subsequently, the scripture readers have permeated the entire Primary program of the Church. Today, millions of Latter-day Saint homes have these scripture readers and use them on a regular basis to help young children learn the basic stories, doctrines, and principles of the standard works. They have recently been digitized and made available through the LDS gospel library app and lds.org in both audio and video formats. Despite these tremendous contributions and advances, a formal, universally adaptable seminary curriculum that accommodates students with disabilities has not been created.

As public school efforts increased in the late 1980s and into the 1990s to mainstream students with disabilities,¹¹ the special education S&I program was slowly merged into the traditional S&I program of the Church. However, the attitude in S&I during that time seemed to be that since mainstreaming had begun, “now everyone was healed,”¹² and little more needed to be done to accommodate students with disabilities. There seemed to be a prevailing attitude that including students with disabilities was only a special education issue and not a general-education issue for all to care about, work on, and offer support and help. The step-sister feeling continued in the administration of

Church education. However, as inclusion began to take effect and students with special needs began attending S&I classes with their traditional peers, a drastic, positive shift in perception began to take place among teachers.¹³

In his April 1991 general conference address “The Moving of the Water,” then Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke of the exceptional efforts to include all students in a seminary program in South America. He said:

In Mendoza, Argentina, we attended a seminary graduation. In the class was a young man who had great difficulty climbing ordinary steps. As the class marched in, two strong young classmates gracefully lifted him up the steps. We watched during and after the proceedings, and it became apparent that the whole class was afflicted with a marvelous kind of blindness. They could not see that he was different. They saw a classmate, a friend. In them the works of God were being manifest. While there was no physical transformation in the boy or in his classmates, they were serving like angels, soothing a spirit locked in a deformed body awaiting that time when it would be everlastingly made perfect.¹⁴

This talk became a landmark in Church education in regard to the integration of students with disabilities into traditional classrooms. Additional principles that Elder Packer taught, such as, “[t]he nearer the normal patterns of conduct and discipline apply to the [disabled], the happier they will be,” began to sink in and have a deep impact on both the teachers and the administration of S&I. As a result, over time, many barriers were removed, and S&I made significant progress toward inclusion.¹⁵

Since that time, efforts have continued to increase to accommodate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible. More recently, John Weaver was asked to join the central office of S&I as a manager over the special-needs program. This became a significant step towards removing the step-sister quality of the program. Among his many projects have been considerable efforts with the curriculum department to incorporate principles of universal design and standardized formatting into S&I curriculum. This has made teacher adaptation for students with disabilities easier because the curriculum is now online in a standardized format that is transferrable to other disability-specific formats. However, teacher adaptation remains a difficult task; it requires significant time and effort for individual teachers to make the necessary adaptations each student needs without the help of a full universal curriculum.

With the continued assistance of John Weaver, section four of the *Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Policy Manual* was updated and

implemented. It outlined, among other things, that three different adapted programs and classes be made available for both seminary and institute programs: the inclusive class (predominately traditional students, some students with disabilities, traditional teacher); the blended class (half traditional students, half students with disabilities, designated teacher with special education experience); and the cluster class (no traditional students, all students with disabilities, designated teacher with special education experience). Each has specific purposes tailored to the needs of the disabled population enrolled. In some areas with large populations of students with disabilities attending release-time programs, an adapted-programs advisor oversees and helps administer these programs. Section four of the policy manual also details important terminology and information concerning each class offered and the specific direction for seminary program administrators to “contact local school administrators and become acquainted with the educational approach for populations with disabilities.”¹⁶ This policy was intended to open the lines of communication between each school’s special education program and the release-time seminaries and, as a result, increase cooperation and collaboration. In some instances, public school special education teachers have even begun to get permission to bring non-LDS special-needs students into seminary so that they can benefit from the one-on-one peer contact they get in the blended classes. Similar results have occurred in institute special-needs classes. Additionally, a few public schools have begun to share or make available support staff such as nurses, specialists, and therapists, as well as provide access to adaptive technology devices like voice buttons, tablets, and other computer-aided devices. Such resources are only available on a limited basis to release-time seminaries without these open lines of communication.

Today, release-time seminary programs are similar to public schools programs in many ways. However, important differences remain between public school efforts to educate students with disabilities and the efforts of release-time seminaries. Seminaries do not require testing, labeling, or formal individualized education plans (IEPs), and as a result, students with disabilities are perceived rather normally by both teachers and classmates. Integration is perceived as easier when traditional students and teachers feel less formality in their association among students with disabilities. However, aside from standard updates to building codes, resources for teachers to appropriately accommodate students with disabilities are generally absent from seminary classrooms unless provided by the local school. Furthermore, teachers and

administrators are traditionally not required to participate in special education training or professional development. Occasionally, teachers come into release-time seminary programs with backgrounds in special education or are provided opportunities such as Mandt training, but because of the general lack of background in special education, it is difficult to evaluate and assess teachers, classrooms, expectations, and discipline with regard to including students with disabilities. Those same findings correspond with the institute and university programs of the Church. Progress overall has been incremental and hints that there is still more to come in the future of special needs and adaptive programs in Church education.



Our Current Situation

Attitudes and Perceived Skills of Including Students with Disabilities

Regarding inclusion, it is worth considering the impact a teacher’s attitude and skill has on an entire class. The objective of all religious educators is to help students understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves, their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven. There is no stipulation that those expectations be altered for students with disabilities. Yet if religious educators are not properly prepared, they can miss those aims

for many of their students with disabilities. As mainstreaming continues to increase and more and more students with special needs are included in traditional classes across the board, there should be careful monitoring of the attitudes and skills religious educators possess that encourage inclusion. Failure to appropriately understand the current attitudes and perceptions of seminary, institute, and university teachers as well as local program administrators can have detrimental effects.¹⁷

If a religious educator is positive in his or her approach to inclusive practices, it will have a directly proportional impact on his or her skill to be able to do so.¹⁸ It follows that a positive attitude regarding including students with disabilities leads teachers to identify and implement proven strategies that bless all students.¹⁹ Purposeful seating arrangements and shortened assignments are helpful and common adaptations of inclusion, but what about adapting materials and curriculum, managing behavioral problems, and giving individual assistance to students with intellectual disabilities? Think of the impact a religious educator could have when trained to be an active observer and recognize when individual students need additional help. That educator would be capable of responding with appropriate adaptations. Consider how much more comfortable a teacher would be, and how conducive an environment they could help create for the Holy Ghost, when they have effectively collaborated with a special education teacher, area adaptive program advisor, or even a parent or guardian. Or ponder for a moment the impact a properly organized peer-tutoring relationship could have on students, in which the mentor serves, testifies, and ministers daily to a student with disabilities. Inclusive classrooms need teachers who feel confident and capable of handling these types of tasks and more.

In 2009, with the permission of S&I, I surveyed over 250 religious educators to discover their attitudes and perceived skills regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities. The results were enlightening and encouraging. Many interesting characteristics, attitudes, perceptions, and relationships were revealed.

Understanding the Nature of Teaching Students with Disabilities and the Resources Available

The ability to teach and reach all the students in our classroom seems to be tied directly to the capacity to understand and connect with them. Discovering what will best meet their needs in the classroom is essential. I

found that on average, religious educators had participated in less than half of one undergraduate or graduate course in special education and had participated in between one and two professional development programs regarding students with disabilities. To put that into perspective, over the course of a career of roughly thirty-five years, the average teacher has once or perhaps twice been engaged, outside of lesson preparation or an occasional local inservice, in developing an ability to reach this significant portion of their students. And if that course was taken five or ten years ago, the landscape, approaches, and resources available for helping special needs students have changed significantly.

At times, religious educators are faced with situations regarding students with disabilities that shock them and disrupt the course of their teaching, while others notice small disruptions over time that build and occasionally escalate. Both types of experiences tend to leave them frustrated and, in many instances, feeling helpless. To illustrate, during the question-and-answer portion of a research forum for S&I, a teacher stepped to the microphone and related a very difficult experience he had recently experienced in the classroom regarding a student with disabilities. His situation had been uncomfortable to say the least, but the last thing he said was, “What should I have done?” That question is often on the minds of religious educators, but when it comes to reaching, helping, and responding to students with special needs, it is particularly poignant that, generally speaking, religious educators do not know where to turn during these situations, or before or after they arise. Nearly 75 percent of teachers indicate that they had, at one point or another, consulted with a special education teacher, and almost 40 percent had worked with an interpreter for American Sign Language, but beyond that, the majority of teachers had not made significant contact with any other related services or resources for students with disabilities, such as nurses, behavioral specialists, or adaptive program advisors. A significant portion (one half) of religious educators also indicated that they were not aware of S&I’s official policies regarding adapted classes and programs for students with disabilities. Most felt that they could benefit from additional support, training, or professional development.

Willingness to Include Students with Special Needs

Most religious educators (84 percent) indicated that they understand the principle of inclusion; however, only one half were in favor of including

students with disabilities in their traditional classrooms. Furthermore, as the level of special needs increases from mild to moderate to severe, that favorability decreases even more. It seems that this sentiment stems from the fact that only one-third of teachers feel they possess the skills necessary to successfully include students with disabilities. That is not surprising given that so few teachers have participated in formal education and training regarding inclusion. When given a set of specific individual special needs and asked to rate their willingness to include students with that particular disability (autism, emotional or behavioral disorders, intellectual disabilities, etc.) their responses were somewhat higher, ranging from 60- to over 90-percent willingness. But when asked to indicate their confidence level in doing so, only an average of 39 percent felt that they were competent enough to include them. All of this was still true even though a strong majority of educators indicated that they had had mostly positive experiences teaching and including students with special needs. These findings indicate that there is a general will but a lack of skill concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Relationships and Conclusions

The research also lent itself to the discovery of some interesting correlations between certain categories of religious educators and the attitudes and perceptions they held. For instance, younger teachers tended to be less aware of the policies regarding students with disabilities; and those with higher levels of education were more likely to feel that they had the skills necessary to successfully include all the students in their classroom. When it came to teachers with more years of teaching experience, they felt more secure in their ability to manage behavioral problems related to students with disabilities but did not feel comfortable in their abilities to properly adapt materials and curriculum. Teachers with more years of experience incorporating students with disabilities were curiously less willing to consult with special education teachers or parents and generally felt less secure in their ability to work with parents of students with disabilities. It is difficult to know in this situation which one is pulling and which one is pushing. Are these teachers less willing to consult because they lack the confidence to interact with other leaders, or do they lack the confidence because they are less willing to do it? I also found that the few teachers who had completed university special education courses perceived they had the skills necessary to successfully include students with disabilities, were more secure in their ability to manage behavioral problems,

and felt strongly that consultations with special education teachers or parents were beneficial. Ultimately, religious educators indicated that if they had participated in training related to teaching students with disabilities, they liked what they learned, were more likely to feel they had acquired adequate skill in the specific area trained on, and were more likely to attend additional special education trainings. There is hope that an increase in professional training could lead to a general increase of inclusionary skill among religious educators.

The information provided by these religious educators opened a candid doorway into the classrooms and offices of religious education that had previously been shut. Their responses are invaluable and teach us many lessons. For most religious educators, including students with special needs into their traditional classroom is not their first choice. Many indicate that they feel students with special needs are better served specifically in blended-classroom settings. That might be the ideal solution if they work in a building or program that offers that type of environment, but the reality is that blended classes are not always available.

Another lesson is that education regarding inclusion is limited among religious educators. This has contributed to a lack of confidence in the skills necessary to include students with disabilities successfully. Teachers need to participate in additional training regarding inclusion of students with disabilities in order to gain confidence and the right skillset. Those who have already participated in professional training regarding inclusion report increased ability to successfully reach and include all their students.

The next lesson is that teachers recognize how peer-tutor relationships are valuable to all involved. They want to get traditional students involved in inclusion efforts—this is the most reported adaptation teachers try to implement. But with so few teachers reporting any additional education or professional training, it is questionable whether they are aware of how to properly organize and administer peer tutors and other resources.

The last lesson is the principle of will without skill. Religious educators are willing to try to include students with all types of disabilities, even multiple disabilities, in their traditional classrooms, but they lack the skills necessary to properly and successfully do it. The concern arises about whether they can truly achieve inclusion. Are students with disabilities provided a quality religious education and experience that meets the objectives we seek?

Progress Toward a Better Understanding of Teaching All Students

The path that lies ahead for religious education and inclusion of students with disabilities will have peaks and valleys. As we strive to increase the minds and capacities of all our students and infuse their lives with the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the blessings of the temple, and better preparation for exaltation, I suggest several recommendations for increasing the skill of religious educators to assist in this endeavor. Inservice programs and professional trainings should be developed and made available for religious educators. These programs should address the needs of specific disabilities and how to implement effective inclusion strategies. Highest on that priority list should be instruction and development of effective peer tutoring strategies, followed by special education techniques, behavioral management, and how to collaborate on issues related to disabilities. Curriculum projects in the future should enhance the ability of teachers to accommodate students with disabilities and incorporate further elements of universal design. Local administrators and teachers should be provided with education regarding the policies of their respective organization regarding adapted classes and programs so that needed resources may be utilized as they were intended.

Religious educators are doing the best they can to reach each of their students with all the knowledge, skills, and inspiration that they possess. They are hungry for and in need of assistance in understanding the nature of teaching those with disabilities and the resources available to them. In order to fulfill the desire that all of Heavenly Father's children be included, we must continue to tread on a path that leads toward a better understanding of teaching all the students who come into our classes. **RE**

Notes

1. Data collected by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services' Office of Special Education Programs indicated in 2008 that there were over 56,000 school-aged children involved in special education programs across the state of Utah. Almost 18,000 (31 percent) of those students with disabilities were secondary-education students. S&I reported in 2009 that 84,433 secondary-aged students were enrolled in Utah seminaries (Annual Report), with close to 11,000 students with disabilities among them.

2. "National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Clinician's Research Digest* 23, no. 11 (November 2005), <https://www.lds.org/topics/disability/faq/statistics?lang=eng>.

3. "Children and Youth with Disabilities," National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp.

4. Matthew 9:35.
5. John 9:2-3.
6. 1 Corinthians 12:18-26.
7. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 210.
8. Marion D. Hanks, "More Joy and Rejoicing," *Ensign*, November 1976, 31.
9. Public Law 94-142, which grew into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, PL 101-476, 1990), and was reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, PL 108-446).
10. By Study and Also by Faith—One Hundred Years of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (Intellectual Reserve, 2015), 535.
11. "Mainstreaming's Rise," *Wall Street Journal Online*, <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-ERICchrtbko704-24.html?printVersion=true>.
12. Sally Hanna, personal communication, 22 September 2008.
13. Sally Hanna, personal communication, 22 September 2008.
14. Boyd K. Packer, "The Moving of the Water," *Ensign*, May 1991, 7-10.
15. Hanna, personal communication, 22 September 2008.
16. *Seminaries and Institutes of Religion Policy Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014), Introduction.
17. E. Avramidis and B. Norwich (2002), "Teachers' Attitudes Towards Integration/Inclusion: A Review of the Literature," *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 77, no. 2 (2002): 129-47, and W. Carter and C. Hughes, "Including High School Students with Severe Disabilities in General Education Classes: Perspectives of General and Special Educators, Paraprofessionals, and Administrators," *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 31, no. 2 (2006): 174-85.
18. C. Titone, "The Philosophy of Inclusion: Roadblocks and Remedies for the Teacher and the Teacher Educator," *Journal of Educational Thought* 39 (2005): 7-32.
19. W. Bender, C. Vail, and K. Scott, "Teachers' Attitudes Toward Increased Mainstreaming: Implementing Effective Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 28, no. 2 (1995): 87. S. Gemmell-Crosby and J. R. Hanzlik, "Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Including Children with Disabilities," *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities* 29 (1994): 279-90.