

A photograph of a person wearing a white, textured sweater, kneeling on a sandy surface. Their hands are resting on their knees, and one hand is touching the sand. The scene is framed by a dark, textured border.

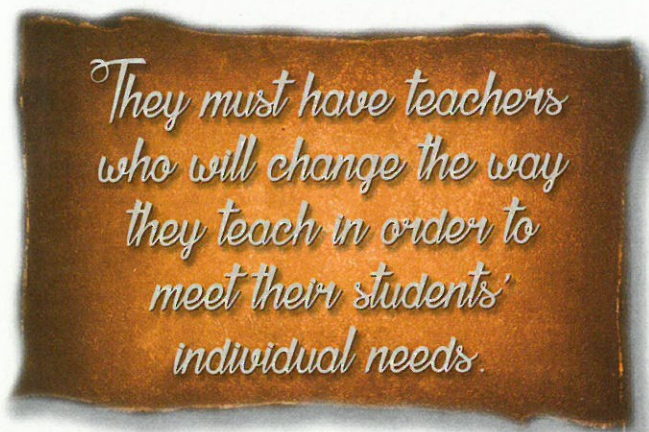
Invisible Disabilities

By Lisa Joyner

Children come in all shapes and sizes, colors and shades, abilities and disabilities. Some of their differences are visible at first glance, but their most important differences are under the surface, hidden from view. Down's syndrome, physical disabilities, vision impairments, hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, and many intellectual disabilities are obvious to observers. However, even more disabilities are brain-based only and not easily perceived through physical features or casual social interactions. ADHD, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, and mild intellectual disabilities can be just as disabling to a child's ability to learn as the visible disabilities are.

An Imperfect Perception

Just days before I was diagnosed with cancer, I looked healthy and strong. No one, including myself and even my doctors, suspected that anything was wrong under the surface. Strangers expected me to open doors for myself. No one offered to carry heavy packages for me, and my fellow teachers



counted on me to manage my own responsibilities. But that picture of health was deceiving. Cancer was lurking under the surface and would have killed me if I had not received the proper diagnosis and undergone the rigorous treatment prescribed by my doctors.

A few weeks after my doctors detected the second cancer, I was pale and weak, I had no hair or eyelashes, and my fingernails were falling off from the side effects of the powerful chemo drugs. Although I looked and felt pitiful, I was at least identified as having a need and was getting the appropriate care to restore my health. I wore wigs and hats to mask the side effects of chemotherapy, but my struggle was visually obvious. There was no hiding the fact that I was sick. Family, friends, and neighbors went out of their way to treat me with kindness. They brought me meals, cleaned my house, decorated my home for Christmas, and sent flowers and cards.

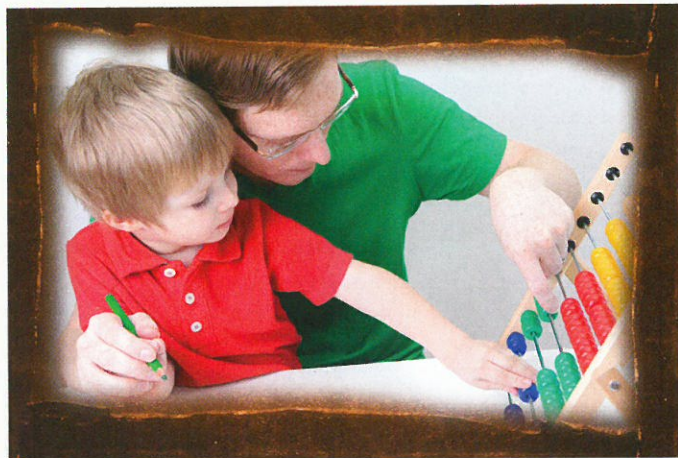
Children who have obvious disabilities, whether cognitive or physical, are regarded with compassion: strangers are patient, and teachers make all the necessary accommodations without complaint or argument. On the other hand, children whose disabilities lie under the surface, hidden from view, are often treated as though they have no disability at all, and therefore have no excuse for not meeting the social norms of behavior or academic performance.

An Unfair Assumption

ADHD and learning disabilities do not appear in the physical features of the children who are affected. Unfortunately for them, these children are viewed as lazy, unmotivated, and troubled when they do not perform at the same level as their non-disabled peers. However, the opposite is usually true. Most of these children spend many more hours on their homework than the average student because that's what is required for them to get a passing grade. A math assignment that the teacher intends to take 20 minutes or less to complete at home may take these students one to two hours and many tears of frustration.

Children who appear lazy and unmotivated may be just that—lazy and unmotivated. However, there could be another explanation (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1994). After years of failing, some children decide that trying is just not worth it anymore and repeatedly fail despite their efforts and their parents' efforts. They get tired—tired of working so hard without any sense of accomplishment, tired of being a "disappointment" to their parents and their teachers, and tired of disappointing themselves. These kids eventually give up when they conclude that school is a worthless use of their time and energy.

Children who have autism or Down's syndrome rarely have their diagnoses questioned by family, friends, or teachers. However, children with ADHD and their parents frequently hear the assertions of the armchair professionals who express their opinions about the "over diagnosis of ADHD" or the "fact" that ADHD does not exist at all. They hear the implications that their children simply have a behavior problem



that is the result of bad parenting. These unsolicited judgments produce feelings of guilt, confusion, and hopelessness for both the child and his family (Samakow, 2012).

It is inappropriate to verbalize such assumptions, especially when that child has been officially diagnosed by a medical professional. It is hurtful and unhelpful to parents to question their difficult decisions regarding the treatment of ADHD with or without medication. Parents feel the weight of their responsibility to make this decision and to get it right, and they are usually greatly conflicted over their choice. They understand that the implications of their choice will impact

their child's life—potentially for a lifetime. When I went public with my decision to receive chemotherapy as a treatment for my cancer, I was inundated with the opinions of well-meaning people who shared their beliefs against chemotherapy. I respected their thoughts, but what I really needed was support and understanding. This was a personal decision, and I was accountable only to my family and to God for my choices. Likewise, parents are accountable only to God who has put these children in their care. When someone is forced to make a difficult decision regarding medication, especially for a child, he needs support, not judgment. It is important that we as teachers play a role of love and support for the families who are struggling to help their disabled child.

The Example of the Master Teacher

Jesus Christ was the Master Teacher of the New Testament. His example as a teacher should be a guide for us. He took time to listen and understand His disciples' individual learning styles. He held His disciples accountable, but He also extended patience and mercy when appropriate. Our students who have disabilities do not need a pass for bad behavior (Welch, 1999). They may in fact need more discipline and direct instruction in acceptable behavior, but discipline should be meted out with patience and understanding with the goal of conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ (Easom & Irwin, 2007).

Jesus did not rely on one style of teaching. He did not hand His followers a textbook, give them an assignment to outline the chapter, and walk away. Jesus employed a variety of teaching strategies to fit the individual needs of His students. When the Pharisees brought a woman for Him to condemn, He used sand and a stick as a visual aid. The Sermon on the Mount is an example of an auditory lecture (without PowerPoint!). He taught numerous object lessons using bread, mustard seeds, olive branches, yeast, salt, and money. Even His parables demonstrate His use of illustrations to help His disciples understand a new concept by relating it to a concept that they already understood. All of these are excellent examples of teaching strategies that we can use to teach our students and reach them with lessons that target all of their various learning styles.

Children with invisible disabilities need teachers who are willing to look below the surface, take the time to try to understand their challenges, and help them find solutions. They must have teachers who will change the way they teach in order to meet their students' individual needs. They need teachers who will become experts on their students' disabilities and who will research creative teaching methods when the traditional ones cease to be effective.

Jesus . . . Unfair?

If He were a teacher today, Jesus might be accused of not being fair. He told a parable in Luke 15 about a shepherd who lost one little sheep out of his herd of one hundred. The shepherd left the ninety-nine remaining sheep safely tucked

away in the fold while he went out into the wilderness to rescue the one sheep who had wandered away from the rest. This suggests that Jesus believes that it is not only acceptable, but expected that we would give a greater portion of our time and resources to the children who need us more than the rest. We as teachers should follow His example, and be less concerned with being *fair*, and be more focused on seeking those children whose disabilities may not be obvious to the rest ("A Special Kind of Love: Marlene Reed," n.d.).

*The righteous considereth
the cause of the poor: but
the wicked regardeth not
to know it.*

Psalms 29:7

*Blessed is he that
considereth the poor:
the Lord will deliver him
in time of trouble.*

Psalms 41:1

The word *poor* is used many times in the Bible, referring not only to the economically poor, but also to the *weak* or the *sick* (Easom & Irwin, 2007). It is not unreasonable to assume that *poor* could refer to the mentally and physically weak, especially considering that Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry seeking out and giving priority to the poor, halt, blind, and maimed (Sutton, 1993). Even His disciples were an odd mix of men with dubious qualifications and a short list of skills; but He saw their potential, and He poured Himself into mentoring them (MacArthur, 2002).

I know a young man who is serving the Lord faithfully today in his local church. He also spent several years teaching in a Christian school. I remember when he was a middle school boy whose single mother attempted to enroll him in a Christian school to get him away from the influences of the public school. He had ADHD and learning disabilities; he was turned away and told that the school didn't "have the resources to help him." This young man went on to serve the Lord anyway, and that Christian school missed out on the blessing and the reward of having a part of that.



We need to acknowledge that some of our students need more from us than others. And we should demonstrate the same patience, love, and dedication to meeting their individual needs that Jesus would if He were their teacher. The rewards may be more than we could begin to calculate—for the children, their families, and even for ourselves.

Lisa Joyner earned a master's degree in Cross-Categorical Special Education from Regent University. In 2006, she and her husband, Oscar, moved from Virginia to Raleigh, North Carolina, where she developed the Specialized Learning Center as a part of the ministry of Friendship Christian School. This program currently serves approximately 60 students who have a variety of diagnosed

disabilities. Lisa believes that it is her ministry to assist other Christian schools developing similar programs to meet the needs of families who have children with special needs. Free resources are available on her website www.lisateaches.com, and she can be reached at lisateaches66@gmail.com.

Resources

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