

NEW CHURCH EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL CHALLENGES

BY KIRSTEN R. ROGERS

Introduction

Twenty-eight years ago, a little girl from another town visited my kindergarten and changed forever my previously stereotyped ideas of appropriate education for children with special challenges. She was a little person. Yet despite her diminutive stature and her need to use a walker, she came with big ideas about learning and playing along with everyone else in our class of abnormal children. And so she did, enriching our days and broadening our horizons at the same time.

Five years passed, and in the spring of 1985, a mother called me. She said that her daughter had been born with spina bifida and needed either braces and crutches or a wheelchair for mobility. Then she asked a question that simply stunned me. Would her daughter be allowed to come to our school? The first thought that rushed to mind was that New Church parents should never have to ask whether their children might attend New Church schools.

That mother's effervescent, red-haired daughter brought her sunshine to our kinder-garten that fall, learning and playing along with everyone else. In the meantime, her mother's question led me to begin considering what attitudes and practices prevalent in the educational world at that time, despite the good intentions of their proponents, might actually be inhibiting children with challenges. Gradually I realized that two aspects in particular disturbed me.

The first of these involved a subliminal yet real mentality that caused many educators, school board members and even parents to react as though students were the "products" of school

systems. Fostered in various ways by the fierce competition of the business world and by federal, state, and local government regulations, this mentality even now often interferes with the essential purposes of education. It subtly shifts the focus of attention away from the students and their individual needs. Many teacher hours are spent instead on paperwork, justification reports, and the preparation for and evaluation of test results. But schools do not exist to produce a product. They exist to provide a service to serve human society by assisting all its children in the process of learning.

The second area of concern involved special education. Lest my point of view be misunderstood, I must begin by stating that children today are fortunate to have special education available in their local schools. Only fifty years ago, most mentally challenged and many physically challenged children were simply institutionalized. For them, life in this world offered little. That is not the case today. Still, I began to question the structure inherent in many special education programs a structure that almost always segregated those with moderate to serious challenges into separate classrooms, often even into separate schools. In such situations, how could these young people learn age-appropriate behavior? How could they learn to interact with others their age who did not have special challenges? How, in other words, could they learn to live, work, and play in the real world.¹

Understandably, the mentally and physically impaired children of New Church parents were the focus of my particular concern. Should not all our children be welcomed into our schools? Should not all New Church teachers—elementary school, high school and college—be willing to develop programs that would help those with challenges grow up with their friends, in their communities, and with the Lord and His church at the center of their lives?

Happily, our teachers and administrators have really worked during the last twenty years to improve New Church education for our young people with special needs. I believe that the challenges now are for teachers and administrators to maintain a serious focus on this area, and for teachers and professors at all levels to keep building their knowledge and skills, so they can design courses that incorporate multiple teaching strategies and adaptations for those with special needs whenever necessary.

Doctrine

As a result of my concerns and questions back in 1988, I decided to research the *Heavenly Doctrines* and the history of educational efforts in the New Church. What do the Writings have to say about the human mind and children that may apply to New Church education for those with mental and physical challenges? How have various bodies of the Church viewed their educational responsibilities? What have been the essential purposes of New Church education during the past 170 years?

The *Heavenly Doctrines* tell us that everything a person does contains his whole mental being his essential humanity. A person's mind consists of his love's affection and the thoughts he forms from that affection. The affection and thoughts together are what he is.² The doctrines also tell us that the human mind can be enriched and perfected to eternity, especially when the person is led by the Lord,³ because, unlike an animal, a person has a spiritual mind that exists simultaneously in both the natural and spiritual worlds⁴. And the spiritual mind lives on after the death of the body.

This description applies just as fully to mentally and physically challenged people as it does to the rest of us. As one passage in the Arcana says of certain newcomers to heaven: Some who have been of childlike mind and simple faith then appear to themselves in white and shining garments, some with crowns. Some are taken around to various angelic societies and

are everywhere charitably received as comrades.⁵

Let us illustrate the communication of intelligence and wisdom from one to another in heaven. Swedenborg records in *Heaven and Hell* the following experience: Certain simple spirits were once taken up into heaven, and on arriving there, they too came into angelic wisdom, so that they then understood things they were never able to comprehend before, and uttered things they were unable to express in their former state.⁶

A similar experience appears in *True Christian Religion*, emphasizing the intuitive power to be gained through worship of the Lord: I saw a spirit who in the company of others appeared simple, because he had acknowledged the Lord alone as the God of heaven and earth, and had established his faith by means of a few truths taken from the Word. He was carried up into heaven to join the wiser angels, and I was told that there he was as wise as they were. In fact, he uttered numerous truths entirely as if of himself, of which he had previously been totally ignorant.⁷

It is clear from these reports that a person's spiritual intelligence may far exceed his natural intelligence. We cannot determine spiritual capacities on the basis of natural aptitude.

In considering a child's development, we learn from the doctrines that every human being is born with a spiritual mind, but it is not open or actively functioning at birth.⁸ It is opened gradually during his life, as he refuses to participate in evil because it is contrary to the Lord's commandments in His Word.⁹ In addition, and of particular importance to New Church educators, we note that the formation of this spiritual mind is based on everything from the Word that exists in the memory.¹⁰ And a person captures things in his memory because of the delight he feels in knowing them.¹¹

The first things a child learns, of course, involve only sensory experiences. He tastes his food, holds his bunny, and watches his mother's face. After a while, he begins to crawl, explores his

world, and tries to talk. He has no conscious awareness of the Lord during infancy. But as the *Arcana* tells us, [Children] learn many things at first, even useless ones, such as games and the like, not that these things may make them wise, but that the way may be prepared for their acquiring useful things that are matters of wisdom...¹²

Throughout childhood, in fact, sensory experience is the only means by which knowledge can enter a person's mind, because the higher levels of his mind are not yet open.¹³ But as the *Heavenly Doctrines* clearly state, some of the sensory truths a child learns become the basis for his later rationality and regeneration: the humanity of the Lord; the life of heaven; the literal sense of the Old and New Testaments; the wonder and usefulness of objects in the Lord's universe. When a child learns about these matters of religion and life, a vital link with heaven is formed; and as the *Arcana* says, the angels then think about Divine things and communicate their affections to the child. This in turn gives him delight and prepares his mind to receive genuine truth and goodness.¹⁴

One of the fundamental responsibilities of New Church teachers, then, is to structure and present sensory knowledge from the Word in such a way that it fosters this vital heavenly communication. To do this, they must also make it the goal in all subject areas. Children of the New Church who have mental and/or physical disabilities can learn from teachers in other schools many useful and interest-ing things, but little or nothing about the Lord. They can certainly learn about Him from their parents, of course, but much of a child's integrated instruction takes place in school. It is of great value for him to see the Lord in everything he learns. As one *Arcana* passage says quite plainly, The innocence of childhood is of no use unless by means of concepts it becomes the innocence of wisdom.¹⁵

And in another equally straightforward passage: Little children

cannot know a particle of truth until they have been provided with concepts. On the other hand, ...the better and more perfectly equipped with concepts they are, the better and more perfectly can intellectual truth...be communicated.¹⁶

We must not underestimate the extreme importance of early and continuous instruction from the literal sense of the Word and the plain statements of the Writings. No child can discriminate between truth and falsity from his own enlightenment. Whatever sight of truth he achieves, whatever useful conclusions he reaches are based on things he has learned from parents and teachers.¹⁷ Yet even though what a person learns during childhood does not make him genuinely wise and loving, the *Heavenly Doctrines* tell us that it does form a plane for the things of the understanding; and the understanding is what receives the truth of faith...., and the truth of faith is what receives the good of charity.¹⁸ In other words, the development of a person's rational faculty and the opening of his spiritual mind depend on knowledge he learns about the Lord and the church during childhood and youth.

A mentally challenged person may not have the higher planes of his mind opened in this world because of something that blocks his deeper understanding of truth. Yet even if the knowledge he gains does not go beyond the sensory plane, it is invaluable to his eternal life, because interior things are implanted in his mind at the same time. Divine Providence describes it this way: All people who are taught by the Lord in the Word are instructed in a few truths while in the world, but in many truths when they become angels. For the interior contents of the Word, which are Divinely spiritual and Divinely celestial, are implanted at the same time, but are not opened in a person until after his death.¹⁹

Every child loves to learn things, especially things about the Lord, and we have seen how vital this early learning is. But love

of knowledge by itself is not enough.²⁰ As the *Arcana* tells us, the things we know are spiritual riches, and we possess them in order to render useful service to our-selves, the neighbor, and the country.²¹ Children, even those with serious challenges, can be guided in using what they know to help each other and to contribute to the life of their home, school, and community.²²

The Development of New Church Education

Educational efforts in the history of the New Church have met with varied success. Some attempts to establish schools have been quite successful, others less so. What we want to examine, however, is why these efforts were made in the first place. What motives have led New Church men and women to try to establish separate schools?

We begin in England during the educational reform movement of the 1800s. Certain members of the General Conference opened schools during that time period. Of particular interest to us is the motivation of their founders. In his work *History of New Church Education* Richard Gladish says, To the prevailing sentiment for educating children of the poor, New Churchmen added the concept of education for heaven.²³

Education for heaven was also one of the purposes expressed by some members of the General Convention in the United States during the 1800s. Milo Williams, an educator and scientist, compared a child's mind to a vessel with two compartments, one for affectional things and the other for natural truths. He said that the important purpose of education was to fill the vessels properly, in connection with the literal sense of the Word. Then, when a child's rational mind began to develop, it would have a plane on which its energy could be properly exercised.²⁴

Williams strongly supported separate New Church schools; and in 1838, Samuel Worcester, chair of the Convention's Committee on Moral and Religious Instruction, declared that children of the New Church must be educated differently from

"children of the world."²⁵ Most of the schools they established were not able to succeed because of concurrent public school reforms.²⁶ But about twenty years later Edmund A. Beaman, in a report to the Convention, also expressed support for New Church schools. He said in his report, Knowledge is useful chiefly as it, like nourishing food, helps to form the mind... [T]he child of the New Church needs a school separate from those of the world, that the means of its mental growth may be, as far as possible, of a New Church quality...It needs a school where the life and sphere of the Church are felt...²⁷

Although the Convention did not expand their educational efforts, nevertheless, in their elucidation of doctrines relating to the instruction of the human mind, Williams, Worcester and Beaman had made important contributions to the future of New Church education.

In the late 19th century, in order to train their own priests, proponents of the Academy movement within General Convention established the Academy of the New Church, which rapidly led to the formation of several other schools. These provided education for the young people of the church from the secondary level to theological school. When the General Church of Pennsylvania broke away from Convention to reorganize as the General Church of the Advent, it too adopted education as one of its central purposes, and our present elementary schools had their beginning. The guiding tenet was expressed by W. H. Benade, one of the founders of the movement and its first bishop. He wrote, "...the primary principle of all instruction is that the...very first word...shall have respect to the Lord..."²⁸

In another important statement he said: If things be taught and learnt as bare sciences, without any leading to what lies beyond them as ends, they will enter the memory indeed but not into the life, and the disposition toward good will not be insinuated into

them from the Lord.²⁹

By the early 20th century, the General Church of the New Jerusalem had been formed. As we see from the description of the 1915 curriculum of the Bryn Athyn Elementary School, education for the children of New Church parents was no longer a new venture but had become a matter of permanent importance. In the introduction, we find this statement: “It is well known that the prime purpose in the establishment of New Church elementary schools is that distinctive religious instruction may be given to New Church children...”³⁰

The 1926 curriculum was described in a more comprehensive report, and its statement of purpose was somewhat expanded. Nevertheless, the essential reason for the school’s existence remained the same: The primary purpose of the school is the instruction of children of New Church parents in the Word of God and the faith of the New Church.³¹

Since 1926, many people have written about the continuing need for New Church education. I will quote here only the Rt. Rev. Willard D. Pendleton. He wrote two books on education, both of which define and clarify the purposes of education. He describes New Church education as “...a ladder set upon the earth, ...by which the human mind may ascend to the acknowledgment of the Lord... We regard the educational process, therefore, as a humanizing process.”³²

And in another place, he reminds us that it is “...not merely a process for formal instruction. In its more interior implications, it is an effort to direct the thought and affections of the child from self to use.”³³

Finally, and of particular importance to our purposes here, Bishop Pendleton provides a comprehensive statement of the objectives in New Church education, which he lists as follows:

“The first...is to introduce the child into a true idea of God.

The second...is the formation of a conscience in the

understanding.

The third...is respect for law and order.

The fourth...is moral integrity. [This includes honesty and insistence on refraining from things, which ought not to be done.]³⁴

The fifth...may be defined as a sense of social responsibility. [This involves things, which ought to be done.]”.

Conclusions Emerging from this Background

Through my investigation into the history of the development of New Church education, I was struck most forcibly by the remarkable consistency of purpose found in the various statements regarding education. Some were more fully delineated than others, and each had its own particular wording, but the essential message was always the same: New Church education exists to lead children to the Lord through a growing awareness of the nature of His Humanity. It exists to introduce children into a heavenly life through obedience to His laws. It exists to help children see the Lord's order and power in everything they learn. And finally, in all of these, it exists to lead through the development of good affections, for nothing is truly learned without them. As the Rev. N. Bruce Rogers said in an address prepared for the 1980 General Assembly, The point of New Church education is to aid parents in minimizing harmful influences and providing beneficial ones. This involves much more than simply instruction in knowledge, though this too is important; it involves the development of attitudes, in acknowledgment of the primacy of love, that the affections may be as good as the knowledges are true.³⁵

At this point some people may be wondering why no mention has been made of academic standards. The explanation is that the schools of the church were never established for purely academic reasons. Certainly, all students, whatever schools they attend, must be willing to work hard and to submit themselves to

the discipline involved in learning. Preservation of academic standards helps the majority of New Church students to maintain this commitment to their education. But some children, because of physical or mental challenges, simply are not able to meet ordinary standards in traditional ways. In such cases, the students cannot entirely adapt to fit the schools. If New Church education is to serve these children of New Church parents, the schools must adapt to fit the students. And these adaptations, while they will not always lead to a college degree, should allow all our children to complete elementary school and high school, and attend at least some college courses in preparation for adulthood and for life as angels of heaven.

It is clear, both from doctrine and from our history, that all children of the New Church deserve our best efforts within our own schools. Our elementary schools and high schools do not exist to compete with local prep schools, which provide only earthly skills. And Bryn Athyn College does not exist to compete with Harvard and Yale, but to provide a unique education based on the spiritual and moral values of the New Church—an education not found in any other college or university. In many cases, our schools do in fact provide an education in academics, sports, and the arts that is competitive with or superior to that generally found elsewhere. This speaks well for the dedication and ability of our teachers, but it is not the reason for the existence of New Church schools. New Church schools exist for the education of all our children in the New Church.

Admittedly, it takes additional time and effort to adapt our schools and programs to meet the needs of students with special challenges. This can be unsettling, especially when the necessary adaptations may differ from year to year. After all, life is easier if it is comfortable and at least somewhat predictable. But these students need us. New Church schools are alone in their ability to nurture children for both the natural and spiritual

worlds. We must always be willing to reassess our priorities in order to give these students the extra time and effort they require for their education. And we need the understanding and cooperation of our financial boards and contributors as well, because of the special funding that will be required.

Trends in the Educational World

When I finally determined to write the original version of this paper (in 1987), one of the areas I wanted to explore was the current thought among educators elsewhere at that time re-garding appropriate placement for children with challenges. Setting aside all religious considerations for the moment, did they believe that these children would grow better and more fully if they were included with their peers in their neighborhood schools? Or would they, in fact, learn better in special classrooms and in segregated schools?

I am delighted to report that during the same period in which my thoughts centered on including children with special challenges, hundreds of leading educators in the United States, Canada, and Europe were also considering this idea. In fact, the preponderance of research during the previous ten years favored inclusion for almost all challenged students. Many integrated programs had been put in place during the 1980s, far too many for me even to begin describing here. But I would like to share with you a few of the forceful statements I read during the course of my research. Douglas Biklen, in his introduction to the book, *More Education/Integration*, wrote, "...integration is not an experiment or a curricular innovation but is rather a constant aspect of quality schooling...all students have gifts and can contribute to the life of a school and community."³⁶

In segregated schools and special education classrooms, students with challenges were often taught together with others of the same mental ability but not the same chronological age. But Norman Kunc, also writing in *More Education/Integration*

said of this, “If we are to assess a child’s Needs, then it is essential to examine all of his needs...” A segregated setting, though it may have an excellent academic program, can fulfill only one quarter of [them]. The child has no hope of learning appropriate social behavior because he is never even given the opportunity to witness age-appropriate behavior.³⁷

One mother expresses the sight she has come to while working with her own handicapped daughter: “The purpose of schooling for anyone is a preparation for adulthood in the community, a training of people to be able to contribute to society.”³⁸

And finally, a group of physicians and educators from Boston explain why people with special challenges should attend regular schools throughout their education: “The opportunities to experience risks, to make decisions, and to assume responsibility are essential to the development of internal control, self-confidence, and independence.” One factor hindering the handicapped adolescent in becoming more independent is the often-observed tendency of parents and society to look upon this individual as an eternal child.³⁹

I return therefore to my two original questions. Should not all our children be welcomed into our schools? Should not all New Church teachers be willing to develop programs that would help even those with challenges grow up with their friends, in their communities, and with the Lord and His church at the center of their lives?

Doctrine, the historical purposes of New Church education, and many current educational trends all seem to invite, indeed to urge an affirmative response. All the children of the church are our children. New Church education exists to serve them all. In other words, to Cain’s question, Am I my brother’s keeper, the answer is, Yes!

In conclusion, I would like to allow a young woman, mentally challenged by Down Syndrome, to speak for herself. She was 21

when she told a Wisconsin legislative subcommittee: "There are a lot of things I can do. I can swim. I can read. I can make friends. I can listen to my records. I can watch television. I can make my own lunch. I can go to see a movie. I can take the bus by myself to Chicago and to work. I can count money. I can sing like a bird. I can brush my teeth. I can do latch hook rugs. I can cook dinner. I can think. I can pray. I can square dance. I can play drums. I know what is right. I know what is wrong."⁴⁰

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 3. Last Judgment 12:3.
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 8. Divine Love and Wisdom 270. See also Coronis 29:2.
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