

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND SPIRITUAL APPLICATIONS: HELP, LORD! I HAVE A SPIRITUAL DISABILITY

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Tell them: 'Hear this, you foolish people who have no understanding, who have eyes but do not discern, who have ears but do not perceive. (Jeremiah 5:2 NET)

Introduction

One of the most influential events of my early life was a Sunday School Promotion Day. My younger sister, Cathy, was not called up with her peers but instead was left sitting alone (Pudlas, 2019). She plaintively turned to our parents and mouthed, “But what about me?” Heart-wrenching as this was, she could have said, “I’m profoundly deaf. What is your challenge?” It is the second question that is the subject of the current reflection.

When Cathy was younger, she asked our mother, “What for God made me deaf?” Our mother, who dearly loved the Lord, was unable to give a satisfactory answer. Ever since, I have been puzzled by the apparent enigmatic juxtaposition of two truths: there is a loving God, and there are people who have disabilities. As I followed my vocation, most recently as a professor educating teachers about diversity and special education, I have come to see that lessons from various types of disabilities can be compared to the spiritual condition of believers.

Like Cathy, and not unlike the recipients of God’s message through Jeremiah or the unseeing, unfeeling, unhearing idols of Psalm 115, some attendees on that Sunday morning may not have been able to *hear* clearly the spiritual messages that God was speaking to them. Others were unable to *see* the hand of God at work in their lives, and still others needed to learn the same spiritual lessons repeatedly. Though seemingly whole, we all have a special need that keeps us from fully learning all that God wants us to learn and being all that he wants us to be.

We should all consider the following questions. Do we struggle to learn spiritual lessons? Once learned, do we forget them easily? Do we wonder how God could be so patient with our bad behaviour? Do we have trouble paying attention when God is speaking? Do we sometimes fail to hear God? Do we sometimes fail to see God? If our answer to any of these questions is yes, we can take comfort from the fact that we are not alone. Perhaps we would benefit from *spiritual special education* (SSE). Perhaps we need special help to overcome barriers and achieve our individual potential as authentic apprentices of Jesus.

Terms

Exceptionality, *special education*, and *inclusion* are important terms in the field of educating persons with various learning challenges. My purpose here is to explore the possibility that a loving God allows or perhaps even causes disabilities so that we may see that we also need SSE in order to grow spiritually.

Exceptionality

If you were in the first meeting of one of my university classes, I would have you stand along with your classmates. I would explain that since I work with students who are “exceptional,” it is good to see a room full of “normal” people. Then I would ask all those who wear glasses or contacts to sit. Next, I would ask all those who cannot water ski or snow ski to sit down. Then I would ask all those who cannot type at least 40 words per minute to sit down. Finally, I would ask anyone who has not sung the Hallelujah Chorus from the Messiah to sit down. Usually there is at least one person who remains (and this is the fun part), to whom I say, in response to the singing question, “Prove it”. On one occasion a student got through several of the first bars of the piece before I could explain I was joking. What was my purpose in engaging students in this exercise?

To define *exceptional*, we must define *normal*. Normal is a relative term and may be contextually defined. The standing students considered themselves normal. However, when sensory ability (need for corrective lenses) was used as the criterion, a portion of the class became exceptional. Other criteria included gross motor skill (skiing), fine motor skill (typing), or gifts and talents (singing) which may be under-utilized without special education.

Special Education

The Tale of the Pike defines the essence of special education. Once upon a time, research was conducted with the (involuntary?) assistance of a pike, a type of fish prized by sports fishermen. This feisty fish was placed in a large tank where he swam freely and enjoyed the fingerlings which were placed in the tank for his dining delight. While the contented pike was unaware, a clear partition was inserted to separate the two sides of the tank. Food fish were placed in the water on the other side of the barrier. The pike swam toward his meal and... banged his nose on the barrier. Not a quitter, the pike tried repeatedly to reach the goal. After some time, the barrier was removed. But when the fingerlings were again placed in the tank to tempt the pike, he swam lethargically and did not attempt to eat them. Some time later, when the researchers came back to check, they found the pike "tanning his tummy at the top of the tank." Not a good sign for fish!! Sadly, the pike had died. Of course, a crime scene investigative team (CSI) was dispatched. They determined the

pike had died of natural causes; he had starved to death. The food was plentiful! Why had the starvation occurred? The pike had learned failure. It learned that despite repeated attempts to reach his food, there was an invisible barrier that could not be overcome; even when that barrier was removed, the lesson of failure was not forgotten.

The *Tale of the Pike* teaches that the essence of special education is the removal of barriers. Barriers, anything that prevents the attainment of full potential, may be of a sensory, physical, emotional, intellectual, or social nature. When we are aware of the nature of barriers, we can prevent them, or at least ameliorate their effects. It should be noted that current terminology prefers *inclusive* education to *special*. Nevertheless, the goal of barrier removal remains; and that includes barriers to our spiritual growth and development.

Full Inclusion

In public education, the prevailing model of delivering education to students deemed exceptional is known as *full inclusion*. Full inclusion, as it is practiced in schools, strives to recognize all students as valued and fully participating members of the school community, regardless of any handicapping condition or disability. It is both a form of pedagogy and an ideology or philosophy.

The biblical conception of the church is that of a fully inclusive body. For example, 1 Corinthians 12 teaches that believers are all members of one body and that the body has many parts. For the body to function effectively, all parts must be contributing. In Ephesians 4, Paul, states, “From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work” (NIV). Each part of the body (the church) must do its work if the body is to be fully functioning. For an insightful exploration of the physiological functioning of the human body see *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* by Paul Brand and Phillip Yancey (2019). Because they can cause varying levels of suffering and distress, Christians need to reconcile the existence of disabilities and other challenges with the reality of a loving God.

A Theology of Exceptionality

“Who sinned, this man or his parents?” This question asked of Jesus when he and his disciples encountered a blind man (John 9) betrayed a worldview. That is, the questioners assumed that the blindness had resulted from sin. Are disabilities the result of sin? The full exploration of that question is not the purpose here. Rather, foundational to our discussion are the answers to four key questions: Did God create all things? Is God sovereign? Is God righteous? How then do we reconcile the existence of exceptional persons, particularly those with disabilities? The scriptural

responses are: Yes!, Yes!, Yes!, and we may never fully know in this life. We do know this: God is the sovereign, righteous, and loving Creator.

Creation

Regarding the creation question, scripture speaks of God's foreknowledge in Romans 8:28-29 and Psalm 139, creation in his image in Genesis 1:27 and 5:1, and the *good and perfect gift* of children in Psalm 127:3-5. The *imago Dei* applies to every person. Other passages speak to the fact of God's hand in creation (Matt 5:48; Luke 6:36; John 1:3; I John 4-8, 11; 1Pet 1:15,16; Gen 2:20; Eccl 3:11). Perhaps, then, "the fall" spoiled or thwarted God's plan.

Sovereignty

However, God is sovereign, and his sovereignty is a major message of both the Old and New Testaments. God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Eph 1:11, 12). Romans 9 speaks of God's sovereign choice. In Isaiah 45, Amos 4, Exodus 4:11, 12, and 9:29, Moses declares the earth is the Lord's. Further, Hebrews 1:3 speaks to the sovereignty of the Son. Thus, the existence of disabilities cannot be explained as an accident. Further, God is not capricious. He does not do things on a whim, but rather acts justly.

Righteousness

Do we believe God is righteous? In light of scripture, we have no choice. For example, when faced with the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham asked rhetorically, "Shall not the judge of the universe do right?" (Gen 18:25). In the Psalms (e.g., 4:1; 7:9), God is called righteous, and that righteousness often refers to the faithfulness with which he acts. In the New Testament, Paul (e.g., Rom 3), speaks of the righteousness of God. As righteous and sovereign, God the Creator does not make mistakes. Disabilities are not accidents.

Reconciliation

How then do we reconcile the existence of exceptional persons, particularly those who are disabled? The birth of a child with disabilities, or the later onset of a disability or some other trauma, may lead to considerable suffering on the part of everyone in the family. In the book of Job, such suffering was endured by "a just man" and was a matter of discipline rather than punishment. Other examples of discipline are found in Deuteronomy 8:5 and Proverbs 3:11, 12. The instruction offered by James is that we are to consider it "pure joy" when we encounter various trials (1:2). Present day Christians must be careful not to fall into the same trap as the well-meaning friends of Job who only added to his misery by telling him how he

should be reacting to his trials. The response to any painful experience is personal and should not be judged by those who are not a part of the experience.

Yet people have physical disabilities and other challenges. Perhaps God's purpose - in part - is to mirror the barriers we encounter in our spiritual lives. For example, we "know" that we are not to be fearful or anxious. We have learned that God has not given us the spirit of fear/timidity. We know this to be true, because we read it in 2 Timothy 1:7. Why, then, are we often fearful? We have not fully learned the lesson and appropriated it for ourselves, despite the words in our Bibles. Our fearfulness can be seen as a kind of spiritual learning disability.

Applications

We believe that God is a loving, sovereign, righteous Creator. At the same time, we know people or have friends or family who have disabilities. On that Sunday in the church basement Cathy was not the only one with special needs. Others too, although unaware, may have been *exceptional* and in need of SSE to meet their full God-ordained potential and to live a full and abundant life as an apprentice of Jesus.

Jesus said that he came in order that we might have life and that we might have it to the full. Eugene Peterson phrased the story he told thus in *The Message*.

Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of. (John 10:6-10)

Two things are evident in this passage. First, Jesus' listeners had no idea what he was talking about, though it was a simple story (learning challenges?). Second, Jesus came to provide a means to real and eternal life, more and better than they ever dreamed of. He promises "abundant life." Perhaps, as A.W. Tozer suggested in *The Pursuit of God* (1986), we are still standing in the outer courts of the temple? What barriers to "abundant life" might we be encountering and how might we overcome those barriers?

Since to be *exceptional* means to deviate from an established norm or standard, none of us, spiritually, is living up to God's normative standard: *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."* (1Pet 1:15, 16). Or, from the Gospel of Matthew, "*Be perfect...*" (Matt

5:48). We need SSE if we are to overcome the barriers that prevent us from developing spiritually to our full God-given and God-mandated potential and thereby experiencing the promised abundant life.

Once we as believers are fully functioning, we will be better able to contribute to a healthier and more vibrant Body of Christ. In seeing our own disabilities including spiritual shortcomings, we might also be appreciative and accepting of others who are identified as *disabled* or *handicapped*. We all reflect God imperfectly.

In my view, disabilities may be volitional acts of a loving, sovereign, righteous Creator. At the very least, he does not choose to intervene in all situations to prevent them; and all humans are created *imago Dei*. Christians and non-Christians alike are affected by disabilities and other challenges. The nature of the challenges may, for Christians, provide a reflection of the struggle to achieve Christlikeness. Every Christian is *exceptional* and in need of SSE to learn his lessons and to live the full and abundant life he intended.

Another lesson can be drawn from the John 9 account of the encounter of Jesus and his disciples with a man born blind. When the disciples presumptively asked who had sinned, Jesus responded that the blindness is not the result of anyone's sins, but rather *that the Glory of God might be revealed*. We might see Jesus' response as intent to miraculously heal the blind man. However, a broader view can be taken. The man's blindness, his sensory inability to see anything, contrasts with the glorious perfection of the omniscient God. God does not want his people to yield to human barriers that prevent them from becoming who and what he wants us to be, and thereby experiencing his best.

There are lessons to be learned from the manner in which students with diverse learning needs receive special education in school. Reviewing the learning principles concerning barriers involved in learning disabilities will help us understand the comparison.

How Learning Occurs

As we drive down a road, we see in the distance a car parked at the side with the hood up. As we approach, we may see someone with their head under the hood staring intently into the engine compartment, pensively rubbing their chin. Why do drivers open the hood and peer intently into its complicated contents?? Do they think that the problem will be identified by a little flag that says, "Fix me"? The problem is we cannot see the inner workings of the car. If we had a schematic to provide a good understanding of how things worked, we could perhaps, identify the problem and fix it. Without that understanding, staring under the hood is pointless. We need to understand basic principles of learning to understand how it should

occur, and consequently how particular barriers make learning difficult in the absence of special help. Some barriers are obvious. For example, a person who cannot hear needs sign language or another means to overcome that barrier. Other barriers are subtle, such as those caused by various forms of learning disability. The discussion of learning principles concerning learning disabilities will be followed by a discussion of spiritual parallels, how Christians may fully become who and what God wants them to be.

Some Basic Learning Principles

Learning involves changes in knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, or skills. These changes occur in the following sequence.

<p style="text-align: center;">Events of Learning and Instruction</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Stage One - Preparing for Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Attention and alertness● Expectancy● Retrieval (of relevant information and/or skills) <p style="text-align: center;">Stage Two - Acquisition and performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Selective perception of stimulus features (paying attention to the important stuff)● Encoding; storage in long term memory (grouping and categorizing for example)● Retrieval and responding● Reinforcement (note this requires social interaction) <p style="text-align: center;">Stage Three - Transfer of learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Cueing retrieval (how can I learn to remember this?)● Generalizing (applying what you've learned to new situations) In other words, in the spiritual, "Live the faith".

The stages of learning make identification of potential barriers and therefore weaknesses obvious. Our alertness and attention might give in to sleepiness because our invited guests stayed late on Saturday night, or we started to watch a movie that went long into the night. Our expectancy may be tempered by giving ourselves permission to daydream about Sunday dinner or the Sunday football game because we are familiar with the Bible reading and think we know what the sermon will be.

Other barriers may be less obvious. They may involve disabilities that are beyond our control. The stories of Steve and Sam illustrate some of those barriers.

Matching Performance with Potential

Steve is beginning the second term of second grade. By most indicators he is quite bright. However, he is still at the emergent stage of reading and has not progressed past repetitive patterns of stories he has memorized. Steve is not able to identify words when they are presented in isolation, and he does not relate groups of letters as being one word. As he points to a single word, he may say two or more words. Steve chooses to “read” only picture books and talks about the pictures. The teacher’s greatest concerns are that he is not able to recognize what a word is, to identify the beginning and end of a word, to read commonly used sight words, or to use print to communicate ideas.

Sam is in the third year of his university program. He became a Christian in grade 12 through a friend’s invitation to a youth event. Sam tries to read the Bible but has trouble understanding the vocabulary and the concepts. Sam can’t see how the various parts relate or even what the terms mean (Old versus New Testament, Gospels, Sanctification, etc.). When the pastor preaches, Sam tends to tune out early. He is increasingly frustrated with his lack of spiritual growth. When the College and Career Group holds a Bible study, Sam often talks about current events or other things heard on radio or seen on TV. Sam really wants to grow in his Christian walk but is beginning to doubt both faith and his conversion experience.

Both Steve and Sam exhibit characteristics that may be indicative of a learning disability. Perhaps we can identify our own spiritual learning through their experience.

Defining Learning Disabilities and Causal Factors

While the term may be used in a general sense, two aspects characterize the classic definition of learning disabilities (LD). The first is a gap between potential (latent ability) and performance (actual achievement). The second is exclusion of other causal factors such as cognitive impairment, sensory problems, or lack of opportunity to learn. Common elements in definitions of learning disabilities include some form of one or more of the following.

- Neurological dysfunction. Some form of processing problem in the brain – similar to a virus or other problem in the hard drive of a computer.
- Uneven growth pattern. Some ability areas develop ahead of others – some strengths, some weaknesses.
- Difficulty in academic learning tasks

- Discrepancy between potential and performance. For example, “He seems capable enough - but he just doesn’t get the good grades.”
- Exclusion of other (e.g., sensory) causes or environmental deprivation
- Average or above average intelligence

On a functional level, how does a person with a learning disability present? A person with a learning disability may exhibit one or more of the following characteristics.

- Perceptual-motor impairments (e.g., body imagery)
- General coordination deficits
- Hyperactivity (“running to and fro”)
- Disorders of attention (... what? Squirrel?... where...?)
- Impulsivity
- Disorders of memory and thinking
- Specific academic problems (e.g., symbols - written or mathematical)
- Disorders of speech and auditory processing
- Emotional liability
- Equivocal neurological signs and EEG irregularities

This list is not exhaustive. The characteristics on the list assist educators to explore potential barriers to learning. For Christians, they also point to spiritual lessons. In the same way a student with a learning disability may look at letters on a printed page and be unable to grasp the concepts expressed, Christians may look at God’s Word and fail to grasp the concepts.

Human beings are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139:14 NIV). For example, we can hear the faintest whisper because our ears amplify sound up to 30 times through a complex and yet efficient system of nerves, tiny bones, and vibrating ear drums, in ear canals designed to focus sound waves. We look at a series of connected black shapes on a page and our brains make sense of these marks, recognizing the groupings of individual letters as words and understanding the concepts represented by the groupings of words.

To further illustrate, we may be able to deduce the message in the following lines.

How weird is this?

*Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy,
it deosn't mttar in waht oredrthe ltteers in a wrod are,
the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae.*

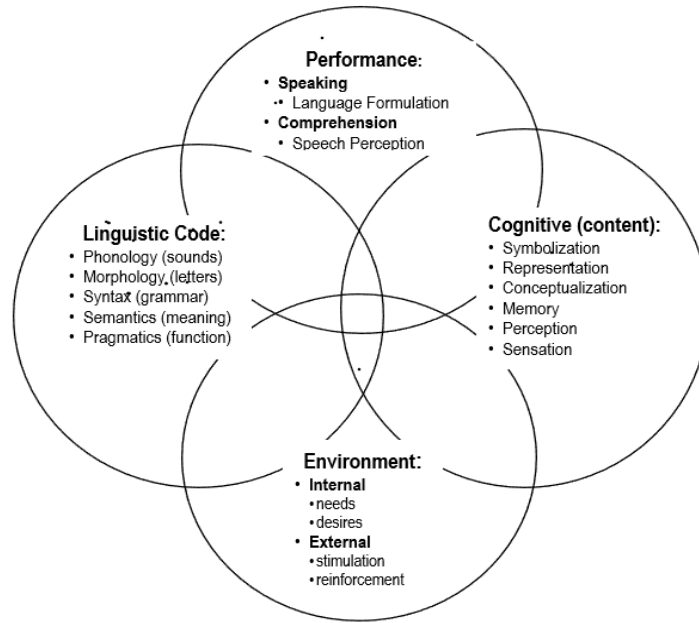
*The rset can be a toatl mses and you can still raed it wouthit porbelm.
Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef butthe wrod as a wlohe.*

For persons with a learning disability (dyslexia, for example) the process of deduction is not that easy. Understanding the nature of their challenge may provide insights that will help ameliorate their barriers. What are some of the characteristics of learning disabilities and how might they apply to our spiritual lives?

From birth we are innately predisposed to make sense of the world. Infants, in most cases, take in a myriad of sights and sounds (sensations and perceptions), and slowly begin to recognize some as more important than others. As their world expands, children begin to categorize, and they do this through language. For a time, all four-legged creatures are “moo moos” (or perhaps “bow wows”). Eventually, children begin to understand that symbols stand for real things. The fact that children, with an increasingly large proportion of the world, recognize the significance of the stylized golden M is one reason it is a brilliant marketing tool on behalf of McDonald’s.

Eventually, in normal developmental patterns, children learn to categorize based on lexical knowledge (they develop a dictionary of known words), semantic knowledge (meaning of words), and to express and receive information based on knowledge of phonetics (production and interpretation of speech sounds), morphology (meaningful written symbols), and syntax (grammar). Meaning is derived based on the reception of the visual and auditory symbols used in language and on their subsequent connection to previously meaningful experiences. Thus, sensation (the gateway), then perception, memory and conceptualization, the cognitive aspects of language, are connected with knowledge about the rules of language and, in addition, breadth of experience (relating the abstract symbol to something tangible) is also important. This complex interrelationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Communicative Competence: An interactive schematic



Note that a *schematic* is an illustration of how things work or should work (think of the schematic that comes with IKEA furniture pieces). This figure as a kind of schematic is an attempt to illustrate that communication is influenced by various component aspects; each facet influences and is influenced by the others. Strengths or weaknesses in the various aspects influence *communicative competence* (the ability to effectively send and receive information).

Barriers - Learning and Spiritual

Barriers may occur within any facet of the model. In the area of the linguistic code, for example, *morphology*, or symbol recognition may be the source of the problem. If we attempt to read scripture in the original Hebrew, we may be stymied by the fact that we have forgotten most of the introductory Hebrew we took in seminary and therefore we cannot get beyond the written symbols to understand the meaning of the words or the propositional intent of the message. If non-Christians read words like *sanctification*, *election of the saints*, or *justification through the blood of Christ*, they may be stymied by the fact that they have no conceptual understanding of what those terms mean and understanding of individual words such as “blood” does not help. Even believers like Sam may have difficulty with many biblical terms let alone the theological truths they describe.

What can we learn from characteristics of and special education for students with learning disabilities that will help us overcome our spiritual learning disabilities? Reading the following descriptions will help us reflect on ourselves, particularly in our spiritual learning and growth.

Perceptual, perceptual-motor, and coordination problems

Perception refers to the use of the senses to recognize, discriminate and interpret stimuli. In other words, does our brain register the recognition of stimuli that the eyes or ears take in? For example, a person may be aware of a sound somewhere in the distance, but only after a few minutes recognize that it is the phone ringing in another room. A young boy named Samuel heard a voice calling but did not recognize it to be the voice of God until it was explained to him by Eli (1 Sam 3). Perceptual motor problems include body image (an awareness of one's body, how the various parts are inter-related, and an understanding of the relation of one's body to the environment), laterality (knowing and being able to utilize the difference between left and right within the body), and directionality (right/left awareness outside of the body). Deficiencies in these areas may lead to difficulty in reading and writing, which progresses from left to right except in Hebrew and Asian languages, and to other tasks requiring motor skills.

Hyperactivity, disorders of attention, and impulsivity

One way in which hyperactivity, attention disorders and impulsivity may be characterized is by excessive non-purposeful movement. A person subject to such movement, as my son demonstrated, may be described as *someone who slides down the bannisters of life ... with all the splinters facing the wrong way*. Related characteristics include perseveration (purposelessly, sometimes disadvantageously, repeating an activity), hypoactivity (sitting very quietly and accomplishing very little, often overlooked in a group because the attention is drawn by the more active members), or inability to focus on important matters and distracted by trivia (often referred to as *Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD*). The latter, while a kind of learning disability, is recognized by certain behaviours and will be discussed a future article on behavioural disorders.

Generally, one of the characteristics of students with LD is that they tend to be impulsive; that is, they may blurt out without thinking. This is important because the Bible teaches Christians to be circumspect in their speech. Proverbs 12:18 states that “[t]he words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” James says, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (1:26). 1 Peter 3:10 advises, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.”

Disorders of memory or of thinking

People who have a memory or thinking learning disability have difficulty remembering information over long periods or even short periods of time. This disability involves both heard and seen information and may result in apparent impulsivity in problem solving. People with thinking disabilities may also have a related difficulty with *metacognition* - literally, thinking about thinking.

People with thinking disabilities may not have an awareness of basic learning strategies or problem-solving principles. They may react to problems randomly rather than reflectively. Our understanding of this disability may increase if we think back to our first encounter with mathematical word problems. In my experience such problems initially made as much sense as the following: “Billy has four oranges. Suzie has seven apples. What is the wholesale price of bananas in Ecuador?” This is clearly a non-sequitur. However, we may learn certain strategies that enable us to solve these problems. For example, when we see the phrase, “how many altogether,” we know that we need to perform the mathematical function of addition. The phrase, “how many more than” means that we need to subtract, and so on. There are similar cues in reading scripture. For example, when a verse says, “I urge you, therefore...”, there is a cause-and-effect relationship. Reflective readers go back to ensure they understand what the “therefore” is referring to (why the “therefore” is there), to understand what follows. Some, however, do not intuit these rules or strategies.

Language/Academic problems

As many as one half of persons with learning disabilities have attendant speech and language problems which may be both expressive and receptive. For example, people with learning disabilities may have difficulty expressing true feelings and “reading” others. Problems may stem from linguistic code areas such as semantics (meanings), syntax (understanding grammar or sentence construction) or pragmatics (the functional use of language in social context). People with this barrier may take things very literally. Instead of understanding the message or sub-text of a statement, they may respond to the literal part. For example, when we say, “It sure is cold in the house this evening,” we might really mean, “Please turn up the thermostat and/or bring a blanket for me.” If our hearers fail to understand the message or take the words literally, problems may result. Misunderstandings may occur also within the academic context if students fail to respond or understand directions. Not hearing implicit meanings can lead to academic difficulties and underachievement. Christians can apply a literal interpretation to their reading of scripture and fail to understand the intent of what God is saying to them through his written Word. Problems with

communication and concomitant academic problems may also lead to the following additional barriers.

- Poor self-esteem
- External locus of control
- Poor motivation
- Learned helplessness (no faith that efforts will result in desired outcomes)
- Emotional liability (i.e., frequent changes in mood)

Emotional liability

Persons with learning disabilities may also exhibit social and emotional problems. These problems may be manifested in poor self-esteem, an external locus of control (I am the hapless victim of circumstance), poor motivation and learned helplessness, all of which may lead to emotional liability. The disability results in frequent changes in mood and may be understandable in light of their difficulties. If persons with learning disabilities cannot read social cues, they may “invade the space” of others and be guilty of other social faux pas which may cause their peers to reject them. Persons who are not familiar with learning disabilities may shy from someone who “just doesn’t get it” or who is always “in their face.” They may see them approaching at church and quickly turn the other way or pretend to be deep in conversation with another person. If the person cannot read emotional cues, avoidance strategies may not work. Because to belong is a basic human need, when persons with learning disabilities are not accepted emotional issues may naturally arise. Additionally, because persons with learning disabilities don’t understand the subtleties of language, especially the pragmatic aspects, when someone makes a comment such as, “the roast in the oven might be burning,” the underlying message that “church went overtime, and we can’t talk with you now” can be missed. Their lack of appropriate response may be interpreted as evidence of some kind of behavioural or emotional problem. Thus, a difficulty in one area may lead to problems in another.

We also can reflect on what some of the spiritual parallels might be. Persons with a learning disability are likely to have social problems, poor school grades and few friends. As a result, they are likely to be subject to frequent changes in mood. Despite their hard work, they are unable to achieve well and, like the pike in the tank, may have developed learned helplessness. They may not try or take a risk. Is this the abundant life that Jesus spoke of?

Learning Disabilities: Intervention and Spiritual Lessons

Some Christians may exhibit characteristics of learning disabilities in their spiritual lives. As we learn more about learning disabilities, we may reflect also on what they might teach us about our own spiritual growth and development toward the fullness of Christ.

The spiritual response is to turn our growth and development over to God, asking that through the Holy Spirit's intervention we might become who and what he wants us to be. My pastor recently illustrated how God breathes life into seeds and makes them into beautiful plants. Seeds need soil, water, light, and nurture. Unlike seeds, human creations of God have a will. They have a part in the spiritual growth and development process. Beyond prayer, some human effort is necessary for improvement.

Learning principles and the field of special education suggest parallels that can help us ameliorate barriers to learning in our spiritual lives. The goal is to overcome barriers. Because the barriers vary from person to person and situation to situation, there is no single best way to overcome them. The educational practice of Response to Intervention (RTI) tries various remedial efforts, some of which are discussed below, and monitors their progress to determine the most effective intervention.

Cognitive training

The cognitive training approach involves three components: changing thought processes, providing strategies for learning, and teaching self-initiative. There are at least two reasons that cognitive training might be appropriate for students with learning disabilities. First, it helps them overcome cognitive and metacognitive problems such as the tendency to impulsivity resulting from a lack of reflection or thinking about thinking by providing specific problem-solving strategies. Second, by stressing involvement and self-initiative, motivational problems of learned helplessness and passivity may be overcome. A variety of techniques fall under this heading: self-instruction, self-monitoring, scaffolded instruction, and reciprocal teaching. A brief description of each technique follows. They can be applied equally to overcoming both academic and spiritual learning disabilities.

Self-instruction

Self-instruction (or self-talk) is a cognitive training technique in which individuals talk aloud to themselves as they solve problems. Typically, this technique is first modeled by a mentor (a parent, teacher or peer). For example, a mother talks herself through the process as she bakes a cake. "Let's see here, if I make this cake from scratch, I will need flour, sugar, eggs, oil... Okay, first I will mix the dry ingredients, then get out the eggs, add them to the flour and other dry ingredients..." The purpose of self-instruction is to make the learner aware of the five basic stages of problem solving.

1. Defining the problem (What do I have to do?)
2. Planning (How can I solve the problem)
3. Strategizing (The ___ strategy will help me by...)
4. Self-evaluation (How am I doing?)
5. Self-reinforcement (Good job. I got it right.)

In the spiritual realm, cognitive training points to the involvement of a mentor/model. We need to fellowship with mature believers who can disciple us. Cognitive training also suggests the need for a template or plan for purposeful wise action. We can find one in Proverbs, the book of wisdom.

Self-monitoring

The self-monitoring technique teaches learners to keep track of their own behaviours. Self-monitoring consists of two components: self-evaluation and self-recording. One example would be keeping journals (prayer or other).

Scaffolded instruction

Much like a physical scaffold, new knowledge and skills are built upon the framework of those previously acquired. A child may remember an old-fashioned flannelgraph story in which Noah is swallowed by a big fish. A child who has grown into an adult may examine that story in light of the bigger picture and deeper spiritual lessons.

Reciprocal teaching

Reciprocal teaching can take many forms. One technique is to have peers teach peers. For example, youth pastors may give their youth opportunities to grow and develop by giving them some responsibility for peer teaching. In this regard, being passive recipients may be of little benefit.

Combined approach (VAKT)

Another cognitive learning technique is the combined or multisensory approach sometimes referred to as *Combined Approach (Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic-Tactile)*. The material is presented to the student, who sees it (visual), says it (auditory), does it (kinesthetic), and feels it (tactile). A student who has problems with word recognition might, for example, see the word printed, read the word out loud, trace the letters of the word, and then feel the raised sandpaper letters of the word. The student mentioned earlier, Sam, might benefit from this approach, learning to recognize that individual letters are connected to form whole

words and then that those words can be connected to form representations of complete ideas.

There are many other cognitive training methods. No one method works for everyone in every situation. In some instances, learning does not proceed naturally or without barriers, just as discipleship involves the overcoming of barriers.

Spiritual Learning Disabilities: Intervention

In the previous discussion of exceptionality and of special education, one important aspect was not addressed. Special education requires a teacher who is aware of the nature of barriers to learning that students of varying ability may encounter. How can we remove the barriers if we do not know what they are? In the spiritual realm, God has given us a teacher in the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us in Rom 8:26ff that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. And in John 14:26 we are told...that the Spirit of God, who was sent at Pentecost to dwell in all believers, was given to instruct us.... “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” In effect, the Holy Spirit is offered as an SSE teacher to enable us to overcome our weaknesses.

In traditional learning some students need more visual cues to learn effectively, e.g., those who are deaf or who have a specific learning disability. Therefore, special education might involve making teaching/learning more concrete by the addition of visual clues and real examples. God gave us a visual cue in the person of his Son. This visual cue enables us to go from a broad concept to something with which we can identify. Social learning theory suggests we learn from observing models; Scripture tells us we are to be “imitators of Christ.” God gives us other visual clues. The whole host of witnesses to God’s faithfulness in Hebrews 11 are visual cues.

We can learn many spiritual lessons from the ways barriers are removed from people with various disabilities. As with the pike, we do not want barriers that might lead to spiritual malnourishment or atrophy. Steve has learning disabilities that manifest themselves when he is learning to read and write and interact with others. Does Sam have spiritual learning disabilities? In both learning disabilities and spiritual disabilities there is a gap between potential and performance. In an academic sense, potential is marked by mental age relative to chronological age, and performance by achievement, typically on school-related tasks. Steve is not where he should be, compared with other students in his class. This is a matter of concern, and he will require special education to achieve his full potential. Is Sam’s spiritual growth commensurate with his age as a Christian? What SSE does he require to bring him to his potential?

We may earnestly attempt to read the Bible and memorize scripture but have little success. We may stare at words on the page of our Bibles and fail to understand the concepts, let alone apply them to our lives. Biblical parallels can be drawn between learning disabilities and spiritual disabilities. James 1: 22-25 says,

²²Obey God's message! Don't fool yourselves by just listening to it. ²³If you hear the message and don't obey it, you are like people who stare at themselves in a mirror ²⁴and forget what they look like as soon as they leave. ²⁵But you must never stop looking at the perfect law that sets you free. God will bless you in everything you do, if you listen and obey, and don't just hear and forget (CEV)

John 5: 39, 40 reads,

“You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about *me*! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want. (MSG).”

These passages suggest that while some people may study the Word diligently, they fail to see the true message of the scriptures; that is, they fail to find Jesus. What might we do to be more effective learners?

The *events of learning and teaching model* may reveal potential problem areas for people with learning disabilities. Common remedial strategies used to overcome barriers in LD may also be useful for spiritual learning.

Overcoming Spiritual Learning Disabilities

The VAKT (see, hear, do, feel) multisensory approach was described earlier. This approach recognizes the multifaceted nature of the learning process. It may be applied to spiritual disabilities.

See.

In Matthew 6:22, Jesus says, “Your eyes are like a window for your body. When they are good, you have all the light you need. ²³But when your eyes are bad, everything is dark. If the light inside you is dark, you surely are in the dark” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction

is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. (NRSV)

Because a wide-ranging outlook means a greater intake of light in the spiritual sphere (2 Cor 4:18), we need to have a broad range of experiences to fully understand spiritual truths.

The first step in learning is directing attention to the appropriate place, that is, looking with purpose. One reason we may fail to learn and develop spiritually is because we are looking at the wrong things. Psalm 34 says, “Keep your eyes on the LORD! You will shine like the sun and never blush with shame.” Seeing requires intentional looking.

Hear

Barriers due to learning disabilities that apply to hearing include inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. A common complaint of wives is that their husbands are hard of *hearing*. More correctly, they may be hard of *listening*. The first requisite for hearing is focusing attention. Concerning impulsivity, James advises Christians to be “quick to listen and slow to speak or to get angry” (James 1:19). Many Christians cannot wait for a person to finish speaking before breaking in with their response. What does God really mean when he says in Psalm 46:1, “Be still, and know that I *am* God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.”

Regarding hyperactivity, perhaps we need to be still – not just quiet, but in a state of receptivity – before we can learn what God wants us to learn. Revelations 8:1 says that when the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was quiet. Matthew Henry’s (1996) commentary suggests this may have been, “A silence of expectation; great things were upon the wheel of providence, and the church of God, both in heaven and earth, stood silent, as became them, to see what God was doing, according to that of Zec. 2:13, ‘Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord, for he has risen up out of his holy habitation.’”

Do

The multisensory model stresses the importance of putting into practice what has been learned, and that practice should include a variety of settings so that the learning can be generalized. If all our study and learning occur only on Sunday in the context of church, we should not be surprised that we are not growing in our spiritual walk. Doing is emphasized in James 1:22 “Listen and obey; be doers not merely hearers.” The story of the two builders in Matthew 7: 24-27 demonstrates the benefits of doing.

Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock. Rain poured down, rivers flooded, and winds beat against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on solid rock. Anyone who hears my teachings and doesn't obey them is like a foolish person who built a house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers flooded, and the winds blew and beat against that house. Finally, it fell with a crash.

Spiritual learning involves looking and listening and putting into practice what we have seen and heard.

Touch/Feel

The touch/feel aspect may be related to lived experience (Figure 1) and may be seen in the teachings of 1 John 1:1 and of Psalm 115:7. In John the NIV says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." This speaks to the importance of lived experience or experiential knowledge. And, in Psalm 115, verse 7, as noted at the outset, "They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats." While the reference is to man-made inanimate idols, the illustration is a reminder that the presence of eyes, ears, and hands does not ensure seeing, or hearing or doing. Recall that one of the facets of a learning disability definition was the exclusion of some external cause. This Psalm may serve as a reminder that while we may appear to have potential, we need volitional action to work toward achieving our God-given potential.

Conclusion

In previous articles (Dyck & Pudlas, 2021; Pudlas, 2019; 2020; Stace-Smith & Pudlas 2020), the focus was full inclusion into the Body for those who may be deemed exceptional and marginalized. Spiritually, all of us are exceptional; by definition, we fall short of God's established normative standard. Here the reflection shifts to how some of the special educational interventions used for persons with learning disabilities (LD) might be applied to enhance our own spiritual growth and development.

Another purpose is to show that we all have our own challenges in living the abundant life Jesus came to provide. Given that realization we should be less prone to "othering," and thereby less prone to marginalize those who we may deem to be different.

Finally, this reminder is offered readers who may be entering some form of Christian ministry. Sometimes the D in LD might aptly describe a learning *deficit*.

As was discussed briefly, the lack of growth, development, and learning experienced by persons with learning disabilities – including those of a spiritual nature – may be due to a dearth of instruction on “how” to learn. The parallels examined in this article have mainly been concerned with personal spiritual growth. We may broaden the parallel to apply to the Church. Teachers educated in special education intervene so that persons with learning disabilities may grow, develop, and learn. Churches also intervene to disciple authentic apprentices of Jesus who live the full life that Jesus has promised them. As special education is a necessary and intentional activity of schooling, discipleship should be a necessary and intentional activity of churches. We rightly seek to bring people to a saving knowledge of the Gospel. Do we do enough to disciple one another to most fully learn to be authentic apprentices of Jesus and to live the full life that he promised?

Ken Pudlas earned his doctorate at the University of British Columbia, and recently retired as a Professor in the School of Education at Trinity Western University. He was instrumental in establishing and teaching special education courses at both UBC and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee prior to his tenure at TWU. Prior to his university career, Ken taught students with special needs in the K-12 public school system in several districts in British Columbia. Dr. Pudlas developed and was the Director of the MA in Educational Studies in Special Education program, approved by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and launched in the summer of 2014. This program seeks to bring together head (knowledge) and hands (skills) motivated by the heart to empower educators toward inclusive praxis. Dr. Pudlas also developed the Minor in Special Education program which has grown in popularity as pre-professional teachers realize the ever-increasing diversity among learners in today’s classrooms. He has done extensive research on the Full Inclusion model of service delivery and has presented locally, nationally, and internationally on topics related to learners with diverse needs.

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