

**Interdependence: Being Reformed by Students with Disabilities**

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**Abstract**

Throughout my career in special education, I have re-considered my beliefs about disability. As I have transitioned from a special educator to a teacher trainer in India to an assistant professor in a Christian college, I have looked beyond limitations and deficits of my students to see individual uniqueness. In this article, I share my lived experience of people with severe special needs ministering to me in India, explore the lived experiences of other disability advocates, and describe the implications this has for my teaching at a Christian college.

Didi! (Big sister in Hindi). I was always greeted enthusiastically with smiles and hugs when I entered the dusty village school area. As I entered the special school each morning, I often focused on what we were going to do that day or week. However, during my year at the orphanage in India, my faith was transformed by my students with severe special needs. My students were focused on being present in each moment, being loved, having friends, laughing, and being interdependent. On the exterior, these students were physically disabled, non-verbal, and/or cognitively delayed. Yet, I was forever impacted by them and their ministry of grace towards me. In this article, I explain my transformed beliefs about disability and how it impacts the way I teach my college courses in a teacher preparation program.

Disability can mean different things to different people in different places. Disability is a complex construct, and there is no universally accepted definition of the term (Singal, 2009). The change in discourse about disability over the years reflects the dominant culture of ableism and the discomfort we feel when discussing issues we fear or don't understand (Yong, 2011). People with disabilities have been rejected through social barriers and binary categories (i.e. normal vs. not normal), which have been constructed by our abelist culture (Creamer, 2009; Hamilton, 2009).

There are multiple lenses through which we can view or understand disability. One of these lenses is social constructionism, which is concerned with how people "describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). Social constructionism assumes a critical stance and encourages us to question our assumptions and perceptions (Burr, 1995). Disability can be viewed as a biological/medical experience, but also a phenomenon of oppression, marginalization, exclusion (Yong, 2011). People with disabilities suffer more from other people's responses to their disability than from their so-called disabling condition (Reinders, 2014). Socially and culturally, people with disabilities have been made "outcasts" and treated in "demeaning and exclusionary ways" (Eiesland, 2001, p. 2; Reinders, 2014, p. 9).

In this article, I consider a theological perspective: a "redemptive theology of disabilities" (Yong, 2011, p. 58). People with disabilities do not need to justify their existence; they are created in the image of God. Their disabilities do not need to be removed or healed for them to be ministers of grace. Instead, others must be saved from discriminatory attitudes and practices.

**My Lived Experience: The Draw of Special Education**

I first explored special education because I was told that it would be difficult to find a job in elementary education; however, jobs were plentiful in the field of special education. As a senior in high school, I had an internship in the middle school special education substantially separate classroom, in which I helped students with their classwork. I loved the excitement and joy on the students' faces when they were able to master a concept after much practice and perseverance. I was patient, and I liked the challenge and problem solving involved in figuring out which intervention or explanation would work best and help the student understand.

After teaching in Hartford, Connecticut for a few years, I spent the next decade training teachers in India. My first experience in India was at an orphanage in a village. The orphanage has a special school, for women and girls (orphaned or semi-orphaned), ages 5 – 45 that have various degrees of special needs. As a young teacher, I tried to transfer my knowledge of American special education to the Indian village context, unsuccessfully. The girls and women at the orphanage, as well as the staff of the special school, taught me important lessons – lessons that can apply to the church, the school, or the university in regards to disability. I was focused on doing – creating a vocational candle-making project, crafting Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives for each woman and girl, and constructing structured activities during school hours. However, I could never do enough for these girls and women. They wanted and needed me to just be. It is easy to get caught up in doing church, rather than being the church (Yong, 2011). India began to break me of my perfectionist attitude. Life can be messy in India — sometimes chaotic. I learned to slow down — to see and hear people. I learned to adjust my focus from getting tasks accomplished for God, to just loving Him, loving others, and allow others to love me.

For girls with special needs from low socio-economic status backgrounds and low castes, a “triple jeopardy” exists (Halder, 2009, p. 635; Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2001). The intersection of gender, disability and poverty/caste can create many educational exclusions for girls with disabilities in India. I explored many of these relationships during my doctoral coursework, especially in a comparative education class. For example, Hodkinson and Devarakonda (2009) examined the idea of inclusion in India and England, given the different cultural context and histories. In India, a number of religions exist, such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Given that 80% of the Indian population identifies as Hindu, the article claims that many assumptions, beliefs and attitudes rooted in present Indian cultures seem to be formulated with reference to Hindu mythology, classic Vedic epics and other religious texts, which reinforce values related to charity, pity and compassion (Hodkinson & Devarakonda, 2009). The authors then proceeded to contrast the Hindu beliefs “to a Christian ethic where the disabled are the Other that the perfect god (Jesus) must heal” (Hodkinson & Devarakonda,

2009, p. 263). Since reading this, I have often wondered about, but never had the opportunity to explore, this claim. Does Christianity treat disability as something that needs to be healed or cured? In this paper, I explain my findings by examining lived experiences of people with disabilities and those who have drawn closer to God through their friendship with people with disabilities.

### **Lived Experiences**

In some qualitative research, the emphasis is on the participants’ experiences and their descriptions of their world. As I consider what disability means, it is necessary to reflect on the lived experiences of people with disabilities. One of the most famous Christian disability advocates is Joni Earekson Tada. Tada has written that “God does not create accidents” (Newman & Tada, 1987, p. 17). God uses disabilities for multiple purposes and each person with a disability is loved by God and has dignity and worth (Yong, 2007).

Another Christian disability advocate was Henri Nouwen, who was not physically disabled himself, but lived in a L’Arche community before his death. The L’Arche communities, founded by Jean Vanier in France in 1964, see people with severe disabilities as vital to the church. In L’Arche communities, people with severe disabilities are teachers to people without disabilities, sharing their lives with each other, and choosing to be with each other, rather than doing something for them. In this way, people with severe disabilities help others see truths about themselves and understand what it means to be truly loved by God while becoming closer to God (Reinders, 2008). People with intellectual disabilities can confront us with truths of our limitation, fears, and our own brokenness. As Nouwen cared for and assisted his core member, Adam, he realized that Adam, “more than anyone, connected me with my inner self, my community, and my God....” He was “my counselor, my teacher, and my guide, who could never say a word to me but taught me more than any book, professor, or spiritual director... the most vulnerable person I have ever known and at the same time the most powerful” (Nouwen, 1997, p. 101). Nouwen recognized that Adam’s way of radical vulnerability was the way of Jesus. According to the Fundamental Principles of the L’Arche communities, people are humans:

Whatever their gifts or their limitations, people are all

bound together in a common humanity. Everyone is of unique and sacred value, and everyone has the same dignity and the same rights. The fundamental rights of each person include the right to life, to care, to a home, to education and to work. Also, since the deepest need of a human being is to love and to be loved, each person has a right to friendship, to communion and to a spiritual life. (L'Arche USA, 2016)

Living in the L'Arche community allows people to learn about God's love in profound ways. In the L'Arche communities, religion provides comfort and meaning to the members while enabling them to treasure and model love (Reimer, 2009). L'Arche focuses on "committed relationships, openness and the acceptance of weakness, a life of friendship and solidarity in and through the little things we can do. It is not a question of doing extraordinary things, but rather doing ordinary things with love" (Reimer, 2009, p. 53). Each life is sacred, and we need each other. At L'Arche, the core members are people with disabilities and are the prophets and teachers.

Another disability advocate, though not a Christian, shares a powerful lived experience in India. Malini Chib, was born with cerebral palsy and has lived in India and the UK. At the time of publication of her book, Malini was 42 years old.

Society always has these stereotypical concepts of disabled people, where they are portrayed as being extremely dependent and helpless. Why? Disabled people are human beings first. But most people see the deformity and the disability before they notice any person attributes. The person within the disabled person is always unnoticed because their physical demands are so immense and often glaring. (Chib, 2011, p. 85)

Attitudes do matter. They can make you feel included or excluded. Foucault argues, 'who is normal?' 'who is disabled?' 'who decides normal and abnormal.' Are we conditioned by society in the definition of what is normal? Do we only see if from society's perspective of normalization? Or can definitions evolve as time goes by to include everyone? ...I cherish those friends who love me just the way I am. They do not try and make you kind of 'normal' which I can never be or may not want to be, because I do not know what your 'normal' is. I know only me. I like me. (Chib, 2011, p,

196 – 198)

We are all interdependent. What we do impacts the lives of others. We are one body (1 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 12:5). According to Chib (2011), "Everyone is interdependent – socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Are we not dependent on the plumber, the electrician, and computer technician?" (p. 149). By focusing on interdependence, I can encourage my pre-service teachers to allow their faith to spill over into their daily lives and vocation, rather than compartmentalizing their beliefs to church and Bible study (Anderson, 2010). We can allow our faith to direct our learning and practice.

Christians often respond with pity and care towards people with disabilities. People with disabilities are often seen as objects of care, concern, or charity – people that need to be ministered to. We often ask the question, "What can we do for them?" (Reinders, 2014, p. 13). However, in a redemptive theology of disability, people with disabilities are people first. They are ministering agents. They are not passive, but they are contributing and interdependent members. They are to be fully included and each contribution received – for the enrichment and edification of others (Yong, 2011). People with disabilities do not need to be cured, however, people without disabilities must be saved from discriminatory attitudes and practices. According to Eiesland (2001), Christianity can work against prejudice and exclusion and instead "foster vision and commitment to change toward a better society, a more adequate theology of humanity, and a model of the church in which all participate fully" (p. 35).

The theology of disability informs, shapes, and guides the practices of the church (Yong, 2007). The way I teach my college students allows their theology of disability to impact their practice as a Christian educator. It is my responsibility to continually reflect on my teaching of special education so that I ensure that I am promoting justice, listening, removing barriers, and allowing full participation of people with disabilities. I aim to model these practices for my students.

### **Integrating Faith and Learning**

Ascribing to the redemptive theology of disabilities allows my theology to be practical and applicable. I teach special education the way I do because of my Christian faith, while acknowledging that people with

disabilities have ordinary and sacred lives (L'Arche, USA, 2016). We don't just want to welcome and invite people with disabilities into our schools and churches, we can honor their contributions and accomplishments. People with disabilities are much more than passive recipients, they can be contributing members of God's kingdom, and we must engage with them, and allow them to minister to us.

It is important for pre-service teachers to reflect on their beliefs and perceptions of disability, since their beliefs will impact the way they teach students with special needs (Thorsos, 2012). Throughout their coursework and over their career, pre-service teachers must reflect on and consider ways in which their beliefs impact interactions with their students and their families, as well as the way they diagnose disabilities and offer intervention and remediation in their classroom.

While it is extremely important for teacher candidates to know and articulate their theology of disability and to create an inclusive, hospitable, and inviting classrooms, teacher candidates also can be made aware of the various worldviews and perspectives from which families may come into their classrooms. We can display empathy – each student and family has a different story. They are doing the best they can with the tools they have (Brown, 2015). Teacher candidates may work in the US with families that have immigrated, or they may live and work abroad and operate in a different context.

Pre-service teachers should be aware of the way people of different ethnicities and cultures view disabilities (IRIS Center, 2008). In some cultures, a disability is something that brings shame or pity to families, or results in stigmatizing the whole family. Other cultures will see a child with a disability as a gift or a blessing (IRIS Center, 2008). New teachers can form trusting relationships with parents by: sharing resources, encouraging more family participation in the IEP process, and providing homework assistance (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2016).

Instead of making assumptions about a student and their behavior (and the parents' behavior), seek information and get to know their story. Recognize the interdependence that exists between the teacher and the student and their family. At times, students and other

staff will support us – they are not always the receivers of our support. A strong, collaborative community is necessary in education. A hospitable classroom focuses on the contribution of each student and member by recognizing who they are, the gifts they bring to the classroom, and how we will benefit and learn from them.

As I share my own personal story of the way my faith and Christian worldview has been reshaped over the years, especially in India, I hope my students will understand more of my personal journey and how my faith has been reformed and I have been transformed to becoming more Christ-like. My faith has been strengthened by students and adults with special needs through humbling and enriching experiences.

The attitude and character of pre-service special educators is the result of the integration of faith and learning. Through their coursework, they develop ethical thinking and behavior (Alleman, Glanzer, & Guthrie, 2016). It is my aim to lay the foundation for my students to become reflective practitioners, constantly evaluating their practice and beliefs. As Christian special educators, we can look at our unexamined prejudices that we may have towards people with disabilities. When we re-think and revisit our views on disability, we can begin to have inviting, healing, and reconciling classrooms, schools, and churches.

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