

Special education programs cater to 'kids in the cracks'

By Emily Morrison

They're referred to by a variety of labels distinguished by legal definitions, social sensitivity or the lack of it, and an emotional emphasis that variously shifts our collective comprehension of the problem toward sympathy or stigma.

Some educators consider them slow learners, others call them learning-disabled or learning-impaired or perceptually handicapped students. There is even dissension as to whether the phrase "slow learners" can be uttered in the same breath with "learning disabilities," since the latter is actually a legal classification. Furthermore, according to Steve Oberst, principal of St. Pius X School, many children labeled as learning-disabled score above average on intelligence tests yet show evidence of a learning impairment that impedes the progress with which they are able to absorb new knowledge or knowledge of certain kinds.

Sister Diana Dolce of Nazareth Academy offers a more colorful catch phrase that seems to strike a balance between conflicting formulas while somehow including an element of each in the equation. "They call them 'the kids in the cracks,'" says Sister Diana, director of the academy's Fundamental Learning Skills program, an award-winning classroom-oriented approach to educating high school students who have special learning needs. "These kids aren't considered 'learning-handicapped,' so they don't have special classifications that would entitle them to that kind of funding. At the same time, they can't keep up with the pace and large group class sizes of regular education, so they end up failing and falling through the cracks."

Sister Diana's solution takes into account the widespread confusion over what causes a supposedly impaired student to experience difficulty learning material with which average to gifted students apparently have little trouble. "Most of our kids are not learning-disabled, in the strict sense," she begins. "Most learning-disabled kids have an above average IQ, but a specific disability in a particular area, like reading or math." City school district programs often place learning-disabled students in regular classrooms and send them periodically to resource rooms for specific help with individual disabilities, according to Sister Diana.

"We look upon IQ more as an indication of how quickly or slowly students can learn material, not as an indication of their ability to learn," she explains. "Most of our students come to us with an IQ in the range of 70 to 85, which means they need a lot more time to learn the same material. If they're given that time, they can learn just as much as everybody else."

The rate of learning most students evince at the beginning of a school year is often excruciatingly slow, Sister Diana notes. "By June, they've increased their rate significantly. The difference between the freshmen and the seniors is phenomenal. Their IQ scores have often gone up by as many as 20 points."

The method by which Sister Diana manages to effect such a dramatic improvement is, fortunately, not a closely guarded secret. She and Sister Jeanne Marie Day designed the FLS program in 1977, after the staff at Nazareth Academy tracked students at different phases in the educational process and discovered that a significant segment appeared to have indeed fallen through what they perceived as an ever-widening crack.

"What we've done is taken the regular New York state curriculum and broken it down into very small segments," says Sister Diana. "We use mastery learning techniques, which means that we don't go on to a new subject until the student has reached 85 percent mastery in the initial one."

Although it takes FLS students four years to complete the state's mandated three years of social studies, for example, these students are able to make relatively rapid progress because their teachers have managed to separate the absolutely essential from the extraneous. If time permits, those elements that were omitted from required units are added back in as "enrichment" material.

To the question of what makes a child a slow learner in the first place, Sister Diana responds, "Some of our children are made slow learners by the level of the curriculum at the elementary level. If you've got good kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers, most children can keep up. If a child is out sick a lot, or has a poor teacher, the gap begins to widen."

Some tasks, she adds, are assigned before children are developmentally ready to perform them, thus creating learning disabilities. Certain students are mentally retarded, while still others develop learning disabilities because they are not given the proper care or motivation at home. "We try to spot those problems as they develop," she

affirms. "If we could help elementary schools to develop programs like ours, we wouldn't need our program on the high school level."

Sister Diana cites as evidence of her theory the remarkable progress made by several students who had been evaluated at the elementary level as hopelessly unable to learn. Once Sister Diana was able to convey to these students the basic learning skills they had never been taught, their competency test scores revealed that, as she puts it, they literally blossomed.

"We need to teach the teachers how to teach these kids within their regular class settings, and at the same time evaluate their curriculum," she asserts. "Down the line, a creative way to look at our parochial school system would be to look at schools in terms of grade level rather than parish location." Sister Diana even advocates the possibility of a centrally located school that would pool, in a single school building, both the resources and learning-impaired students from all over the diocese.

Fortunately for elementary school students in the diocese of Rochester who require special education classes, such innovative steps may obviate the need for extensive remediation at the secondary level, perhaps sooner than most of us imagine. According to Sister M. Edwardine Weaver, superintendent of schools, the Department of General Education has initiated a task force to assess special education needs across the diocese and make specific recommendations. Under consideration are "modifications of present programs, options for locating such programs centrally or regionally, and alternative sources of funding." The task force is currently working with contacts in Albany, in cooperation with the New York state Department of Education, to explore resources for full utilization of services available through current legislation.

"Our drawback has been in obtaining additional funding," Sister Edwardine states. "We're committed to addressing the problem, and have begun to take some steps toward doing that."

In the meantime, two radically different elementary level programs being initiated this fall at Holy Cross School and Sacred Heart School will join one already established at St. Pius X. Sister Theresa Collins oversees a reading and language development program at St. Pius X that aids learning-impaired students from the primary grades. These students attend remedial classes in a special education room for two hours each day, until they are ready to graduate to a maintenance program for those who are subsequently "mainstreamed" back into regular classroom instruction. Lynn Keifer directs a remedial reading program for St. Pius X intermediate students evaluated at the lower 5th to 10th percentiles of their classes. Both teachers, according to Principal Steve Oberst, hold master's degrees as well as New York State certification in special education.

Holy Cross School is currently in the process of hiring a special education teacher, through a grant provided by the diocese to set up a learning disability resource room, according to the school's principal, Sister Caroline Knipper. Full-time students of Holy Cross are eligible to receive special instruction for a designated period of time each day, provided they have been evaluated to qualify for the program by the District Committee on the Handicapped.

The resource room will service students who have a diagnosed learning disability of a perceptual or emotional nature, says Sister Caroline, who cites as examples problems with auditory or visual perception, and emphasizes that learning-disabled students are not slow learners or students with low IQ scores. "If I said to a child, 'Take this to the rectory, give it to Father Wheeland, and ask him to call me,' and the child could only grasp the first part of my request, then that would qualify as an auditory perception problem," she offers.

A typical parent of such a child might say, for example, "I told him an hour ago to go upstairs and brush his teeth, and he still hasn't done it." Such children are often considered stubborn or disobedient, explains Sister Caroline, when the real problem resides in difficulty with grasping the meaning of oral requests or instructions.

Children with visual perception problems, she continues, don't remember as well what they read as what they hear. Other learning-disabled students include emotionally handicapped children who have difficulty behaving in a regular classroom setting. A child with a moderate emotional disability might be a possible candidate for the special remediation the resource room will provide.

"Sometimes, a learning disability becomes an emotional problem, because the child becomes discouraged and frustrated, and



Sister Caroline Knipper, principal of Holy Cross School, is in the process of interviewing applicants for the position of special education teacher. Sister Caroline plans to initiate a learning disabilities resource room program at Holy Cross this fall.

loses self-confidence," Sister Caroline adds. "The upbeat side of this, of course, is that, when parents and school work together to identify a learning disability, to understand the nature of the disability and learn ways to meet the child's needs, it can be a wonderful happening for the child. As with a medical diagnosis, finally identifying the problem is often a great relief."

Learning disabilities are often initially diagnosed by a school's Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) team, a psychologist, social worker, school nurse, and speech therapist provided to every public and parochial school by the City School District. "Once a month, our PPS team sits down with us and we talk about our academic or behavioral concerns about a particular youngster," says Sister Caroline. "A child, for instance, doesn't seem to be paying attention, or is doing well in reading and not in math, or is acting out or disrupting class. If it looks like the child just needs a little bit of prodding or encouragement, we recommend that the teacher go back and try several suggestions, then report back to us." If a genuine learning disability is suspected, the parents must fill out a three-page form for submission to the Committee on the Handicapped, which then

makes a recommendation as to whether placement in such a program as the Holy Cross resource room is advisable.

"I've never seen a youngster fail, no matter the nature of the disability, when parents and school work together," says Sister Caroline. "When a parent can take the risk of being open and the school can take the risk of working with the child, nobody loses."

The services of outside agencies and private counselors, says Sister Caroline, are becoming invaluable sources of understanding and support. With parental affirmation, an agency or therapist will often report to school officials on the results of individual testing. "Such support is given and received professionally, and used professionally," she adds.

"Up until now, parents who have desired a Catholic education for their learning-disabled children haven't always had that option," says Sister Caroline, who reports that she always experienced a high degree of cooperation from the City School District during the many years that Holy Cross students were bused to city school programs for the learning-disabled. Now that Holy

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