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1981 has been the International Year of Disabled Persons. Its aim – to draw attention to the plight of the 450 million physically or mentally handicapped human beings throughout the world (a total equal to the entire population of Africa, or that of the United States and the Soviet Union combined). As 1981 draws to a close, we spotlight the efforts being made by a school in Switzerland to practise the theme preached during the International Year of Disabled Persons – “full participation and equality.”

The lesson learned at the Ecole

By Colin Farmer

CHRISTINE was a lovely, pretty baby, but her parents found her very restless. As the months went by she became more and more wild and unruly. By the time she was expected to begin speaking, her parents started to worry. She seemed unresponsive and incapable of more than a meaningless babble.

Then tests confirmed the worst fears: Christine was almost totally deaf. Her wild behaviour was a response to the frustration that she was otherwise incapable of expressing.

Her parents, Rosemarie and Wolfgang Haas, were on the staff of the Ecole d'Humanité, a community of educators and children in the Swiss mountain village of Hasliberg in the Bernese Oberland attended by students from many parts of the world. Fortunately, at least, Christine had been born into a closely-knit community.

Mr and Mrs Haas were determined to make every effort to enable Christine to become an equal. Rather than raising her as a deaf-mute who communicates

by sign language, their goal was to train her so that she could speak with everyone and live like any other child in the school.

Under expert guidance, Mrs Haas was able to train Christine so that even at a relatively early age she could be given small speaking parts in school plays. From the age of nine she was able to attend regular school classes.

Now, at the age of 16, she can share fully in the school and social life with other youngsters. Christine is even able to address the school assembly and – in addition to her native German – is a promising student of French and English.

Her accomplishments have

been noted in specialised circles far beyond the school – and have even made an important contribution to the school itself.

American educator Natalie Luthi, who co-directs the school with her Swiss husband Armin, recalls that Christine was a very special case.

“Deaf children are rarely taught to speak in a style that is easily understood,” she said. “They are often stigmatised by their garbled pronunciation or by using sign language.

“I had never seen such a badly handicapped person working with others and feeling at home with them. For most of us here it was the first time we realised this could be done so easily. Today

she is fully integrated into our school programme.”

Sacrifices for Susanne

Christine was barely on her way when the school was asked to accept a girl confined to a wheelchair. At first, the staff were hesitant, even fearful of the proposal. But once Susanne had joined the school, the effect of her presence was far from scary.

She required constant help, had to be pushed down the long footpath and up to the laboratory, even in snow and sleet. But there was always a youngster eager to help her. Her presence brought out generosity and readiness to make sacrifices among the other children.

“Everyone became more alert, more attentive to Susanne’s needs and to his own behaviour,” recalls Mrs Haas. “We also had to watch our own words. We could no longer thoughtlessly protest ‘I’m not blind, I’m not deaf, I’m not lame’.

“The children grew far more conscious of their own physical senses and attitudes – it was an immense enrichment for them.”

There are now six seriously disabled children in the school (blind, deaf and spastic), not counting others with such ‘minor’ disabilities as speech defects and a missing arm.

“But they all spread goodwill and sunshine, have a very contagious happiness about them,” says Mrs Luthi. “They are excited about life in the school, and enthusiastic about classes, meetings, plans for a hike or a dance evening.”

Initially, for ‘normal’ people,



Christine Haas with foreign students at the Ecole

d'Humanité



Hasliberg in the Bernese Oberland . . .
scenic setting for the Ecole d'Humanité

fear is a major obstacle – fear of the unknown, fear of those who are 'different'. This barrier can, however, be overcome through close personal experience and growing respect for those who accomplish with the greatest effort and endeavour what – for most of us – seems so easy.

One of the boys suffers from a neurological disorder which causes him to stumble from step to step, thrusting his body forward and backward as he advances with difficulty. But he was determined to take part in the annual three-day hike and felt challenged to join others in walking up a mountain.

Nothing could hold him back. He puffed and pushed himself painstakingly up the rocky path. The others were already at the top when he finally made it, together with two children who stayed by his side.

Everyone was awed by the effort he had made, marvelled at his strength and courage. Discovering what climbing means to someone who can't walk, they completely forgot their own aching feet.

One teacher, Frederic Bach-told, had worked in an institution for the disabled before joining the Ecole d'Humanité.

"I was aware that we should not approach the handicapped with pity, yet I adopted a protective attitude towards them," he said.

"When I came here I found that this attitude was an unconscious obstacle in my relationship with my blind colleague, Martin, a teacher of mathematics.

"Gradually, however, he became a true partner. I cherished his friendship and ideas. He had fewer contacts with

pupils than other teachers did, but his relations were deeper and enduring, even after he left the school.

"Many children, especially in adolescence, ask themselves: 'Why am I here, what am I doing, what is the sense of it all?'"

"They were strongly attracted to Martin and seemed to say: 'You are someone who has mastered life, overcome your handicap. Surely I can learn from you how to cope with my own life.'"

Segregated suffering

Experience in the education of the disabled in a normal environment has given confidence to the educators. Moreover, it has convinced them that the education in institutions which cater for children who all suffer from the same disability only reinforces

their segregation rather than preparing them for life in the world.

It is so much easier to resort to sign language or mere lip reading, to move about in a protected environment. But what happens when this environment is withdrawn and the disabled are confronted by conditions for which they have not been prepared?

A teacher found that "one disability counteracts the other and helps children to overcome their shortcomings. The presence of other handicapped is in fact useful when disabilities are different. But when children of the same disability are constantly together it only reinforces their handicap."

Why, however, do 'normal' people see only the disability when they encounter a disabled person? Why don't they see the hidden face of the disabled, the latent and sometimes apparent abilities?

Everyone is disabled in certain situations. A monolingual person feels handicapped in the environment of a language he can neither understand nor read. But should he be called 'handicapped'?

Fear of another's disability and awkwardness in human contact turn into natural ease when the able-bodied live closely with the disabled in a mixed community. Readiness to accept physical differences prepares children similarly to accept differences in race, religion and personalities.

That is a lesson learned by the Ecole d'Humanité.



Christine, a promising student of French and English, addresses the school assembly

Photos: Ecole d'Humanité and Hasliberg
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