ABSTRACT
SPECIAL EDUCATION AS A MORAL MANDATE IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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This study summarizes the level of services offered to students with special educational needs in Catholic schools and finds that children with disabilities are underserved and that research regarding the extent and types of services offered is insufficient. More importantly, the author examines the practice of Catholic schools’ non-admission of students with special needs using: traditional Catholic Social Teaching, especially the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas; virtue ethics; the hermeneutic of real, lived experience; and liberation theologies and related liberatory disciplines. Viewed through each of these lenses, current Catholic school practice, in the majority of cases, is unjust. To remain true to Christian theological ethics, schools must begin a practice of admission, as a rule, with some possible exceptions for children with special educational needs as opposed to the current process of non-admission, as a rule, with some possible exceptions.

Parents give many reasons for desiring a Catholic education for their children, but an excellent education in both academics and in the Catholic faith (Durow, 2007; Scanlan, 2009) are among the most commonly mentioned. Through this education, parents and schools hope to bring children to their full flourishing, in keeping with their human dignity, and to benefit the common good. If the Church offers such schooling to some children, should it not be offered to all, especially to the most vulnerable?

Liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1988; Eiesland, 1994), philosophy (Dussel, 2003), psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994), and pedagogy (Freire, 2000), along with Miranda Fricker’s (2007) epistemic injustice theory of virtue ethics, all contend that our collective understanding is shaped by those in power. Power structures in government, business, entertainment, and even sometimes in the Church project an image of fully-abled, light-skinned, middle- to upper-class, individuals (as opposed to people in community) with conventional intelligence not just as the norm, but as the ideal. Instead, the aforementioned authors and theories call us not only to reject the conventional wisdom and stereotypes, but also to destroy them, the first step of which is to destroy the old norm-based system of admission to Catholic schools. Finally, this thesis offers some pragmatic strategies to begin this process.