

In Memory of a Teacher, Mentor, Scholar and Friend:

Samuel A. Kirk

Born 1904, Died 1996

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Dr. Samuel A. Kirk, the father of modern Special Education, died on 21 July 1996. He began his professional life as a psychologist, obtaining both a Bachelors and Masters Degree in psychology from the University of Chicago. His PhD was in physiological and clinical psychology from the University of Michigan. To earn money while a graduate student, Sam taught children with disabilities: first at the Oaks School in Chicago, and later at the Wayne County Training School near Detroit. While at the latter, he collaborated with his wife, Winni and T.Hegge to create the Hegge, Kirk, & Kirk "Remedial Reading Drills", which are still in use some 60 years later. Following completion of his doctorate, Sam became director of special education teacher education programs at Milwaukee State Teachers College; served as a rehabilitation specialist with the US Army in World War II; and in 1947, joined the faculty of the University of Illinois.

While well versed in the contributions of pioneers in the field, Sam led the way in insisting that a score on an IQ test did *not* provide a blueprint to what that child could (or could *not*) do in the future. Further, as a psychologist, he sought to develop assessment instruments that would provide a differential diagnosis, not just a classification, and hence would serve to provide the teacher with a means of individualizing his or her teaching to meet the child's unique needs. A fuller appreciation of his contributions can be obtained from his selected papers and speeches, compiled by Harris and Kirk, and

published by the Council for Exceptional Children: "The Foundations of Special Education" (1993, 303 pages).

Dr. Kirk was also an internationalist in the finest sense of that term. Long before the days of electronic mail and facsimile transfer of graphic materials across long distance by telephone circuits, Sam was an international figure. His books were translated into many languages, and he was constantly being sought to address national meetings of professionals and parents throughout the world. After he retired from the University of Illinois and moved to Tucson, Arizona he was invited to teach at a university in Mexico, so he insisted on taking Spanish lessons so that he would be able to lecture in that language and not require the service of an interpreter. He even became a TV personality, not in the USA, but Japan, when he was invited by the Japan's National Television Company to spend several weeks there and offer a series of programs, based on his writings.

My memories of Sam are probably much different from many others. I first met him at a CEC conference in San Francisco in 1950; then was his tenth doctoral advisee from 1954-57; and finally a colleague at Illinois from 1962 to his retirement. Despite his training (and doctoral dissertation) as a "rat" psychologist, Sam was first and foremost a teacher. Moreover, his research activities were of a practical nature, designed to improve the quality of teaching children with disabilities. This also extended to the families of his doctoral students. For example, my

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wife and I learned several new polka dances at Sam & Winni's home in Urbana.

Most memorable, though, was a snowy winter's day in 1962, shortly after I had returned to Illinois as a faculty member. Sam asked how my son, Larry was enjoying sledding. When I replied that we didn't have a sled, Sam insisted that I bring Larry to the office that afternoon. There, he presented Larry with

a racing sled that Sam's son had discarded. When it became obvious that neither Larry nor I knew what to do with it, Sam had us come to the sidewalk in front of the office and proceed to demonstrate the "belly-flop" technique on the snow-covered sidewalk, barely missing a half-dozen pedestrians enroute.

Sam was truly a father figure and friend to all his doctoral students and their families.

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