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## **Is Special Education Making a Difference?**

### **Abstract**

The premise of education has always been to prepare future citizens to live, work, and play within the community. Each member of the community should have the skills and desire to contribute to society. However, the system for delivering education has not always worked well for individuals who do not learn, hear, see, speak, move, or behave the same as the majority of their typically developing peers. Thus, special education grew out of need to educate those who could not succeed in traditional curricula.

The impetus for special education began both, as a practical and an altruistic response to educate children who would or could not benefit from the standard curriculum or pedagogy. The ultimate goal was still to provide these citizens with the opportunity to live, work, and play by means of an alternative curriculum and specialized pedagogy. Specialized educational practice emerged for persons who were blind, deaf, or experienced orthopedic impairments and had normal cognitive abilities. However, due to many fears, prejudices, and ignorance children who experienced more significant disabilities were removed from society rather than included. Education became less of a goal, replaced, instead, by minimal care taking or removal from society.

Students receiving specialized supports and services acquired an education; however, few achieved economic independence as adults. The adult world of work, independent living, and access to social and leisure activities left much to be desired. Persons with more severe disabilities languished in institutions or were hidden away in private homes.

In the 1960's a movement began to deinstitutionalize persons with disabilities and return them to society with the opportunity to have access to all facets of mainstream society. Thus, began the need for a reevaluation of what education was and should be. Special education broadened to include children with low incidence disabilities and the pedagogy for children with high incidence disabilities underwent close scrutiny. Legislation, litigation,

and parent advocacy provided the stimulus to cultivate and define best practice in special education.

Despite the best of intentions and the development of successful researched-based pedagogical strategies, rates of employment for persons with disabilities are still extremely high. Services for adults remain scattered and less than satisfactory. The question remains, how can we do this better? Further, resources are being stretched in all of education and the numbers of children identified as needing special education are increasing. Clearly, the need for special education remains, but there is also a strong need for a change in all of education. A redefinition of best practice is order. The collateral effects on business, economics, and society are paramount. Finally, the research methodologies used must provide the kind of answers and support needed to affect educational systems change and create best practice for all children.

## **Introduction**

Most countries have some form of specialized education for children who differ from their typically developing peers in their ability to access the standard curriculum and benefit from traditional pedagogy. In some countries specialized education may be available only to a small population of students – for example, students who experience sensory impairments such as blindness or deafness. Limited resources, cultural patterns, or educational philosophy may inhibit additional or expanded special education services to other children who experience difficulties in physically accessing schools or succeeding in the standard curriculum. Children with more significant disabilities may be served outside of the educational system and instead receive services through a health and welfare system. In some countries (e.g., USA, Canada, Great Britain) extensive special education services exist to support numerous children with all types of disabilities in a variety of educational settings and programs.

The purpose of this paper is to examine special education, as it now exists in the United States of America (USA). Since the passage of P.L. 94-142 The Education for all Handicapped Children's Act in 1975 extensive resources have been given to school systems to provide a free and appropriate education for all children regardless of ability or potential to learn within the general education classroom given a standard curriculum. With more than 25 years of specialized service, we now have a complete generation that has experienced special education. This begs the question, "Has Special Education made a difference?" The answer is not simple.

## **Special Education before 1975**

Special education, when it first began in the USA in the late 1800's was the result of observation and research by American educators studying in Europe and the goodwill of social and church workers. Initially, institutions, methodology, and tests designed by European physicians and educators were brought to the USA and translated into English or adapted to fit the culture of a young and growing country. Schools for the blind and deaf sprouted up and eventually each state would maintain a residential facility to provide

an education to children who were blind or deaf. Institutions for the “feeble-minded” were built and children, often placed there in infancy, grew into adulthood and stayed within the walls of the institutions. Children with orthopedic impairments received services via a medical model. Children who did not do well in school were often held back or dropped out of school at an early age.

The results of war and the subsequent injuries suffered by soldiers prompted legislation in the 1920’s that would create rehabilitation and opportunities for adults with disabilities to engage in meaningful work and return to as near as normal a life as possible. This would eventually filter down and lead to increased recognition of the need to provide services to children who experienced similar disabilities due to birth defects, childhood accidents, or unknown etiologies.

Families also played an increasing role in identifying and providing services for their children. Parents began to question the wisdom of advice from medical practitioners and started to fight for services for their children.

However, the singular, most compelling act occurred with the landmark decision in *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*. If students could not be discriminated because of race or color, disability advocates rationalized neither should students with disabilities. It wasn’t long before *PARC vs. the state of Pennsylvania* established the sought after precedence that children with disabilities were equal to children without and should have access to the same educational opportunities.

## **Educational Change**

The Education for all Handicapped Children’s Act (EHCA) changed education in many ways, but unfortunately, educational change did not come easy nor did it always result in something that was better. From the very beginning a two-track system emerged and to this day has been maintained in both the delivery of educational services to children with disabilities and teacher preparation with the exception of isolated examples. Thus, while school districts added special education programs, the programs were not always integrated in a way that would create an inclusive learning community. Children were separated from their peers and taught in isolated classrooms or separate schools.

I believe the initial response to the mandate for special education was more a matter of bricks and mortar than educational philosophy. Schools already existed with a defined set of services and expectations. There was a first grade classroom or two third grade classrooms per building. Finding a classroom or space for a new program created logistical problems that in the face of increasing demands, administrators met by parsing up what little space remained. Thus, early special education programs existed in boiler rooms, closets, and other less than desirable classroom spaces. Even today, many special education programs find themselves in portable classrooms adjacent to the school building.

However, educational change has taken place and continues to change. With the civil rights movement laying the groundwork, parents and disability advocates increasingly

lobbied for and demanded more integrated services for their children. They knew their child with a disability was more like the nondisabled peer than different. Parents wanted and demanded services for their child. Numerous court cases and due process hearings have listened to parent's concerns and issues. The results of these legal proceedings and legislation have continued to expand and define special education services. Educational research has also contributed a tremendous knowledge base with regards to theory and practice. Best practice has emerged. Continued research is needed to refine best practice and assist schools in engaging in best practice.

## **School-based Change**

Schools began by serving children ages 5 – 21. Early changes focused on expanding services to include young children ages 0 – 5. Children who are identified at birth or shortly after receive early intervention services, usually in the home. As children reach the preschool age (3 to 5) services move from the home to a small group setting with other children although the focus is still on the family and the child within the structure of the family. Services for students age 18 –21 have moved away from traditional high school settings to post secondary settings such as a community college or work experience. All children with disabilities, regardless of the type or level of disability, are now served in age-appropriate settings.

The number of children identified as having a disability has increased. Debate continues as to whether the increase in numbers of children qualifying for special education is an artifact of socially constructed disabilities (i.e., learning disability), poor teaching, an inappropriate emphasis on standardized testing, or failure of families. Regardless of why, the reality for a special education teacher is increased caseloads and more diversity among that caseload. Federal legislation has added disability categories since the original law was passed (e.g., autism, traumatic brain injury) and the current reauthorization effort includes a strong lobbying effort to further delineate the disability categories by adding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The focus on labeling has done little for the individual but has increased public awareness, channeled funds, and promoted research.

The most sought after change has been the change in student learning. Students with disabilities are learning, although there are pockets of failure. We quickly learned that even students with the most severe disabilities could acquire skills and become more independent, and thus, rely less on caregivers. With specialized pedagogy, smaller student-teacher ratios, and modifications to the curriculum; students who were failing in the regular classroom/curricula could be successful. However, there is a continued need for more specialized curricula and modified instructional materials. The impetus behind the recent legislation for the No Child Left Behind Act clearly indicates, though, that we are not serving all children effectively. On the other hand, failure in school does not equal a disability. Many children are failing who do not have a disability. The need to sort out what constitutes at-risk (for learning problems), disability, and failure to learn is a priority.

Perhaps the biggest change in school has occurred on a personal level for all children. The inclusion of children with disabilities into schools has in many ways engendered a

pluralistic society. Students who go to school together recognize each other's worth and potential contributions to society. Children, who then grow into adults, become more tolerant and caring towards those that are different from them. These children, of this first generation of mandated special education, are now beginning their own families and careers. As teachers, doctors, lawyers, firemen, retail clerks, and other workers, their encounters with persons with disabilities could be much different than their predecessors. As parents of children with disabilities, their expectations of the child and the system will reflect their own education alongside children with disabilities.

The engendering of a pluralistic society occurs when students are educated along side one another. Much effort has been made to integrate and include children with disabilities into the mainstream of public education. Although fraught with logistical problems in a two-track system, many committed parents, administrators, and general and special education teachers have worked hard to create inclusive learning communities. Unfortunately, as sometimes happens in schools, there appears to be a slight trend toward returning to segregated specialized supports and services rather than maintaining these supports and services in the general education setting. This is one educational cycle that should not repeat itself. Also, students identified as having behavior or emotional disorders continue to be educated in separate classrooms and programs. Issues of safety and discipline remain.

### **Teacher Preparation Change**

Schools and Colleges of Education responded quickly to the change in schools, particularly in the area of licensure and/or certification. In many instances teacher preparation programs strove to prepare preservice teachers in a manner that promoted best practice. However, the emergence and continuation of the two-track system within higher education continued to support the two-track system within the public school system rather than promoting a redesign of education. Further, the gap between research and practice most certainly exists in special education. Thus, teachers leave preparation programs often unprepared for the realities of the classroom. Special education teachers have the highest burnout rates and burnout more quickly.

The biggest problem has been the lack of fully qualified special education teachers. While teacher preparation programs continue to graduate beginning teachers in over supply areas such as social studies and elementary education, there continues to be a shortage of special education teachers. Alternative certification programs and unique delivery services have tried to meet the need. Distance education has proven very helpful in assisting school districts recruit and retain qualified special education teachers.

### **Societal Change**

Numerous changes have taken place within our society to promote awareness, acceptance, and inclusion of persons with disabilities into the mainstream of life. People with disabilities are increasingly attending college, living independently, becoming

productive members of the work force, and enjoying recreational and leisure opportunities. Technology has been a powerful equalizer for persons with disabilities. Computers have made many jobs possible and provided a level of independence not thought possible. Without education these advances would not be happening. However, more still needs to occur. Colleges and other institutions of higher education or advanced vocational training must provide specialized services and supports for students with disabilities. Students who have exited the public school system continue to need adaptations and modifications in order to be successful learners. Potential employers must also become aware of the possibilities for making accommodations in the work place. Persons with disabilities still experience higher rates of unemployment even though research demonstrates they make dedicated and professional employees.

Accessibility and universal design have made it possible for persons to live within the community and function as independently as possible. I frequently encounter persons with disabilities in the grocery store, on public transportation, and in other community settings. However, lack of funding or inaccessibility still restricts the lives of many people with disabilities.

Perhaps the biggest indicator of change and acceptance has come in the form of movies and literature about persons with disabilities. First of all, there are simply more. Second, a change has occurred in the portrayal of persons with disabilities. While many characters still experience physical disabilities, there is less focus on the need for pity or seclusion. Instead, the focus is on accomplishment and benefit to society. Films and stories offer insight and pave the way for empathy. Several high profile celebrities (e.g., Christopher Reeve, Michael J. Fox) have experienced the onset of a disability in adulthood. Their efforts to inform the public, focus research priorities, and solicit funds have had drastic effects and raised the hopes of many individuals. Non-fiction accounts of persons with disabilities have also increased awareness and understanding. Persons with disabilities or their parents or siblings have written many of these works. Each one has offered us invaluable insight into the lives of persons with disabilities and their families or helped to foster a greater understanding of the disability itself.

## **Summary**

Much progress has been made in the last three decades since the mandate for special education took place in the public schools. Since schools are our main public institution within the USA, the effects of special education have had a ripple effect throughout the community and the country. Plus, a complete generation of children has emerged from an educational system that included special education. No facet of society has been left untouched. Change has not been easy, nor has it always been effective. Funding continues to be a major issue and the increasing number of children qualifying for special education services taxes an already overwhelmed system. In the long run though, funding special education appears to decrease the amount of funding necessary to support adults with disabilities.

Special education, as a discipline within the USA, is entering adulthood. It continues to grow and evolve. Like the adolescent years of youth, when one thinks back on those most

tumultuous times, one generally expresses wholeheartedly a desire not to go back. Special education has made a difference and continues to do so. We should not discontinue the system; however special education must continue to change and evolve in such a way as to meet the ever changing needs of society. Finally, special education will more than likely continue as a catalyst in educational change.

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