The New Push for Excellence: Widening the Schism Between Regular and Special Education

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ABSTRACT. At least half of the children called learning disabled are misidentified; they need help in school but do not warrant the label handicapped. The costs of special services for these children are excessive because much of the extra resources are eaten up by the bureaucratic requirements of assessment and staffing. The authors of the foregoing articles are commended for their altruism because they are willing to give up power, to relinquish the separate domain of special education. If special education were merged with regular education, children’s needs could be met without bureaucratic costs. However, the natural reports are an impediment to the merger of special and regular education because accountability demands make classroom teachers less willing to take responsibility for hard-to-teach children.

I. My reaction to the first four articles in this Special Feature section is organized by four main points:

1. The authors of these articles have aptly portrayed the familiar problems pervading special education.

2. They exhibit unusual courage when they propose a solution requiring special educators to relinquish resources, territory, and claims to specialized knowledge.

3. Unfortunately, the authors have rightly anticipated that educational reforms in response to the national reports will exacerbate problems in special education, especially the overidentification of children as handicapped and the widening schism between regular and special education.

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COST IMPLICATIONS

The ever-growing number of children classified as learning disabled (LD) nationally has stagger-
ing cost implications, as noted by Hagerty and Abramson. What Hagerty and Abramson did not say is that much of the incremental cost is wasted. Almost half of the special education budget for LD pupils is wasted up by assessment and staffing (Shepherd & Smith, 1981). In addi-
tion, the authors recognized a cost, not mea-
sured in dollars, of the server-ending referrals to special education. Teachers, already ill at ease with hand-to-teach children (hence the referrals), become less and less able to respond to the range of individual differences in their classrooms. In a sense, regular and special education teachers have colluded to relieve regular teachers of responsibilities for teaching children functioning at the bottom of their class.

PROPOSED REMEDY

The remedy proposed by these authors is to merge, submerge, possibly even lose the iden-
tity of special education in regular education. If mildly handicapped children are indisting-
uishable from other remedial populations and these is not unique treatment, then there is no need for costly identification procedures or for a separate cadre of teachers. Although current specialists may have a greater repertoire of skills for coping with learning difficulties, these are the very skills regular teachers should acquire to preclude the need for a separate cate-
gory of children. Thus, Pugach makes the altru-
istic suggestion that special educators, including professors who train teachers of the mildly handicapped, must "give away" their special knowledge and unique credentials. (In truth, new skills for general education would have to be accompanied by new attitudes. Presently, teachers in training are taught a referral model, i.e., to solve a problem by finding the appropri-
ate external resources.)

The authors are courageous because they propose to give up power. Some special educa-
tion experts recognize the invalidity of the current identification system but propose to fix it by expanding the province of special educa-
tion to serve generic learning problems in "non-
categorical programs." Usually these proposals imply that children would still be considered "handicapped" to qualify for special education but the exact type of mild handicap would not have to be specified. Expansionists are genuinely concerned that many children struggling in school need special help. But the expansionists do not consider the excessive cost of helping these children under the rubric of special educa-
tion, nor do they acknowledge that endless referrals perpetuate teaching deficiencies.

NATIONAL REPORTS

The national reports are not monolithic in character. Still, I believe the authors of this special feature are correct to say that the na-
tional reports, especially A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Educa-
tion, 1983), ignored special education because attention to the educational needs of a low-
achieving group runs counter to the new emph-
asis on excellence and higher standards. It is also true that various reformers ignore special education because they believe it is a separate enterprise serving a discrete and extreme popu-
lation. Special educators must share some of the blame for this misperception. In political arenas, advocates sometimes use extreme exam-

gles to characterize the needs of handicapped students.

Higher standards for all students will exaggerate the tendency to refer difficult children to special education. Ironically, Royer and Stiger deplore tracking but indirectly foster the most extreme tracking: that is, the tracking of children into groups of normal and handicapped. In an atmosphere of intense accountability, the spe-
cial education label provides a refuge for both the teacher and student. If a child is handi-
capped regular teachers are absolved from respon-
sibility. And, as we have already seen in the minimum competency movement, special educa-
tion students may receive a diploma denied to their low-achieving normal classmates. Brave talk about teachers learning to adapt to a wider range of differences is unrealistic when the sanctions for "failing to teach" or "failing to learn" are serious.

PROFESSIONAL ENTRAPMENT

Hagerty and Abramson have analyzed the prob-
lems facing special education hoping that with full understanding the profession can engage in proactive change. They are overly optimistic.

In fact, they fear that the band is wider. Cost in the special education arena is at an upper bound. For example, the 1981 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education notes, "LD teachers and staff are scarce, so there are few or no special education professionals." The problem is that vocational education is as scarce as special education professionals.

Why can't special teachers be as scarce as vocational teachers? Because the cost is too high. Special teachers are scarce, then the problem is not that vocational education is low in quality.

RECOMMENDATION

Even Hagerty and Abramson admit that current barriers to inclusion are a challenge. But good sense knows that children who are capable of learning with their peers should be included in regular education. Costs and benefits of inclusion are still being calculated, but the trend is clear. The costs of special education, including the costs of placements and personnel, are high. Costs of inclusive education are lower. Costs of the bandwagon of isolation are frightening.

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in fact, they have revealed precisely why the field is hamstrung and cannot rescue itself. Cast in the worst light, the impediment is entrenchment. Jobs and professional identities depend on a separate system. It is a plain fact, for example, that if children were served with remedial help and by team teaching in the regular classroom, school districts would hire many fewer school psychologists (and probably fewer "LD teachers").

There is also a sincere commitment to helping children with special needs that seems, invariably, to prevent significant change. Consider again the wane involved in identifying learning problems as mild "handicaps." Our cost analysis in Colorado (Shepard & Smith, 1981) revealed two interesting figures: (a) Together the state and federal funds supported just under half of the annual special education cost for LD pupils; (b) just under half of the annual LD resources were spent on assessment and staffing. In other words, the districts paid every penny of the extra instructions' support the children received.

Why can't districts cut through the bureaucratic red tape and run their own remedial programs? Because specialists exist. They fear that without the clout of the handicapped label, they will be unable to extract the same level of support from their districts. Sometimes called the "band uniform" problem, many believe that without the mandate of P.L. 94-142, districts would be inclined to spend some of their own special education dollars on band uniforms or general education programs. So, many special educators perpetuate the illusion that districts are generating an extra resource (federal and state dollars) by identifying more and more children as handicapped.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Even Hagerty and Abramson, who recognize the intransigence of advocacy groups, are themselves against official limits on the number of children identified as handicapped. Categorical caps would not resolve the problems of inadequate instruction, they say. But caps on the percentage of mild handicaps would stop runaway overidentification. If special education advocates are afraid of losing resources for hard-to-teach children, why not bargain explicitly? For example, the state and federal governments could pay the full cost of education for the 4% of children who are most severely disabled so long as each district provided evidence that it was spending an equal number of dollars serving its low achieving population. A policy of this sort would guarantee services to the most seriously impaired, would permit greater flexibility, would avoid categorical labels for mild problems, could clearly increase the number of at-risk children served without increased cost (assessment dollars would be redirected to instruction), and would ensure that districts continued to invest in remedial services. If special educators are not willing to "vote" into negotiations of this type, the present system is likely to grow until it is harshly curtailed by a political backlash.

The desirable reinstatement of special and regular education to provide a continuum of instructional services, advocated by the preceding articles, will not occur until the proposals for funding algorithms are as altruistic as Puig's suggestions for teacher training. Special education will have to lose to gain what it seeks for a huge population of at-risk children.

REFERENCES


