



The Changing Role of the Special Educator

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Across the nation, educators are taking a long hard look at special education as it exists today, and are somewhat disturbed by that look. They are suggesting some rather radical changes in both the administrative arrangements of the classes, and the training of the teachers to staff these classes. We in Hawaii are no exception, and are also looking at our training program.

In recent years, a large amount of research has been conducted on the efficacy of placing retarded children in special classes, as opposed to placing them in a regular classroom setting. Although the results are not totally conclusive, there is a strong indication that special classes are really not as special and as effective as had been assumed. Some published research findings show that retarded children in regular classes actually achieve academically at a significantly higher level than those placed in special classes. Evaluation of the social and emotional adjustment of these children seems to favor the special class setting; but with close scrutiny this aspect is also minimized.

Realizing there are numerous limitations in special classes for any group of exceptional children, new ideas and innovations have been set forth. One of the most obvious limitations is that of isolation of the

exceptional children in the special class setting. They are placed in an unrealistic situation, both academically and socially, with other children of similar problems, and deficits. They are allowed little integration into the total school population. In many cases isolation is almost total because other students know they are in the "dumbbell" class, and treat them as such. Thus, social integration, a most important aspect of the education of these exceptional children, is sadly lacking as a part of the total educational program.

The most accepted approach set forth in recent years, and one that is receiving some field testing across the nation, is that of the resource-type of teacher for exceptional children, rather than a teacher for each specific category of exceptional children as now exists. A suitable title is yet forthcoming. Some suggestions have been clinical teacher, special teacher, resource teacher, and special learning teacher. Although no title has received wide acceptance, the basic idea behind each suggestion remains the same.

Special educators tend to agree that a "new breed" of teacher is needed in order to meet the changing concepts in educating the exceptional child. They prefer to train a teacher who can function in a

resource-type of setting equally well with children who are classified as retarded, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, brain damaged, or otherwise. The premise involved here is that the teacher should work with the specific problems of the student, rather than the classification into which the child might fall.

The training of the teacher to fit the above described criteria is not an easy task. No real agreement exists regarding the necessary courses, sequencing of these courses, and practicum experiences. This problem stems, in part, from the newness of the approach, and the lack of research both in the university setting and in the field. Students turned out from any of these new programs are so few that little research has been conducted at this stage of its development.

There are a variety of reasons for the new look at teacher training. First, there is the stark realization that teacher training institutions are never going to turn out the required number of teachers to fill the ever increasing numbers of classrooms established for exceptional children throughout the nation. Radical new approaches must be tried to meet these increased demands.

Secondly, a new emphasis in the field of testing is also affecting special education programs. New

tests, such as the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Ability, yield profiles of the child's strengths and weaknesses in a variety of tested areas. Thus, specific facts are known about each child, rather than just I.Q., or his verbal and quantitative scores. With profiles available for each child, the teacher can then program for specific disabilities, capitalizing on the existing strengths and weaknesses of the child.

Thirdly, and closely related to the above, as new curriculum and administrative approaches have been explored in the field of special education, it has been found that many of them work equally well with a variety of children. A specific example of this is the engineered classroom, developed by Dr. Frank Hewett at University of California at Los Angeles. This is a highly structured classroom situation utilizing behavior shaping techniques. It works well with retarded children, emotionally disturbed children, and deprived children who are functioning below grade level.

Thus, the above three examples are but part of many other examples of why a new fresh approach is necessary in the field of special education.

The next obvious question is that of how the "new breed" should be trained. As previously mentioned, no one as of yet has an answer that has been proven to be correct; so much is trial and error at this point. However, a consensus of opinion can be gathered on some aspects of training.

One area of concern has been over the large number of courses offered by many institutions. One of the best known, and most prestigious of the colleges for the training of special education personnel, offers courses in nine different areas of exceptionality, with a total of ninety-eight courses

being offered in special education. The staff required to teach these courses would be enormous. This large course listing has, in part, been brought on by the United States Office of Education's fellowship programs, which require a complete course listing in each area of exceptionality for which the university asks for funding.

However, as details are worked out with the United States Office of Education, listing could be radically lowered. Students can take a course in "Curriculum for the Exceptional Child," in which curriculum for the retarded, emotionally disturbed, and the learning disabled child is presented as one unit, for much of what is applicable to one group is also applicable to the other. Likewise, other classes that could, and are being combined, are those in the seminars for exceptional children, reading and research courses, and psycho-educational appraisal courses. In addition, more in-depth and breadth courses in learning disabilities are being offered, as this seems to be a common component of many exceptional children's problems. This course deals with the learning problems of children, rather than with specific categories of children.

The last question is concerned with how the newly trained teacher will fit into the public school program? The trend seems to be away from classes and schools for exceptional children, and the integration of these children into regular classes whenever possible. It is readily realized that not all of these exceptional children can fit into a regular class, regardless of what plans are made beforehand. And, for some, the only answer is a special classroom or expulsion from the public school. However, whenever possible these children should be integrated.

The special trained teacher will then serve a dual function. On one hand she will be a resource teacher for the children, and on the other a resource teacher for the regular classroom teacher. Any child who is having specific problems in academic areas can be sent to the resource teacher for help. By the same token, she may set up various reading, math, and related groups for the children based on the learning difficulties and deficits, rather than the child's classification. Thus, children would be free to go to the resource teacher whenever academic problems arise. By the same token, they would receive art, physical education, music and all of academics that they possibly could, from the regular teachers.

The resource teacher also would help the regular teacher to keep the children in the regular classroom whenever possible by helping plan the children's class work. She could aid in getting materials for individualized instruction, appropriate reading levels, unit materials, and such, so as to minimize the amount of time the child must leave the class for specific individualized help.

Granted, the above is an ambitious project. However, all indications are this is the new look in special education. And, it is brought about by better research, more sophistication in curriculum development, and better and more comprehensive testing methods. The question now is how long it will take colleges, universities, and the public school systems to accept this approach, and begin to utilize the better trained personnel that should be turned out because of the revamping of the teacher training program in special education. It is hoped that it won't have to be as long as many educators in the field feel it will.