

Introduction: Critical Voices on Special Education

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On the most basic level, any form of schooling is predicated upon a set of beliefs, values, or ideology. The Kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) configuration that has evolved in the United States is a prime example. Sound arguments could easily be made favoring other arrangements; e.g., pre-K through tenth grade. The K-12 configuration is based more on tradition than logic; and to change it would be quite difficult—but it probably will be different sometime in the future. The same holds true with special education. At first, there was no education for the handicapped, then institutionalization, then special classes, etc. Therefore, changing special education's arrangements will be difficult, because educational programs are a function of ideology and tradition.

One need not be a “zeitgeist detective” to realize that the growing numbers of children classified as mildly handicapped indicates two significant points: (a) the increasing practice of labeling children as impaired learners is an attempt to preserve the rigid K-12 system, and (b) stating that most of these impaired students have mild learning disabilities is a form of pneumatology (a ludicrous study of spirits applied to education). For the mildly handicapped, special education of any type provides a warm supportive environment where, unfortunately, academic standards are lowered; and, at the same time, such students' standardized group test scores—if they take these tests—are not included in the official regular class, school, or district averages. Thus, not only does special education nurture the individual mildly handicapped student, it also preserves the integrity of the K-12 schooling arrangement.

This book examines some of special education's current problems; moreover, it shows the way toward their solution with some new thoughts on theory, policy, and, most importantly, substantial ideas about more efficacious school practice. Contained within this volume of collected papers are previously published journal articles, several of which are from obscure periodicals; but also, some original work by the editor. Additionally, there are short position papers pertaining to special education; these, along with some very brief articles, are appended at the end. The critical voices represented in this tome are not only those of researchers and scholars, but also large national practitioner organizations representing thousands of other critical but unnamed voices. All of the authors or organizations whose work was selected to appear in this edited book represent much of the vanguard of thought about special education today—although not all of them consider themselves to be exclusively special educators, as their ideas could be applied to all students. What all of these authors have in common is their critical posture toward today's system of education for the "classified" exceptional learner.

Although there is little doubt over who is a seriously impaired youngster, there is major concern over the millions of students who are classified as being educationally handicapped because of mild to moderate problems. Those pupils who are blind, deaf, orthopedically disabled, severely to profoundly retarded, and autistic clearly have special educational needs which in most cases require differential educational treatment. On the other hand, for those students with no obvious physical, sensory, or behavioral/emotional disorder, and who do poorly in school, there is grave critical concern. Today, there are serious critics of special education who believe many students of the latter group, the so-called mild to moderate handicapped, should not be part of special education. And this second group constitutes most of the current population of classified exceptional students. These mild to moderate handicaps are in most cases more a product of the educational institutions or the society which produces them—most students are placed into special education because they read poorly or exhibit behavior considered too disruptive for ordinary classes. Furthermore, in most instances, there is no difference between the instruction which these pupils received in regular education—

and did poorly with — to that provided in segregated special classes.

Those school professionals responsible for placing students with no obvious disability into special education do so with good intent; they believe these students will be better helped this way, as ordinary education has failed them. But in order to justify the special placement, psychoeducational tests—most of which have little or no real relationship to instruction or academics—will be administered until the search for some alleged psychopathology or neuropathology is found. And when this occurs, a nurturant change to a less demanding special program is made. Almost all of these machinations are done, really, because of the failure of the regular school program to serve many of today's children; and this is a result of socio-political problems outside the school. But it appears, as things are now done in the schools, that there are millions of children with mild to moderate *internal* handicaps. (Refer to Sigmon [1987a] for an extensive discussion of this problem.) This is what the criticism toward special education today is primarily directed. The problem of the (mis)treatment of the so-called mild to moderate handicapped student remains an "open secret" to a growing number of research-educators at the university level; but this notion is not really known, by and large, within the schools where nothing has yet changed. The lag time between the development of new pedagogic ideas and their implementation in the schools can be as much as fifty years.

Special education must be de-emphasized as soon as possible in favor of re-emphasizing remedial education. Ivan Illich (1970) proposed "deschooling society" so that schools could be re-made to better meet human needs. I propose that most (mild to moderate) educationally handicapped students be immediately deprogrammed from special education and be placed into regular education with remedial instruction.

It is thought that all the authors here believe the key to better education for all students is threefold: More attention to their individual human needs, a solid foundation for learning how to learn, and good instruction. The following chapters address this tripartite notion directly or indirectly. This is done through diverse topics such as different public policy, developmental theory, learning strategy instruction, the "activity model" of reading assessment, and counseling.

In Part I, we primarily discuss the current mistreatment of the mild educationally handicapped. In Part II, different outlooks and methods for dealing with the so-called mildly handicapped are pointed out. (There is, of course, some unavoidable overlap between Parts I and II.) Thus, the emphasis in the second part—the bulk of the book—is on services prior to classification. So rather than using the time of school professionals to “confirm” with questionable inferential psychoeducational test findings a child’s mild handicap, children who have difficulty in school are first provided a myriad of helpful services. Hence, professional resources are utilized prior to special educational placement, there is a major change of emphasis in professional practice under the existing special ed arrangements, many at-risk students benefit individually, and the regular education K-12 configuration continues to function. In essence, this service delivery model—being primarily based upon pre-referral interventions—serves as both a way to change special services/education from within and maintains the K-12 schooling configuration. It may be possible to humanely preserve the K-12 regular education arrangement by merely changing the curriculum (Sigmon, 1987b); and this would reduce the need of regular education to place many students into special education. Nevertheless, special ed’s current regulations (US federal statute P.L. 94-142) must be changed, especially in regard to the present noxious labels and their lenient eligibility (as handicapped) criteria.

Part I opens with a chapter by Scott B. Sigmon, whose emphasis is on problems pertaining to the mild or educable mentally retarded (EMR) label, social class, racial minorities, IQ and standardized tests. Next, Christine E. Sleeter provides her interpretation as to why the learning disability (LD) category is a social construct and how it came about. Then, Sigmon discusses the mildly learning disabled from the radical perspective of the educational foundations field. Lynn M. Gelzheiser shows the relationship of dysfunctional LD policy to current practices, and she proposes alternatively a policy which advocates “a minority view of disability.” Part I concludes with a chapter by George J. Hagerly and Marty Abramson on obstacles to policy change for the mildly handicapped.

Part II starts with chapter 6 where Sigmon proposes a qualitative, interactive “methodology for rational discourse on

special education" knowledge, research, and theory. Sigmon follows with a piece on orthopedically disabled children illustrating how actual impairment is not necessarily handicapping, and how each person, with obvious or suspected impairment, must be viewed individually. Larry Maheady, Richard Towne, Bob Algozine, Jane Mercer, and James Ysseldyke, in a classic article, make an appeal for "alternative practices prior to [formal special education] referral" because of "minority overrepresentation." Inasmuch as almost all students considered learning disabled have reading problems, Peter H. Johnston offers a fresh, "Vygotskian perspective on assessment in reading." Steven A. Carlson outlines "non-normative" assessment procedures as an alternative to those currently in vogue. The University of Kansas Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities (KU-IRLD) had, as its "major mission," the development of "a validated intervention model for LD adolescents" (Schumaker, Deshler, Alley, & Warner, 1983, p. 69). Two significant pieces based on the KU-IRLD work are included within this collection. The first, by Jean B. Schumaker and Donald D. Deshler, explains how the consideration of "setting demand variables" are a part of good "program planning." The second, by Deshler and Schumaker, focuses on "learning strategies" as "an instructional alternative for low-achieving adolescents." At this juncture, Sigmon addresses counseling as an essential, and oft neglected, prereferral intervention. Part II ends with a chapter by Alan Gartner and Dorothy Kerzner Lipsky in which they delineate—actually, they reiterate elegantly and succinctly much of what was previously discussed within this edited collection—and reconceptualize seven crucial areas of special education.

There are six short appendices. The first by Sigmon is a framework for counseling related to his counseling chapter in Part II; it suggests who should be counseled in the schools and relates this to special education. Appendix B, by Sigmon, looks at racial/gender factors regarding special ed placement locally and state-wide. In Appendix C, Sigmon offers an example of school practitioner research on classroom behaviors, which, in their extreme, could lead to special placement. "Rights Without Labels" (Appendix D) is a position statement by three national organizations regarding school services and noxious special ed rubrics. Appendix E is a published letter by Sigmon commenting on

Appendix D. This book closes with another position paper (Appendix F) authored by two of the same three national organizations who penned Appendix D; it is “apropos” to close *Critical Voices on Special Education* with “Advocacy for Appropriate Educational Services for All Children”—it should be the bottom line on education in a democracy.

Finally, I have come to realize that problems regarding the schooling of the “mildly educationally handicapped”—the bulk of the special education population—are complex and *always* involve regular education. This book makes an attempt to change special ed in the short-term, by showing some things that can be done now. Future work in special ed must be more far reaching, it must be systemic and organizational.