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UNDERSTANDING EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Understanding Exceptional Children and Youth

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Credits

To Todd, Craig, and Gary

Preface

Hopefully we are reaching a time in our understanding of children with special needs when we can view them as individuals first and not merely as categories and labels. This book is written with that intention.

You will notice that chapters are not designated by disability labels—mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, physically disabled, learning disabled, and so on. We join the growing number of special educators, regular educators, and parents who no longer believe in narrowly defining and categorizing children for educational purposes. Labels of this kind have not proved to be educationally relevant. The children so labeled—indeed, all children—are complicated persons, and persistent efforts to fit them into predetermined categories and to teach them according to what we know about those categories have not proved to be instructionally sound. Thus we have tried to be judicious in our descriptions of special education labels. While we recognize their prevalent use as a kind of shorthand approach to understanding children, our decision was to offer an alternative approach—that of a noncategorical orientation to understanding disabled children. It is our belief that one's effectiveness may be enhanced by utilizing diverse information to study each child.

In writing this book, we did not attempt to convey an overburdening amount of detail on the various handicapping conditions and programs for exceptional children. Instead, we offer information, frames of reference, and descriptions of promising practices that can assist us in understanding children and designing school and community responses.

We decided to construct a text that reflects the major areas of functioning in a child's life: socioemotional development, communication and language development, and intellectual and cognitive development. In discussions of these areas attention was also paid to children's biological and physical development. These are important areas of develop-

ment for all children, and our task has been to delineate what is involved in each of these and to indicate the particular needs and problems experienced by disabled children as they grow and develop in each area.

This approach reflects what nonspecialists as well as specialists know about children. For example, all children, regardless of their label, experience and show emotions. It is a mistake to focus only on a child's limited intellectual capacity as we tend to do with children labeled retarded. By doing so we ignore the child's feelings. It is inconceivable that these children—and all children regardless of their disability—are not experiencing emotions and processing them on some level. Because category designations are so imprecise, special educators often seek to determine a child's major liability. Again, in the case of those labeled retarded, the dimension of intellectual ability tends to be the primary focus. Even when other prominent skills or assets are present, they are perceived to be the exception, an oddity, not a central variable to be factored into educational placement and teaching programs. For example, educators and parents consistently report on the warmth and responsiveness of children with Down's syndrome (formerly referred to as "mongoloid"). However, it is only recently, as the children have been placed in mainstreamed classrooms, that this quality so long observed and documented has been turned to the children's advantage.

Organization

Part I, "History, Issues, and Advocacy," provides background information to help us understand how special education practices such as labeling have led an increasing number of professionals, parents, and legislators to seek innovative solutions to perplexing issues. For those readers new to special education, it may be helpful to realize that decisions about what is best for children have traditionally been made in the context of society's concerns and needs. Certainly, the persons responsible for those decisions believed they responded with the best of intentions. Yet on a number of issues, such as the benefits of placing disabled children in large institutions, thinking has changed dramatically over the years. Part I also points out that our current solutions to long-standing problems and issues in our field face problems of their own. The deinstitutionalization movement—or the removal of children and adults from institutions by placing them back into the community—is currently facing increasing criticism from the public and from policy makers who must contend with public attitudes and the lack of community facilities.

Part II, "Understanding and Teaching Disabled Students," provides descriptions of children and their needs and strengths that can help us understand why some of the issues and controversies described in Part I have remained so resistant to solutions, even though many changes have occurred. The chapters in this part describe essential areas of development for disabled children: socioemotional development, language and communication, intellectual and cognitive development, and physical development. Despite the fact that each of these areas is described in a separate chapter, we hope that you will keep in mind their interrelated nature. For teachers, it is important to look at the whole child and to recognize the contributions each area of functioning makes to a child's development.

Part II concludes with two chapters on instructional approaches, including detailed descriptions of teaching procedures that respond to children's needs. Again, while there are specific references to "types" of disability, the emphasis is on developing an instructional problem-solving orientation that will allow you as a teacher to assess disabled children's learning and social needs and to design instructional approaches responsive to those needs.

Part III, "Understanding Disabled Students in Context," contains three chapters: one on parents and professionals, and two on adolescents in the community. They serve to underscore the importance of viewing disability in a broader context, one that helps us recognize the pivotal role that parents play in a child's development and the importance of designing programs in the community that respond to the individual's needs for increasing independence. These chapters also underscore the importance of teachers actively involving themselves with parents, as support for both the child and the family. Moreover, the point is forcefully made that parents have much to contribute to the educational process and that teachers would do well to remain open to parent input. The chapters on adolescents in the community reflect the growing recognition of the need to design transitional services and programs for students as they move into adolescence and young adulthood and prepare for independent lives. The notion of independence is central throughout this book. All of the contributing authors believe that the goal of teaching is to foster independent and competent behavior in disabled children. It is fitting that the final chapter focuses on ways that educators and the public can structure community living arrangements and vocational and recreational opportunities to maximize a disabled person's functioning in the community.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the contributing authors, each of whom responded with enthusiasm and skill to the task of writing for a noncategorical textbook. They share my belief in the potential of all students to change, and they recognize that by studying the whole child we can learn to respond thoughtfully and systematically to children's needs. Others shared this vision: Mylan Jaixen, College Editor at Little, Brown and Company, responded to the challenge of publishing an innovative introductory textbook with thoughtful technical assistance and expertise. Deborah Olson and Connie Salvetti provided editorial and typing assistance throughout the preparation of this book.

Throughout the task of writing various drafts of the manuscript, we were given much help by our reviewers. I wish to thank Earl E. Davis, The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; Richard I. Fisher, Colorado State University; Lois N. Hodgson, The University of Toledo; C. Julius Meisel, University of Delaware; Maurice Miller, Indiana State University; Stanley F. Vasa, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; and Sharon R. Vaughn, University of Miami.

I am particularly indebted to Steven Apter and Burton Blatt, colleagues and friends, whose works and lives have influenced me in profound ways. Their untimely deaths are felt deeply by many in our field, but they are remembered for their vision of a field in which all persons with disabilities are treated with dignity and respect.

P.K.

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Brief Contents

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Part I

History, Issues, and Advocacy

The inclusion of a chapter on the history of special education in an introductory textbook is predictable. Your reading of textbooks in other introductory courses may have conditioned you to bear with those authors who were convinced that a thorough approach to the field requires the inclusion of such material. You, on the other hand, were eager to get to the content of the field that lay beyond "ancient" history. Taylor and Searl, the authors of the following chapter on history, issues, and advocacy present a convincing argument of the relevance of this material for the present and everyday functioning of teachers. Their thesis is that current issues and practices can be best understood if one has some historical perspective. Also, an appreciation of the current political and social climate will help you analyze existing programs and public policies as they affect disabled children. Most important of all, this chapter stresses the impact that history and current practices have on you as a teacher in your efforts to respond to children, their families, and community agencies.

Your tasks, therefore, are to become an informed citizen, to utilize your understanding of the current climate to advocate for children's services and programs, and perhaps to seek political and social changes in our schools and in society. Before you cast yourself as an advocate, however, you should become familiar with a few of the current practices, policies, and issues that impinge on teachers, parents, and policy makers.

Deinstitutionalization, or the movement of persons from institutions into communities, is a current and rather dramatic example of an issue that has been with us for a long time. Our response to the question of whether or not to place children in institutions is influenced by the tenor of the times. In support of deinstitutionalization is litigation such as the consent decree between the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania guaranteeing a free public education for retarded children, as well as placing community emphasis in the wording of Public Law 94-142 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975), which calls for handicapped children to be educated with their nondisabled peers to an appropriate extent. Litigation and legislation, which are described in the following chapter, in the 1970s made powerful inroads into how we thought about separating disabled persons from the mainstream of school and community life. By the mid-1980s the populations of institutions for those who are retarded, mentally ill, deaf, and so on have been greatly reduced; thus what first appeared to some as a solution has become a problem. Communities and the public are growing increasingly alarmed with what they perceive to be the "dumping" of mentally ill and other disabled adults into the community without adequate planning. This trend is in marked contrast to the prevailing thought in the mid-1800s, when placement of children and adults into institutions was considered a desirable antidote to inadequate community practices.

As both a teacher and an informed citizen, you should recognize that the reintegration of disabled persons into regular school programs and into the community is indeed dependent upon the existence of responsive programs and the availability of supportive services. Currently, the deinstitutionalization movement is in difficulty because (1) communities never readied themselves for accepting disabled citizens, and (2) the federal government did not systematically follow through with its mandate of the 1960s to develop and fund community mental health centers. As a teacher you can contribute to more positive attitudes toward disabled children by creating programs that are effective and that include other teachers and school personnel as well as parents and other community members. It is the existence of negative attitudes toward the disabled, as well as the lack of community programs, that is contributing to the current

controversy. The climate of the community, including the attitudes of its citizens, will directly affect you and your children in school. These factors are translated into the level of psychological and financial support that special and regular education programs receive. You can contribute to greater understanding and also provide technical assistance in your community and school.

Prevention of disability is another broad area of concern that has historical roots and immediate consequences for children and their families and implications for action on your part. Again, solutions are dependent upon the existence of an informed citizenry, and while answers remain elusive questions abound:

· Why do we still have over 600,000 children with lead levels in their blood over the safety levels set by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta? The informed segments of society now recognize that small doses of lead can harm children and that undetected and untreated lead poisoning can cause brain damage and retardation. This is just one example of how society creates disability.

· Why do we still have malnourished and hungry children in a society as affluent as ours? Malnutrition is another condition that contributes to diminished functioning and even disability—mental, physical, and emotional. The Children's Defense Fund (1984b)—a child advocacy organization—reported an increase of three million new children in poverty since 1979. In providing a portrait of child poverty, the organization states:

> The poor children in America are not just black children in shacks in a Southern town, towheaded white children in Appalachian hollows, or children in displaced rural families living in the mean streets of a barrio or ghetto. They are children nearby—in your town, your neighborhood, your street. They are the children of an unemployed steel worker or auto worker and his wife for whom the only available jobs are part time and low wage. They are the children of the single parent who gets little or no child support and who works at a minimum wage retail sales job. They are the children whose family broke up in divorce and who are now living with grandma and making it on social security checks. They are immigrants to this free land from wars in Asia and Central America. They are all races, sizes, ages, and descriptions. (p. 21)

And, of course, they can be found in special education programs and classrooms.

· Are children suffering unduly from the recession of the 1980s and the federal budget cuts that ensued? The authors of the Children's Defense Fund 1984 study believe they are, and a recent summary of the government's efforts to reduce access to social welfare programs by Robert Pear (1984) of the *New York Times* confirms this conclusion.

· Is the lack of permanency planning for children placed in foster care contributing to children's emotional instability and their inability to direct their energy to learning and positive interpersonal relationships? According to Dorcas Hardy (1984), Assistant Secretary for Human Development Services, Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C., the situation of having more than 500,000 children in foster care by the late 1970s and the growing recognition of the actual and potential damage to such children mobilized policy makers at the state and federal levels to act. One outcome has been legislative reform to encourage the permanent placement or adoption of children in foster care. Special-needs children constitute a significant number of these: 36,000 special-needs children are legally free for adoption as well as thousands of others for whom adoption is the plan of choice. There is a national special-needs adoption initiative comprised of efforts to design legislation encouraging adoptions of hard-to-place children and adolescents and in-