

Preparing Teachers for Special Education in the United States: A Reflection

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Preparing teachers for special education in the United States is a reflection that is not merely another attempt to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it is an investigation to learn from the past, use applications today in order to secure concrete and measurable goals in the diversified future of special education in America. Several historical figures became the voice of individuals with disabilities when persons with disabilities were sequestered from society in America. They are modern day heroes and will be remembered for their courageous deeds to define the individual beyond their disability. While tremendous progress has been made, active preparation is essential for the future educators that will carry the torch of freedom, which is free and appropriate education and full inclusion for all students with disabilities in America.

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Brief History of Special Education

One of the most fascinating aspects of special education is that it literally rode into America on the coattails of the Civil Rights Movement. One of the most powerful and memorable occasions of this era was Dr. Martin Luther King's speech, *I Have a Dream*. August 28, 1963 was a fantastic day at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., because a historical man had the courage to stand up and speak up for a dire need in the nation. Dr. Martin Luther King (August 28, 1963) stated,

In a sense, we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"... But, we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so, we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy... Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

Several advocacy groups were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and parent organizations began to develop which included the United Cerebral Palsy Association, the Muscular Dystrophy Association

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and John F. Kennedy's Panel on Mental Retardation (History of Special Education—The Grassroots Advocacy, 2009). Springing from the advocacy of these groups, the Congress passed PL (Public Law) 94-142 in November of 1975 which mandated federal funding for special education (History of Special Education—The Grassroots Advocacy, 2009). It took until 1977 for this legislation to become effective and became the foundation for federal special education legislation (History of Special Education—The Grassroots Advocacy, 2009). PL 94-142 was significant, because it required public schools to provide a free and appropriate public education to children with disabilities, and required schools to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. This law was expanded in 1983 to include parental supports at the state level, and in 1986, legislation provided for the needs of infants and preschoolers. The IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) was identified as the new title of this legislation in 1990. Prior to this special education legislation, the future was uncertain for students with disabilities, because many children grew up in institutions that were thought to be the best alternative for the children and their families. Like the Civil Rights Movement, special education has made tremendous progress. However, there is still much research to be completed and many different discoveries to be made in order to truly serve children with disabilities in the United States.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver

There are those in the society who have the courage to stand and speak for those who do not have a voice. They are the people that use their opportunities to serve others and think of themselves later. These are the heroes of America. Eunice Kennedy Shriver is an American hero. Mrs. Shriver gave Naola Rubens the courage to decline to sign the paperwork that her pediatrician gave her after her daughter, Lori was born. Ms. Rubens had no conversation or discussion with this doctor, who asked her to legally sign her baby girl over to an institution that cared for children with Down's syndrome (Anton, 2009). Eunice Kennedy Shriver supported other parents in the trenches in the 1960s who were choosing to face public opposition by raising their children with disabilities at home, rather than follow the cultural norm of institutionalizing "imbeciles or idiots" that occurred in society for the last 150 years (Anton, 2009). Since resources for parents of children with disabilities did not exist, Mrs. Shriver used her brother, John F. Kennedy, and his presidency to bring about much needed awareness to the humanity and educational needs of this group of people (Anton, 2009). John F. Kennedy had a sister, who had intellectual disabilities, and with that awareness, he responded to the claims of abuse and unfair treatment of people that were institutionalized (Anton, 2009). The phenomenal aspect of this darkness that the Kennedy's brought to the limelight was that people with disabilities could become productive members of society with education and training, rather than being discarded as by-products of reproduction gone awry (Anton, 2009). Eunice Kennedy Shriver organized the first Special Olympics in Chicago at Soldier Field Stadium (Anton, 2009). She delivered the famous oration at the opening ceremonies, "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt" (Anton, 2009). Her success in this endeavor gave the world an important message. Eunice Kennedy Shriver gave a voice to the unspoken population in America through the very powerful system—athletics (Anton, 2009). Because of courage and a voice that could not be silenced, Lori Rubens became a special Olympian who participated in bowling, tennis, and track and field (Anton, 2009). Today, Lori, 48 years old, lives in a house with support and is enjoying retirement from her job at PARC (Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children) (Anton, 2009). Dr. Brian Skotko, a board member of the

National Down Syndrome Society and a fellow in genetics at Children's Hospital Boston, said, "We owe it all to Eunice Kennedy Shriver to continue to fight for the justice and acceptance that all people deserve whether or not you have a disability" (Anton, 2009). Like Dr. King, Eunice Kennedy Shriver provided a strong and courageous voice to people who could not speak for themselves. No longer accepting unacceptable behavior from social norms, Dr. King and Mrs. Shriver rowed through the torrential current of the 1960s, and successfully navigated that political and social period to secure equality for African American people and those with disabilities. As special educators, it is our job today to ensure that we have the same determination to serve our students and their families, as these American heroes certainly paved that highway of change and opportunity.

Foundation for No Child Left Behind Legislation

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the first legislation into law that attempted to bring equality to students that were from low-income families (Zipkin, 2009). The ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) was a predecessor to NCLB (No Child Left Behind) (Zipkin, 2009). President Johnson said (Robelen, 2005; as cited in Zipkin, 2009),

By passing this bill, we bridge the gap between helplessness and hope for more than five million educationally deprived children. I believe deeply no law I have signed or will ever sign means more to the future of America.

NCLB had the same vision for education that all children would be served regardless of social status or geographic location. In an attempt to level the playing field, NCLB sought to aid underachieving students by the means of title one funding (Zipkin, 2009). Although ESEA or NCLB was not specifically designed to serve children with disabilities, this legislation has a tremendous impact on special education services and delivery models. In reality, this legislation brought much needed awareness to the field of special education, and the desperate needs that waited to be funded in order to serve the at population of students with disabilities. NCLB benefits students with disabilities by focusing on three areas that are assessments, accommodations and highly qualified teachers (Zipkin, 2009). Why is this significant to the preparation of future special educators? It is important to realize that education policy and methods are erected much like a building of wooden blocks. A construction crew does not simply build a model and begin implementation in the classroom. Education begins with a foundation, which is usually legislation, and then is researched one step at a time until the final model is implemented with a live student population. Special educators are professionals that must be able to acquire the knowledge of the past, in order to apply it to the present, while documenting ideas in order to research the future. Special education is a complex and professional career that is not for the weak at heart!

Philosophical Perspectives

In order to prepare special education teachers for the future, it is necessary to investigate philosophies that founded our current perspectives on learning. Our present fields of educational thought require sufficient questioning, because the focus is on today's children with disabilities. However, education is based on philosophical approaches that help to shape ideals in the classroom and society. The first philosophy is idealism and was founded by Plato in about 400 B.C. (Cohen, 1999a). Simply put, idealism focuses on the fact that ideas are the "only true reality, the only thing worth knowing" and that our souls

are perfect at birth (Cohen, 1999a). Therefore, the role of education is merely to bring ideas to higher levels of an individuals' consciousness (Cohen, 1999b). Knowing that there is an eternal battle of the nature versus nurture debate in childhood development, Plato appears to be on the far end of the nature argument, and that will be a difficult theory to uphold on its own. With the many environmental factors which have been identified in the role of disabilities that can be prevented in children, this theory looks more like a nicely aged block of Swiss cheese than a sound educational philosophy. However, the teaching methods aligned with this way of thinking are valid and measurable in the classroom. Through lecture, discussion and questions that lead students to extended knowledge, idealism does have valid strengths in the classroom using these methods.

Realism is another educational philosophy. In realism, truth is what can be measured or observed. Aristotle founded this view and developed it as a result of sitting under Plato's teachings. Obviously, Aristotle was not concerned about deviating from what he had been taught, and therefore, became the father of the scientific method. Significant factors of this educational style include: systematic instruction, mastery of facts, critical thinking skills and using of scientific skills, such as observation and experimentation (Cohen, 1999a). It is quite apparent that the field of special education should adhere to the realist philosophy, due to the very nature of using systematic instruction and scientific measures in order to measure progress and achieve knowledge.

In pragmatism (or experientialism), reality is not fixed and is constantly changing because, "The focus is on the reality of experience" (Cohen, 1999b). Therefore, our educational applications must always be re-focusing on issues as they arise in our presence. Without absolute truth or a moral center, it is difficult to determine "reality", as it can easily differ from one individual to the next. Dewey (1859-1952) used pragmatist approaches in his learning strategies. His identification of different ethnic groups and their inherent value in a democratic society support special education values of today. Segments of multicultural groups are being falsely identified as needing special education, due to faulty screening processes, and gifted and talented students that are not being identified because of standard IQ (intelligent quotient) tests that are not accurately measuring ethnic groups. Since IQ testing is likely to remain as one popular source of identification in the future due to the accountability requirements of NCLB, special educators must eliminate biases that such testing may exacerbate (Role of Intelligence Testing in Society: Intelligence Testing in the Future, 2009). Furthermore, a slice of pragmatism could be the solution to the future of special education with respect to different cultural groups.

Existentialism was founded by Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who was not only a philosopher, but also a minister. This method is inviting, because its focus is on the individual and the freedom that they inherently have to define themselves. The attractive part of this philosophy is that as individuals, we must take advantage of the responsibility that we must define who we are in relation to existence. Existence is a constant and remains before our creation (Cohen, 1999b). Another inviting factor about existentialism is that we do not have to accept other philosophies and are really expected to develop our own ways of thinking. There is an abundance of ways that this could apply to special education, but the main factor would be the creative license that can be used to develop an IEP (individualized educational plan) that truly serves an individual and their specific needs, in order to define the educational strategies that will help them transit into a successful adulthood. This respects the existential idea that we are creating "the development of authentic individuals, as we make meaning of our lives. Beginning with a student's needs,

versus adhering to strict core content is the major problem with this idea, as it relates to NCLB. However, there must be a balance within these factors, as special education truly is an individual process.

The following educational philosophies focus more on what should be taught rather than the basis for which educational philosophies are founded upon. First is the Perennialism. This concept focuses on education through the history of the western civilization. According to Cohen (1999), "The focus is to teach ideas that are everlasting to seek enduring truths which are constant, not changing, as the natural and human worlds at their most essential level do not change". Therefore, shaping the intellect is of the utmost importance when examining the value of an education. Essentialism basically is preparing students to "become valuable members of society" through methods that use a systematic approach. This philosophy can be directly applied to the recent IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) focusing on transiting students with IEP's into post-secondary careers and successful independent adult lives. Progressivism is a field of thought that focuses on the whole child without regard to any other factors in the classroom. A popular method that was used after World War II in Italy is called the Reggio Emilio philosophy. Reggio Emilio is basically allowing students to guide their learning with a complete focus on the students and their classroom interests. It also includes the idea that students will move onto the next subject of interest when they are ready. Lastly is the reconstructionism/critical theory philosophy. In a nutshell, this educational design had a world-wide focus that uses the educational model to use "teaching as banking", in order to increase awareness of oppression by developing communication and critical thinking skills. Strategies of the social reconstructionists include: inquiry, dialogue, multiple perspectives and community/worldwide awareness which are a primary focus of learning within subject areas.

Why Teach Special Education?

Because of the stipulation of highly qualified teachers in NCLB, a significant shortage of special education teachers surfaced. Along with the fact that in all of the teachers across subject areas, only 10% teach special education (Information Avenue Archives, *The Special Education Teacher*, 1997-2000). Of these special education teachers, most are young females that have achieved a master's degree in their field. Special education may see such a shortage in the field for many reasons. It is a teaching profession that has a large turnover, in that many teachers transfer into the regular classroom or leave teaching altogether in the first five years due to the demands of the profession (Information Avenue Archives, *The Special Education Teacher*, 1997-2000). Among the many challenges that special education teachers face, these are a few of the most intensive obstacles to overcome, and perhaps, which may explain the large turnover in the profession. And it is the isolation that special education teachers experience by working with a specific group of children with overwhelming individual needs in resource rooms. Oftentimes, these educators do not have the support of the school administration, which makes it tremendously difficult to gain the professional and financial support in order to provide the best services for their students. Meanwhile, IDEA mandates require students with disabilities to be served and educated in the least restrictive environment with legal repercussions. Therefore, special educators are stuck between a proverbial rock and a hard place trying to be the public relations director between administrations, parents and students, because special education has yet to be fully funded by the Congress, although current legislation clearly requires service delivery on many different levels. Another factor that is a strong deterrent to the field is the overwhelming amount of paperwork (Information Avenue Archives, *The*

Special Education Teacher, 1997-2000). Because of specific laws and IEP requirements, special educators must document progress for each individual student, which equals many hours outside of the classroom. Another challenge is the additional responsibility of overseeing paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in their school.

However, special education professionals teach students with disabilities, because they love what they do every day. Inside each child is a gift that requires a creative and unique service delivery method to unlock in order to give them the extensive possibilities of their future. Like the exceptional students they teach, special education teachers are exceptional people. Aside from being creative, goal-oriented and flexible, special educators must also have tremendous interpersonal communication skills in order to balance all members of an IEP team to focus on the best interest of the student. The ultimate goal is the child. The greatest concept that we can teach is “hope, love and most important, belief in themselves” (Information Avenue Archives, The Special Education Teacher, 1997-2000). Choosing this field for any other reason is a grave error and may explain the high turnover in the field of special education.

Alternative Education Programs

One of the answers to the shortage of special education teachers is alternative special education degree programs that primarily pull candidates from the military, or from mid-life career changes (Ackerman, Jaeger, & Smith, 2002). Concern has been expressed over the quality of teachers that have been produced through these programs. The quality of graduates of alternative programs when compared to those of traditional programs is directly linked to the duration and quality of graduates’ education in the alternative programs. Therefore, it is very simple to assess that quick training programs are not going to produce quality special education teachers that will effectively prepare students with disabilities for the future. Finally, there is a great concern for scientifically proven methods in teaching and what is actually happening in classrooms across America. The knowledge is available, in fact, that is what has brought this issue to the forefront. However, until state legislatures enforce professional development effectively, this unfortunate issue may not change (Ackerman et al., 2002). With the high amount of special education teachers coming from alternative certification programs, professional development may be the key that keeps these educators on the brink of new knowledge. Combined with “limited research in general education and no research in special education delineating the characteristics of preparation programs that enable novice teachers to master and apply research-based practices in the classroom”, special education is behind the eight ball (Ackerman et al., 2002). It is frustrating that Congress has set these high-standards of achievement without funding or mandating necessary training for its special education teachers. It really seems to perpetuate the problem of special education by expecting individuals to do too much with too little. Something has got to give or this cycle will not change!

Present Day Concerns

Without identifying the concerns of today, we cannot create the solutions of the future! A survey in California found that thousands of teachers quit the profession out of despair because as one educator described himself being “set up to fail” (Asimov & Erman, 2007). Mr. Lammers, former Marion County, in California and also a teacher of the year stated, “Too many kids, and not enough time to feel, I was accomplishing strong academics. To me, the system is almost set up to fail” (Asimov & Erman, 2007). Lammers also pointed out that

he worked in an affluent school district and that children's needs were not always addressed at home (Asimov & Erman, 2007). He pointed out that the rising incidence of children coming to school without any parental support and the expectations of teachers to provide for all of their needs just became overwhelming (Asimov & Erman, 2007). Exhausted from working evenings, weekends and holidays, Lammers left the field of education to become a writer (Asimov & Erman, 2007). In another instance, Sherry Jacobs, a special education teacher for children with emotional and cognitive disabilities, worked in a school where the principal refused to bring in necessary supportive services to help an emotionally disturbed boy (Asimov & Erman, 2007). Even though Ms. Jacobs "went over the principal's head", she and the student suffered burns after the student became enraged in the classroom one day, because the principal did not want any outside intervention in the building (Asimov & Erman, 2007). This is a prime example of too little too late when teachers have to fight for the rights of their exceptional students. Ms. Jacobs was clear that it was not the student's fault, but the lack of cooperation and collaboration to meet his needs (Asimov & Erman, 2007). Fortunately, she did not leave the profession, although she did gain employment with another school district (Asimov & Erman, 2007). The following six recommendations were found in the study, "A possible dream: Retaining California teachers so all students can learn":

- (1) School administrators should continuously assess teaching conditions;
- (2) California should increase education funding to at least adequate levels;
- (3) Introducing administrative policies that support teachers' instructional needs;
- (4) Principals should focus on "high-quality teaching and learning conditions";
- (5) The state should establish standards for teaching and learning conditions;
- (6) Administrators should address specific challenges in retaining special education teachers (Asimov & Erman, 2007).

As we look to the future preparing special education teachers in America, everyone faces the critical issue of how to train and keep good teachers in classrooms! The next generation is depending on us!

Another concern in a successful future for special education teachers is where students should learn? There is disagreement between groups of special educators as to where children with disabilities should be educated. At the core of this least restrictive environment issue is the idea of collaboration or co-teaching. Aside from the time factors, personality differences and philosophical differences that would need to be navigated in a true co-teaching setting, training teachers to effectively utilize this core concept is necessary for success (Successful Teaching, 2008). One of the greatest challenges to foster this co-teaching relationship may be in the fact that general education teachers will have to learn to accommodate students with disabilities in their classrooms, when many of them may not prefer not to learn that task with everything else on their classroom "plate" (Successful Teaching, 2008).

A real factor in special education is that many parents, especially in New York City, are unaware of the rights of their children that need special education (Greene, 2009). Unfortunately, this result in inner-city schools is coming up short on their responsibilities to provide a FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education) to disabled students, due to the teacher shortage being the most pronounced in rural and impoverished school systems (Greene, 2009). The most tragic result is that in New York in school years of 2006-2007, two-thirds of students with disabilities had to wait at least 60 days to enter a school that would serve them appropriately (Greene, 2009). New York schools got away with this failure to deliver services, because punitive damages are not awarded in special education cases and the worst possible result to a

district would be providing services that are legally required in the first place (Greene, 2009). The solution to this is parental involvement. However, disabilities beget disabilities and not all parents are equipped to navigate the red tape of the legal system, if they are even aware of their children's rights. Furthermore, since students have a federal right to a FAPE and if adequate services are not being met in a public school, New Yorkers can go to court and demand a publicly funded spot in a private institution (Greene, 2009). Unfortunately, only children from affluent families are aware of this option (Greene, 2009). Future special education teachers must be prepared to "teach" parents as well as their children, so these students will receive the education that they deserve. Not only are we educators, we are also advocates of the students. Therefore, it is our job to ensure that their IEP goals serve students with diverse disabilities to the best of our ability. Another important part of teaching advocacy is demonstrating and assuring our students that they can be self-advocates. Empowering them to recruit teacher attention in the classroom is a great way to begin this beneficial and essential life-long skill. Self-advocacy is an essential part of transition into adulthood, whether we have disabilities or not. We must learn how to find our voice and use it appropriately in order to take care of ourselves.

Diversity

Along the same lines of poverty and rural areas, we encounter the need to encompass diversity in special education. "In 1983, the shortage of special educators was highlighted in *A Nation at Risk*. It is still with us 25 years later and shows no signs of disappearing, and in the coming decades, it could well worsen" (A Nation at risk: The teacher shortage in special education, 2008). Although this research reiterated the need for special educators, the grave absence of teacher diversity in the field must be addressed, because African American and Hispanic male students are overrepresented in the special education population (A Nation at risk: The teacher shortage in special education, 2008). Since America is a true "melting pot" of cultural ideals and social mores, it is essential that we expand diversity in classroom teachers, because individuals of varying cultures are role models to students and can reflect the accomplishments that they can achieve! Because of this cyclical issue, finding qualified special education teachers that reflect diverse backgrounds is very challenging. Therefore, the educators of today must afford our students with every possible opportunity to reach for post-secondary education in order to break a cycle and create these educators in the future!

Another essential factor in diversity is how districts will serve Latino students. Since Latino families represent the fastest growing part of the American population and are the largest minority group at present, the future is unclear as to how well they will reap the rewards of the "American Dream" of immigrants of the past (Noguera, 2006). Due to the fact that Latino youth often miss extended periods of time trying to maintain familial relationships between Mexico and the United States, some schools have modified their schedules in order to accommodate this population, so that students do not fall behind in their class work (Noguera, 2006). Since these families view family and school as separate entities, employing special education teachers with knowledge of the culture and values certainly will assist in bridging that gap, so that the ultimate benefit falls upon the child (Noguera, 2006). Latino youth are highly represented in special education placements, although they are polite and respectful to adults, and not many Latino children are described as studious (Noguera, 2006). Perhaps, that is due to the fact that their culture remains intact, while other groups that have migrated to the U.S. eagerly adopted traditional American culture in order to blend in with the norm (Noguera, 2009). Noguera

(2006, p. 134) stated,

Theoretically at least, education should serve as a means out of poverty.

As it has for other groups in the past, education should be the source of opportunity and a pathway to a better life. Unfortunately, more often than not, schools that serve Latino immigrant youth fail to become vehicles through which their dreams and aspirations can be fulfilled.

Too many are trapped in the worst schools and are treated as though their inability to speak fluent English was a sign of cognitive and cultural deficit.

What will it take for education to serve Latin youth and become a genuine resource for Latino immigrants? How can educators help students to make the transition to a new society less painful, particularly for those who lack family support? How can we make sure that the needs of Latino immigrant students are not ignored, because their parents lack the power and voice to make their needs heard?

The challenge lies before us to create bridges of opportunities that reach from the islands of different cultures to the mainstream of America, that do not require families to give up their own heritage in order to climb out of poverty and pursue the American dream that each of us deserve.

Hope for the Future of Special Education

Margaret Mead said, “We are now at a point where we must educate our children in what no one knew yesterday and prepare our schools for what no one knows yet” (Villa, 2000, p. 2). Education has forged the river of inventions, technology and diversity, yet still remains with the same challenge that we found in the one room schoolhouses of yesteryear (Villa, 2000). This present factor is to serve the students with all of their needs today with the pressures of legislation, the challenges of society and the ever-present hope of their success for the future! Is this a one size which fits all approach? Absolutely not! Due to technology, children are more aware than ever about world culture. Why cannot we connect that same cultural awareness with content so as to develop students’ relevance that teaches them to be independent, caring citizens of the United States? The educational philosophies that were discussed earlier in this review lend themselves to the thinkers that created their awareness. These education frontrunners, such as Maria Montessori, Paolo Freire, and John Dewey, have left us powerful examples of teaching models that still are effective today in classrooms (Villa, 2000). Like a successful democracy, schools should be known for their desire to foster collaboration and co-teaching strategies rather than being satisfied with meeting standards (Villa, 2000). Villa (2000, p. 28) made a great point in his speech when he asked, “Where is the disability. Is it in the student or is it in the system that we have created and maintained?”. This is where visionaries reflect on the past in order to secure the future. Isn’t that the main reason that we study American and world history? So must it be with the field of special education. Klopff stated, “Whatever is, is possible” (Villa, 2000, p. 34). It is time for action, and it begins with today’s special educators.

Effective Teacher Programs

Since there is little research on special education and increasingly higher demands from the Congress in the field, the time has come for action. Since we are unable to use data from special education, Brownell, Ross, Colon, and McCallum (2005) suggested using findings from previous studies in general education areas. This is fine in theory, however, due to the teacher shortage and NCLB mandates; the alternative teaching certificate degrees have no basis in which to measure the quality of the degree candidates that are being presented to the special education profession (Brownell et al., 2005). Two studies were implemented at two different institutions

that modeled an excellence in teaching and seven similar models were found in both studies (Brownell et al., 2005). The seven features of the conclusive ideas of the AACTE (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education) and IRA (individual retirement account) studies are:

- (1) Coherent program vision;
- (2) Conscious blending of theory, disciplinary knowledge and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge and practice;
- (3) Carefully crafted field experiences;
- (4) Standards for quality teaching;
- (5) Active pedagogy;
- (6) Focus on meeting the needs of a diverse student population;
- (7) Collaboration as a vehicle for building professional community (Brownell et al., 2005, p. 10).

Conversely, this research team went to great lengths to investigate a model that could be applied to special education. The conclusions that they observed within this model are as follows (Please keep in mind that their research was obtained using keywords in searches in professional journals, and that a variety of research objectives were written for other studies'. Therefore, some important details could have been omitted (Brownell et al., 2005)). The five findings were as follows:

- (1) Crafting extensive field experience;
- (2) Working together/collaboration;
- (3) Evaluating the impact of the teacher education program;
- (4) Focusing on inclusion and cultural diversity;
- (5) Maintaining a positivist or constructivist orientation towards teacher knowledge (Brownell et al., 2005, pp. 19-23).

The findings were interesting when compared and found the following:

In both fields, teacher education is labor intensive, carefully crafted, focused on connecting theory and practice, collaborative, and invested in creating teachers who can respond to the needs of children and youth, particularly those with diverse needs. (Brownell et al., 2005, p. 24)

Another sound factor in this study was that philosophies differed greatly in the field of special education versus the general education studies (Brownell et al., 2005). Perhaps, it may be useful to embrace the segments of educational philosophies that serve our students on an individual basis to create the successful individual. In short, take what you like and leave the rest in order to form your own model to serve the individual child. With so many alternative education routes to certification, much more research is necessary in the field of special education in order to ensure that students with disabilities receive the fully-inclusive education that they deserve.

A System of Checks and Balances: The American Way

America was founded on a system of checks and balances in order to control the balance of power within our central government. This system of checks and balances is as American as it can get! In our society, there is another system of checks and balances that are law, medicine and education (Kauffman, 2007). In this article, two questions were addressed in assessing the core issues and the problems in special education, as it pertains to the future. One is conferred by evidence-based instruction and the other relies on

the protection afforded by the legal system (Kauffman, 2007). What this boils down to is the question of whether the legal system or the medical system will solve the problems that are the here and now of special education. Interestingly enough, in our society, the law generally plays the role of the enforcer that hands out the negative consequences for a harmful action. Another common factor is that the wheels of justice spin slowly in our culture. In special education, there are no penalties other than services that should have been provided to a student in the first place (Kauffman, 2007). So in reality, there are no real penalties. There are only parents and advocacy groups that are watchdogs for the rights of people with disabilities. Therefore, the law merely chases the infractions and attempts to enforce the laws that are written. The medical field is a profession of healing, prevention and health. When a “patient” is ill, doctors run tests to determine the cause of the ailment, so that it can be treated and cured. Not only does the medical field respond, but it does so immediately, because often, these are matters of life and death. It is not being suggested that special education completely align with the medical field, because students with disabilities are not always sick, and therefore, do not always need medical care. What these people all need is the right to a free and appropriate education and full inclusion. But, the system of checks and balances between these three fields: education, law and medicine, has become out of balance. Special education has aligned more closely with the field of law and relativist thinking and we are in trouble (Kauffman, 2007). Education, like medicine, would do well to be guided in practice by scientific evidence (Mostert et al., 2008; as cited in Kauffman, 2007). With the balance of the legal system that can provide some “teeth” to this model, special education would fare much better in training and retaining teachers for the future.

What Now?

“Awareness is half the level of change” (Zaring, 2009). If we are really going to prepare and retain quality special education teachers, then diversity, accommodation, collaboration and parental involvement will be the highway that will bring us to our destination. As long as teachers want special education students out of their classrooms, education will make no progress, because it is so difficult to teach in such compartmentalized conditions. Nurturing general education teachers is a key factor and using differentiated instruction methods in order to expand knowledge and awareness. A child is not going to be successful in a classroom until a teacher buys into them. Therefore, it is their job as special educators to mentor that relationship so that full inclusion can become a reality (Zaring, 2009). Building bridges with general education teachers does not require an engineering degree. With four simple steps, a special educator can bridge that gap. These are as follows:

- (1) Acknowledging the general education teacher’s feelings of frustration;
- (2) Acceptance;
- (3) Looking down the road for them;
- (4) Reminding them it is just this year.

With the slogan of progress not perfection and serving the children we have today, special educators can collaborate with general education teachers. Using schedules that encourage educators to work together, co-planning time and clearly defined roles in the classroom, collaboration can become a successful reality (Tollefson, 2009).

Responsible Inclusion

There has been great debate over the years about the inclusion model and special educators and parents

that sway back and forth with opinions like willow trees in thunderstorms. Rather than having a straight line model of inclusion, why not view education as a unified process where a team approach is used? In this unified condition, general and special educators work together towards the same goal which is serving the child with disabilities (Tollefson, 2009). Can you imagine the ultimate outcome? Transition issues flow from one classroom to another and give students new opportunities to become successful members of their respective communities!

Responsiveness to Intervention

The old “wait to fail model” is perhaps one of the greatest crises in modern special education (SCOPE—Newsletter of the Washington State Association of School Psychologists, 2004). Responsiveness to intervention is a model that assesses all students on a three-tiered model to ensure that all students can learn and are provided the necessary services. One of the few concerns about this design is that, if less students are referred to special education and resources and staffing decrease, how would this impact the population currently being served? (SCOPE—Newsletter of the Washington State Association of School Psychologists, 2004). However, some of the results found in this study were that staff had more time to discover prevention, and all grades were making progress in achieving their goals in reading/oral reading fluency (SCOPE—Newsletter of the Washington State Association of School Psychologists, 2004). Zaring (2009) believed that responsiveness to intervention was the key, because students were evaluated and placed more accurately. In the Eminence Independent School District in Kentucky where Margie Zaring is the district-wide early intervention specialist, she has seen a trend of identifying less LD (learning disabled) students. Where early intervention is essential, responsiveness to intervention is the cure!

Transition Services in Special Education

One of the most frustrating parts of special education is the low percentages of young adults that transit from special education into their communities as a participating member. A solution to this concern is using an 11-step strategy that is aligned with a student’s IEP that focus on the student’s participation (Kohler & Field, 2003). Eleanor Roosevelt said, “The future belongs to those who have a dream” (find quote). The “take charge for the future intervention model resulted in significant increases in the level of student involvement in transition planning activities and meetings, empowerment and transition awareness” (Kohler & Field, 2003, p. 17). Furthermore, another study has been identified as being successful in helping to define a student’s sense of self-determination.

The use of the steps to self-determination, an experimental curriculum consisting of five major components (know yourself, value yourself, plan, act, experience outcomes, and learn) resulted in significant increases in behaviors considered correlated to self-determination (Kohler & Field, 2003, p. 21). Two other models were also found to significantly increase student success and autonomy was the self-determined learning model of instruction (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000), and the next step curriculum (Kohler & Field, 2003). It is clearly evident that student involvement is directly related to their personal success!

Conclusions

Special education teachers are exceptional people that teach exceptional students. While we wear many

hats and perform a wide variety of job roles within our profession, it is essential to realize that the most important factor in our jobs is the individuals that we serve. It is essential that these students are seen as people first and then identified educationally by their specific learning needs. There are various philosophies and program models for us to choose and models and the type of teacher that we will be, when the classroom door closes. Let us research them and know not only who we are, but how we will implement them in our own classrooms. Just as each individual is unique, so each IEP should be designed as such. Tony Coechno, chair of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, opened a national conference with the following:

We want everything we were entitled to as citizens, nothing more, but nothing less. We want the privileges of full citizenship, but we also welcome its responsibilities. We want the respect we deserve and we demand the rights we have been denied. We now recognize that empowerment is not a gift to be given, but a right to be demanded. (Cone, 1994, p. 145; as cited in Heward, 2009, p. 596)

The most important part of preparing teachers for special education in America is that a reflection is to be inspiring! Make your enthusiasm for learning contagious! Be sure that what you are offering to your students would be enough, if it was the way your own children were being taught and treated.

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