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Research Paper

The Argument Itself: (Are Teachers Ready for Special Needs Part II)

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To understand the arguments surrounding special education and disabilities, one must know the roots of the argument. First comes historic law. In 1975, a law that was originally called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was born. This law was amended over the years and eventually became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997. (Quality Counts) Second, one has to understand that this law is the foundation for all curriculums and funding for the school systems of the country. The law works like this: Children are identified as a special needs student with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). (IDEA Practices) Afterwards, the student is placed in a category to qualify him or her as special needs or not.

Once out of the qualifying stage, accommodations must be provided. This is where the issue of federal help comes into play. Depending on the severity of the situation a school will get more or less federal aid. However, some states like Washington have to pay their own bill with taxpayers' money.

There is an organization called the Financial Task Force (FTF) within the President's Commission for Excellence on Special Education. The FTF's job is to help to regulate funds from the government to schools for special education. The FTF on March 21, 2002, held a public hearing to discuss this very topic. It was conducted by the President's Commission for Excellence on Special Education. In this hearing some interesting points were raised. These points include: financial data on how much money is spent already, opinions on how to make special education better, federal limitations, opinions on incentives or lack there of, and statistics on ratios of special needs to regular students.

According to the President's Commission document, the nation spends \$40-\$50 billion dollars on special education! (FTF Hearing-Chaikind) Doug Gill of the President's Commission, Chairman of the hearing, states that money is not enough to handle all of the needs though. Dr. Gill also says he is open to any help that can be given like suggestions on improving the system.

Bill Freund, of the FTF, gave a few recommendations that could be taken into national scrutiny. First, Freund says that federal funds should be given out based on the "excess cost" of special education. Next, the national average should have a close bearing on funding. Next, continue the federal limit of 12 percent per state enrollment of special education students. Finally, Freund states that that if states pay their own way, states should be given a way of some type to lessen financial pressure. (FTF Hearing)

Dr. Stephen Chaikind, also of FTF, has a differing viewpoint. Rather than sinking an increased amount of funds into special education, he feels that researching is more important. He also has recommendations on the matter of funding. His recommendations include: looking at current data in category perspectives like disability type, accommodations received, location, the method to deliver those accommodations, placement (I think this means severity of disability), student characteristics, etc. (FTF Hearing) Next, he says to look for new ideas to improve the system. Next, fund said ideas, and finally, rate the outcomes by frequency and quality.

Mainstreaming and inclusion are also big topics. Special education can vary from child to child because each individual one is different in abilities and needs for accommodation. How do teachers feel about special education? Although teachers have varied opinions, I interviewed a former special education teacher who had a strong

viewpoint. Her name is Debbie Britton. She has a B.S. in Elementary Education and a minor in Special Education from The College of St. Joseph the Provider (1979). She started teaching in 1979 and taught until 1981. This time period was when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was a relatively new law. Ms. Britton stated that she originally taught adults and then went on to teach kids who ranged in age from five to eight. Some of her students were badly off and others not as much. She also stated in the interview that if her students were caught early by the school system, they would have a better shot at life because they are more used to a school setting. Her children were caught early, the adults that she taught were not so lucky. Ms. Britton stated that her adults “were taught helplessness in an institutional setting” Ms. Britton stated that her adult students could hardly do anything for themselves. However, the health of some of her students was questionable. For some students, Tuberous Sclerosis was the cause of their profound retardation or handicap. (She was not too specific on what this disorder was.) For others, she says, the cause of this profound handicap or retardation was a plain lack of early intervention. She left her teaching career due to marriage, feeling unfit for the particular job, and legal red tape. However, in my opinion she is a strong voice on the difference between early intervention and not. In my opinion as well, Ms. Britton is also a strong historical landmark for a country learning how to ready students for life.

Most teachers according to a 2002-2003 poll, say that special education students should be held under a different standard. “More than eight out of ten teachers believe that most special education students should be expected to meet a separate set of academic standards, rather than the same standards as others their age.” (Quality Counts) Also, according to this article, states vary in the provision of accommodations given

because of concern over the fairness of the accommodations. Evidently some states believe that some accommodations provide an unfair advantage for the special needs student while others do not believe so. (Quality Counts 4) According to this article, “15 states forbid students to take state tests with ‘modifications.’” (Quality Counts 4)

Mainstreaming also has another side. This side is the individual child and his/her needs. Some students do not get what they need and just get the bare minimums. Carola Seegert, author of Nasty Girls, Thugs and Humans Like Us, says that “due to heritage, literature focuses on the child not the needs. This could make an impairment a handicap.” (Preface) This basically means, in my humble translation, that though we may mean well, we grossly underestimate and therefore cheat students out of a good school experience; filled with the accommodations needed.

Parents are very important people in the role of advocacy for their child in that they help to keep the school systems on their toes. No good parent would want one of his or her children underdeveloped or malnourished educationally or any other way. My family did not want me in a learning disabilities area where I could not best fulfill my potential. My parents knew how valuable I could be to society in my case. Therefore, mainstreaming was the way to go for me. Some students with disabilities obviously need to go to less conventional means of education, but as Seegert wrote, some do not get what is needed.

Questions still remain. Is there more funding needed for special education, or is more research needed. Do teachers need stricter guidelines to follow? Are accommodations being given properly? How does one know except the student who

receives accommodations? Are the accommodations truly unfair? These and other questions need to be answered before the true big picture can be seen.

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