

Educating Children with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility

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- Let me begin by sharing with you some recent thoughts of President Reagan on the national importance of education:

America has always been enamored of learning. From polished men of letters like Thomas Jefferson to humble self-taught people like Abe Lincoln, and from inventors like Thomas Edison to visionaries like Martin Luther King—Americans put their faith in the power of education to enrich lives and make our nation strong.

In the past several years, Americans have recognized the fact that we have expected too little of our students, and often we get what we expect. As a nation, we have seen this as a challenge, and we have begun to respond. One of this administration's first priorities was to establish a National Commission on Excellence in Education. We asked it to help us chart a new course which would permit us to correct the mistakes of the past.

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When the Commission on Excellence issued its report, it set forth the premise that problems in education could be corrected. That is, they could be corrected provided that our general citizenry and those who have public responsibility in the matter care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required.

A singular challenge facing education today is the challenge of providing the best, most effective education possible for children and youth with learning problems. Over the past two decades there has been a proliferation of legislation and federally funded "special," "compensatory," and "remedial" education programs designed to ensure educational success for these students.

These programs were designed with the best of motivations, and it is fair to state: to make achievement and academic growth possible for America's students. Each of the programs mentioned earlier have contributed significantly to this stated goal. Each service system has expanded knowledge about pedagogy and technology for selected segments of the student population. For example, special education, in the 10th year since the passage of Public Law 94-142, and the special system I know the best, has:

1. Refined the concept and practice of individualized instruction.
2. Redefined the role of parents in the education of the child.

3. Made education possible for 1/2 million previously unserved severely handicapped children.
4. Improved services for several million others.

Yet the complete fulfillment of the goal eludes us. In reality, the reviews of these separate special systems submitted by parents, teachers, and administrators say clearly: Programs have achieved mixed results for some children. And one explanation for mixed reviews is the special nature of our programs.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

The special approach has been the predominant structure of programs designed to improve educational outcomes for students with learning problems. At the heart of the special approach is the presumption that students with learning problems cannot be effectively taught in regular education programs even with a variety of support. Students need to be "pulled-out" into special settings where they can receive remedial services. Although well-intentioned, this so-called "pull-out" approach to the educational difficulties of students with learning problems has failed in many instances to meet the educational needs of these students and has created, however unwittingly, barriers to their successful education.

I am one who firmly believes that the basic form and substance of our institutions and the language we employ to describe them are revealing and of rock-bed importance.

My point is that the language and terminology we use in describing our education system is full of the language of separation, of fragmentation, of removal. To the extent that our language reflects the reality of our system as many diverse parts never or rarely connected as a whole, it reflects a flawed vision of education for our children.

Philosophers say that ideas have consequence and that one must know the consequences of one's ideas. There are four consequences which flow from the system as we know it. The first major consequence of the way we presently think and go about educating students with learning problems involves the eligibility requirements and screening procedures which can exclude many of these students from needed educational support. There are; undetermined numbers of students who do

not fit into compartmentalized special programs. These youngsters may not receive the needed extra services in the regular classroom and are not "eligible" to receive the special services available in the special programs because they do not meet the state or federal eligibility requirements. In other words, special programming can work against a coherent strategy for the provision of services to all students who need individualized assistance.

Another consequence is the tendency to equate poor performance with a handicap. In addition, there is the stigmatization of students who have been placed in special programs which segregate them from their peers and from regular school activities. Often the results are lowered academic and social expectations on the part of the students themselves, as well as their peers and their teachers, which can lead to poor performance and an inability to learn effectively.

Yet another consequence of the way we think and go about educating students with learning problems is that special programs frequently address failure rather than prevention. The current practice in education is to make special programs available to children and youth with learning problems after serious learning deficiencies are identified—deficiencies which could possibly have been ameliorated with early intervention. Under present special education rules, monies and programs are authorized for students with learning problems only when these youngsters have demonstrably failed and have been evaluated as "seriously emotionally disturbed" or "learning disabled." Professionals who could help correct incipient problems during the early developmental stages are prevented from doing so by a lack of authorization. The services of these professionals must be withheld until the problems are severe enough for the child to be qualified for one or more special programs.

A final consequence of the way we think about educating children with learning problems is the effect it has on parents. Some parents interpret the rigid rules and eligibility requirements to which the schools must adhere as an indication that school officials are not willing to help their child. Other parents feel that the school actively discourages their participation in shaping educational programs for their children. We have also seen that conflicts may arise when the school perceives the parents' requests for services and a stronger voice in decision

making as being excessive, costly, and inappropriate. The result in either case is the lack of a cooperative, supportive partnership between school officials, teachers, and parents in the education of the child.

CHANGING DIRECTIONS IN EDUCATION

Having presented some of the apparent problems in the way we go about educating children with learning problems, let me take a few minutes to share with you my thoughts on *why* and what changes are needed if we, as education professionals, are to eliminate these problems and more effectively serve *all* children and youth with special learning needs.

Reasons for Change

First, the whys. Foremost, I see a need for improved educational outcomes which reflect today's technological and societal realities. The world around us is in a rapid and continuous state of change. It is therefore important that the nation's schools prepare all students to identify, analyze, and resolve problems as they arise; to increase their ability to respond and cope in a flexible manner with change; to develop character, which serves as the firm basis for sound judgment and considered decision making; and to enter the community as informed and educated citizens who are capable of living and working as independent and productive adults.

As forward-thinking professionals, we can see that greater levels of educational support will be necessary if we are to accommodate the expanding literacy requirements that accompany rapid technological growth. If we want to be prepared as a society meeting the challenges of projected economic, demographic, and technological realities, it will require concerted efforts to effect lasting and responsible changes in the education we provide students with learning problems.

Additionally, it has also become increasingly apparent that there is a need to more efficiently use resources to accommodate the burgeoning number of students who are failing to learn through conventional education methods. Meeting the educational needs of all students is becoming more difficult, because there has been a dramatic increase in the number of children and youth who are unable to learn adequately in the general education system.

Of the more than 39 million young people enrolled in public schools, over 10% or 4,373,000 are eligible for special education services under federal and/or state law. Another 10% to 20% of the children and youth in our nation's schools are not handicapped, but they do have mild or moderate learning and behavior difficulties which interfere with their educational progress. These students are commonly described as "slow learners," students who exhibit social, conduct, and behavior difficulties; possess low self-esteem; or have problems in understanding or using language.

It is therefore estimated that some 20% to 30% of the school-aged population, or at least 7,800,000 students, are having difficulty progressing in our public schools. Of these, in addition to handicapped students, over 5,000,000 children receive services through special programs serving the educationally and linguistically disadvantaged. The numbers alone argue for new strategies to increase the educational success of these students. If allowed to fail in large numbers, these children, as adults, will represent an enormous pool of unused, marginally productive manpower.

Appropriate and Effective Changes

Of course, much of what I've said would be pointless without discussing what can be done to create the vision we have of improving educational outcomes for children and youth with specific learning needs.

One thing that can be accomplished is reform at the building level. Building-level administrators often cannot mold all the resources in their building to produce effective programs. Special programs can prevent this. Building-level administrators must be empowered to assemble appropriate professional and other resources for delivering effective, coordinated, comprehensive services for all students based on individual educational needs rather than eligibility for special programs. This means special programs and regular education programs must be *allowed to collectively contribute skills and resources to carry out individualized education plans based on individualized education needs.*

In this regard, there could be supporting experimental trials in a number of states and local school districts as opposed to wholesale national legislative change. These trial efforts must of course ensure that the rights of students

presently in special programs will be maintained.

These trials, which should include systematic and rigorous monitoring and documentation, would permit carefully designed experimentation aimed at serving students in more comprehensive ways. However, I should emphasize that this strategy requires more than just experimentation. One of the major weaknesses of current classification and service delivery systems is the inadequacy of data measuring educational outcomes. Thus, these trials also would focus on the necessity of accumulating data on the efficacy of these new instructional approaches on the "outcomes" side. For this strategy to work, policy-makers, professionals, parents, and advocates must make a broad commitment to monitor the experiments and to slowly revise guidelines and policies in a responsible way.

Yet another thing that can be done to better educate students with learning problems involves the critical process of early identification and intervention. We all realize that learning problems do not develop suddenly or capriciously. Many children and youth with learning disabilities have long and consistent histories which document various kinds of learning difficulties in school. Research shows there is a positive correlation between the age at which intervention occurs and the level of success which can be expected as a result of the intervention. This correlation suggests that it is at the early elementary school level that organized and systematic intervention might best prepare children for the more formal and demanding structure of later grades.

Another approach to better education is curriculum-based assessment. This approach would emphasize the assessment of each student's strengths and weaknesses for instructional planning purposes, rather than emphasizing categorization or labeling. In classes with individualized programs, momentary learning problems are not viewed as failures but rather as opportunities for further instruction. In such educational environments, children and youth with special learning needs should be able to receive instruction that is tailored to their specific and individual needs, without suffering the negative effects of social stigma.

One final thing that can be done is to bring on line educational programs and techniques with demonstrated effectiveness. All of us in the education profession realize that a major de-

velopment during this past decade has been the recognition that some instructional approaches and techniques are far more effective than others. Research on the factors and variables which enhance the learning process has been synthesized in recent years. Having been compiled and critically analyzed, the data suggest methods of organizing and delivering instruction which are substantially superior to traditional and currently widespread and entrenched practices. Yet the state of the art in education is far ahead of the state of actual practice in the schools, even though improvements that have great potential benefit for both regular education and students with special learning needs seem feasible for implementation. "Effective" schools have come to be defined as those that employ principals who are actively engaged in instructional leadership, teachers who work together as a team, testing and evaluating to monitor educational progress, and parents who function as informed partners in decision making.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

I strongly believe that, in any experimental efforts, parents should be deeply involved and their rights to due process and participation in planning should be assured, especially in matters relating to the child's individualized education plan. An appropriate mechanism for assuring parental involvement would be parent advisory boards to assist schools in determining ways to more effectively involve parents in their children's education. The establishment of school-parent programs for developing an atmosphere in the home which is conducive to academic achievement has been found to increase supervised homework; encourage parent-child conversations about school and everyday events; encourage reading; reduce nonproductive television viewing; and have an outstanding record of success in promoting achievement.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If we are to correct the flawed vision, to refine the vision, not obliterate what is good in present vision, not destroy what we have worked so hard to achieve, then an atmosphere of trust will have to be created. Success will mean constant input from parents, administrators, teachers, and state and local governments. It

will mean acceptance of the general applicability of special education techniques beyond the confines of the special education class. Success will mean the creation of a more powerful, more responsive education system, one with enhanced component parts. It will not mean that the role of special education teachers and other special assistance providers will be eliminated or diminished. It does not mean the consolidation of special education into regular education. Nor will it mean placing an overwhelming and unfair financial burden on one part of the system.

It does mean that special programs must be allowed to use their knowledge base and services to prevent students with learning prob-

lems from reaching the point of failure in the educational system.

It does mean that programs must be allowed to establish a partnership with regular education to cooperatively assess the educational needs of students with learning problems and to cooperatively develop effective educational strategies for meeting those needs.

In the delivery of educational services to meet individualized needs, it does mean that administrators and teachers must be allowed to collectively contribute skills and resources to carry out appropriate educational plans.

It does mean the nurturing of a shared commitment to the future of all children with special learning needs.