Exceptional Children, Vol. 53, No. 4, pp. 327–329.

The New Push for Excellence: Widening the Schism Between Regular and Special Education

LORRIE A. SHEPARD

ABSTRACT: At least half of the children called learning disabled are misidentified; they need help in school but do not warrant the label handicapped. The costs of special services for these children are excessive because much of the extra resources are eaten up by the bureaucratic requirements of assessment and staffing. The authors of the foregoing articles are commended for their altruism because they are willing to give up power, to relinquish the separate dominion of special education. If special education were merged with regular education, children's needs could be met without bureaucratic costs. However, the national reports are an impediment to the merger of special and regular education because accountability demands make classroom teachers less willing to take responsibility for hard-to-teach children.

■ My reaction to the first four articles in this Special Feature section is organized by four main points:

1. The authors of these articles have aptly portrayed the familiar problems pervading special education.
2. They exhibit unusual courage when they propose a solution requiring special educators to relinquish resources, territory, and claims to specialized knowledge.
3. Unfortunately, the authors have rightly anticipated that educational reforms in response to the national reports will exacerbate problems in special education, especially the overidentification of children as handicapped and the widening schism between regular and special education.
4. Given the obstacles to reasonable solutions, my advice is for the authors to take bigger risks, to be even more courageous.

LORRIE A. SHEPARD *is Professor and Chair of Research and Evaluation Methodology, School of Education, University of Colorado, Boulder.*

While the rhetoric of the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) calls to mind images of severely disabled, physically, or mentally impaired children, the reality is that 90% of the children served are very mildly "handicapped." At least half of the learning disabled population could more accurately be described as slow learners, as children with second-language backgrounds, as children who are naughty in class, as those who are absent often or move from school to school, or as average learners in above-average school districts (Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983). No one can deny that the children served in special education need help in school, but the fact remains that these mildly "handicapped" children are indistinguishable from other low achievers (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982).

COST IMPLICATIONS

The ever-growing number of children classified as learning disabled (LD) nationally has staggering cost implications, as noted by Hagerty and Abramson. What Hagerty and Abramson did not say is that much of the incremental cost is wasted. Almost half of the special education budget for LD pupils is eaten up by assessment and staffing (Shepard & Smith, 1981). In addition, the authors recognized a cost, not measured in dollars, of the never-ending referrals to special education. Teachers, already ill at ease with hard-to-teach children (hence the referrals), become less and less able to respond to the range of individual differences in their classrooms. In a sense, regular and special education teachers have colluded to relieve regular teachers of responsibilities for teaching children functioning at the bottom of their class.

PROPOSED REMEDY

The remedy proposed by these authors is to merge, submerge, possibly even lose the identity of special education in regular education. If mildly handicapped children are indistinguishable from other remedial populations and there is not unique treatment, then there is no need for costly identification procedures or for a separate cadre of teachers. Although current specialists may have a greater repertoire of skills for coping with learning difficulties, these are the very skills regular teachers should acquire to preclude the need for a separate category of children. Thus, Pugach makes the altruistic suggestion that special educators, including professors who train teachers of the mildly handicapped, must "give away" their special knowledge and unique credentials. (In truth, new skills for general education would have to be accompanied by new attitudes. Presently, teachers in training are taught a referral model, i.e., to solve a problem by finding the appropriate external resources.)

The authors are courageous because they propose to give up power. Some special education experts recognize the invalidity of the current identification system but propose to fix it by *expanding* the province of special education to serve generic learning problems in "noncategorical programs." Usually these proposals imply that children would still be considered "handicapped" to qualify for special education but the exact type of mild handicap would not have to be specified. Expansionists are genuinely concerned that many children struggling in school need special help. But the expansionists do not consider the excessive cost of helping these children under the rubric of special education, nor do they acknowledge that endless referrals perpetuate teaching deficiencies.

NATIONAL REPORTS

The national reports are not monolithic in character. Still, I believe the authors of this special feature are correct to say that the national reports, especially *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), ignored special education because attention to the educational needs of a low-achieving group runs counter to the new emphasis on excellence and higher standards. It is also true that various reformers ignore special education because they believe it is a separate enterprise serving a discrete and extreme population. Special educators must share some of the blame for this misperception. In political arenas, advocates sometimes use extreme examples to characterize the needs of handicapped students.

Higher standards for all students will exaggerate the tendency to refer difficult children to special education. Ironically, Boyer and Sizer deplore tracking but indirectly foster the most extreme tracking, that is, the sorting of children into groups of normal and handicapped. In an atmosphere of intense accountability, the special education label provides a refuge for both the teacher and student. If a child is handicapped, regular teachers are absolved from responsibility. And, as we have already seen in the minimum competency movement, special education students may receive a diploma denied to their low-achieving normal classmates. Brave talk about teachers learning to adapt to a wider range of differences is unrealistic when the sanctions for "failing to teach" or "failing to learn" are serious.

PROFESSIONAL ENTRENCHMENT

Hagerty and Abramson have analyzed the problems facing special education hoping that with full understanding the profession can engage in proactive change. They are overly optimistic.

In fact, they have revealed precisely why the field is hamstrung and cannot rescue itself. Cast in the worst light, the impediment is entrenchment. Jobs and professional identities depend on a separate system. It is a plain fact, for example, that if children were served with remedial help and by team teaching in the regular classroom, school districts would hire many fewer school psychologists (and probably fewer "LD teachers").

There is also a sincere commitment to helping children with special needs that seems, invariably, to prevent significant change. Consider again the waste involved in identifying learning problems as mild "handicaps." Our cost analysis in Colorado (Shepard & Smith, 1981) revealed two interesting figures: (a) Together the state and federal funds supported just under half of the annual special education cost for LD pupils; (b) just under half of the annual LD resources were spent on assessment and staffing. In other words, the districts paid every penny of the extra instructional support the children received.

Why can't districts cut through the bureaucratic red tape and run their own remedial programs? Because specialists resist. They fear that without the clout of the handicapped label, they will be unable to extract the same level of support from their districts. Sometimes called the "band uniform" problem, many believe that without the mandate of P.L. 94-142, districts would be inclined to spend some of their own special education dollars on band uniforms or general education programs. So, many special educators perpetrate the illusion that districts are garnering an extra resource (federal and state dollars) by identifying more and more children as handicapped.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Even Hagerty and Abramson, who recognize the intransigence of advocacy groups, are themselves against official limits on the number of children identified as handicapped. Categorical caps would not resolve the problems of inadequate instruction, they say. But caps on the percentage of mild handicaps *would* stop runaway overidentification. If special education advocates are afraid of losing resources for hard-to-teach children, why not bargain explicitly? For example, the state and federal governments could pay the full cost of education for the 4% of children who are most severely disabled so long as each district provided evidence that it was spending an equal number of dollars serving its low achieving population. A policy of this sort would guarantee services to the most seriously impaired, would permit greater flexibility, would avoid categorical labels for mild problems, could clearly increase the number of at-risk children served without increased cost (assessment dollars would be redirected to instruction), and would ensure that districts continued to invest in remedial services. If special educators are not willing to enter into negotiations of this type, the present system is likely to grow until it is harshly curtailed by a political backlash.

The desirable reintegration of special and regular education to provide a continuum of instructional services, advocated by the preceding articles, will not occur until the proposals for funding algorithms are as altruistic as Pugach's suggestions for teacher training. Special education will have to lose to gain what it seeks for a huge population of at-risk children.

REFERENCES

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Shepard, L., & Smith, M. L. (with Davis, A., Glass, G. V., Riley, A., & Vojir, C.). (1981). *Evaluation of the identification of perceptual-communicative disorders in Colorado*. Boulder, CO: Laboratory of Educational Research.

Shepard, L. A., Smith, M. L., & Vojir, C. P. (1983). Characteristics of pupils identified as learning disabled. *The Journal of Special Education, 16*, 73-85.

Ysseldyke, J. E., Algozzine, B., Shinn, M. R., & McGue, M. (1982). Similarities and differences between low achievers and students labeled learning disabled. *The Journal of Special Education, 16*, 73-85.