

CHAPTER

1

DIFFERENT DISABILITIES, COMMON GOALS

In 1975, the U.S. Congress passed the first bill for children with disabilities, called the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, which has subsequently been renamed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA 2004). However, in adopting the initial version of the act, many state public educational systems excluded children with physical disabilities and impairments (for example, children who were deaf, blind, or physically handicapped), and children with learning disabilities and emotional disabilities, from special education services. Prior to this time, children with mental retardation and speech and language difficulties had been recognized as needing increased services, but those with learning disabilities were not formally recognized for federal funding until the passing of the law in the mid 1970s. In 2003, approximately 6 million children (roughly 13 percent of all school-age children) were receiving some form of special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

The number of students with disabilities (ages three to twenty-one) who received special education services in the United States in 1976–77 was 3.7 million (8 percent of the school population); however, in 2005–06, that number had increased to 6.7 million students, representing 14 percent of the school population (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2006). Critics of special education point to this increase as evidence of a tendency to over-identify children with special needs. However, the Association of State

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Units on Aging (2005) reports that the number of individuals with disabilities between age twenty-one and sixty-five represents 19 percent of the U.S. population. The fact is that due to technological advances, increased awareness about disabilities, and pharmacological interventions, many individuals survive today and are recognized as disabled who would not have been recognized in the past. Furthermore, comparing actual percentage rates for school-aged children reveals that 10.4 percent of the school-age population were receiving special education in 1980 compared with 13.4 percent in 2003, which represents an increase of only approximately 3.4 percent over a twenty-four-year span.

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?

Children who receive special education and related services represent children between three and twenty-one years of age who have a wide range of difficulties, disabilities, and special needs that interfere with their learning. The following list will provide a profile of characteristics that may apply to children who receive special education services:

- Children with special needs differ in ability levels, strengths and weaknesses, ages, learning styles, pace of learning, and personality or temperament.
- Students who receive special education services represent a wide range of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.
- All students who receive special education assistance qualify for services based on their unique learning needs.
- Students who receive special education services will be provided with an individualized education program (IEP) that is specifically designed to meet their learning needs by incorporating modifications in instructional design or materials or other adaptive methods.
- In addition to modifications to their learning program, students may also require support services such as speech-language therapy, adaptive physical education, physical or occupational therapy, or counseling services.
- While some children may require minimal adjustments to achieve success, others with chronic health problems or multiple disabilities may require more complex adaptations and accommodations.

- Some students may experience cognitive deficits, such as intellectual delays that may range from mild to severe mental retardation, and therefore may require more time and repetition to consolidate information.
- Other students may not have cognitive impairments; however, they may experience impaired learning due to a variety of processing problems that interfere with their perception, reception, expression of information, or ability to recall information.
- Some students may require adaptations that accommodate their physical disabilities, such as wheelchairs or other devices, in order to improve their mobility in the classroom.
- Other students may require technical and assisted devices to adapt the educational program to sensory impairments such as vision or hearing problems.
- For some students, emotional or behavioral problems can be a barrier to learning and school success.
- While some students may require special education services for a limited amount of time in order to reduce the gap between their academic performance and their grade level, other students may require special education services throughout their school enrollment.

Although most people support the notion of special education services to improve educational opportunities for children with disabilities, there continues to be controversy and discussion about how the process should be funded and the best way to deliver services and monitor the success of programs.

WHAT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARE SAYING AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ARE ASKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION

A Public Agenda survey of over 850 superintendents and principals (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, & Foley, 2001) revealed that in times of increasing need and accountability (teacher shortages and high teacher turnover, overcrowded schools, higher academic standards) and decreasing budgets, administrators struggle to balance the needs of special education and regular education programs. In addition to voicing financial concerns, administrators have criticized the bureaucratic process of administering special education (which has become extremely paperwork-heavy and time-consuming) and the need for increased research to determine whether special education programs are actually effective. One of the

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major questions revealed by the survey was whether special education programs are a dumping ground for difficult students.

WHY DO WE NEED SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Critics of special education have asked some of the following questions: Couldn't we just get rid of special education if teachers were better trained to work with all children and give more consistent discipline? Would special education be needed if parents did a better job of disciplining their children? If special education is working, then why are so many children still enrolled? (Johnson, Duffett, Farkas, & Wilson, 2002).

By the time you finish reading this book, we hope that you will have found the answers to the questions posed in the box and any other questions that you may have. As you will see, administrators, teachers, and parents are all somewhat frustrated with the special education process, which means that in understanding how the process works, it is important to see the different concerns that each of the players brings to the table in order to create the best possible opportunities for a child. While some critics of special education are prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater, others suggest shifting the emphasis from the process to the results. Horn and Tynan (2001) suggest that it is time to make special education special again by working to improve outcomes for children in special education and empowering students through compensatory mechanisms that will allow them to become more successful in regular education. For those of us who work in special education, that is always the goal. The movement toward response to intervention (RTI), which will be discussed in Chapter Four, is another attempt to focus on early intervention strategies that can increase opportunities for success in the regular classroom in a shorter period of time than would be required if a full assessment were necessary.

Another question that critics have asked is why special education classrooms are populated mostly by male students. Unfortunately, being male is a risk factor for many disabilities and a significantly higher proportion of males than females have attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder. As a result, it would not be surprising to see more males than females in special education programs. Of the parents surveyed in the Public Agenda report described in the next section (Johnson et al., 2002), two-thirds had

a male child in special education and only one-third had a female child in special education.

WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ARE ASKING

Researchers from the Public Agenda report (Johnson et al., 2002) surveyed over 500 parents of children with special needs to obtain an in-depth look at how parents perceive the experiences and special education services that their children receive from the public education system. Results from that survey suggest the following:

- The majority of parents did not side with the critics who believe that educators are too eager to place children in special education; on the contrary, over half complained that information about special education was hard to come by and that schools were slow to volunteer the information.
- Once their child was in a special education program, 84 percent of parents felt that their child's teacher really cared about their child; 77 percent felt a part of their child's special education team; and almost 70 percent felt that their child's teachers were knowledgeable about their child's disability and how to work with it. A majority also felt that teachers were capable of managing their child's behavior and discipline.
- A majority of parents reported that their child spent the better part of the day in the regular class, regardless of the extent of disability, and most were supportive of this arrangement because it satisfied social and academic needs. However, parents also voiced concern that for special needs children, academics were often emphasized at the expense of social development, which is very important for these children.
- Parents were mixed in their feelings about how children with special needs were accommodated during standardized or statewide testing and exit exams. Many felt that if accommodations were not provided, their child would never pass.
- Many parents were less than satisfied with the number of services available and felt that they had to persist in order for services to be provided. Parents indicated a number of stumbling blocks and barriers within the special education process, including the process itself, paperwork, bureaucracy, and difficulty in getting help quickly.

WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THEIR PROFESSION

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) conducted an Internet survey during 1998–99 to obtain perceptions of special education teachers about the status of special education programs in their schools. Almost 200 teachers from thirty-two states responded to the survey. On average, the respondents had been teaching students with disabilities for five and a half years and had a caseload of twenty students. A majority reported that they were spending increasingly more time on paperwork and meetings and less time for teaching their students. A large majority (83 percent) indicated that they did not have enough time to spend on each individual student. Many also complained about IEPs and the legalese of IEP forms, and teachers in both general education and special education said they wanted easier access to modified textbooks for students with disabilities rather than having to spend time adapting existing materials for individual students enrolled in special education programs.

Over 1,500 special education teachers responded to a more recent survey conducted by the Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) in 2006. Educators who responded had an average caseload of twenty-five students, the majority of which (57.9 percent) were categorized as learning disabled; smaller percentages of students had disabilities in areas of emotional problems (9 percent), mental retardation (7.6 percent), autism (4.3 percent), speech and language (4.1 percent), and developmental delay (1.3 percent). Thirty-five percent of respondents had a master's degree or higher. In response to a severe shortage of special education teachers nationally and high turnover rates in the profession, the survey looked at how special education teachers felt about their job and special education in particular. Although the respondents were generally satisfied, approximately one-third of the respondents stated that they planned to leave their positions in the following year.

Why would special education teachers be inclined to leave their profession? Frustration with paperwork and non-teaching responsibilities were high on the list of reasons. The special education teachers who responded to the TCER survey indicated that they spent an average of 57.9 hours a month (approximately 1.4 weeks per month) engaged in non-teaching activities (for example, planning, paperwork, meetings, and committees). In addition, they specified other needs:

- More release time for professional development
- Adequate classroom space and equipment

- Access to reliable computers in order to complete paperwork
- Adequate support regarding legal issues
- Opportunities to meet with other special education teachers in the district

For the majority of special education teachers, elements that would increase job satisfaction included more time to work with students; improved classroom facilities; and a supportive school environment. Supportive school environments were described as having

- Teacher involvement in the decision-making process
- A campus administrator who provides information and advice and helps resolve classroom issues
- Policies that are consistently applied
- A principal who understands the challenges of working in special education
- Evaluative feedback to improve teaching
- An administrator who considers student and teacher capabilities when placing students
- A principal who is knowledgeable about special education laws

As a result of their survey, TCER made two recommendations on how to improve special education services and the quality of the school environment:

1. Find ways to inform parents and general education teachers about special education topics.
2. Create more opportunities for teachers to spend uninterrupted time with their students in adequate classroom facilities.

CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EDUCATION: ACHIEVING COMMON GOALS

As we have seen in this chapter, administrators, teachers, and educators all share the common goal of providing the best possible educational opportunities for children; however, it is also clear that special education can be a complex and frustrating process for all concerned. For parents, obtaining information about

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special education services available in their child's school is often a major stumbling block. For special education teachers, working in a school environment in which administrators and general education teachers are aware and supportive of special education could make the difference in whether they remain as special education teachers or leave the profession. Special education teachers want more time to work with children individually. Administrators want to be able to hire high-quality special education teachers and retain them in the face of high turnover rates in the profession. And in the middle of it all is the special needs child, who just wants to learn and be successful in school.

In the next chapter, we will provide an overview of the different disabilities that qualify a child for special education services and how these disabilities are labeled and defined by educators. In Chapter Three, we will provide in-depth discussion of some of the more common disabilities, such as learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, Asperger's disorder, emotional disorders (including bipolar disorder), and behavioral disorders; how these disabilities are defined and labeled by clinicians who may be involved in helping a student; and suggestions for how to assist students with disabilities at home and at school. In Chapter Four, we will discuss response to intervention and how it works.