

An Introduction to Special Needs

Throughout history, people with disabilities have been subject to discrimination, violence and misunderstanding. For many years the term “handicapped” was used to describe all people with a physical or mental difference from the “norm,” illustrating the long-held belief that all people should interact with the environment in the same, or at least a very similar, way. Rather than adapt the “norm” to encompass a greater variety of needs, those who were “different” were often ostracized and denied basic human rights.

Today, the term “handicap” is used to refer more accurately to the problems a person with a disability encounters when interacting with his or her environment. The word “disability” is used to refer to how a person’s ability to perform certain tasks is limited as a result of reduced functioning of a body part or organ. It has only been within recent decades that society has come to recognize that having a disability does not prevent a person from working and living as well as anyone else. When conditions for working and living are made accessible to people with disabilities, opportunities for success become equitable.

In 1975, The United States passed the first in a series of legislation aimed at providing people with disabilities equal treatment under the law. The purpose of the enactment of what was to become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was to equalize opportunities for participation in education and employment while integrating people with disabilities into the larger community. This legislation defined several major categories of disabling conditions. The services that would be made available to people with disabilities and their rights pertaining to public education were also outlined in the legislation.

There are currently 28 million hard of hearing and deaf Americans, approximately 10 to 11 million blind and visually impaired people in North America, and more than 50 million Americans with disabilities, approximately half of whom are students. During the 1999-2000 school year, more than 6 million students were served under IDEA, close to 10% of the total public school population. Among these students, almost 3 million were classified as having a learning disability and over 1 million were diagnosed as having a speech or language disorder. Students with mental retardation and emotional disabilities comprised the next two largest categories of those served, with numbers reaching over 600,000 and 470,000 respectively.

The majority of students with disabilities are required to achieve the same academic levels as their non-impaired peers. Unfortunately, there are few specialized materials to help these exceptional students. Special education, as we now know it, is still a developing field. The variability among individual needs within a particular category is extensive. Though a common trait relates people with a certain disability, individual strengths and capabilities vary as widely

among them as in any other population of people. Couple this diversity with the newness of techniques for teaching learners with special needs and the task of finding the best teaching method for each person seems daunting. However, there are some techniques that have proven to be effective in increasing academic success as well as feelings of self-worth among many students.

Students with special needs, especially those with a learning disability, commonly have difficulty generalizing skills learned in one situation to another area of living outside of this context. To assist students in meeting with success in a variety of situations, teachers can use varied modalities when teaching various tasks and do so in different settings. By making content as interesting and authentic to students as possible, teachers can fully engage students in the learning process thereby helping them to internalize what they see, hear and do.

Sustaining attention and focus is another common challenge for students with special needs. Simple adjustments made by the attentive teacher can lead to incredible differences in the amount of time a student spends engaged in the learning process. For example, a teacher may intentionally speak softly (with students with typical hearing capabilities) to strengthen the effort students make toward attending to what is said. By reducing outside stimuli such as “white noise,” using familiar cue words to focus student attention, or by simply changing physical proximity to an inattentive student, teachers can make small adaptations that can lead to greater success for more students, regardless of individual needs.

Learners with special needs share many commonalities with their typically achieving peers, among these the desire for independence and self-determination. To assist students with special needs in gaining greater autonomy teachers must first allow students to make choices about what they are learning. Not only should the choice between several topics or activities be offered but also the opportunity to explore the limitless choices of the larger context of learning. In this, teachers must learn to follow the student’s lead, allow time for discovery, and focus on the things that are important to the individual.

In the endeavor of finding ways to assist diverse learners along their individual paths of discovery, it is essential that we learn to examine our own attitudes and values regarding disabilities. We must be careful to remember that categories and labels of disabling conditions do not indicate the ability of an individual person. Instead, we should look at the person holistically, determining their strengths as well as areas of difficulty. Then, we should use this information to develop an educational program that will focus on how the person’s strengths can be used as a means of improving the areas of weakness.