



3-1981

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Recommended Citation

Frith, Greg H. and Lindsey, Jimmy D. (1981) "Special Services and Saving Money: Avenues for Decreasing Special Education Personnel Costs," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol6/iss1/5>

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Special Services and Saving Money: Avenues for Decreasing Special Education Personnel Costs

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Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) requires that every handicapped child in the country receive a free and appropriate public education. Today most states have undertaken the implementation of P.L. 94-142 and have enacted separate legislation that also requires that special education services be provided for all handicapped children and youth. While the right of handicapped students to receive a free and appropriate public education is almost universally recognized, considerable disagreement exists over programming variables and the cost of providing such educational programs. These problems, unfortunately, have been compounded by such factors as: (a) inflation; (b) citizenry opposition to increased taxes; (c) a proportionately small share of educational expenses being assumed by the federal government; (d) a lack of qualified personnel in some areas of exceptionality; (e) the cost and availability of related services; (f) a lack of facilities that are architecturally free of barriers for physically handicapped children; (g) increasing demands by parents of handicapped children; (h) expensive materials and equipment; (i) smaller pupil-teacher ratios in special education programs; and (j) small numbers of students in the low incidence exceptionalities, e.g., deaf, blind, severe/profound, and multi-handicapped students, particularly in rural areas.

Thompson (1980) reported that the national average cost of educating an exceptional child in 1978-79 was \$3,638 compared to \$1,819 for educating the nonhandicapped child. The National School Board Association predicts that the cost differential will increase in the coming years.

There is no doubt that special education is expensive. There is also no question that these services will have to be provided. Therefore, the question becomes one of how to provide quality services with the limited funding that is allocated to local education agencies. As personnel costs comprise the largest single budgetary item in education and are affected by instructional and non-instructional variables, they appear to be a logical focal point in a discussion of basic avenues for reducing the expense of providing special education services.

The purpose of this manuscript is to describe a series of established "teacher/learner" approaches that have been successfully demonstrated to have utility from a cost/benefit viewpoint and from an instructional perspective. In terms of personnel costs, these approaches range from free to less than half the average teacher salary. Included in this discussion will be: (a) the use of children in the instructional process: e.g., peer tutoring, cross-age tutoring, and cross-exceptionality tutoring; (b) the use of community personnel: e.g., parents, volunteers, and foster grandparents; (c) various categories of paraprofessionals; and (d) computer assisted instruction and other technological procedures. Before initiating this discussion, it must be stressed that the principals and teachers remain the most important individuals in the instructional program and that their authority and responsibilities cannot be usurped. It remains their role to facilitate or manage the use of each or all of the aforementioned approaches. There can be no doubt that teachers must have assistance if all handicapped children are to have an individualized program predicated on their respective skills, interests, and abilities. The principals and teachers must be a part of the decision-making process.

Children as "Teachers"

Lindsey and Watts (1979) referred to "docemur docendo," meaning "he who teaches, learns," in justifying the use of students to teach other students. This

approach has been popular over the years in many regular classrooms as teachers have asked the better students to assist the slower ones. When applied to exceptional student education, the student as a teacher concept can be trichotomous in nature. The three approaches follow.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring occurs when students from within a specific group or class assist with the instruction of one or more of their classmates. For example, a sixth grade learning disabled student in a resource room or special class could assist two of his less capable friends (peers) with acquiring basic skills in the use of fractions. The tutor's own knowledge of fractions will be reinforced, the two students being tutored may learn more rapidly because the concepts are explained in a one-to-two instructional setting, and student interpersonal relationships are strengthened. Furthermore, the teacher has more time to provide individualized attention to other students. It is recommended that teachers use good judgment in selecting and matching student tutors and learners. It is also recommended that teachers conduct simple training activities for tutors as well as frequently monitor actual tutoring sessions.

Cross-Age Tutoring

Cross-age tutoring is the use of older students to instruct younger ones. Younger students frequently are better behaved and more attentive when tutored by older students than they are when tutored by their peers. This may be the result of peer pressure. An example of cross-age tutoring is using a 17-year-old educable mentally retarded student to teach spelling words to a small group of intermediate educable mentally retarded students. Secondary and elementary exceptional or non-exceptional students considering teaching as a profession may have the desire and motivation to work closely with the principals and

teachers to acquire effective tutoring skills. Again, caution is urged when selecting and matching students. Simple training activities for tutors are also recommended.

Cross-Exceptionality Tutoring

A variation of peer and cross-age tutoring is cross-exceptionality tutoring. In this approach, students in one area of exceptionality are used to instruct students in another area of exceptionality, peers, or cross-ages. For example, a student in a learning disabilities resource room or special education class could explain appropriate social behaviors to students in a behavior disorders class or to students in a regular class. The learning disabled tutor could be talking to his peer level or to younger students. The combinations are endless.

Tutor training activities, monitoring of the tutor by the teacher, and appropriate selection and matching of tutors and learners are the key variables in the successful use of students as teachers. The teacher remains the most critical person as "facilitator" of the process.

Literature Support

Data exist in the professional literature to support the use of students as tutors in the instructional process. Student tutoring programs have been found to improve: (a) attitude and interest in schools (Melaragno, 1970); (b) academic performance (Allen, 1976; DeGirolomo, Hill, Horan, & Shute, 1974); (c) self confidence and self image (Weiner, Goldman, Lev, Tolendano, & Rosner, 1974); (d) social behavior or deportment (Page, 1970); and (e) value clarification (Hymovity, 1975).

Community Volunteers

The use of various types of community volunteers can reduce personnel costs and facilitate the instructional process by introducing additional authority figures into the classroom. Proper selection of these volunteers by the principal and teacher is important in order to control the quality, commitment, and skill level of these persons. The principal and teachers never must be placed in a situation where they are forced to work with someone who challenges their instructional authority. A cooperative effort with the teacher in command may be the most important element if this approach is to be successful. Since the sources of community volunteers are diversified, effective job screening techniques and inservice programming must be used in combination to develop a cooperative effort and to channel positively the interests and skills of the volunteers.

Parents

Parents, preferably unemployed mothers, frequently express an interest in assisting teachers with the individualized instruction of handicapped students. When parents of exceptional students are used in the classroom, it is normally advisable for them to work with students other than their own children. It may even be best for these parents to work in classrooms that do not include their own children. For a parent to work with or around her own child(ren) would probably be awkward or even embarrassing to the student(s) and/or the parent. Where parents of nonhandicapped students are being used with handicapped children, the problem does not exist. The potential advantages of parent volunteers as an instructional manpower source should not be overlooked. Again, appropriate job screening techniques and inservice experiences are recommended.

Various investigators have addressed the practicality of using parents in a volunteer capacity (Schuck, 1979; McLoughlin, Edge, & Strenecky, 1978;

Kronick, 1976; Eaton, 1978; Murray, 1973; Kelley, 1973; Thomas & Martinez, 1979). McLoughlin et al. and Kronick also stressed the value of appropriate preparation for parents prior to their actual interaction with exceptional children.

Volunteer Workers

Community volunteers normally have more utility as instructional personnel than parents. These volunteers can be particularly useful with activities where one-to-one interaction is helpful: e.g., swimming, field trips, adapted physical education, remedial academics, etc. In many localities, community action agencies sponsor volunteer programs that welcome opportunities to work in the schools. Volunteers can be especially helpful in assisting with children of low incidence exceptionalities such as deaf, blind, severe/profound, and multi-handicapped students. They can be helpful also with exceptional students that need close adult physical proximity to assist them with controlling their learning and classroom behaviors. School administrators should use every opportunity to publicly acknowledge the efforts of volunteers as a type of reward. Again, it is suggested that administrators utilize job screening techniques to reduce the use of nondependable volunteers. These techniques also reduce the constant inservice planning and implementation required to develop volunteer competencies.

The feasibility and advantages of utilizing volunteers in the instructional program have been discussed by Sawyer (1977), Conk (1977), Brimm and Hartman (1978), Jackson (1977) and Slack (1978). An important element that is common in the literature is the necessity of adequately preparing the volunteer(s) prior to involvement in the classroom.

Foster Grandparents

"Foster Grandparents" is a relatively new concept that is designed to provide employment for elderly people who are interested in a variety of service related occupations. This program is federally funded but, unfortunately, is not currently operational in every community. Where it is functioning, many educators are not aware of its existence or the instructional manpower assistance that could be available upon request. Experience has indicated that children relate well to these elderly persons. In addition, the use of the elderly provides the "foster grandparents" with an additional purpose in life and with positive feelings about their contributions. Again, appropriate job screening techniques and inservice experiences are important for the successful implementation of this concept.

Paraprofessionals

The use of paraprofessionals in special education has been increasing significantly across the country since the enactment of P.L. 94-142. Paraprofessionals have been successfully employed by local education agencies to work with children across exceptionalities. These exceptionalities include: (a) preschool and lower elementary level handicapped learners (Karnes, Teska, & Hodgins, 1970; Olshin, 1971); (b) mental retardation (Johnson & Ferryman, 1969); (c) behavior disorders (Cowan, Dorr, Sandler, & McWilliams, 1971; Nichtern, Donahue, O'Shea, Marans, Curtis, & Brody, 1964); (d) learning disabilities (Jones, 1969; Schortinghuis & Frohman, 1974); (e) auditorially impaired (Boyd & Barras, 1975; Palmer, 1975); and (f) speech and language disorders (Garry & Barry, 1977; Guess, Smith, & Ensminger, 1974). Frith and Lindsey (in press) have described the role of the paraprofessional in assisting regular classroom teachers who are assigned multi-handicapped students. In addition, Frith, Lindsey, and Edwards (in press) have examined the use of paraprofessionals in a non-categorical program to provide services for handicapped children

in rural areas. The instructional "track record" for paraprofessionals is excellent.

Aides

A distinction is normally made in most states between teacher aides and paraprofessionals. An individual may be employed as an aide without prior professional training and without a specified number of clock hours of inservice training. (The paraprofessional usually has one to two years of college. This preparation differential is frequently reflected in salary steps on a career ladder established by State Boards of Education.) The aide is assigned to a specific school and/or teacher and is subject to the teacher's control within the instructional setting. The availability of aides at the current time and the lower salary range are two variables that should be considered when school systems are debating between employing aides versus paraprofessionals. Good job screening techniques and inservice experiences will increase the utility and competency level of aides.

Paraprofessionals

The role of the paraprofessional is diversified and can be defined to include such responsibilities as: (a) administering informal assessment instruments; (b) planning simple instructional activities; (c) securing materials and equipment; (d) supporting team teaching endeavors; (e) assisting physically handicapped students with mobility; and (f) coordinating case study reports (Frith & Lindsey, in press). A well trained paraprofessional can be a valuable and relatively inexpensive asset in a multi-dimensional special education program. The paraprofessional's involvement in regular classroom programming for exceptional students can also have a positive and profound effect on the education of nonhandicapped students. Utilizing effective job screening techniques for employment and conducting inservice experiences increase the possibility for a successful paraprofessional component.

Computer Assisted Technology

In recent years educators have been actively expanding the use of computer assisted technology as an instructional tool within the school environment. Special education has been a leader in this area as a result of its traditional interest in individualizing instruction. Computers and other highly technical equipment were initially too expensive to have universal appeal. Also, there was a fundamental fear that machines would reduce the need for teachers. Both these concerns have abated to a considerable extent and sophisticated equipment is now being viewed with increasing favor. In fact, the cost of computers has actually been reduced due to their mass production and increased use for non-instructional purposes by local education agencies. The initial cost for capital outlay may be relatively high, but the instructional and non-instructional benefits return the investment many fold through facilitating reporting and accounting as well as promoting the individualizing of teaching procedures. When compared to rising teacher salaries and the educational gains that many exceptional students are making, computer assisted instruction is inexpensive.

Support for the use of computer assisted technology has been advanced by several authors (Vitello & Bruce, 1977; Watson, 1978; Schnitker & Boeker, 1978; Withrow, 1978; vonFeldt, 1978). Data indicate that computer based instruction is feasible for children exhibiting a wide range of handicapping conditions.

Conclusion

The right to a free and appropriate public education for all handicapped children has been mandated by P.L. 94-142. Because provisions for these services are becoming increasingly expensive, school systems are searching for avenues to reduce cost. One possible area for such reduction is in special education personnel costs. The authors have explored several approaches that have a proven "track record" in actual classroom settings. If properly utilized,

these approaches would: (a) improve student performance; (b) reduce personnel costs; (c) enhance school-community relationships; and (d) provide for greater individualization of instruction. Administrators must be prepared to implement pre-programming and/or employment activities. Three important activities are principal-parent-student planning sessions, job screening procedures, and quality inservice experiences. A Friday "Brown Bag Lunch Activity" would be an excellent time for planning, implementing, and/or evaluating the recommendations and ideas advanced in this manuscript.

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