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Special Education in the Twenty First Century: Challenges and Opportunities or a New Graveyard, Roy Brown,
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I have chosen this paper because of the holistic and systematic analysis offered of the potential changes and challenges likely in the field of special education in the 21st century in relation to concept of inclusion and its application. I particularly appreciated his consideration of the challenges identified for educators not only of children but also of teachers of children.

Norma Hart
June 2016

Special Education in the Twenty First Century: Challenges and Opportunities or a New Graveyard?

Roy I Brown

Synopsis

In this paper consideration is given to possible changes and challenges which are likely to occur in the field of special education in the new millennium. As we leave a world of linear thinking and notions of one-to-one causation to an examination of interactive models, educators and scientists need to abandon political orthodoxies and mission approaches to intervention. The 21st century will require the careful demonstration and evaluation of ideas including the consequences of applying those ideas. For example, if inclusion is to be assessed as a total process, we need to ensure that the model is effectively planned, costed and evaluated. A more flexible interpretation of the notion of inclusion has to be adopted extending beyond simply educational inclusion to embrace, family, social and community inclusion. One concept that has largely escaped consideration in the field of special education but which has a direct relevance is that of quality of life. The principles underpinning this concept are briefly examined. Special education departments within universities are strongly encouraged to abandon too narrow a professional focus and adopt a broader multi-disciplinary approach in the fields of research, demonstration and practice. For their part, teachers in the 21st century will need to learn more about the origins of their own values and be capable of accepting multi-value systems, while still encouraging and enabling pupils to make their own choices. If the kind of challenges described in this paper are not addressed then there is likely to be little future for special education in the 21st century.

Setting the Scene

I HAVE the advantage of having been part of developments in special education and the disabilities field for nearly forty years and spread over three continents. Developments over that period have been quite remarkable and have included the closure of institutions, the development of demonstration programmes to illustrate change, plus the advent of new technologies. Further, many special and residential schools have been closed and to a considerable degree education has much greater responsibility for children with multiple and severe disabilities. All of these changes were interactive with other political and social developments. They have been part of a humanitarian movement, which has led to a worldwide focus on educational inclusion for people with disabilities and a concerted thrust towards community inclusion. Many who were institutionalised or secluded in residential and special schools have progressed to work, community living, partnership and marriage. Some now have their own families. During this time a variety of fads and fancies have come and many have gone. New disciplines have been established and have sought to find applications relevant to the disabilities field. Unfortunately, however, many have forgotten or chosen to ignore previous efforts to improve and develop special education. I believe it essential that those entering special education are conversant with such developments.

In examining the future, it is wise to take stock of the past. Values and philosophies have changed. In the United Kingdom such changes only became possible because of the work of people like O'Connor and Tizard (1956), Tizard (1958), Tansley and Gulliford (1960), Segal (1967), Gunzburg (1968) and Clarke and Clarke (1974). More recently others, such as Peter Mittler and his colleagues, have supported and encouraged major changes in the field of special education (see for example Mittler, Brouillette & Harris, 1993). These examples particularly relate to issues of developmental and multiple disabilities. In English speaking countries, other than the United Kingdom, equivalent changes and developments took place. Sometimes changes seemed to be associated with particular countries and specific aspects of disability. Like a relay race the baton of demonstration has been passed from one country to another. Much of the work that I have noted took place in the fifties, sixties and seventies. Of course, changes have been taking place in this field for a long period of history, but it is probably over the past 40 years that colossal changes have occurred at an ever increasing pace. As we shall see the nature of disability has changed (eg, the increase in physical and central nervous system injuries in car accidents, the survival of premature babies) and with it the concepts and interpretations deployed.

Special education and mental retardation services were originally seen as Cinderella practices. Along with other specialised services in the disabilities sector, these areas have become mainstream. At this moment many such services look as if they may either be absorbed into more general education or sidelined, as

other more recent and glamorous possibilities are considered. The changes at this level are occasioned by our recent and current interests in such areas as ageing, the genome project, extreme diseases such as AIDS, and other social concerns such as family abuse. Further, the area is under threat from the incoming tide of economic rationalism. Society has become increasingly secular and values have become individualised and personal. The colonial world has become to some degree the undeveloped or developing world, and the race for economic leadership in technology, communication, banking and allied ventures have come to dominate much of our society.

The media focuses our attention on what they see as the big issues. Malpractice and abuse are newsworthy as are the attempts at legal redress. Professional and ethical practice have become key words. We have learned the language of discrimination and set up systems to combat evils that we have not yet fully identified. Of course, there is great variability across countries and, even within countries, for standards, practices and values may differ considerably. There is no standard Australian, Canadian or Scottish approach to disability, but, trends and directions, with areas of considerable progress and instances of surprising stagnation.

I am sure readers can add their own list of changes and contributions to the above. Those I present are not listed because they are extraordinary or because they occasion concern, though some meet these criteria, but because they seem to me to be important variables in discussing 'Whither special education?'.

Despite these examples there are many who see little change and note the rise of unacceptable conditions for those with disabilities. I would argue that there have been major shifts which provide for a greater degree of openness and scrutiny which provide individuals with greater freedom to pursue rights and concerns. But such changes cloud the picture, making the situation more complex and less accessible to decision making. Society changes and therefore new challenges arise. It is this changing web which catches our attention as we move to the 21st century. It is a more complex world full of shades of grey or light depending on your predisposition.

Special education affected by genetic and social worlds

It is probably fair to conclude that education has been driven by social and political value systems rather than the findings of scientific research. In the broadest sense the influence of scientific research is readily apparent, yet it has often been subverted, sometimes by scientists themselves, to reinforce or support personal values. At times this has led to the doctoring of evidence, such as the touching up of photographs by Goddard in an attempt to make the Kallikak family members appear more defective and sinister than they really were (Gould, 1996). Goddard like many of his generation were concerned over what they perceived to be the increasing dangers posed by large numbers of persons with defective intelligence. They recommended, and some carried out, the sterilisation of people who were said to be mentally retarded as a result of poor inheritance. Of course such views were negated when their inappropriateness was demonstrated or when the fabrication of evidence came to light. This rejection was reinforced by the discovery of the appalling conditions under which many of these individuals lived in government funded institutions. More balanced views were argued by scientists like Penrose (1949) and Haldane (1949). They too had social and political values, as well as their research data. After a period of studying and recognising the impact of environmental effects (eg, O'Connor & Tizard, 1956; Clarke & Clarke, 1974) we see the emergence of two strong movements. The first, supported largely by sociology and social psychology, which, at its extremes, sees the social environment as the cause of disability. The second is a restatement of an inheritance model which, at its extremes, believes we are able to, and should in the near future, do away with disability and the so-called genetic diseases of later life. Views are often cyclic. They come and go and then return in a more sophisticated form. They probably leave us more knowledgeable and, for a period, more humble about our knowledge base than at the height of the battle. Again it is the media and our communication systems, along with desires to discover major effects, which take attention away from the more sanguine views long since propounded - namely - not whether environment or inheritance is the more important, but how these two major processes interact with one another under various circumstances. Parallel debates go on in the field of curriculum and educational methodology. It is not whether one approach is better, but under what circumstances and in whose hands a particular approach is effective. The future then requires some modifying and mediating forces. Our arguments need to become more comparative and less specific and concrete. We need to seek the effects of interaction between teachers, children and methods and to continue to seek new answers to old questions. Who are the most effective teachers for specific children using what particular methodologies?

We are at last leaving the world of linear thinking and one to one causation for interactive models where circumstance and opportunity play important roles. This requires a measure of sophistication on the part of educators and scientists, which does not sit well with political orthodoxy, mission approaches to intervention, or the deployment of excited mass media.

The rise of technology

Research has also resulted in a range of new