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## Special education: Myths and reality

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### Abstract

After decades of research and improvements in educational practices, special education (SpEd) provides reliable instruction and services to exceptional children with varying degrees and disabilities. Mental retardation, Learning Disabilities, Emotional Disturbances, Communication Disorders, Hearing and Visual Impairment, Physically impaired and Gifted Children are included in these special groups. Numerous definitions of “special education” and “exceptional children” have been suggested so far, but not a single definition is accepted by everyone or even by a majority of people. The purpose of this study is to bridge these differences on the basis of the findings of an empirical research and conclude to a more reliable, workable and accurate definition of both terms. This will maximize the effectiveness of services provided to persons with special needs. The following problem statements-questions were asked to the sample of 683 persons, parents of exceptional children and special education teachers surveyed. (a) How have you been aware of the exceptionality of the child? (causal), (b) To what extent do you believe that inclusion will help exceptional children? (relationship) and (c) To what extent do you agree with certain characteristics attached to the various exceptionalities? (impact). Common special needs include, among others, the case of gifted individuals. This appears to be a paradox. In no way can giftedness be considered as a special needs condition. This paper will, in the conclusion and recommendation sectors, highlight the various misconceptions about special education, will focus attention to the importance of caring for gifted individuals and deal with the social side of special education. Additionally, it will propose measures that will ensure the most effective involvement of parents of exceptional children in the study of differences. It is believed that a close link between families, teachers and educationalists will produce better results to the benefit of all parties concerned. In parallel, reference will be made to measures taken by a number of countries worldwide for the support of handicapped and gifted, that can be used as an example to be followed.

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### 1. Introduction

It is supported that the object of education is to provide results, which means that researchers, educationists, faculty members and teachers have to proceed to the design and implementation of programmes by means of which individuals will develop abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour of positive value in the society in which they live. For ages, renowned educators have carried out researches and proposed reforms in general education practices, since education came to be regarded as a necessity to countries in order to prosper and gain power.

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Due to the development of democratic ideas, education has been considered to be the right of everybody who should have a chance to become educated and cultured to the degree of his/her capability. Therefrom, educational planning had to be geared to the attainment of this goal. Yet, a great number of children, the exceptional children, with varying degrees of disabilities had not been able to benefit from the relative reforms.

The use of certain terms to describe specific characteristics of children and define special education programmes has been strongly debated by educationists, teachers and parents of handicapped children.

Among the primary objectives of this paper is to present special education in a way that would make the field quite real and focus on the educational programmes and classroom strategies.

## 2. Definitions

It is important to define and differentiate certain terms used in Special Education, before presenting the findings of an empirical research carried out during a period of six months. Certain definitions are not readily accepted and create confusion and uncertainty. It is generally accepted that to attain workable solutions of the problems pertaining to persons with specific needs the consent of the absolute majority is required.

### 2.1. Special education

(a) One definition (Gargiulo, R.M.) incorporates the provision of social services in SpEd public schools to individuals between 3-21 years old. The objections are (a) social services are offered to school children by co-operating organizations. (b) There is no reason such services to be restricted to public schools only, since it is recognized that private schools have played an essential part in the education of handicapped children (Hallahan D.P. and Kauffman, J.M.) and (c) the age limit is groundless.

(b) Hallahan and Kauffman refer to the satisfaction of unique needs of an exceptional child. None-the-less this implies a rather individualized procedure which is in conflict with the concept of inclusion.

(c) According to Stevens G. D., special education is offered to pupils deviating from the normal ones. Yet, he does not clarify whether this deviation is below or above normal.

### 2.2. Exceptional children

This term, as used in SpEd constitutes a misconception. As a linguistic term “exceptional children” denotes those who have more than average intelligence, ability or skills. As a pedagogical term it is used to denote children whose performance deviates from the normal, either below or above. (Heward W.L. and Orlansky M. D. ). The term handicapped, though restrictive is more accurate since it does not include the intellectually gifted children. The inclusive term “exceptional” is supported by many educationists and psychologists for purely social and psychological reasons. This is mainly due to the pressure of more parents who are reluctant to have their children identified as having various problems and difficulties because of physical, mental or behavioural characteristics different from the normal individuals.

At the Special Education Department of Western Michigan University, USA we have deliberately substituted the term “handicapped” with the linguistically awkward term “Handicapper”. The concept was that by using an adjective instead of a past participle would give to the individuals the impression of energy and activity. Sequel to that, the proposed term might be :

*“ Exceptional children are those who require special education and related services matched with their characteristics in order to realize their educational, social and/or professional potentialities in full”.*

It is recommended that the term “Special Education” is defined as : the branch of education which provides planned and systematic programmes and supporting environment to meet the specific requirements of individuals below or above normal in order to cope with their social, academic and/or professional potentialities”.

## 3. Awareness and Labeling

In deciding to carry out educational researches for Special Education, educators find it difficult to select a reliable representative sample. Determining the number of handicapped children with accuracy is not feasible.

Parents are reluctant to have their children identified as exceptional and tend to consider such classification as a family stigma. Therefore, prevalence in no way can be considered as a reliable indicator. On the other hand, the process of labeling has been disputed. Those advocating the implementation of this system consider labeling of handicapped children as a very important tool for administrative and educational reasons. On the contrary, some educators believe that the labels classifying exceptional children stigmatize them and affect their self-esteem negatively.

Possible benefits of labeling include: (a) Responsible response to differences in learning and behaviour, (b) Easier acceptance of the atypical behaviour of children with disabilities on the part of peers, parents or teachers, and (c) Assistance in making the needs of exceptional children more visible to policy makers and the public (Heward, W. L., 2006)

Possible disadvantages of labeling include: (a) Negative influence of the children’s self-esteem, (b) stigmatization of children, and (c) focus on the specific disability leads people to think only in terms of what the individuals cannot do instead of what may be able to learn to do. (Heward, W. L. op.cit.)

The sample of 683 persons who were interviewed in the framework of an empirical research consisted of 418 parents of exceptional children and 265 special education teachers.

The 418 parents were asked : “ *How have you been aware of the exceptionality of your children?*” The following table 1 shows their responses:

Table1. Means of identification

Sample	Incidental observation	From psychologists	From school teachers	From schoolmates	From friendly families
418	185 (44.26%)	68 (16.27%)	35 (8.37%)	72 (17.23%)	58 (13.87%)

All 683 persons were asked: “ *To what extent do you believe that inclusion will help exceptional children in their studies?*”

Table2. Inclusion

Sample	Very helpful	Helpful	A little helpful	No helpful at all	I donot know
683	193 (28.25)	160 (23.42%)	138 (20.20%)	126 (18.44%)	66 (9.69%)

Finally, the 683 individuals were asked : “ *To what extent do you agree with certain characteristics attached to the various exceptionalities, such as handicapped, special, impaired, of special needs*” to which they responded (Table 3) :

Table 3- Characterization

Sample	I quite agree	I agree	I agree a little	I disagree	I quite disagree
683	69 (10.13%)	40 (5.85%)	184 (26.93%)	201 (29.42%)	66 (9.69%)

#### 4. The Gifted Children Paradox

If a definition of the term “gifted children” has to be given this could be: “ Gifted children are those who demonstrate at least the potential of a remarkable and valued contribution to the human condition by means of high intelligence, ability to formulate novel ideas, high level of motivation “ (Hallahan, D.P. and Kauffman, J. M. op.cit) to be considered as a gifted child a student must be identified as performing in the top 3% to 5% of the school-age population. It is almost a myth to identify a child as gifted on the basis of only an IQ score. It is true that the administration of the traditional IQ testing like Standard Binet or WISC (Wechler Intelligence Scale for Children) constitutes a first reliable test for gifted identification, but it is not the only evidence.. According to the current trends, giftedness involves a combination of procedures, such as intelligence scores, creativity measures and high degree of achievement.

For ages, researchers have been trying to identify the origins of giftedness. Though not readily accepted, factors are considered to be genetic, biological, social, cultural and others. It is evident from all the above that giftedness

cannot be considered as a special needs condition in the sense and to the extent that the term is used to identify the various categories of handicapped children.

## 5. Conclusion

a. The prevalence of handicapped persons may have dramatic impact on our social setting if they are not given the proper attention. Due to the reluctance of parents to accept the exceptionality of their children, regardless of the specific category, the implementation of special measures to meet their needs is hindered.

b. The fact that the most commonly used definitions of the terms “Special education” and “Exceptional children” are strongly debated creates serious problems in communication between professionals and parents. It is believed that the recommended definition in para. 2.1 of this paper is a positive step towards dealing with these children more effectively.

Additionally, it has been observed that there is a considerable number of myths surrounding exceptional children. Given that the impact of these misconceptions upon our societies is catastrophic and constitutes a barrier to their progress the target of this paper is also to restore the truth and provide a forum for parents, policy makers, researchers and educators in order to proceed to reforms of policies and lasting solutions to the problems encountered by the individuals of all specific categories.

Some characteristic misconceptions about the various categories of exceptionality are mentioned here below: (Table 4)

Table 4 - Myths and reality

Myth	Reality
General	
>Most exceptional children receive special education.	It is wrong. Only about have of them do.
>Labeling a child “retarded”, “disturbed” etc is inappropriate.	It is wrong. Labeling is an effective way to describe it.
Mentally retarded	
> Most mentally retarded children look different from normal	The vast majority is not altered in physical appearance.
>In most cases the cause for mental retardation is identified.	Wrong. In most cases cannot be identified.
Learning Disabled	
>All learning-disabled children have brain damage.	It is possible to have a learning problem without brain damage.
>Learning disabilities have nothing to do with environmental disadvantage.	Wrong. A poor environment may be a contributing factor.
Emotionally disturbed	
>Most disturbed children escape the notice of people around them	Most such children are quite easy to spot.
>Disturbed children are usually bright.	Wrong. Their IQ score ranges between 50 and 90
Language disorders	
> Such individuals are always emotionally disturbed.	Not always.
>There is no relationship between intelligence and disorder.	Wrong. More often they are persons with lower IQ.
Hearing impaired	
>Deafness leads automatically to inability to speak.	Most deaf people can be taught some use of language
>Hearing aids should not be used for mild or severe losses.	There are no losses to prevent someone to use aids
Visually impaired	
>The blind have an extra sense to detect objects.	Wrong. They only develop an obstacle sense.
>The blind are helpless and dependent.	With a favorable learning experience are independent.
Physically handicapped	
>Those people always have psychological problems.	There is no such association.
>Cerebral palsy is a contagious disease.	Cerebral palsy is nota disease.
The Gifted	
>Gifted individuals are in a sense super-humans.	Gifted children are not super humans.
>The gifted tend to be mentally unstable.	Wrong. They are emotionally healthy people.

c. Labeling is a procedure that, also, has been disputed mainly for social and psychological reasons, whereas educationally seems to be very helpful.

d. The findings of the empirical research carried out reveal that almost half the parents (44.26%) were unable to identify the problems of their children. As it is, it is not strange that only 24.64% have consulted psychologists and special education teachers, whereas 31.16% were based rather on a hear-say evidence. The inclusion programme provides that all students regardless of disabilities and academic abilities are educated in a general education class together with normal children. In the responses of those surveyed this procedure enjoys an acceptance of 71.87%.

## 6. Recommendations

It is hoped that this paper with the proposed amendments and suggestions will cause those interested, parents of exceptional children, educators and others to examine their own attitudes, beliefs and expectations as concerns exceptional children.

(a) It is very important certain definitions pertaining to SpEd to be amended. Terms like “exceptional children”, “children with special needs” resemble to a negative labeling. The word “need” denotes a necessity resulting from a situation. On the contrary, if we use the term “children deserving special care” we convey the concept of a cause for concern, which is more appropriate for social, psychological, educational and professional reasons. Similarly, “gifted children” should be substituted by “talented children”, since the word “gifted” refers to something given, donated, whereas the term “talented” denotes something innate, faculty which is actually the differentia, as a characteristic of the children.

(b) To identify the exceptionalities of their children parents should have access to structured information programmes via internet, brochures, articles of newspapers and magazines, radios etc.

(c) Organizations of parents of children deserving special care will be of tremendous support to those individuals.

(d) Specially trained teachers assisted in their classroom activities by teacher aides (paraprofessionals) should view children as individual persons ready to integrate into the community life.

(e) Children deserving special care should be given the right to live and participate in settings that are as normal as possible. (Heward, W. L. and Orlansky, M.D, op.cit)

(f) To meet today’s challenges in SpEd and make a difference for children deserving special care, educators should proceed to instructional adaptations both in the content and format of the relevant materials (Lenz, K. and Schumaker, J. 2008).

## 7. Special education globally

The creation of effective learning environments for exceptional students must involve both regular and special educators who are confronted with countless new challenges and responsibilities. (Heward, W.L. and Orlansky, M. D, op.cit.)

Truly enough, special education enjoys an increased concern in numerous countries globally.

The following examples are meant to facilitate comparative studies of educators to decide about the formats and procedures to meet the specific needs of their countries:

(a)Japan: According to OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) special education has shifted to special support education to respond to needs of children with disabilities. To this end, 999 schools for five types of exceptionality are operated accommodating 98.796 children. However, among several innovative reforms first priority is given to the abolition of these special schools and instead establish community schools which will function as educational support centers. (Kaorum Yamagushi, 2010)

(b)France: Special educational services deal with children with disabilities and provide support for the families. Commonly, learning assistance is provided outside of school hours by therapists, whereas in severe cases children are admitted to specialist schools (AngloINFO, Paris 2008).

(c)Germany: Diverse forms of institutional and educational co-operation between mainstream schools and special schools have developed. The curricula implemented in these schools guarantee that those students receive appropriate and equal opportunity. It is estimated that 2.4% of all school age children need special education.(European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009)

(e) Turkey: Assessment of children with special educational needs is provided in guidance and research under the

Department of Education. In the 2004-2005 school year approximately 10,000 pupils at primary level and 1,230 pupils at secondary level attended special schools or similar institutions. ( Report of Arion Study visit to Eskisehir, 2005)

(f) Greece: The situation is not very promising as regards the future measures for Special Education. In September 1997 the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki started offering undergraduate courses for teachers of Special Education. Yet, up to November 2009 no professional rights have been recognized for the graduates of this department. Moreover, in spite of the commitment of the relative directory of the Ministry of Education (April 2009) that full details about the policy concerning Special Education would be announced shortly, after almost seven months the situation is still pending.(Ministry of Education, 2009)

(g) United Kingdom: A report from the Cabinet Office informs that 772,000 children (7% of all children) are disabled. Additionally, 31 million pounds sterling are allocated for the years 2009-2010 to improve outcomes of children with SEN (Special Educational Needs). (Department for children, schools and families, 2009).

(h)United States of America: Emphasis is focused on inclusion which is considered to reduce social stigmas and improve academic achievement. Three out of five students with learning disabilities spend the majority of their time in the regular classroom (Cortiella, C. 2009) in either of the two sub-types of inclusion, that is the regular inclusion, for nearly all the day, supplemented by services outside the regular classroom, or the full inclusion, in which case the children remain in the general classrooms all the time (Bowe, Frank, 2005) Other provisions include: (a) Free and appropriate public education (FAPE), (b) receipt of special educational services for students with physical and non-physical disabilities, (c) a transition plan focused on the students' life after school, and (d) distribution of publications and resources to assist families of children with disabilities, developed by OSEP (Office of Special Education Programmes), USA-Dept. of Education (2009).

(i) A case study was carried out at Bradley University, USA (2008) by Susan Crandell and Celia E.Johnson focused on the use of video instruction to teach classroom participation skills to a student of Asperger Syndrome, the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). It consisted of short instructional video clips and role plays viewed by the student daily for eight weeks. At the end of this period the student responded positively to the video instructions. This is a promising experience of the use of technology in the training of children deserving special care.

Could it be claimed that this is the pioneer of using e-learning in Special Education?

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