At its core, special education is about the individual. In its ideal form, special education provides the structure by which people with exceptionalities may be provided with appropriate adaptations and/or modifications to their environments such that they have the opportunity to reach their individual potential. The field of special education, moving out of its infancy, is still grappling with just how this ideal can be achieved. Researchers are building off of past successes in an effort to conceptualize new and exciting approaches to the education of individuals with exceptional needs.

The United States is one of the most progressive countries in the world with regard to the enculturation of people with exceptionalities into the fabric of its society. This has not always been the case, and indeed, the United States continues to be challenged by its call to have all of its citizens reach their individual potential. For most of its brief existence, the field of special education has been attempting to find a productive role to address this societal challenge.

Since its conception less than 40 years ago, progress regarding this lofty goal has been debatable. Some may argue that special education programming has not changed fundamentally since the mid-1970s. Others can see the vast and important changes that have taken place, recognizing the abilities of people instead of their disabilities. It is encouraging that special education maintains a place at the forefront of the minds of educational researchers who continue to refine and redefine the important field designed to meet the needs of individuals with exceptionalities.

**Historical Backdrop**

Civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s found in Article 14 of the U.S. Constitution the legal bedrock by which the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 was based. In brief, that act stated that it was unlawful to discriminate based on race, gender, national origin, and/or religion. This legislation set the precedent of “equal protection under the law.” Disability activists would take their cue from their civil rights brethren. A decade later, after several related pieces of legislation had been enacted, a watershed piece of legislation was enacted that set into motion an educational system that eventually would become known as special education (e.g., the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

On November 28, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94–142. This legislation was known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The legislation provided for free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for individuals with exceptionalities to be delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This act, which was amended in 1986 and renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, has since been reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004.

**The Special Education System**

Special education is a system designed primarily for individuals between the ages of birth through 21 who have been identified as having certain types of exceptionalities. Under current law, there are 13 categories of exceptionality protected and serviced within this system: specific learning disabilities,
speech or language impairments, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, deaf-blind, multiple disabilities, developmental delay, and other health impairments.

Although not identified as a category of exceptionality under federal law, “gifted and talented” is often thought of as an area of exceptionality within the field of special education. Educational programming decisions for individuals with exceptional gifts and talents are usually made at the discretion of individual states and/or localities.

**Characteristics of Special Education**

Several characteristics of the special education system are designed to maximize individual potential and enhance learning opportunities for individuals with exceptionalities. Those characteristics are individualization, individual instruction, and explicit instruction.

**Individualization**

Individualization is a student-centered approach to service delivery and instructional decision making that is the hallmark of special education. A team of stakeholders collaborates to develop and implement an appropriate and reasonable program based on the needs and age of each individual.

Individual need is determined through the special education referral, planning, and placement processes. Generally speaking, special education at all levels (i.e., birth to 3 years of age, preschool, and K–12) involves the following five components:

1. Initiation of a referral—could be made by a medical doctor (e.g., at birth), preschool teacher, or K–12 general or special education teacher, among others, when a concern is identified

2. Assessment of individual eligibility (and educational need at the preschool and K–12 levels)—the type of assessments for eligibility that are used will depend to a great extent on the age and nature of the presenting exceptionality

3. Development of the individualized program—these programs are called different things at different levels, such as Individual Family Service Plan, Birth to 3; Individualized Educational Program (PK exit or graduation); or Individualized Transition Plan (age 15 until appropriate)

4. Determination of the appropriate environment in which services are to be received—hospital, day care, public school, residential facility, and so on (at the K–12 level, this is known as determining the least restrictive environment, or LRE)

5. Evaluation of program effectiveness—at all levels, a mechanism by which the individualized program is reviewed and reevaluated as necessary, but is typically done on a yearly basis

**Intensive Instruction**

Intensive instruction at all levels involves frequent instructional experiences of significant duration related to the individual's needs. It may involve actively engaging individuals in their natural or learning environment by requiring high rates of appropriate response to the material presented, carefully matching instruction to student ability and skill level, providing instructional cues and prompts to support learning and then fading them when appropriate, and/or providing detailed feedback that is directly focused on the task the student is expected to complete.

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**Explicit Instruction**

Individuals with exceptionalities often require more structure and teacher-directed approaches to learning than their nonexceptional peers (the exception often being individuals with exceptional gifts and talents). Three different types of instructional approaches are frequently used when teaching students with exceptionalities. They include basic skills instruction, adaptive instruction, and/or functional life skill instruction.

*Basic skills instruction* stresses that the individual must learn a specified set of sequenced skills, each a prerequisite to the next. *Adaptive instruction* is designed to fit the demands of a task or setting aligned to a person's needs and abilities. *Functional life skill instruction* teaches students only those skills that will help them succeed in practical matters related to the natural setting, whether it be the classroom, family, or community.

**Current Issues in K–12 Special Education**

Providing services to individuals with exceptionalities in the LRE has withstood the changes in the special education landscape. There have been many attempts over the years to reframe and rename LRE. Some of the terminology used to describe how to service and educate students with disabilities has been referred to as *mainstreaming*, *Regular Education Initiative*, *inclusion*, and *access to the general education classroom*. Currently, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 refers to students and their “access to the general education curriculum.” Despite changes in vocabulary, the message is simple and clear. Special education is in a time of tremendous change resulting from legal mandates related to closing the achievement gap.

Numerous research reports have shown that too many students are being placed within the special education system. Additionally, research has shown that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education settings. Indeed, productive academic achievement outcomes resulting from special education services and supports arguably have been questionable. As a result, recent legislation has been enacted that attempts to focus educators’ efforts on early intervention and prevention.

**Promising Practice**

There is an emerging body of research that has demonstrated how evidence-based, schoolwide intervention approaches can affect positive academic and behavioral outcomes for K–12 students with exceptionalities. As a result, schoolwide intervention approaches are under rapid development, evaluation, and implementation across the country. The traditional role of the special educator may be changing. Future special educators may act as trainers, consultants, coaches, collaborators, and implementers of specially designed instruction and supports in a schoolwide model, acting as “interventionists.” This new type of special educator may have the flexibility and comprehensiveness in training to work across many settings.

*See also*

Autism Spectrum Disorders; Behavior Disorders; Behavior Modification; Bilingual Education; Gifted and Talented Students; Mental Retardation

**Further Readings**


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