Trends Occurring in Special Education Today

Emily Streich

Professor Lucas

Southwest Minnesota State University

Abstract

There are several aspects that affect teachers in the special education field today. These include increases in number of individuals being diagnosed with special needs, special education teacher shortages, rising costs in special education, and assistive technology, all of which came from academic journals. I will go in depth on all of these topics and explain how they have an effect on teachers and students. In addition to these topics, I have conducted an interview with an Early Childhood Special Education teacher Traci Olson, and will be introducing what she had to say. Overall, these four topics play a major role in how the special education field works today and also how it will transform in the future.

Trends Occurring in Special Education Today

There are several popular trends occurring in the Special Education field today. Majoring in this field has led me to research both the positives and negatives of this job. Several trends found to be the most prevalent today include increasing numbers of students being diagnosed with special needs, a growing demand for special education teachers, increasing costs of special education, and the use of assistive technology. All of these issues effect the way that both classroom and special education teachers do their job. In addition, new discoveries lead researchers to make evaluations and processes more efficient.

One trend in the Special Education field is that more students are being diagnosed with special needs. Studies show that while diagnosis of major disorders have decreased recently, the number of minor disorders have increased significantly in the last few years. In today’s society there have been several discoveries that allow professionals to screen children better for disabilities and illnesses. These inventions are more thorough than ever before, therefore, catching more children and diagnosing them with special needs. Often times, teachers refer students to special education because they are failing to reach the standards that the majority of others have met. While some deem this to be a sole determining factor, it does not always give an accurate representation of the child’s abilities. Therefore, several children are admitted to the special education program based on a teacher’s “best judgment”. Due to the fact that this decision is made by a teacher’s opinion and not any other tests, studies show that several students are misdiagnosed as having special needs and hence do not actually need to be in the program.

The requirements to be admitted into a special education program vary widely by state. Certain states require that the child only meet one of several qualifications. This could be as simple as not being a good listener, to as major as not being able to communicate verbally with others. Furthermore, eligibility requirements are listed under categories of disorders that a child may be diagnosed with. By only needing to meet one of the eligibility requirements, students could be wrongfully put into the special education program. This in effect would account for some of the increasing numbers of individuals in special education. In addition, this issue also brings up the question of whether there should be further professional testing done once admitted to the program. Although several states do extensive testing on special needs students, there is no one rule that says every state needs to thoroughly examine their students.

Another thing that could account for the rise in special education numbers, is how the family is fairing in society. For instance, the authors state that “Dunn (1968) estimated that 60 percent to 80 percent of students identified as disabled were from low socioeconomic status or ethnic minority households” (Hibel, Farkas, Morgan, ) Over the last decade, the United States has encountered several factors that have drastically changed the economy. The majority of these factors have harmed the economy and therefore had a large impact on a vast amount of families, theoretically accounting for the rising number of students in special education programs. In addition, some racial backgrounds are more often involved in special education than others. While some see this as being racist, research shows that factors such as the environment, health, nutrition, and social aspects of an individual’s life can play a large role in how they develop both mentally and physically.

Due to the rising numbers of students entering special education, teachers in the field are also becoming a high demand. According to Bonnie S. Billingsley and James McLeskey whom work with Virginia and Florida University, in recent years special education teachers have been hard to come by, due in part by the laws that the No Child Left Behind Act has set forth. This law states that special education teachers must be “highly qualified”. According to Billingsley and McLeskey, “Although such a mandate would provide increasing assurance that all special education teachers are highly qualified to teach content area subjects, it could also make the shortage of special education teachers worse, unless powerful policy initiatives are enacted to counteract this outcome” (Billingsley, McLeskey, 2004). Based on this law, many teachers would have to get certified in another area of study as well. This requirement would then cause more teachers to leave the field for at least a small period of time. In addition, students could look at the extra certification that they need and decide that they no longer want to go through the training that it takes to go into this field.

After conducting an interview with Early Childhood Special Education teacher Traci Olson, I learned about several issues that she faces in the field today. Collaboration among classroom teachers and special education teachers can become difficult if one is not willing to work with the other. Their views on how to teach the student may differ, so it is all about compromising and finding a happy medium that works for the both of them. Olson uses specialized instruction in her office and bases it off of what the child’s specific needs are. These needs are not always met within the classroom and therefore are reflected in the child’s progress report. Olson also creates evaluations and reports that are sent to parents and classroom teachers. These evaluations report the child’s progress and play a key role in the collaboration of the teachers and parents.

Another trend that Olson mentioned was that children can make progress in one area, but may fall back in another skill at the same time. Once children are diagnosed with special needs and enter the special education program, the teacher often has them leave the room for assignments. On one hand, this could be beneficial due to the fact that the child can learn at their own pace. It may also allow them to get another understanding of how a concept works. On the other hand, the child is not getting to interact with other students and therefore they are not working on their social skills. One thing that special education teachers strive to do is, is to get their kids to interact with others in a positive and appropriate manner. Often times, Olson will work with children in the classroom so that all skills are worked on at the same time. This not only helps to prevent children from falling behind on certain skills, but it also trains them to work more efficiently in busy environments. Finally, Olson uses several different types of technology to engage her student’s attention on learning new things.

Rising costs in special education programs are effecting the way that schools are providing for their students. Studies from 1985 and 1986 show that it cost roughly two and a half times more for a disabled student to attend school compared to a regular student. Furthermore, the cost of special education rose approximated ten percent between 1977 and 1985 when it was calculated with inflation costs. Special education costs today have risen dramatically since 1985 and this is largely because there has also been a thirty percent increase of special education students within the last ten years. The Center for Special Education Finance states, that today schools spend about three and a half times more on special needs students than they do on average students (Moore, 1988) In addition, some schools pay up to thirty thousand dollars per student with special needs, each year. These rising costs for special education programs create several questions among schools and parents. For instance, if such a large portion of money is being spent on special education, then is this depriving classroom education the funds that they need to teach average students? On questions like these it is hard to pinpoint a specific answer, but federal funding was put in place to resolve these issues. Federal special education aid helps schools to afford the programs that they need to successfully accommodate student’s needs, but the still increasing costs do not diminish their concern.

Students are relying on assistive technology today more than ever before. The author Ghaleb Alnahdi from Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia defines assistive technology as “An item or piece of equipment or product system either acquired commercially, off the shelf, modified, or customized and used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capability for individual with disabilities” (Alnahdi, 2014). Whether the child has physical impairments or a mental disorder, assistive technology allows them to live more independently. Mari Beth Coleman whom works at the University of Tennessee states, “For students with physical disabilities, AT devices may include those which increase physical access as well as items which increase the capacity for communication or performance of academic tasks” (Coleman, 2011). Such assistive technology could include something as simple as a pencil grip, or as major as a computer that speaks for the individual. At Lakeview School, teachers use smart boards, audio books, and ipads to teach students. This assistive technology allows teachers to download apps that focus on the different subjects that they are trying to teach.

There are several popular trends occurring in the Special Education field today. There is a steadily increasing number of special education students in today’s schools and therefore special education teachers are also in high demand. After my interview with Early Childhood Special Education teacher Traci Olson, I have learned some issues in the field that she has experienced firsthand, and about some of the things that she does to help fight those negative trends. In addition, special education program costs have increased in recent years, leaving schools searching for money. Finally, assistive technology aids children not only in the classroom but in real life as well. I have also learned more about what this includes from my interview with Olson, and how to incorporate it into different lessons. Overall, all of the trends mentioned throughout this paper have effects on not only teachers and students, but parents as well.

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