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What Factors Drive Special Education?

On the broadest scale, special education is driven by social, political, and economic factors. These three factors do not operate independently; they interact. For example, the Head Start program, created in 1965, is a program of intervention for disadvantaged preschool children. Is Head Start a social, political, or economic innovation? Clearly the program had social origins and benefits: Providing educational opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers improves their chances for success in later schooling and reduces the likelihood of their needing other special services. Head Start also has political origins and benefits: Members of Congress and other political organizations fought to establish the program and continue to support it. In addition, Head Start is influenced by economic factors: The costs of prevention have reduced later special-service costs, and the program has added “producers” to society.

As you read the following sections about social, political, and economic factors, bear this in mind: There are no clear distinctions among the factors that influence special education. They work together to affect the ways in which special education is practiced.

SOCIAL VALUES

Many of society's resources are limited. People hold social values, opinions, and beliefs that influence how those limited resources are distributed. These social values affect who receives special education services; who pays for them; which services are provided; and where, when, and how they are delivered. Social values are not absolute. Two people may hold different values or hold the same values to varying degrees. For some, education is a critical social value; for others, it is less important than a new civic center, good roads, or national defense. People voice their social values by voting in local, state, and national elections for candidates who believe as they do, and by forming or joining advocacy groups.

Social values are always changing. The general social climate—national and global—has a strong impact on educational policy. Social attitudes toward education in general and toward aspects of special education shifted radically, for example, after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957. Fear that the United States was falling behind the Soviet Union led to new programs to educate students with disabilities, disadvantaged students, and gifted students.

Changes in Classification

In recent years, a major change occurred in classification practices: The number of students classified as having mental retardation has decreased, while the number classified as having learning disabilities has dramatically increased. This change did not happen because of a sudden "cure" for mental retardation or because of an epidemic that resulted in learning disabilities. Rather, the overrepresentation of students of color in the mental retardation category led to legal challenges to the classification system. Many people also became concerned about the stigma attached to retardation. Eventually, the definition of mental retardation was refined and awareness raised, and fewer students were assigned to that category. Meanwhile, learning disabilities came to the fore as a designation with greater social

acceptability. Because society could provide services for students with learning disabilities, use of that category increased.

Early Intervention

The influence of social factors on special education is probably no more apparent than it is in the education of very young children (see Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 2000). Early intervention is the fastest growing area in special education. During the first part of the twentieth century, the education of very young children with special needs was a concern of a small, dedicated group of educators. Initially, private moneys financed early childhood education, and preschool programs for children with disabilities were operated largely by independent agencies (such as the United Cerebral Palsy Association) or parent organizations. Designed to provide relief for families, these programs were the first to provide educational services of direct benefit to young children. Interest in early childhood education revived during the 1960s, partly because Americans had entered a fierce scientific rivalry with the Soviet Union and partly because, as the post-World War II economy slackened, large numbers of women entered the workforce and needed child care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Shifting Responsibilities

Increasing numbers of students were not meeting the academic and behavioral standards of public schools. The Head Start program was a response to this shortcoming, a way to help disadvantaged children adapt to the educational program by giving them learning readiness skills. During the 1990s, early intervention programs had to respond to complex social issues. More and more children were being exposed prenatally to drugs such as cocaine. Each year, more babies were born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Many children had to attend to their own needs, and increasing numbers were getting their basic nutrition from schools and service agencies. Today, society seems to have relegated to schools the important responsibilities of child care

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and the fostering of child development—responsibilities that previously lay with families. Moreover, early intervention and elementary school programs are often expected to counteract the social effects of poverty, unemployment, racism, war, and drug abuse.

POLITICAL FACTORS

A variety of political factors, closely related to social and economic factors, have significant effects on public policy regarding the education of students with disabilities. First, the general political climate influences public policy in special education. In a liberal or progressive political climate, special education services tend to become more available; the resources for delivering services are greater. In a conservative political climate, services become limited. During the 1960s, a liberal period, many federal programs were initiated for students with disabilities and disadvantaged students. In the late 1970s and 1980s, a conservative period, fiscal restraint was evident. Major questions were raised about the benefits of special education services, funding for programs was cut, and proposals to abolish the U.S. Department of Education were made. Now, with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110), there is a push for evidence-based interventions, massive programs to support literacy instruction in the early grades (Reading First), and accountability.

Second, the political action of parents and advocacy groups shapes special education policy. Class-action lawsuits have played a major role in the last several decades. The case of *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972, 1974), for example, forced the state of California to stop using intelligence tests to place African-American students in classes for students with mental retardation. In 1993, the parents of such students again sued the California Department of Education, this time to allow their children to be given intelligence tests. It was argued that exclusion of the students from intellectual assessment might keep the students from being declared eligible for the benefits of services for students with learning disabilities. As these cases illustrate, the ramifications of

legal action can be complex. Overall, however, families and advocacy groups have used the court system to win educational rights for students with disabilities, as well as protection from abusive treatment and involuntary institutionalization.

Advocacy Groups

Advocacy groups directly influence policymakers and legislators. Groups interested in special education range from broad-based organizations, such as the Council for Exceptional Children and the American Federation of Teachers, to groups concerned with particular disabilities, such as the Learning Disabilities Association of America (see Resources section). The larger and more powerful groups wield political influence through their statements and publications. When the American Federation of Teachers issues guidelines for placement of students who are exceptional, educators throughout the U.S. take notice. Many advocacy groups also employ lobbyists—experts who know how to disseminate information, sway public opinion, and pressure important legislators. Advocacy groups often band together to address issues. A group called Citizens Concerned About Disability, comprised of representatives of major professional associations and advocacy groups (usually each group is represented by a person called a government liaison), meets regularly in Washington, DC, to have a voice in legislation and federal educational and mental-health policy issues. The major educational laws of the past two decades—the laws that define special education as it exists today—are very much a result of such political influence. So are the ongoing changes in categorization, such as the relatively recent establishment of autism and traumatic brain injury as separate federal disability categories.

Government Agencies

Certain government agencies protect or further the rights of individuals who are exceptional. For example, both the U.S. Office of Civil Rights and the Bureau of Indian Affairs have

Window on Practice: Case Study in Advocacy: Passage of Goals 2000

Goals 2000 is a federal education act that was signed in March 1994. (The act is discussed in more detail in the Goals 2000 section of this module.) It is a good example of the power of advocacy groups. The original draft of the act listed six national goals, but the final law includes eight. Where did the extra two goals come from?

During debate on the bill, teacher groups argued that if they were to provide the up-to-date instruction implied by the act, they would need greater opportunities for professional development and training. Thus a goal relating to teacher education and professional development was added to the law.

Teachers and families argued that students could not achieve the national goals without considerable family involvement and strong linkages between homes and schools. For this reason, a goal concerning family participation was added.

Other differences between the original and final drafts include:

The original draft had no specific language to indicate that the law applied to all American children, including those with disabilities. But parents of students with disabilities argued that the high educational standards specified in the act should apply to their children as well as others. In the end, such language was added.

The original bill mandated that states establish opportunity-to-learn standards (described later in this module). This provision reflected the belief that if we hold students responsible for achieving high standards, we should also hold schools and school personnel responsible for delivering the related instruction. But teacher unions and others actively opposed this requirement. As a result, in the law's final language, the opportunity-to-learn standards became voluntary rather than mandatory for the states.

The law's original version mentioned only certain academic subjects. The final version named a number of other subjects because groups of teachers representing the omitted subject areas successfully lobbied for their inclusion.

These changes were neither unusual nor unexpected. Goals 2000 is merely one instance of the major role played by advocacy groups in formulating public policy on education.

influenced the provision of services for those with disabilities. Thus a federal or state bureaucracy can itself become an important political factor.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

Who pays for special education? Public education dollars come from federal, state, and local governments. For many years, local governments provided the largest share. In the 1978–79 school year, however, the state share of funding rose above the local share (Stern, 1988), and the state contribution has remained higher ever since.

When in 1975 it enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (1990), Congress assigned the responsibility for providing a free, appropriate public education to all children with disabilities to state and local governments. However, state educational agencies and local school districts get federal financial assistance in implementing the nation's special education mandates. Along with this financial help, the federal government provides supervision, policy support, and technical assistance.

OSEP Programs

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the U.S. Department of Education administers two funding programs:

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the IDEA Part B State Grant Program and the Chapter 1 Program for Children With Disabilities. Under the IDEA Part B State Grant Program, funds are distributed to states according to the total numbers of students with disabilities reported as receiving special education and related services. State educational agencies conduct an annual child count on December 1 of the previous fiscal year and submit these counts to OSEP.

Funds appropriated by OSEP during federal fiscal year (FFY) 2004 amounted to approximately \$14.2 billion, with a request for approximately \$15.4 billion in FFY 2005. At least 75 percent of the funds that a state receives under the IDEA Part B State Grant Program must be distributed to local educational agencies and intermediate educational units to assist in the education of students with disabilities. Local education agencies must certify to the state that they are not using these funds to replace local funding, but to pay for excess costs of educating students with disabilities.

Federal Review of State Plans

The U.S. Department of Education attaches “strings” to such allocations. States must submit program goals, objectives, strategies, and priorities annually to the secretary of education for review and approval. State plans are reviewed to spot deficiencies in service delivery. To receive its funding, the state must provide the assurance that it will implement corrected procedures during the forthcoming year and that all deficiencies in the plan will be corrected before the next grant cycle.

On-site monitoring reviews are another important component of the federal program-review process. Each state that receives financial assistance is visited about every three years by a monitoring team from the U.S. Department of Education. The team visits the state education agency and representative local education agencies. In addition to reviewing a state’s written policies and procedures, members of the monitoring team solicit information from families, the general public, advocates, and representatives of professional groups. They hold public meetings and solicit written testimony on the quality of service provided by the state.

Competition for Funding

The federal monitoring process produces a degree of uncertainty in educational funding; federal money is not automatic. Another source of uncertainty is that education is only one among many social services that the government provides. General and special education must compete for dollars with highways, sanitation, and other services. To the extent that members of society value special education more than other services, special education is financed more heavily. Special education also competes with general education for financial resources. From all the funds provided for education, moneys must be allocated between general and special education. When a state increases the moneys allocated to special education, moneys allocated to general education typically diminish.

Research Priorities

Government spending patterns influence public policy on the education of students who are exceptional, although those spending patterns also *reflect* public policy. If you want to know where the most research activity in special education will take place over the next five years, look at the research priorities established by the U.S. Department of Education. During the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government made mental retardation a priority, and centers for research on mental retardation were established across the country. As funding priorities changed, new centers were established, and old ones changed their names and expanded their missions. During the middle and late 1970s, institutes were funded to conduct research on learning disabilities and on early intervention. The 1980s saw less federal support for research on learning disabilities. Instead, support shifted to research on students with severe disabilities and transition services for older students with disabilities. In the 1990s, emphasis was on early childhood education. Currently, the focus has shifted to evidence-based treatments and accountability. Decisions to shift research efforts often are motivated by economics: Researchers go where the money is.

Competition Among Categorical Programs

The overall pool of money available to provide special education services must be divided among all exceptional students. This necessity creates competition for resources among the various categorical programs. If a fixed amount of money is available to educate students with disabilities, and if school personnel decide to spend a greater proportion of that money on educating students who are deaf, then less money is available for educating students with other exceptionalities.

Allocation Methods

Technical methods of funding allocation also influence special education services. State legislatures decide how much state money will be allocated to the education of students who are exceptional, and they decide how the state moneys and the funds received from the federal government will be distributed to local education agencies. There are various criteria for these decisions.

Some states allocate funds according to the number of "teacher units." That is, for each school district, the state determines a reasonable number of special education personnel on the basis of community demographics; then the state provides a certain percentage of those people's salaries. This method discourages schools from identifying large numbers of students with disabilities. More students mean larger special education classes, but not more money; hence, schools often develop informal policies that inhibit teachers from identifying students with special education needs.

Other states use a "pupil unit" method of allocation. This method is based on the assumption that it costs more to educate students with disabilities than students who are not disabled. The largest extra cost is for special education personnel; other costs include specially designed transportation, food services, equipment, and health and rehabilitation services. State departments of education typically pay school districts a subsidy for each student. In the per-pupil method of allocation, the state makes

up for the extra cost of educating students with disabilities by increasing the subsidy for each of these students. For example, if the state calculates that students with disabilities are 2.4 times more expensive to educate than those without disabilities, the state multiplies its subsidy by 2.4 for every student in the district who is classified as disabled. Average per-pupil costs vary from state to state, as do extra costs. The pupil-unit method seems fairer than the teacher-unit method. However, it encourages "bounty hunting" by school district administrators who may manipulate the number of students classified as disabled in order to increase the district's subsidy.

Some states, recognizing that certain disabilities require greater educational expenses than others, use a specific multiplier for each disability category. The state education department might decide that educating students who are blind costs twice as much as educating those with learning disabilities, and adjust the subsidies accordingly. Even this system can be manipulated; schools may label their students according to expected financial return rather than according to needs.

In times of financial prosperity, these economic considerations may fade. If money is not an issue, schools seldom attempt to limit services to students who are exceptional or to restrict the number of students declared eligible. For most public school districts, however, times have not been prosperous. Furthermore, the enrollment of greater numbers of students with severe disabilities in public education programs has increased the financial burden on schools. Buildings and equipment must be modified, and new equipment and facilities purchased. Because schools must provide education and *related* services, they end up paying for communication boards, hearing aids, and other devices. As the financial burden increases, educators become concerned about the number of students receiving special education and about who will pay the costs. There is a tenuous balance between society's desire to provide special education services and its ability to pay for them.