
Teachers who work with exceptional children must, in their preparation, seek and master certain competencies and understandings. Only so can they help children who are different to cope with their own needs and to use their own potentialities.

Children Who Are Different Need Teachers Who Are Different

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COLLEGES and universities are responsible for preparing teachers for the many thousands of children who are or seem to be different. By different we mean those children who vary from the "normal" in their mental, physical, or social characteristics. Modification of teaching strategies and techniques is at present, of course, an imperative need of any educational system.

Programs offered for the preparation of teachers for different children must provide a variety of opportunities for experiences to assure their competence to work with children and youth who urgently need special help.

My experience as an Instructor of Special Education at the University of Puerto Rico has convinced me of the ineffectiveness of traditional teaching programs that focus mainly on theoretical content rather than on practical and innovative strategy that will help prepare teachers to deal adequately with the education of these children.

I recall one of my first students, who when assigned to work with mentally retarded children in a slum area asked to be transferred. He used the following argument: "After four years of college studies I am not going to work in a slum area with such inadequate facilities."

Another young girl could not finish her practicum with trainable mentally retarded children because she felt "insecure." She confessed that her image of these special

children was totally different from her expectations of the type of students she would meet.

I had another student teacher in a reading class for moderately mentally retarded children. There were 18 children in the group and four reading levels. She started the class without getting the attention of the pupils so, from the beginning, she failed to control them. Her anxiety grew; she moved from one place to another scolding and trying to get some of the children seated. The situation was so desperate that once she tried to quiet a boisterous boy by using masking tape over his mouth.

Another student teacher working in a group of handicapped children tried to teach a 12-year-old emotionally disturbed boy not to smoke by asking him to smoke a cigar in front of the class. The student teacher used this technique because the boy had been smoking cigarettes behind doors and had invited some of the other children to join him.

These few examples show that many of the students finish their teacher preparation without the development of the competencies needed to work effectively with these children. Therefore, we must look for changes.

I believe we need to look seriously into

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the curriculum and programs of teacher preparation, especially for those working with children who are different.

What Skills Are Needed?

At present our program has improved considerably. During the junior and senior years our students are exposed to a continuum of laboratory experiences which include: observation and work in the community agencies that have to do with exceptional children; practice teaching in the public schools with "normal" and exceptional children. In this practicum they have a seminar in which classroom situations and immediate needs are presented and discussed to try to find possible solutions to problems.

There is still a lot of work to be done. In my opinion, such programs should offer a curriculum which provides for:

- Acquisition of general and specific knowledge with greater emphasis on practical psychology and sociology that will enable teachers to become proficient in child development and growth and to understand and cope with the different situations of the particular society in which their students live.

- Participation in varied experiences dealing with normal and exceptional children to give them the earliest opportunity for the application of knowledge through continuous laboratory experience from the beginning of their study programs. They must also have

experience working in the community to get a real picture of the children's social and cultural background.

- Self evaluation so that students can determine in time if they feel capable of working with these children. This self evaluation must be continuous during their training in order that the prospective teachers may discover their potentialities and their interests as well as their weaknesses to be improved.

- Development of teaching competencies that enable them to make educative diagnoses, provide individualized instruction, and select and use teaching strategies applicable to the children's needs.

- Becoming sensitive to the child's attitudes and feelings about himself and others and the relationship which his image bears on his capacity and willingness to learn and to express himself.

- Making maximum use of community resources such as parents, volunteers, and public agencies.

- Upgrading the profession by means of new study courses and seminars offered outside the campus in the school setting.

The success in teaching children who are different in coping with their own needs and using their potentialities toward a more productive and satisfying life will depend on the efficiency of well prepared teachers who serve as facilitators or guides as well as partners in the learning process. □

DIFFERENTIATED STAFFING

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