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Research on Exceptionality

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EDCC 530: Education of Exceptional Children and Youth

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EXCEPTIONALITY

According to *Dictionary.com*, exceptionalism is “forming an exception or rare instance, etc,” which is a very obvious definition. Digging deeper, though I did not find a quotable definition of exceptionalism, I did find *The Council for Exceptional Children’s* (CEC) website, which to gives a very clear picture of what this expression really means in terms of our subject matter: it is the umbrella term for any and all kinds of disabled people, including gifted and talented individuals. “Exceptional” students, then, means students that fit into the “Special Education” category.

Eligibility for Special Education as opposed to eligibility for Educational Enrichment Programs appears to be like comparing apples to oranges. First of all, as noted above, Special Education refers to students with either specific or general “disabilities,” which have a huge scope across the board. A FAQ on the *Learning Disabilities Association of America’s* website made it clear that “in order for a child to be declared eligible for special education and related services it must be determined that the child is a ‘child with a disability’ and is in need of special education and related services.” A disability is defined on this site as “mental retardation, a hearing impairment including deafness, a specific learning disability,” etc.

Educational Enrichment Programs, from what my research garnered, seems to be quite a different story. One does not need to have a “disability” to be eligible. According to the *Lakeside School’s Lakeside Educational Enrichment Program (LEEP)* website, their enrichment program “is aimed primarily at ... public school students about to enter ninth grade. Students apply to enter the program, and are often recommended by their middle school counselors.”

This shows that Special Education is truly a special kind of education for learners that require a specific kind of learning environment, while Enrichment Programs are meant for students who are simply looking to get more out of their education.

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Economic Advantages of Special Ed

Working at a school for students with Learning Disabilities, I have first-hand knowledge of the economic advantages of Special Education. The ones I've seen who receive the largest advantages are the parents, the school, and, of course, the students.

First of all, in terms of the parents, I discovered on the LDonline.org website that "if the public school agrees that [their] child may have a learning disability and may need special help, the school must evaluate [their] child at no cost to [them]." That is a major advantage, as evaluation costs are notoriously expensive. Also, the article on this site stated that "members of the IEP team can justify removal from the general education classroom" if deemed necessary. This is not something parents can usually do with a child who is not disabled, unless they are willing to shell out a usually monstrous amount for a private school.

And that leads to the economic advantages for the schools. I work in a Nonpublic school, which receives multiple federal and local benefits. An article on Ed.gov states that Nonpublic schools "receive the same federally funded services provided to their public school counterparts. . . . These services must meet the needs of the private school students and teachers, be comparable to those provided to public school children and teachers, and must be provided in a timely way." So, without special education students, neither public nor private schools would receive this funding for certain special education services. For instance, at my school (Chelsea School), the majority of the students receive tuition from the county or state, which is an economic advantage for the school because, without this provided funding, the students would not be able to afford their tuition and the school would, frankly, not be able to exist.

Lastly, according to the Ed.gov article, "private school [special education] teachers can also benefit from federally funded programs to improve their teaching or to integrate technology into their classrooms." Technology is quickly becoming a necessity in the special education classroom and it is becoming a reality because of special education.

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Risk Factors for Disabilities

There are some disabilities that seem to have no definable cause, such as Down syndrome. According to an article on About.com, “Down syndrome is not attributable to any behavioral activity of the parents or environmental factors.” However, there are many other disabilities that can be directly attributed to certain risk factors.

First, according to a Conference Paper by Alexandrowicz, C. L. and Hogan, “parental status marital conflict and distress and maternal and paternal resources have all been associated with youth emotional adjustment mental health and educational attainment.” This seems to be a pretty obvious one; a child in an unstable family is at risk for a disability because the child usually faces neglect, abuse, and many other negative aspects of an unhealthy relationship.

Secondly, according to *The Disability Helper* website “without the economic factors, the growth and development of [a disabled child’s] behaviour and personal skills cannot be achieved.” Economic factors are a major contributor as well because, for instance, if a child is brought up in a low-income area, they have a higher risk of being exposed to other factors that surround this factor, such as crime and broken homes, which could lead to such disabilities as emotional disorders.

Third, according to the site noted above, “coronary heart disease, hypertension, stroke and cancer are some of the risk factors due to poor diet and nutrition which can be the cause of illness, disability and death.” This is another seemingly obvious one, but, especially in terms of the disability, poor diet can be a serious risk factor if the conditions are bad enough, and can lead to extreme low self-esteem, obesity, and depression. All of these can be classified as a disability.

Fourth, genetic risk factors are a major cause of disabilities. Also according to *The Disability Helper website* “some diseases are the result of individual genetic make up such as muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis.”

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IDEA VS. SECTION 504

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, known as IDEA, and Section 504, a civil rights law, appear to be very similar in nature and purpose. Both deal with individuals with disabilities and their rights in terms of education. However, there are some vital differences between the two.

First, according to Mastropieri and Scruggs, authors of *The Inclusive Classroom* (2007), IDEA “specifi[es] that all children—including those with disabilities formerly excluded from school—[are] entitled to a free, appropriate public education. This law [goes] far beyond any previous legislation in specifying that ... this ‘special’ education was to be provided in the least-restrictive environment” (p. 3).

As for Section 504, *WrightsLaw.com* (2006) tells us that this legislation “is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities [and] ensures that the child with a disability has equal access to an education. The child may receive accommodations and modifications.”

These two pieces of legislation do seem to be quite similar, yet, *WrightsLaw.com* continues: “unlike ... [IDEA], Section 504 does not require the school to provide an individualized educational program (IEP) that is designed to meet the child's unique needs and provides the child with educational benefit.” Also, according to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2007), under Section 504, “students may not be classified as disabled according to the IDEA guidelines, but they must demonstrate a significant learning problem that affects their ability to function in school” (p.11).

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UNIVERSAL DESIGN AND SMART ROOMS

Accommodating individuals with disabilities is an ever-growing and evolving practice, especially in education. A breakthrough in accommodating individuals with disabilities has come in the form of universal design, which is utilized in smart houses and smart rooms. These breakthroughs have a major impact on the disabled.

First, according to *UDeducation.org*, “Universal Design is an approach to the design of all products and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or situation.” Examples of universal design come in the form of ‘smart’ homes and ‘smart’ rooms. *SmartThinking.UKideas.com* tells us “‘Smart’ Home is the term commonly used to define a residence that uses a home controller to integrate the residences various home automation systems ... [which] allows them to communicate with one another. So, for example, according to *Vismod.Media.Mit.edu*, a ‘smart’ room would “have cameras, microphones, and other sensors, and [would] use these inputs to try to interpret what people are doing in order to help them.”

This is indeed a breakthrough for individuals with disabilities because they can now have much more universal control and accessibility to their living and/or learning space. Basically, with the idea of universal design applied to a ‘smart’ room in a ‘smart’ house or a ‘smart’ school, a person confined to a wheelchair would simply have to press a close-by button to turn on a light instead of reaching for a light switch that they normally would not have been able to reach.

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MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Dr. Thomas Armstrong of ThomasArmstrong.com tells us that “the theory of multiple intelligences was developed in 1983 by Dr. Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University” (Armstrong, 2000) and LDpride.com conveys “Multiple Intelligences are seven different ways to demonstrate intellectual ability.” These seven intelligences include, linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist. Armstrong (2000) mentions that our schools systems and our society mainly focus on linguistic and logical-mathematical: good speakers and analytical thinkers. And yet, Gardner’s theory shows us that there are several different other kinds of intelligences, which means that we have to rethink the way students are taught and the way they are tested.

Traditionally, our education system values lecturing, handouts/worksheets, cumulative tests, etc. But Gardner’s theory disproves the value placed solely on these traditions because it theorizes that not only do students think in different ways, they learn in different ways. Armstrong (2000) says that Gardner’s theory “suggests that teachers be trained to present their lessons in a wide variety of ways using music, cooperative learning, art activities,” etc.

In terms of testing, TeacherVision.fen.com mentions that “assessment should reflect the diversity of intelligences and learning styles in [our] classroom[s]. For example, students who are good at spatial learning might not display the full range of their knowledge on an essay test” (p. 1).

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Synesthesia, Music, and Education

Seeing in color is referred to as ‘synesthesia.’ Technically, according to a *Scientific American* article by Ramachandran and Hubbard, “synesthesia is a condition in which otherwise normal people experience the blending of two or more senses” (p. 54, 2003). Ramachandran and Hubbard point out, for instance, that someone might see blue when a certain note is played on the piano and another may experience a bitter taste when handling certain foods.

It is interesting, as Cytowic (1995) notes, that synesthesia is not a more well-known and utilized experience. Indeed, Cytowic tells us that synesthesia has been long forgotten, remembered, and forgotten again throughout history. Perhaps this is why it is not more commonly known. Day (2001), shows in an article that synesthesia has been noted and studied throughout history by everyone from Aristotle, who equated harmonies of colors to those of sounds, to Miles Davis, who wrote an album based on colors. Synesthesia does appear to be common when associated with music and those that see colors upon hearing certain notes need not be able to read music; they simply know the correct note they are aiming for when they see the color that their mind associates with that note.

Ramachandran and Hubbard (2003) point out that the study of synesthesia can help better understand the structure and function of the human brain. And to this end, it seems to me that any deeper understanding of the brain can greatly help special education in that special education teachers are constantly looking for new ways to better understand, and thus better educate their disabled students.

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Beautiful Autistic Children

“It is a surprising fact that ... autistic children are exceptionally good-looking” reads an article on *Public Autism Awareness's* website (2004). This article goes on to discuss how physically attractive autistic children can be a source of solace for parents who otherwise have difficulty dealing with their child's disability. The author mentions a doctor's comment to a parent during their 3-year-old's diagnosis: ““He's so beautiful. What are you worrying about?”” The operative subject here is the fact that the attractive autistic individuals being discussed are pre-pubescent children. So what changes when autistic children reach puberty?

The answer to the above questions is pretty obvious: pretty much the same thing that happens to non-disabled children. Spencer, Dupree, Swanson, and Cunningham (1998) discuss how the onset of puberty commonly brings about an intense, near obsessive view of one's vanity. And not only does puberty affect a person's view of himself or herself, it affects our perceptions of them.

The *Public Autism Awareness* (2004) article points out that vanity, or the lack thereof in terms of children, is the key issue into how we perceive autistic youngsters. Even more so than 'normal' children, those with autism are utterly devoid of vanity. This article also points out that autistic kids don't carry around with them “the more disfiguring human emotions - guile, malice, greed...” But with puberty comes many of these traits, along with all of the other physical characteristics of a 'normal' child. *Cool Nurse* (2007) describes puberty as a time when many physical changes occur, including body shape and hair growth. So whether or not an autistic child gains a sense of vanity with puberty, their bodies change and, alas, so does the way we perceive their beauty.

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IDEA in Private and Charter Schools

Generally, a private school is an educational institution that is not accountable to the federal, state, or local government, and tuition is usually required. Ordover (1999) tells that even though charter schools are publicly funded, they are basically the same idea as a private school. Charters can usually create their own rules, regulations, means of educating, and the selection of their students. Even though the effects of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) appear to be more prevalent in public schools, private and charters have been effected as well.

First, all special education students are entitled to FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education). However, according to the *National Center for Learning Disabilities* (2007), students may be giving up their right to FAPE upon entering the private school realm. The *NCLD* website then tells us that entering private schooling stipulates certain eligibility standards for IDEA. For instance, a disabled student may or may not be eligible for IDEA accommodations depending on whether or not they were placed in private school by their parents before or after the initial determination of IDEA eligibility. Also, if the student was placed in private school by a public school district, the terms for eligibility change. *NCLD* also tells us that once a student has been deemed eligible for IDEA standards in private school, the initial public school district must create a specific “services plan” for the student with a representative from the private school.

Charter schools are a bit different. Ordover (1999) indicates that if the charter school is part of a LEA (Local School District), it will receive the same IDEA funding as the public school in that district, but if not, it may or may not receive IDEA funding, depending on the SEA’s (State Education Agency) stipulations regarding IDEA.

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Prolonged Drug Use for ADHD

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2007) discusses Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a disorder that includes the uncontrollable characteristics of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Due to its uncontrollable nature and the adverse effects that it can have in terms of education, certain medications can be prescribed to help contain ADHD. According to *Keep Kids Healthy.com* (2007), some of the more popular medications include Adderall, Concerta, Metadate, and Ritalin, all of which are meant to help subside the hyperactivity of the person with ADHD and to help promote focus. Even though some of these drugs are relatively new to treating ADHD, as *Keep Kids Healthy* points out, they are all still prescription medication for children meant for prolonged use, which have certain implications for the takers.

First of all, the reason that ADHD medications may have to be taken for a ‘prolonged’ period of time is due to the fact, as the NIMH (2007) puts it, the medications do not cure the disorder, they just alleviate the symptoms for a limited period of time. But how long is ‘prolonged? NIMH says “about 80 percent of children who need medication for ADHD still need it as teenagers. Over 50 percent need medication as adults” (2007). There is no specific amount of time that defines the idea of ‘prolonged’ usage; ‘prolonged’ could mean a person’s entire life in some cases.

What does this mean for a ‘prolonged’ user? The Alliance for Human Research Protection (AHRP) (2007) discusses several implications. Drugs like Adderall could cause “serious cardiovascular events and psychiatric events” including hallucinations, delusional thinking, and aggressive behavior. The AHRP also points out that “prolonged use increases the likelihood of addiction.”

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Teaching Literacy

Needlman (2004) says that literacy is more than just the ability of being able to read, write, and speak. The current idea of literacy is the social implications of being able to read, write, and speak. Not only do we use literacy to communicate as a species, we use it to survive. For instance, as Needleman, discusses, adults use literacy to comprehend their medical bills – and the more they understand such things, the better they can cope with them. As for children, literacy can uplift or hurt their self-esteem.

Teaching literacy is a multi-faceted thing. Strickland (n.d.) points out that how one teaches literacy is just as important as what one teaches. Just because one may be attempting to teach the same set of grammar skills to a class does not mean that they should stick to one teaching strategy to do so. Strickland encourages teachers to develop a routine and stick to it, while also employing a “multilevel” instructional pattern. This may mean assigning one classroom activity that invites various responses. Strickland maintains that this kind of literacy instruction is important because students always come from different backgrounds and are equipped with different, varying abilities.

That leads to the idea of teaching literacy to the disabled. Those with Learning Disabilities, for instance, are greatly affected by literacy since it is the area where their learning deficiency usually mostly lies. Despite having average to above average intelligence, those with LDs largely have trouble reading, writing, and otherwise successfully communicating. The *Literacy and Learning Disabilities* (n.d.) web site discusses many ways to better educate literacy to those with disabilities, including extended time for information processing, technological adaptations, and more direct instruction.

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When Billy Broke His Head

According to the *National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke* (NINDS) (2007), Cerebral Palsy (CP) refers to any number of early-onset neurological disorders of body movement and muscle coordination that do not worsen over time. *The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists* (ADRS) (n.d.) points out that when an individual with CP is interested in driving, certain considerations must be taken into account, especially if CP impairments lie in the areas of vision, perception and/or learning. In terms of the physicality of the driving, ADRS discusses how, depending on the specific physical impairment in regards to the person's CP, a range of "adaptive equipment" can be used in the vehicle, including left gas pedal, hand pedals for braking and gas, and modifications that allow a wheelchair-bound person to transfer to the driver's seat.

However, before a person with CP in Washington, DC can even consider how they shall drive their car, they must find how they can obtain a license. Since the driving test in DC, as in all states, is standardized, those with CP may have more difficult time getting a license. DC's DMV web site lists the standard steps for obtaining a license, which include passing the eye test and the knowledge and skills test. If any person cannot pass these tests, they cannot obtain a license. However, according to the *Brain Injury Resource Foundation* (2007), if the person with CP is able to pass the standardized written portions of the test, they can they obtain a referral from a doctor for a comprehensive driving evaluation by a certified driving rehabilitation specialist (CDRS), and then they may take the standard driving test and they may used an adapted car.

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