

Curriculum Problems Confronting Administrators of Schools of Special Education

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It is axiomatic in education that all children must be equipped to find as satisfactory a place in the post-school world as is possible. Therefore, satisfactory transition into adult society is one of the prime aims of *special education programmes for pre-vocational students*.

The transition from school into the adult world is the first step in a continuous process in which the student gradually increases his independence. The more effective the school's educational programme is in meeting the needs of the individual, in developing potential and strengths and at the same time in improving social skills, the better prepared the handicapped students will be for moving from the security of the school environment into the uncertainty of the adult world of employment. Although the transition from school to employment is only one step in the student's overall life education, it is perhaps one of the most crucial times in the student's life where there is a break from one life style (student) to another (employee).

Of 250,000 young Australians who reach school leaving age each year, close to 100,000 continue their education and complete twelve years of schooling. Many go from there to higher education. Some 35,000 to 40,000 gain apprenticeships. Perhaps 10,000 to 15,000 enter full-time vocational courses which have no Year 12 prerequisites. The remainder, over half of whom are females, seek to enter the labour force with no substantial vocational preparation. There are as many as 100,000 in this category.

Since the beginning of the 1980s several significant events have occurred in relation to the education of the mildly intellectually handicapped. Among those events have been: (a) a move towards positive integration by the Queensland Education Department; (b) the worsening economic climate; and (c) the tendency for some special school students to remain at school until seventeen years of age instead of leaving school at the statutory leaving age of fifteen, which was the norm in the past.

The trend towards integration has meant that special schools have become "terminal institutions" in that the student's education continues until he/she leaves school. This has caused the teaching staff to be

involved not only in the teaching of academic type subjects but also in preparing students for life in a complex competitive world outside the school environment. Teachers assist students to build self-esteem and to develop skills which will help them to cope with society.

The second factor which has had a tremendous bearing upon the futures of special school students has been the state of the economy. The possibility of employment for special school leavers has been affected by the adverse economic climate which, among other things, has resulted in a reduction in the number of jobs available, and perhaps, more importantly, increasing competition for jobs which are available. These factors put the special school leaver at a greater risk in obtaining employment.

The economic and employment problem is summed up by Blakers (1978) when he suggests that high levels of youth and general unemployment have begun to undermine the long established patterns of transition and work and are forcing reassessment of concepts such as work, occupations and leisure. He further states that it would be unrealistic to ignore the effect on the employment prospects of handicapped young people. When the general unemployment rate rises, the handicapped youth is indeed at a greater disadvantage.

Changing technology and the introduction of labour-saving machines in the manufacturing section of the community mean that many of the unskilled and semi-skilled jobs which were available to special school students are now no longer available.

The third factor influencing the future of special school students has been the Education Act which established the statutory leaving age of fifteen years, but which permits special school students to remain at school until seventeen years of age. Many students now continue their education beyond the leaving age. Since employment opportunities for handicapped students have worsened because of increased competitiveness, and because many students are staying on at school, it was important to review the curriculum of special schools.

From the literature surveyed, it is possible to make some significant generalizations, among which the following are important.

1. Personal competency is more important than it was considered to be previously.
2. There is a detrimental effect from the labelling of children as "educable", "retarded" or "handicapped", as this may affect

- teacher/community expectations and produce negative attitudes.
3. The community must accept the responsibility to ensure that there are employment opportunities for those capable of working.
 4. Programmes for mildly mentally handicapped students aged fourteen years and over would be more successful if preceded by an educational programme which emphasises social development and work skills.

Most of the above generalizations have been ratified by Brolin, a respected authority on the pre-vocational education for the mildly handicapped. He suggests that:

more imaginative programmes by vocational teachers, better placement skills, less government procedural red tape and reduced labelling ... contribute toward a more promising vocational future for these students.

Prior to 1975 students in most special schools in Queensland followed a general academic programme, with limited pre-vocational skills being taught. On reaching fifteen years of age the student usually gained employment immediately. In the age group of fifteen to nineteen, the dramatic increase in unemployment since 1975 (which reached 19% in 1979 and continues to rise) puts even the 'normal' high school leavers at risk in obtaining employment. If the 'normal' high school leaver is at risk then the student who is mildly handicapped is put at an even greater risk when endeavouring to obtain employment.

It would follow, therefore, that educators need to be aware of the changing vocational needs of students and this, in turn, would indicate a need to improve the vocational programme. "The curriculum content must be designed to give students functional skills and opportunities to use those skills in meaningful jobs." (Brolin, 1976)

To ascertain what initiatives might be taken in Queensland, a school-specific study was undertaken. The school is one on the south bank of the Brisbane River and serves one of the older suburban areas. It was selected because it is representative of schools designated "special" which cater for a specified clientele. Children attending special schools are disadvantaged in a situation of high unemployment among school leavers; this arises because employers have the opportunity of selecting employees from a more academically able population.

The Method

A modified Delphic Probe, of two rounds, was used to obtain data. A question was formulated to pose to the respondents. This was: "What initiatives would Special Education have to take in order to meet the needs of pre-vocational students in the 1990s?"

Fifteen teachers in Special Education were asked to participate in the exercise. The first part was carried out using the direct-interview method. Each interview lasted twenty-five to thirty minutes. The advantage of this technique is the interviewer's opportunity to explicate statements, thereby reducing ambiguity. However, the success of this method is dependent upon the adaptability of the interviewee and his/her ability to respond to verbal questioning. Interviewees are often ill-at-ease, unless the researcher has given them time in which to ponder the question. During the interview respondents often wish to qualify, add to or subtract from previous statements made.

From the interviews each respondent generated three working statements. Thus a total of forty-five working statements were compiled. Those statements were then grouped according to their adherence to a theme. Seven categories were used: (1) daily living skills; (2) work experience; (3) school curricula; (4) leisure skills; (5) parent/school liaison; (6) employment prospects; and (7) other concepts. Of the original forty-five statements generated, some were subsumed because of repetitious ideas. A total of thirty-five items were finally used.

Those thirty-five items comprised the key to compiling the second round opinionnaire. To each item respondents were asked to assign a priority rating and indicate time of desirable implementation. On receipt of the completed opinionnaires a decoding analysis was made. To obtain the hierarchy of items a weighted score method was used.

The Rank Order

The ten most important items were:

1. Increase the knowledge and awareness of community resources and social services available.
2. Establish stronger links with employers providing work experience.
3. Provide more continuous programming related to actual survival/

daily living skills.

4. Provide opportunities through specific programmes for development of social skills, particularly with respect to job applications, interviews and retention of employment.
5. Equip children for better use of recreation time through teaching hobbies, sports, crafts, indoor games, etc.
6. Include more work on developing leisure activity skills such as leather work, gardening, pottery, which may produce a source of income.
8. Emphasise skills relating to self-sufficiency (e.g. budgeting, small home repairs, etc.) in Home Economics and Manual Arts courses.
9. Provide more opportunities for actual work experience.
10. Foster in students more socially acceptable behaviour by providing more opportunities for being away from home in other group situations for a prescribed time (camps, independent living courses, etc..

Rank Order of Remaining Items

11. Increase emphasis on leisure time activities in preparation for the possibility of non-employment.
12. Encourage more parent/teacher interaction so that teachers and parents develop more realistic goals for students.
13. Assess the suitability in both educational and emotional terms of students being prepared for work experience.
14. Require Special Education to develop school-based surveys to assess accurately the needs of pre-vocational students.
15. Look at the advantage of having our own special education unit for the training of students under industrial conditions.
16. Recommend that legislation be changed so that guidelines for work experience in special schools are differentiated from high schools and are therefore more appropriate for special schools.
17. Reassess work-oriented teaching values and their relevance to pre-vocational students.
18. Organise more in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of actual work experience.
19. Provide greater access to TAFE college courses, in terms of widening the courses offered and increasing the number of places for students in courses.
20. Avoid the pitfall of narrowing excessively the curriculum for pre-vocational students to purely vocational skills since they need

development on all fronts.

21. Introduce field apprenticeships as an integral part of pre-vocational courses.
22. Enhance social and emotional development of students through community involvement and giving, caring and sharing.
23. Focus more on the Home Economics and Manual Arts skills.
24. Start pre-vocational training at thirteen instead of fourteen years.
25. Explore alternatives to such programmed entertainment as television.
26. Establish a central facility or school (such as a modified TAFE with teachers from Special Education) specifically for senior special school students.
27. Use more industrial-type vocabulary in teaching programmes.
28. Concentrate more on encouraging skills which will lead to sheltered workshop employment.
29. Recognise the low potential for employment and therefore stress survival skills rather than job-linked skills.
30. Set up for special school students sheltered workshops which are funded by governments and private enterprise.
31. Redesign school layouts to provide home living and maintenance areas and to create a "home" atmosphere rather than a "classroom" atmosphere.
32. Provide working knowledge of computer-based information retrieval for the more literate pre-vocational students.
33. Train students for assembly line work so that all students would learn to follow instructions and to work under typical factory conditions.
34. Terminate all formal work with the exception of functional maths and reading and concentrate on teaching living skills.
35. Provide pre-vocational courses that are more technologically parallel to industry and which provide training which is relevant to industry.

Conclusion

The data indicate a somewhat pessimistic attitude towards pre-vocational students obtaining employment when they leave school. This is indicated by the highest ranked item. It would seem that respondents were influenced by the current employment situation. Further reinforcement of this attitude may be inferred from the emphasis placed on social, leisure and daily living skills.

Another indication is the call to include survival technique and strategies: General social skills relating to behaviour, skills relating to self-sufficiency (budgeting, small home repairs, bike repairs, etc.) and leisure skills which may provide hobbies or in some cases, the basis for income.

Perhaps the major change indicators lie in the call for increased work experience, improved skills relating to job applications, interviews and retention of jobs in order to gain employment after leaving school. There is the potential for many pre-vocational students to be unable to attain employment and there is a need for emphasis on social and daily living skills so that each student has a measure of self-sufficiency and emphasis on leisure skills both in terms of hobbies and in terms of income generation.

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