

Part I

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

One would think that in a country where mandatory school attendance is couched in public policy, the education of children and youth with exceptional learning needs would never be an issue. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Historically, the establishment of a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities has not been interpreted as being central to the provisions governing public education in this country. Consequently, parents, professionals, advocates, and persons with disabilities themselves have gone through a long and arduous process to achieve the civil rights of individuals with disabilities and making what we have today, in the form of special education, public policy.

Understanding the process and the efforts behind it to bring about these public policies, along with their educational implications, is an important part of the knowledge base necessary to be an effective teacher. Although policies do not result in effective instruction, they create the conditions under which teachers and others must operate to make a difference in the lives of children, youth, and adults with disabilities. It becomes your responsibility as a practicing professional to ensure that you know what your obligations are and that you possess the knowledge and skills required to fulfill them.

To fully understand the potential impact of disability on the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families, it is important to keep in perspective what is occurring in the larger society. With advances in medical science, for example, more children survive who earlier might not have lived due to the severity of their medical condition. However, although they have survived, many require treatment, services, and resources that are essential to their quality of life. Further, shifts in the economy can create employment conditions that can greatly restrict opportunities for employment or resources central to their daily lives. Finally, changing demographics can make a difference in what communities are able or willing to do to ensure that the needs of persons with disabilities are accommodated across the life span.

While much has been achieved in this country to bring about equality for many groups, including those with disabilities, it is a constant struggle. As circumstances change, policy makers must be constantly aware of how changing circumstances impact all groups. Further,

advocates, families, and professionals must be vigilant in monitoring societal changes and pursue equity for all.

As a beginning teacher your role in achieving equity is no less than that of other advocates and policy makers. In fact, in many ways your role will be more strategic. You will find yourself responsible for implementing many public policies and for monitoring others. At the same time you are uniquely responsible for becoming an effective teacher in an educational system where resources are often insufficient and available interventions are sometimes not as powerful as necessary. Yet your role is central to the accountability called for in education by public policy today.

The complexities that surround the education of children and youth with disabilities make the decision about what to cover first in an introductory text difficult at best. Some might argue that beginning teachers should first be introduced to the pedagogy of how to teach students with exceptional learning needs. Others may take the view that because of the numerous ways in which conditions that cause disabilities affect learning and behavioral attributes, these should take center stage, beginning with a chapter on each disability and associated learning characteristics.

Amidst these varying opinions, we are of the conviction that it is important for individuals preparing to be teachers to have a foundation in the policies that undergird special education and the role of the teacher. We also believe that having a perspective on the programmatic contributions that education can make to students' quality of life across the life span is essential early in the study of special education.

The rationale for the emphasis on foundations is most evident. Early advocacy efforts were directed at ensuring educational equity. For the most part, that was interpreted to mean access to education with a concern for the appropriateness of the education provided across the different categories of learners with disabilities. As access was eventually gained, it soon became apparent that education during the traditional school-age years was not sufficient to prepare students with disabilities for the challenges to be faced later in life in terms of employment, independent living, and so on. Specifically, it became clear that there was a need for early intervention and special preparation in the form of transition programs at the secondary level and beyond. Just as educational equity generalized across disability groups, the same was true for early intervention and transition. Finally, in recent years the impact of cultural, linguistic, and instructional diversity on all disability groups has become a significant issue among educators and policy makers.

Each of these topics warrants serious consideration by all teachers. In most teacher preparation programs their importance is reinforced by coursework devoted to the study of them. In this book we have positioned the study of early intervention, transition and diversity early on to provide readers insight into the programmatic needs of children and youth with disabilities while creating a framework for the study of specific disability groups.