



4-1-1981

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John M. Dodd

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Recommended Citation

Dodd, John M. (1981) "Toward special services - minus prejudices," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 8: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1904>

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It's not only the law—it's right

Toward special services—minus prejudices

By John M. Dodd

Rural education emphases should include education for health, education for vocation, education for leisure, and education for citizenship (Sipple, 1920, p. 7). While these suggestions were made 60 years ago and without special regard for children with handicapping conditions, they are appropriate curricular goals for all children.

Unlike 1920 when those goals were elaborated in the first volume of a journal called *Rural Education*, published by the Northern Normal and Industrial School at Aberdeen, South Dakota, current litigation has combined with current legislation to promise a guarantee of an appropriate public education for all school age persons. Public Law 94-142 is civil rights legislation for handicapped children. It provides for an appropriate education in the least restrictive alternative without regard for whether handicapped children live in urban or rural areas. At times compliance with the law in rural areas faces obstacles that seem insurmountable. Yet, the law is relentless. Children in rural areas deserve and must receive educational programs which are second to none. Still, even the hope for such a guaranteed right makes it necessary to face facts. Among those facts is the necessity to realize that both distance and sparse population concentrations make efforts to comply with the spirit and the letter of PL 94-142 sluggish at best.

Programs for teacher education for the handicapped must shoulder greater responsibilities when it prepares teachers for rural areas. A specialist cannot be employed for every handicapping condition in small communities. Therefore, it is imperative that several specializations are built into the preparation of the one or few rural special educators who can be employed in small communities.

The need for multiple specializations requires supervised practical experience with a wide variety of handicapping conditions in children. It requires the ability to decide which techniques and which materials are to be used for which condition and to do so without supervision. It requires a diverse teacher education program of solid excellence. It may require a greater expenditure of funds per teacher and it may require more time to prepare an excellent rural special educator than it requires to prepare a teacher with a single specialization. Failure to do so shortchanges handicapped children of rural America and denies their rights.

Handicapped children deserve very early education because children who have difficulty learning have no time to waste waiting for opportunities to learn. Because young handicapped children often cannot be grouped homogeneously and because they should not be bussed great distances, frequently they must depend on parents or other family members for early intervention. Parents need very early information and ample encouragement. In rural areas it is imperative that the special education system must develop an early and lasting partnership with parents.

While a partnership usually needs to be formed to provide appropriate learning opportunities very early, often partnerships between schools must be formed to provide appropriate educational opportunities during later school age years too. This partnership, usually described as an educational cooperative, provides services in a variety of ways. Itinerant specialists may be employed jointly to provide direct teaching to children and consultant help to teachers. Consultant teachers may be shared primarily to provide consultation to teachers who provide direct instruction for handicapped children. Other arrangements call for employing a teacher, who provides direct instruction for part or all of an instructional day, frequently for youngsters who ride a bus to a centrally located school. However, all of these arrangements require cooperation beyond that required to provide an appropriate education for non-handicapped youngsters.

Rural special educators must be able to sustain isolation. They must have the courage to act whether there are colleagues to provide reassurance or not. They must keep current in several exceptionalities through journals and continued in-service education. To fail to do so fails to fulfill the promise of PL-142 and fails to meet the educational needs of the handicapped.

Greater resources need to be allocated to rural special education programs to provide instruction for health, vocation, leisure and citizenship for the rural handicapped. Legislation, litigation, and need combined with teacher conviction dictate that education for handicapped children in rural areas must be second to none.

References

- Sipple, Leslie B. "What the State Normal Schools Can and Should Do for the Improvement of Rural Schools and Country Life." *Rural Education*: Volume 1, No. 5, 1920.