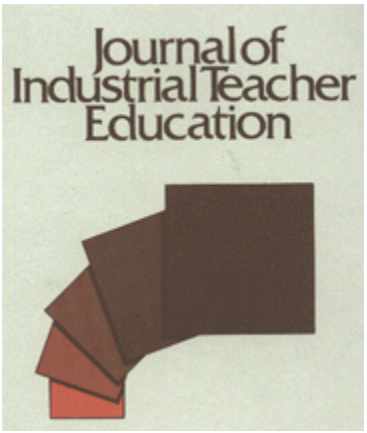


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# The Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on Career and Technical Education: Implications for Students with Special Needs

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With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), redefined expectations and accountability appeared concerning education of students in the nation's schools (McLeod, D'Amico, & Protheroe, 2003). The focus of this article is to examine the ramifications of NCLB on students with special needs. In addition, given NCLB, the idea of inclusion for career and technical education now needs rethinking; and the methods of monitoring student success may need to be redefined.

Inclusion, the practice of placing students with individual educational plans (IEPs) in regular education classes instead of limiting them to laboratory classes taught by teachers of students with special needs, has gained popularity within the past several decades in public comprehensive schools grades, kindergarten through 12th grade. The main principle of inclusion is to provide an education for children ". . . in a way that honors and respects students and does not violate the norms of belonging" (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000, p. xiv).

The idea of inclusion traces its roots to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which required that students receive a meaningful education and ". . . participate in state- and district-wide assessments" (Heward, 2003, p. 188). As with most policies, IDEA has changed

drastically from its initial appearance in education. What once began as a means to better manage and provide for the education of students with special needs has emerged as a way of defining the educational setting of students.

Much research has been completed regarding the practice of inclusion within schools. Darling-Hammond and Falk (1997) stated that students separated from the general school population often do not receive the same quality of education as that received by the school's general population. This quality is measured in standardized test scores, drop-out rates and employability of students after graduation. In addition, providing separate programs is costly and makes similar programs from similar schools compete for funding (Odden & Picus, 2000). Furthermore, educating students in a regular education setting costs a district 25% to 60% less than serving them within a special education setting (Chambers, Parrish, Lieberman, & Wolman, 1998). This cost is incurred in a special education setting through lower teacher-student ratios, teacher aides, and in some case, student aides.

At one point, the acquisition of elementary skills was seen to be the crux of special education. Students were repeatedly taught the same elementary skills, even as they entered a high school setting. This instruction continued throughout the students' educational years until they graduated. In the end, students were seldom given the opportunity to apply these skills in practical applications (Reid, 1988). Eventually, educators and. policy makers, armed with the desire to provide better opportunities for all students, identified a more comprehensive education as necessary for students with special needs. Placement within the general population became the desired educational setting for these students (Lefrancois, 1995).

In one particular study, this discrepancy was evident. Weiss and Lloyd (2002) conducted a study that found that all participating teachers concluded that the instruction within the special education lab setting ". . . included content that was at a lower level, broken down into smaller units, delivered at a slower pace, and individualized more than in the general education classroom" (p. 65). This was in congruence with the earliest forms of the progressive adult education movement, during which Dewey, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel envisioned education as a process that removed ". . . the child from the passivity and uniformity of traditional education" (Elias & Merriam, 1995, p. 49).

The idea of the least restrictive environment being the best setting for all students has been reshaped from separate buildings for students with special needs to an ideal that all students, no matter the severity of the disability, should have the right to experience life, albeit in an educational setting with a general representation of society (Artiles, 2003). Students of all abilities now have the opportunity to sit in regular educational classrooms with their peers. A majority of the school day of 46% of students with special needs was spent in a regular classroom setting during the 1997-1998 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). While these students may still attend some laboratory classes, this means that during the school day they are mixing with a general population of students, creating new peer groups and enjoying a school day that closely resembles that of an average student.

One type of student who benefits greatly from an inclusion environment is the student with learning disabilities. Although "learning disability" is ". . . a broad term that covers a pool of possible causes, symptoms and outcomes . . . (Neuwirth, 1993, p.4), it is nevertheless representative of a large portion of IEP students (Lefrancois, 1995). Students with learning disabilities make up the vast majority of students with special needs who spend most of their time in inclusive environments. While students with learning disabilities do not usually suffer from physical deformities or other characteristics that make them easily identifiable, these students have special needs that cannot be lumped into any general category. Students with learning disabilities, as determined by their IEP and its requirements, have forced school educators to rethink their methods of teaching and assessment (Lefrancois).

**No Child Left Behind**

However, the NCLB Act of 2001, as proposed by President George W. Bush as a ". . . reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965" (McLeod, D'Amico, & Protheroe, 2003, p. 1), drastically redefined what might be considered the educational success of a student. By the school year 2013-2014, all students, regardless of IEP specification, must pass their state's proficiency requirements, as determined by standardized test scores (McLeod, D'Amico, & Protheroe). In other words, no matter a student's ability or handicap, all students, including those with special needs, will show proficiency in subject areas by taking a state-administered assessment test and passing according to the guidelines set forth by that state.

Even without the consideration of the new place of students with special needs, particularly students with learning disabilities within the classroom, the reality of education in the United States of America is that over 5 million high school students are unable to read their textbooks to a sufficient level or to even understand other materials written for their grade level (Grigg, Daane, Jin, & Campbell, 2003). In addition, 383,000 students in grades 10-12 leave school without graduating (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Both the large population of students with learning disabilities within United States' schools and the large population of unsuccessful students in general require a response from all educators. However, what is viewed as success for students is very much an issue of who is doing the viewing (Artiles, 2003). Career and technical education programs have for years graduated students capable of finding jobs within the fields for which they were trained. With the enactment of NCLB, this measurement of success may not be enough.

## Career and Technical Education

John Dewey, at the beginning of the 20th century, forever changed education in the United States when he not only advocated but also demonstrated the validity of an educational environment structured around the practical experience. Students began asking, "Why am I learning this?" While the more traditional liberal arts education answered, "Because it is good for you," career and technical education instructors began seeing the real career potential for skills learned in school; and the instructors were thus constantly forced to find a means of connecting school content to outside school experiences the student would face (Elias & Merriam, 1995).

While regular education students flourished in this new hands-on environment, students with special needs perhaps flourished even more. Historically, career and technical education and the programs that fall within the career-technical education umbrella tackle the aspects of student education in a way that enhances learning through hands-on experiences (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Special education programs were started with the idea that experiential learning could enable all students to reach a degree of success (Heward, 2003). Because of this approach, students with learning disabilities, who have had a difficult time processing the written and spoken language, have had more success within educational settings that promote kinesthetic means rather than a more traditional instructional approach based upon lectures and note-taking (Neuwirth, 1993). Yet, because of the reform movement that began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, it is now expressed in NCLB that students' success will be measured by a standardized test.

## General Implications

For years, the IEP of a student in special education programs has guided that student's education and has provided a means to determine the level of that student's success. For some students, success may have been achieved if the student showed greater self-esteem during the school year. "This position runs counter to the standards-based reform movement . . ." (Heward, 2003, p. 188) that has become the prevalent cry of reformers in the United States. Yet IDEA reaffirms the concept that the meaning of a skill and the measure of its success for a student depends upon the relevancy of that skill to that student's life (Heward).

This again leads to the relevancy of testing in a student's life. While the importance of a sufficient reading level to a student is without dispute, the method of measuring that reading level might be arguable. Research has exposed the problem of transferability in means of measurement and results in measurement. Helwig, Rozek-Tedesco, and Tinday (2002) displayed this problem while studying the impact of altering standardized mathematics testing from a read-and-answer approach to an oral administration. In the end, the question of how much the actual test was altered because of the means of administration was unanswered. Yet again comes the issue regarding the method in which a test is administered. To meet the needs of a student's IEP, an educator may be directed to administer a test orally; however, the very change in the administration of that test might skew the test itself.

## Implications for Career and Technical Education

The primary question for career and technical educators then becomes, "How will I meet the needs of my students while at the same time meeting the requirements of NCLB?" Overarching the concerns of many educators regarding the new requirements of NCLB is the idea of appropriate training for educators in order to instigate new practices to better meet the needs of all students (Forlin, 2001). Within the past few decades, educators in secondary public schools have begun team-teaching with teachers of students with special needs, participating in IEP meetings of students on a regular basis, and attending numerous hours structured around the idea of teaching to a large variety of learning types (Heward, 2003).

Another consideration of NCLB is the training of career and technical education teachers. Although career and technical education teachers use a more tactile learning approach, will this truly satisfy the requirements of NCLB? Perhaps most alarming is the idea that secondary education environments may become reluctant to recommend students with special needs to career and technical education programs so that more instruction might take place in the traditional secondary environment to guarantee the students' passing state-administered assessments. Indeed, at what point will career-technical programs become answerable to NCLB?

The impact on career and technical programs on fulfilling all components of NCLB are, of course, unknown until years have passed and research has taken place. During this point in its implementation, the ramifications of NCLB on vocational programs and school in general are, at best, speculative.

Will the stipulations of NCLB eventually require the removal of students with IEPs from a career and technical education program, or will career and technical education programs eventually require the placement of teachers of students with special needs in every classroom to best meet the needs of special education students? Perhaps most importantly, will these new requirements eventually lead to students with special needs being forced to enroll in more traditional liberal arts programs as a reaction to the emphasis placed upon high-stakes testing? The future educational landscape will be shaped within the ideals of success rather than the simple appearance and functionality of programs (Heward, 2003). Student success, rather than simple placement, will determine a student's educational path.

"The professional educator should be constantly in the process of examining, evaluating and perhaps rejecting or modifying what has been received from the past" (Elias & Merriam, 1995, p. 206). At the same time, the professional educator is now asked to predict the future somewhat in regard to the needs of students. In addition, policy makers and the outside public are constantly redefining not only those needs, but also the best means for measuring and assessing whether those needs have truly been met.

In essence, the current struggle of reforms-based education and the continuation of current educational practices becomes a classic struggle of liberal education versus

progressive education (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Ironically, during the past century, the struggle began with liberal educators structuring standards and practices in comprehensive schools, while at the same time progressive educators did the same in career-technical programs. Indeed, it seems upon close examination that even special education has been somewhat influenced by the progressive movement. However, with the reforms-based movement and high-stakes testing becoming such pivotal forces in society, liberal education is demanding a say in what takes place within the career and technical education programs, which in turn will influence the education received by students with special needs.

The answer is that more research must be completed to examine the best practices in place, instead of continually swinging from one perspective to another. However, rather than making assumptions, changing programs, and then researching, educators must take the high road and demand better treatment from policy makers and the public in general.

This revolt from simply following the demands of lawmakers should not be made by generalized statements, but backed by solid research in the field. At this time, it seems that educators, always strapped for funding, are simply taking the funds offered by the government with all the stipulations attached.

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