

DIALOGUE

Special Education Cannot Be Allowed To Continue As Is: Its A Matter Of Survival For Black Youth

By Bryant Mason, Senior Fellow Phelps-Stokes Fund (Part 3 of a 3 part series)

"There are too many children of color in special education who have been taken off the express train and put on the local. The local never catches up with the express."

The late Ron Edmonds' efforts in New York City's public schools showed that fundamental to the work in school effectiveness is that school improvement must involve both quality and equity. Stated in a more inclusively specific way, results of school reform must benefit all students, including special education students.

To successfully merge these two groups of students, five factors must exist to achieve quality and equity: (1) high expectations for all students, and staff acceptance of responsibility for students' learning; (2) instructional leadership on the part of the principal; (3) a safe and orderly environment conducive to learning; (4) a clear and focused mission concerning instructional goals shared by the staff; and (5) frequent monitoring of student progress.

Instead of dividing students and placing them in separate systems, "special education fiefdoms," based on arbitrary judgements of abilities, more attention should be placed on developing a merged system. We need to change our thinking to focus more on differences among people, in the ways we choose to organize schools for their education, and in how we view the purpose of that education. This new view would reject a division of handicapped and non-handicapped students. Individuals demonstrate different learning patterns.

In merged system, effective practices in classrooms and schools would characterize education for all students. No longer would there be an education system that focuses on limitations of "handicapped" students, a teacher's incapacity to teach students because of a lack of special credentials, or instruction that is determined by labels attached to students. Nor would blame be placed on students or on family characteristics.

A new system means curriculum adaptations and individualized educational strategies that would allow both general and special education students to take more rigorous courses. What distinguishes general and special education is

that in general education in order to help young people make wise course choices, schools are

increasingly requiring students to take courses that match their grade level and abilities. Schools

are seeing to it that the materials used in those courses are intellectually challenging,

Moreover: "the more rigorous the course of study, the more students achieve, within the

limits of their capacity. Student achievement also depends on (See Dialogue, Page 21)

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