

**CAREER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
FOR THE MILDLY HANDICAPPED**

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By

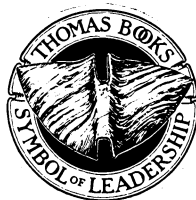
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CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER
Springfield • Illinois • U. S. A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265

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ISBN 0-398-05344-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-6436

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Printed in the United States of America
Q-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Cummings, Rhoda Woods.

Career and vocational education for the mildly handicapped.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Handicapped youth—Vocational education—United States. 2. Career education—United States.

I. Maddux, Cleborn D., 1942- . II. Title.

LC4019.7.C86 1987 371.9'044 87-6436

ISBN 0-398-05344-8

To the writers and researchers whose work have made this book possible, and to scholars everywhere who expend the extra effort and make the sacrifices required in the pursuit of knowledge.

PREFACE

TODAY THE field of Special Education is facing a *major crisis*. This crisis is related to education for *mildly handicapped students* and results from the failure to adequately prepare them for adult living.

Traditionally, special education has done an acceptable job of preparing more severely handicapped students for work. For many of these individuals, planning for their future begins at an early age. In fact, immediately after parents are told their child is handicapped, they often receive professional advice that they should begin planning for the child's future. The usual next steps are to enroll the child first in an infant stimulation program, then in an early childhood program, and finally in a public or private school special education program. *From kindergarten on*, these programs emphasize the development of self-help, vocational, and other independent living skills. The ultimate goal of such programs is to equip students with skills for adult living.

What awaits the participants of these programs once they leave school? Many have access to group homes where, under the guidance of a trained supervisor, they are able to interact with peers, and they are assigned specific responsibilities necessary for the efficient operation of the home. In addition, they have companionship, and the opportunity to make friends with whom they can visit at the end of a day. Because of the skills many of them have acquired during their school years, they have part- or full-time jobs, depending on the extent of their disability. Many of them have access to community services, receive discounts on public transportation, and attend community-sponsored events such as dances, circuses, and such. They participate in summer and winter special olympics. In short, many moderately and some severely handicapped individuals lead active and fulfilling lives as adults.

Unfortunately, the same has not been true for many *mildly* handicapped youth. Many of these individuals have grown up, left the public schools, and are attempting to become integrated into adult society.

However, as the literature has recently begun to show, large numbers of these individuals continue to suffer from the effects of their disability. In fact, for many of them, their handicap has become even more of a problem as they have grown older. Researchers are now beginning to look at some of the problems encountered by this group after they leave school, and they are discovering some alarming facts!

Many mildly handicapped students are leaving schools unprepared either for college, vocational/technical school, or employment. They often have difficulty finding employment, and if they do find a job, they often cannot keep it because of their poor work habits and inadequate interpersonal skills. It has been said that many become victims of an invisible handicap which neither they nor their employers understand. They may live their lives in frustration, isolation, depression, and at levels far below their potential. If they do find and keep employment, it may be in dead-end jobs that are boring and do not make use of their full capabilities.

As a result, public school officials are beginning to recognize that academic remediation alone will not solve the problems of this handicapped population. Because of this realization, some initial attempts are being made to provide mildly handicapped students with career/vocational as well as academic instruction. However, many of these programs are often inappropriate.

We believe a major factor underlying all of these difficulties is the lack of a firm, theoretical foundation in career/vocational education. We fear this atheoretical orientation has characterized much of program development in vocational and career education, both for handicapped and nonhandicapped populations. The result has been a lack of clearly-defined models from which excellent career/vocational education programs could be developed.

Thus, the purpose for writing this book is to present a plan for career/vocational education program development grounded firmly in a theoretical framework that has withstood the scrutiny of research and the test of time. We have chosen John Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments. This theory will be used as the framework for a career/vocational education program designed to prepare mildly handicapped students for a variety of potentially fulfilling occupations.

In summary, we believe that the majority of mildly handicapped students will not succeed without this kind of extensive, well-planned, appropriate, *theory-based* public school preparation. It is for this group that a need exists for drastic reforms in Special Education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WE WISH TO acknowledge two colleagues who have had an indirect, yet positive impact on the content of this book. We are indebted to Dr. Jane Winer who was responsible for introducing us to the concept of career development theory, and to Dr. Corrine Kass, a pioneer in the field of learning disabilities, who has been an exemplary model of scholarship and a continuing source of inspiration.

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Chapter One

THE MILDLY HANDICAPPED

THE SUBJECT of this book is vocational special education for the mildly handicapped. Brief consideration of this topic will probably lead the reader to at least two initial questions:

1. Who are the mildly handicapped?
2. Why do the mildly handicapped need a special vocational education program?

We will begin by answering both questions in a cursory fashion. The remainder of this chapter will then explore these answers in depth.

First, mildly handicapped individuals as defined in this book are those with learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, or mild emotional disturbance.

Second, they need a special vocational education program because the experiences of the authors as well as the results of a growing body of research studies indicate that these individuals are not being adequately prepared for life after public school. They usually do not receive adequate vocational training, and they have problems interacting with employers and coworkers. Consequently, they have difficulty finding and keeping a job, and they are often unemployed or underemployed. This state of affairs is extremely wasteful, costing our nation millions of dollars and subjecting our handicapped citizens to untold and largely unnecessary frustration and suffering.

THE MILDLY HANDICAPPED

The term *mildly handicapped* is poorly chosen from one point of view. Someone once observed that a *mild handicap* is similar to a *minor operation*,

in that *minor* operations are restricted only to those performed on someone else! Similarly, *mild* handicaps can occur only to other people's children, never our own.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that all handicapping conditions can be viewed as falling along a continuum of severity ranging from mild to severe (Kirk & Gallagher, 1983). The individuals about whom this book is written fall somewhere toward the mild end of this continuum. We will begin our discussion of the mildly handicapped by defining learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance.

The Learning Disabled

The newest and most controversial category of handicapping conditions is that of *learning disabilities*. The term is currently recognized in federal law and is applied to a wide variety of learning problems that occur in otherwise normal individuals. Although there have always been learning disabled people, the term was not coined until the early 1960s when Sam Kirk used it at a professional meeting. Prior to that time, various terms were used including brain injured, brain damaged, hyperactive, and neurologically impaired. Kirk preferred the new term because he and other authorities felt the older terms emphasized causation, were not scientifically sound, and provided an excuse not to teach such children.

The Crisis in Learning Disabilities

The authors feel that the learning disabilities movement is currently in the midst of a crisis that threatens its very existence. The field is under attack from without by lawmakers, regular educators and other professionals and it is torn from within by petty and unprofessional rivalries, jealousies, and power brokering. Classrooms for learning disabled children are bursting at the seams with students who are not handicapped and who should not be in special education programs, and many young LD teachers have never had a classically learning disabled child placed in their programs. To understand how this sad state of affairs has come to pass, it is necessary to present a brief history of the field of learning disabilities. Interested readers who desire more detailed information are referred to our earlier text on parenting the learning disabled (Cummings & Maddux, 1985b).

Overidentification

Although there are many problems and controversies in learning disabilities, we believe that the most serious is the problem of overidentification of learning disabled children. Ironically, overidentification has been a problem in learning disabilities almost from the moment the field was created.

The term *learning disabilities* caught on immediately after Kirk coined it in the early sixties. After all, it was far less noxious than any of the previously-used terms that emphasized causation and seemed to imply more serious physical and mental impairment. This “softening” of terms was welcomed by parents, school administrators, physicians, and other child service professionals. At their urging, state and federal officials began passing laws that recognized the *new* condition. These laws, most of which were passed in the 1960s and early 1970s, made special funding available for school districts that instituted programs for learning disabled students. Typically, these laws added to district budgets a substantial amount of money for each child identified as learning disabled. Consequently, the 1960s and 1970s were periods of great growth in terms of the numbers of children who were identified as learning disabled (Cummings & Maddux, 1985b). School districts across the country began identifying larger and larger percentages of their students as learning disabled. In fact, many school administrators seemed more concerned with obtaining additional special education funding than with ensuring that accurate identification procedures were in place in their districts.

Students were labeled LD and then placed in special classrooms to be taught by teachers who were supposedly experts in the field of learning disabilities. However, the speed with which children were being identified and placed far surpassed the ability of colleges and universities to turn out properly prepared specialists. The result was an acute shortage of teachers certified in learning disabilities.

Overidentification thus spawned a different, though related problem; that of inadequate training of teachers. School district officials across the country were experiencing difficulty in locating and recruiting certified LD teachers. The officials reacted to this problem by applying pressure on state departments of education to initiate special temporary emergency certification programs. These programs licensed teachers for learning disabilities classrooms who had only minimal special training. Many such emergency programs were approved. The