

Societal institutions must engage in planned efforts to develop awareness, acceptance and adoption of positive attitudes, and advocacy for the special needs of handicapped individuals.

Guidance Counselors and Special Education Students

by Peggy Dettmer and Margery Neely

A first step in university commitment toward development of understanding about handicapism should include an analysis of the extent to which course offerings address multicultural concerns. A study conducted at Florida State University (Funk et al, 1981) revealed that while issues concerning sexism and racism had found their way into most education courses, attention to handicapism was missing in nearly one-third of those courses. This finding parallels the sluggish attitudes of society toward handicapped persons and their needs. These attitudes prevail in spite of recent advances made through legislation and litigation.

Several sociological factors contribute to indifference toward handicapism. First, a nonhandicapped person is less likely, in most circumstances, to have opportunity for interaction with a handicapped person than with a person of another sex or race. Many exceptional individuals are not even recognized as handicapped because they do not demonstrate outwardly any manifestations of the handicap. Also, many members of the handicapped population cannot articulate their needs and concerns to the public; therefore, they must rely on the willingness of others to make that effort in their behalf. Finally, spe-

cial note must be taken of the current Zeitgeist in which physical perfection and specific standards of beauty are idolized.

Societal institutions such as universities must engage in planned efforts to develop awareness, acceptance and adoption of positive attitudes, and finally, advocacy for the special needs of handicapped individuals. Planners and implementors of educational programs must accept responsibility for guiding preservice and inservice educators beyond the awareness level of information assimilation to levels of adoption and advocacy in which they become change agents for the elimination of stereotypes toward handicapism.

Awareness of Handicaps and Needs of the Handicapped

Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, specified that all handicapped children would have available to them a free and appropriate public education emphasizing special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs. Services to be provided include pupil personnel services and related services such as student counseling, parent counseling and consultation with other school staff.

In keeping with this legal action, university teacher training programs were commissioned to provide school personnel with information about the characteristics and educational needs of exceptional individuals. This awareness training has been implemented at other preservice and graduate levels, as well as through inservice and staff development in local school districts.

Students in education programs are introduced in their coursework to categorical labels of exceptionality including: MS (multiple and severely handicapped); SD (semi-dependent); SI (semi-independent); HI (hearing impaired); VI (visually impaired); ED (emotionally disturbed), and LD (learning disabled). In some states gifted (G) individuals are included as exceptional students in mandates for special education.

Under P.L. 94-142 school personnel are designated as providers of certain services that benefit handicapped persons. For instance, guidance counselors are directed to provide counseling with students and parents, information for parents about developmental needs of their exceptional child, appropriate appraisal of interests and abilities, and suggestions for educational planning, management and consultation. In the preservice training for guidance counselors, students typically are introduced to descriptions of guidance services, techniques for group and individual counseling, information sources, communication skills development, appraisal techniques, organization and management of individual and group learning processes, and consultation skills. These services apply to nonhandicapped students as well as to those who are handicapped.

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Now, the question must be asked: Is this type of knowledge enough for enabling the guidance counselor to serve the very special needs of exceptional students? An application of this question to specific school situations may be helpful.

Kim Baker and Terry Jones are teachers of English who have decided to work toward master's degrees in counseling. Kim has taught for three years after completing a teacher preparation program in which a course on the exceptional child was required for certification. Terry is a veteran teacher of 15 years and, not having had an undergraduate course on exceptional children, was required by legislation to complete such a course before recertification would be approved.

As experienced teachers, Kim and Terry have run the gamut of students in their English classes—from studious to unmotivated, from the quick learner to the slow student, from polite teen-ager to the incorrigible. Their attitudes have been shaped by their preparation programs as well as their own experiences about who can be helped, and in what ways, within the regular school setting. Unfortunately, their contacts with handicapped individuals have been limited. Mainstreaming has not affected their class structure with any great influx of mentally handicapped, severely learning disabled or emotionally disturbed students. Hearing impaired and visually impaired students are rare, and in Kim's case even the highly gifted students have been excused from that English course.

So how will these experienced professionals lay the templates of their individual feelings, stereotypes and preconceived ideas about handicapped persons upon the requirements of guidance counselor roles? Will coursework at an information and awareness level be enough to ensure that Kim and Terry do not become card-shuffling, schedule-juggling "counselors" but sensitive, empathic **counselors** who advocate for the rights of all students including the handicapped?

Teacher educators must assume that guidance counseling for special education students will require modifications both cognitive and affective in nature. For example, special counseling problems presented by needs of the handicapped can be expected to include self-conflict, self-other conflict, maladaptive behaviors and particular vocational problems (Neely, 1982). Requests for consultation will call for indirect service to handicapped students through direct service to teachers and parents. Participants in the consultation process will be required to establish their roles, work at defining the problem, set baseline data, implement and monitor a plan of action, and evaluate that plan while engaging in followup on the problem.

The preceding remarks underscore the multifaceted dimensions involved in assisting school personnel such as guidance counselors to prepare for their demanding roles. During training, whether it be preservice or graduate coursework, prospective guid-

ance counselors must continue to grow personally in their ability to ascertain and provide for the needs of all students, including the handicapped. It will not be enough that they emerge "nouveau committed," as are those *nouveau riche* who eagerly and enthusiastically display trappings of newly acquired positions whether such demonstrations are appropriate or not. On the contrary, guidance counselor training must encourage positive attributes of identification, humor, energy, enthusiasm and commitment which are refined into that "touch of class" so necessary to be successful in meeting students' needs.

Even though guidance counselors may have completed an introductory course on exceptional children, when faced with the new responsibilities and actual student needs as outlined by P.L. 94-142, they can be expected to demonstrate any one or several of the following deficits:

1. Lack of knowledge about handicaps and those affected by the handicaps
2. Lack of skills in dealing with handicaps
3. Lack of objectivity toward handicaps
4. Lack of sensitivity to the needs of those affected by handicaps
5. Lack of self-confidence in dealing assertively with handicaps
6. Lack of resources with which to serve the handicapped

These deficits occur because educators come to their roles equipped with attitudes such as unfamiliarity with ramifications of a handicap, resentment toward demands brought on by needs of the handicapped, discomfort or even embarrassment when interacting with a person who has a handicap, rigidity in arranging and managing learning environments, distaste or even revulsion toward the handicap, and surprisingly, even fear that one's efforts might make the handicapping condition worse.

These deficits and attitudes must be met directly in teacher-preparation programs which have been designed to take students beyond information and awareness levels to process-building levels of acceptance, adoption and advocacy. The training programs must include methods and strategies that demand involvement with the handicapped and intensive self-study by the student.

Acceptance and Adoption of Constructive Attitudes and Plans for Handicapped

Recently a television commentator described an event in his boyhood when his father took him to the train station to see presidential candidate Harry Truman. As the train passed through their small town, it slowed just enough so that Mr. Truman could stand on the end of the platform and wave to the crowd. "We waved back," the commentator remarked, "and believed that now we knew the man."

So it may be that Kim and Terry "waved" at the handicapped in the course of their readings, research papers, lectures, case studies and guest speakers

who were brought in for one-shot sessions during classes. However, common sense dictates that they did not really get to know the handicapped any more than did that young boy get to know Harry Truman. Casual classroom encounters with ideas and people do not cause students to feel the pull of the burdens which blindness, cerebral palsy, or mental retardation make upon the handicapped individual and those closely involved with that person. Students, therefore, tend to treat everything they read about the handicapped in terms of a nail, as Maslow warned, when they have only the hammer of indirect experience. So a child is identified and referred to as "a blind student" rather than "a student who happens to be blind."

The knowledge base formulated at an awareness level is testable, certainly, but it seldom translates automatically into action. Rather, it is remote, third person, abstract booklearning aimed at helping the student pass the next test over assigned material. Unless more involvement-based activities are infused into the curriculum, graduate students such as Kim and Terry probably will make only superficial translations of material at the awareness level.

How might these two able professionals reach an **acceptance** level where they **adopt** plans for serving handicapped students more effectively? The normative expectations, as provided by public school job descriptions, are undoubtedly in place for guidance counselor roles; therefore, it is the personal dimensions that Kim and Terry bring to the role and their interactions with involvement-centered activities, that will make the difference. Students must be assisted by their coursework, by interaction with university faculty, and by guided independent study to address those stereotypes and preconceptions which might be swept under the rug at the awareness level, but become naggingly unavoidable at the more desirable acceptance/adoption level.

Vignettes, discussions, personal examinations and interviews will demonstrate to most students how little they really know about handicaps and how miniscule the efforts of society have been so far toward eliminating handicapism in schools and beyond the school walls. The traditional guidance viewpoint that "each person is a unique and worthwhile individual" remains a pat phrase until Kim and Terry examine what it requires of their own resources and then begin to develop their own plans of activity to support the handicapped.

Skill labs and field trips can be utilized to build understanding of others' problems and needs. The field trips should be intensive, with involvement and interaction among visitors and handicapped residents. Even more valuable would be a buddy system in which a nonhandicapped person is buddied with a handicapped person for an extended period of time, feeling the weight of the handicap and the resultant frustration. Students who keep diaries or journals often find that their personal viewpoints are refined by

rereading thoughts and perceptions they record over a period of time. This activity would be a valuable concomitant activity for strategies structured around intensive involvement with exceptional persons.

Kim and Terry could profit from getting to know successful individuals who happen to have handicaps. As these persons share stories of their successes, the guidance counselors could gather information and develop insights for sharing with handicapped students in the future.

Rap sessions, handled compassionately, do much to develop the listening skills and values clarifications techniques that help guidance counselors work effectively with the handicapped. Bibliotherapy can be used to match persons, problems, and books about those problems in order to clarify issues and promote empathy. Special materials for use with children can be brought into university courses and, in the course of studying the materials, students may acquire additional skills for their repertoires of counseling techniques. As students consider their earlier perceptions and beliefs about handicapism, they can use these discarded attitudes as benchmarks with which to understand the limited visions of others who need assistance in dealing with persons who are handicapped.

Advocacy for Handicapped and Their Needs

Advocacy denotes a proactive approach rather than a reactive response. Advocates take charge when the occasion calls for it. They anticipate needs in the area of concern, then go out and do something about that concern.

An initial step toward advocacy for the handicapped would be to help formulate a school plan for eliminating handicapism. Advocacy brings out creative impulses and generates enthusiasm for just causes. It encourages fuller use of the myriad of resources available almost everywhere if one just takes the time and energy to search for them.

Every effort must be made by university personnel to ensure that development in multicultural education does not become meaningless lip service soon to be forgotten by teachers, counselors and other school staff as they return to the hubbub of daily school routine. Universities must assume responsibility for guiding students in their training programs beyond the simplistic concept of "Special Olympics Day" or "Handicapped Week" to a process development that will enable them to deal effectively with all problems related to persons with handicaps and handicapism in society. Becoming aware of their own process of development through these stages will enable students to transfer and teach the same process to their clientele.

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Commitment to Equity

... "True commitment is exemplified only by actions, not by empty words. An action becomes a commitment when those responsible for fulfilling the action are doing so, not because it is the rule or a responsibility as a result of a rule, but because it is the right thing to do. If this notion is missing, then the entire action may become meaningless."

—Samuel E. Spaght