

Revitalizing Special Education

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Revitalizing Special Education: Revolution, Devolution, and Evolution

EDITED BY

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Dedicated to the memory of three colleagues whose work is indispensable in revitalizing special education, as they exemplified the best thinking and practices of the profession:

Barbara D. Bateman

Gary M. Sasso

Richard L. Simpson

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Foreword

This book is about revitalizing special education so that it becomes universally accepted and provides students with educational disabilities (SWED) with the most effective education for optimizing their social, educational, and vocational outcomes and ensures their maximum inclusion in their communities postschool. The book is considered to be needed because special education appears to have been “devolving” rather than “evolving” due to disparaging comments made about it over many decades, and these have damaged its public image.

It is suggested that revitalizing it may require a “revolution” in thinking about what it means – thinking clearly about what special education is and does. This will require a recommitment to its scientific base, focusing on Enlightenment thinking and research evidence at a time when these concepts are being challenged as universal requirements for civilized societies.

It is considered that the challenges to special education have come about because of “zombie” ideas (Krugman, 2020), that is, ideas that go on and on and just won’t die, regardless of lack of evidence or sound logic or any redeeming value. They’re ideas that are clearly wrong, illogical, and inconsistent with what we know. Yet these ideas live on, maintaining adherents and often gaining popular support.

An example of a political zombie idea is Trump’s “big lie” that the 2020 US election was stolen from him, which lives on and on, and is believed by millions of Americans despite extensive undisputed evidence that it is not true. A consequence of this was that many believers of this zombie idea stormed the US Capital in an attempted coup.

A zombie idea in education, that goes on and on despite zero evidence supporting it, is that full inclusion of all children with SWED in mainstream classes can successfully replace all special education provision. This zombie first appeared in the 1970s and has persisted ever since, even though attempts at establishing full inclusion have not produced any evidence of its successful implementation or evidence that it has been able to provide effective education for all children with SWED in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Fuchs et al., 2022). As a consequence of the continued promotion of this zombie idea, some countries that have well-developed special education systems, such as Ireland and North Macedonia, are reported to be considering abandoning these in favor of implementing full inclusion.

These zombies live on typically because vested interests promote propaganda campaigns aimed at making sure that reasoned voices challenging them are

silenced, for example, by smearing these voices with unsavory slurs. In the case of special education this includes accusing it of denying children with SWED their human rights.

It is essential to fight the zombies, hoping logic and evidence – Enlightenment truth – will keep them quiet for as long as possible in order to weaken their abilities to influence people. A key aspect of fighting zombies is producing books like this that challenge them using logic, science, and evidence. The contributors to this book provide logical insights, scientifically based theories, and research evidence to help in this fight.

The book is forward-looking, with an aim to change the trajectory of special education toward greater, more generalized progress. It accepts that reforms are needed, but considers that these reforms must be based on a logical scientific approach with a specific focus on evidence-based practice, not on unrealistic ideological visions such as full inclusion.

The authors accept that inclusion of *many* SWED in general education is important, when it is appropriate. However, Kauffman and his colleagues are clearly under no illusion about the seriousness of the zombie threat to special education throughout the world. The chances of special education's survival as a distinct and separate part of public education have been diminished by statements from the United Nations and other agencies that have supported an international emphasis on inclusion of all students with disabilities in regular public school classes. As a result, disenchantment with special education has led many to give up on it rather than retain it as an idea that needs development and working to make it everything it can be.

After decades of withering criticism from its own scholars and practitioners and the unrealistic assumption that including literally all students in regular public school classes is going to be best, it's time for revitalizing special education. Rational educators recognize both special education's indispensability in public education for *all* as well as its areas for improvement. They seek, as Kauffman urges in this book, to make special education the valuable and effective service it should be by focusing on special *instruction* rather than on where exceptional students are placed, which is a key aspect of a revitalized special education.

Garry Hornby,
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Preface

Special and general education must come to terms with realities involving students, classrooms, schools, and systems. Both special and general public education have serious faults, and both need substantial improvement. Neither will be improved by abandoning or ignoring the other, nor will combining them make public education better. General and special educators sometimes seem engaged in a shared delusion or *folie à deux* that the two can be successfully combined. Those who believe “general” and “special” are terms no longer needed are sadly deluded. General education needs to change, too, but this book is about revitalizing *special* education, not general education.

For far too long, education has been built on fantasy, speculation, philosophy, and admirable intention grounded in neither reliable empirical data nor rational thought about the data we have nor the problems we face. Those who comprehend the real worlds of students and teaching understand that the probability of transforming general education so that it serves *all* students well without special education is vanishingly small. Those who understand the nature and range of disabilities do not get caught up in the fantasy that *all* students who have them can be incorporated in ordinary public education classes for at least part of the school day or that most SWED can most appropriately be placed in such classes *all* of the time. Facing these realities is difficult but necessary. It is time for Enlightenment thinking and reliable scientific data to better implement what we know and to find out more about what we don't.

A basic premise of this book is that special education has been devolving rather than evolving. The devolution – reversal, slow decay, or unraveling, the opposite of evolution – is not uniform throughout the world. Some nations only recently or only now are developing universal public education systems. They are being urged to construct fully inclusive education without the mention of special education, appropriate education, alternative placement (or education), or least restrictive environment (Anastasiou et al., 2018). In all nations, the idealized or intellectualized vision of total inclusion is being confronted by the reality of the need for special education, specialist education, or alternative education for some exceptional children (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020).

Both the concept and the practice of special education needs to be evolving, but that will require revolutionary changes in the way they are talked about and done. Disparaging comments about special education over many decades have damaged both its public image and its ability to help exceptional learners. Inappropriate comparisons of special education to racial segregation have been

particularly illogical and nefarious. Such criticisms of special education reveal catawampus conceptual models.

Some models of special education are decidedly nonscientific or even antiscientific (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011, 2013; Kauffman et al., 2017). Although writing about genetics, Harden (2021) had some comments relevant to models of special education:

Ultimately, *all* interventions and policies are built on a model about how the world works: “If you change x , then y will happen.” A model of the world that pretends all people are... the same... is a wrong model of how the world works. The more often our models of the world are wrong, the more often we will fail in designing interventions and policies that do what they intend to do, and the more often we will face the unintended consequences of not investing in something more effective.

(pp. 184–185)

In too many instances, special education has strayed from the scientific model (to which Harden, 2021, refers) of figuring out difficult educational problems. Scheibel et al. (2022) described the probable economic costs of ignoring scientific evidence, compounding the ethical and moral costs of implementing interventions that lack the support of reliable empirical evidence.

This book is about revitalizing special education so that it provides more obvious and reliable help to students with disabilities regardless of their color or other excuses for discrimination. Revitalizing it will require a second revolution in thinking about what it means – thinking clearly about what special education is and does. After decades of derogation, roughly corresponding in time to the “Reagan Revolution” in the United States (i.e., the late 1970s to early 1980s), special education needs revitalizing in America and elsewhere to become more consistently the helpful service deserved by those who need it. Special education needs examination, including self-appraisal. Many questions about special education arise, including these:

- Is it something that should be jettisoned, or is it something that should be saved and improved?
- Is it something that should be merged with general education? Why, or why not?
- When does the unfairness called discrimination involve withholding needed services?
- Is special education oppressive, and if so how?
- Under what conditions is it appropriate to call something “segregated” rather than “dedicated?”

This book is not an attack on people or their intentions. Good intentions underlie the work of those proposing general education for all and the elimination of special education. Extremely important is recognition of the fundamental

goal – making the education of *all* students as appropriate and effective as possible. The important questions are about how best to do that and whether it can be done always or only in general education environments or without special education.

Neither is this book an attempt to silence anyone’s expression of alternative views about what education, general or special, is or does by necessity. People have a right to express their ideas as best they can, and heterodoxy, not orthodoxy, is something to be prized. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all ideas are equally good or useful, and it is not an appeal to be nonevaluative or nondiscriminatory of propositions. It is an appeal to logic and empirical evidence in the Enlightenment tradition, not an appeal to mindlessness. If logic and Enlightenment ideas about the constitution of knowledge are rejected as “orthodoxy,” then “bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005) is undetectable and truth is unknowable (Blackburn, 2005; Neiman, 2008; Rauch, 2021).

Certainly, improvement of general education would make the work of special educators easier. However, the inclusion of more SWED in general education also makes general educators’ practice more complicated. Perhaps the inclusion of *all* SWED in general education will make general education teachers’ tasks impossible for the vast majority – especially, if *all* children are to be taught *well*.

This book is intended to refute ideas that will not bear the careful scrutiny and logical thinking that a science of appropriate education for all requires. It is intended to do this in plain, straightforward language. Psychologist Dutton wrote, “The function of language, we shall learn, is actually extremely basic. It is, fundamentally, to differentiate ‘this’ from ‘that.’” (Dutton, 2020, p. 11). Better thinking about what we describe, conclude, say, recommend, and write is what this book is intended to encourage. Too often, our thinking about education issues is not as clear, logical, and evidence-based as it should be and is, instead, based on emotions, biases, or ideologies defended with religious fervor (Kauffman et al., in press). Lloyd (2022) pointed out a common delusion of those of us who have a scientific orientation and try to be logical: believing that we have explained the cause of something because we have described that something. We must be careful how and what we think.

Unfortunately, language – whether plain and straightforward or obtuse and convoluted, and whether written or oral – requires citing the works of individuals who promote or promoted bad ideas. The chapters of this book attack bad *ideas* that refuse to die (what Krugman, 2020, calls “zombies”; see Kauffman & Hornby, in press, for discussion of zombies in special education). Separating persons from ideas, just as separating persons from disabilities, is difficult but necessary to achieve actual social justice. Nevertheless, people should be accountable for what they say and write (Krugman, 2020; Rauch, 2021).

This book is not an appeal to “return to the good old days” of special education. It is not the nostalgia that Applebaum (2020) describes so biting. It is not a rejection of the notion that change can be very good, nor is it an assault on progress. Neither is it a denial of the fact that progress has been made in some areas of concept and practice.

Rather, this book is forward-looking, meant to change the trajectory of special education toward greater, more generalized progress. It is an attempt to lessen the chances that change is mistaken for progress. It does recognize that change is necessary, but also that change is not necessarily progress and that some changes are actually regressive, even if they seem progressive at first blush. It is about changes needed to make special education substantively better, not necessarily to make it more palatable to everyone regardless of their beliefs.

This book is not antireform or antiinclusion. Reforms are needed, but reforms that are movement toward better education, not just change. Inclusion of *many* SWED in general education is important, and it can be appropriate (Hornby & Kauffman, 2021). Inclusion of *all* SWED in general education is not only illegal in the United States under IDEA but an extreme idea that is bound to be counterproductive anywhere in the world (Anastasiou et al., 2018; Kauffman, Ahrbeck, et al., 2020; Kauffman, Anastasiou, et al., 2020). Probably, it is good to keep in mind that the number of cases required to refute the claim of literally *all* is precisely one. More than a single student for whom a separate, dedicated educational environment is most appropriate can be found among school-age youngsters. Probably, there are many such students, enough to demand the continuation of a continuum of alternative placements for education.

The authors contributing to this book help us understand the true meaning and necessity of special education, and its wise ideas and practices that need to be revitalized. The contributors to this volume understand the reality of the threats special education faces and are committed to making special education better for students and their families. They are neither Pollyannas nor confirmed, biased pessimists. All, except myself, are among those most likely to influence special education's future.

In the opening chapter, I sketch the difficulties special education has faced since the 1970s, how special education has fallen into disrepute, and the revolutionary changes in thinking needed for its revitalization. This is followed by Vannest, Sallese, and Peltier's explanation of how special education must be a visible, identifiable part of a system of public education. It continues with Yell and Prince's observations of special education law and why appropriate education for all requires a continuum of alternative placements. Landrum addresses the foundations of special education and explains why they must include both scientific evidence and logic. He explains not only what science is but also why science is often rejected as our best bet for making progress. Pullen then explains why science and logic must be the basis for instruction. Individualized, appropriate, effective instruction is the foremost idea of special education. Travers notes why special education includes things neither needed by nor appropriate for *all* students and full inclusion is both illegal and unwise. Wiley, Harker, and McCollum describe how tiers could be made things we won't end up seeing as just another fad or a way of getting rid of special education. Gloski Woods, Wang, and Morgan provide a study of special education's effectiveness, which is very difficult, if not impossible, to assess with irrefutable statistical rigor (see Kauffman et al., 2022 for further discussion of a similar problem). Nevertheless, Gloski et al. found a way to make the best possible statistical comparisons that used various

experimental designs. They found that SWED who received special education, compared to SWED who did not receive it, were better off. These findings should give pause to those who want to rid schools of special education. Meyer and Plucker detail how students with advanced learning needs, but not having a disability, have been neglected. Hallenbeck gives us her personal perspective on how special education has deteriorated since she began teaching and what changes are needed to make the lives of individuals with disabilities better. Finally, Gage speculates about the possible, alternative futures of special education. He ends by referring to Vonnegut's (1961) brilliant short story, *Harrison Bergeron*, illustrating the pig-headedly cruel and illogical notion that all diversities are the same and deserve the same treatment – naturally, a notion propounded in the name of equality or equity.

Together, we hope we will see the incremental changes that will make special education's future more certain to improve students' lives. We hope special education will become what it should be, not an ill-defined, unidentifiable, or veiled aspect of all public education but a well-defined, valued, even treasured part of making public education appropriate for all, focused on appropriate instruction and including all SWED. Special educators should be unafraid, even proud, to speak special education's name. Changes like these would be revolutionary in the best sense of that word – radically progressive. Such changes are more likely to occur if appropriate, effective instruction regardless of where it occurs, not the place it is provided, is special education's clear focus and its pride.

JMK

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March 2022

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Acknowledgments

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