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CANBERRA COLLEGE OF ADVANCED EDUCATION
SCHOOL OF TEACHER EDUCATION

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN
THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Aims of the Study

This report aims to describe the central issues confronting education systems today, with reference to contemporary developments in the Australian Capital Territory, drawing attention, specifically, to the problems of Special Education sub-systems and tracing the development of this sub-system in the A.C.T.

Background to the Report

Bureaucratic practices and role perceptions persist in systems which are attempting to solve problems emerging from increasingly demanding environments which are growing rapidly in complexity and turbulence.¹

Where these practices are related to the servicing aspect of the organization they may increase efficiency in those functions which can be subjected to mechanistic control. Dysfunction can be avoided if safeguards are built into the organizational framework to allow adequate communication, co-ordination and co-operation in servicing the needs of those in primary roles.

2.

Special Education, Guidance and Counselling Services were established at a time when bureaucratic administrative practices prevailed in educational systems. Closed system structures were deemed then to be appropriate organizations for mechanistic approaches to human problems.

This approach was apparent in the categorization of educational needs on aetiological and psychometric data. The growth of Special Education classes, aimed at securing homogeneous target populations for specialised programmes, characterises this period.

The persistence of the bureaucratic model in an inappropriate environment has resulted in the fixing of certain aspects of the primary task and role. Further, it has placed some important aspects of decision making, namely, needs assessment and the determination of criteria for child placement as well as the actual placement of children, outside the scope of the school in the centrally administered sub-systems of Guidance and Special Education. This has resulted in instances of teachers in mainstream classes in the A.C.T. exhibiting reluctance to propose children for special placement at a time when the beneficial effects of specialized interventions could be maximised.

It has also helped to institutionalise prevalent views of lock-step educational programming. This creates dilemmas

for teachers as they attempt to integrate children who are developmentally or educationally retarded as judged by this criterion, and it presents barriers to the availability of specialized technical assistance to children with learning disabilities placed in mainstream classes.

The climate of education in the A.C.T. is one of increasing openness. In mainstream education parents, teachers, principals and personnel within the Schools Office are beginning to assume new roles as a result of confrontations and compromises. This process is also evidenced in the Schools Authority's Council and Standing Committees. This level of openness is not yet discernible in Special Education which in many ways appears to be operating in a closed system.

Outline of the Study

The ensuing chapters expand these main points in the following manner:

Chapter 2 describes major issues faced by education systems today as they attempt to develop organizational structures to maximise technological developments and pursue goals congruent with modern educational philosophies. It draws attention to contemporary developments in the A.C.T. with reference to problems faced by Special Education sub-systems.

Chapter 3 traces the development of Special Education services in the A.C.T. It refers to the initial impetus and growth shared by all elements within the larger system.

- (i) up to the establishment of the Interim A.C.T. Schools Authority;
- (ii) Special Education since the establishment of the Interim Authority.

Chapter 4 enumerates the main factors which have led to the dissipation of this impetus and describes some new initiatives and trends which have emerged.

Chapter 5 overviews theoretical, organizational and technical solutions which have been proposed to overcome the problems identified in Chapter 2 and shared by all systems as they become increasingly open to rapidly changing environments, and indicates some principles on which a sound policy for Special Education in the A.C.T. might be based.

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