

## Chapter XXVII

# The Ethical Dilemma over Money in Special Education

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### ABSTRACT

*The allocation of resources for assistive technology does not have to result in a gap between general and special education. This case study illustrates how a school district can respond to this ethical dilemma with the philosophy that special education technology is money well spent for all education, general as well as special needs. This chapter will discuss the ethical dilemma of funding assistive technology for general education and special education. It will explore the issues of ethnicity, social attitudes and the socio-economic factors regarding technology and special education. It will also examine the tools of technology that provides a bridge to close the learning gap in special education and finally, the benefits that the bridge provides to the special education population and general education.*

*The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil.*

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson (Emerson, 1844/2006, p. 251)

In the twenty-first century, respecting the pupil, that is, making learning an equitable, accessible, and intellectually blossoming experience, is increasingly difficult, especially when that student is a special education student. The concern has to do with funding. In the work of assistive

technology, school administrators struggle over allocating resources between general education and special education. More often than not, it's the general education students who receive the bulk of the resources, and the special education students who "lack respect" (McDonald [Weblog]) in receiving resource assistance. The result is an ethically unfair treatment of students.

In this chapter, I'll argue that allocating resources for assistive technology doesn't have to result in a gap between general and special education. In fact, in my school district, we've responded

to this ethical dilemma with the philosophy that special education technology is money well spent for *all* education, general as well as special needs. Drawing on the case study of my school district, this chapter will discuss the ethical dilemma of funding assistive technology for general education and special education. It will explore the issues of ethnicity, social attitudes, and the socio-economic factors regarding technology and special education. It will also examine the tools of technology that provide a bridge to close the learning gap in special education. And finally, I will discuss the benefits that this bridge offers to the special education population and general education.

In the past decades, the United States has created laws making it possible for people with physical disabilities to access any building, and every public space, allowing them to be individually independent of others. Those laws are designed to protect a minority of people with extreme needs. But, what about education? Educators would agree that their goal for all students is to create an independent learner. Isn't special education, where a minority of students have high learning needs, similar to the minority of people with physical disabilities? Shouldn't special education students get the same level of access to educational technology that general education students get? How can this population benefit from the use of technology in the classroom? For clarification, special education refers to a student body that is receiving assistance in education because they have been medically diagnosed with a disability and qualify for assistance. The modified education they receive either in a resource room (a room that the student goes to for extra assistance) or a special education classroom (with other special education students) involves techniques, exercises, and subject matter designed for students whose learning needs cannot be met by the standard school curriculum (American Heritage® Dictionary, n.d. online). These special education students differ from general education students because of the modification they receive; general

education students take core school curriculum classes without any assistance (*Wikipedia*, n.d. online). In other parts of the world the term Special Educational Needs (SEN), would reflect a similar connotation.

Special education students who can work on their own will do so if given the proper tools to be an independent learner. As an educator, I have dubbed this the "I do it myself" philosophy, and technology can support that approach. As a result, many immeasurable benefits can accrue from the use of technology in the special education field. For example, looking at education more positively, (Johnston & Cooley, 2001 p.88), technology can facilitate students' willingness to be more open to new educational challenges (p.88), enlarging their circle of peers that can increase their academic level (p.88), and finally increase their self-esteem (p.88). Consequently, the ethical dilemma facing schools lies in determining how funds should be distributed between the general education population and the special education population. Perhaps there is no ethical dilemma. Maybe the solution lies in leveling out the distributions so as to benefit both groups.

## **THE BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY**

Perception is a huge problem, and technology has a huge perception issue. One of the core problems for technology is that it is viewed as an "add-on" in various forms for school districts. In the book, *The Promise of Technology in Schools; The Next 20 years*, authors Charles Stallard and Julie Coker (2001) explain that when Instructional Technology (IT) is "viewed as an add-on to traditional process of running schools, it will be among the first thing to be cut when budgets become tight" (p. 49). Stallard and Coker define instructional technology as the use of computers, compact disc, interactive media, modem, satellite and teleconferencing to support learning in the classroom (p.

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