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**Structural barriers provide obstacles to change in special education.**

# Mainstreaming the organization

**By Donald L. Robson**

Modern bureaucratic organizations, once in operation, seem to take on a life of their own. Though administrators flatter themselves with such labels as manager, supervisor, leader, or director, in reality the organization controls the actions of the administrator at least as often as he controls and directs the organization. One of its greatest strengths as a mechanism for organizational goal attainment is the stability and regularity of the bureaucratic structure. It is this characteristic, this very stability, which at the same time is so frequently criticized. The bureaucracy, it is said, is inflexible and unyielding. Change, it is said, is difficult to accomplish. And so it is. Frequently we see the need for altering our processes or our goals to accommodate new conditions. Often we would impose our new perspective on an existing organizational structure only to find resistance, even refusal. Instinctively we blame the system for its failure to accommodate new ideas and adapt to new directions. In a sense, the system (bureaucracy) is at fault.

Special education, a bureaucratically-organized enterprise, has declared a fundamental alteration in its goals. Instead of serving the function of educating all handicapped youngsters within a parallel system, the goal now is the maintenance of all handicapped students within the "mainstream" of regular education. If this goal is to be realized, however, more will be required than simply adopting new slogans or assigning new values to old

goals. Fundamental changes in the structure of the delivery system will be required. Educators must understand clearly what is to be accomplished and what must be done to accomplish it before their best efforts have any chance of enduring the natural bureaucratic aversion to the uncertainty of change.

The bureaucratic structure, designed to accomplish certain specific goals, is the major obstacle to ready change. In a greater sense, however, the problem lies in our inability to recognize the variables which must be altered if our desired change is to endure. It is not enough to proclaim a change in our goals from this date forth. Nor is it enough to simply adopt a new method or procedure for accomplishing a specified task. Redesigning our physical plants will not suffice, nor will improving the morale of employees insure the success of desired changes. Such alterations are simply tinkering. The long-term endurance of any of these innovations within the educational organization is a matter of derision. Our "bandwagoning" techniques for adopting change are legend. The innovations which will endure within the bureaucracy, however, are those which involve changes in the structure of the organization itself.

## **The Existing Structure**

It is difficult for general educators to know how to react to the new urging of advocates and special educators for "mainstreaming." Their natural aversion to pressure groups and to the increasing incursion of the federal government into their business causes a reflex suspicion, even resistance. This is particularly true since only a few years ago special educators and advocates made impressive progress in the establishment of programs for the handicapped. These gains were made with the logic that exceptional youngsters had needs which demanded special facilities and specially trained teachers. As a result, special financial arrangements needed to be made and an entire organizational structure grew up around the need to deliver special education to youngsters who were not or could not be served adequately by the "regular" system. Special educators made frequent appearances before boards of education, citizen and administrative groups to justify the need for ever increasing financial support of programs and services based on the accepted model of specialization of function. That is, the case was made to parents of prospective students and to boards of education that a better job of meeting the special needs of these children could be done by specializing services. Thus a separate delivery system was created with its own students, personnel, facilities, administrative structure, financing, even its own Washington Bureau. Today, just as this separate delivery system approaches its maximum expansion, the rationale has changed, and this change threatens the very foundation of the structure so recently built.

This essay will examine some social and theoretical antecedents to our current general and special education thinking. In addition, it will attempt to state concerns of both general and special education administrators in relation to the perceived effects of the proposed change.

## **Changing the Rules of the Game**

Though our rhetoric has proclaimed it, educational opportunity in America never has been universalistic in 1970s terms. That is, when viewed from our present perspective, the provision of free public education has been

exclusionary in its fundamental nature. While it seems, from listening to advocates of various excluded groups, that their people have been conspired against, singled out and marked for discrimination, it is the contention of this observer that the problem is systemic rather than conspiratorial.

From its earliest beginnings, formal education has been a privilege of those who could afford it. Only in this century, and largely in this country, has the concept of universal education even approached reality. The process, however, has been one of slowly including groups of individuals not previously served, rather than terminating existing services to individuals. Further, such inclusion has come about through the confrontations and struggles of the group not served, rather than as a result of any social justice goals of the group in power. It is significant that this process of gradual inclusion has not come about as a result of changes in the service delivery system. Rather, fundamental views of our educational responsibility have been altered by changing social forces related to a changing view of the needs of society.

During its formative period, there was a rather wide gap between this nation's philosophical adherence to individual rights and its need for organizational and institutional stability. The greater good was deemed to be national prosperity which could be evidenced by the success of the capitalistic system. Group values and organizational interests were reflected in our laws and public policies. Similarly, during periods of war or national stress such as the great depression, the rights of individuals have been subjugated in favor of group needs and interests. The traditionalist conservative view continues to stress the individual's responsibility to the group rather than the group's responsibility to the individual. It was the failure of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon to convince Americans that they must subjugate their individual rights in favor of the national interest that led to our eventual withdrawal from Vietnam.

The repression of dissent, the need for secrecy, the inaccessibility to the decision-making process were not accepted as legitimate responses to a concerned populace. The struggle between individual rights and individual responsibilities gradually shifted in favor of the former. More recently, educators who argue that the efficiency and effectiveness of the system depend upon the exclusion of some individuals have seen their arguments fall on deaf legal ears. (See for example the PARC and Mills cases.)

The federal government, once almost totally absent from the educational scene, has assumed responsibility for the protection of individual rights of citizens vis-a-vis educational institutions. This social justice goal often is in conflict with cost effectiveness or organizational efficiency. Callahan (1962) has pointed out the social influences which have enforced these values on educators. 'Specialization in the context of effectiveness and efficiency makes sense to administrators. Their concerns for these fundamental organizational demands should not be disregarded or taken lightly even in relation to so noble a cause. This is particularly so since current demands for accountability are directly translatable into these two terms. Taxpayers in revolt demand both efficiency and effectiveness.'

### Structural Barriers to Change

Social values, then, have gradually and subtly shifted,

and these shifts have created new pressures on our education delivery systems. While we might wish it were otherwise, the system is slow to adjust to these new demands. There are a number of factors which account for this seeming reluctance. One of the most obvious factors is the problem of "sunk costs." The heavy investment by any organization in the physical plant, expensive equipment, or operation acts as a natural barrier to significant adaptation or radical change. There is a normal reluctance on the part of administrators, operating under rationality norms, to readily abandon heavy investments in facilities, equipment, or operations. Having accepted the argument for such a structure, general education administrators have been reluctant to assume responsibilities presently allocated to special educators. There has been a heavy psychological, as well as fiscal, investment in the development of the current special education delivery system. Many battles were fought and won to achieve the present structure. Battles took place in courtrooms, classrooms, and legislative back rooms until ultimately, every state in the union had some form of mandatory special education. While the concept of mainstreaming does not operationally abrogate these gains, philosophically it is, in a sense antithetical to the assumptions upon which "special" education was established.

The division of responsibility, so characteristic of the bureaucratic form of organization, creates still another barrier to ready change. The responsibilities of the various components of the educational delivery mechanism gradually have been identified as individual populations have been identified. Small empires have emerged and special interest groups have grown into large national organizations. Beginning with Associations for Retarded Children (ARCs), the network has proliferated to include all special categories of handicapped, both children and adults. The existence and activity of such interest groups support the continuance of categorical specialization. One result is the reluctance, even the inability, of the delivery system to amalgamate these divisions and to incorporate them into the structure of general education. Ironically, then, the very existence of the groups which call for mainstreaming acts in a way to deter the widespread adoption of the concept. It will be necessary to find a way to reconcile what seem to be antithetical notions; separate special programs for exceptional needs students and educating all students in the most normal setting possible.

The structure of the organization has a pervasive influence on its policy. In terms of special education, the dissolution of categorical designations and the provision of a continuum of services to all children is, in fact, inhibited by the existing organizational structure. State departments of special education distribute state and federal dollars to local education agencies on the basis of the number of categorically identified individuals. Further, the need for financial support is contingent upon the specification of various populations according to traditional labels. As long as financing is inextricably tied to categorical labels, so too will the policy and structure of the delivery system be ordered.

Theorists recognize the fundamental organizational need for certainty. Thompson (1960) points out, however, that in organizations where "... knowledge of cause/effect relationships is known to be incomplete, organizations under rationality norms evaluate component units in terms of organizational rationality."<sup>2</sup> The educational en-

terprise operates on a clearly imperfect technological base. That is, no universal truths guide all practitioners in the delivery of their services to clients. Educational sub-components, then, tend to be judged, not in terms of absolute empirical standards, but rather, in terms of the unit's ability to meet expectations of other units with which it is interdependent. General education, not designed to be universally functional, judges special education in terms of its ability to deal with special populations of clients. The concept of mainstreaming, if carried to its logical conclusion, could thus render the special education sub-component impotent in the eyes of general educators.

Similarly, the imperfect nature of the technological base in education is related to the problem of imprecise measurement faced by educators. Increasingly, teachers, already uncertain of the efficacy of their methods, are being threatened with the spectre of accountability. This term itself is not defined clearly and often engenders free-floating anxiety among teachers and administrators alike. The addition of "hard to teach" handicapped youngsters with special problems requiring special skills and methods, in the light of such a possibility, should be understood easily as a source of concern. A clear, concise and exact meaning must be attached to the concept of mainstreaming. The vagaries of diverse interpretations must be removed so that the concept may be operationalized, evaluated and modified for specific individuals and populations. Failure to recognize this inherent technological limitation of the educational delivery system causes a gap between public expectations and professional capabilities. Special programs, methods, personnel and organizations were necessitated by the inability of the existing system to effectively serve handicapped populations. Rather than redesign or modify the existing system, a separate sub-unit was created to deal with the special problems presented. Meanwhile, the general education system continued as before. Teacher training, administrative structure and methodological practice all remained largely unchanged. What, then, has changed to enable handicapped youngsters to be served adequately in the regular education structure? The widespread reaction of anxiety among general educators would seem to indicate that there have been no fundamental operational changes. Mainstreaming, then, represents a change in what is expected **from** the delivery system rather than a change in any capability **by** that system. This is the origin of much of the reaction among general educators, particularly those held most accountable, the administrators.

Finally, the creation and maintenance of a separate delivery system for handicapped individuals has resulted in a certain amount of competition, inevitable among sub-components of the same organization. There has been the need to siphon off a share of financial resources to support special education, a much higher per unit cost operation. This factor has been the subject of increased criticism as funds have become increasingly scarce. It should be noted that this factor may have as much to do with the current demand for mainstreaming as any other influence, especially when considered in light of some of the efficacy studies which show little return for the special education dollar. More important from the perspective of the general education administrator, has been the emphasis among special educators of their separate status. During times when general education has lost

revenues and clients, special education has continued to spend a seemingly inexhaustible supply of money. In districts forced to cut professional staff and operate with inadequate supplies and equipment, special education programs continued to carpet classrooms, acquire sophisticated equipment and add new teachers. Such independence from the common plight of general education has been a very real factor both among teachers and administrators in creating barriers to the acceptance of the mainstreaming movement.

Even prosperity in the face of general education's poverty might have been overcome, however, had it not been for one tragic condition. In order to justify such great per unit costs for special education it was necessary to show a disparity in the needs of these youngsters. Programs thus funded were not, by law, to include youngsters not specifically identified (via the medical model) as so handicapped. Financial arrangements continue to reimburse on a categorical or program basis for a specified identifiable, uniquely handicapped population of youngsters. Mainstreaming, it would seem, is by law a one-way street. The full continuum of services exists to serve youngsters specifically identified as handicapped, but is not totally available to those not so identified. Teachers of the mentally retarded who take "non-retarded" youngsters into their classroom for reading instruction technically are in violation of the law. Certainly, the structure does not encourage this "reverse integration."

### Summary

As a social justice concept, full participation in all aspects of society by all members of society is a noble and worthy goal. As a legal mandate to educators, however, it may not be a practical or reasonable expectation without recognition of such system variables which inhibit or work against full implementation. While it may be that adherence to new social expectations eventually will bring about such changes, there are many barriers which operate to make these modifications slow in coming and painful in the process. Among the factors discussed herein have been the natural traditionalism and conservatism of educators which cause a resistance to change and several organizational factors which inhibit change or cause a negative reaction to it. Among such organizational characteristics are sunk costs, specialization of function, the influence of structure on policy, the incomplete technology of education, the high per unit cost, and the relative independence of special education from the common plight of other sub-units. While such factors individually and collectively do not preclude the successful integration of handicapped youngsters, they do provide formidable obstacles to the ready adoption of such a philosophy among general educators. The extent to which these, and other concerns, are dealt with by those who anticipate such changes will determine the degree of success in reaching the mainstreaming goal.

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2. Thompson, James D. *Organizations in Action*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.