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Meeting the special needs of exceptional children is a responsibility to be shared by all educators.

Mainstreaming: Issues and answers

by Bill R. Wagonseller and Donald F. McHenry



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Since the early nineteen hundreds, most of the classes established for special education students in the United States have been segregated, self-contained classes designed for children in specific categorical classifications, i.e.: mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed or learning disabled. These were the students that also were affected by the compulsory attendance law that stated their education was complete after they reached 16 years of age, or had completed the eighth grade.

In the last decade the need to bridge the gap between regular education and special education has been emphasized by both researchers and court litigations. Teaching handicapped and non-handicapped children together in the same classroom is the greatest challenge that faces both regular and special educators as we look to the future.

The term "mainstreaming" refers to the integration of students with special needs into a resource room, while remaining as much a part of the regular school program as possible. Mainstreaming involves focusing on a student's specific needs and abilities rather than on categorical labels such as "educationally handicapped," "learning disabled" or "mentally retarded." The specifics of a mainstreaming program are to provide the student with effective, appropriate instruction without depriving the student of the social and personal benefits of the regular classroom.

It is difficult to avoid not being a proponent for the mainstreaming concept after considering the implications of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142). This law, and the guaranteed civil rights law of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, both include the right to equality of educational opportunity not confined to those labeled bright or normal.

The most important words in this provision are "appropriate" and "least restrictive environment." It is a misconception to assume that least restrictive environment automatically means that all handicapped students will be mainstreamed. For some students, the least restrictive environment could indeed be a combination of the regular classroom and resource room for periods of varied times and activities. For other children, the least restrictive environment may be a self-contained program.

Each individual student covered by the law is to have an individualized written instructional plan designed for his or her special education needs. This plan must be reevaluated on at least an annual basis by appropriate professional personnel and the parents or guardian of the child. The program should be developed so as to integrate the child into the regular classroom or regular school activities as much as possible. Students for whom integrated programs are not appropriate must be provided an educational plan requiring full time placement in a resource room or self-contained classroom.

The major problem with educators accepting mainstreaming or the resource room concept is that there has never been a clear understanding of what either concept means. Most school districts have made their own interpretations, and these interpretations have often been more in favor of administration, and not necessarily in the best interest of the special education pupils.

The resource room model has been developed for children requiring special education support, but who also

need "regular" education if their "self" concept, as well as other social and emotional aspects of a child, are to develop normally. The primary goal of the resource room is to provide the kind of instructional support to both the child and his teacher that makes it feasible for the child to return to the regular class. The authors see mainstreaming as a treatment approach for special education students, and the resource room concept as the place where the special education training will be conducted. The child, no matter what the disability or problem, should never be placed in the resource room over three or four hours a day. If the child needs more than the recommended three or four hours, he or she should be in a self-contained classroom. It is essential that the overall emphasis of the program be on experiencing success.

Since the nineteen-sixties there has been strong support from educators to move from teaching special education students by categorical label, to mainstreaming special education with individualized programming. Advocates of mainstreaming do not believe that teachers can teach by labels. Therefore, teachers and psychologists must be responsible for evaluating each child, finding his or her individual strengths and weaknesses and developing a comprehensive and effective individual educational plan from those findings.

Chaffin (1974) listed the following factors that have contributed to school districts changing their delivery system for educating mildly and moderately retarded children.

1. The equivocal results of research dealing with the effectiveness of special classes for the mildly retarded.
2. The recognition that many of the diagnostic instruments used for identifying retarded children were culturally biased, which often resulted in inappropriate diagnosis and placement of children into special classes for the retarded.
3. The realization on the part of special educators that the effects of "labeling" a child may be more debilitating than the diagnosed handicapped.
4. Court litigation in special education related to placement practices and the rights of children to appropriate educational treatment.

Other leaders in the field that have stated similar positions are Dunn, 1968; Dunn, 1973; Tilley, 1970; Kalstoe, 1972; Hammill and Wiederholt, 1972. Hammill and Weiderholt (1972) listed some procedures and policies that were classified as acceptable in earlier years, but have been reviewed and later reclassified as being "controversial." The points in question are in regard to the placement of children with learning and behavioral disorders: 1.) The use of the traditional psycho-medical disability classification system, with its heavy emphasis on "diagnosis" and "labeling," 2.) The criteria employed by school personnel to designate children as handicapped, and 3.) The use of the special class as the only or primary vehicle for providing services to the handicapped. Because of these and other difficulties in classifying children with learning and behavior problems into distinct categories, teachers are confronted with an unfair share of the responsibility for the individual child's education. The teacher is trained to write individual education programs, but is not trained to teach according to the unknown qualities denoted by labels or categories.

We have reviewed the problems of self-contained classrooms, categorical classification, reification and the basic elements of the current law requiring the least restrictive, appropriate environment. We must now examine some of the shortcomings of mainstreaming, and specific ways that local school districts can provide a more effective and appropriate program for more children.

Shortcomings:

1. Programs are based on the number of students instead of instructional and programming needs.
2. Little consistency exists between evaluation, monitoring and programming between special education teachers and regular classroom teachers.
3. Little consistency exists between special educational programs in the same district.
4. There is a lack of comprehensive information in the cumulative records.
5. Out-of-state or district information is often lacking.
6. Evaluation procedures and responsibilities are unclear.
7. There is a lack of sufficient funds to support the program needs; i.e.: physical plant, materials, equipment and consumables.
8. Little sharing or distribution of materials exists for flexibility of levels, and for better meeting the needs of changing enrollments.
9. No prerogative is established for appropriate parental involvement.
10. No release time is allotted for the observing and updating of programs for methods, materials, etc.
11. Identification is seldom individually determined, but rather is often based on norms, percentages, and comparative analysis.
12. Once referred—**always** identified, labeled and placed. Large numbers are programmed for reading programs, speech, special education, etc.
13. Administrators are held accountable for pupil counts in respect to funding, release time and materials. "For numbers and not severity."
14. Little in-service is held on the part of regular educators or administrators for special education.
15. Few supportive personnel for regular and special education teachers are provided; i.e.: grade school counselors, consultants, paraprofessionals, etc.
16. No communication is provided on ancillary programs or community resources as alternatives for referrals.
17. No release time is provided for special education teachers to view programs in higher grades.
18. No planned time or structure for open lines of communication between staff, administrators, and parents is provided.

The authors do not mean to suggest that there are any instant formulas for resolving the shortcomings listed. However, all are resolvable with a cooperative effort on the part of all educators. Solutions to these problems tend to fall into four basic areas: 1.) Training; 2.) Organization; 3.) Communication; and 4.) Support. Let's look at each of these in detail.

Training:

It is apparent that a lot of misinformation and individual interpretation exists at all levels regarding the concept of mainstreaming. Teacher training institutions must adjust to meet the new emphasis in special education, but so must local education agencies in the form of preservice and inservice programs. Administrators, special and regular teachers, ancillary personnel and parents must all become adequately informed as to the roles, responsibilities, and changing emphasis of special education. General coursework in special education should become a requirement for recertification for both teachers and administrators. In addition, incentive programs should be implemented for parent training and to promote their increased involvement in the educational process. A significant part of personnel training should include release time and opportunities to visit and observe other programs and approaches used in the field.

Organization:

The organizational structure and policies of special services to children must maintain an element of flexibility if the emphasis of the program is to be on the individual. There must be a willingness to modify methods, materials and levels of placement according to changing needs. Opportunities for sharing and exchanging both materials and ideas is essential for an effective program. At the same time, it is important to maintain written long and short term objectives, with well defined time lines and specific support services required, as a means of insuring steady, significant progress. Procedures for monitoring and evaluating progress must be well established, with clearly established responsibilities for the assignment of grades.

Communication:

It has been said that it is impossible to not communicate. Though this may be true, much of the communication occurring in education is either a result of chance, or becomes engulfed in "hidden agendas" and/or barriers to the effective sharing of information. Planned conferences, programmed lunches and newsletters can all facilitate improved communication and awareness. Specific times should be designated for the purpose of

reviewing student progress by all persons involved with the student, including the parents. Administrators, staff and parents must all communicate openly for optimum program effectiveness.

Support:

Providing appropriate, comprehensive educational services requires more than an individual effort by a few teachers. Supportive personnel are an essential part of any educational program. Elementary level counselors, educational consultants, media specialists, diagnosticians and paraprofessionals all contribute significantly to a well balanced approach to providing special student services. Support personnel can assume a greater role in the implementation of informal and formal standardized remediation techniques. Teachers also need to be informed as to the community resources available which might provide alternatives or additional support to the special education program. Perhaps the most critical problem is that of financial support. Sufficient funds are necessary to support program needs at all levels. Districts need to review their priorities, and attempt to lend maximum financial support to providing appropriate, equal education to all students. Funding, as well as staff assignments, might be better allotted by using a "weighted" FTE, based upon the degree of severity in determining the numbers in a special education class. In addition, federal funds are still readily available for financing special projects in special education. Parents, and other special interest groups, can be extremely helpful in gaining support for special programs.

Meeting the special needs of exceptional children is a responsibility to be shared by all educators. Mainstreaming should be viewed as nothing more than an administrative arrangement designed to provide the least restrictive and most appropriate program possible to meet the individual needs of these children.

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