

Chapter 2

MAINSTREAMING



HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND MAINSTREAMING

The origin of current philosophies regarding the integration of handicapped and non-handicapped students in education environments, has its roots in the conviction that young children are more alike than different, that all children share certain developmental needs, and that the best way to meet these needs is to serve exceptional children in the same environments which also serve non-handicapped children (Birch, 1974).

From earliest times, handicapped people were excluded from participating in society. Frequently, they were subject to fear, ridicule or even torture (Hewett, 1974). Very little attention at all was directed toward maintaining educational programs for the handicapped. It wasn't until the middle of the nineteenth century that society began to pay attention to the needs of the handicapped. At about this time, institutions were first established to educate handicapped children.

By the early 20th century, special education classes in public school systems began to be established. These classes were created as a result of the advent of compulsory education legislation. Compulsory attendance brought handicapped children to schools where they could not be handled and were not welcome. However, these children, who were previously eliminated from schools, could not be disregarded. Therefore, a movement toward the establishment of separate special classes for handicapped children had begun.

Often the environments of special classes reflected the same dehumanizing attitudes which had previously totally excluded handicapped children from public schools. Walls and floors were designed to be "indestructable", furniture was unmovable, door locks could not be operated by children.

Once established, special classes proliferated. (Bates, West, Schmerl, 1977). They were hailed for their practicality in providing homogeneous groupings. One of the basic assumptions of the special class approach is that children with similar handicap types have similar educational needs. All children

with similar handicaps were thus assigned to the same class without regard to individual academic potential or needs.

The middle of the 20th century has marked a period of renewed societal concern with the problems and rights of handicapped persons. A major result of this concern has been the development of architectural solutions which provide physical access to buildings for physically handicapped persons.

Spurred by legislative mandate, many "regular" education facilities have been modified to become "barrier-free". This allowed for establishment of exceptional education classes in the same buildings as non-handicapped children. This led to side-by-side yet still separate, education systems with little contact between handicapped and non-handicapped children. This approach also failed to recognize that physical accessibility is not a problem for most handicapped children, nor were the legitimate problems of the children taken into concern.

The concept of integration in exceptional education denotes the provision of educational settings which serve handicapped and non-handicapped in ways which are more similar than different. A key goal is to facilitate the possibility of considerable interaction between handicapped and non-handicapped children. Interaction, it is believed, can help reduce alienation and prejudices, expose children to a wider range of personal and learning experiences, help children develop positive self-images toward themselves, as "emphasis of the strengths and weaknesses of all children" helps bring forth the realization that disabilities are "but one aspect of a person's life" (Meisels, 1977).

Since the 1960's, a large number of court decisions have ruled in favor of handicapped children's right to public education along with their non-handicapped peers. Among those which are considered landmark cases are Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; Mills v. The Board of Education of District of Columbia Public Schools and LeBanks v. Spears of the Orleans Parish (Louisiana) Public Schools.

The court decision in Pennsylvania ordered access to free public schools for all retarded children, regardless of severity of retardation or associated handicaps, and ordered that the education programs provided to all children be appropriate to the individual needs of each child, within the confines of the most integrated, most normalized program possible. In the LeBanks v. Spears case, the court ruled that placement of exceptional children within the regular public school classes, with appropriate support services, is preferable to placement in special, segregated classes.

The right of handicapped children to education within the "least restrictive alternative environment" was established in Wisconsin with the passage by the State Legislature of Chapter 115, in 1965. The federally enacted Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), decrees that "each public agency shall insure that to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children (including children in public and private facilities) are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of handicapped children from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature and severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes, with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved".

The term "mainstreaming" was devised to emphasize the education of "exceptional children within the mainstream of society". The term has become operationalized to refer to the placement of handicapped children in regular classes, with non-handicapped children, at least part of the day, with additional supportive services also provided. The main thrust of mainstreaming has been directed at children with mild problems, who compose the majority of all handicapped children (Reynolds, 1962). Mainstreaming does not mean placement of children with severe disabilities in regular classrooms in cases when such placement would be severely disruptive to academic instruction.

To date, nearly every state legislature in the nation has upheld the rights of all handicapped children to free public education, regardless of type or severity of their handicaps, in environments which, to the greatest extent possible, insures integration of handicapped and non-handicapped children.

MODELS OF MAINSTREAMING PROGRAMS

Mainstreaming, by its nature, requires schools to view students as individuals and to determine students' programs on this basis. This approach stands in contrast to the more traditional special class system where children were regarded as either being handicapped or non-handicapped.

The "cascade" system (Reynolds, 1962) establishes a framework for exceptional education delivery which provides for a variety of teaching approaches in a range of environmental settings. The "cascade" begins by assuming that most handicapped children can be absorbed into regular classes with little change of program. From this base, modified programs and settings are provided to accommodate children who are more severely handicapped.

A corollary to the "cascade" system is the principle of "least restrictive environment". This is to say that within a public school system, handicapped children should be placed where they may receive the most appropriate education while maintaining as much contact as possible with the mainstream of the educational system (Molloy, 1974).

In keeping with the spirit of the "cascade", most school systems have developed programs which provide a range of methods to mainstream handicapped children, relevant to the specific needs of individuals. The most common alternatives to mainstreaming are:

- Handicapped children are educated in regular classes full-time. Periodic visits to the regular class by special teachers to conduct individualized instruction with handicapped children may occur.
- Handicapped children are based in regular classes most of the time. However, children periodically leave regular class for special instruction in "resource rooms".
- Handicapped children are based in "self-contained" special classes. Periodically they join activities in regular classrooms.
- Handicapped children are educated in special classes full-time and join others at lunch, library, gymnasium, and special events.