Myths of Mainstreaming

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While the concept of mainstreaming is highly commendable as an educational objective, it promises more than our educational institutions can deliver at this time. This article will critique some of its flaws, such as grade-level curriculum demands, reporting systems, standardized tests, teacher training, and the individualization of instruction. As a child advocate, the author discusses the often unfortunate sequelae of current educational practices on the learning disabled child, his family, and concerned professionals. Modifications are proposed to improve and facilitate more effective implementation of mainstreaming.

Recent federal legislation has been passed to ensure the implementation of programs to meet the needs of handicapped children. In its almost poetic statement of goals, Public Law 94-142 reflects a movement to develop programs designed to meet each handicapped child's unique educational needs, "in order to help each child become all he is capable of being." The thrust of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act is to provide each youngster with the "least restrictive environment." Implicit in this philosophy is the concept of mainstreaming, i.e., maintaining the child in regular education settings as much as possible while providing the necessary ancillary services to remediate his specific areas of weakness. The plethora of recent publications, multimedia kits and conferences, and workshops and seminars have bombarded the educational community in attempts to enhance their motivation and provide the know-how for implementation of this legislation. This literature, however, makes only cursory mention of what I believe are the major areas of difficulty with the successful integration of handicapped children in regular educational settings.

As a professional who has observed and participated in this movement from its inception, I am increasingly concerned by the often negative impact of mainstreaming on the very children this legislation is designed to help.
Although I have the uncomfortable feeling that taking issue with mainstreaming is akin to being against apple pie and motherhood, I think the problems need to be made explicit so that they can be ameliorated. The concept is highly commendable as an educational objective, but it promises more than our current system can possibly deliver at this time. While I heartily endorse the concept, I will attempt to critique its flaws and to propose modifications to ameliorate them.

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Mainstreaming is not a new concept. Prior to 1905 when the Paris school system approached Alfred Binet, the psychologist, to design a measure of intelligence to determine which children could not profit from “regular” education, all classes were open to all children. Thus psychology and education joined forces to eliminate the “retarded” from the mainstream. Strauss then delineated another category, i.e., the brain-injured, who needed special educational methods in order to learn. School psychologists trained in assessing children’s abilities and personalities were hired in increasing numbers in the 1950s and 1960s to also identify those youngsters too emotionally disturbed to remain in the mainstream. Thus the field of special education emerged and special classes proliferated to educate those labeled as retarded, brain-injured, or emotionally disturbed.

In 1964, HEW defined learning disabilities, and attention was focused on yet another category of children with special educational needs. Suddenly the educational domain was in a state of virtual turmoil. The labeling and special class movement was now confronted with a diagnostic entity that cut across previously defined categories. Learning disabled children have “average” intelligence (although they may score in the retarded range on some measures, depending on their deficits), may have minimal brain damage and “soft signs” or evidence of neurological insult, and may have significant “emotional overlay” as a consequence of their inability to meet school and parental demands. We in education or psychology could no longer be quite as comfortable with labeling children as we grappled with such questions as, “Is he aphasic or retarded?” and “Is she emotionally disturbed as a result of the dyslexia or vice versa?”

Thus we have come full circle, and the government has now mandated that mainstreaming is “in” this year. Unfortunately, this is also the year for the “back to basics” advocates and for accountability. This includes a movement toward national standardized achievement testing, concern over declining SAT scores, increasing demands for tighter budgetary control, public involvement in all aspects of education, and behavioral objectives that clearly define a hierarchy of educational steps as well as the criteria for mastery. It is my contention that these confictual movements need to be scrutinized and that attempts need to be made to integrate the often contradictory demands placed on our educational institutions. We must determine our priorities and clarify communication so that we are not attempting to fulfill the contradictory messages simultaneously.

**THE FIVE MYTHS**

Let us consider the myths of mainstreaming.

1. **Curriculum demands must remain virtually intact or standards will deteriorate.**

   The scope and sequence of our “lock-step” curriculum need extensive modifications if we are to promote integration of the handicapped. Specifically, the introduction of writing demands in the primary classroom must be made flexible if we are to do more than apply band-aids in the resource room by offering perceptual motor training for children with fine motor developmental lags. These same children are then expected to meet regular classroom standards for writing, and all too often they must take home the written work they missed when they were out for remediation. Children with difficulty in sequencing should not be penalized for their inability to learn the times tables in third grade.
but should have free access to models to use without any stigma. Syntax and grammar demands need to be modified for children with language and auditory deficits. We expect children with severe reading disability to deal with content subjects like social studies and science when we fail to provide them with alternate strategies for learning the concepts besides textbooks they cannot read. Children with visual-spatial lags cannot be held accountable for map skills or concepts of the solar system according to the same grade-level time table we have demarked for regular education. In the language arts, the arbitrary divisions into spelling, English, reading, writing, and oral expression serve to further fragment the already fragmented child. Children should learn to say, read, write, and spell the same words. Oral reading, despite its uselessness in the real world, unfortunately remains firmly entrenched in the elementary school curriculum. Of course, children need to individually read aloud to someone to help them integrate sound-symbol relationships. There certainly is no rational explanation, however, for the emphasis of what seems to them like interminable listening to their classmates' faltering attempts to master the code. Children with handicaps in particular are often exposed to unnecessary humiliating experiences in the name of "reading group instruction." (Recently, a hyperactive first grader's good report card was marred by comments about his inability to maintain attention when classmates read and a parental admonition to ensure cooperation.)

(2) Report cards should reflect ability to meet grade-level standards in each subject.

Schools, parents, and children need and want to be able to assess progress. Unfortunately, our grading system all too often is designed to compare children to each other and to an arbitrary standard rather than to describe progress of each individual child in his journey toward the mastery of skills.

It is incredible to me that we invest untold energy, time, and expense in determining children's strengths and deficits and then grade them accordingly to universal standards. Why do we bother to determine that Joseph has a high-frequency hearing loss and severe auditory processing difficulties and then proceed to fail him in listening skills? Children with visual deficits often need to subvocalize and/or use their fingers to anchor the place as they learn to decode, yet many report cards still penalize children for using these techniques. In my practice I often see children with marked developmental motor lags penalized with D's or U's in written expression. Conversely, I see those with word-finding difficulties with demand language failing in vocabulary skills. All too often these same children are marked for poor test grades in specific subjects, when they could have readily passed an oral examination on the concepts presented. How many times do we need to penalize a youngster for the writing, speaking, or reading problem? Almost all report cards also include sections for grades in work habits. Categories such as "works independently," "pays attention," "organizes time well," or "needs individual attention" are often more reflective of the teacher's classroom structure and organization than of the child's. For example, Michelle, a very bright fourth-grade learning disabled youngster, was expected to keep a looseleaf notebook despite her tendency toward disorganization. When she asked her teacher if she could use a separate hard cover notebook for each subject (because her notebook was falling apart despite her attempts to use dividers and reinforcements), she was told she could not be "different." Of course her report card noted that she "needed improvement in organizing." Similarly, when children with known short auditory attention spans are expected to listen for extended periods of time, they should not be penalized for their teacher's insensitivity to their needs. How often do grades in reading comprehension merely reflect the child's ability to execute the workbook pages? Finally, the whole sacred concept of grade level needs to be redefined. Within the same school, the standards for grade-level performance remain subjective and vary widely,
despite our attempts to be objective. I propose that grading be individualized and that each child be measured against himself. In this way children would be able to realistically assess their performance without the stigma of constant comparison. For too long the schools have insisted that the grading is in response to parental pressure, while parents have complained that schools impose these arbitrary standards. The child remains caught in the middle between the two blaming systems. It's a vicious cycle.

(3) Standardized testing should continue to be used to assess children's progress and teacher effectiveness.

Effective mainstreaming is possible if more selective use is made of standardized measures of achievement and intelligence. Unfortunately, current practice continues to track children according to these results. Also, parents are often given sophisticated printouts as to their child's comparison to other children both locally and nationally in each of the subject areas. These official documents often symbolically emblazon a score on a child's forehead, even though we all recognize that these measures cannot be considered valid for handicapped children. However, I do not propose that we throw out the baby with the bath water. Rather, I propose that we print out each child's progress as compared with his own performance over time. Also, we must look at our practice of measuring teacher, school, or district effectiveness on the basis of these scores. How often have I seen special class, resource, or regular class teachers state, "I must get him ready for the achievement test." Thus the youngster with a severe math spatial deficit is drilled in multiplication despite the fact that addition and subtraction are not yet mastered.

(4) Teacher training has exposed teachers to dealing with special needs in regular classrooms.

The concepts of Montessori and Piaget should be incorporated so that the mainstream utilizes multisensory methodology. Too often only some resource rooms use manipulatives and an activity-based learning milieu, while mainstream classrooms tend to rely on paper and pencil and workbook orientations. Classroom structure and organization should be geared to provide the needed organization for all children. Homework practices need to be modified so that all children can comply with the expectations.

Therefore, I hope that the university departments of education, reading, special education, psychology, and speech pathology would consider merging to produce future educators that can provide a flexible mainstream where children can succeed. Rather than promoting further specialization, we should be moving toward developing a more generalistic professional. Each separate department functions autonomously, invested in the myth that their perspective is "the right one" and no communication, sharing, or integration is promoted. In fact, each separate discipline carefully preserves its separateness, and jealousy guards its domain. In the real world, therefore, most interdisciplinary teams present their views, but no real dialogue takes place. The handicapped child is all too often "divided" among the various services available, as if his speech, his reading, and his perceptual, emotional, and academic needs were not inextricably related. To further compound the problem, these services are seldom integrated with his mainstream program.

(5) Individualized instruction provides the learning experiences fit for each child's needs.

We pay lip service to this concept, as if we did individualize instruction in the mainstream. In reality, instruction, testing, grading, and homework are group-oriented, if not class-oriented. Grouping practices are usually concerned with pacing or the depth of instruction rather than making any real modification of modes of presentation, content, or testing procedures. We simply designate the fast, average, and slow children and expose all of them to the same curriculum at different rates. Of course, all those in average and slow groups are constantly reminded, often verbally, that they need extra effort so that they can "catch up." This practice does much to perpetuate feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. If we really feel that mainstream
education should promote the feelings of industry and competence that Erikson delineates as the identity crisis of the school child, we should actively promote individualized instruction.

CONCLUSION

If indeed we agree that (a) maturational lags affect the child's ability to learn and that (b) emotional problems develop as a consequence of the child's inability to meet school and parental demands, then modification of the mainstream is long overdue. We must enhance each child's feeling of competence so that he may compensate for his deficits as maturation takes place. As it stands now, schools are indeed responsible for creating iatrogenic emotional problems in the name of mainstreaming. Let us continue to provide the shallow pools for the children who cannot swim as we modify the mainstream for those trying to swim. Too many children are in deep water.

In 1970 former New York State Commissioner of Education Ewald B. Nyquist wrote,

I am committed to the concept of mainstreaming because it expands the opportunities and options available to handicapped children. The concept tends to discourage the labeling and stereotyping that limit the way people see these children and ultimately the way they see themselves. Ending the isolation of these children, this approach allows them to become an accepted part of the life of the school and the community.

The modifications of mainstreaming will enable the educator to truly "nourish the capacity of all children to grow, to develop and to be joyful and full of life."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Diamond is currently Director of Psychological Services at the South Shore Learning Center, as well as in the private practice of individual and family psychotherapy. She received her PhD degree in school psychology and family therapy training at the Center for Family Learning and is currently in the Adelphi University postdoctoral program in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. She has experience as a classroom teacher, school psychologist, coordinator of an extended readiness project, and consultant to various school systems. She has made presentations at various professional conferences since 1967 and has served on the Board of the Orton Society. Her particular interests include early identification, family dynamics specific to those with learning disabled youngsters, and the relationship between physiologically based learning disabilities and emotional development. Requests for reprints should be addressed to her at South Shore Learning Center, 483 Merrick Road, Lynbrook, N.Y. 11563.

REFERENCE


CONFERENCE CALENDAR

June 7-9, 1979 — 2nd Annual International Psychohistorical Association convention, New York City Coliseum Holiday Inn, New York, N.Y.

June 14-16, 1979 — "Poverty Children and Their Language: Innovative Teaching Strategies" is the theme of a conference on innovations in the field of pediatric language for those working with speech and hearing disorders in children, sponsored by the University of Tennessee-Knoxville Department of Audiology and Speech and Pathology, on campus.

June 18-19, 1979 — A multi-disciplinary international conference titled "Advances in Research and Services for Children with Special Needs," celebrating the International Year of the Child, will be held at the University of British Columbia student union, and is sponsored by the Children's Hospital of Vancouver and the Woodward Foundation. For more information contact Dr. Geraldine Schwartz, conference coordinator, Children's Hospital, 250 W. 59th Ave., Vancouver, B.C. Canada.

July-August, 1979 — 8-Week Graduate Study Abroad Program in Special Education, England and Denmark, sponsored by New York University School of Education, Health, Nursing, and Arts Professions. For more information contact Helen J. Kelly, Director, Office of Off-Campus Programs, 64 Press Annex, Washington Square, New York, N.Y.