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The Open Mainstreaming Model

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Mainstreaming--although a controversial, ill-defined, loosely interpreted concept--holds some exciting possibilities for exceptional children. The open classroom direction in schools seems to provide an excellent starting point for conceptualizing a school environment in which children of different ages interests, backgrounds, aptitudes, and abilities all find meaningful, appropriate, and productive experiences. It should be noted, however, that since the open classroom concept is itself somewhat controversial and often loosely interpreted, it is difficult to say whether any particular open classroom model would provide the essential environment for successful mainstreaming. The purpose of this article is to discuss some aspects of an educational model, referred to as "open mainstreaming," that is designed to facilitate successful mainstreaming. Three considerations deemed essential to approach the mainstreaming issue will be discussed.

1. It cannot be assumed that all children will become instant encountering, exploring, creative learners simply by changing the school environment. Harlow (1975), in an in-depth discussion of this issue, concluded that some children may need only to be freed from certain restraints and structures to become "encounterers" (those who explore and interact with their environment in a way which allows them to make sense out of their environment and to learn by encountering the world about them). Other children, according to Harlow, will relate to their environment as "adjusters" (those concerned with learning what is expected of them by others and then producing corresponding behavior). Still other children will be "survivors" in the school environment (concerned with merely getting through time and space without disturbing established ways of satisfying needs).

In this context, children presently referred to

as "exceptional"--MR, LD, ED, etc.--are probably "survivors" in most school settings, particularly those designed to meet the needs of the encountering students (which is, according to Harlow, the case in most open classroom programs).

2. Mainstreaming cannot be a simple disbandment of special classes and returning exceptional children to the regular classrooms. Edwin Martin (1974), Deputy Commissioner for Education of the Handicapped, stated his concern on this matter from a national perspective: "I am concerned today, however, about the pell-mell, and I fear naive, mad dash to mainstream children, based on our hopes of better things for them. I fear we are failing to develop our approach to mainstreaming with a full recognition of the barriers which must be overcome" (p. 151).

3. Mainstreaming cannot be a restrictive and stifling environment, for the "encounterers" need freedom and opportunity to develop their full potential through exploring and interacting with their environment.

Toffler (1970), in speculating on the shape education should take to prepare children to be adults in a "future world," describes our present educational system as being designed for "assembling masses of students (raw material) to be processed by teachers (workers) in a centrally located school (factory)" (p. 400). In essence, schools have been designed and operated on the premise that all students should be adjusters. This has been accomplished by restraining creative exploration by the encounterers and simply expecting the survivors to adjust. Those who could not adjust, of course, were sent off to other "factories" (special education classes) where it was hoped they could adjust to a less demanding regimen. Toffler states: "Tomorrow's illiterate will not be the man who can't read; he will be the man who has not learned to learn" (p. 414). Learning how to learn is probably not facilitated by learning how to adjust.

Having eliminated some possibilities, a brief

description of the open mainstreaming model will follow. It will provide a multifaceted environment to allow different relational patterns among students, teachers, and curricula: Encounterers will be allowed to encounter; adjusters will be encouraged to move in the direction of encountering; and survivors will be able to adjust (figure out the game) and then also move toward eventual encountering.

The relational pattern among the teacher, student, and curriculum for the encounterer will be one which intends encountering. The curriculum will be loosely structured and very broad. It will consist of a library, scientific instruments, materials for painting and drawing, musical instruments, etc. In short, it will consist of the world of the child. The teacher will take a relatively passive role in the interaction pattern. She will be a coach, sitting on the sidelines supporting and shouting encouragement, not a quarterback calling all the plays. The student will be the active element in the three-way relationship. He will manipulate the environment with the skills he has obtained to explore, solve, enjoy, and simply "find out" about many things.

Rather than "curing" the adjuster by shock treatment--simply placing him in a free and open environment and expecting him to encounter--a gradual transition will be encouraged. At first the structure (rules and directions the adjuster depends upon for security) will be present in both teacher and curriculum. The teacher will then begin to expect more and more independent behavior from the student. The curriculum will be designed to gradually demand more decision-making and problem-solving behavior. It will begin to provide more options, with less direction. The student will then move from a more passive to a more active role in the interaction on a graduated scale.

Children who are only surviving in the school setting will receive major focus in this article. These children are, for the most part, those who have been labeled "exceptional" and sent to special

education classrooms. Despite the fact that these labels represent only reifications of medical and psychometric hypothetical constructs, these children were severed from the mainstream of education (the regular classroom) because they either exhibited incompatible, or failed to exhibit compatible, behaviors with reference to expected norms. Part of the reason these children become out of sync with the rest of the school world is not because they happen to listen to a different drummer, but because the school expects certain skills or behaviors which simply are not part of their repertoire. They cannot adjust to the expected because they lack certain basic overt behavior patterns, many of which are precursors to academic success in schools.

To quote Toffler again: "Any program of diversification must therefore be accomplished by strong efforts to create common reference points among a people through a unifying system of skills. While all students should not study the same course, imbibe the same facts, or store the same sets of data, all students should be grounded in certain common skills needed for human communication and social integration" (p. 413). For the survivor, the immediate focus of the three-way interaction will be the acquisition of those basic behaviors that will allow him to adjust to certain common norms. The process, of course, will not end here. As with the adjuster, the eventual goal will be encountering.

To argue the relative merits of improving self-confidence in order to improve skills or improving skills in order to improve self-confidence is much like the old chicken and egg argument. One position is that success and progress in specific skills is the quickest way to foster self-confidence. Aside from this issue, however, is the question of how much real encountering can be done without certain basic skills. Just as the builder who cannot perform certain skills of the trade (hammering, sawing, and measuring) would have difficulty putting together a creative edifice, so will a child who cannot decode printed words have difficulty interacting with the author whose stories and sage wisdom are all about him in the school. To

be sure, he may listen to the stories or derive meaning from the pictures, but that is not quite the same. Similarly, certain basic mathematical functions must be mastered, and mastered to quite a high degree of proficiency, before mathematics can be used as a tool for investigating the real world and solving the problems it presents.

For the survivor, the teacher and curriculum must be combined in a direct, overt behavior-management approach designed for the acquisition and elimination of specific behaviors. Some of these behaviors will be social in nature, some academic--but all observable (sometimes only to the child) and measurable.

In planning for the survivor the teacher will want to consider an individualized instruction program which consists of an appropriate goal, an appropriate rate of progress, and an appropriate starting level. The obvious problem for the teacher in this situation is one of management and logistics. Regardless of how desirable or undesirable it might be to individualize instruction for all children, present student-teacher ratios make it physically impossible. Degrees of individualization may be obtained, however.

For those children who lack specific fundamental skills, one suggestion can be offered for individualizing the acquisition of these skills according to level, rate, route, and goal.

When a child's repertoire of behaviors is not consistent enough with the behavior the environment intends, two possible solutions exist: (1) Change the environment so that it intends behaviors more similar to those the child already has acquired, or (2) change the repertoire of behaviors by adding to and/or deleting from. The first alternative is a necessary first step, but only a temporary solution. In this situation we provide what Lindsley (1964) called a "prosthetic" environment. If we do not want the child to go through life as a "cripple" we must, if possible, take away his crutches. When the child's handicap is behavioral in nature, we take away the crutches by pinpointing

specific overt behaviors which are intended by the environment and by manipulating the existing environment to bring about change in the desired direction.

In the open mainstreaming classroom, the teacher will consult with the student who lacks one of these specific behaviors and together they will define the behavior (e.g., writing numbers) and establish a goal which represents proficiency in that behavior. When dealing with observable, measurable behaviors, the ideal measurement technique is rate (Johnson and Brothen, 1975). Rate equals the number of movements or behaviors divided by the number of minutes the behavior was observed. Once a standard unit of measure is available, goals can be established in specific quantitative terms (e.g. writing numbers correctly at a rate of 60 per minute with no errors.)

Next, with the teacher's advice, the route will be the sequence of events and materials which will be followed to achieve this goal. Perhaps it is decided that a short practice period in writing numbers on standard lined paper followed by a two-minute test to determine progress in proficiency would be appropriate. The rate of progress can be monitored since continuous measurement is taking place, and the child can be reinforced for his progress on an individualized basis, since he is not competing with other children (where he has always failed) but with himself in terms of yesterday's performance. Finally, with a specific behavior and a standard unit of measurement it is easy to establish the beginning level--simply his present rate established by the first two-minute timing.

With an initial student-teacher conference, this program could be implemented. And, by recording each day's measurement results on a chart, the child could carry out and monitor his own progress. The teacher may now give brief encouragement and advice, which occupies only a very brief amount of the time she must divide among all her students.

This approach consists of a series of well-defined and well-established procedures. What is difficult is

placing it in proper perspective. To impose specific highly structured other-directed programs for manipulating environmental events on the child who already has a good repertoire of essential behaviors and is busily interacting with his environment in a complementary, productive way (the encounterer) would certainly not be good education. To invite the adjusting child to feel secure in this type of structure would be taking a step backwards. To neglect to take direct action in the most efficient way possible for changing the survivor's repertoire of essential behaviors, on the other hand, would be negligent.

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