MAINSTREAMING

Mainstreaming concerns the rights of exceptional students to equal access in education. This brief paper will define mainstreaming, summarize three important philosophical bases, discuss the legal foundations, relate the intent or goal of mainstreaming legislation, survey the difference between mainstreaming and inclusion in recent educational literature, and look at some challenges for educators.

Definition. Mainstreaming simply means that "students with disabilities must be educated in regular classrooms whenever possible."[1] The concept is based on the deinstitutionalization of those with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are taken out of a segregated environment, that is, an institution for disabled persons or a special education classroom. They are placed into the mainstream of society or into a "general" classroom which is, theoretically, the least restrictive environment.

Philosophical pillars. Mainstreaming is based upon a concept of deinstitutionalization of persons with handicaps or "the process of removing people from institutions and placing them in less restrictive settings."[2] Deinstitutionalization is based on three broad philosophical ideas. These are normalization, the concept of a least restrictive environment, and the need for a healthy developmental model. Normalization is defined as "making available to handicapped people the

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[1]Robert F. McNergney and Joanne M. Herbert, *Foundations of Education: The Challenge of Professional Practice*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 361.

[2]Harold E. Mitzel, ed., *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1982), 1:433.

patterns, conditions, and opportunities that characterize the everyday life of people in the mainstream of society."[3] The least restrictive environment is the physical, educational, and emotional setting that allows the person with a disability the greatest opportunity for growth and development, or in other words the environment that fully maximizes his or her potential. The concept of a healthy developmental model means that students with disabilities are neither isolated nor restricted. They are not segregated from peers, they are not segregated from teachers of general education, and they are not segregated from activities, events, and situations that any other child necessarily would experience in the routine course of school day affairs. The least restrictive environment that gives opportunity for a healthy development model is the normal or regular classroom–the *mainstream* of society for children and youth in school.

Legal foundations. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, KS* (1954) set the tone for all subsequent legislation benefitting persons with disabilities. The ruling that separate is not equal presaged the eventual demise of institutionalization. The high court's decision implied that to institutionalize or segregate those with disabilities connoted inequality. In this respect, subsequent legislation for the disabled rests on a solid foundation of a

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[3]Ibid.

broader civil rights precedent.[4] But old habits die hard; legislation in favor of mainstreaming those with disabilities was not enacted until 1975.

Prior to the mid-1970s, as many as forty-eight states "excluded physically and mentally handicapped students from compulsory school attendance."[5] In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) or Public Law 94-142 guaranteed "every handicapped child between the ages of 3 and 21 a free, appropriate public education [FAPE]."[6] The law specified the adaptation of educational programs to individual needs based on a detailed and specialized Individualized Education Program or IEP.[7] Furthermore, these objectives for each student with a

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[4]Compare Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973; and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. See too Deborah Deutsch Smith, *Introduction to Special Education: Teaching in an Age of Challenge*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 30-33; and Todd DeMitchell and Georgia M. Kerns, "Does Least Restrictive Environment Mean No Restrictions? *The Clearing House* 70, no. 3 (January-February 1997) [accessed online (February 2011), Motlow State Community College, Expanded Academic ASAP Infotrac].

[5]Kathleen Nosek, *The Dyslexic Scholar: Helping Your Child Succeed in the School System* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing, 1995), 24.

[6]Ibid. Nosek summarizes the criteria imposed upon local school districts as follows: "(1) identifying handicapped children; (2) evaluating or assessing children; (3) developing an individual education plan (IEP) for each handicapped child before he receives special education; (4) deciding what special instruction and which services are to be provided; (5) deciding how handicapped children are to be placed; (6) maintaining education records and files for children in special education; and (7) hearing and appeals for complaints or grievances."

[7]The IEP is an important part of the educational process for each student with a disability. A student's IEP shows "current level of performance with strengths and limitations, long and short term goals, criteria for success, methods for assessing mastery of objectives, amount of time spent in general education classrooms, and beginning and ending dates for special services." The IEP gives both educators and parents an objective plan by which to measure growth and structure future programming. See McNergney and Herbert, *Foundations of Education*, 363.

disability were to be realized in the least restrictive environment or LRE. Reauthorizations and

amendments to Public Law 94-142, such as Public Law 99-457 (1986) and Public Law 101-476

(1990), have built on but have not significantly altered the ideas of FAPE, the IEP, and LRE.

The latter modification did provide, however, a "catchy" new acronym for mainstreaming, IDEA

or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and altered terminology such as "people first,"

added two categories, and required earlier transition services.[8]

> *Intent or goal*. Specifically targeted by the law are children with "handicaps" or "learning

disabilities" that are defined as:

> disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in
> understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself
> in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do
> mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual
> handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental
> aphasia.[9]

The objective or goal of such mainstreaming is that the overall quality of American civic life will

be improved by a reciprocal effect when people with disabilities experience "opportunities for

maximum development, social integration, and participation in the normal aspects of society."[10]

This is noticeable especially at the elementary level where students with no experiential

knowledge of persons with disabilities encounter such limitations for the first time. The growth

curve is accelerated for both "normal" students and for the disabled during this formative time of

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[8]See Smith, *Introduction to Special Education*, 22-29.

[9]Nosek, *The Dyslexic Scholar*, 25.

[10]Mitzel, ed., *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, 1:436.

initial encounter.[11] Integration of those with disabilities into the mainstream creates a more

realistic picture of society in order to achieve the common good by illuminating relational

perspectives between those who are perceived collectively to be "weak" or "strong". Attitudes

will be improved, understanding will be enhanced, and cultural barriers and stereotypes of both

those with and without disabilities will be broken down.[12]

   Mainstreaming versus inclusion. In the real world of practical application, "definitions of

mainstreaming vary according to the philosophy of the school system."[13] The variations seem to

teeter between *partial* inclusion and *full* inclusion. Mainstreaming, generally speaking, is a

broad umbrella that defines a number of possible variants toward regular classroom inclusion of

students with disabilities. Those who are comfortable with this flexible approach, as satisfying

the intent of the law, tend to use the term mainstreaming without regard to specificity concerning

inclusion.

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   [11]Two beautifully written youth books illustrate mainstreaming in action and make a powerful argument for the education of children with disabilities in a regular classroom. The benefits for children with disabilities through socialization and the reciprocal value of other students learning about disabilities outweigh some of the disadvantages in mainstreaming. See Joe Lasker, *Nick Joins In* (Chicago, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 1980); and Helen Hermann and Bill Hermann, *Jenny's Magic Wand* (New York, NY: Franklin Watts, 1988). Nick, a wheelchair bound boy, and Jenny, a blind girl, are both enriched when they learn with other children.

   [12]A good illustration of this type of civic benefit is the contribution to society by "gifted disabled" or gifted people with disabilities, for example, Helen Keller and Steven Hawkins. See Smith, *Introduction to Special Education*, 298.

   [13]Daryl J. Wilcox and Stanley E. Wigle, "Mainstreaming Revisited: 20 Years Later," *Education* 117, no. 3 (Spring 1997) [accessed online (February 2011), Motlow State Community College, Expanded Academic ASAP Infotrac].

For example, Wilcox and Wigle reference J. W. Birch's classic 1974 study on mainstreaming and

conclude that:

> he saw mainstreaming as a valid alternative to self-contained special
> classes for appropriately selected students and teachers, but he also maintained
> that mainstreaming was not applicable to all exceptional students. Both
> mainstreaming and individualization were considered to be desirable concepts but
> not easily attainable for every student with disabilities.[14]

On the other hand, those who are not assured of progress in mainstreaming tend to restrict its

meaning to what they observe being accomplished, namely partial inclusion. Mainstreaming or

partial inclusion, by this definition, falls short of *full* inclusion that is, they feel, the precise intent

of the law. Lanier and Lanier draw this distinction when they argue that:

> in a full inclusive model, students with disabilities, no matter how severe,
> are taught in the regular classroom of their home school with their age and grade
> peers, for the full day, with support services provided within that classroom.
> Inclusion differs from mainstreaming in that the latter term usually refers to
> integrating children with disabilities and non-handicapped children for only a
> portion of the day, which may be during nonacademic times.[15]

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[14]Ibid., 2. Compare the comments of Thomas E. Scruggs and Margo A. Mastropieri: "'Mainstreaming' (and more recently 'inclusion') describes the process of integrating students with disabilities into general education classes in order to address the requirement of 'least restrictive environment' mandated by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act." "Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming/Inclusion, 1958-1995: A Research Synthesis," *Exceptional Children* 63, no. 1 (Fall 1996) [accessed online (February 2011), Motlow State Community College, Expanded Academic ASAP Infotrac].

[15]Nancy J. Lanier and William L. Lanier, "The Effects of Experience on Teachers' Attitudes toward Incorporating Special Students into the Regular Classroom," *Education* 117, no. 2 (Winter 1996) [accessed online (February 2011), Motlow State Community College, Expanded Academic ASAP Infotrac]. Compare the comments of Bruno J. D'Alonzo, Gerard Giordano, and Dawn M. Vanleeuwen: "The goals of this movement [i.e., away from a dual system of education with two independent branches, general and special] have ranged from modification of the

The corollary to this interpretation of mainstreaming is to drop the term altogether in favor of using inclusion or full inclusion when discussing issues of education for persons with disabilities or in formulating policy. A good example of the latter comes from the New Mexico State Department of Education. In 1991, the department circulated the following to all public school personnel in the state.

> The New Mexico State Department of Education believes that all students must be educated in school environments which fully include rather than exclude them. School environments include all curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular programs and activities. Full inclusion means that all children must be educated in supported, heterogeneous, age-appropriate, natural, child-focused classrooms, schools and community environments for the purpose of preparing them for full participation in our diverse and integrated society. The New Mexico State Department of Education supports, encourages and will facilitate emerging local practices and creative utilization of resources which address the full inclusion of all children in the local school and community.[16]

This administrative attempt to conclude the debate over the ambiguities of mainstreaming relies on a semantic shift, a tactic commonly used by bureaucratic organizations. But the debate no doubt will continue as local schools unravel the knotty problems they face when confronted with a plethora of possible combinations of needs (for example, types and levels) of students with disabilities.

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offered continuum of services (mainstreaming or partial inclusion) to elimination of the entire continuum (full inclusion, or simply, inclusion). Elimination of the entire continuum of services leads to full inclusion, whereby all students with disabilities are educated full time in the general education program." "Perceptions by Teachers about the Benefits and Liabilities of Inclusion," *Preventing School Failures* 42, no. 1 (Fall 1997) [accessed online (February 2011), Motlow State Community College, Expanded Academic ASAP Infotrac].

[16]D'Alonzo, et al., "Perceptions by Teachers about the Benefits and Liabilities of Inclusion."

Challenges for educators. The debate between those in favor of *full* inclusion versus

those in favor of *partial* inclusion highlights significant challenges for mainstreaming. Full

inclusionists argue that separate programs are costly and do not work very well. Partial

inclusionists counter that an overhaul of the system for special students would erode their

existing support and would overburden the current general system.[17] This indecisive assessment,

however, does not address fully the real world concerns of educators who day by day face

demanding circumstances. What is on the mind of teachers of both general and special education

classes when dealing with students who have disabilities? The study by D'Alonzo, Giordano,

and Vanleeuwen highlights the following practical concerns of teachers: "adequate

administrative support, stress, class size and management, curriculum changes, parental

cooperation, and personnel conflict."[18] A survey of teachers by Lanier and Lanier based on sixty

classroom scenarios dealing with students who had a disability reveals this same pragmatic mind

set. Scenarios varied in degree of challenge from expecting little difficulty, to intermediate

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[17]See McNergney and Herbert, *Foundations of Education*, 362. Compare Wilcox and
Wigle, "Mainstreaming Revisited," who revisited six school districts in Washington state, Texas,
Arizona, Kentucky, and West Virginia in a follow-up on the study conducted by J. W. Birch in
1974. They identified four important guidelines voiced by educators for implementing
mainstreaming: "teacher preparation, placement and services for students, attitudes toward
mainstreaming, and cost factors of mainstreaming."

[18]D'Alonzo, et al., "Perceptions by Teachers about the Benefits and Liabilities of
Inclusion." Compare the research of Scruggs and Mastropieri, "Teacher Perceptions of
Mainstreaming/Inclusion," that emphasizes time, training, personnel resources, material
resources, class size, and consideration of the severity of the disability.

difficulty, to much difficulty. Since many assumptions guide the goals of inclusion,[19] the authors

portray a need for general education teachers to "have realistic expectations of special students

and their ability to deal with those students."[20] Inclusion, they found, is enhanced when such

expectations are built on a supportive school environment, appropriate teaching materials, set

policies with characteristic situations, and good communication between general and special

teachers.

That discrepancies exist between aspirations for and realistic expectations of the inclusion

of students with disabilities in the general classroom should be cause for concern. The study of

Scruggs and Mastropieri, for example, found that perceptions of teachers regarding inclusion

reveal that about two-thirds support the concept of mainstreaming. But only about one-third

thought they had necessary time, skills, training, or resources for mainstreaming.[21] This gap in

desire and perception of ability to perform on the part of educators underscores the need for more

work. Possibly innovative models for a different conceptualization of the integrated

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[19]Notably, "to include or exclude special students depends upon the willingness of classroom teachers to accept and support those students." Lanier and Lanier, "Effects of Experience on Teachers' Attitudes."

[20]Ibid.

[21]Scruggs and Mastropieri, "Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming/Inclusion." The authors, who use "mainstreaming" and "inclusion" interchangeably, organize the results of their research around a series of questions: (1) Do teachers support M/I of students with disabilities in general education classes? (2) Are general education classroom teachers willing to teach students with disabilities? (3) Do students benefit from M/I? (4) Do students with disabilities have a negative effect on the classroom environment? (5) Do general education teachers have enough time for M/I? (6) Do teachers have sufficient expertise / training for M/I? (7) Do teachers have sufficient resources for M/I?

general/special classroom with its goals, obstacles, and operating procedures might be developed

and utilized.[22]

The bottom line is that there may be no easy answers, and mainstreaming might be a

disadvantage in some circumstances involving extreme disabilities. But the attempt to integrate

people with disabilities into the mainstream at some level will always be, at the very least, the

legal thing to do and, more importantly, the humane thing to do.

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[22]For examples in a secondary context, see Cheryl M. Jorgensen, *Restructuring High Schools for All Students: Taking Inclusion to the Next Level* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1998).

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