

Viewpoint

Will Mainstreaming Fit?

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The mere passage of PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Act, will not make mainstreaming fit into the average American classroom. We have tried many times before, with the passage of a public law, not only to promote but to force implementation of various concepts into American education. But when we look beyond the public law and the accumulated paperwork that is requested of teachers, individual schools, and school systems, we often find that very little has really changed for the intended target group. Is it possible that we will discover in the near future that PL 94-142 and the concept of mainstreaming have suffered the same fate?

I strongly suggest that the paperwork can be completed in such a manner that PL 94-142 and the concept of mainstreaming can look good on paper. We can easily reassign children to different instructional settings, and we can learn how to fill out an individual educational program form for each child. We can submit our reports on time and fill in all appropriate boxes. But all of this may not have a positive impact on the lives of children.

Regardless of what is written on paper or how good any report looks, it is what happens to Karen and Kevin in the classroom that makes the crucial difference. Significant positive educational change is not made in the halls of Congress, in the state capitol, or in the superintendent's office without the support of the classroom teacher. Without the support of the classroom teacher, any significant change is doomed where it counts the most, in the classroom with the target group. If we assume that PL 94-142 can have a significant impact on the lives of children without the support of the classroom teacher, then we surely are not students of recent educational history.

What Have We Learned About Educational Change?

It is highly possible that we have learned very little about educational change, but perhaps time will prove this wrong. I suspect, however, that we are still making the same mistakes over and over again. This certainly seems true of our beginning attempts at implementing PL 94-142 since it appears that the classroom teacher will be last to be involved.

Major decisions about PL 94-142 and mainstreaming are now being made outside the classroom with little or no consideration for or about the classroom teacher. The most crucial element of effective educational change, the classroom teacher, is being ignored again during the planning stage. To ignore teachers during significant stages of major decision making is to reject them as potential contributors. This is a seriously damaging mistake that we have made many times before and should have learned never to make again.

No one, including the body that passed PL 94-142, appreciates being ignored during the decision-making process. People who frequently find themselves in this situation, and teachers frequently do, often resist just on principle and, over a period of time, become sophisticated at resisting. Many classroom teachers will resist the concept of mainstreaming if they feel they are being forced to accept the concept and the children. They will often resist just because they do not like to be ignored when decisions are made. Other teachers will resist because they worked "long and hard" to get handicapped children out of their classrooms and now are being told to let them back in again. If teachers in large numbers

resist PL 94-142 and the concept of mainstreaming, the impact of this resistance can be devastating to the program just as it was to the curriculum reform movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.

The vast curriculum reform movement of the late 1950s and 1960s failed to materialize in the classrooms. John Goodlad and associates from UCLA discovered that very few of the curriculum innovations were practiced in the classroom. To use the title of Dr. Goodlad's book, the curriculum innovations never got *Behind the Classroom Door*. The essence of Goodlad's conclusion was that a great many teachers did not accept the innovations and, even though there was outside pressure to conform, teachers resisted and left the innovations in the hall.

Open education and open space schools provide yet another example of how crucial teacher acceptance of new ideas is if change is to take place. Open space schools created for team teaching have not always been successful. Schools that were unsuccessful with teaming were almost always those schools that forced teachers into team teaching or required them to teach with teachers who were not compatible. Successful teaming situations, on the other hand, consist of teachers committed to teaming. The condition of open education is very similar in that a teacher cannot be forced into being open or to accept and implement open learning environments. Forcing someone to become something they are not or to act in ways that are inconsistent with their belief system results in resistance to the desired change. Teachers who are able to consider a proposed change and to assist in the process of creating a change become less resistant to change. The more teachers are involved in the total process, including the decision-making stage, the less resistance one encounters throughout the total process.

We probably have learned a great deal more about educational change than what we have considered here, but we haven't learned anything that has a more profound impact on educational change than this:

Nothing of any consequence will ever change in education without the assistance and support of the classroom teacher.

Is It Too Late for 94-142 and Mainstreaming?

PL 94-142 is hardly out of the starting gate, and already we're raising the question of its potentially early demise. Surely some may suggest that we haven't given it a chance and that we should not raise the question of failure before it has become fully operational. I would suggest, however, that we should never contemplate any kind of educational change without considering the potential for failure. To always be aware of the potential for failure is neither a negative response nor is it an example of a doomsday attitude. It is a realistic approach to educational planning and change.

Educational change cannot be a mere exercise of force or power. The use of force and power in initiating educational change is, in the final analysis, counterproductive where it counts the most—in the classroom with children. Force and power, when used to change the behavior of people, often results in anger, hostility, disrespect, and countermovements. These negative feelings and countermovements direct our attention away from children, sap our energy, and consume our precious time. Confrontations of these kinds have no real winners, they only have real losers, and the real losers are always the children.

If we could disregard for a moment all the factors that motivate us in the political and edu-

cational arena, we just might discover that the question raised here is totally unimportant in the human arena. For those who can do this perhaps the question becomes, "Is it too late for our children?" If the basic intent of PL 94-142 has potentially positive ramifications for humankind, and I believe it does, then our concern must be for mankind and not for the public law. The difference here, though subtle, is clear. PL 94-142 can survive and look good on paper, but not really serve its basic intent.

It doesn't appear to be too late for PL 94-142 to make a significant contribution to the lives of children in classrooms throughout America. However, it is obvious that the major decisions about

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implementation strategies to date have not included the classroom teacher. Every decision that is now being made or that will be made without the involvement of and input from the classroom teacher systematically decreases the potential of PL 94-142 of making a positive contribution to the lives of all children.

Negotiating the Traps—Summarizing and Looking Ahead

We have, within recent educational history, many examples of programs that have failed to make a significant contribution to the lives of children. In many of these examples, we have had federal money, federal mandates, support from state educational agencies, and support from local administrators, and still many programs sputtered and died at the classroom door. The key to the fate of these programs was often the lack of support from the classroom teacher. Our first and most crucial trap to negotiate is the trap of moving out without the guidance and support of the classroom teacher.

Our second trap is the mistaken belief that

we can, through the use of power and force, ignore the first potential trap. We are as a nation still paying homage to the God of power and force. This reverence of power and force is particularly enticing to school administrators during this period of skewed teacher supply and demand ratios. Regardless of how personally satisfying it may be to have power, the indiscriminate use of that power in the educational setting is a liability not an asset, and most assuredly, a potentially dangerous trap for constructive educational change.

It should be obvious to all of us that the power of the federal government can force change upon public education, and PL 94-142 will be no exception. But, for those of us in the educational system, it is obvious that the power of the federal government has distinct limits as it reaches all the way down to the individual classroom. These limits in the educational arena are no different from the limits that the federal government also faces when trying to reach down to individual offices within its own structure. The power of state and local education agencies faces similar limitations as it reaches down to the individual classroom. The previously mentioned traps become even more crucial as we face the reality of these limitations.

The fate of our children, as they might benefit from PL 94-142 and mainstreaming, appears to lie in our collective abilities to recognize the crucial need for everyone to be involved in the total process of educational change. If we can secure broad range involvement, PL 94-142 and mainstreaming may fit; however, without such involvement the chances for a good fit must rest somewhere between slim and none. [27]



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