



Mainstreaming as a Natural Experience

Carol Merz

Given time and understanding, two classes of first graders—one of handicapped children, the other of normal children—developed their own ways of learning about each other.

A small blond child crawls to the door of a first-grade classroom and pauses, showing mild curiosity at the noisy activity. The first graders pay little attention to the wide blue eyes watching them or to the squeals of greeting; they are too busy with their paste and scissors. The tiny, immature child is actually as old as most first-grade children. She is multiply-handicapped and looks about two years old to the untrained eye.

A first-grade class is making ice cream. Children watch the teacher intently; their arms shoot up with great enthusiasm to volunteer for each operation. Among the most eager volunteers is a child with cerebral palsy. He is in a wheel chair and cannot speak, but

his lack of coordination has not lessened his enthusiasm. He takes his turn with the egg beater, while two young friends hold the bowl firmly in front of him.

These scenes are typical in a small school where contacts between normal and handicapped children have occurred naturally and successfully.

At a time when legislation demands that teachers and administrators create programs and situations to mainstream handicapped children, school personnel often feel resentful and pressured. The programs designed to meet such legal requirements can be contrived and artificial. This is the story of a small school with a high percentage of handicapped children. In this

school, programs slowly but happily evolved, programs that came about as a result of teachers seeing the needs of children and trying to meet them.

The children who became involved in this process came together by accident when overcrowding forced some classes to move to an annex—one wing of an old school that was retained and remodeled when the rest of the old school was razed. The annex held six classrooms, lavatories, and a small office, and was located about 100 yards from the main building. There staff members found themselves isolated from the rest of the faculty, and they became a self-sufficient little unit. The annex housed four first-grade classes and two classes of multiply-handicapped children. One of the handicapped classes had children six and seven years old, most of whom, because of developmental lag, appeared much younger.

The first year no planned interaction took place, but in a building with six teachers and 100 children it didn't take long before everyone knew everyone else fairly well. The physical and occupational therapists often worked in the hall with their special children, riding tricycles, crawling, walking, and running. The first graders, most of whom had recently been through the same sort of activity in nursery school, were not bothered by the noise or the immature behavior. Many had preschool brothers and sisters at home. They were accustomed to the world of diapers, drooling, squealing, and babbling, the kind of behavior that tends to stigmatize handicapped children and socially isolate them from their normal age mates. Since these children looked much younger than they actually were, their behavior did not seem inappropriate to the normal children.

The teachers of the handicapped classes began taking them

out on the playground when the other children had recess. At first the handicapped children were terrified by the noise and activity of 100 normal six-year-olds. But after repeated exposure, along with the comforting presence of a familiar adult, they became as comfortable on the playground as they were in the sheltered environment of their classroom.

By the second year in the annex the teachers became aware that one handicapped child seemed very bright. Previous assessments of Tim's intelligence had been too low because of his difficulty in responding in a testing situation. He had cerebral palsy, which made speech impossible, but he was communicating fairly well by pointing to words printed on the tray of his wheel chair.

The entire staff was impressed by his enthusiasm and perseverance. One first-grade teacher wanted Tim in her class on a regular basis. The special education teacher talked to the first-grade students about Tim's special needs and what he could and could not do. The children were allowed to sit in his wheel chair and question the teacher. As a result, they looked forward to meeting him.

Soon, Tim became an integral part of the class. The children clus-



tered around him with eager chatter each day as he was wheeled from the school bus to his classroom. He participated in science experiments, films, story time, cooking activities, and class parties. The two teachers are now planning for next year when Tim will participate in regular first-grade reading instruction.

Most of the other children had handicaps so severe they could not participate at all in the regular school curriculum, so the teachers decided to send some first graders into the special education class each day to play with the children. Groups of two or three students went daily to the class to build with blocks, help with sorting activities, and generally do the same kinds of things they were doing at home with younger brothers and sisters. These small group sessions provided a more intense personal contact than playground activities. First graders even served as "coaches" later in preparing the handicapped children for participation in the Special Olympics.

After a few attempts to send handicapped children to other classes, the special education teacher decided to limit her mainstreaming to one first-grade class. This enabled her to spend more time with her mainstreaming partner—an element both teachers felt was essential in their program. This suggests that "class pairing" may be a valuable technique for easing the mainstreaming process.

Both teachers are enthusiastic about the benefits of this mainstreaming experience for their children. The special education teacher feels that her children can cope more confidently with the noise and activity level of the normal world; that they have become less dependent on their special teachers; and that they have increased their ability to communicate and deal with others.

The first graders in the regular classes have become tolerant and

understanding of the handicapped. What's more, they have learned to appreciate the individual personalities that lie beyond the handicaps. Both groups of children have formed friendships in a wider circle than would have occurred otherwise.

A Natural Experience

What were the conditions that brought about this successful experience? First, the classes were neighbors, their doorways being just across the hall from one another. Second, there was no formal exchange of students or planned contact the first year, so there was time to let the contact develop naturally. Also, being relatively isolated from the main faculty group, the two teachers formed a friendship, spending time together before and after school as well as during breaks.

Primarily, however, this mainstreaming experience came about because of the concern of two teachers for the instructional needs of their children. They were not carrying out a commitment to a vague principle or ideal of education. They were, instead, looking at each child as an individual and thinking, "How can I provide the best experience for his or her development?" Under these conditions and with this approach, mainstreaming may just possibly be a natural experience. *EL*



Carol Merz is Administrative Assistant, Richland Public Schools, Richland, Washington.

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.