



## IEP's Are Not the Answer

A surprising number of people say the way experts are now helping handicapped children is the model that schools should use for all children. It is not. In fact, the model is dangerous because it diffuses authority for the teaching act. As a result, the classroom is more repressive because teachers are encouraged to use drill and repetition.

Let me explain. Public Law 94-142, the law that encourages mainstreaming, requires that each child suspected of being handicapped be tested by various experts. Their diagnoses become the basis for the educational prescription drawn up to help the child. The parents, school psychologists, teacher or teachers, a school administrator, and occasionally some of the experts involved in the assessment sit down together to plan an individual education program.

This procedure appears to be an open, scientific method. It seems to fit education to the child's needs. It seems to allow the parents the right to decide if the education is appropriate for their child. At the same time, the procedures appear to hold the teacher accountable because they spell out the long-term goals, the short-term objectives, and the tests to be used. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

Because a committee draws up the child's individual education plan, it may turn out that no one is respon-

sible. Though everyone on the committee may have an equal opportunity to contribute suggestions, some participants may be more equal than others. For example, the parents may be overwhelmed by the presence of qualified school people, and may be unable to decide if the professionals' suggestions are reasonable. Even the chairperson, who is often the school principal, may not feel personally accountable for the outcome of the meeting.

If anything guides the decisions, it is the results of the tests the psychologists or support personnel have given. These tests are not dependable because the disabilities they are seeking, such as dyslexia, are vague. Nonetheless, the results appear in statistical form that commands attention.

The danger these tests represent is that they direct the committee's attention to the child's deficiencies at the expense of considering the context within which the deficiencies occur. As a result, the suggestions to help the child may be limited to some form of basic skills reinforcement. Even when such lessons are taught in an interesting way, they separate the acquisition of skills from cultural understandings. For example, basic skills remediation may teach the child to add or multiply but leave him or her without a real sense of number. Or the child may learn to read but have no realization of how literature can improve his or her life. Ultimately, this approach makes it harder to teach skills because the

children have no desire to learn material for which they see no purpose.

The curriculum that comes from an interdisciplinary team is often simplistic because the model is a caricature of scientific thought. It copies, in part, the ways scientists hypothesize, experiment, and conclude, but it does not provide for integration and adaptation. To make an intelligent plan, someone has to combine the test results, with an understanding of the child's experiences and preferences. The same person has to modify the plan as it unfolds, helping the student use the skills and information acquired in one lesson to set new learning objectives.

Before trying the IEP approach with children of normal or above average intelligence, principals and central office people should improve the way the model is being used with handicapped children. They must make sure that when a team sets up teaching plans, the teacher does not lose control.

Specialists should not attempt to be instructional experts but should be advisors to the teacher. And rather than being regarded as just a member of the planning group, the teacher should be considered the prime decision maker. Goals and plans set by the group should be clear, but they must also be tentative and flexible, permitting the teacher to use professional judgment. That way, he or she can also assume responsibility for the results. ■

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