

## Navigating the Mainstream

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**T**wo years ago, we closed our resource room and set the inmates free. Although most of those handicapped children are still with us, no one remembers who the ghosts were that once inhabited our back ward. The children now are in regular classrooms full-time, where they work shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow students, where teachers modify the teaching for their particular needs, and where specialists come in to teach them — along with their nonhandicapped classmates — in small groups. All this has happened not as a result of the national movement toward “full inclusion schools” or “supported education,” but because we, as educators, could not tolerate the old pull-out and self-contained systems any longer.

What you would have seen if you had visited our resource room before we closed it was a relentless dance of children drifting in, filling in workbook pages, getting marks on their daily work records, and drifting out again. Their teacher was kind and patient, but he had no time to hold group activities, design individual lessons or find out what was going on in the regular classrooms. Instead, he maintained a set of nearly identical IEPs and followed commercial self-instruction programs that required little or no teaching. Clearly, kids weren't learning much, but at least they were docile.

Our rural school district has about

20 students classified as handicapped each year, not counting those with speech problems. Most of them are “learning disabled,” four or five are “emotionally disturbed,” and two or three, “mentally retarded.” That works out to 8 percent of our total enrollment, which while not high, is higher than it needs to be. Actually, most of our handicapped kids might be more accurately called physically or emotionally battered. The cruel irony was that our school was battering them, too, by isolating them from their classmates and filling their days with meaningless drudgery. Worst of all, there was no way out; nobody ever got “unclassified.”

Like most people in and out of education, our staff held to three widespread misconceptions about special education: (1) the teaching is “special,” (2) it can make handicapped children whole, and (3) special teaching is all that is required for handicapped children to learn.

The truth is that special education teaching is no different from regular teaching. In resource rooms teachers have the advantages of fewer students and less distracting surroundings. They rely more heavily on behavior control than motivation, but their teaching methods are no more magical than those used by their counterparts in regular classrooms. They plan, struggle, react, and plan again, trying to capture a child's attention and hold it until there is a breakthrough.

Adults have the same learning blocks as children. Adults who are successful have learned how to work around their deficiencies. Unsuccessful ones deny, conceal, and fail, just as they did when they were children. Our fate is decided by the number and severity of our learning problems, as balanced against our strengths and self-esteem, and the

quality of education we get at school and home. If lucky, we learn to cope and compensate, but no one is ever cured.

Good teaching is only half the story; the other half is good learning, and that depends more on psychological factors than intellectual ones. Handicapped children need to be persuaded that what they are being taught is worthwhile and that they are capable of learning it. Such beliefs are essential to learning, but hard to come by when you are a student in a resource room.

Two years ago, no one on our school staff could have articulated these truths, but somehow, out of our collective experience, we knew them and we had the determination to work them into a program. What resulted is our own version of supported education.

At no point did we dump handicapped children back into regular classrooms to flounder while their teachers fumed. We worked out plans that would support children and teachers and reallocated our modest resources to implement them. First, we assumed that all teachers could teach handicapped students, as long as they had consultation with specialists who were familiar with their classrooms, appropriate materials, time to plan, collegial interaction, help from instructional assistants, and support from the administration.

Second, we accepted that our mission was to teach strategies above subject matter, determination and resourcefulness above mastery. Handicapped children might learn less and more slowly in our classrooms than other children, but they would come away with the skills to manage academics, get along with people, and deal with the exigencies of living in a complex society.

Above all, we worked at helping children believe they were learners. By adjusting the number, pace, and difficulty of learning tasks for each child and making sure that everything we asked children to do had meaning and purpose, we laid a foundation of success that was both apparent and real.

During these two years of change, we have been more successful at attaining this last goal than the preceding ones. Not only do our goals require significant alterations in customary practices; but they demand more time, better planning, problem solving, and the most efficient use of money and personnel possible. Like most school staffs in today's economic environment, we are stretched pretty thin.

At present, a committee of teachers, administrators, specialists, and parents is refining our model to make it work better next year. Our classroom teachers need to become more adept at managing the larger range of students and resources they've been given, more aggressive about asserting their competence to teach all students, and more insistent about getting the help they need. Our specialists need to improve their skills as consultants and diminish their role as *the* teacher of handicapped students. Administrators need to become more proficient at securing human and material resources and directing them to the places where they are needed. Parents need to understand how special education in regular classrooms works and become a part of the team that is supporting their child.

Navigating the mainstream is difficult for all of us, adults and children, but there is no going back to the stagnant pond we left behind. □

## Forms of Curriculum Inquiry

*Edited by Edmund C. Short*  
Albany, New York:  
State University of New York Press, 1991

*Forms of Curriculum Inquiry* is a well-titled book, useful principally for graduate students exploring methods of curriculum scholarship. This edited volume brings together an international cast of authors: each one describes a different way of asking and answering curriculum questions. Introductory and closing chapters by Edmund Short provide an important context for the 17 different "forms" of curriculum inquiry described in the volume.

Are there really 17 distinct forms of curriculum inquiry? Short himself cautions that the forms represented in the book (including, for example, conceptual analysis, ampliative criticism, and inquiry that is historical, ethnographic, aesthetic, narrative, hermeneutic, or action-oriented) are not necessarily the only ones available or even the preferred ones. They are illustrative of the ways curriculum scholars work and the problems curriculum scholars work with — a first step toward defining a schema for curriculum inquiry. What is most important about the volume is that it should help readers recognize the necessity of multiple forms of inquiry if the range of worthwhile curriculum questions are to be adequately addressed. It also provides initial clues about how to match method of curriculum scholarship with the specific question one wants to study.

The chapters describing particular forms of curriculum inquiry describe their purposes and procedures as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Each chapter also provides a helpful bibliography for readers interested in serious work with a particular method.

Available from State University of New York Press, State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246, for \$19.95 (paper) or \$59.50 (hard cover).

— Reviewed by Lauren Sosniak, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri.

## The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice

*Elliot W. Eisner*  
New York:  
Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991

Just as Picasso took a yellow spot and made it into a sun, Elliot Eisner takes a manuscript and makes it into an educational planet. *The Enlightened Eye*, though at times a litany of educational gurus and their theories, remains both fascinating and illuminating as it presents the world of human beings teaching and invites us to expand our epistemological and critical approaches to teaching. Seldom do we find in our curriculum library a book so erudite, so expressive, so sensitive, replete with literary and artistic excerpts and metaphors that are both exemplary of the author's focus and striking in their effect on the reader.

Eisner describes in detail the role "qualitative inquiry" plays in generating consciousness of what and how we are teaching or learning and shows us why the most sophisticated practitioners and critics may be called connoisseurs.

Since schools rarely encourage teachers to reflect about education, this work, heavy as it is, can be the fuel for curricular discussion prior to the process of school improvement.

Available from Macmillan Publishing Co., 866 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022, for \$37.

— Reviewed by Jonathan Swift, Livonia Public School, Livonia, Michigan.

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