

Features

New York education program integrates handicapped

Leora Aisenberg

Mainstreaming, or integrating handicapped children with their 'normal' peers in the classroom, is a concept of education which continues to spark controversy even in 1981, the United Nations Year of the Disabled. But three York education students have challenged the traditional skepticism of some educators, establishing a programme involving a diversified group of children.

Informally titled the "Saturday-Get-Together", the programme runs weekly, from ten to four, in a room donated by the university.

There are now twenty children enrolled in the project, almost half of whom have some sort of handicap. "The basic thrust is for kids to learn to live together," explained fourth year education student and head teacher Donna Bracewell. "The emphasis is on accepting each other."

Accomplishments and goals are varied.

The children range in age from four to twelve years. Three have been labelled retarded; one is in a wheelchair, another has cerebral palsy. One boy has a severe perceptual handicap, and another child is profoundly deaf.

Their accomplishments and goals are as varied as their backgrounds and personalities. For one participant, the greatest achievement was learning how to dress herself; for another, it was discovering the pleasures of music and philosophy.

"Rejection is usually based on fear."

Activities in the Saturday classes include gym sessions, cooking lessons and field trips. The main focus of the morning is a group meeting which allows the children to express themselves and overcome their fears about each others' differences.

Confrontations have been far from the norm, says Bracewell. At one point, some of the older boys felt threatened by Peter, a

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retarded twelve year old. The problem was resolved, however, during a group meeting when trepidations were vocalized. "Rejection is usually based on fear."

One argument against mainstreaming contends that 'normal' kids are neglected, due to the amount of attention required for the other children's physical needs. "Not so," maintains Bracewell. "The way to get around that is to make the kids responsible for each other—then they all feel special."

Signs of progress, both academic and social, have been encouraging; and parents have

responded enthusiastically. Unlike the image often presented in the media, however not every case consists of an overnight miracle. Notes the teacher: "Most of the gains have been intangible or small." Nevertheless, there have been some instances of dramatic improvement.

Kids are often set up to fail.

Six year old Debbie is classified as "educably retarded". Her parents were told that she would never be able to dress herself, follow instructions or express herself in sentences. Today, she can perform all three tasks;

moreover, she is starting to recognize print and participate in group activities.

Part of the problem in the educational system, says Bracewell, is that kids are often set up to fail, sometimes conforming to a label already assigned to them. "In special ed, what they may gain academically, they may lose socially," she added.

Mainstreaming requires money for extra resources: trained assistants, transportation, etc. But, as Bracewell points out, "in the long run, it may save the government money because many of these children will be able to be functioning citizens." She and her colleagues hope that some form of integration, perhaps similar to

their model, will eventually be instituted in the public school system.

All the people presently involved in the programme, including Bracewell, student-teachers Kathy Milligan and Sue Shearer, part-time student Clark Hortsing, teacher's aide Kerri Chernet and faculty advisor Dr. Marsha Forest, are working on a volunteer basis. They hope to receive funding for a proposed summer programme, comprised of two one-month sessions, running Monday to Friday.

"Learn to live harmoniously"

The summer project will stress cognitive skills and language development, as well as the usual activities. Financial assistance is essential in order to implement the programme.

The response to the Saturday programmes from various consultants and boards of education has been positive. The possibility of a summer session is being viewed with much interest.

The York students experimented with the hypothesis that "children of all shapes, sizes and abilities can learn to live harmoniously with one another", and they have supported their ideas with a successful programme. They have also dispelled the myth that handicapped children are the only ones who benefit from such an environment.

Increased sensitivity and awareness.

Mainstreaming has increased the sensitivity and awareness of the normal youngsters. They have developed scholastically, but also emotionally, as caring human beings. Perhaps not every child, handicapped or otherwise, can adjust completely to this type of programme. However, judging by the obvious warmth and eagerness of the Saturday-Get-Togethers, these children have established a model that all adults should emulate.

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