

## Cleansing the Main Stream

Which is more educative, being handicapped or being helped? The question, though admittedly arbitrary, is something of a sleeper.

Let us take a number of severely handicapped children and, so that they may be the more easily helped, let us segregate them in a separate community. Not unaware that the majority of people outside that community are free of their handicaps, they will now nevertheless not feel unduly handicapped with respect to each other. However, in this way they are deprived of the stimulus of a handicap that only exceptional exertions could overcome; they are supplied with help, though invited to make no exertion to deserve it; why then should any of them learn anything much? There may be very little competition in their own league; it has been decreed that they shall not compete in the other.

The critical educational thing about a handicap — severe or not, and we all seem to have something — is that one should perceive it for what it is and that one should perceive the feasibility of getting on in spite of it. The critical thing about help in education seems to be that it should not be thrust upon one without asking; that is, of course, beyond the help needed for basic survival, for which no one should have to ask. Both elements must have their place in any effective educational process, which will depend for its effectiveness on the judgment with which the emphasis is made to shift from moment to moment. In practice, of course, systems and whole cultures tend to lean towards one or the other for their chief operating principle. Some, like the British, have made much of handicap, and tend to dwell on it with relish; the English system has been likened to a twenty-year hurdle race, each successive hurdle being higher than the last. The Americans are inclined towards giving help, but would like people to know about it and are apt to trade upon the fact. (It is an interesting point, on the side, to note that in each case the educational practice appears to be compensating for an aspect of national character that notoriously runs in the opposite direction. In the States, the phenomenon of the self-made man, helped by no one, embodies a dominant value. In England, the solidarity of the individual

with his class, the maintenance of mutual comfort implicit in the observance of what is or is not done, is still we suspect the over-riding criterion of general acceptance.

Have these somewhat general speculations anything more than a random connection with the special cases of special education? There is reason to think so. In reading the articles in this issue one is impressed by at least two factors: the extraordinary ingenuity that after years of devoted struggle with the most obdurate handicaps is now emerging with fundamental insights, breakthroughs of significance ranging widely over the field of learning; and the implication, stated plainly more than once, that the exacting standards of professional cooperation called for by "mainstreaming" of handicapped children are also called for by the already general recognition of the existence of individual needs throughout education. Every child in school, no less than those more strikingly handicapped, has indeed the same civil right to a professionally managed and "individualized education plan."

Indeed, everyone has a handicap of some sort, and certainly we are so inclined to feel from time to time. Nothing removes a person's feelings of this sort quicker than being put alongside someone else who is much worse off. Thus one predictable consequence of placing handicapped children alongside others in school is that the latter will see less reason to be sorry for themselves; the former may become sharply more aware of their differences, but they should also discover new potential if only because they have much in common; and the help that normal children will give to the handicapped (given understanding and a little persuasion) will cheer things up vastly by making both parties feel a good deal better about themselves. Whatever the adults around do about the "individualized education plans," this must surely be the real potential pay-off of the mainstreaming movement.

People can be cruelly handicapped by poverty, by wealth, by any one of an immense range of situations a child may be born into; by the role of abject weakness accorded to her within the family; by a humiliating role accorded to him in class. Can education make the difference by which a person can break free? Can it, to list specifics, supply basic help for survival, unasked; can it bring about at the right moment a confrontation with one's handicap, and the realization of one's potential; can it stand by with the other help that will be wanted, until it is asked for? We must believe so. But we must recognize also the scale of the task.

Carrying out the requirements of mainstreaming for just those special cases (13% of the school population?) will require immense efforts of coordination and personal adaptation, and these very likely in many places will fail or result in botches. Existing practices, personal and organizational, are hostile to the development of effective individualization of education. The traditional school board with its line and staff and budget, the traditional school administration

with its time-tables and tests, the traditional teacher with his or her virginal autonomy, are none of them ready for or disposed towards the sensitive, extensive, and genuinely skilled collaboration on behalf of an individual child that is the example set before us now by the vision that has been developed for special education.

Besides that vision, there are exemplary actualities. An awareness of special education as a field has been borne in upon some of us outside it by the number and quality of practising teachers who turn to it, often at great expense of energy and time. Behind their efforts lies an unmistakable enthusiasm, a rediscovered sense of purpose lost sight of in regular teaching. In spite of often being poorly equipped and badly housed, today's special education classes work under conditions of freedom from the pressures of numbers and of time and of criteria to be met, conditions that enhance enormously the personal relationship between teacher and taught though in a very demanding way. It is because the exceptional personalities acquired by good teachers are challenged by these demands exactly in the areas of their strength, and because what they have to give is not only massively drawn upon but clearly needed, that these teachers find the satisfaction in their work — if only in this corner of the contemporary educational system — that they looked for in entering the profession. People — both teachers and students — are at their best when they know that they are needed.

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