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MAINSTREAMING EMOTIONALLY, BEHAVIORALLY AND LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS IN PUBLIC CLASSROOMS: THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS AND THE LAW

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to illustrate how the four principles of the Contact Hypothesis—equal status, interpersonal interactions, cooperation and norms—provide for a more appropriate, effective, and just mainstreaming of disabled children into public school classrooms. I specifically will show that the mainstreaming of severely emotional, behavioral and learning disabled children is ineffective and counterproductive to the learning and social environment. I will demonstrate the ambiguity of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, which provides for the rights of children with disabilities to have a free public education, and show how the principles of the Contact Hypothesis are appropriate grounds to revise that law.

Introduction

Problem

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) which states that children with disabilities have a right to a “free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.” In 1990-91, the law was renamed the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 101-476 and P.L. 102-119) and expanded the types of disabilities covered to include, among others, autism and traumatic brain injury (Shanker, 1994). This law has led the way to mainstreamed classrooms. However, the law is ambiguous in its wording and sets no guidelines or limits for the severity of disabilities it encompasses. Under this present law, there is little hope for effective education or development of practical social skills for students in an inclusive class.

Proposal

My proposal is that the law be amended to include the use of principles of the Contact Hypothesis. These principles will facilitate more effective educa
tion and socialization in mainstreamed classes of emotional, behavioral and learning disabled students and nondisabled students.

**Contact Hypothesis**

The Contact Hypothesis states that “intergroup contact under certain prerequisite conditions promotes the development of more harmonious intergroup relations” (Gaertner, Rust, Dovidio, Bachman & Anastasio, 1994). In other words, the principles of the Contact Hypothesis will change the members’ perceptions of the separate groups from “‘us’ and ‘them’ to ‘we’” (Gaertner et al., 1994), which will enhance learning and peer relationships in the classroom.

Four group characteristics are necessary to develop and maintain group cohesiveness: equal status between groups, interpersonal interactions, cooperative activities for subordinate goals, and support of norms (Brehm & Kassin, 1996).

**Equal Status**

For equal status to be present, all students must be equally prepared academically and socially to enter the mainstreamed classroom. Bringing an emotional, behavioral or learning disabled student into a classroom without the appropriate preparation and skills can be disastrous to the students and the classroom environment. This is a main deficiency in the law because it does not limit the severity of the disabilities provided for.

Academically, equal status means that all students must share an ability to learn and have the appropriate intelligence to comprehend and retain the material. A common argument for full classroom inclusion is the “separate but equal” argument, meaning that those who are different are considered “inferior.” However, “separate but equal” has historically referred to race and not to abilities and needs (Shanker, 1994). The fact remains that children with severe learning disabilities and those without are not equal in their learning abilities. Disabled students need more specialized and individual attention in the classroom than do nondisabled students. This not only emphasizes their inequalities to other students, but hinders the educational experience of the nondisabled students.

Research suggests that only moderately or mildly disabled children should be included in mainstreamed classes. A study of mainstreamed classrooms found that mildly disabled children showed greater improvement in reading skills than did those who received regular “pull-out” [where the students are taught in separate environments] special education (Marston, 1996).
Of classrooms with severely disabled students, teachers comment that inclusion is "not appropriate for severe kids—they cannot focus in a large group—needs are 1:1 or 1:2 if significantly discrepant" and that these students need more attention than the teachers can give (Marston, 1996).

To determine which disabled students would benefit from inclusive classes, more appropriate pre-testing is needed to discern their abilities and readiness for mainstreaming. Studies have found the Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) to be an effective instrument for this purpose (Fuchs, Fuchs, Fernstrom, 1992).

Socially, equal status means that the disabled and nondisabled students see each other as equal peers and have the same opportunity to become members of the ingroup. Disabled children are disadvantaged in the mainstreamed classroom because they are obviously not socially equal to nondisabled children.

Some inclusionists argue that the disabled are handicapped further when segregated from nondisabled children because they are denied the chance to develop social skills necessary to function in a predominantly nondisabled society. However, according to Shanker (1994), if the disability is severe, it is unlikely that the child will learn to socialize or be received as a friend by other class members because of the vast inequality.

This last point is extremely important because, according to Farmer & Farmer (1996), disabled students' social networks largely determine whether they enter into positive peer relationships or remain in a social system that supports their problematic social ineptness. A defeating cycle then emerges: the student's severe disability alienates the student from nondisabled students and secures his affiliation with other disabled students, thereby supporting and affirming the antisocial behavior or social disability. In a study of mainstream classroom social networks, emotional, behavioral and learning disabled students became members of peer clusters of students with less positive characteristics than did nondisabled students (Farmer & Farmer, 1996).

**Interpersonal Interactions**

Students must not only be together physically, but they must interact on a personal level. The fact that the classroom is mainstreamed is merely "leading a horse to water ..." Although disabled and nondisabled students share a classroom, there is no guarantee that the two groups will interact. The classroom must be structured to encourage interpersonal interactions.

Proximity has been shown to affect social relations and group perception. A study by Gaertner et al. (1994) demonstrated that seating
arrangement reduced bias between groups and that frequent contact creates favorable intergroup attitudes. This supports the mere exposure theory that states that repeated contact with someone may produce positive feelings towards that individual (Brehm & Kassin, 1996).

Personal interaction is the first step in converging outgroups in order to become members of the same team. "To be maximally effective, contact and acquaintance programs should lead to a sense of equality in social status . . . the gain is greater if these members regard themselves as part of a team" (Gaertner et al., 1994). If the child is severely disabled, however, frequent contact with other students may act adversely toward integration of groups by accentuating differences.

Studies suggest that controlling the number of disabled students per classroom results in more effective learning and better peer relationships by limiting levels of antisocial behavior (Farmer & Farmer, 1996). Students with emotional and behavioral disabilities are less likely to engage in negative behaviors when there are relatively few of them in the classroom.

Cooperation

Cooperation and working towards subordinate goals (goals that cannot be accomplished without input from each member of a team) benefit all members of a team (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Academically, both disabled and nondisabled students gain because they are responsible for part of the whole learning goal. Inclusive classrooms transfer the focus of the teacher from all-authority to that of a facilitator of learning. "Students work together, teach one another, and actively participate in their own and their classmates' education...not to compete with others, but to learn with and from others" (Sapn-Shevin, 1994).

Socially, cooperation and subordinate goals cement a common group identity. One study on groups found that "when the groups initially conceived of themselves as two groups, the introduction of cooperative interaction increased the extent to which members rated the aggregate as one group and decreased bias in evaluative ratings" (Gaertner et al., 1994). In order to contribute to the success of the subordinate goal, the disabled students must have the ability to do the necessary tasks, communicate effectively with their peers, and be able to participate in the dynamics of small group interactions.

Norms

Social norms are extremely important in mainstreaming classrooms. Not only must the nondisabled students accept the disabled students, but the
administrators, teachers and community must accept the inclusion policy. Although inclusive classrooms and mainstreaming are occurring more frequently and are becoming the norm in society by law, they are considered the exception in the classroom and the community. Inclusion remains a controversial issue in many communities.

Gaertner et al. (1994) maintains that “contact and acquaintance programs should . . . occur in ordinary purposeful pursuits.” In other words, the educational content and classroom structure should be the norm in which the nondisabled and disabled students come together. Fuchs et al. (1992) propose that “transenvironmental programming” should be used for mainstreamed classrooms, and school systems seem to be naturally moving in that direction. This programming is an ideal environment in which to employ the Contact Hypothesis. Classes are smaller with individual attention given to students, are small-group and cooperative learning oriented, material is unique to students’ needs and students are reinforced with additional resources.

Conclusion

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act is not being effective in its purpose because of its ambiguity. It needs to be amended to utilize the four principles of the Contact Hypothesis in order to provide adequately for the educational and social skills needs of both disabled and nondisabled students. These principles are equal status, interpersonal interaction, cooperation and norms. The law should specify certain criteria for educational environment and curriculum, limit the degree of disabilities of the students that are mainstreamed and insure that the rights of all students be preserved in the educational setting.

Limitations and Future Research

Because this subject is so controversial and the findings are so varied, this paper is limited by the small amount of research cited. I am aware that many other sides of the picture have not been presented here. One possible area to research would be the combination of full-inclusion and pull-out programs, which in one study received better results than either full-inclusion or pull-out alone.

The subject of mainstream pre-testing and preparation have only been touched on here. More extensive study as to the time, costs, means and appropriateness of these would be germane.
Of course, when the federal government is involved, care always needs to be taken to assure that the changes would not create an even larger monster than we are trying to defeat. The danger is that when anything is written into law, it is often very difficult to clarify and is open for interpretation. In the pursuit for clarity, there is the risk of the government possessing too stringent a control.

References


