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ABSTRACT

The paper, given by the director of a project to train teachers for early childhood education programs which integrate handicapped and normal children, focuses on the effects of labeling on teacher-child interaction. The author recounts her own experience with teaching handicapped children and the historical tendency to label and segregate various classes of children. She notes the problem her project has had in coping with the insecurity of teachers when confronted with a handicapped child in the regular class. Stressed is the need for all teachers to learn to assess each child, plan individualized programs, and overcome prejudices concerning human differences. (DB)

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CLUSTER TRAINING WORKSHOP ON THE HANDICAPPED CHILD
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Palm Springs, California

"WHAT'S IN A LABEL"

Dr. Molly C. Gorelick

I am sorry that I am unable to be with you during this conference which I know will contribute a great deal toward the successful integration of children with handicaps into the mainstram of community life. I have asked Miss Loretta Friedman, my assistant in the project "Careers in Integrated Early Childhood Programs" to read this message to you in the hope that my personal experiences and work will be of some assistance to you in the challenging program on which you are embarking.

Twenty-five years ago I accepted my first teaching position. By choice, I requested a class of mentally retarded children. Some of my professors tried to discourage me from this choice, saying that I would be wasting my talents. But I disagreed with them. I was a psychology major and I felt that I could learn more about learning, from teaching children who were reputed to have difficulty in learning. I felt that the bright children would learn in spite of me - but the retarded would really put my skill as a teacher to the test.

The first thing I learned from the educable mentally retarded was that the term Mentally Retarded was a label that told me very little about each individual child except perhaps that their I.Q.s fell between 50 and 75 plus or minus a probable error of 5 points. The label EMR did not tell me

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that Manuel could solve problems in construction that were beyond my comprehension or that Ralph could draw beautiful designs, or that Margaret's social competencies and sensitivity to others was to be envied.

As Special Education programs proliferated in the years that followed, we started to label more children and we segregated them from the mainstream of childhood - all in our sincere effort to help them. In California we had created approximately 29 different special categories and proceeded to focus in on the child's disability - his handicap. This emphasis on the child's handicap led to stereotyped conceptions of children who possessed these handicaps. We called them retarded, blind, deaf, cerebral palsied, as if their total physiology, their total cognitive and emotional functioning could be described by the label retarded, blind, deaf, and so on. We failed to advertise their many abilities and talents.

After teaching retarded children I taught classes of bright, classes of gifted, classes of slow learners and other children so labeled. I found that there was no such thing as a homogeneous class of children no matter what their label or age. Each child, regardless of his label is a profile of abilities and disabilities. It is time we emphasized abilities rather than disabilities. Another truth that I learned, was that the basic knowledge we possess about how human beings learn applies to all children, that there are no magic teaching formulas and methods which will work for all children or only for special children. That the good teacher - assesses each child's strengths and weaknesses

and then selects the method or methods which will be appropriate for that child. Thus, it is incumbent upon those of us who are training teachers to ground prospective teachers well in a wide repertoire of teaching styles and methods. Those who are in teaching should continually add new approaches to their existing repertoire so as to be able to reach the individual child.

In September 1971 at California State University, Northridge I initiated a project to train teachers at the preschool level to work in nursery schools integrating children with handicaps.

Our first problem, when we integrated children with handicap such as Downs syndrome, deafness, blindness and cerebral palsy into the existing University nursery school, was teacher uncertainty. They asked "What do I do with the retarded child? What do I do with the deaf child?" My answer was, "What do you do with any child who is new to a class?" "How do you communicate if you are in a foreign country? Try that with the deaf child." The teachers were insecure, fearful about their ability to deal with a little child who came to them with a label. Teachers who were considered superior and experienced were suddenly unsure of their teaching abilities - they felt they lacked the skill and training to handle a child with a handicap. Thus, before we can succeed in integrating children, we will have to overcome this insecurity and attitude that only specialized experts can work with children with handicaps.

We have to develop a new/old breed of teachers - who, like the teacher in the little red school house had to assess each child and plan individualized programs for the wide spectrum of abilities found in a single classroom.

The preschool is a wonderful place to begin the integration of children. Young children can and do accept differences whether

they are in race, creed or handicap if their teachers, parents, and the community model such acceptance and eliminate their own fears of differences. We can greatly reduce segregation of children if we break down the mental barriers we have built up concerning differences. Of course, there will be some children for whom special classes are needed. Too frequently, when we change our direction in education we throw the baby out with the dirty water. Let's not eliminate all special nursery classes or specialists but let's look at children as individuals and make placements accordingly.

Above all, let's examine our own fears and prejudices honestly. For example, teachers say "Won't the blind child or the deaf child take an inordinate amount of teacher time? Won't the other children be neglected?" This can, but should not happen. Each and every child in that classroom needs attention and to provide this, you use: assistant teachers, parent aides, high school aides, and community volunteers. Let's not forget that the children themselves can be taught to help each other - even at this very young age. For example, the children in our program quickly imitated the teacher and would turn the hard of hearing child's face toward them when they wanted to speak to him. They would guide the blind child, by saying, "Listen to my voice, Kyle" or "Here, touch this, Kyle".

One mother reported that her four year old son, hearing that their old sick dog couldn't bark anymore suggested that he could teach the dog some sign language. A volunteer who had been tutoring the deaf child had taught the other children in the class some signing.

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In summary, in our preschool project we called our teachers Developmental Teachers because we want to train young people to appreciate and understand the similarities and differences in the development of all children. We want these teachers to feel competent in providing a variety of learning opportunities which will permit the children to develop and grow according to their own individual profile of abilities. Hopefully, these teachers will help eliminate the segregation, and minority status of many young children with handicaps and return them to the mainstream of childhood.