CHAPTER 7

Mainstreaming: Entering Another Classroom's Culture

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Over the past 25 years, much has happened to protect—and extend—the rights of children who have special educational needs, particularly their right to have access to the general curriculum, to study the same things that regular education students study, and to share in the regular educational setting.

In 1975, the federal government passed PL 94-142, called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which entitles students with disabilities to a "free appropriate education." The most recently amended version of this law is called the Individuals with Disabilities Act, one of whose stipulations is that all students have a right to be educated in the "least restrictive environment." In Massachusetts the phrase used to describe this right of special needs students is "access to the general curriculum." That is, students may leave the specialized small-group setting and be integrated into the larger-group setting of a regular classroom, which is considered to be less restrictive.

"Mainstreaming," as this practice is called, requires schools to integrate special education students into regular education classrooms for some part of their school day. Most special education programs are designed around small-group settings. Mainstreamed students thus must leave this familiar setting to go into large regular classrooms. As many teachers and administrators have learned, this is a major and complicated task.

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LEARNING FROM STUDENTS

As a special educator who entered the field in the 1970s, I enthusiastically embraced the concept of mainstreaming and strongly advocated having special needs students integrated as much as possible into "regular" classrooms. In fact, at one point, I nearly alienated myself from some regular education teachers due to my zeal to mainstream my students with behavioral disorders. In my role of mainstreaming advocate, I spent a considerable amount of time negotiating mainstreaming with both teachers and students.

However, even I, committed as I was, could not fail to notice that students did not go gladly into this new, "less restrictive" environment. A special needs student begins mainstreaming only when the teacher assesses that that child is ready. Yet my students, when I determined that one of them was ready, were often reluctant to leave the special needs classroom to go to the regular class for the designated mainstreaming period. I had to develop a whole repertoire of incentives in order to convince them. I exhorted them in various ways. I told them that mainstreaming was important for them. They said it wasn't. I told them their goal was to be in the mainstream. They told me they didn't want to go. I told them that I knew what was best for them. They said that this was not it.

In the face of their resistance, I persisted. In the mid-1990s, I joined the BTRS, where I was encouraged by other teachers to think about aspects of my students and my teaching that puzzled or perplexed me. The group carried out research on such puzzles, as described in other chapters of this book. One of the topics we discussed at our meetings was classroom discourse and the different ways it influenced the social reality of classrooms. We read some of James Gee's work and became familiar with his idea of discourse: "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'" (Gee, 1989c, p. 1). Based on our reading of Gee, Cazden, and others, we developed our ideas about our own classrooms, particularly ideas about the unique discourse of each class.

For me, this material had a special significance. I have always believed that the classroom community has a strong impact on student learning and so must be carefully shaped by the teacher. Each classroom has a unique culture consisting of implicit and explicit rules. We develop symbols and language as a community; we construct our meanings together; we come to know one another as individuals as we become a cohesive group. To become a member of the classroom

community, the child must understand both the stated and implied cultural norms of the community.

For example, my practice of alerting a child to his misbehavior would involve a nonthreatening but clear statement: "That's a 'reminder.'" I intended this statement to correct the behavior neutrally and not to personally threaten the child. Reminders were cumulative. Once a student received three reminders in a given period, he/she was sent to a "time out" area. Students also could earn points for lack of reminders. In this classroom, the simple three-word statement "that's a reminder" was really a symbol that stood for a whole system of practices related to student behavior and discipline. Students internalized these as they became members of our classroom culture. The statement "that's a reminder" was part of our classroom discourse and would not be readily understood by someone outside our community. There are many examples of this kind of learning in every classroom. The children who belong to the community know and understand the language and the culture.

After reading Gee's work on discourse and identity, and talking with my colleagues in the BTRS, I began to formulate new questions about my students. When they participate in the mainstreaming process, the special needs students are in the particularly difficult position of having to learn more than one classroom discourse. If my students are learning the discourse of the mainstream class with only a limited amount of time in such classroom, aren't they engaged in a complex learning process? Do the mainstreamed special needs students become, in some way, bicultural? If so, what does that say about our assumptions regarding their overall learning ability? They must be doing some extraordinary learning. I wanted to know how they did this, how they internalized the information, and, as their classroom teacher, how I could incorporate this learning process into my classroom practices.

With the seminar's help, I began to explore my students' encounters with the discourse of mainstream. My specific questions concerned what happened when they journeyed outside our own environment, with the routines and symbols they all understood well? How did they learn to interpret the discourse of the mainstream classrooms?

Looking back, my enthusiastic expectations seem astonishing. I did not, in fact, discover extraordinary learning. Rather, to my dismay, I discovered problems. Through my students' reports on their experiences, I was exposed to intricacies of mainstreaming to which I previously had been blind. In what follows, I will describe what I found and how I now understand it.

The Setting

This story begins with a special education class consisting of 4 first-grade students, 3 second-grade students, a teaching assistant, and myself. The learning problems of the individual students in this class varied, thus creating a fairly diverse group. Generally, special needs classrooms are designed to serve students with one predominant disability, such as a behavior disorders class or a learning disabilities class. A substantially separate or self-contained classroom such as mine usually is considered to be the most restrictive classroom setting within a public school. Children are assigned to such classes because the severity of their learning difficulties requires that they receive individualized instruction and specialized teaching techniques. Although they also are assigned to a certain grade-level regular class for the purpose of mainstreaming, the special needs class remains their homeroom.

The school was a culturally diverse K–3 school. It had the atmosphere of a neighborhood school with a tightknit sense of community. The class size averaged 22 students. For the most part, the teachers believed in the benefits of mainstreaming and welcomed the special needs students into their classes.

The Question

Members of the BTRS use a number of different research methods. Some have spent many months observing in a classroom, either tape-recording or just taking field notes. Others have asked students to carry out tasks and have analyzed the resulting student work. I decided on a direct approach. I got a tape recorder and interviewed the children. Because my workday did not allow me to follow all students into their mainstreaming classrooms, and because I could not interview each child separately, I interviewed them together.

I audiotaped their talk and then transcribed it. I brought the transcripts to the weekly seminar meetings, where we listened to and discussed the transcripts. At first the tapes seemed unrevealing. But over time and through discussions, we were able to hear what the students were telling us. What I learned about mainstreaming really came from listening to the students with my colleagues in the BTRS. What I learned was not what I thought I was going to learn, and not what I thought I knew already.

What I Found: The Children's View

The general response from my students was that they did not like to go to the mainstream classrooms. Believing as I did that mainstreaming is the crux of the special needs students' program, I was distressed by their attitude. Naturally I wanted to know more. (All the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, except that of Steve Griffin, who is a member of BTRS and gave permission for his name to be used.)

Lacking Social Knowledge in Gym. Often, gym class is one of the first classes students are mainstreamed into since it does not require academic skills. This was the idea with Chuck, a second grader. Not only was Chuck physically fit but he also was well liked by his peers and had always impressed me with his good sportsmanship. I often would use Chuck's cooperative behavior as a positive example for the rest of the class. In spite of these advantages, Chuck found playing games hard.

Chuck had been placed in my special education class because of a severe learning disability, resulting in a need for intensive individualized instruction. He had, for the 2 previous years, received special education services in the resource room, yet he had attained only beginning first-grade reading skills. Teaching Chuck required using many specialized methods.

Yet he was physically fit, well coordinated, cooperative, and even tempered. Why would gym class be hard? What information does a child need in order to be competent at playing games? Chuck explains below, but his words alone do not convey the anguished feeling and resigned tone heard in the tape itself.

Teacher: How about you, Chuck? Do you like going to Steve Griffin's classroom?
Chuck: (shakes head)
Teacher: No?
Chuck: Because (mumbles) . . . the gym (mumbles)
Teacher: I'm sorry I didn't hear you.
Chuck: Gym. It's hard
Teacher: Gym is hard?
Chuck: Yeah (mumbles) playing the games.
Teacher: Mm-hmm
Chuck: And (speaks softly and sighs) that's it.

The games in the gym class are generally team games. They are not as structured as academic subjects. Students are bombarded with multiple levels of information. First there is understanding the directives as well as the style of the teacher. Then there is learning the explicit and implicit rules. Next there is knowing the style and temperament of teammates and opponents: who the strong players are, the weak players, the fair players, and the unfair players. Finally, there is becoming accustomed to the physical space. One often must glean information through participation and observation. The dynamics of playing team games go beyond simply knowing the rules of the game. The children who are in a classroom community full-time learn implicit information about one another. Chuck, a child who visited this class for only a part of each day, lacked a wealth of information, which put him at a disadvantage and must have created some discomfort. It must have been exhausting. Yet gym is the period that commonly is recommended as the starting point for mainstreaming of the able-bodied student. For Chuck, being physically able and well liked did not guarantee a successful mainstream experience.

Different Expressions, Different Meanings. Earl also expressed lack of enthusiasm for mainstreaming. Earl was referred to the special education class because of a severe language disability, which made communication quite difficult for him. He often could not find the word he wanted or used words out of context or mispronounced them. In order to compensate for his difficulty, Earl frequently acted as if he did understand when he didn't at all.

Mr. Jones was the teacher of the first-grade class to which my first graders were mainstreamed. Although I saw Mr. Jones as very accommodating, my other students too expressed insecurities about being there. I wondered why, and started to consider the nature of the discourse practices that were common in his classroom. Mr. Jones's style involved frequent interjections of humor. For the learning-disabled student, this posed a challenge of interpretation. For example, in telling Earl to sit down, Mr. Jones might say, "Earl, ze bottom . . . sit on it." Like my use of the phrase "that's a reminder," his warnings to students were indirect and must come to be understood by becoming a member of the classroom. He was telling Earl in a lighthearted way to sit down. The full-time members of the class learned to understand and appreciate Mr. Jones's humor through frequent exposure. The special needs students just did not understand and consequently were probably confused. Earl is language disabled. How could he possibly process this? What happens when he does not sit down because he does

not know he was told to sit down? Is he seen as defiant? Earl often would compensate for the inability to process language with bravado. So, he could come across as defiantly refusing a request when in fact he just did not have a clue as to what he had been asked to do.

Mr. Jones, as a teacher of 25 first-grade students, did not have the time to stop and determine whether the special needs students had sufficiently processed each simple request. Often, special needs students are acutely aware of tone and will rely on tone to determine content. The difference between my tone and Mr. Jones's tone, coupled with my students not fully understanding the discourse, I believe, resulted in the anxiety they experienced. Again, this comes from their not being members of the culture. Their lack of constant participation in this community meant that they could not adapt to the differences in the teacher's style, which was a part of this community. They could only guess at what was acceptable and hope that they conformed to the norms. When I questioned them as to how they knew what was the right thing to do in Mr. Jones's class, they said, "If you didn't get yelled at, you did the right thing." This is the kind of anxiety these children experienced in the "least restrictive setting."

Social Language and Peer Interaction. Ian experienced a range of special needs relating to his learning difficulties, which included limitations in social skills. Ian saw things from a different perspective. Much of his program was devoted to learning appropriate interactions with both peers and adults. Ian had achieved success in this area within our community, but I was particularly disturbed by his report of being in the mainstream. His interpretation of his mainstream experience was highly critical. Ian described how for him entering the mainstream class was an alienating experience.

> *Teacher:* Okay. Ian?
> *Ian:* I don't like it.
> *Teacher:* You don't like it either?
> *Ian:* It feels like that class doesn't pay attention to you. Doesn't like—'cause they always go like right next to you and say, "Can I play with you?" and then they ask again and again and again.
> *Teacher:* So you find that you are not like a part of the class?
> *Ian:* I like it better up here, a lot way better.

The exasperated and discouraged tone of Ian's response was striking. The phrase "again and again and again" seems to indicate that the peer relationships do not get beyond the introductory phase. I started to think about how children talk with one another after relationships are successfully formed. When children are friends, it is natural for them to play with one another. The formality of initiating play with a request becomes obsolete. The requests were significant for Ian because, I believe, they were a reminder to him that he was not a regular member of the community. The students of the mainstream class did not perceive the continuity of Ian's presence among them. Ian also commented, "That class doesn't pay attention to you." Understandably, Ian's attendance in the mainstream class was not as significant to the regular class students as it was to him. For the mainstream students, their routine would continue whether or not Ian was with them. For Ian, it was a significant event. His world had changed. He was in unfamiliar territory. He wanted to continue his ongoing work on social skills. But how do you do that if nobody is paying attention? Ian's tone as well as his words express his sense that going to the mainstream class was an alienating experience for him.

Missing a Frame of Reference. Earl here explains one aspect of what he perceives as different about Mr. Jones's class. His comments illuminate how the mainstreamed student lacks an accurate frame of reference to gauge the routine of the classroom experiences. Earl's concerns regarding the regular education class focus on "special things" happening.

> *Teacher:* What about you, Earl? Do you like to go to Mr. Jones's room?
> *Earl:* 'Cause it is not fun.
> *Teacher:* It is not fun?
> *Earl:* It's only fun if it is indoor recess and we get to pick.
> *Teacher:* Is it fun in this class?
> *Earl:* Yeah.
> *Teacher:* Why is it fun in this class?
> *Earl:* 'Cause we get to do fun things and special . . .
> *Teacher:* Mr. Jones doesn't do special things in the class?
> *Earl:* Not for us. That's why I don't like to go there.

Earl's response seems to point to many issues. Earl stated that Mr. Jones did not do special things for "us." He clearly saw himself and his special needs classmates as a separate entity. He did not identify the group as part of Mr. Jones's class. He, in fact, believed that special things happened outside of the time he spent in the classroom. Earl

almost suggested that mainstreaming had a discriminatory component. However, given that he was with the class only on a limited basis, he did not have an accurate frame of reference from which to determine what was special. Perhaps, he was, in fact, missing the "fun things" or maybe he did participate in the fun things but was unaware of it because he did not have the rest of the day by which to measure what was mundane and what was special.

The second-grade students were mainstreamed to Steve Griffin's class. Steve Griffin is also a member of the BTRS. From our group meetings, I was more aware of what was happening in his classroom, and could accurately see how much my students' interpretation of events suffered from lack of a frame of reference and from lack of membership in the culture of his classroom.

Steve Griffin was researching sharing time in his classroom. As described elsewhere in this volume, the students were progressively redesigning the format for sharing time. Steve Griffin saw this process as unique to his classroom and therefore as part of the culture. We were both interested in how my students would interpret what was happening. This seemed to Steve and me a clear example of an event where my students were not part of the everyday occurrences. We decided that my students would observe rather than actually participate in sharing time since we expected it to be difficult for them to figure out at first. We saw this as a wonderful opportunity to follow my students' thinking.

John's report on sharing time in Steve Griffin's classroom shed some light on how special needs students frequently determine, however inaccurately, the hidden structures and routines of the regular classroom.

Teacher: Okay you know what I was wondering about is, is Steve Griffin's share [sharing time] like our share or is it different?
Chuck: Kinda different.
John: It's different.
Teacher: Let John answer this question. Why is it different, John?
John: 'Cause we don't share like, um, how ya show . . . Take, um, like toys to school but we don't [take] toys to school and like up here 'cause we had a different one like book share. But kids read books and they take time to um know it and next sometimes they . . . Steve Griffin brings in the camera, . . . they um have the story in their head.
Teacher: Okay so they already know the story before sharing time.

John: They don't have to be books.
Teacher: They don't have to be books?
John: 'Cause, um they took practice doing something.
Teacher: They practice the story before they do share?
John: Then they make up the stories and then they practice it.
Teacher: And they do share?
John: Yeah. They do it.

Their perceptions, while thoughtful, were quite inaccurate. Given the information that I had, I was baffled by my students' remarks. I had to double check with Steve Griffin. He assured me that there were no rehearsals or text involved. The reality of what was happening during this sharing time was that the students were creating fictitious stories, what they referred to as "I need people stories" (see Chapter 2).

John's interpretation of sharing time is similar to the way Earl interpreted the "special things" in Mr. Jones's class, in that John thought significant events were occurring while he was not there. John took it one step further and deduced, however incorrectly, what occurred while he was not there. John, in effect, filled in the gaps for himself. He did not know what to do with the fact that Steve Griffin was videotaping on this particular day. Probably John missed Steve's explanation of the camera. John tried to create a reason for the camera but somehow he could not quite place it. He was convinced it meant something.

John was placed in the special needs class so that he could receive help with his slow learning process. John often needed to have information presented to him slowly and repeatedly. Here he found himself having to understand something for which he was not fully informed so he created his own information. One wonders how often we are unable to fully inform the special education student about the meaning and nature of events in the regular classroom. How often do they have to rely on their own interpretations?

These two examples where a student clearly showed the lack of a frame of reference led me to wonder about the general contrasts my students observed in the two settings, so I asked them about differences. I believe that the strength of their responses also indicates a heightened, and perhaps exaggerated, perception of the contrast between the different settings. These are examples of what they felt to be the differences between the mainstream class and our class.

Robert: Well, in Steve Griffin's class, you don't get any free choice.
Teacher: What else, John?

John: If you want to play with the computer while he is talking, you can't play with the computer until after the next date.
Teacher: Okay, Linda?
Linda: In Mr. Jones's class it just like, um, they aren't even as big a library like ours, it's only a tiny library. They only have two seats.
Teacher: Hm,hm.
Linda: And also block corner and (goes into a lengthy description of the physical space).
Ian: Well, there the classrooms have boards that are bigger, like that are about the same size as about half of the part of the walls in this room.
Earl: Yeah, we have to act different 'cause he [garbled] then we go to the back table, our group, back table, and then everybody looks at you—you're stupid—us [garbled].

Some might wonder how much of the students' difficulty in verbalizing the differences is based in their special needs. Certainly the students' learning difficulties played a role in their observations. The responses of the students reflect their special needs. Robert stated that there was not as much free time in Steve Griffin's class. Robert's main disability was behavioral. He depended on free time as an outlet. John, on the other hand, identified a rule he knew well. Since John learned best concretely and through rote, his focus was on what he had practiced.

Behavior issues compounded Linda's learning problem. She focused on the various sections of the room as being different. She used the purposes of the different areas as a source of control. Ian, who was highly distractable, noticed the size difference, particularly the boards. Most likely he had a sense of containment in the small special education class, which he did not experience in the mainstream. Earl, who was quite sensitive, responded at an emotional level. He felt they had to act differently. Again Earl referred to his special education classmates as "we" and "us." He also expressed his sensitivity at being looked at and being "stupid."

MORE QUESTIONS

Although the students' learning difficulties are a factor, I now think that the process of mainstreaming would be difficult for any student when considered from the perspective of classroom culture. We are asking students to act as if they belong to a culture that is relatively

unfamiliar. Their special needs only exacerbate what would naturally be difficult. Any child placed in a setting other than that to which he/she has grown accustomed would experience a sense of difference. I wonder why we expect special needs students to be so adaptable.

This study provided me with many insights as well as more questions to explore. As I listened to the tapes and studied the transcripts, I found that the transmission of the classroom culture is intricately woven into the fabric of the ongoing dialogue between the students and the teacher. The mainstreamed student enters in the middle of the conversation. As adults we can all identify with the feeling of entering in the middle of an ongoing event. We try to determine what has gone on from what is going on in such a way that we keep up with what continues to go on. It is no small feat. Yet this appears to be what we expect from special needs students when they are mainstreamed. To compound the situation, they leave before the conversation has come to an end. Even in the best of mainstreaming situations, it is impossible to keep a student abreast of what goes on in one classroom. So in one way or another the special needs student who participates in the mainstream experience is always at a disadvantage. Does this not contribute to the child's already acknowledged disadvantage?

Encouraging the special needs student to participate in mainstreaming, to some degree, is degrading to the special needs class. In effect, the child is being given the message that this class, where he/she is competent in the discourse, is not the ideal class. The ideal class is the one in which he/she feels out of place or, in Earl's word, "stupid." Does this not compound the students' already low self-esteem? The place where they can be competent is the "less than" community. It seems to me now to pose a dilemma: Children should strive to be out of the special class where they are competent so that they can be in the mainstream where they are incompetent. Why are we so uncomfortable about the classes where the students are comfortable? Isn't comfort an important ingredient of a quality public education?

As I recall the many special needs students I have worked with, I cannot recall a single one who requested to be mainstreamed. It was my enthusiasm for mainstreaming that was propelling them. Now I wonder, did they know what I did not recognize? Maybe. Of course, if we wait for students' requests, there may not be too much education going on. Still, I think that these children have a valid point, and they have taught me something. There are many theoretical bases for mainstreaming, but many of those theories are based on the adult's perception of the child's experience.

We, as adults, have an obligation to determine what is in the best interest of the child; this is our job. One of the greatest benefits of this study is that it has helped me see with the child's eyes, listen with the child's ears, and feel with the child's heart. I question whether the students feel as excluded in their special education classrooms as we adults are apt to think. Which is more inclusive: to be learning in an environment where one's needs are closely attended to and generally met, or an environment where one is a marginal member of the community and one's ability to compete is impaired? I now think more carefully about just what "least restrictive" means for young learners.

CHAPTER 8

"Look, Karen, I'm Runn Like Jello": Imagination as a a Topic, a Tool for Literacy and Learning

KAREN GALLAS

> Emily is sitting alone at a table with one of her ants in her hand. She is talking to the ant, asking it questions: "Do you have anything else to say?" She puts her head close to the ant and listens. Later she explains that the ant has been telling her that she's 10 years old, and her birthday is August 2nd, and it's a her. She shows me how she wrote that information on a piece of paper. (Field Notes: September 22, 1995)

Emily was the first child I taught who, at 6, had quite plainly begun her life work. Emily was a scientist, and it is quite possible she was born that way because she was the only 6-year-old I have known whose life revolved around a desire to immerse herself exclusively in the study of the natural world. In Emily's case, her chief fascination was with insects, most especially ants. During the year I taught her, in fine weather she spent all of her outdoor time pursuing insects, capturing them, and making containers to keep them in so that she could take them home with her for further observation. As a collector, she was never without plastic baggies, and any crawling thing was scooped up and put in her cubby for later study. She drew the insects and bugs she collected, wrote about them avidly, and offered a wealth of information about most of

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