

This Week's Citation Classic

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Dunn L M. Special education for the mildly retarded—is much of it justifiable?
Except. Child. 35:5-22, 1968.
[Inst. on Mental Retardation and Intellectual Development, George Peabody
Coll. for Teachers, Nashville, TN]

It was argued that the then prevalent practice should cease of labeling many disadvantaged children from the minority groups as mentally retarded because they scored a bit low on tests of intelligence. Instead of placing them in segregated special day classes, it was proposed that they remain *unlabeled* in the mainstream of education with special educators serving as resource teachers for all pupils with learning difficulties. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (SSCI[®]) indicates that this paper has been cited in over 240 publications since 1968.]

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"There are two main reasons why this paper has been referenced and reprinted so often. One is explained by the quotation: 'Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come.' The other is because of status. I was an active past-president of the professional organization in whose house organ the paper appeared. It was highlighted in the lead position in the first issue of the year. A reader could hardly overlook it. Perhaps there is a third reason. On rereading the article today, I find it to be quite ambiguous. Almost anyone could find something in it with which to agree, even though some special educators (school people who specialize in the education of handicapped children) were upset and threatened by it.

"There are two other, more important forces which, combined, swept 'mainstreaming' into the schools in a record, short seven-year period. *First*, parents from minority groups sought the relief of the courts against school people labeling their children as mentally retarded and so segregating them into special day classes. Time and again they won their cases. *Second*, in 1975, the federal government passed, and funded generously, 'The Education of All Handicapped Children Act' (Public Law 94-142) which mandated that all handicapped children be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs.

"I am frequently asked three questions: 1. Are you sorry you stirred up such a hornet's nest? 2. Have the schools implemented your major suggestions? 3. Have you changed your views? The answer to the first question is 'no.' I still feel self-contained special schools and classes for the mildly retarded are primarily devices to enable the regular schoolteachers to transfer the pupils they consider to be 'misfits' out of sight and out of mind. Too, I still feel it is unethical to label minority group children as mentally retarded when they are disruptive in school, when they are slow learners, and especially when they obtain IQ scores in the 60s.

"The answer to the second question is a resounding 'no.' My main suggestion was that we stop classifying minority group children as mentally retarded when they do moderately poorly on intelligence tests because this label is not a badge of distinction. To a slight degree, this has happened. However, through PL 94-142, a new category was created known as 'learning disabilities.' Now, an even larger percentage of children who formerly would have been labeled educable mentally retarded are called learning disabled, certainly an improvement over mentally retarded. These so-called learning disabled pupils are then placed in the mainstream (regular class) but fished out once or twice a day, and placed in an aquarium (resource room), both for tutoring and to provide relief for the regular teacher and his or her more able charges. Empirical evidence indicates they achieve no more under this arrangement than if they were left unlabeled in the regular grades (see Semmel et al., 1979).

"The answer to the third question is a qualified 'yes.' Where I was most wrong in my article, in my current view, was in finding a place for so-called special educators in serving these mainstreamed children. I now think their talents would be better utilized if they focused solely on the moderately and severely handicapped. Full responsibility for the so-called mildly retarded/learning disabled, who are often disruptive males, should rest with regular and remedial educators who will need to do a better job than they have in the past of individualizing instruction for these pupils.

"For the best update on mainstreaming, I recommend the article 'Mainstreaming: perspectives on educating handicapped children in the public school.'"¹

1. Semmel M I, Gottlieb J & Robinson N M. Mainstreaming: perspectives on educating handicapped children in the public school. (Berliner D C, ed.) *Review of research in education*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 1979. Vol. 7. p. 223-79.