

## THE "GET TOGETHER" MODEL:

### educational integration for all children

#### INTRODUCTION

There is a great deal of discussion these days about the concepts of integration, mainstreaming, and normalization. There are mounds of good intentions and plenty of talk, but there are few real models which tell us whether integration truly works. There is ample evidence to show that special class placement for mildly handicapped children is inappropriate and inefficient (Christopolos & Renz, 1969; Dunn, 1968; Lilly, 1970). There is also data to show that contrary to long held beliefs, special class placement provides no greater academic or social adjustment benefits to handicapped children than regular class placement (Blatt, 1958; Carroll, 1967; Goldstein, Moss & Jordan, 1965; Johnson, 1950; Kern & Pfaffle, 1962; Mayer, 1966; Meyerowitz, 1962, 1967). Lilly (1970) has charged that placing a child in special education is purely an administrative action, based on categories and labels which have no prescriptive value. Christopolos and Renz (1969) argue that special education does not provide special curricula or special methods, but does instead segregate children whose educational difficulties are intolerable to teachers.

Research to date, however, has not examined the complex set of classroom dynamics (including teacher behaviour) which contribute positively or negatively to integration. Research to date has not told us what types of classrooms and teachers foster integration. For example, we need to look more closely at:

- 1) teacher-child interactions
- 2) teacher influence on peer-interactions and
- 3) modelling and observational learning in the classroom.

In order for integration to succeed, concrete models must be created that demonstrate that integration is beneficial to both handicapped and non-handicapped children. Those of us who have worked with the "Saturday and Summer Get Together" believe that they could be models to prove that integration can work and that learning for all children is enhanced.

### HISTORY

In October 1980, a group of three York University education students, one York Faculty of Education Professor and six children began to get together. There was Margaret, profoundly deaf from birth who was driving her family crazy and was described by the school as a severe behaviour problem. Her brother Gary was labelled "perceptually handicapped" and had been placed in a special class. Jane and Ivan were two very bright five and six year olds whose parents wanted them to be learning more. Tom was eight; not walking, not yet talking and attending a school for the trainable retarded.

The three enthusiastic university students started meeting regularly in a small room at York with these children. Word spread. By November there were 25 students - all shapes, sizes, colours. Some came labelled bright and gifted, others mentally retarded, deaf, or learning disabled. But the labels started to disappear as a rich learning community was established each Saturday.

The program flourished and the group decided to run the project as a two month full time summer day school. A grant was obtained from Summer '81 (a Federal project to support students in summer jobs) and the Summer Get-Together ran for two months with 27 students and a waiting list of 14.

## THE PRESENT

Currently there are 42 children (two-thirds "normal" and one-third handicapped) in the 1981-82 Saturday Get-Together. Plans are underway to run a Summer '82 Get-Together program.

The ethical assertion of the model is that the "special child", no matter the severity of his/her handicap or problems, belongs in an integrated educational environment. But we already know that this does not happen by simply placing a handicapped child among "normal" peers. Stephanie Bruni's dissertation entitled The class and them, clearly shows that the factors of integrating handicapped and non-handicapped children in public schools are diverse and complex, and that true integration does not take place by just wishing.

Preliminary observation on the "Get-Together" Model shows that true integration and learning can take place, but only under specific conditions and with close guidance and supervision. Our preliminary experience shows the need for: strong leadership, constant observation, in-service teacher education, parent education and specific skills training.

Once again there is abundant research, especially from the field of sociology, proving the detrimental effects of segregation (Goffman, et al) but there is a lack of evidence documenting the beneficial aspects of integration.

A group of observers spent a day at the Summer Get-Together in July, 1981. The following is a description of what they observed:

"When we spent a day in the program, we saw the children participating actively with each other. We saw nothing that would indicate any distance, rejection or ridicule between the handicapped or "labelled" children and the other children.

The activities we observed included the following:

- . During a half hour of learning dance movements, a nine-year-old boy spontaneously went over to a five-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, picked him up and re-stated the teacher's instructions. At one point, the instruction was: "Sh-Sh - be perfectly still". The small boy broke out laughing, the other boy broke out laughing too and as he continued to say, "Sh-sh", they were both grinning widely at each other.
- . While all the children sat in a circle to hear and discuss a pirate story, and together solve the problem of recovering the treasure, one of the children put her arm around another child with cerebral palsy to help him sit upright.
- . During the "circle", one child with cerebral palsy began to crawl across the circle. Two other children immediately helped him and brought him back in as a participating member.
- . One of the children is not yet toilet-trained, but this was not an issue with either the children or staff (except, of course, that toilet training was a goal for her).
- . One 12-year-old boy travels to and from the program on public transit with a younger boy who has cerebral palsy.

- During periods when the children choose their own activities, the groups that formed spontaneously included the handicapped children."

We are at the point where there is a need to solidify and build the Model into a full time school so that others can learn how to integrate children successfully.

The principles of the programme are clear but we need to demonstrate to the public that this Model does indeed work.

Our 10 operating principles are as follows:

1. We believe in a small manageable size programme - i.e. quality not quantity.
2. We believe in community involvement.
3. We believe in pluralism and diversity.
4. We believe that schools will grow from strength to strength - in other words we do not operate from a deficit model.
5. We believe that schools must change the way they deal with handicapped children.
6. We know all children can learn.
7. We believe the basic skills of literacy are a key to learning and that they can and must be taught.
8. We believe there are many appropriate learning environments and many ways to learn and teach. No one way is good for everyone; hence the need for alternatives.
9. We believe in relating school to the real world - i.e. being out of the school and in the community as much as possible.

10. We believe that educational leadership is necessary.

Our value base is as follows:

1. few aspects of a child's life are more important than sharing normal educational experiences with children of his/her own age;
2. if the rights of any are diminished, so are, in the long run, the rights of all;
3. new attitudes and values come from action, not from talk; from deeds, not words;
4. integration is not possible as long as special schools and special classes exist because these "special" programmes will always try to 'maintain' the handicapped children for funding (economic not educational) purposes;
5. integration will cause problems, but not for the children involved. Problems will arise because of an existing system of institutions, special classes, hospitals, clinics, etc. whose purpose will be challenged.

This summer (1982) the Get-together Model will work with the North York Community and take a dozen students from the Driftwood Public School into the programme.

Why should your college give space to this programme:

1. The project has social policy implications for the school system. With proper research we can influence the direction of Bill 82 and have impact on the schools.

2. The project will give good public relations to wherever it is housed. Many people have shown interest in this programme. I have already presented the slide show and lecture at the following places:

- a) University of Wisconsin, Madison (Special Ed. Conference)
- b) Aug. '82 - International Conference on the Study of Mental Deficiency
- c) West Parry Sound 2-day conference on community education
- d) Thistleton School.
- e) T.V. Ontario programme on Bill 82, etc.

3. Michelle Lansberg did an excellent article on the programme (see attached).

Others, including the York Gazette, have shown interest in this project (see articles).

4. The teachers will be 2 graduates of York and will involve members of your community as helpers, etc.

We are ready to start our school. We have all the ingredients:

- a) 2 young and enthusiastic teachers
- b) parents and children
- c) a director
- d) but we need a space. A place where 28 children can form a learning community.

I'd be happy to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss this further. Thanks for your consideration of this matter.