

MAINSTREAMING

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Special Education, Educational Psychology, Disability Studies, Public Policy

1. Core Definition

Mainstreaming, within the context of special education, refers to the practice of integrating students with certain educational, physical, or cognitive disabilities into general education classrooms for specific periods during the school day. This concept operates on the fundamental premise that students with disabilities should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers--or **mainstreamed**--whenever appropriate and beneficial. Typically, this placement occurs when students can meet the academic demands with minimal or no modification, or for social interaction and non-academic subjects (such as art, music, or physical education). The core definition emphasizes providing students with disabilities access to the general curriculum and the broader social experience of typical schooling, offering them a view of what a **normal childhood** is like, as opposed to the segregated, isolated educational settings that were common prior to the mid-20th century.

The philosophy underpinning mainstreaming is rooted in the belief that exposure to the general education environment fosters essential social skills, improves adaptive behaviors, and provides motivational role models for students with special needs. Crucially, mainstreaming differs significantly from the later concept of **full inclusion** in that the student's placement in the regular classroom is contingent upon their readiness and ability to benefit from the general curriculum without fundamentally altering the classroom structure. The decision to mainstream a student is typically determined by an individualized education program (**IEP**) team, which assesses the student's needs, academic progress, and social maturity against the inherent demands of the general education setting.

This approach requires a delicate balancing act: maximizing the student's exposure to the mainstream environment while simultaneously ensuring they receive the specialized instructional support and related services necessary to address their specific disability. The goal is to avoid the stigma and potential developmental limitations associated with permanent placement in self-contained special education classrooms, while still guaranteeing academic and social progress. Mainstreaming is thus defined by conditional placement, often utilizing a "pull-out" model where students leave the general classroom for targeted specialized services but return for defined periods of general instruction or critical social interaction.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The movement toward mainstreaming emerged prominently in the United States and Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, following decades of institutionalization and segregated schooling for individuals with disabilities. This critical shift was fueled by landmark civil rights legislation and mounting public criticism regarding the ethical and developmental harms of segregation. The term itself reflects the ambition to move students from the educational periphery into the **main flow** of societal and scholastic experience. Prior to this era, students with significant needs were often placed in separate day schools or institutional residential settings, severely limiting their exposure to typical social behaviors, peer interaction, and standard academic content.

A pivotal legal milestone that cemented the framework for mainstreaming was the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in the United States in 1975, which was subsequently reauthorized and expanded as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This foundational legislation introduced the mandate of providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all children with disabilities and, crucially, established the principle of the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**. The LRE principle dictates that students with disabilities must be educated alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. It is LRE that forms the legal and philosophical backbone justifying the practice of mainstreaming, requiring school administrators and IEP teams to first attempt placement in the general classroom before considering more restrictive, segregated settings.

The adoption of mainstreaming represented a significant philosophical departure from previous educational models. It was largely influenced by normalization principles developed initially in Scandinavia, which argued that individuals with disabilities should live lives as close as possible to the accepted norm of society. However, early applications of mainstreaming often focused primarily on the physical placement of the student (i.e., putting the child in the room) rather than on providing the necessary instructional modifications and supports required to foster true educational success. As educational methodologies evolved, the focus shifted incrementally from mere integration (physical presence) to meaningful instructional support, setting the stage for subsequent, more comprehensive models like full inclusion.

3. Core Principles of Mainstreaming

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): This is the legally binding, foundational principle requiring that a student with a disability be educated alongside non-disabled peers unless the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes, even with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily. This principle is the legal driver that necessitates the consideration of mainstreaming placements.

Conditional Placement: Unlike the philosophical stance of full inclusion, placement in the general education setting under mainstreaming is strictly conditional upon the student's demonstrated readiness and ability to succeed, or at least participate meaningfully. Placement decisions are

often driven by individualized readiness assessments or the student's ability to meet academic performance milestones. If a student's severe needs cannot be met, they are often returned to a more restrictive, specialized setting.

Academic Readiness Focus: Mainstreaming often places a greater emphasis on academic assimilation, resulting in students frequently being mainstreamed into classes where they are already performing close to grade level or where the content is less academically intensive, such as non-core subjects like physical education, art, or elective courses.

Access to Typical Peer Models: A core theoretical benefit is the opportunity for students with disabilities to observe and imitate the behavior, language, and nuanced social interactions of their non-disabled peers. This exposure is viewed as a critical component in facilitating better social, emotional, and behavioral development.

4. Distinction from Inclusion (Integration vs. Inclusion)

While the terms mainstreaming and inclusion are sometimes used interchangeably in popular discourse, they represent fundamentally distinct educational philosophies and implementation strategies within the field of special education. **Mainstreaming** is fundamentally focused on **integration**, which implies that the student with the disability must adapt to the existing general education environment. In this model, the student typically earns their way into the regular classroom after demonstrating readiness and often receives specialized support via the "pull-out" method, outside of the mainstream setting. This approach retains the general education classroom structure as the fixed standard to which the student must conform.

In contrast, inclusion, which became the preferred pedagogical model in many educational systems starting in the 1990s, is based on the philosophy that the general education classroom is the primary and permanent educational placement for all students, regardless of the severity of their disability. Inclusion requires the general education environment itself to be fundamentally modified and adapted--through structural changes like co-teaching, intensive differentiated instruction, and the application of universal design for learning--to proactively meet the diverse needs of all learners. Full inclusion assumes the educational system must change to accommodate the child, rather than requiring the child to meet the system's pre-existing standard.

The primary philosophical difference lies in the starting point and the expectation of systemic change. Mainstreaming views the general classroom as a privilege earned through demonstrated readiness and conformity; inclusion views the general classroom as a fundamental, non-negotiable right that necessitates systemic and instructional adaptation. The practical implication is that mainstreamed students typically receive crucial services via a "pull-out" resource room model, while inclusively placed students receive services via a "push-in" or collaborative team-teaching model fully within the general classroom setting.

5. Implementation Models and Requirements

Effective implementation of mainstreaming requires rigorous planning, continuous collaboration, and robust resource allocation to ensure that the student is not simply placed in a general classroom without the necessary foundational supports. The implementation process is dictated entirely by the student's specific **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**, which identifies the precise amount of time spent in the mainstream environment and the nature of the required supports. Key components necessary for successful mainstreaming often involve supplementary aids and services that bridge the inherent academic or social gap between the student's needs and the demands of the general environment.

Typical models involve strategically scheduling students for general education periods focused initially on socialization, such as lunch, recess, or school assemblies, before moving incrementally to academic mainstreaming in non-graded or less critical core subjects. For academic subjects, success often hinges on highly trained support staff, such as paraprofessionals, specialized aides, or resource room specialists, who provide preparatory instruction or follow-up assistance to reinforce concepts taught in the general classroom. Requirements for the school district must include adequate and ongoing training for general education teachers on sophisticated differentiated instruction techniques and the specific accommodations outlined in the IEP, ensuring they can competently manage a diverse range of learning styles and behavioral needs without compromising the instruction for their other students.

Furthermore, a crucial requirement for ethical and legal compliance is the continuous monitoring and quantitative assessment of the student's progress within the mainstream setting. If a student demonstrates significant struggle, regression, or if the environment proves too stressful or restrictive, the IEP team must promptly reconvene to review and adjust the placement. This adjustment may involve increasing specialized support, modifying the academic expectations, or returning the student to a more supportive, restrictive environment. This commitment to continuous review ensures that the mandate of the **Least Restrictive Environment** is upheld, guaranteeing that the student benefits substantively from the placement rather than just maintaining physical presence.

6. Significance and Intended Impact

The introduction of mainstreaming marked a profound and necessary shift toward educational equity and accessibility for students with disabilities, fundamentally dismantling the long-standing legacy of segregation in education. The intended impact of mainstreaming is purposefully multifaceted, targeting both the students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. For the former group, the policy aims to normalize the educational experience, providing indispensable exposure to typical social norms, appropriate academic expectations, and diverse peer interaction

that stimulates robust language, cognitive, and adaptive development. By placing these children in settings where they will have a necessary view of what **normal childhood** is like, educators hoped to drastically reduce the institutional dependency and learned helplessness often associated with permanent segregated settings.

For non-disabled students, the presence of mainstreamed peers is intended to foster crucial attributes such as empathy, tolerance, patience, and a deeper, more accurate understanding of human diversity and ability. Interaction with students who have different abilities can effectively reduce societal prejudice and better prepare all students for collaborative participation in a heterogeneous adult society. Therefore, the benefits of mainstreaming are intended to be reciprocal, creating a richer, more representative, and ethically informed learning environment for the entire student body. Furthermore, the push for mainstreaming spurred critical legislative and funding changes that led to massive public investments in specialized instructional methods, resource rooms, and comprehensive professional development in special education across national school systems.

In public policy terms, mainstreaming validated the principle that segregation based solely on disability status is inherently discriminatory and educationally harmful. It firmly established the legal precedent that education is a fundamental right, not a conditional privilege, for all children, regardless of physical or mental condition. While the concept has since been largely superseded by the inclusion model in many areas, mainstreaming laid the indispensable legal and infrastructural groundwork for integrating specialized services within the general education framework, fundamentally altering the trajectory of special education pedagogy forever.

7. Criticisms and Debates (The Shift to Full Inclusion)

Despite its initially progressive intent and significant legal mandate, mainstreaming faced considerable academic and ethical criticism, ultimately leading to the widespread advocacy for full inclusion. The primary critique centered squarely on the conditional nature of the placement. Critics argued vehemently that requiring a student to earn their place in the general classroom perpetuated a harmful two-tiered system and implicitly suggested that the student was a temporary visitor in the mainstream environment. If a student failed to keep up with the unaltered curriculum or behavioral expectations, the default action was often immediate removal back to a more restrictive setting, a pattern that reinforced the student's identity as "different" or "unfit" for the regular classroom environment.

Furthermore, early implementation of mainstreaming often failed to provide the necessary, intensive support structure within the general education classroom itself. General education teachers, frequently lacking specialized training in disability pedagogy or adequate co-teaching support, struggled immensely to meet the highly individualized academic and behavioral needs of

mainstreamed students, often leading to ineffective instruction for the student with the disability. This pervasive lack of systemic adaptation meant that while the physical integration (presence in the room) occurred, true academic or social integration was often superficial, potentially leaving the student feeling isolated or struggling severely in an environment not truly equipped or trained to serve them effectively.

The most enduring and significant debate surrounds the interpretation of the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)** mandate. While mainstreaming interpreted LRE as a continuum--requiring movement from self-contained settings toward general education based on readiness--advocates for full inclusion argued that the general education classroom is inherently the LRE for every child, and that failure to adapt the environment constitutes an illegal denial of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). This fundamental philosophical disagreement prompted many jurisdictions to shift decisively away from the conditional "pull-out" model of mainstreaming toward the collaborative, systemic change inherent in the full inclusion philosophy, viewing the latter as a far more robust, equitable, and philosophically consistent fulfillment of modern educational rights.

Further Reading

[Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) - U.S. Department of Education](#)

[Inclusion \(education\) - Wikipedia](#)