

Mainstreaming

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Mainstreaming

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Education, Special Education

1. Core Definition

Mainstreaming is an educational practice referring to the selective integration of students with special needs into general education classrooms for specific, appropriate periods, rather than for the entirety of their school day. This approach is predicated on the belief that students with disabilities can benefit both academically and socially from interacting with their typically developing peers, provided they receive adequate support to ensure their successful participation. The fundamental premise is that while some specialized instruction might be best delivered in a separate setting, opportunities for normalized experiences within the general classroom are invaluable.

During these mainstreamed periods, students typically bring with them a suite of individualized supports designed to facilitate their learning and engagement. These supports can range from practical accommodations such as a **special chair** tailored to their physical needs, to the presence of a **one-to-one aid** who provides direct assistance, guidance, and behavioral support. Furthermore, **assistive technology devices**, which might include communication aids, specialized software, or adaptive tools, are often crucial components, enabling students to access the curriculum and communicate effectively within the mainstream environment. The selection of these supports is meticulously planned as part of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

For instance, a child diagnosed with **Down's Syndrome** might be integrated into a general education classroom for subjects like art, music, physical education, and English classes. These subjects are often chosen for mainstreaming due to their potential for fostering social interaction, their less rigid academic demands compared to subjects like advanced mathematics or science, or their capacity for accommodating diverse learning styles through hands-on activities. The goal is to provide beneficial exposure and participation without overwhelming the student or the general education teacher, carefully balancing the need for specialized instruction with opportunities for social and academic integration.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of **mainstreaming** emerged as a significant development in the history of special education during the mid-20th century, representing a philosophical and practical shift away from the widespread segregation and institutionalization of students with disabilities. Prior to this period, children with special needs were predominantly educated in separate schools, special classes, or even residential institutions, often isolated from their non-disabled peers and denied access to the

general curriculum. This isolation was increasingly challenged by civil rights movements and growing advocacy for the rights of individuals with disabilities, which began to question the ethics and effectiveness of segregated educational systems.

The legal impetus for mainstreaming gained substantial ground in the United States with the passage of landmark legislation. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), a pivotal piece of legislation, mandated that all children with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The LRE principle stipulated that students with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, and that removal from the general education environment should only occur when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

It was within this legal framework that **mainstreaming** became the primary interpretation of LRE. It represented a compromise: acknowledging the need for specialized instruction and support, while also recognizing the importance of social integration. The term itself reflected the idea of bringing students from the "sidestream" of special education into the "mainstream" of general education. This period saw the development of "resource rooms" and "pull-out" programs, where students would receive specialized instruction for part of the day and then join their peers for other activities. While a significant step forward, mainstreaming laid the groundwork for further debates and evolving philosophies in special education that would eventually lead to the broader concept of inclusion.

3. Key Characteristics and Implementation Models

A defining characteristic of **mainstreaming** is its partial and selective nature. Unlike full inclusion, where the general education classroom is the primary placement for all students, mainstreaming involves students spending only a portion of their school day in general education settings. The decision of which classes or activities a student will be mainstreamed into is highly individualized, determined through the comprehensive Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, which involves parents, educators, and relevant specialists. These decisions typically consider the student's academic abilities, social-emotional needs, and the specific demands of each subject, often favoring non-academic subjects or those with a strong social component.

The implementation of mainstreaming heavily relies on the provision of comprehensive support systems to bridge the gap between a student's needs and the general classroom environment. These supports are not merely supplementary but are often critical for a student's ability to participate meaningfully. They include the deployment of paraprofessionals or instructional assistants, often referred to as one-to-one aids, who provide direct, individualized support in the

general education setting. Furthermore, access to specialized equipment, such as adapted seating, communication boards, or advanced assistive technology, ensures that students can physically and cognitively access the learning environment and curriculum. Modifications to instructional materials, assignments, and assessments are also commonly employed to match the student's learning profile.

Common implementation models for mainstreaming typically involve a combination of general and special education environments. Students might attend a general education class for subjects like art, music, or physical education, as described in the initial definition, where social interaction and participation are key learning objectives. For more academically demanding subjects such as mathematics, reading, or science, the student might receive instruction in a specialized resource room or a separate special education classroom, where a special education teacher can provide targeted, intensive instruction tailored to their unique learning styles and pace. This dual approach aims to provide the best of both worlds: specialized instruction where necessary, and integrated experiences where beneficial, thereby maximizing the student's potential for both academic growth and social development.

4. Rationale and Intended Benefits

The fundamental rationale behind **mainstreaming** is multi-faceted, aiming to provide students with disabilities an education that is both appropriate to their individual needs and integrated into the broader educational community. One of the primary intended benefits is improved **social-emotional development**. By interacting regularly with non-disabled peers, students with special needs gain invaluable opportunities to develop social skills, practice appropriate social behaviors, and form friendships. This exposure can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and stigmatization often associated with segregated placements, fostering a greater sense of belonging and self-esteem. Peers without disabilities also benefit from these interactions, learning empathy, understanding, and acceptance of diversity.

Beyond social gains, mainstreaming also seeks to provide **academic benefits**. Placing students in general education settings, even for a portion of the day, exposes them to the general curriculum and higher academic expectations that may not be present in entirely segregated environments. While direct instruction in core subjects might still occur in special education settings, the time spent in mainstream classes can reinforce learning, provide different instructional perspectives, and encourage students to strive for greater academic achievement. General education teachers, when adequately supported, can also offer diverse teaching strategies that may benefit students with special needs.

Furthermore, mainstreaming serves a vital role in fulfilling legal mandates, particularly the principle of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education

Act (IDEA). This legal framework requires that students with disabilities be educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible. Mainstreaming was an early and influential interpretation of this mandate, ensuring that schools moved away from automatic segregation and began actively seeking opportunities for integration. It represented a crucial step towards providing equitable educational opportunities and preparing students with disabilities for life in a diverse society, promoting their civic engagement and independence.

5. Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its noble intentions and historical importance, **mainstreaming** has faced considerable challenges and criticisms, particularly as educational philosophies have evolved towards more comprehensive inclusive models. One significant challenge lies in the potential for students with disabilities to experience feelings of isolation or inadequacy within the general education classroom. If supports are insufficient, or if the general education teacher lacks adequate training or resources, a mainstreamed student might physically be present but remain socially or academically disengaged, leading to what critics sometimes call "tokenism" rather than true integration. Without meaningful participation, the intended social and academic benefits can be severely diminished.

General education teachers often face substantial hurdles when implementing mainstreaming effectively. Many teachers are not specifically trained in special education methodologies, behavioral management for diverse needs, or the comprehensive application of accommodations and modifications. The added responsibility of adapting lessons and managing a classroom with a wider range of learning needs can lead to increased workload, stress, and a feeling of being ill-equipped, potentially impacting the quality of instruction for all students. Resource constraints, including insufficient paraprofessional support, limited access to specialized materials, and lack of collaborative planning time with special education professionals, further exacerbate these difficulties.

Philosophically, a primary criticism of mainstreaming is that it places the onus on the student with a disability to adapt to the existing general education environment, rather than requiring the system to adapt to the student. Critics argue that mainstreaming often implies that students must "earn" their way into the general classroom, suggesting they must reach a certain level of readiness before being permitted to join their peers. This contrasts sharply with the philosophy of full inclusion, which posits that all students inherently belong in the general education classroom from the outset, and that the educational system has a responsibility to provide the necessary supports and modifications to make that environment accessible and beneficial for everyone. This ongoing debate highlights the complexities of ensuring equitable and effective education for all learners.

6. Mainstreaming vs. Inclusion

While the terms **mainstreaming** and **inclusion** are sometimes used interchangeably, they represent distinct approaches within special education, each with its own philosophy, implementation strategies, and historical context. Understanding the nuances between them is crucial for appreciating the evolution of educational practices for students with disabilities. Mainstreaming, as previously discussed, is characterized by the selective placement of students with special needs into general education classrooms for specific periods or subjects. It often involves a "pull-out" model, where students receive specialized instruction in a resource room or separate setting for parts of the day and are then "pushed in" or integrated into general education for other subjects, usually those where their participation is deemed less academically demanding or more socially beneficial.

The core tenet of mainstreaming is that students with disabilities should be integrated when they can keep up with the general education curriculum with some support, or when the social benefits outweigh the academic challenges. The focus is often on preparing the student to fit into the existing general education structure. This model assumes that the general education classroom is the standard environment, and students with disabilities are brought into it under specific conditions. The responsibility for adaptation often falls more heavily on the student and the special education staff who prepare them, with general education teachers primarily delivering their standard curriculum.

In contrast, **inclusion** is a more comprehensive and pervasive philosophy that advocates for all students, regardless of disability, to be educated together in the general education classroom as their primary learning environment. The inclusive model emphasizes the adaptation of the general education environment, curriculum, and instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of all learners. Rather than students being "pulled out," inclusion typically employs "push-in" services, where special education teachers, therapists, and other support staff come into the general education classroom to provide support collaboratively alongside the general education teacher. This approach fosters a shared responsibility among all educators for the learning and well-being of every student, promoting a belief that diversity enriches the learning experience for everyone. Inclusion is generally considered the more progressive and preferred approach in contemporary special education discourse, advocating for a fundamental shift in educational paradigms to create environments where all students are not just present, but truly belong and can thrive.

7. Contemporary Relevance and Evolution

In contemporary special education discourse, the term **mainstreaming** has largely been superseded by the broader and more encompassing philosophy of inclusion. While the specific word "mainstreaming" might be heard less frequently in policy discussions, the fundamental

principle it championed - the right of students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers - remains a cornerstone of modern special education. The evolution from mainstreaming to inclusion reflects a deeper understanding of pedagogical best practices and a stronger commitment to equity, shifting from a model of selective integration to one of universal belonging and access.

Despite this shift, elements of mainstreaming persist in current inclusive practices, particularly for students with significant and complex needs. For instance, some students may still spend portions of their day in specialized resource rooms or receive individualized pull-out therapy, even within an overall inclusive framework. These practices are now typically viewed as components of a continuum of services designed to ensure the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for each student, rather than as an end goal in themselves. The key difference lies in the underlying philosophy: modern approaches aim for the general education classroom to be the default setting, with specialized services provided within or as closely linked to that setting as possible.

The ongoing challenge in education is to find the optimal balance between providing necessary specialized support and maximizing integration for every student. This requires continuous professional development for general education teachers, robust collaborative planning between general and special educators, and adequate resources to implement effective accommodations and modifications. The legacy of mainstreaming lies in its role as a crucial stepping stone, initiating the movement away from segregation and paving the way for the more holistic and equity-focused practices of inclusion that shape special education today, continually pushing schools to adapt and innovate to serve all learners effectively.

Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Mainstreaming \(education\)](#)

[Understood.org: The Difference Between Mainstreaming and Inclusion](#)

[Understood.org: What is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)?](#)

[Understood.org: What is the Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\)?](#)

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