

Cooperation between general and special educators is essential for mainstreaming to work.

# Competencies needed by school counselors in order to facilitate mainstreaming

by Pamela V. Cochrane



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One of the principle themes inherent in the concept of mainstreaming is cooperation between general and special educators (Caster, 1975; Kaufman, Gottlieb, Agard, & Kukic, 1975). Without this cooperation and coordination of effort, educators will not attain the ultimate goal of mainstreaming: providing an appropriate education for exceptional children in the most conducive environment. Educators must assume joint responsibility for exceptional children being educated in public schools.

School counselors are in a unique position to contribute to the success of mainstreaming. Their training and experience provide them with specific competencies that relate directly to the facilitation of this process: knowledge of development psychology, interpersonal relationships, communication, counseling and consulting techniques (Cochrane and Marini, 1977a & b). However, mastery of additional competencies not usually included in counselor education training sequences would enable counselors to take a leadership role in the mainstreaming process. This article suggests competencies that could be included in traditional pre-service and in-service training sequences that would enable counselors to make significant contributions to the education of exceptional students. (Deno, 1970).

The suggested competencies were developed by the author while director of the University of Florida Dean's Project. Extensive interviews with elementary school counselors in the field, and with counselor education and special education faculty were conducted before and during the initial development. In the spring of 1977, the final list of competencies was mailed to 220 faculty in public and private universities, half of which had Dean's Projects, and half of which did not. The faculty were asked to report their "opinion of the degree of mastery of each competency necessary for the elementary school counselor to facilitate mainstreaming in his/her school." The rating scale that was used was:

5. Mastery of the competency is absolutely essential for success.
4. The competency is needed at a rather high skill level.

3. The competency is needed at an average level.
2. The competency is useful but not essential
1. The competency is not needed.

Responses were received from 136 faculty members from every state in the nation (70 from counselor education faculty from universities without Dean's Projects; 66 from Dean's Project personnel). The modal response on all but five of the competencies was "5," that mastery is essential. The modal response for competencies 1.1, 1.2, 2.2 and 3.1 was "4," that competency is needed at a rather high level.

### Specific competencies

#### 1. School Law/State Regulations

The elementary school counselor should have knowledge of:

- 1.1 federal, state and district regulations relating to exceptional student programs.
- 1.2 federal, state and district regulations relating to the identification of exceptional students.
- 1.3 federal, state and district regulations relating to the placement of exceptional students in the least restrictive environment.
- 1.4 due process as it relates to exceptional students.
- 1.5 his/her responsibility relating to confidentiality of exceptional students' school records.
- 1.6 the principles and practice of nondiscriminatory testing.

In order to act effectively in the mainstreaming process, elementary school counselors must have knowledge of school law, both federal and state, and state and district regulations that relate directly to exceptional child programs as well as the identification and placement of exceptional students. This knowledge enables counselors to effectively meet the needs of exceptional children within the parameters specified by the laws and regulations, and helps ensure that mandated special services are provided by individual districts. Specific emphasis should be placed on Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Act of 1975, as it relates to and effects local special education programs.

The counselor also should have specific knowledge of the due process procedures that are followed in order to protect the rights of students. These procedures may vary from district to district, but will be fundamentally similar to the procedures outlined in PL 94-142. In order to further protect the rights of students, the counselor should be aware of the regulations relating to the confidentiality of student records.

Nondiscriminatory testing is also mandated by PL 94-142, and because of the role the counselor may play in the testing procedure, s/he must be aware of the implications of the use of tests judged by some to discriminate against ethnic and racial minorities. This issue may not be resolved in the near future, but counselors should know the arguments for and against the use of standardized tests for the placement of students in special education programs.

#### 2. Identification and Placement of Exceptional Students

The elementary school counselor:

- 2.1 has knowledge of the characteristics of exceptional students.

- 2.2 has knowledge of the definition of each area of exceptionality accepted for use in his/her district.
- 2.3 can initiate and/or implement the use of appropriate instruments for screening for exceptional students.
- 2.4 has knowledge of, and can implement the referral process accepted for use in his/her district.
- 2.5 knows the procedure recommended in his/her district for the placement (staffing) of referred students.
- 2.6 is aware of and can assemble all assessment data pertinent to the placement (staffing) decisions about referred students.
- 2.7 can interpret the assessment data for members of the placement committee, including parents.
- 2.8 has knowledge of the continuum of services available to exceptional students and the least restrictive environment appropriate for placement of individual students.

Eligibility for special education services is contingent upon accurate and prompt identification of those students who are in need of special services. In order to identify exceptional students the counselor must possess reasonable knowledge of the characteristics of exceptional students as well as the definition of each area of exceptionality. This knowledge will facilitate the counselor's full participation in all aspects of the special education program.

Screening for exceptional students and subsequent referral for possible special education services can be implemented by the counselor. Both procedures may be district specific, but can still be presented to school counselors on a general basis. The procedures used to reach placement decisions will also vary from district to district, but will have basic similarities that are mandated by P.L. 94-142.

The personnel responsible for placement decisions should be presented with as much information as possible that is relevant to that decision. Because of the school counselor's familiarity with students in his/her school(s), it is logical that s/he assume partial responsibility for collecting that data. Also, the counselor will further insure appropriate placement if s/he is able to successfully interpret this data to everyone, including parents, who take part in the placement process.

Counselors also need to be aware of the continuum of services available to exceptional children and the least restrictive environment appropriate for the placement of individual students. This knowledge is essential if mainstreaming is to be successfully implemented in a school district.

#### 3. Organization and Delivery of Services

The elementary school counselor:

- 3.1 can provide assistance in the design of individual education programs as mandated by P.L. 94-142.
- 3.2 can provide assistance in the implementation of individualized education programs.
- 3.3 can facilitate formal and informal communication between school personnel responsible for mainstreamed exceptional students.

- 3.4 can provide teachers with affective intervention skills for interaction with exceptional students.
- 3.5 can use appropriate counseling techniques with individuals and groups of exceptional students in a continuum of educational settings.
- 3.6 can use appropriate counseling techniques with parents and families of exceptional students.
- 3.7 can serve as a referral source to community agencies that provide services to exceptional students and their families.
- 3.8 has knowledge of and can implement the district recommended procedure for review, re-assignment and dismissal of exceptional students.

School counselors can apply many of their traditional skills in the organization and delivery of services to exceptional students. Of the competencies listed in this section, the only ones that provide a new role deal with the design and implementation of individual education programs (IEP's) as mandated by P.L. 94-142. The components of the IEP's could be coordinated by counselors, and success could be insured by the maintenance of a formal or informal system of communication between all personnel responsible for mainstreamed exceptional students. This communication is absolutely essential when more than one professional is responsible for individual students.

Counselors can share their affective intervention skills with teachers who work with exceptional students, as well as use these skills on a one-to-one and small group basis with exceptional students. The affective domain is the area that school counselors are traditionally prepared to concentrate on, and this concentration should be extended to include all the students in the schools.

Counselors are also in a position to work effectively with parents and families of exceptional students. This can be accomplished by direct counseling with the parents and families, or by referral to appropriate community agencies.

The final competency deals with periodic review of the placement of exceptional students. Yearly review is mandated by P.L. 94-142, and counselors can insure that this is completed as scheduled.

#### Conclusions and implications

The State of Florida has been the vanguard in the development of a state-wide elementary school counselor program, and because of this the competencies listed

here were developed for use with this professional group. Many states have not taken this approach, and in those states there will be very few elementary school counselors. However, with few modifications this same list of competencies can be used to develop pre-service and in-service training components for middle and secondary school counselors.

There are several approaches that could be taken to enable pre- and in-service counselors to attain mastery of these competencies. A traditional one semester course could be developed and offered that would cover all the material suggested. Another approach that would increase flexibility is the development of modules and components that present the same information. Modules could be integrated into already existing courses, or could be used as a complete training sequence. The inherent flexibility of modularization would enable students to proceed at their own pace and to pursue individual interests.

It is probable that counselor education training programs already enable mastery of some of the competencies listed here. The list could be used to identify specific program deficits, and action could be taken to remedy this deficit. Any measure taken to enable school counselors to assume a leadership role in the mainstreaming process will further help to insure its success. The responsibility for the success of mainstreaming rests with educators, and not with the children. The sooner we face this responsibility and marshal our resources, the sooner we will be able to provide a truly appropriate education to all children in the mainstream of education.

#### References

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