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FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

A LEARNING CENTER PLAN FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

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A LEARNING CENTER FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Past and present efforts to evaluate, classify, describe and provide educational programs for exceptional children are being seriously questioned by many in the field of education. The specialized, self-contained classes that have evolved for handicapped students, the degree of specialization found in graduate courses, state credential requirements, and public school financing may be operating to the detriment of the students we are ostensibly seeking to help (Dunn, 1968). Questions about the possible limited effectiveness of special education curriculum and instructional techniques, and doubts about cost effectiveness along with more profound doubts about the social-psychological impact of the traditional special classes have increased (Blackman, 1967; Connor, 1968; Quay, 1968; & Lilly, 1970). A recent survey of fifty-seven special education researchers, conducted by The Council for Exceptional Children Information Center, identified behavior modification, alternatives to traditional disability groupings, and special class placement as the principal current issues in the field of special education (Jordan, 1971).

Many parents, as well as educators, question the desirability of traditional self-contained classrooms for many exceptional children. Labeling, damage to self-concept, compartmentalization, concerns by minority groups, and loss of stimulating opportunities, as well as questions about the constitutionality of some current testing and grouping practices are matters of increasing concern. Furthermore, some school districts are unable to offer a full range of programs for handicapped students because of the demand for special classes each with its own specially trained teacher.

The decade of the seventies will certainly be marked by the search for, and widespread adoption of, new methods of instruction and new models for service delivery. The emphasis may well shift from the medico-psychological model to educational models whose philosophical and empirical foundations lend themselves to objective,

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results that can be combined with an opportunity to evaluate cost-effectiveness.

Philosophical Premises

The authors share two basic premises about exceptional children. The first belief is that all exceptional children are, first and foremost, learners—learners who have often been labeled and placed in separate, self-contained rooms because of handicaps. Viewing the child as a learner rather than labeling him may create an optimism and open-mindedness that will result in a more favorable atmosphere for the actual instructional situation. The educational program and teacher must now assume the responsibility for providing productive instructional experiences. This shift in emphasis from labels to learners may help avoid some of the self-fulfilling prophecy effect of traditional, self-contained rooms of categorized handicapped students.

The second belief is that it is desirable to remove as many exceptional children as possible from separate self-contained rooms and integrate them for optimum periods of time in regular classrooms. This assumes, of course, that the exceptional children are prepared for, and supported during, the time they are in regular classrooms.

THE MADISON SCHOOL PLAN

With these two philosophical premises in mind and as an outgrowth of an earlier program which was based on an engineered classroom concept of behavior modification (Hewett, 1967), the authors began to conceptualize an operational learning center that would facilitate the grouping of students according to their learning deficits as opposed to traditional grouping by exceptionality and/or diagnostic categories (Soloway, 1970). In the past students often were tested, classified, and grouped according to how well they perform or rate on a variety of measures that evaluate such factors as vision, hearing, motor coordination, intelligence, and perceptual ability. If a child scores from 88 to 112 on the intelligence scale or continuum, he is rated "average or normal" and is placed in the regular classroom. If another child scores significantly higher or above 132 on the intelligence continuum, he may be classified "gifted" and be given "enrichment opportunities." Still another child may score below 70 and be placed in a special classroom for the educable mentally retarded (EMR). In the special classroom for the educable mentally retarded, he will be seen as a different kind of student, taught in a different way, with different expectations; and, sadly enough, he will often become different. The same can be true of students who have auditory, visual, motoric, physical, or perceptual handicaps.

With these facts in mind, the authors were confronted with the task of organizing an education program with instructional settings for several traditional disability categories into one learning center that could serve a typical elementary school. It was decided that one scale or dimension that is common to all children, regardless of possible handicaps, is their *readiness for regular classroom functioning*. This common dimension seemed to encompass four basic behaviors or abilities that all children must have in order to succeed in school.

1. The first set of behaviors includes the ability to pay attention, respond, and follow directions as formulated in a developmental sequence (Hewett, 1964). In The Madison School Plan, this has been expanded to include the additional pre-academic skills of taking part verbally or orally and doing what one is told in terms of reasonable class limits. These skills are basic to succeeding in a regular classroom, regardless of the student's visual, intellectual, or physical abilities.

2. The second set of behaviors includes the academic abilities of being neat, being correct, being able to read, spell, write, and do arithmetic.

3. The third set of behaviors requires that the child must be able to function in the instructional settings that occur in the regular classroom—when the teach-

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er is giving directions from the front of the room, when the child is working in a small group, or when the child is working independently. Differing kinds of concentration or attention are required when the entire class is reading silently for information than when the teacher is explaining a new concept at the chalkboard.

4. The fourth area is related to the student's susceptibility to regular classroom rewards or reinforcers. While some children are motivated by report card grades, others are encouraged by a smile or word of praise from the teacher, and a few may respond better, at least initially, when given candy, tokens, or checkmarks that can be exchanged for a small prize.

The authors felt that an instructional program, encompassing the above concepts in a learning center environment, would offer optimum opportunities for children to learn the skills necessary to facilitate maximum regular classroom integration. The operational model provided an instructional program for exceptional children based on their specific learning strengths or weaknesses rather than traditional categories for the handicapped. Identified as The Madison School Plan, the project was initiated in September, 1968, and was made possible through a California State Department of Education Title VI-B Grant.

The project was directed toward the demonstration and evaluation of a plan for the education of a group of handicapped children who would have been labeled educable mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, and visually or auditorily impaired. This plan, to be described in detail below, provides for the education of these children in a setting that allows free flow of children between the regular classes and the specialized facility (learning center). The plan permits the elimination of traditional disability grouping for all but administrative purposes and provides an instructional program that is linked to a continuous assessment of those educational variables that have hindered the performance of the exceptional child in the regular classroom in the past.

The grouping framework utilized in The Madison School Plan was organized by creating four points along the dimension of readiness for regular classroom functioning: Pre-Academic I, Pre-Academic II, Academic I, and Academic II (the regular classroom). Each of these sections in the learning center sets an expectancy according to the four areas of behavior that were mentioned above.

Pre-Academic I

This section of the learning center was conceived as a largely self-contained class grouping of six to twelve students and is essentially an engineered classroom (Stillwell, et al., 1970). The strongest instructional setting, teacher-child or child-independent, is used since students in this section need to learn to sit still, pay attention, respond appropriately, take turns, follow simple directions, get along with others, and begin to develop the ability to function in small groups (see Figure 1). While the emphasis is on the pre-academic skills discussed above in the first set of behaviors, academic written exercises in reading, spelling, handwriting, and arithmetic represent the major experiences during the day. It is while working on these academic materials that the students learn to ask for help and finish a task. All of these behaviors are appropriately rewarded. Many of the open-ended, multilevel tasks in use were developed or evaluated by the teachers in the original engineered classroom project and are now commercially available (Taylor, Artuso, & Hewett, 1970). The highest level of reinforcement for each student is used. This is a continuation of the checkmark system, backed up with candy, food, free time, or a free chance which is patterned after the Monopoly game's "Take-A-Chance" card.

Pre-Academic I is a launching experience in this learning center concept in much the same manner as the engineered classroom was originally intended. The students do not spend any time in the regular classroom. The visually and auditorily impaired, as well as the mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed students who need to master the pre-academic skills necessary to function in the regular classroom, would start in this section of the center. They are children who need the experience of the Pre-Academic I learning environment. The environment is labeled, not the student; and in this way we attempt to avoid the negative effects that sometimes occur with student labels.

Pre-Academic II

At this level the emphasis shifts from pre-academic skills to academic skills. However, the big shift is in the kind of work setting. In Pre-Academic I the children work individually at self-contained units with a teacher or aide. Little or no group work or interaction occurs. In Pre-Academic II, six to eight children sit at a cluster of tables, getting all of their instruction from the teacher who is in the middle of the cluster. The children work together, cooperate, are paired off, and encouraged to raise their hands and participate verbally. This section is designed to foster social interaction and verbal participation in group lessons which was missing in the original engineered classroom design. In terms of reinforcement,

the checkmark system is still used; but students usually are limited to trading their completed Work Record Cards for fifteen to twenty minutes of free time. Beginning with Pre-Academic II, each student is integrated into a regular classroom for at least a few minutes during the day.

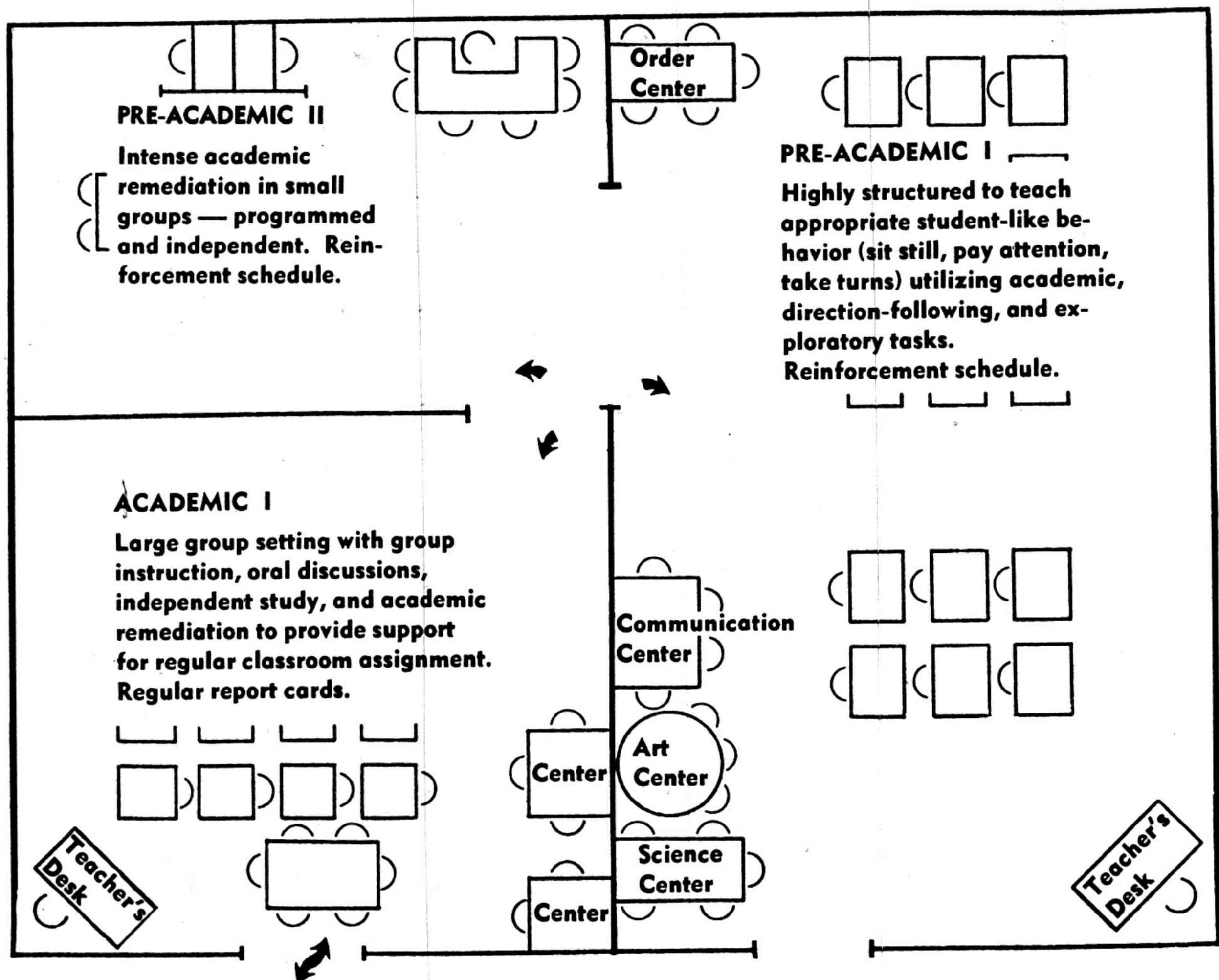
Academic I

This section of the learning center is a simulated regular classroom setting for twelve to twenty-five children who have primary academic problems that can be dealt with in a large teacher-class setting. These students have the ability to spend increasing amounts of time in the regular classroom and have a readiness for the more traditional system of grading in terms of effort, quality of work, and citizenship. In this setting, the teacher leads class discussions and presents lessons to the large group in reading, arithmetic, spelling, social studies, and English. Students are grouped within this setting in the same manner expected by a regular classroom teacher; and opportunities for silent, independent study are also present. Emphasis is placed on helping each student with the specific skills needed to increase the amount of time spent in a regular classroom.

Academic II

This is the regular classroom in the school composed of twenty-eight to thirty-five students. It follows the typical

FIGURE 1
Two Typical Learning Center Classrooms with Connecting Door



public school program. All handicapped students in the program are assigned to one of the Pre-Academic I, Pre-Academic II, or Academic I settings. Those in the latter two groups are integrated for varying periods of time in Academic II.

Background Procedures

The existing six elementary and two secondary learning centers are located in regular public schools in Santa Monica, California. They serve the exceptional students as well as numerous regular students in the individual schools where they are located. Transportation of students is held to a minimum since the problems of having separate self-contained classrooms for each area of exceptionality have been dramatically reduced.

Students with auditory or visual handicaps are assigned to an appropriate setting within the center and are integrated into regular classrooms for varying lengths of time, depending on their abilities. These students, as well as other students in the center, have the services of specialists in oral communications, lip reading, braille, mobility instruction, and speech therapy. It is not unusual to see several mentally retarded or visually impaired children profiting from participation in an oral communication lesson that is designed primarily for the hearing handicapped. The same might be true for lessons in mobility or speech articulation.

Usually two classrooms that are next to each other, with or without a door between them, are converted into a center. It is important to keep in mind the needs of the students to be served and the composition of the groups before arbitrarily setting up the rooms within the center. It has been found that, although the room arrangement described in Figure 1 is generally in use in the operational centers in Santa Monica, there must be flexibility. Several other variations have been utilized when the particular needs of the students in any one school require different instructional emphasis (see Figure 2).

A daily schedule for the three settings within the learning center is carefully planned to provide individual, independent, and group lessons that relate to specific student needs. Commercially available materials are utilized, programed instructional techniques are employed, and teacher preparation time is kept to a minimum (see Figure 3).

The model implies, in essence, that first you assign children to a grouping category based on a pre-placement inventory and that once this assignment has been made you zero in on a continual detailed assessment over a period of time, rather than stop with just an initial assessment which is often the case in traditional programs.

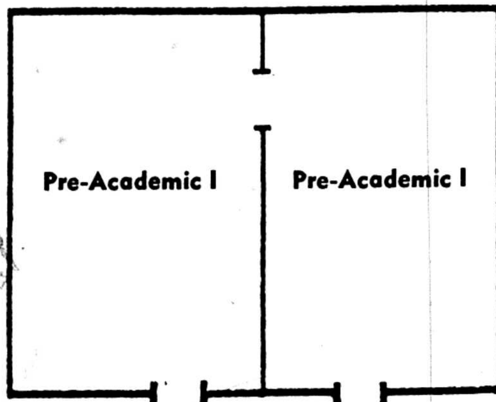
In order to maintain a continuous assessment of each child's progress and provide data for reassignment to different groupings, two types of procedures are utilized—a checkmark system in Pre-Academic I and II, and a numerical rating system in Academic I and II. In the checkmark system, the teacher gives each child a maximum of ten checkmarks, in the form of alphabet letters that represent attending to work, following directions, etc., *every twenty minutes* during the day. These checkmarks are given in two categories; a possible five are given for the child's performance with the instructional tasks and five for his classroom behavior. When giving checkmarks, the teacher may give all ten checkmarks to bolster strengths or elect to withhold several checkmarks in either category to alert the child to an area where he needs to improve.

At the beginning of the school year, as many of the educationally handicapped children with learning disabilities as possible are assigned to regular classrooms. As students are referred out to the special program because they cannot handle the behavioral and academic demands of the class, an attempt is made to preserve some link with the regular class by having the child return for morning exercises, P.E., music, etc. As they demonstrate academic and/or behavioral improvement an effort is made to increase their time in the regular class until optimum placement is reached. The evaluation procedures aid in determining this reassignment. The EMR children start in the special program, but early in the school year efforts are made to establish a regular classroom link for them. During the year, their progress on the evaluation ratings is noted and integration increased whenever possible.

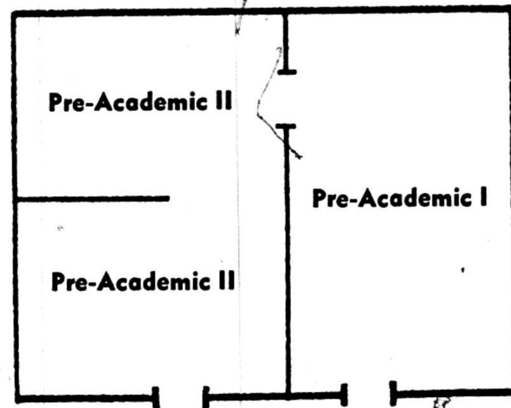
During the 1970-71 school year, 73% of the educable mentally retarded students and 85% of the emotionally disturbed students from the six learning centers were integrated into regular classrooms for one hour or more each day. By the beginning of the 1971-72 school year, 36% of the educable mentally retarded students and 41% of the emotionally disturbed students were integrated full time into regular classrooms.

The authors are aware that any attempt to overhaul practices in special education has to take two things into account. *First,* one must be able to demonstrate that what is to be done has more in it for the exceptional child than what was being done before. One is accountable to show that this child is, indeed, better off in Pre-Academic I or II than he was in the EMR or EH class. The *second* thing one must do is answer the questions of practicality and ease of replication. If the program costs two or three times as much as existing programs and if it requires more teachers and additional facilities, it's prob-

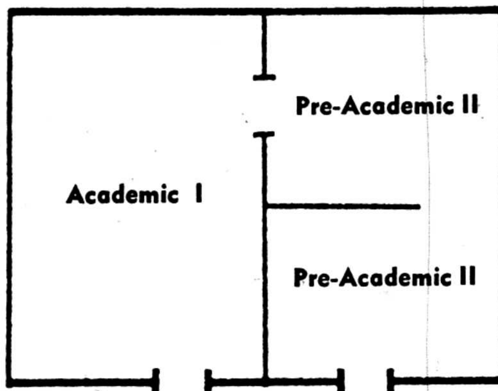
FIGURE 2
Variations of the Learning Center Classroom Model



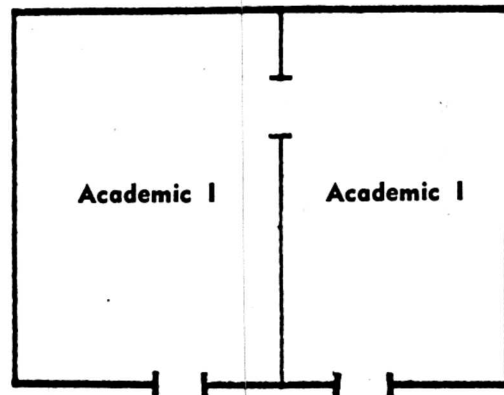
All of the students need to learn how to sit still, follow directions, take turns, and raise their hands. As some students progress, they will move into the Pre-Academic II and Academic I portion of the center, which will evolve as one of the Pre-Academic I settings is converted. This is the most widely used variation when starting a new center and may be the best starting model.



Some of the students are beyond Pre-Academic I and can function in Pre-Academic II settings, but are not ready for Academic I. This will evolve later as one Pre-Academic II setting is converted into an Academic I.



None of the children in this model need the experiences of Pre-Academic I since they can all follow directions, raise their hands, and take turns.



All of the children can be integrated into regular classrooms during the day and need only occasional supportive instructional assistance.

ably not going to be replicated very many places. In sum, the child has to be given something more than he is given in the traditional framework, and the field of special education should not be encumbered with costs beyond any reasonable level.

SUMMARY

The Madison School Plan, developed over a three-year period, attempts to combine traditional categories of exceptionality along a dimension of readiness for regular classroom functioning and provide for the instruction of educable mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled students in a setting allowing an increased flow of children between regular classrooms and a specialized resource facility. The plan permits the elimination of traditional disability grouping and the resultant self-contained classrooms. The exceptional students are not labeled, but considered to be learners in various stages of preparation for return to the regular classroom. Assessment and evaluation of the children is based on academic and behavioral functioning, and a major goal of the plan is to increase the amount of time the exceptional child participates in a regular classroom program.

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FIGURE 3

Daily Schedule of Activities in the Learning Center

Time	Academic I	Pre-Academic II	Pre-Academic I
8:45	Typical Class Opening Exercises		Direction-following Task
9:00	Reading: Typical large class reading program. Group and individual reading. Basal Readers, SRA, etc.	Reading: Remedial-reading instruction or motivation for story writing.	Reading: Individual Reading
		Story writing or remedial follow-up task.	Word Study
		Word study. Individual reading, programmed material.	Skill Reading
10:00	. . . . Recess	Recess	Recess . . . .
10:15	Arithmetic: Typical large class program. Discussions. Group and independent work.	Arithmetic: Arithmetic instruction. Specific follow-up tasks. Remedial opportunities.	Arithmetic: Arithmetic Drill / Instruction / Follow-Up
10:55	Spelling	Language Development and/or Spelling.	Language Skills
11:25	. . . . Lunch	Lunch	Lunch . . . .
12:25	Read to Class.	Pre-Academic II students join ← either → group according to their individual needs.	Exploratory: Art, Science, Order, Communication
12:40	Social Studies, English, Art		
1:50	. . . . Recess	Recess	Recess . . . .
2:00	Physical Education		Opportunities for individualized remedial instruction.
2:30	Individual Tutoring		
3:00			

CLASSROOM FORUM

Edited by Austin J. Connolly, University of Missouri

PROBLEM 18
Much has been written about parent-teacher counseling, but little is written about teacher-pupil counseling. As a special education teacher, I have several students who need some assistance. What is my role?

You, as the classroom teacher, do have a role in student counseling—a major one. Ira Gordan, in his book *The Teacher as a Guidance Worker*, states that "the teacher is the basis for any good guidance program." The teacher who has daily contact with each child is likely to have established a rapport which cannot be attained in periodic visits to a counselor. The teacher also has the benefit of personal observation, only some of which may get formally recorded in anecdotal records.

Not all teachers are a good source of guidance and counseling, however. In fact, many teachers are unable to attain a counseling relationship; it is particularly difficult for the regular class teacher and the exceptional child. The child's scholastic ineptness, his immaturity or misbehavior may create a barrier which the teacher is unable or unwilling to bridge.

In addition, the teacher is not necessarily the sole source of counseling assistance. All personnel with whom the child comes in contact—principal, counselor, school secretary, janitor, etc.—should assume the guidance function. Occasionally, professional assistance outside the school will be necessary—mental health clinics, private practice, welfare offices, vocational rehabilitation services, etc. Two of the major services the teacher can provide are recognizing the limitations of her professional training and guiding children in need of professional help to the appropriate resource.

Fortunately, the majority of students do not require the services of a specialist; they do need the opportunity to interact with a sensitive adult who is skilled in interpersonal relationships. It is at this point that teachers can benefit most from the philosophies employed by guidance and counseling personnel:

1. Accept the child for what he is—another human being with equal rights and concommitant responsibilities.
2. Assume the goal of assisting the student to become an independent individual.
3. Be a good listener—the child must work through his own problems, a process that generally takes time.

The teacher who is willing to meet her counseling and guidance responsibilities must do more than pay them lip service. She will need to establish a classroom climate conducive to the discussion of adjustment problems, etc. Much can be done in group settings, and materials are now available for this purpose (i.e., *DUSO* Program and *Coping With* series from the American Guidance Service, Inc.). The teacher should also establish time each day to meet with students on a one-to-one basis. Students may be scheduled on a formal, rotating basis (i.e., one each day) or at the request of the teacher or student. In meeting with students on an independent basis, the teacher should:

1. Assist the child in attaining a realistic, but positive viewpoint of *himself* and his *abilities*.
2. Assist the child in viewing others and situations in a positive way.
3. Assist the student in exploring the viable alternatives and solutions to any predicament.
4. Assist the student in gaining confidence to assume responsibility for his own decisions.

The watchword for today's education is *relevance*. There are no tasks a teacher can perform which are more relevant to a child's future than the counseling functions listed above.

PROBLEM 20
I teach in a special EMR class. Our district has decided to explore the reintegration of some of my students into the regular class. What is my role?

All readers are invited to send their solutions to Problem 19. The October, 1972 issue will summarize contributions by readers. Complimentary subscriptions will be awarded each month for the best solutions. Send your response to the Editorial Offices, *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 6635 East Villanova Place, Denver, Colorado 80222.

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