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**The Effects of Full Inclusion on Special Education  
Placement and Practices:  
The Case of a Hartford Elementary School**

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Each year more schools adopt inclusion models in which students with disabilities receive special education services in general education classrooms. This idea has evolved over time starting with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1966. (US Dept of Ed) This legislation encouraged public schools to include special needs students, through granting them federal funding based on the number of special needs students in their school. Then in 1975 the government passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), which created the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). (US Dept of Ed) The IEP helped to specialize education for individual students who required special needs, ironically exactly as it sounds. The idea was that if each special needs student had special teaching strategies and techniques then they would be able to catch up with their peers academically. During the 1980's teachers started mainstreaming students, which meant the special education students who were in separate classrooms from the regular education classroom would slowly join the regular education classrooms. The special education students would leave their classroom for one or two classes a day in which they were feeling confident or where they were performing well. This design was so the students could work to be mainstreamed into society upon finishing schools. Then in 1990 the EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). (US Dept of Ed) The two major grounds for this legislation were to promote anti-discrimination and a long term investment on the nation's economic health. Then in 2002 there was a lawsuit brought on by five students and their families against the State of Connecticut and its Board of Education. The suit demanded more time for

students with disabilities to be with students without disabilities. (PJ Class action Lawsuit 2002) This lawsuit was particularly influential in Hartford, along with the reforming of the IDEA. In 2004 IDEA was reformed creating two major requirements for public schools; (1) there should be free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students and (2) that this education should be in the least restrictive environment (LRE). (US Dept of Ed) Every time a federal law is passed regarding public education each state and local school board is left on their own to interpret the laws. When IDEA 2004 was passed Hartford interpreted the FAPE and LRE to mean that all students should be fully included in regular classrooms. As a result, in the fall of 2005 all Hartford Public School children were in the same classroom, regardless of special education labels. The full inclusion model differs from the previous mainstreaming model partially, but in a significant way. Inclusion means that students are always with the regular classroom students and are pulled out to work with a special education teacher only once in awhile.

This swift change, as it was decided in July 2005 and implemented in September 2005, brings up some interesting questions as all teachers are now expected to teach all students. There is no longer a way to just separate students out of your classroom by giving them a learning disability. For example, some teachers have been able to get students out of their classroom because they were afraid of them and didn't want to or couldn't teach them. Dr. Malone brought up a good point in a New York Times article in the fall of 2005 when he said, "The simplest way to

deal [with the toughest students]... is to teach the kids who are easy to teach and warehouse the most difficult ones.” (Salzman) However, at this point in Hartford there is no place to ‘warehouse’ students because of full inclusion. So, teachers now have to teach all students no matter what their labels may be. This makes me wonder if there has been a new way to warehouse students, which leads me to ask; Has the process of labeling special education students changed according to teachers’ perceptions since full inclusion was implemented in 2005? Has there been a change in labels? Have any labels been used more or less?

Originally I wanted to look at the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, but the Hartford Public School District did not provide the best place for this. Hartford Public School district is 94.7% minority (2004-2005) and Hobbs Elementary School (pseudonym) is 98.2% minority (2004-2005), so this study cannot address the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education but, we can see and understand whether the special education labeling process has changed in a predominantly minority area. (Strategic school profile)

Students labeled with special education needs are taught by specifically trained teachers, except today in Hartford they are now included in regular education classrooms. Regular classroom teachers now are required to teach all students, which they me feel unprepared for. My research, although wasn’t looking at teachers’ preparedness for inclusion, did aim to see if the labeling process has changed because regular classroom teachers are now teaching them. When a

change occurs that affects the entire district there has to be many changes in order for the policy to be successful. So as I have come across research in many areas of inclusion there was not much to be found regarding the labeling process. I found this important because there are many ways to help a student, but how do they help the teachers. Through my research I find ways that the labeling process has helped teachers handle inclusion, even though I don't find it to be the final answer. Also, part of the reason students were placed in separate classrooms was to avoid discrimination because of their disabilities and now all the students are together. So, it is interesting to find out how they are protecting against discriminating special education students, because unfortunately it doesn't seem to be phased out of society.

From my research I have found that although there has been no change in the actual process a student is labeled or diagnosed, there are more students being misdiagnosed with ADHD or Other Health Impaired (OHI), and fewer students labeled with serious emotional disturbance (SED). The special education teachers believed that the broadening of labels and overuse of ADHD medication was influenced by the policy changing schools to full inclusion.

Teaching in an inclusive school can be difficult for teachers who are not familiar with special education students, because they now have an added responsibility every day. Some believe that this isn't really a problem, as Richard Shade argues that we have built a

“system that has communicated for 20 years that separate education is better and that special education personnel have some ‘special way’ of dealing with children, general educators are reluctant to suddenly believe that their classrooms are the best place to educate all students. Additionally, many are reluctant to believe that they have or can be trained to have the necessary skills to make it work.” (Shade, 2001)

Shade’s quote states a belief that many teachers have, but may not be necessarily true. Teachers now not only have to learn how to teach special education students, but more importantly believe that they can do it successfully. With the help of special education teachers and administrators they will be able to confidently teach all students. Research has shown that teachers’ comfort level with teaching special education students has a great affect on their students’ behavior and their teaching effectiveness. (Lago-Delello, 1998) When teachers feel they cannot teach the special needs students in their classroom, there is heavy pressure and stress placed on them. Friend and Bursuck (1999) suggest for those teachers to work with teachers who have the special education training in order to learn and become more comfortable with their students. However, many times the special education teacher is “floating” between two or three classes throughout the school day. When this happens special needs students become ignored, which hurts the student even more. Another problem for special education students, particularly behavioral problems, in inclusion classrooms is to experience difficulty gaining acceptance from teachers and peers in the classroom, and in turn are at higher risk for serious academic failure. (Martin, 1992) Teachers in regular education classrooms most often are not prepared to deal with students identified with any type of SED, but students are placed in full inclusion classrooms where the teacher

will probably not meet their needs and as a result will most likely magnify their behavioral problems. (Lago-Delello, 1998)

Ray McDermott (2006) argues that students being labeled as Learning Disabled (LD) are highly failed by their school. He blames rumors and says, “Change the school, and LD becomes less relevant.” (McDermott, 2006 pg 15) His argument continues to say that our schools, “relentlessly create conditions under which rumors of disability and disadvantaged background are attended to and their person counted, theorized, explained, and remediated.” (McDermott, 2006 pg 16) This idea that rumors, in other words prejudice, about students create the idea that there is something wrong and needs to be fixed is disturbing. So, if the school places all students together, which is full inclusion, will McDermott’s idea that LD will diminish or become less relevant true? This theory sounds good and probable, but it’s hard to believe that just by changing the school to full inclusion that all prejudice by teachers and students will diminish.

This was a qualitative study based on classroom observations and interviews with teachers and administrators at Hobbs elementary school (pseudonym). The methods of my research have remained consistent as I thought that Hobbs elementary school would provide me with rich information, and it was the easiest to access for me in terms of distance. Although, I encountered some difficulty when contacting teachers and administrators at Hobbs, eventually I was successful and everyone I was in touch with was extremely easy going. When I first met Mr.

Snuggles (pseudonym), the assistant principal, I realized that now that I was in the school I would have little problem getting quality research. He immediately put me in contact with Mrs. Wormwood (pseudonym), who is the special education teacher for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and she graciously accepted me into her classroom and said, “Anything you need just let me know, anything I can do to help.” I found out her classroom schedule and decided when I would come in to observe, and sometimes help with her class. I ended up visiting her class the most, because she floated to the two other 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms and sometimes taught her own class. Observing Mrs. Wormwood allowed me to see how the special education teacher taught the classroom, compared to the other 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, Mr. Swinkle (pseudonym) and Mrs. Blinks (pseudonym). I also interviewed all three teachers to find out what they thought had changed since full inclusion in regards to the labeling process. I asked open ended questions in order to let the interviewees explain their answers in their own words, particularly the question about the labeling process. (See interview questions attached in appendix A) I wanted to, one know the labeling process, and two find out if there were any changes. I also knew that each teacher was able to see their students IEP, so I was curious to see if they had more IEP students or less, or if there were more or less students being labeled with any particular special needs since full inclusion. Through talking with the teachers informally I was able to learn more than I probably needed at some times but, most of the teachers seemed more comfortable just talking with me rather than in sit down formal interviews. So, I tried to take as much advantage of their free time as I could so that I didn’t miss any information that

could be interesting to my research. Throughout the observations I was watching to see how teachers approach students, if the teacher treated everyone the same or certain individuals different. I also was listening to the teacher to find out how the teacher approaches students and what approach the teacher thinks is appropriate, and how successful the teacher is with her approach.

I also conducted formal interviews with a total of 8 faculty members, one principal, the three 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers mentioned above, two 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, and two kindergarten teachers. These other interviews allowed me to see what their individual roles were before full inclusion and after. Also, I was able to better understand the process of labeling students now and before inclusion, from their opinions. I planned to reach an understanding of the labeling process and if it has changed since full inclusion last fall. I found it extremely useful to have a couple teachers from different grades even though scheduling worked out so that I was only able to get three different grades, it was good to have a variation. Also my interview with Mr. Snuggles was useful as he is the administrator in charge of special education.

Hobbs Elementary school is in one of the poorest cities in the U.S., it is also considered one of the roughest cities in the Northeast. The Hispanic grocery store across the street accurately represents the neighborhood and the majority of students attending the school. The school has about 480 students in the kindergarten through the sixth grade. There is no green grass; no trees and the

swing-sets hang over pavement. Teachers' lessons are frequently silenced by the roaring wail of sirens as police cars and ambulances fly past the school. Inside, the hallway walls are covered with students' work, which rewards and provides some motivation to them. In Mrs. Wormwood's classroom, which is similar to all the classrooms, are more motivational posters such as, "character is a little thing that makes a big difference." The teacher also has the room decorated according to the seasons. For example, the fall had leaves, Indians, turkeys, pilgrims, etc. Then in the winter it changed to snowmen and snowflakes. All this decoration seems to bring a happy welcoming feel to the classroom, but the students don't seem to recognize the decorations that way. My first time in the classroom it was empty, and the second time it was filled with students who were typical 6<sup>th</sup> graders, loud, hyper, some eager to learn and others pre-occupied with whatever was going on in their 6<sup>th</sup> grade minds.

Through my interviews I found out special education is controlled by state and federal laws. First, I was told that the "single most important thing to remember about special education is it is a legal procedure and the written form contractual, protected by law (PL91142-federal Law requiring 'free and equal education to all.') regardless of sex, race, creed or disability." (Wormwood interview 1) I was also told that the actual labeling or diagnosing process also follows legally mandated guidelines. The process, which hasn't changed since inclusion because it is a legal process, can be summarized in 4 steps. First, the student is referred by a teacher or parent to the special education teacher because they believe there is

something unusual about the child's learning or behavior in the classroom. The next step is the special education teacher administers cognitive tests. The two most commonly used are the WIATT-II and the Woodcock Johnson. Then the student is given a full psychological evaluation by the school psychologist. The school psychologist then reviews the cognitive tests and the psychological tests and determines his conclusion. The school psychologist then brings his findings to a meeting with the Planning and Placement Team (PPT). The PPT consists of the special education teacher, school administrator, school psychologist, the parent or guardian, and in some cases (depending on the student's age) the student. Finally the goal of the PPT meeting is to design the students IEP. Throughout this process there are different forms to fill out in order to keep track and file away everything that has been discussed and decided. Also, it is important to note that anything said during the PPT regarding the student must be documented and if necessary put into the student's IEP. This is important because many teachers are afraid to speak up during these meetings, because whatever is said must be done.

“There are definitely more students diagnosed with ADHD, or as it is now referred to ‘other health impaired’ (OHI), within the last two years.” (Wormwood Interview 1) Teachers and other health professionals are following the same legal process when diagnosing students, but some changes have unfolded in the trends associated with labeling students. The reason for this new label of OHI, which doesn't sound bad, is used more often since inclusion is because this diagnosis is given to disabilities believed to be treatable with medicine. Teachers who believe

their student's medication will "heal" them helps the teacher believe that the student will not be a problem in the class. OHI is an example of a broad way to diagnose students and in turn make teachers more comfortable with a student who does have a special need in their class. If a teacher believes that a student's special need can be controlled or treated with medicine then they are more confident that they can teach the student successfully. For example, Mr. Blinks said to me during an after school conversation that most of his IEP students are on medication so most of the time he doesn't notice much difference between those students or any others, unless they are having a bad day or he thinks they forgot to take it. This idea of the "quick-fix" through medicine seems to be a common answer in our society as a whole and has clearly affected education too. Mrs. Wormwood has also expressed that she is upset that so many students are being misdiagnosed, in her opinion, with ADHD medicine when she believes they really need more than medicine, like therapy and guidance. She estimated that less than 75% of the students on medication really do need it.

During the first day I observed a class it was the Success For All (SFA) reading class, which was students from one of the lower levels. The teacher was trying to explain a story to the students and get them involved by explaining a project, which involved them bringing in twigs and sticks in order to build a miniature "Indian Long House" of their own. As some students started asking questions about where or what to get specifically, others just sort of spaced out of the classroom. The question session ended and the teacher when on to explain the

story and referencing the Long Houses, making their project relevant and encouraging them to want to do it, but those students whose minds wandered started to come back to the class, but inappropriately. The students started getting “antsy” in their seats and whispering and arguing with their neighbor. Most of them were clearly uninterested in their teacher’s story and her questions. It seemed that these students got lost in the class with either lack of interest or lack of understanding the material. One student repeatedly asked if he could go help a certain teacher, which has been a reward for good behavior, but was repeatedly given the answer no, because he wasn’t behaving in class. The teacher said, “How can I send you to help someone else when you can’t behave in here?” The student didn’t have much response, but was clearly not going to give up. As the student became more obnoxious and interruptive, the teacher threatened to send him back to another teacher’s classroom. He clearly didn’t want to go to that teacher’s class because he would get in trouble for being sent out of SFA, but didn’t want to stay in Mrs. Wormwood’s class either. So, I walked out of the classroom with the student and began to ask him what was wrong and why he was acting out. He didn’t have many answers but to me seemed very upset that he was not able to help in the office like he planned. I finally got him to promise to behave in class and brought him back. When we returned he tried to answer some questions and did get involved in the class, appropriately. I found out later that he does have an IEP and is taking ADHD medication, but the teacher thought that he was not necessarily hyperactive. I wondered well what his label was, because he definitely wasn’t able or willing to sit through that class. She said he just needs attention; he

is “babied” at home and can’t handle it when he doesn’t get what he wants. I thought that was an interesting assumption, but she explained that his Grandma is in all the time making excuses and promising better behavior out of him, but that nothing really has changed. So, she said, “I am trying to help him realize he can’t get everything he wants just because he wants it. He can’t handle that.” If I was not in the class that day, this student may have got in more trouble because I wouldn’t have been able to talk to him and get him to come back to class. This is a student that is trying to be helped with the “quick-fix” of medication, and not being helped with his more serious attention problems.

One other trend is that it has become more difficult to diagnose and label a student with SED. Mrs. Wormwood said that this label has almost been “extinct”. She think it is partly because of the money it costs to treat these students, who often have to be sent to a separate school which can cost about \$60,000 a year, which is a little less than ten times as much as a student who is taught at their school. The other part is because of inclusion and regular classroom teachers are not prepared to handle a student with such a special need. This brings up the idea that they were ‘warehousing” the students who were acting out and disturbing the class. Now, all teachers will have to learn how to manage the class with students who may have been sent to a different classroom before inclusion. Although, Mrs. Wormwood does admit that since the reducing of such labels they may be “mislabeling just to get servicing for students who don’t fit into a ‘category’.” So, I am not sure that because they have reduced some labels there still aren’t ways to

get some ‘disorderly’ students out of the classroom. She told me a story about a student who was acting out and being extremely aggressive and violent, but was labeled OHI. It took four years and for this student to hit a teacher for them to finally label him SED and send him to another school. But, because of the aggression and violence they had to call the police into the school because the teachers are not trained to handle students in situations like this. As a result, instead of labeling the student SED and spending the money they waited for the student to strike a teacher and then get the police involved, which means that the student will also now have a police record.

A commonality found during interviews with regular classroom teachers was there positive view of inclusion and there quick response that not much has changed. Mrs. Wormwood said that most of the regular classroom teachers would most likely think that inclusion was going well and that not much has changed. She was right, Mrs. Taverna said, “Not much has changed. I mean yeah I have more students with IEP’s but the disruption in the class is about the same and I still have Mrs. Wormwood’s support when things do get difficult.” (Taverna interview 1) I think this can be partly attributed to her belief that it is supposed to be better, but also because she relies heavily on Mrs. Wormwood, as they all do rely on their special education teachers. One of the special education teachers, Mrs. Randall, said that “she can’t be late to a certain teacher’s class or she will immediately receive a phone call asking where she is.” (Randall interview 1) She also added that there a few children who are particularly disruptive in that class. Regardless

the differentiating views of teachers bring up more questions about inclusion that this research unfortunately does not answer.

During one visit after school hours I was talking with Mrs. Wormwood and Mrs. Randall, who share a room, and a student came in and the Mrs. Wormwood said proudly, “This is one of our success stories.” As she asked the reluctant student if inclusion worked for her and if she liked working outside of the regular classroom or with the classroom better, she whispered, “I pulled her out.” The student did agree that she would rather do her work outside of the class because; she had to read a book that was obvious to the class was a lower level. Although the school is full inclusion, there are still students that do feel more comfortable being pulled out of the classroom and fortunately for some there are teachers that recognize the need for them to be pulled out. I gathered that Mrs. Wormwood, although not “enraged”, as she said, with the changes in education she takes what she knows and adds it to her bag, “like Mary Poppins”, to help her be more successful teaching. Although this particular situation does not prove my research question I found it to be interesting because even though this teacher does not totally agree with inclusion, she has found ways to make it work. She does not denounce the schools decision she just works with it and I find this to be a good quality that she deserves credit for.

In conclusion, my research has found that many special education teachers and school psychologists have tried to help regular classroom teachers’ transition to full inclusion

through broadening their labels of special education and medicating more students. They have done this in order to protect students from discrimination or prejudice. This also gives teachers more confidence, through a little deception, that they can handle students that require special needs in their classroom. Although my research was only done for a short time I find that it gives sufficient information to determine these conclusions, because the teachers have seen the transition into full inclusion for a full year. I do think that this research should be addressed in more depth in order to find out if these trends continue and to fix them, especially the overuse of medications. Finally, I have a feeling that special education policies and practices will be debated for a long time, if not forever, because every student learns different and every teacher teaches different. In order for there to be one answer we would all have to be the same, which will probably never happen.

## Appendix A

### Background Information

- 1) What is your position and how long have you been at this position?  
What does this position entail?
- 2) How long have you been at McDonough? Where were you before?
- 3) What type of degrees or training do you have?

### Special Education and the 'Labeling' process

- 1) What are the steps to testing a student for special education?
- 2) What is your role in the process, including assessment and giving special services in the classroom.
- 3) After a student is placed in special education what kind of 'special education' do they receive?
- 4) If a student is perceived as needing special education but testing proves otherwise, what does the school do to help the student in the classroom?

### Special Education since mainstreaming

- 1) How has the assessment procedures changed since mainstreaming?
- 2) What has been the greatest challenge with mainstreaming special education students?
- 3) Have you seen more or less students being 'labeled' special ed since mainstreaming has been implemented?
- 4) In your experience have you seen more minorities, boys, girls or any particular group labeled special Ed?

### General

- 1) What can you tell me about Special Education, as far as students here at McDonough?
  - Teachers and students major needs?
  - Any particular patterns or trends?
- 2) What kind of communication do you have with parents once a student is diagnosed?
- 3) Is there any other relevant information that I didn't ask, but may be helpful for me?

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Strategic School Profile

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