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Students in Need: Benefits and Challenges of a Special Education School

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Abstract: This study examines a special education therapeutic private school in an urban city. The purpose of this study is to look at the problems special needs students face outside of school before and after they are referred to this school. I want to find out what techniques and programs are implemented within this school that help these mentally disabled students cope with their issues and ultimately transition back into their district public schools. I interview top administrators within the school and support my data through a quantitative data analysis by Wagner et al (2005 and 2006). Ultimately, I find that the Cary Grant School has many programs in place to positively affect students socially and academically. The newest program in place is a Positive Behavioral System known as the Color System. To date, little research has been done on PBS model in private special needs schools, therefore it is necessary for more research to be done on the topic.

Introduction

Research within the field of Special Education is particularly important because these students are the most in need of supports and interventions from outside sources. Special Education is “provided to a child with an identified disability who needs specially designed instruction to meet his/her needs and to enable the child to access the general curriculum of the school district.” (CT Department of Education) Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) all students with special needs are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Under these provisions a child with special needs is awarded the most appropriate education program to fit his or her needs. Whether this means a teacher aid within the classroom, different approaches to teaching, technology use, or even being sent to a private institution that will cater more specifically to the students needs, the student’s district must provide the means.

Special Education has a very unique and important place within the education field. It is unlike any other type of education because of the students it caters to. Each student with a disability requires a different type of education with different techniques and practices. One way of educating one student may not work for another, even if they have similar disabilities. Much research has been done on public schools and the inclusion model, where special needs students are integrated into the same classroom and school as regular students. There are mixed ideas about whether the inclusion model is the most beneficial learning strategy for students with special needs. The arguments supporting the inclusion model are that it is a less restrictive environment and students are able to participate in all of the activities that general education students do. But while the inclusion model may be more beneficial for some students, it does not necessarily

work for everyone. Some students need a restrictive environment, even if it is temporary, in order to learn. But, more research needs to be done on schools that specialize in special needs and practices for an accurate comparison. This research is especially important now because in the past few years, due to the IDEIA many schools have adopted a new behavioral model, which emphasizes positive reinforcement instead of punishment. Research within the field of special education is very important because the field is always evolving. New techniques are always being discovered and with the emergence of technology new ways of learning for students with disabilities have come about. Through my research I look at a private institution that has recently adopted this Positive Behavior Support (PBS) model.

The Cary Grant School¹ is a small private institution founded in 1968 to provide students in grades K-12 with an extremely structured and therapeutic educational experience. The Cary Grant School is connected to the Branchport Hospital and is also part of a mental health facility. Because of the resources that the school has access to, it is able to provide the students with more than just a private learning experience. Clinicians, therapists, psychiatrists, and psychologists are available if a student needs support beyond learning. All students within this school are mentally disabled in some way and most are emotionally disturbed (ED) layered with other mental issues due to trauma and hardships in their own lives. According to Wagner et al (2005). “Children and youth with emotional disturbance are a group that has serious, multiple, and complex problems. Parents report that a wide range of disabilities affect their children, including anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, oppositional behavior, and psychosis.” (p. 91) The goal of the Grant School is

¹ All names of the school, its surroundings, and people have been changed

to help the students cope with their issues by providing them the necessary supports with the hope that they will ultimately return back to their district public schools. Through my research I look at the ways in which the school is able to serve this population of emotionally disturbed students, and how it has achieved a high success rate of sending students back to their hometown public schools.

Research Question:

Despite the Grant School’s previous reputation of success they have recently changed the behavioral model and have adopted new programs within the school, which the staff hopes will help students to return back to their home districts more quickly. My overall goal is to find out in what ways the Grant School most benefits its students through implemented programs and other services and in which ways a private institution can be a challenge for students. My research question is: According to administrators, what are the benefits and challenges for students of a special education private school?

Thesis:

My research on the Cary Grant School shows that students in special education schools have a severe lack of academic confidence and self-esteem due to factors from their home life and previous school setting. I discerned from my interviews that, according to administrators, if a positive reinforcement system is enforced in the schools and at home, students can have a better chance of academic and social success in their home school districts.

Literature Review/Case For Significance

Dunlap, et al. (2010) state that, “problem behaviors have been identified consistently as perhaps the greatest impediment to effective educational services” (p. 9)

These researchers look at the importance of implementing individualized behavior plans for students with the most severe behavioral problems, specifically emotional disturbance, in helping them succeed within the public school setting. Dunlap, et al (2010) test one PBS model called “Prevent-Teach-Reinforce” (PTR). This model “is intended to address the needs of students with the most serious behavior problems, and it may be implemented in the contexts of general and special education” (p. 11). They select a random sample of individuals who express some behavioral issues within the classroom; not the most extreme cases. They report on two randomly selected students that have been given the individualized PTR program and other necessary supports. The researchers examined the behavioral outcomes of the students and analyzed the impact of the program on their behavior. Both students positively benefited from the program, which showed that individualized programs can work for students with low-grade behavioral issues in a general education classroom. These researchers do not report on school wide implementation of PBS programs and also do not look at students with extreme emotional disturbances.

My research will shed light on a school wide PBS program and how it operates in a school with students who have severe emotional and mental disorders. I am looking to see if a program like this can be successful for a school as a whole, or if it tends to only work for individual students. Dunlap, et al. (2010) want to make their audience is aware that this study is preliminary research to something that needs to be looked at much more in-depth. “These questions of external validity will require careful research to understand the parameters in which the model can be replicated successfully in the diverse school contexts where effective behavior support is needed.” (p. 18) More research within

different school settings is important to see if the PBS model truly works for students with emotional disorders in various educational contexts.

Much of the previous Special Education research has been done within an inclusion model setting, whether in public, private, or charter schools. Very little research has been done within a special needs specific school that accepts only students on a need basis. One author who did do research within a segregated setting though, is Katherine Brewer (2006). Brewer looked at teacher and administrator perceptions, through interviews, of which methods and strategies were most successful in this school and how this environment benefited the students it served. Her research question and methods are similar to mine in that she is looking at staff perceptions within one specific school but the programs in place at the school she researched varied from the ones of my school. The school in which she researched implemented a Point System and a Level System. Within these two systems students earn points based on three categories, “behavior (how they behave individually or towards adults), Social Interaction (how appropriately they interact with each other), and Task (whether they complete or refuse academic work)” (p. 11). If the students have issues throughout the day with one of these they drop down a level and they lose privileges. The students can be dismissed from the classroom and unable to return or have privileges until they go through many predetermined steps. Through Brewer’s research she found that some teachers called this system “punitive”, meaning that they thought it was too harsh and didn’t reinforce positive behavior, while others liked the system and thought that the only way to teach students with emotional disturbances was through the loss of privileges and other forms of punishment. The types of punishment in this system can force students out of the classroom, which is not always

academically beneficial. Some of the teachers thought the, “behavior modification system needed to be changed to be more positive and less punitive” (p. 17). Through my research I show a different type of system, the Positive Behavioral System (PBS), that does encompass a more positive aspect to behavioral consequences. Brewer’s (2006) research is important to mine because the differing programs can be compared to see which system seems to benefit special needs students more.

A necessary piece for anyone to succeed in school is parental support and guidance. Parental support is even more necessary for students with disabilities because they need to be in a structured and reassuring environment. Sammy J. Spann, Frank W. Kohler, and Delann Soenksen (2003) examine parent perceptions in their disabled child’s special needs programs through a telephone survey. They found that many parents felt disconnected from the school and planning of their child’s individualized education program (IEP). Many parents were dissatisfied with how the school handled their child’s needs saying, “The teachers think that my child should sit around and vegetate all day.” (p. 235) and the parents felt that the only way to get into contact with the school was by their effort. Through talking with administrators at the Grant School I found the opposite to be true, and I will explore that aspect through my findings. Although Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen’s (2003) research examined special needs programs they did not look at a school that specialized in Special Education. It is interesting to compare the opposing views of parents and administrators, because these groups are on opposite sides of the spectrum. Spann also used a phone survey that can provide short, quick responses, which may not give the best insight into the issues.

Because all of these studies are fairly new it shows that there is still much need for further research within this field of special education. Positive behavioral systems heavily came about after the renewed version of IDEA was implemented in 2004. Since then some programs have been tested and put in place within certain school contexts. These trial programs need to be studied to see if the outcomes for students are positive. My research will give insight into how a private special education school has implemented this type of program school wide and how it is operating within this school setting.

Methodology

My research question is based on perspectives of administrators and how they view the programs that are implemented within the Cary Grant School. This type of research is becoming increasingly necessary because of the recent adoption of the Positive Behavioral System within this school and other schools. Some research has been done on the PBS in general education but not much has looked at the models put in place in private special education schools. In order to determine administrators' perspectives I spoke with three of the top administrators at the Cary Grant School. I was granted permission to conduct this research project over a three-month period through Trinity College's Institutional Review Board. I recorded and later transcribed all of my interviews which each last about 30-45 minutes. Each interviewee was given a consent form to sign that stated their protected privacy and that they did not have to answer anything they did not want to. All names of the school, its surroundings, and the people within the school, have been changed to protect their privacy.

I spoke with the special education coordinator of the school, Jennifer Lentil, who has worked at the Grant School for 27 years and has seen the school go through many changes. She works individually with students who have psychotic issues to work to stabilize them. She also works on the curriculum and behavioral management system within the school. I conducted two in-depth interviews with her which each lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Next I spoke with the administrative principal for the elementary school, Shirley Kerr. Shirley works on the curriculum for the elementary school and is also involved in marketing the school to Local Education Agencies to boost referral rates. She has worked at the Cary Grant School for approximately thirteen years and is the supervisor for all of the staff in the elementary school. I also spoke with the middle school administrator, Mary Barbor, who has been working at the Grant School for 25 years. Both interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes as well.

Through speaking with these three administrators I was looking for different methods and approaches, if any, used in the three levels of schooling. I wanted to know if behavioral management styles or other supports differed between grade levels. I also was looking for any differences in the issues the administrators perceived the students having in and out of the school setting. I used a structured guide with questions I felt were broad enough to not persuade my informants' answers but also focused on what I was looking for. Although I used this guide, my interviews with the administrators tended to be very relaxed and I let the conversation take on its own path, which I found, led me to more extensive information.

I also analyzed two parts of Wagner et al.'s (2005 and 2006) study to support my findings from the personal interviews. Wagner conducted a nationwide survey on the characteristics, resources, programs, services, and supports given to emotionally disturbed students within a general education classroom. They used two surveys, the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS). By using two surveys the researchers were able to differentiate issues by grade level, and also look at how transitions between grade levels affected ED students. I am able to support my findings through Wagner's quantitative data and look at any similarities and differences between the findings.

The Cary Grant School - Context

My interest in Special Education goes back as far as I can remember because of my Grandfather's involvement in the construction of the Americans with Disabilities Act and his son, my uncle, who has Down syndrome. Throughout college I have become increasingly interested in the different special education policies and what schools do in order to accommodate students with special needs. In my junior year I briefly studied a special education program within a very diverse urban high school. I found that the special education program was very disorganized and I couldn't put my finger on exactly how the students learned within the environment. There were 154 students within the senior class at this high school and almost 40 of them had special needs. There were only two teachers trained in special education at this school that had to keep track of all of the students' progress and were supposed to be in the classroom with them for at least one period a day. This proves to be impossible within this school because of the limited amount of staff and such high volume of students who need the attention. After learning a

little bit about how this public school operated I was interested in looking into a specialized program that had a reputation for success with special needs students.

My own experience at the urban public high school was reinforced from the moment I walked into the Cary Grant School. The grounds were very well kept and security cars drove around because of the mental health facility and hospital that the school shares the grounds with. I walked through the doors and the special education coordinator, Jennifer, greeted me and we went upstairs. I noticed that there were doors separating every corridor, and all were locked. As we were on our way to her office she said, “As you can see we are a very restrictive, controlled environment, everything needs to be locked at all times.” This is because the students at the Grant School sometimes cannot control their emotions and need the restrictive structure in order to restrain themselves and calm themselves down. She showed me the place where they do this and “take space” safely, it is a small room with a camera inside and a small glass window on the door so that they can be watched at all times. Students are referred to the Grant School because they require this specialized supervision and could not handle the unstructured public school.

The Grant School is a state approved special education facility that serves students on a referral basis from their local education agency (LEA). The student’s public district schools have tracked their progress and have tried different mechanisms and programs to help the student get back on track but nothing has worked. At this point of failure from the public school the student is referred and looked at by the Grant School. A Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting is called which includes a group of professionals (clinicians, therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, special education

coordinators) and the parents of the child to come up with the best educational solution for the individual. Once the child is determined to be in need of special education and shows promise within a specialized school they are admitted into the Grant School with the monetary support of the family's home district. The same team of professionals from the PPT meeting create an individualized education program (IEP) for the student that caters to the individual's needs. The Grant School follows state mandated curriculum but also attends to the student's individual needs through their IEP's. The child can be referred to the Grant School at any grade level and at any time of year. The students are bussed in each day from all over central Connecticut with a wide range of socioeconomic status and ethnicities.

Once at the Grant School the child is placed within a classroom, which becomes their support group. They do everything with the same group of people, which includes classroom learning, group therapy sessions, lunch, and playtime. This creates a strong environment where the student can feel comfortable and supported. The goal of the school is to create enough confidence emotionally and academically so that the student can return back to their home district with a sense of control and reassurance. Many students come in with low self-esteem and a sense of failure, and they need to be emotionally rebuilt so they can create goals for themselves and learn how to cope with their issues. Through a series of intensive supports and programs the Grant School has a high success rate for sending the students back to their home district. But I found it is very important that all parties involved use the proper techniques, including parents, so that the student will feel supported and learn how to deal with hardships. I will briefly lay

out a few of the programs, and then go more in-depth with perspectives from my interviewees later.

First, the student to teacher ratio within the classroom is very low. There are no more than eight students in one classroom with one teacher, an assistant teacher, and additional intensive staff if need be. This helps the students get the individualized attention they need within the classroom and to learn the proper ways of achieving academic success and dealing with their mental issues. Next, there are group therapy sessions within each classroom in the elementary, middle school and high school. Students work within the same group and build a support system through that group. This is a way for the students to talk about and cope with their issues.

One of the newest programs in place, which my literature review reflects, is the Positive Behavioral System (PBS). In the Grant School they call it the Color System and it is only two years old. The color system has three components, red, yellow, and green, and also three expected behaviors students are supposed to follow. The first is pro-social or respectful, the second is responsibility, and the third is safety toward yourself and others. Students are supposed to follow these three behaviors in all realms of their schooling. When a student is on his or her best behavior they are on green and they are getting rewarded for this behavior by earning “Grant Bucks” which accumulate to be used to purchase a prize at the school store. If they are off task or acting out they can fall to yellow, when they are on yellow they still earn Grant Bucks, but not as many. If their behavior is out of control and they are harmful toward themselves or others they fall to red, and they earn no rewards. But if a student falls to yellow or red they have the opportunity to immediately fix whatever they did. This is where the positive restorative

piece comes in and where the students learn how to fix a certain situation. If the student falls to red or yellow they are able to either take space if they need it and calm down and then begin to restore the issue, or begin solving the problem right away. For example, if they hit someone they would apologize to the person and try to understand what they did wrong. Once they do this, they are back on green and everything is okay again. This positive reinforcement can build confidence and help students realize that if they fix what they did wrong everyone will forgive them and move on. It reinforces the notion that if a student acts appropriately they will be rewarded.

Along with building confidence and prosocial behaviors the students are also tracked academically through a program called AIMSweb. AIMSweb is a program to benchmark the students progress through tests and other experiments. Depending on the students need AIMSweb will track progress yearly, monthly, or more frequently if necessary. With this program the school is able to see how a student is doing and if necessary implement or take away academic supports. Because of this students will not fall behind academically and if they begin to the school will intervene.

The Grant School also tries to heavily involve and inform parents. Research has shown that parental involvement and support is crucial for academic achievement and is even more necessary for students with mental instability. At the Grant School students bring home daily parent contact sheets that inform parents on how their child did in school that day. The assistant teacher within each classroom records this data on each student every 15-30 minutes. The report can be very simplistic, as in smiley faces or frowns, or more in-depth if something serious, good or bad, went on during the day.

Parents are also called at least daily, just so teachers can speak with them and try to make a real connection with them.

These examples of the programs and strategies that are implemented within the Grant School are used to boost student success academically and emotionally. They also are used to benchmark students progress so that a students IEP can be adjusted accordingly. The hope is that the students enrolled in the Grant School will fully grasp the concepts of the programs and will in turn be ready to return to their home school districts and back into the regular classroom.

Findings:

Servicing Students in a Vacuum

While I did not have access to parents during my research, due to privacy issues, I came across many sources that indicated parents have a large impact on their child's success socially and academically. This notion was proven by my interviews with the administrators at the Grant School and also through data collected by Wagner et al. (2005) Although I do not want to make a universal claim that families and parents are to be labeled as the cause for the placement of their emotionally disturbed child in special education, because it is not necessarily true, my research along with previous research has shown that they do play a major role. Economic and academic factors plague families of children with emotional disturbance. Through Wagner's (2005) nationwide survey she found that approximately one third live below poverty level, in households with a single parent, and one fifth live in households where one or both parents are unemployed and have not received a high school diploma. (p. 90) Although I do not have this data

pertaining to the Grant School specifically my interviews gave insight into the types of families the students come from.

Wagner et al. (2005) provide countless references to studies that show parent involvement as directly contributing to student attendance, school behavior, and academic performance. But in many cases parents of children with ED have had poor schooling experiences as well. (p. 81) This theme came up in my interview with the administrative principal in the elementary school, Shirley Cutler.

A lot of kids don't have the support at home to do homework... I read an op-ed piece by Malcolm Gladwell the other day and he said, it's time to stop attacking the teachers and think about what's going on at home... it's really important for parents to be supportive. Even if they're not well educated, it's not that difficult to take a walk to the grocery store and help kids make some outside connections. (Personal Interview with Shirley)

Establishing relationships should begin when a child is first born, but if the parents are not able to facilitate that, then the child is at a disadvantage from the beginning. Another aspect that Shirley said contributes to low-social skills and lack of interactions is the use of technology. Many students who are referred to the Grant School have minimal social skills to begin with and those are reinforced by texting, watching television and playing video games. The students may use technology as a way to avoid social interaction.

I have a kindergartner who's probably been sitting in front of a TV for the past 5 years, and if Sesame Street worked, we'd all be geniuses. You know, you can't sit in front of a TV in a vacuum without someone interacting with you. Most of learning occurs really is learned in the context of a relationship, it really comes back to that. (Personal Interview with Shirley)

Forming outside social relationships is very important for anyone, with or without disability. But these relationships become even more difficult for students who already have problems socially and are then pulled out of their home school districts.

Our kids struggle socially, they just do, and they struggle more when they go home and they play with their friends and they can't get along with them, and now they don't get along with them even more because they're outsiders, because they don't go to the schools that all the other kids go to. (Personal Interview with Jennifer)

Wagner et al. (2005) found through her survey that students with ED have very low social skills and self-control. She found that through a sample size of 854 ED children that 27.2% of them had very low overall social skills and 28.8% of them had low self-control. These percentages were compared to other students who had other disabilities, which included visual, hearing, and orthopedic health impairments. The sample size of these students was about 7,483. Of these students approximately 11% experienced both low overall social skills and low self-control. (p. 86) From these numbers and the interviews with Jennifer and Shirley we can see that emotionally disturbed students tend to experience more social problems, which make it hard for them to function in regular society, along with being isolated through attending a private institution.

Parent involvement and attention truly affects a student's learning ability and motivation. Wagner et al. (2005) support the notion of parent involvement but interestingly found that parents of students with ED do help their children with their homework but they do not volunteer at school or attend classroom or school wide events. (p. 92) Through my interviews I found that the administrators were very displeased with the amount of parent involvement at the Grant School.

We have a parent contact sheet that goes home everyday which talks about the kids day...our staff puts so much time into writing and we ask the parents to sign off on it so that we know they've seen the daily report. And they don't come back signed, or my mother saw it but she didn't care. It sometimes (pause) it's hard to service kids in a vacuum and sometimes we feel that way. We have open houses we often have a raffle to try and encourage families to come in because we need them. We need the parents to come in to see that the school and the families need to work together.

Many of our parents are so checked out that it's a struggle for us.
(Personal Interview, Jennifer)

This lack of parent involvement poses a challenge for the students within this school because as Shirley sates, "If your parents won't stand up for you and advocate for you and help you to get the help that you need, who will?" (Personal Interview, Shirley) This quote is extremely powerful and sheds light on the fact that parent involvement is of high importance for educational success. The school cannot do it alone, the support needs to come equally from both angles.

Almost Too Late

Another challenge that affects not only the students but the staff at the Grant School as well is the fact that the students who are referred to the Grant School are sometimes referred very late. Meaning, they have experienced many hardships in their lives and public schooling before a school official or parent realize they need intervention. Many times children with ED have attended multiple schools and have been suspended or expelled. From Wagner et al. (2005) survey they found that 47.7% of elementary and middle school students with ED have been either expelled or suspended at some point in their school careers while 72.9% of secondary school students with ED have been suspended or expelled (p. 88). These immense figures show how much trouble students with ED have in school, and without the proper supports they are unable to get themselves back on track. Some are sent to special education specific school, but not always soon enough.

Districts have tried everything to keep kids in their district schools for as long as possible but it ends up hurting the kid more. And it's sad, at that point their situation could not be worse and it takes a lot of work for us to try and get them moving in a positive direction again. (Personal Interview, Jennifer)

Wagner et al. (2005) data found that there is a gap of almost two years between the time the student is diagnosed with ED, or another similar issue, and the time that a specialized program or any type of services begin. (p. 92) Two years is an extended period of time for students with ED to function by themselves, especially within the same setting that could have caused their issues to begin with. This can result in worsening conditions and make interventions even more difficult. Students with ED need a very structured environment, and usually the public schools and home do not provide that.

Just One of Those Days

On my visit to the Grant School to speak with Mary I sat in the office for about a half an hour waiting for her. I could tell something was going on upstairs because a voice kept coming over the loud speaker, “can someone come upstairs please”, “we need more staff on the third floor”, and “he just left the classroom”. The secretary told me that it was just “one of those days” which I knew from previous interviews that meant some students were acting out and not behaving. Mary came running downstairs to greet me and explained the situation,

Sorry about the wait this is a crazy time of year, right before the holidays and right before vacation. The kids begin to get nervous. They might say that they don't like school but they do, they like and need the structure.
(Informal Conversation, Mary)

Jennifer also told me a similar story from a conversation about tracking students' progress relating to the Color System,

The amount of time kids are on green and percentage of time they're on yellow. You know, do we notice on Mondays and Fridays our kids are on red a lot? Yeah, they're coming back from a weekend. We're just coming back from a week off (because of the snow storm) our kids are having a very hard week, which is standard after long weekend, after holidays, not having power. This was a tough week. (Personal Interview, Jennifer)

Through these statements it is shown that the typically unstructured environment of the home life negatively affects students in school because they get nervous about returning home and the uncertainties that come with it. It was also shown that the unstructured public school environment causes students with ED to lose control of themselves and their academics, and as a result they lose confidence. A common theme found through my interviews is that many students who come in to the Grant School have very low self-esteem due to the lack of support from their previous school and/or home lives.

We have a lot of kids with low self-esteem who have not done well in school. And so they're sitting next to the straight A kid in their public school and they maybe are an anxious kid who earns C's, so already their self-esteem is kind of off. (Personal Interview, Mary)

Mary, the middle school administrator, reinforces the notion that low self-esteem and lack of support within the public schools has truly affected the students who come to the Grant School. The lack of stability in the students' lives before coming to the Grant School causes the student to need a very structured and restrictive environment in order to become stable academically and socially. Shirley told me that she has one student who is in his 13th foster placement, and many home situations are very unstructured and parents do not always put emphasis on their child's education. This contributes to a lack of confidence and motivation at school. Confidence is a key ingredient to a student's success academically and socially. Administrators agree that once a student comes into the Grant School confidence and self-esteem issues are immediately addressed, but they also need to be reinforced within the home.

Learning in a Non-Traditional Way

Wagner et al (2005) state, "Individuals {children and youth} identified as having ED vary in terms of the number and intensity of the challenges they face. Dealing with

this complexity will require an effectively coordinated, multidisciplinary, and multiagency approach to intervention that is also highly individualized.” (p. 93) Once a student is referred to the Cary Grant School a team of professionals, along with parents, meet to make up the individualized education program (IEP) for the student. This program will work to encompass all aspects that contribute to education with the hope that the student will be able to academically and socially benefit. Since the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004 there has been a significant policy push for students with disabilities to be in the general education classroom. But as I found through interviews and Wagner et al’s second study in 2006 this is not always the best solution for students with ED. These students need a more controlled and structured environment to be able to learn successfully. The Grant School provides just this.

We provide differentiated and modified instruction as needed for students in every area. We accommodate their needs. Socially, emotionally, behaviorally, psychiatrically, psychologically, and academically. (Personal Interview, Shirley)

The Grant School has many programs and services in place to support students in the ways Shirley listed. Wagner et al (2006) lay out four main components that mentally disabled students’ require within their educational environment. There needs to be a structured teaching environment, meaning direct and individualized instruction, also students need independent learning strategies, well trained teachers and opportunities for peer-mediated learning (p. 13). The first three components became very obvious to me while learning about the school and through my interviews.

We look at kids in a different way than the public school does. We look at kids, we design programs within our facility that are really kind of out of the box programs to support kids being successful. Um, school is a place

where kids expect to come and learn, and should come and learn and um.. They don't have to do it in such a traditional way here. You know, if they want to lay on the floor to do a lesson, then they can lay on the floor to do a lesson! (Personal Interview, Mary)

This shows that students are able to learn in whatever way they feel is best, even if it is not in the most traditional way. This is part of the individualized learning component. Students are encouraged to access education in a way that is comforting for them. Many times within public schools teachers do not want or have the tools and training to accommodate special needs. Wagner et al (2006) say, "most general educators have had minimal preparation for working with any students with disabilities and do not feel prepared to address the unique needs of students with ED" (p. 14) The teachers at the Grant School are very well prepared to deal with the needs of ED students because of the intensive training they have to go through. Teachers are able to grasp the unique educational environment the ED students need and are able to teach them according to those needs. The class size is also very small with at least two teachers in one classroom, which gives the students a very structured and individualized education. Students who have mental disabilities need very clear instruction according to Mary.

So helping kids to be successful, looking at work in smaller chunks for our kids, breaking things down, using rubrics to really be clear about what our expectations are. Kind of almost guaranteeing success initially, so then you can start building and as you build the academic skill you're also gonna build the self-esteem and how they feel about what they're doing. (Personal Interview, Mary)

Confidence is Key

Emotionally disturbed students need this type of restrictive environment and the individualized attention that comes along with it. The Grant School has programs for tracking students' progress academically and making sure they are successfully learning.

One of those programs is the AIMSweb program, which establishes benchmarks and areas that need improvement. Through this academic interventions can be staged and IEP's can be adjusted depending on the students' progress.

If a student is two or more years below grade level, in whatever subject, we use a direct instruction intervention program that includes the testing so that we can address those lacking skills. Otherwise they're just going to continue to progress two years below grade level or three years below grade level and if you don't put something different in there it will just add to the downfall. (Personal Interview, Jennifer)

This is a huge benefit for students who attend a specialized school. There is more attention on them to prevent them from falling behind in school, or to help them catch up. Once students have a plan of how they are going to go about learning and what practices are going to be used, their confidence begins to build. According to the three administrators I spoke with confidence and self-esteem are two of the most important factors that contribute to academic success. Once a student embodies these two categories they will be able to make strides academically and socially.

The social programs used in the Grant School have proven, through research and observation, to be successful in helping to return students back to their district schools. One of the programs in the school is the Color System, a PBS program, which promotes and reinforces positive behavior and restoration. The color system is meant to help students learn and understand positive behaviors in and out of school. Mary reflects on the three pillars of the color system, "We really put it all together in a very clear curriculum. You know, this is how you behave in the cafeteria as far as socially, responsibly, and safely. This is how you behave in the bathroom as far as socially, responsibly, and safety wise." (Personal Interview, Mary) Learning how to behave in

common areas is very important socially for students with ED, unlike most people they need to learn very specifically how to behave.

The Color System also encompasses a restorative component as well. If a student does something that is disrespectful or hurtful they are able to fix that and it is then forgotten about. This promotes positive behavior and boosts self-esteem because in order for the issue to be dismissed they must do something to fix the situation.

If they become unsafe, they can't follow a direction or they go out of bounds they go to something called 'red'. And as soon as they do their restorative task or they repair a relationship or they do something to restore whatever got them, if they broke a chair or they hit somebody or they ripped a book, once they restore that issue with somebody they go right back into class and they go right back to green... So we're trying to get our kids back in as soon as they do their restorative task we want them back in the classroom we want them back on green so once that's done they go right back. And every days new, so they could have an atrocious day one day and then they come back and they're starting fresh everyday. (Personal interview, Jennifer)

Students are able to walk into the Grant School everyday with a fresh start, and without consequences looming over their heads. It teaches these students "you can mess up and restore that and move on." (Personal Interview, Mary) The previous level system was much more of a "punitive" system according to Mary, where students could lose privileges for up to five days. On the color systems students can restore their actions very quickly and they do not miss out on class time.

According to all of the administrators the positive reinforcement the students are receiving through the color system is, "like the first time ever!" So it is very exciting to them that this new program is working. It will still need revising and readjusting just like all aspects of education do, but the administrators are so far very pleased with the results. It boosts the students confidence much faster and in a 'non-punitive' way. It also has

helped to gain parent support. “I have parents who come and, everyone's got an IEP, and parents come for the PPT meeting and say, ‘you know this is the most positive meeting I’ve had” (Personal Interview, Shirley) This reflects very positively on the program and administrators hope that this program will continue to gain parental support and advance student achievement.

The PBS model works within the context of the Grant School because all of the students are dealing with similar issues. They all have behavioral problems, which affect them in and out of the classroom so their learning styles are similar. They need to learn how to behave appropriately and once they do this their confidence builds because people are not always mad at them or punishing them. According to administrators both parents and school staff are much happier with student behavior, which in turn creates a more positive relationship with the student. These positive relationships boost self-esteem and help the student to feel more accepted in society.

Conclusion:

The President’s Commission of Excellence in Special Education concludes that “special education is a system based on failure” (Wagner 2005, 92) Students need to fail in some way in order to be referred to special education and then failures continue from there until the right solution is found that benefits the student. Through the research I have done and the knowledge I have gained through my administrator interviews at the Grant School I see a successful school that has implemented successful programs. According to administrators the new PBS model has been hugely successful within this specific school to deal with emotional needs, but the school cannot do it alone. Parental support and guidance is one of the greatest challenges the students face and must be

present in order for the child with special needs to fully benefit, academically and socially, from these programs. If all of the necessary supports are in place the student will be able to return back to their home school district and reintegrate into society with confidence both academically and socially.

Limitations and Future Research

My data sources are limited due to the busy schedules of the teachers and other staff at the Grant School. I also sent out a brief teacher questionnaire with the hopes I would get enough responses to use as a data source, but unfortunately only two teachers responded out of the possible twenty-five. I also only collected one-sided perspectives to the educational means of the Grant School. Further research that included parent perspectives would be very beneficial to this field and would widen the knowledge base within the field of special education. Also, looking into a school wide Positive Behavioral System model in a general education setting to see how and if it works there. This would be the best way to see if special education private schools are necessary or if there are ways to include the students with severe mental disabilities into the general curriculum.

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