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“Who Really Gets Left Behind?”
The Impact of “No Child Left Behind” On Special Needs Services at a
Hartford School

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The “No Child Left Behind” Act (NCLB) is a federal law that was passed in 2001. This policy was implemented to improve the performance of public schools through high expectations, goals and standards of success for all. The NCLB act mandates that all students be proficient in math and reading by the year 2014, with the development of “highly qualified” teachers. A strict assessment of students’ standardized tests scores is the government’s basis for evaluating school performance. Since the implementation of NCLB, many school programs have been changed, placing federal funds in areas of need, according to the government. My research project examined the “No Child Left Behind” Act. This is an appropriate and relevant time to be researching this topic, as the NCLB Act is up for reauthorization by the end of 2007. The question that guided my research was; how does the “No Child Left Behind” Act impacted the services for special needs students in an urban public school? I conducted qualitative research, focusing on the changes that have been made in special education at Nodding¹, a local elementary school in Hartford, CT.

The aim of this research is to shed light on the affect that NCLB has on the students of urban public schools. Focusing on special education is particularly important,

¹ All names have been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

as special needs students are often the most vulnerable, especially in urban public schools where there are already so many existing inequalities. Based on my ethnographic research at Nodding Elementary, I argue that the demands of the reform “No Child Left Behind” have resulted in insufficient provision and implementation of services for special needs students in “failing” schools.

Many studies and research have been done on the effects, changes and impacts the NCLB Act has had on education in the last six years. Fore and Voltz (2006) studied the results of standard based curriculum and assessment implemented by the NCLB act. They found that by requiring all students to learn the same thing at the same time is unfair to special needs students, as it does not allow for individual goal setting and the content outside of the general curriculum that is used with special needs student is not accounted for in assessments.² The researchers also say, “Rigidly tying IEPs to grade level expectations may undermine the individualization that has served as a cornerstone of special education.” (p.333) This can be seen often in urban public schools, as they are the schools that are considered “failing” therefore there is a larger emphasis on the students achieving the grade level expectations and less emphasis on their individual needs to succeed.

For clarification and understanding the implications of my study the term “failing” school will be discussed. Under the NCLB accountability system schools are assessed based on the implementation of the state-wide standardized test. The same test is

² Voltz, Deborah L., and Cecil Fore. "Urban Special Education in the Context of Standards Based Reform." Remedial and Special Education 27 (2006): 333. Wilson Web. Trinity College. 3 Oct. 2007.

administered to all students in each school. Upon assessment schools are categorized. This research creates a better understanding of why teachers put so much emphasis on assessments such as the CMT's (Connecticut Mastery Test) because the ramifications of failure are so extreme. Schools that are assessed as being "needs improvement" or "failing" face the most serious consequences. Schools in their fourth year of failure must take at least one "corrective action" such as adopting a new curriculum or replacing some staff. After six years of failure, schools might be restructured, bring in an entirely new staff or open a new charter school in the place of the failing school. A recent U.S. News and World Report article stated that, "The number of schools facing federal sanctions is growing. Nationwide, 4,509 schools serving more than 2 million children or about 8 percent of all federally funded schools have failed to bring enough students to grade level for four or more years."³ NCLB places heavy pressure on schools and teachers to achieve grade level expectations. The phrase "teaching to the test" is commonly used in explaining teacher's focus on standardized tests. Some argue that the focus of NCLB should be providing guidance to "failing" schools rather than punishing them with harsh sanctions.

All schools in Connecticut are required to take the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT). They test used to be administered in grades 4, 6, and 8, but with the implementation of NCLB students are tested every year between the grades of 3-8. In my classroom observations it was apparent that teachers felt the pressure for their students to succeed on the CMT.

³ US News and World Report

The term “highly qualified” teachers is used in the NCLB Act. The NCLB definition of “highly qualified” teachers has influenced to the change in services for special needs students. The law says that in order for states to receive federal funding all teachers must be “highly qualified”. To be deemed “highly qualified” teachers must have, a bachelor’s degree, full state certification, and prove they know the subject they teach. It is in the last requirement that special educators are left behind, because they are not competent in one core curriculum subject. Therefore, the primary deliverer of instruction could never be a special ed teacher, which forces co-teaching in classrooms. NCLB addresses this directly stating;

“The highly qualified teacher requirements apply only to teachers providing direct instruction in core academic subjects. Special educators who do not directly instruct students in core academic subjects or who provide only consultation to highly qualified teachers in adapting curricula, using behavioral supports and interventions or selecting appropriate accommodations, do not need to demonstrate subject-matter competency in those subjects.”⁴

This statement attempts to legitimize not labeling special educators as “highly qualified” teachers. The fact that special ed teachers can not be deemed “highly qualified” devalues their position and status as educators, along with minimizing the roles and services they can provide to a school and students. One argument is that instead of emphasizing the need for “highly qualified” teachers the goal should be to produce “highly effective” teachers. I did not ask the special ed coordinator or paraprofessional their opinions on this

⁴ "New No Child Left Behind Flexibility: Highly Qualified Teachers." US Department of Education. 29 Nov. 2005. 22 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/teachers/hqtflexibility.html>>.

matter as I thought that it might be offensive. I understand this might be a limitation in my research.

The title of the Act, “No Child Left Behind” is a paradox, as many students that should benefit from the Act are in actuality the ones being left behind. One argument is that NCLB is too heavily focused on the under achievement of students, and in turn gifted or talented students are not receiving the appropriate services. In Washington, D.C.; one gifted girl in fifth grade was handed a textbook by her teacher, who said, “If you need help you can consult the back of the book or you can ask me, but I really need to help the other students catch up.”⁵ Some argue that schools have little incentive to teach gifted students to meet their potential. Ann Sheldon, executive director of the Ohio Association for Gifted Children, stated, “These (gifted) kids don’t really count for anything in the federal accountability system.” In addressing the change in special needs services, it is important to address the issue of gifted and talented children not being appropriately served as one of the repercussions of the NCLB act. The emphasis of the NCLB Act is deeply rooted in the underachievement of students in “failing” schools. There is little motivation or incentive for teachers to further the development of gifted or talented students.

In researching the NCLB Act I used the ideology presented by researchers Bejoian and Reid (2005) in their study, “A Disability Studies Perspective on the Bush Education Agenda”, as my conceptual framework. The researchers used a disability

⁵ Ramirez, Eddy. "Room to Improve." US News & World Report 12 Nov. 2007: 45-50.

studies lens to critique the NCLB Act arguing that, “Disability is a fundamentally ideological and political enterprise. Federal, state, and local laws and the societal institutions that implement them determine what resources will be allocated and how—in ways that enact particular visions of desirable outcomes.”⁶ This disability studies lens was used as a framework for my research. I took my understanding and knowledge from previous studies and applied it to my personal research experience; looking at how the NCLB Act has impacted the change in services for special needs students.

My research was done at Nodding Elementary, a local Hartford School. Trinity College and more specifically the educational studies program collaborate with Nodding Elementary, which is why I choose this as my placement for research. I engaged in qualitative research for my study, focusing on the changes that have been made in services provided for special needs students, along with the attitudes of school personnel on the same subject.

My two main research methods were observations and interviews. All special ed students have been mainstreamed in Hartford, meaning they are in the regular classroom with all other students. Accordingly, schools are responding to the new policies of mainstreaming and the NCLB act at the same time. The ethnographic approach of observation was valuable in my research because I was able to see how these changes affected the students first hand. Observation took place in two 6th grade classrooms, which had approximately 18-22 students. Both classrooms organized their students in

⁶ Bejoian, Lynne M., and D K. Reid. "A Disability Studies Perspective on the Bush Education Agenda: the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001." Equity and Excellence in Education 38 (2005): 220-231.

clusters, grouping student's desks together so that they are split into about four or five groups. I sat in the back of the classroom when observing trying best not to distract the students. My observation totaled ten hours over a five week period.

The method for collecting data for observations was done by taking extensive notes after every departure of Nodding Elementary. Categories I was interested in observing consisted of: student's response to mainstreaming, student teacher interactions, student to student interactions, class composition, curriculum, movement and body language of teacher and students. Special needs students in each 6th grade classroom were identified by the teacher when observation began.

In addition to observation interviews were also conducted with four school personnel at Nodding. Informed consent was used in this study. All of the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, who I was, and what the study was about, and then gave their written consent. I interviewed the special ed coordinator, one 6th grade teacher, a paraprofessional and the social worker. The interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes each and were done at a mutually convenient time. I spent more time with the special ed coordinator so informal interviews took place over the five week period. In addition I choose only to interview one of the 6th grade teachers because there was a substitute in the other classroom for three out of the five weeks I was there. All formal interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. I used a list of interview questions (see Appendix A) to guide the interviews but they were not stringent I tried to let the interviews be as organic as possible. My hope for these interviews was to

find personal opinions or attitudes about the current services being provided to special needs students. Although the district wide policy of mainstreaming students is not a direct impact of NCLB, many teachers associated the two policy changes when addressing questions on special needs services.

Nodding Elementary school is currently “failing” under the NCLB accountability system. Nodding Elementary is faced with inequalities that can be seen in many urban public schools. In 2005 there were 434 students, 97.9% of the student body were minority students, mostly Latino. In addition, 73.3% of the students qualified for free or reduced price meals, which demonstrates the severity of poverty at this school. The 2005-06 strategic school profile shows that 15.4% of the students were in special education; and 25.5% of the students received bilingual education and/or English as a second language services. This statistic is relevant, as I am researching special needs services, and services related to speech and language fall under this umbrella. The staff that provides services to these students were grouped together in one staff category as counselors, social workers and school psychologist; in 2005-06 there were 1.4 persons in that category. It is important to note, that in this 2007 school year some of the psychiatric special needs services were cut and the funding was placed into the areas of reading comprehension and math. In addition, there is currently one social worker for nearly 550 students. These figures show that there is a shortage of services relative to the need that exists.

The topic of special needs services in accord with NCLB interested me because there has been so much debate over the topic of “No Child Left Behind”. Students in low income urban public schools face many disparities, especially children that require additional special needs services. From my research and analysis at Nodding, I found that the demands of the reform “No Child Left Behind” have resulted in insufficient provision and implementation of services for special needs students in “failing” schools.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA: 1997) mandates that, “all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education [FAPE] that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for employment and independent living”⁷ Under IDEA the term related services includes but is not limited to psychiatric services, speech and language services, physical and occupational therapy, social work services, and medical services for diagnosis.

As stated earlier, all special ed students have been mainstreamed in Hartford, which means they spend at least 60% of their time in the general ed classroom. In one of the 6th grade classrooms I observed a boy named Eddie. I was surprised to find that Eddie had stayed back a year because he was small in size compared to the other boys in the class. The class was made up of about 18 students and one teacher. It was explained to me that Eddie had a form of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). OCD is characterized by repetitive behaviors or mental acts that the person feels driven to perform in response

⁷ <http://www.nichey.org/pubs/newsdig/nd16txt.htm>

to an obsession.⁸ Eddie was placed in a group cluster with three other students, two boys and one girl. Through observation I noticed that Eddie would meticulously write out every letter. When a letter did not conform to his standards he would crumple up the paper and throw it. If this happened when he was doing work in a workbook he would fiercely erase whatever he had done. When this happened it distracted other students, which only further irritated Eddie. Every time this occurred Eddie would have to start whatever he was doing all over again. I observed more than one instance when this behavior occurred and was not addressed or even noticed by the teacher.

I inferred from this observation that insufficient services were being provided to Eddie for him to reach his potential. The disorder OCD is classified under emotional behavior disorder (EBD) in special education. Potential services for EBD include behavior therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy or medication, which would be monitored and carried out by the school psychologist. As mentioned earlier, this 2007 school year, some of the psychiatric special needs services were cut and the funding was placed into the areas of reading comprehension and math. Therefore, Eddie is not receiving the appropriate services to help him deal with his disorder which is hindering his academic potential and performance. He is one of the children who is being left behind.

The topic of the psychiatric services being cut was addressed in an interview with the special ed coordinator Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith has been at Nodding for over 10 years and in the field of special education for over 20 years. In an informal interview Ms. Smith inferred that she is trying to leave special education because she feels as though

⁸ <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/index.shtml>

policies and legislation including reforms such as NCLB have made it hard for her to do her job, and impossible to do it well. In our interview Ms. Smith explained the apprehension she had to labeling students as having Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD). She explained that high numbers of students were being placed into the category of “specific learning disability” that should be labeled as having an “emotional behavior disorder”. Some of the reasons for this are due to the politics of labeling a child as EBD. Bejoian and Reid’s (2005) disability studies lens can be applied to this situation as an example of how Federal, State and local laws along with definitions of disabilities, impact the labeling process for special education. Ms. Smith explained this issue by saying; “There is no cure for children who are labeled as emotionally disturbed because of that there is resistance to label them as that.” Unlike ADD or ADHD which is considered a “curable” disorder through the use of medication, once a child is labeled as EBD that label stays with them for life.

Individuals with the label EBD are not allowed to go into certain professions such as the police force or the military. Ms. Smith acknowledged this by saying; “If someone is emotionally disturbed do we really want them in the police force with a gun? If a child is ED they need to be labeled as that, and get counseling instead of masking it with LD.” This quote from Ms. Smith confirms the complexity of the labeling process in special education, especially for those students with emotional behavior disorder. There are severe implications for students who are not appropriately labeled. Previous research has shows that, “many teachers would say that 10% to 20% of their students have "emotional

problems" while the actual number of those with severe and or chronic problems is closer to 2% to 3% of the school age population. Currently less than one-half that number are formally identified and receive special education services.”⁹ In addition, research has shown that students that are diagnosed with emotional behavioral disorder are often “underserved by educational and mental health systems in the United States.”¹⁰ Many of the children with EBD have records in the social system such as probation. If children are not appropriately labeled as having EBD there are implications for society and all aspects of the legal system. Law enforcement and prisons may be impacted by inadequate diagnosis and treatment of children with EBD. Refocusing on my research at Nodding Elementary, many students have counseling written into their IEP (individualized education plan); however, with the lack of psychiatric services and only one social worker available, the needs of the students cannot possibly be met. The distribution of government funding to specific areas of “need” such as math and reading comprehension is an effect of NCLB. This has impacted special education, resulting in fewer services being available to address the needs of EBD students.

After analyzing my observation notes and transcribed interviews, I concluded that one of my biggest findings from my research at Nodding Elementary was that the psychiatric services were cut and funding was placed in the areas of math and reading comprehension. I concluded that the demands of the “No Child Left Behind” Act which

⁹ Zabel, Robert H. "Emotional Disturbances." ERIC Digest (1988): 1-2.

¹⁰ Gresham, Frank M. "Response to Intervention: an Alternative Means of Identifying Students as Emotionally Disturbed." Education and Treatment of Children: 328-344. Wilson Web. 14 Oct. 2007.

are firmly based on accountability and achievement have impacted the services provided to special needs students. Nodding Elementary, like so many other urban public schools in our country lacks the necessary funding and resources for students to achieve their potential. This is counteracts the supposed intentions of the NCLB policy.

This research indicates that the “No Child Left Behind” Act negatively impacts special needs services. Evidence gathered from observations and interviews at Nodding Elementary demonstrate the serious implications that this policy has on services provided in urban public schools. The findings of this research could be used by administrative personnel in making decisions about appropriate areas to place funding. In addition, this research could be useful to policymakers deciding whether to reauthorize NCLB or enact similar legislation. Most importantly, this paper supports the idea that the “No Child Left Behind” Act is not an effective solution to leveling the playing field and creating equality in public education in the United States.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions:

Questions for Teachers/Paraprofessionals

- 1) How did you become a teacher?
- 2) How long have you been working at this school?
- 3) What is the teacher/ student ratio in your classroom?
- 4) What changes have you seen over time?
- 5) How many special needs children are in your classroom?
- 6) How are special needs children placed in classrooms?
- 7) Hartford recently changed their policy so that all special education children are mainstreamed, how has this affected your teaching?
- 8) What services are currently provided for special needs students?
- 9) What are your thoughts about the special needs services provided to your students? Is there anything you would change?
- 10) Since the “No Child Left Behind” Act was implemented, what changes, if any have you seen in the services for special needs students?

Questions for Special Ed Teacher/Social Worker

- 11) How did you become a _____? (teacher, social worker)
- 12) How long have you been working at this school?
- 13) What are the services currently provided to special needs students?
- 14) What is the breakdown in numbers of special needs students in specific categories? (i.e. Learning Disability, Behavioral, ESL)
- 15) What is the number of students who receive services from the speech therapist, psychiatric services and counseling?
- 16) Do you feel there is a need for more special education teachers?
- 17) Since the “No Child Left Behind” Act was implemented, what changes, if any have you seen in the services for special needs students?
- 18) Has the NCLB act changed anything in the creation and implementation of IEPs? What about assessments, CMT’s?
- 19) What are your thoughts on parental involvement with special needs students?
- 20) About how many parents or guardians attend PPT meetings?