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# Regular Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Mainstreaming: One Year After Full-Inclusion

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Regular Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Mainstreaming:  
One Year After Full-Inclusion

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**Introduction:**

Every child deserves an equal opportunity to learn in an environment that will adequately allow him/her to reach his/her potential. Whether such an environment is provided is a concern especially in the area of special education. Federal laws have been created to provide such an environment for all students, especially those with disabilities. The federally mandated Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), amended in 1997, created “the most significant changes in federal special education law since the original passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children act of 1975” (Patterson, 2005). The primary goal of the amendment of IDEA was “to ensure educational equity and eliminate the mis-education and chronic exclusion experienced by children with disabilities” (Kavale, 2002). One key mandate of IDEA was that all students with disabilities are to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), meaning all special education students are to be educated along side students who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent possible.

In September 2005, in order to maintain federal funding and in compliance with a court decision to monitor the Connecticut schools’ fulfillment of IDEA, the Hartford public school system rapidly de-segregated special education students from general education students. Hartford’s 3,900 (as of the 2004-2005 school year) special education students, who were once bused to separate schools or educated in separate classrooms, were now attending their neighborhood schools and were fully included in regular education classrooms. The question of whether Hartford was prepared for such a massive change was one that many were asking, especially regular education classroom teachers. It was expected that initially such a transition would be, for lack of a better word, chaotic. However, the intent of this research is to investigate if, after a year of full-inclusion in the

Hartford Public School system, the situation has improved. Specifically, my research asks: have regular education teachers changed their views of mainstreaming over the past year? Have they changed their classroom practices in order to accommodate new understandings of mainstreaming and if so, how?

In Fall 2005, a Trinity College student researched the perspectives of both regular education and special education teachers on mainstreaming special needs students in a Hartford elementary school. Over the course of the semester, this student found that many regular education teachers felt overwhelmed and unprepared for the immediate mainstreaming of all special education students (Wetmore, 2005). Because it has been a year since mainstreaming was implemented, I am interested in the current views of teachers on mainstreaming in Hartford, and to see how these views differ from the views of teachers last year.

I hope that my research will provide better insight on the way teachers are reacting to mainstreaming. It is important to investigate the changes in perceptions of mainstreaming to see if the implementation of IDEA is actually achieving its intended purpose. Because everyone in the Hartford public school system is affected by this decision (regular and special education students and teachers, administrators, etc), I hope that my research can provide information on how this transition can proceed smoothly for everyone. The investigation of the current views of regular education teachers can also provide evidence of the benefits resulting from mainstreaming, not only for special education students but for regular education teachers and students and the Elm Street Elementary School (pseudonym) as a whole. Conversely, my research may also be able to provide evidence to show that more teacher training, in-service and/or professional

development days are necessary for making this decision as successful as possible for everyone involved.

The initial reaction to the mainstreaming decision described by many regular education teachers was one of shock and an overwhelming feeling of being unprepared for this change. While these teachers do see some potential benefits of mainstreaming, their feelings of preparedness have only slightly changed over the past year. The teachers are adapting to this change and are modifying their classroom practices accordingly. However, this adaptation is due to the teachers' utilization of resources external to the school system, not from any formal support provided by the school system.

### **Related Research:**

For purposes of clarification, it is important to define the term *inclusion*. An inclusive school environment according to one researcher,

“...is one in which students with the full range of abilities and disabilities receive their in-school educational services in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support...Inclusion is based upon the presumption of starting with the norm and then making adaptations as needed, rather than focusing on the abnormal and trying to fix disabilities to make students fit into a preconceived notion of what is normal” (Ruef, 2003).

An article in the Hartford Courant reporting on this transition occurring in the Hartford Public School System claimed, “...six months later, teachers, parents and experts say, the system is [still] in crisis: Special education students are not getting the services they need, regular classrooms are being disrupted and teachers are exasperated” (Gottlieb, 2006). Laurie deBettencourt (1999) suggests that, “the success of programs that accommodate students with special needs depends on the supports and training available to general educators.”

Since mainstreaming of special education students is becoming common practice in schools, the attitudes of both regular and special education teachers towards mainstreaming have been documented. In an article by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) a synthesis of past articles on regular classroom teachers' perceptions of mainstreaming was presented along with general findings seen across many of the articles. It was found that while more than half of the teachers surveyed thought that mainstreaming could be beneficial, only a small number of teachers felt that they had the necessary resources necessary to make mainstreaming successful. Bruneau-Balderrama (1997) found that, "general education teachers expressed concern over the adequacy of their own preparation, class size, workload, grading policy, and ability to give equal attention to all students." This finding echoes the concerns of educators in the Hartford public school system. Kavale (2002), found similar results; It was found that, "A good proportion [of regular classroom teachers] also believed that they did not have sufficient classroom time for inclusion efforts, that they were not prepared to teach students with disabilities, and that they might not receive the support necessary for inclusion efforts." What is alarming about this finding is that, "Many general education teachers are limited in their knowledge of special education law and policies, yet they play an integral role in educating students with special needs" (Patterson, 2005). Lacking sufficient knowledge of, and training in how to accommodate special education students, regular education classroom teachers find that, "the overwhelming challenge for [them] is to obtain the skills necessary to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms and implement successful inclusive practice" (Kamens, 2003). In another study, regular classroom elementary school teachers were surveyed to find what they felt was needed to

successfully teach a class with a variety of learners. It was found that teachers expressed the need for education and information regarding specific learning disabilities, and administrative and collegial support to make the transition more successful (Kamens, 2003). It was also found in a study of teachers' perceptions of resources needed and resources provided that while 94% of regular classroom teachers reported feeling that training was necessary, only 28% of teachers actually received some form of training (Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder & Lisowski, 1995). Thus, there exists a tension between "...maximising achievement *and* integration at the same time...greater inclusion is chosen even if it may mean a less effective education" (Kavale, 2002). Because this change was implemented primarily through laws passed, many schools similar to the Elm Street Elementary School have made the transition to full inclusion, without many of the necessary resources.

It has been well documented that inclusion can be beneficial for regular and special education teachers, special education students and their non-disabled peers as well as parents. Stainback, Stainback & Ayers (1992) argue that in successful, "inclusive settings students can learn to understand, respect, be sensitive to, and grow comfortable with individual differences and similarities among their peers."

Much has also been reported on what makes inclusive classrooms successful and unsuccessful. One practice found to be successful in alleviating the stress felt by the regular classroom teachers is a collaborative teaching approach, or co-teaching (Fink, 2004; deBettencourt, 1999; Raison, Hanson, Hall & Reynolds, 1995; Jehlen, 2002). Researchers have also provided lists of factors that are essential to making inclusion successful. Ruef (2003) suggested five strategies that can help create a "meaningful,

inclusive” environment. Additionally at the seminar, *Inclusion Strategies That Really Work: A Practical Approach to Special Education in the Regular Classroom*, presented by Barb Peterson ten different factors that contribute to the success of inclusion were discussed: 1) planning; 2) time; 3) communication; 4) flexibility; 5) preparation of parents; 6) joint ownership; 7) disciplinary program; 8) curriculum selections; 9) timing; and 10) varied instruction. These characteristics are also ones typically described by schools with a successful inclusion program (e.g. Lipsky & Gartner, 1992).

It is important to review past research on the inclusion transition schools encounter to identify common patterns, struggles as well as successes that may help the Elm Street Elementary school in its own transition.

### **Methodology:**

Given that the focus of my research is on the current views of regular education teachers on mainstreaming, I chose to employ a qualitative research design. More specifically, I have conducted comprehensive formal interviews and careful classroom observations. I also had several informal conversations with many of the teachers I worked with. For the past eight weeks, I have spent at least five hours each week at Elm Street Elementary School. Over the course of the eight weeks, I observed and interviewed four regular education teachers – two in the second grade, one in the third grade and one in the sixth grade – and two special education teachers – one who works with the second and third grade and one who works with the fourth and sixth grade. (The names of all teachers have been changed). Since I am primarily interested in the teachers’ views of inclusion, I did not conduct any student interviews.

The purpose of the interviews with special education teachers was to get their perspective on how they see regular education teachers adjusting. My hope was that the interviews with regular education teachers would provide some insight into the current perspectives of teachers in Hartford. During the formal interviews with the regular education teachers I asked a total of seventeen questions; I asked a total of twenty-one questions during the interviews with the special education teachers (see Appendix A). The interviews typically lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. I asked teachers about their experiences last year, when the full-inclusion decision was first put into effect, as well as questions regarding their current teaching practices, and how, if at all, these attitudes, practices and/or reactions regarding full-inclusion have changed. While conducting the formal interviews, I tape recorded and later transcribed our conversations.

Classroom observations and informal conversations were recorded in a journal. Throughout the semester, I spent a total of eight hours observing each classroom. My initial observations focused on the general classroom dynamics. Once I became more familiar with the class, I later focused my observations on teacher-student interactions, especially the interactions between regular education teachers and special education students. My role while spending time in the classroom was primarily as an observer, however when the teacher or any of the students asked me for help, I willingly assisted them. These observations allowed for confirmation or contradiction of the information shared during the interviews. Conducting observations also provided a context in which to place the interviews.

### **Elm Street Elementary School:**

Elm Street Elementary School is located in an urban neighborhood a few blocks away from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. It is a traditional elementary school serving students from pre-kindergarten through grade six. The total enrollment for the 2005-2006 school year was 434 students. 97.9% of students attending Elm Street Elementary are minority students, primarily Hispanic; 68% of the student body speaks a language other than English at home. As a result, Elm Street Elementary has a dual-language program in which 25.5% of students are enrolled. 73.3% of students attending Elm Street Elementary are eligible for free or reduced lunch. 15.4% of the students receive Special Education services. (CT State Department of Education, Strategic School Profile, 2005)

### **Teachers at the Elm Street Elementary School:**

#### *Ms. Brozena*

Ms. Brozena is a young, energetic second grade teacher. She completed her student teaching semester at Elm Street Elementary and was hired the following year. She has been teaching for two years, both years teaching second grade students. This year she has twenty-three students in her class, only two are labeled special education Learning Disabled (LD) and both receive speech services (one female, one male). Ms. Brozena is currently working towards her Master's Degree in Special Education.

#### *Mrs. Smith*

Mrs. Smith is an enthusiastic, very knowledgeable second grade teacher who has been teaching for ten years and has spent the last nine years teaching at Elm Street Elementary. The year prior to teaching at Elm Street Elementary, Mrs. Smith taught first

grade in a suburb of Hartford. This year she has seventeen students in her class, she commented excitedly on having this small class size: “I have seventeen kids, which is a first. I’ve always had the max, twenty-three, this has been the first year I’ve never had the max. I’ve had to ask people, do you want these desks!?”<sup>1</sup> Three of her students receive special education services; one student is Autistic (male), one is labeled Behavior Disordered (BD) (male), and the other receives speech services (female). Mrs. Smith has a Master’s Degree in Special Education and is currently working towards a second Master’s Degree in Educational Technology.

*Mr. Johnson*

Mr. Johnson is a young, organized, personable third grade teacher at Elm Street Elementary. He has been teaching for three years. He has been teaching third grade for two years at Elm Street Elementary. Prior to teaching at Elm Street Elementary, Mr. Johnson taught fourth grade at a suburban elementary school. This year he has twenty students, two of which receive special education services; one is labeled Other Health Impaired (OHI) due to his diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy (male); and the other student is labeled Learning Disabled (LD) and receives both speech and literacy services. Mr. Johnson is currently working towards his Master’s Degree in Education, Reading and Language at the elementary school level.

*Mrs. Mann*

Mrs. Mann is a reserved, soft spoken Special Education teacher at Elm Street Elementary. She works primarily with five teachers in the second and third grades. She has been teaching for “...many, many years. I can’t tell you because then you’ll know

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<sup>1</sup> Interview: Mrs. Smith 11/17/2006

I'm old.”<sup>2</sup> She has been a Special Education teacher in Hartford for the past eight years. Prior to working at Elm Street Elementary, Mrs. Mann was a regular classroom teacher who taught grades three through six in a suburban elementary school.

*Mr. Leonard*

Mr. Leonard is a quiet yet confident, supportive sixth grade teacher at Elm Street Elementary School. He has been teaching for the past eight years; the last two at Elm Street Elementary teaching in the sixth grade. Prior to teaching at Elm Street Elementary, Mr. Leonard taught grades fifth through eighth at a Parochial school in Rhode Island. He currently has a class of sixteen students, four of which are labeled special education; three are Learning Disabled (LD) (two male, one female), and one is Behavior Disordered (BD) (male).

*Mrs. Cerrone*

Mrs. Cerrone is a very outgoing, humorous Special Education teacher. She works primarily with four teachers in the fourth and sixth grades. She has been teaching for the past eleven years, spending the last two years as a Special Education teacher at Elm Street Elementary. Prior to working at Elm Street Elementary, Mrs. Cerrone was a permanent substitute in a suburb of Hartford. She described the various positions she held during her time spent as a substitute: “When I was a permanent substitute, I was in kindergarten through twelfth grade classes. I also taught in special ed classes in grades seven, eight and nine through twelve. [I] also [taught] special ed [in grades] four through six. I taught life science, consumer/family classes, tech ed and health classes also.”

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<sup>2</sup> Interview: Mrs. Mann 11/13/2006

### *Classroom Arrangements*

While spending time in the four regular classroom teachers' rooms, I noticed some similarities and some differences. Mrs. Smith and Mr. Johnson both have computers in their classroom, while Mrs. Brozena and Mr. Leonard do not. The primary reason for this difference is because the special education students of both Mrs. Smith and Mr. Johnson use the computer to aid their speech services. All teachers have their walls covered with work completed by their students. Ms. Brozena, Mrs. Smith and Mr. Johnson also have student work hung on the walls of the hallway outside of their classroom. All teachers have their desks in clusters; the groups ranged from two students per group to six students per group. This group clustering allows for interaction and collaboration among the students. All teachers encouraged group work often. Every classroom also had a reading area signified by a large rug. Due to the variety in room sizes, some reading areas were larger than others but all reading areas had some common characteristics. The reading areas had pillows for students to use, book cases with a variety of books and a "word wall" was usually near by. These areas served a variety of purposes. During my time in the classrooms I saw the reading area used as: a meeting place for the class to come together and hold a discussion; a quiet place to work if a student's group was too noisy; a quiet area to read silently; and as a place for a student to "chill out" if necessary.

## **Analysis of Findings:**

*“Let me see, my first reaction? I was shocked”<sup>3</sup>.*

After asking the teachers some background questions about their experiences as teachers, the first question I asked was: “What was your initial reaction to Hartford’s decision to rapidly mainstream all students?” The overwhelming response I received from both the regular classroom teachers as well as the special education teachers was that they were “shocked” and “not prepared” for such a drastic change. Among other reasons, one common justification for this state of “shock” described by many of the teachers was because they did not know what to expect. Ms. Brozena described the day she was told about the mainstreaming decision. She said that the principal at the time told her the school was going to be implementing inclusion and told her that it was going to be a “hard year” because there were going to be a lot of changes and that Ms. Brozena should “get prepared.” Ms. Brozena ended the school year last year with eight students labeled special education. One of her eight special education students had Cerebral Palsy. She described how she found out she was having a student with that severe a disability:

“I didn’t even know I was having a student with Cerebral Palsy, I found out one minute before I picked up my class... I remember...I was so nervous, it was first day, my first year teaching and...the assistant principal, he came in and said, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry to bother you, but I have to check out your room to make sure it’s wheelchair accessible.’ And later on they brought in all the equipment, which is a lot of equipment, he had to have a special desk and I was maxed out.”

Similarly, Mr. Johnson wasn’t sure what to expect of this change. He said that he asked himself many questions including:

“...How many students would be mainstreamed into my room? What type of training would I...receive? What type, if any, in-class support would I receive? How would the

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<sup>3</sup> Interview: Mrs. Smith 11/17/2006

special ed students adjust to large class sizes? Would the special ed students feel discouraged if they see students around them who are not having learning difficulties?”<sup>4</sup>

He said that at first he was “...optimistic in believing that the system would ‘catch us up’ to make sure that we were prepared.” Mr. Johnson’s questions however were left unanswered. He soon found the answers to the questions through experience, like Ms. Brozena, because that’s what he was faced with. Mr. Leonard also said he wasn’t sure what to expect. He said, “I wasn’t expecting having students with such low levels of ability, with no support.”<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Johnson’s initial optimism soon began to wither away. He said that as he talked to other veteran teachers and family members it was suggested that he shouldn’t, “...count on too much” from the school district.

Mrs. Cerrone justified the regular classroom teachers’ “knee-jerk” reaction saying, “I think for the regular ed teacher who’s not prepared, she sees certain behaviors come in that maybe special ed teachers...see everyday in our classrooms...I think that throws the regular education teachers into a panic.”<sup>6</sup>

A year later, not knowing what to expect is still a concern for the regular classroom teachers. Ms. Brozena spoke of the difficulties she has this year with mainstreaming saying, “Just, the hardest thing is just not being prepared, not having any training, not having any PD’s, not having the [cumulative report] when school starts to look at their IEP. Just not knowing, like what to expect.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview: Mr. Johnson 10/27/2006

<sup>5</sup> Interview: Mr. Leonard 11/13/2006

<sup>6</sup> Interview: Mrs. Cerrone 11/3/2006

<sup>7</sup> Interview: Ms. Brozena 11/13/2006

### *Lack of Training*

When I asked the teachers about any training provided before the start of last year, I received a variety of responses. Some teachers like Ms. Brozena and Mrs. Smith, were given an optional Professional Development (PD) workshop to attend at the end of the summer, just before the start of the school year. Mrs. Smith did not attend but Ms. Brozena did. At the workshop that Ms. Brozena attended, the topic of inclusion was not even discussed. Mr. Johnson, though not planning on receiving much support from the school system (as previously quoted), did receive some training. Mr. Johnson attended a four-day workshop where one of the four days he was “pretty sure” talked about inclusion. He did not however “think the training was adequate...”<sup>8</sup> Mr. Leonard vaguely remembered some discussion of IDEA at the teacher orientation he was required to attend prior to the start of his first year at the Elm Street Elementary School. He said, “We went over the court decision of IDEA, but we had no training, or at least none that I can remember. If I can’t remember it, I’m not sure what that says about how helpful it was.”<sup>9</sup> While Ms. Brozena, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Leonard did attend some form of workshop, not one found it helpful.

Surprisingly, other than the few professional development days provided at the start of last year no additional training has been provided. Every teacher answered with a resounding “no” to the question of “have you received any additional training?” Not only because of the magnitude of this change but also the lack of formal training provided by the school system left teachers with no choice but to find alternative ways of preparing for, and dealing with, this drastic change. Mr. Johnson told me, “Basically,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview: Mr. Johnson 10/27/2006

<sup>9</sup> Interview: Mr. Leonard 11/13/2006

because there hasn't been much provided training, I have sought out as much guidance as possible."<sup>10</sup>

### *Adaptation*

Many of these teachers found that simply being forced to accommodate all students has made them deal with mainstreaming, and as a result, feel more prepared. Ms. Brozena experienced just this: "...I feel as though, even next year if I get more special ed students, I can deal with it..."<sup>11</sup> Though some teachers do feel more prepared as a result of their experiences, the teachers believe this is still not an adequate way to learn how to support students' needs, nor is it fair for the teachers or their students. Ms. Brozena, though she feels slightly more prepared to teach students with disabilities said, "...I still feel like we should have, I mean we should be receiving some training on it, mainstreaming, because I know a lot of teachers still don't know what to do."<sup>12</sup> When I asked Mrs. Cerrone how she thought the regular classroom teachers were adjusting she said, "Not well, but you can't blame them...they've had no training, they've had no introduction."<sup>13</sup>

The teachers have also said they feel a little more prepared because they had a large number of special education students in their classrooms this last year. Ms. Brozena had eight special education students in her classroom last year, this year she only has two special education students. Due to her experiences accommodating for eight students last year, she feels able to accommodate for her two students this year. Mrs.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview: Mr. Johnson 10/27/2006

<sup>11</sup> Interview: Ms. Brozena 11/13/2006

<sup>12</sup> Interview: Ms. Brozena 11/13/2006

<sup>13</sup> Interview: Mrs. Cerrone, 11/3/2006

Cerrone spoke to many of the teachers' sentiments of feeling more prepared because of their experiences, but still not knowing what to expect when she said to me,

“Do we feel a little more prepared? I think every time you get one more thing under your belt, but I'm not going to get comfortable, I mean, you never know. If funding drops out or if the population shifts, so how comfortable am I going to get? I'm trying to learn to go with the flow...”<sup>14</sup>

Other than learning how to help their students with disabilities out of necessity – because they were still responsible for educating all of their students – with or without training and/or support, the teachers seemed to take advantage of two common resources to help them in this transition: courses taken for a Master's Degree program and informal conversations with other teachers in similar situations.

Three of the teachers were fortunate enough to have learned about students with special needs through courses taken as part of master's degree programs. When asked what has helped the most in this transition, Ms. Brozena responded, “Because I really haven't gotten any training, it's really just my master[s] classes that really do help, and it's really not Hartford...”<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Smith similarly responded to the question with,

“I would say my special ed background, but I can't say anything from support here, no training...if I had to be honest and say what training or resources – I didn't get anything” she also added, “...I had a good background, but I still felt unprepared, I still felt stressed, *with* the background; because unless you're in it, the textbook isn't real life.”<sup>16</sup>

For teachers who have had no training and who have not had any classes, and even for teachers who have, this transition has been extremely difficult.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview: Mrs. Cerrone 11/3/2006

<sup>15</sup> Interview: Ms. Brozena 11/13/2006

<sup>16</sup> Interview: Mrs. Smith 11/17/2006

Many of the teachers use each other as resources. Mrs. Mann noticed this, commenting, "...It's really finding the children's needs...it's a team approach with a lot of those teachers."<sup>17</sup> The relationship that Ms. Brozena and Mrs. Smith have developed exemplifies this "team approach" that Mrs. Mann spoke of. Their classrooms are across the hall and they frequently talk with each other about their students. Ms. Brozena commented on the support she receives from Mrs. Smith:

"And she helps, you know, we're both taking classes and we both get ideas from each other. So, some things work for me, and some things work for her. And then we switch for SFA...I pretty much get her kids, she gets my kids. So we say, what works? What do I do that helps?"<sup>18</sup>

The teachers are in fact adjusting, primarily because they have personally sought out the resources they need in order to make their classroom a successful inclusive setting. Many teachers find that their special education students are sometimes many grade levels below their non-disabled peers. Since the Special Education teachers are shared between two grades, the shared planning time they have together is less than ideal, leaving the regular classroom teachers to make modifications without the help of the Special Education teachers. Ms. Brozena described her struggle with making modifications:

"...I'm provided with just second grade material, nothing lower, and that was hard because a lot of my special ed students were either a year or two years behind and I had to track down the math facilitator to get first grade material or kindergarten material, just to get them, pretty much, on grade level because they didn't have the basic skills and that was very hard, because I was lacking material and the kids could definitely not do second grade material...and that took about a month to get all the right materials."<sup>19</sup>

Mrs. Smith was faced with a similar problem of not having adequate materials for her special education students. She says:

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<sup>17</sup> Interview: Mrs. Mann 11/13/2006

<sup>18</sup> Interview Ms. Brozena 11/13/2006

<sup>19</sup> Interview: Ms. Brozena 11/13/2006

“I contact Kindergarten for Math books, First grade for math books; it’s just doing a lot of contacting to find appropriate materials. That’s why it would be so wonderful if there could be two of us in the room together, all that would be taken care of – the behavioral issues, there would be someone full time.”<sup>20</sup>

In order to modify and accommodate for their students with disabilities, both Ms. Brozena and Mrs. Smith have realized now that it is up to them to take the initiative and allocate the resources necessary to teach their students.

### *Benefits of Mainstreaming*

Despite the initial shock and the lack of formal support and training, every teacher I spoke with said they see the benefits of mainstreaming in their classrooms, especially socially. Last year Ms. Brozena had a student, Ari, who has Cerebral Palsy; this year Ari is in Mr. Johnson’s class. The two teachers, both only teaching for a few years, have a close supportive relationship. Ms. Brozena has been able to give Mr. Johnson some advice regarding strategies of what works with Ari and his disabilities. Ms. Brozena described the transformation she saw take place over the course of the year:

“I read a book about Cerebral Palsy to the class and we talked about it and this was mid-September, because I realized there was a huge problem, the kids wouldn’t even sit near him and then the kids would be like ‘ugh, the carpet is soaking wet’ and then there was a problem with the smell. So, then once I read that book, it really, really helped. I told Mr. Johnson to read it, too. It is a children’s book and it talks about what Cerebral Palsy is and how you can help him. And then after I read it, the kids really did understand, and they were helping him try to walk, because he is trying to walk because he has leg braces. By the end of the year the kids were working with him, even, I got observed a couple of times and the principal couldn’t believe how the kids interacted with him.”

At the start of the school year, Mr. Johnson took Ms. Brozena’s advice and read the children’s book about Cerebral Palsy to his students. During one of my first few

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<sup>20</sup> Interview: Mrs. Smith 11/17/2006

visits to Mr. Johnson's class, I made a note of the interaction between Ari and the other students.

Ari came in late. Mr. Morin says he comes late to class every morning because he eats breakfast here. The students are very welcoming, and not at all mean. The students are helping him fix his glasses, help get him in and out of his special desk, help him with his work, giving him hugs, etc. Two girls who sit near him were helping so much, they weren't doing their work. Mr. Johnson let them help for a while, thanked them for helping Ari and then refocused them and told them to keep working.<sup>21</sup>

Without inclusion, the chance that non-disabled students would learn about disabilities in general is low. Mrs. Smith commented on this aspect of socialization saying:

"...I think it's also beneficial for the regular ed kids who also get to see and work with some of the kids with learning disabilities...It gives them a sense of community and family and working together, because we say that we're a big family in here."<sup>22</sup>

Academically, teachers have also seen some benefits resulting from mainstreaming. Mrs. Cerrone, while working in a classroom with many students, both special ed and non-labeled found that, "It doesn't hurt regular ed students to hear something twice, or from someone new, or in a different way."<sup>23</sup>

Mainstreaming does not only benefit students, but also the teachers in the school. Mrs. Mann said that this change helps regular classroom teachers', "patience, their understanding, their acceptance."<sup>24</sup> Mr. Johnson talked about his own growth that has occurred over the past year. He said, "For me, seeing this interaction has broadened my views on mainstreaming and teaching as a whole."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Excerpt from Field Notes: 10/20/2006

<sup>22</sup> Interview: Mrs. Smith 11/13/2006

<sup>23</sup> Interview: Mrs. Cerrone 11/3/2006

<sup>24</sup> Interview: Mrs. Mann 11/13/2006

<sup>25</sup> Interview: Mr. Johnson 10/27/2006

## **Conclusion:**

*“It just needs to be reworked, revamped, something needs to happen!”<sup>26</sup>*

In an informal conversation I had with Ms. Brozena we talked about the effectiveness of the way this decision was put into place. She said to me,

“I agree, if it’s done correctly, and it’s kind of eased in and not just thrown at you, I think it effective. *Do you think it would be considered effective here?* No. It’s definitely not effective here. I mean I wish it was done correctly here. *Does it have potential to be done correctly here?* Yeah, potential.”

Many of the teachers I spoke with offered suggestions of what would help in this mainstreaming process. Mrs. Smith advocated for co-teaching, a strategy that has proven to be beneficial in an inclusive school setting. She said:

“I want co-teaching. I want two teachers in one room, and I said I would be the one willing to do it. Give me all the special ed kids, give them to me, even if I had half and half and then give me Mrs. Mann, and she and I propose that we teach together all-day-long, these kids, and service them in this room and we would do collaboration. That’s what I want.”<sup>27</sup>

Schirmer et al (2005) also agrees that co-teaching is an important teaching strategy that can help inclusive schools be more effective. He concluded that,

“Inclusion is based on the understanding that both special education teachers and general education teachers have expertise about models and theories, characteristics of learners, assessment, learning styles, learning environments, strategies and techniques, curriculum classroom management, and child development. By combining their knowledge and talents, they can develop strategies that focus less on matching the child’s disability to the teaching method and more on methods that are effective with all children.”

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<sup>26</sup> Interview: Mr. Leonard 11/13/2006

<sup>27</sup> Interview: Mrs. Craft 11/17/2006

At Elm Street Elementary, this goal is not yet achievable because of a lack of formal support and training provided. However, it is hopeful that when this training and support is provided, the Elm Street Elementary School will be a successful inclusive school. Documenting the progress that has been made over the past year despite the lack of training and support gives me confidence that the Elm Street Elementary school has the ability to achieve the goal of inclusion: to, "...raise standards, increase student achievement, enhance positive self-identity, encourage strong social relationships, and enable students to develop the knowledge and skills to become lifelong independent learners" (Schirmer et al, 1995).

Clearly, formal support and training is necessary. But, for the time being, the regular classroom teachers are adjusting and are able to educate their special education students because they have sought out the necessary resources. The situation can only improve if support is provided.

The Hartford Courant article published in February 2006 optimistically stated, "District officials say they are confident that the efforts being made...will eventually translate into broader success. Next year, if all goes according to plan, even more special education students will be transferred to regular classes throughout the district" (Gottlieb, 2006). It will be interesting to follow the case of the Hartford Public School system to see if, in fact, formal support and training is provided by the school district and continued progress is made.

The regular classroom teachers' thoughts on the situation at Elm Street Elementary School is exemplified by a statement made by Mr. Johnson: "I think we'd

all agree that things could be improved, like more support and more training...[but] we know this is the way it is, so we need to do the best we could for all our students.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interview: Mr. Johnson 10/27/2006

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

### *Background Information*

- How long have you been teaching?
- How many years have you been teaching in Hartford?
- What grades have you taught/are you currently teaching?

### *Previous view of mainstreaming*

- What was your initial reaction to Hartford's decision to rapidly mainstream all students?
- Did you feel prepared for this change?
- What type of training did you receive before the start of last year?
  - How would you evaluate the training? Was it helpful?
- What was the hardest thing about mainstreaming then?

### *Current views of mainstreaming*

- Now that mainstreaming has been in effect for a year, how prepared do you feel with regards to mainstreaming?
- How has your teaching changed over the past year?
- Have you changed your approach?
- Have you received any additional training?
  - How would you evaluate the training? Was it helpful?
- How have your administrators helped in the mainstreaming process?
- Have classroom dynamics (i.e. student interaction) changed over the past year?
- Has the overall attitude of the school changed as a result of this transition?
- What has helped the most in this transition?
- If you could change one thing about mainstreaming, what would it be?
- What is the hardest thing about mainstreaming now?
- What goals do you have in order to make mainstreaming more effective in your classroom?
- What do you think is the best part of mainstreaming?
- What aspect of mainstreaming do you think it most beneficial to all students?

### *Special education teachers*

- How do you determine how often, how long you stay and when to go to regular education classrooms?
- What is the relationship like between regular education and special education teachers?
- How do you see the regular education teachers adjusting to this change?
- How has your relationship with regular education teachers changed, if at all?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent

### INFORMED CONSENT

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (please print name) hereby consent to my participation in this research project.

This study involves an investigation of the effect of mainstreaming on regular education classroom teachers in Hartford. I understand that all of my responses in this study are completely confidential and will be used only for research purposes. I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary. I further understand that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without any penalty.

The benefits of this project are to provide better insight on the way teachers are reacting to mainstreaming and how to make this transition as successful as possible. The potential risks are that the interview may elicit some uncomfortable feelings and that the presence of the researcher in the classroom may disrupt the normal classroom routine.

If I have any questions regarding this project or wish to have further information, I am free to contact Professor Andrea Dyrness in the Educational Studies Department at Trinity College, (860)297-2323.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date